

CHAPTER 27

HUTCH'S REPROOF

Today, as luck would have it, could be the last game of the World Series. Chicago, the maligned, much beloved Cubbies, are within one game of sending their hometown, a half a country away, into another fit of justifiable delirium. Odds are they will. They have played heroically thus far, as they have throughout this entire season. Sadly, a pair of inexplicable errors kept them from winning it all in five. Winning at home would have been sweet. It was not to be. The final game, perhaps the final two, will be played in Anaheim. Even those for whom Chicago, the Second City, is merely a less feverish New York sense the monumental import of the coming two hundred or so minutes. They want a taste of it, intrusive adverts be damned. The sports bars are already jammed.

Herbert Porter sees that the sky is still bright behind Highland Avenue. Traffic has picked up earlier than usual for a Friday. Hutch had Ty help him create a special selection of spirit flowers in the colors of the respective teams – blue/white for Chicago, red/white for the Angels. He is hopeful of eliciting at least a few additional impulse sales from those who will not attend but will watch some of the game and partake of the excitement.

Hutch is not a particular fan of baseball, however. Today holds special significance for a more important reason: the Parks, Jules and Vivian. He needed to be on his corner no later than five-thirty since, for years, she or they often have come this way on

Fridays. Their special restaurant is on Sawtelle, in the Japanese district, Alece had explained when he mentioned the Parks' notable regularity. It had always seemed to Hutch an odd choice of food for Koreans, perhaps akin to the same forbearance that allows Jews to own German cars. In any event, Ocean Park Boulevard is their most direct route. Vivian Park was less reliable while her husband and partner was away. Now it is the two of them again.

He is alone on the curb at the southwest corner of Ocean Park Boulevard and Lincoln. Ty was happy to have been instructed to stay in the apartment, to watch the game and not overindulge. Hutch did not want to have his plan go awry, did not want to have the opportunity to deliver his message be lost because he was distracted. The pattern has been set. When they stop, she will expect him to offer his flowers. She will take two, most likely a red and a yellow, and place them carefully to one side before paying. It will be only slightly different today. Instead of simply stepping back, ten dollars richer, to watch them drive off, he will take an additional moment or two of their time. It will be worth it.

Hutch sets down one of the two paper sacks with particular care. Great globes of color emanate from its open top. He leans down, reaches in to adjust the protruding stems so that it stands firmly upright. The low sun emboldens Hutch's large, bright blooms, enhances their bursts of color. He positions one pastel flower, its long stem already down behind his collar, partway around his ear. Facing west, looking into a bright sky and gauging the traffic, he grasps the stiff stalks of several others from the other bag before setting it down also. Unstable, top heavy with the remaining blooms jutting out, it is blown over by the onshore breeze. He rights it, pushes it close to the other with his foot.

The paper flower aside Hutch's head is in striking contrast to the monochrome scandal of his unkempt hair. Replace his blue pants with a bright waist cloth, make his hair thick and of glistening ebony instead of uneven gray, have him present a naked chest not hidden under a bulky brown and white checked shirt, let him show white teeth behind a smile rather than be tight lipped with an un-Californian pallor, then he might appear to be channeling Gauguin. Set him upon uneven ground surrounded by plants with huge green leaves and the impression would be complete.

It takes him a few moments to arrange the selection of fan-specific creations for his left hand. He is careful to separate them so that his intent, their honorific purpose, is obvious, hopefully

evocative as well. Hutch has never seriously entertained the idea of creating signage for his enterprise. His regular presence plus the tempting sample stationed above his ear have sufficed. Today, the team colors enhance his offerings.

His arms are slightly out from his sides, his hands poke out from sleeves that are too short. As a few sales are concluded, he stoops to take out other paper flowers from the once again tipped over sack. He would usually arrange his creations so that each hand makes a full presentation of all their colors. Today, unique circumstance and firm intent have altered his approach. With only a single stem grasped in his right hand, he maintains at least one of each team's designated tokens prominent in the bunch in the other. When the traffic stops, obedient to the signal at Lincoln, he beckons with the lone bloom. He steps between the twin lines of stopped vehicles, gesturing with his right hand at the grouping in his left, trying to arouse the curiosity of the generally elsewhere focused commuters and perchance to elicit a purchase. Bending forward adjacent to each captive commuter, he strides alongside, presenting that single stem then the sinister bunch. He is glad to have found an active intersection with a "No Right Turn on Red Between 4:30PM and 7PM, Sundays Excepted" designation.

