

**Mick Stern**

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## **Get Out of Town**

I ran into him on Second Avenue, way downtown. I had just stepped in and then immediately out of an overheated, suffocating little occult bookstore that must have depended on demonic protection to stay in business.

The cold air was bracing. The moment I saw him I yelled “Vagrant!” That was his nickname. He crossed the street to shake hands and trade high fives. But I didn’t take his enthusiasm seriously. He was always glad to find somebody to talk to for a few minutes. He spent his days wandering around the East Village looking for something to do. An old and very small dog waddled alongside him. He tugged on the leash to persuade the reluctant animal to climb over a high curb.

“What’s happening?” he said, “Been a while. You moved out of, what was that place? Fifth and B?”

“I moved a year and a half ago. I live in Chelsea now. It’s alright.”

The dog finally made it onto the sidewalk and began to lead Vagrant down the street. I walked with them. He said, “So you went uptown. You must meet a lot of rich chicks.”

“I wish. You still living with your mother?”

His vacant gray eyes flashed with annoyance. Despite his nickname, he had never left home.

“I’ve got a good lead on a one-bedroom on Hudson,” he said quickly. “It’s in the back, quiet, lots of privacy. My uncle knows the landlord.” Then he added, “My mom’s gonna shit a brick when she hears I’m moving.”

As far as I knew, his mother had tried everything she could think of to get him get out and start his own life.

“Your dog looks a little pooped.”

“He’s just old.”

“What’s his name again?”

He blushed slightly. “It’s either Jeff or Kenny. I haven’t made up my mind yet.”

I leaned over and patted Jeff or Kenny on the head. The dog’s tongue unrolled and he began to pant.

“What have you been up to?” I asked.

“Nothing, The usual. You?”

“Too much to get into. And I’d probably forget half of it. I should write it down. ”

“I wouldn’t read it anyway. Other people’s lives bore me almost as much as my own.”

“Coming from you, that’s a pretty positive statement.. You used to go around saying that everything sucks.”

“Everything sucks.”

“Now say it with a smile.”

“I did say it with a smile—it was a *downtown* smile.” He was suddenly impatient. “Shit, it’s past three already. I gotta go home and take the garbage out. You’re OK? You’re good? Still seeing that Gloria chick? I love the way her mouth is shaped. Perfect for ... never mind, am I out of line?”

“You’re always out of line, but this time, no harm done, because I don’t know anybody named Gloria.”

“OK, I gotta run.”

“Wait! Wait! I’ve been looking for you for two days. I have to talk to you.”

“What about?”

“I have to explain it to you.”

“I hate explanations. They just confuse me.”

Our stroll had brought us near Ukrainian diner, one of the cheapest and most popular restaurants in the neighborhood. I gestured to the door. “Lunch is on me.”

“I don’t know.”

“Come on, I really have to talk to you.”

“OK. I guess.”

Vagrant fumbled with Jeff or Kenny’s leash and tied it to a parking meter. When Jeff or Kenny began to understand that he was going to be left out on the street alone, he barked with surprising vigor and pulled so hard at the leash he almost stood up on his hind legs. Vagrant ordered him to sit and be quiet. The dog barked and his master shouted. I finally grabbed Vagrant’s arm and pulled him away.

Inside the restaurant, the warm air fogged my glasses. “Remember Taglio?” I said. “He once told me that if you want to keep your glasses from fogging when you go indoors, walk in backwards.”

“He’s got major combat fatigue,” Vagrant said dismissively.

Everybody in the diner, regardless of gender or national origin, was dressed entirely in black and smoking cigarettes with attitude, as if posing for an album cover. (This was 1984 or ‘85.) The only person who didn’t belong was Vagrant, and he had actually been born and raised in this neighborhood. He wore old jeans, a green and beige jacket with zippered front pockets, and white running shoes with tiny blinking LED lights. His hair was conservatively cut and combed back.

We slid into a booth, fiddled with plastic menus, and ordered.

“What did you want to talk to me about?”

“Let me get something to eat first. I can’t discuss on an empty stomach.”

Vagrant yawned and leaned back in his chair. “I gotta tell you what happened to me a couple of months ago. I got this crappy job as a clerk in an art supply store. One day this woman comes in, pays for something, and forgets her card on the counter. It was like God himself put it there for me.” He paused. “I shoved the card in my pocket and walked out of the store. Then I ran across the street and caught the 6 train to Canal Steet. ”

“Did you withdraw money?”

“Nah, I didn’t have her PIN number. But I know these guys who run an electronics shop near Canal and Broadway. They’ll take any card that works. The card was in the name of Sandra Liu. And they were like, ‘What can we do for you today, Sandra?’ I charged \$1100 worth of car stereos. Car stereos are chill. They’re practically like currency. I got 800 bucks cash for them.”

“But this chick is going find out her card is missing sooner or later. And they won’t need Colombo to figure out who took it.”

“Sure, everybody knows I took it, but they can’t do anything about it. The cops don’t even investigate robberies any more. And a grand is just small change for a credit card company. The only person who came after me was Sandra Liu. She got my phone number somehow and called up my mother. My mother can be difficult when she wants to be. I heard her say, ‘Well if you think my son has your car stereo you can go in his room and look for it.’ She said it in a real loud voice so I could hear every word.”

“Why did she want you to hear every word?”

“So I would get the shit out of my room.”

“Nice of her.”

Vagrant shrugged.

The waiter put down two plates of cheese pirogues, sour cream in little bowls and two cups of coffee.

“Hey, “ Vagrant said, through a mouth full of cheese. “Sowhat did you want to talk to me about? I ain’t got all day.”

“Sure you do, but I’m gonna tell you anyway. I have inside information that there’s going to be a huge bust in the East Village. A clean sweep. They’re going to make the neighborhood safe for democracy and boutique shopping. What they did in Soho.”

“Yeah?”

“The cops are going to take the dealers out. For good. Once Avenue C is safe for yuppies, the landlords can start making some real money.”

“Yeah, right, Yuppies on Avenue C would be like, mugger’s paradise.”

“No, the muggers will have to move out, because they won’t be able to mug enough people to make the rent. The old Ukrainians, I guess they own their buildings, but I don’t know about the Puerto Ricans and Dominicans.”

“This place could use some change.” Vagrant sniffed and emptied four packets of sugar into his coffee.

“You don’t understand what I’m telling you.” I said.

“I understand.”

“I don’t think so. The cops are going to sweep this ‘hood and grab everybody they can hang a charge on.”

“And the next day, everything will be back to normal. Different dealers, same dope.”

I tried to avoid looking in his eyes. I said, “This is not about a few arrests. This is going to be an invasion. Vagrant, I don’t know how to say this, but ... you have to get out of town.”

“What the fuck are you talking about? I ain’t done anything!”

“Look, Vague, let’s get real. You’ve been a runner for a long time now.”

“Only part time, when I needed money.”

“Part time’ won’t stand up in court.”

“I didn’t do nothing!” He jumped up, rolled up his sleeve and showed a clean inner elbow. “Does that look like a junkie’s arm? Huh? Huh? I’m not stupid. And I’m no rich pimp, either. All I get is a free snort now and then.”

“OK, OK, siddown, siddown. Now, are you absolutely sure you only sold to people you know and trusted?”

“Sure I’m sure ... I hope.”

“Hope isn’t good enough. You gotta leave town. If you stay, they’ll take you in. No doubt about it.”

“How do you know? Who told you this shit? Where did you hear this vile fucking evil shit?”

“A source. A guy I know.”

“You expect me to leave town because some guy who doesn’t even have a name says so?”

“No, it’s not a guy without a name ... it was a cop.”

“What kind of cop told you this? Uh oh—did you get busted?”

I cringed for a moment. Unfortunately, Vagrant caught it.

“You got busted, and now you’re going to dime on me,” he said grimly.

“No, man, it’s not like that, the cops already had your name.”

“But they got more information. From you.”

“Vagrant, just *leave town!*”

“I can’t, I won’t, I refuse, my mother’s sick, I need her, she needs me. So go fuck yourself!”

“Look, they’re not going to chase you. You’re not on America’s Ten Most Wanted list or anything. Just lie low in Boston or Miami for awhile. You can come back eventually.”

“Boston is too old and Miami’s too hot and sticky.”

“I should have brought some travel brochures. I didn’t know it would be so hard to convince you to stay out of jail.”

“Where’d you get busted?”

“In a stupid club on the West Side Highway. What difference does it make? I’ve been offered a job teaching high school starting next September. If this charge sticks, they’ll never let me in a classroom again.”

“I’m supposed to give up my life so you can jerk off in a faculty lounge? Think again.” He started putting on his coat.

“I’m thinking right now.”

“Well, good luck with that. I’m going home.”

He stomped away.

I didn’t run after him. What could I say? The two narcs who interviewed me showed me a lot of mug shots, and his face was the only one I could identify. Undercover narcs had seen him chatting and hanging out in front of crack houses. They didn’t know that he spent his waking hours in the street because his mother didn’t want him underfoot. They didn’t realize that he knew the local players because he had grown up with them. They assigned all kinds of motives to him. He didn’t have any.

I felt bad about the whole thing, but at least I’d warned him. A lot of guys wouldn’t have done that. Anyway, Vagrant *needed* to get out of New York, bust or no bust. A change of scene would do wonders for his narrow existence. It wasn’t my fault that he was scared of the world outside his little corner of the city.

When I stepped out on the street, I almost bumped into him. He was shouting into the wind: “Jeff! Jeff! Kenny! Kenny!”

“What happened?” I said.

“The dog slipped his leash while I was inside talking to *you*.” The word “you” rang with accusation.

“I’ll help you find him.”

He began to cry. “No, you won’t, you slimy motherfucker ! Get the hell out of here or I’ll fuck you up!” He came at me with his fists held high. He was serious. I turned and ran like hell. He chased me for half a block, then abruptly turned around as if I had suddenly vanished.

I stopped to let the burning in my lungs subside. I put my hands on my thighs and bent over, breathing heavily. I kept an eye on him, but he seemed to have forgotten me. He turned and turned in every direction yelling, “Jeff! Kenny! Jeff! Kenny!”

[END]