Hutch tilts his head back for a quick look far ahead each time he senses the traffic beginning to move, which is typically when he has progressed a half dozen car lengths from the corner, nearly to the end of an often impatient queue. Then he threads his way to the curb, striding quickly through any narrow space that opens as the vehicles get underway. Once again on the sidewalk, he moves the flowers in slow arcs, up and down on either side, as he walks along the cracked sidewalk to the corner to start again – a ludicrous, over-sized and under-plumed bird unable to fly. Back at his corner, Hutch looks west along the length of Ocean Park Boulevard. He sees no sign of the anticipated long, black sedan. It is Friday; she always has the driver stop on Friday.

The passing cars have their windows rolled up. Those inside are firmly in their own world. "Pretty," he has tried. "For the girl friend," or "Surprise the wife with one." "Five dollars, only five ...," he has offered through the occasional open window, rarely with enough time to finish. He has mimed and mouthed the same lines so many times, they have become automatic. Today adding "Angels!" to his repertoire has met with encouraging success. As his stock declines, he becomes increasingly demonstrative.

Hutch is barely aware of anything save the traffic signal's state and the need to watch for that ill-humored or inattentive one who would run him over if he were not careful. On occasion, either being too slow to make change or just too slow, he has been caught in the flow, standing sideways on the solid white lane stripe until next the traffic comes to a halt. Hatless, his eyes are strained from squinting. He might have found it preferable to stand on the diagonal corner, to work the westbound flow and thus present his back to the sun. What would be more pleasant is not necessarily better. The traffic is flowing predominantly to the east and south, away from the commercial center of Santa Monica. Therefore, he paces back and forth, in and amongst, where the potential customers are, not where he would like them to be. Besides, he has his expectation.

To the passing commuters he is a strange one. Enclosed by glass, plastic, and metal, alone or partnered, they see him as a soundless mouthing figure. Some divine his task, perceive his intent. Some even show a glimmer of empathy. The majority allow no more than a hint of him to enter their consciousness. They are snug in their familiar world, not easily perturbed by a pacing older man with blobs of color punctuating his ungainly shape. They are captive to tepid talk, to rhythmic throbs of music from their radios or flash memories. Some have companions to occupy them, or engine noises that have become familiar and reassuring. The regulars know Hutch by sight, if not by name. They may nod or even grin their lack of interest. These momentary fragments of human contact, while unproductive, lessen the tedium of his anonymity. There are the occasional few who lower their windows and, if the vehicle next in line allows, cast a comment to Hutch as they retrieve a bright paper bloom or two. Pity may partly underlie their inclination to purchase, perhaps even kindness.

Hutch feels a slight chill from the fitful breeze. He looks up for an instant and sees it bother the high fronds of nearby palms. Typical, he thinks, perfectly normal, not a sign of anything amiss. He hears the noise of tires upon detritus – leaves, a lost twig, an empty cup, or a crumpled sack being propelled along to its final demise. There is the occasional crunchy squeal of a rapid start. There is the infrequent horn blast. There are the rare loud but unintelligible words that convey only emotion through the glass between him and them. Hutch hears it all without truly perceiving, for it is all so familiar.

The commuters enter then, just as quickly, exit his world. Only for an instant do they see his bulky frame, his active mouth, his cartoonish offerings, his searching eyes. Far less often the last, his eyes. That would bring him too close, make him difficult to deny. Hutch has learned to watch the eyes, all the while accepting their reluctance to meet his.

"No need to water," he has grinned in the few seconds he is given. His "Lasts for ...," has often hung in the air as the vehicles depart. Traffic control leaves little time for connection.

He is, as are they, tethered to private needs, to habits and constraints. When he does speak out to them, his voice has the frank rasp of age plus the undertone of much that burdens him: too little money and too much regret. If he had a chance to converse, he might be able, in a few terse sentences, to convey the sad fading of his productive life, the recognition of opportunities lost to younger men. He might even confess his own errors, his failing health, and his guilt-ridden concern for Ty. He would delight in quickly summarizing the begrudged help they receive and how it enables them to survive, how his selling childish paper flowers justifies hope, which is what he must rely upon for the both of them. But there is neither need nor opportunity for such explanations. Herbert Porter waits, patient and silent, for the traffic signal to create another double line of stopped traffic for him to canvass.

"Cubbies," he exhorts, extending one hand then the other. "Angels."

Looking to either side, he waves the clenched bouquet at those he intuits, from some movement of head or eyes, are likely to have a spark of interest. When spotted, he leans closer and endeavors to fan it into decision.

"Only two more for the Angels!" he exclaims, as if it were news.

Across windshields, against side windows, close – occasionally imprudently close – he gestures and coaxes. Roll it down, he endeavors to command those who glance his way or even smile straight ahead, for he then is confident they are aware of his intent. He does not offer art or beauty. He is satisfied to have his creations be seen simply as something different, as casual, even silly fun. Any of these would be a sufficient beginning.

"For the table. Pretty," and, "For your team. Five dollars; one Bronzie," he mouths repeatedly.

"Two for ten!" he often adds, hoping the humor of the null added value might pierce the barrier between them.

Hutch has been busy and, almost without his having noticed, the shadows have lengthened. The traffic has dwindled to occasional clusters, interspersed with one or no car waiting. He can anticipate fewer prospects. And still no black limo. He gnaws his lip. Next week he will try again, if he still has the will. Today it is time to leave. Only a few flowers remain in his left hand. He passes the lone stem from his right to join them, so that he can rearrange the bills he has roughly stuffed into his jeans. It has been a relatively successful day in most respects. People have been more responsive than usual, it seems. Yes, a good day he decides, even if those for whom he has been waiting have not appeared. His anxiety and the overlying feeling of disappointment begin to fade.

"Not bad," he says, although Ty is not there to hear. "Not bad. World Series. Today, of all days."

He jams the wad back atop the coins in his tight pocket.

The sound of a distant siren captures his attention. It is the warbling wail of a fire engine heading up Lincoln toward him. Hutch searches to his left, south. He cannot yet see it; it must be extremely loud, he decides, for it to carry this far. Standing motionless on the sidewalk, he slowly turns his head back around, resuming his westward gaze, squinting into the late sunlight and far up the slope of the virtually empty boulevard. No, it will not be today, he affirms inwardly. He will have to wait for another time.

Hutch's body stiffens. His head snaps to the right. The long dark sedan is in the curb lane. It already has slowed to stop with its rear window already partway down. Relieved of its heavy tint, he can see her familiar face coming into view with him beside, both relaxed and comfortable. Hutch wets his lips as if in preparation to speak and smiles. From his earlier heavy, now nearly empty bag of stock, he replaces the eye-catching spirit blooms in his left hand with a pristine, colorless pair. He reaches in with his right hand and lifts the sack, his hand remaining inside. His eyes are fixed on the widening gap of the rear window as he approaches. He pays no attention to his reflection in the glass of the curb side front door of the limousine nor does he give thought to the driver on the other side of it, whose presence is necessary for his intent but inconsequential to his purpose.

Jules Park, with his indefatigable smile, is at the far side of the rear seat, his eyes fixed on the video screen at the base of the driver's seat back. An Angels fan, Hutch guesses. The reason,

possibly, for their being late. She, on the near side, already has a tenner out and is extending it toward Hutch. She stares at the offerings in his left hand, at the two flowers neither red nor yellow. She is speaking but it is hard for Hutch to hear because of the fire truck that has turned and is racing along Ocean Park Boulevard past them. Its siren is an insistent scream of shifting pitch that overwhelms everything else even as it moves away. The video cameras overseeing the intersection follow its progress.

Hutch leans toward the window, extends his lightly burdened hand and drops the pair of paper blossoms onto her lap, a pile of white upon the black of her dress. She looks up, aghast. Her eyes come alive with actual contact. Hutch is grateful for that brief acknowledgment. It is what he had hoped for. He presents her with the bottom of the bag enveloping his right hand. Resting his wrist upon the sill, he squeezes with strong fingers and thumb.

The force of the blast is like having a heavy, leather pillow slammed against his chest. The stab of pain that pierces his ears is far sharper than he had expected. His head is momentarily clamped in a vise as her face disappears. Hutch's eyelids slam shut; his arm jerks and twists. He is not aware of pulling the trigger a second time. That wild discharge crashes into the roof above her. He had failed to keep a sufficiently firm hold on the heavy, double-action, semi-automatic pistol. In the open desert, in a firm stance, the weapon had seemed less refractory as well as far less loud. He should not have put his head so close to the open window, should not have blocked the sound with his bulk, he will later affirm. Later, that is, when he has time to think, when his eyes no longer smart and his mouth is no longer filled with the taste of burning cotton. He smells acrid sulphur, hears a hollow scream and whistle coming from his own ears. None of these sensations will fade for many minutes.

He shifts the shredded, blackened end of the paper sack toward Jules, toward the transfixed Park Jung-a. This time he properly anticipates that the trigger pull will be much lighter. He presses his arm down hard, forces the muscles of his forearm to remain tight, to be in control as he squeezes the trigger twice again. Hutch feels the successive percussive slams of pressure. There is the sharp sting of a hot spent cartridge careening off his forehead, quite distinct from the warm splatter felt before. For the first time, he is aware of the orange flash tight to the muzzle, of its intense brightness in the carmine gray mist of blood spray and smoke.

The door hangs open as the driver jumps out and sprints away. She is young and shapely. Her cap, with its shiny, stiff brim, is liberated by her panic. Caught by the breeze, it skitters along the pavement. Her long black hair uncoils behind her. She looks back to see Hutch following her with his eyes. To Hutch, her silence belies her gaping mouth.

With no foot on the brake, Parks' sedan inches slowly forward, toward Lincoln Boulevard. The southbound lanes are sparsely occupied. An enormous silver, extended body SUV, with a load of children dressed in beach attire, swerves sharply. The driver is attentive, fortunately, uncommonly, and swings safely past. She sounds her horn at the lunatic vehicle, which has not heeded the traffic signal, and continues to do so for many seconds thereafter. Hutch is deaf to this protest. Gun hand at his side, he looks over the trunk of the limo to the adjacent corner, where he sees someone familiar at the bus stop, someone whose eyes are fixed upon him. Strangely, this speck of human contact, as fleeting as it is, calms him. He steps back, bends down to place the pistol, and the enveloping shreds of blackened paper bag, inside the empty, unscathed sack. Having regained sufficient poise to recognize that the hot weapon is cocked and its magazine unspent, he thumbs the safety on before laboriously extending his reluctant fingers to release it.

The limo continues its slow progression across the southbound lanes of Lincoln Boulevard, nosing into northbound traffic. A fast approaching vehicle swerves to the right. The brilliantly white coupe escapes to continue on its way. Hutch stares at it, deaf to the steady horn that proclaims its operator's fright; his or her anger will come later. Hutch puts one hand to his ear, rubs it hard while working his jaw. He swallows. None of this helps.

He is vaguely aware of the tanker truck, which is several car lengths behind the coupe and likewise going too fast. With the limo well into the northbound lanes, the truck's driver reacts instinctively, but particularly badly. He, also, twists the wheel hard to the right, trying to avoid a direct impact. His heavy load of gasoline possesses too much momentum to allow this evasion. The fifth wheel groans. The trailer tank twists crazily, flips crosswise, and slams directly down onto the intruder. In his defense, as they would later determine, had the driver either endeavored to go left or even straight ahead, the result would have been essentially the same. He was certainly going too fast to stop.

Hutch has a peripheral impression of the bright red and dull gray boiling mass of the fireball, feels its sudden sear. Even from across the wide street, the heat is intense. He hunches against it, walking quickly, in the opposite direction up the rise. After a few paces, he escapes into the shelter of Seventh Court and wipes downward from brow to chin with one palm.

"Good thing not a lot of traffic on Lincoln," he thinks. He repeats it aloud as a test but can detect only a fuzzy rumble. He swallows hard several times, hoping that this and a pinkie again working at his ear canal will restore his hearing. It will take hours.

Out of sight to him, the Parks' limo, like an oversized beetle, yields to the weight of the tanker's full load. Gasoline pours over and into it. Glass, plastic, metal, and flesh are totally consumed. The high mounted cameras swivel down, belatedly capturing it all for later examination.

Alece, who had been asked to steam Park's suit coat before leaving and is waiting for the #3 to take her home, will later state what happened. She will report that she heard two loud bangs, "... or three, maybe," and that someone ran off. She will recount the big car's slow drift into traffic, her impression of the speeding southbound and northbound cars that were able to avoid it. She will describe the subsequent gasoline tanker that could not, its poor dead driver's valiant attempt, the explosion, and the fireball.

"I was scared. Thought I was in hell, God save me from it."

She will leave out a few details. Why not? Hutch had assuaged her covert anger and it cost her nothing. She will have no reason to reveal that the fleeing driver was Park's whore, a skinny bitch of a whore who looked down on her and spoke only Korean.

The gasoline burns hot enough and long enough to fuse the wreckage to the asphalt. Little information will be extracted from that wound. No additional reliable witnesses will come forth, no one with whom to vet Alece's account or from whom to learn something further about what had preceded the crash. The limo's driver could possibly add useful details, if she were to turn up. She never will. She will disappear as if she never existed, will return home or go to another city, another assignment. She, also, has escaped scrutiny by the high mounted tracking cameras, which instead followed the fire engine and only belatedly reoriented to dutifully record the drama of the tanker's explosion. They will provide a record, yes, but no explanation. It will be weeks before there are enough data for alternative interpretations.

