

RICK MALOY

## The Sin in the Cemetery

“**M**anley, rats! Over there.”

Manley stayed on his back under the shade of the ancient silver maple, lifted the bill of his baseball hat, and glanced up to locate the excited voice.

Directly above, Scorza dangled from a branch by one hand. The other hand held a buttered Kaiser roll, partially wrapped in deli paper. He shook the snack toward Section B. “Two of them,” he said, his gaze fixed in the distance. “They going to that new grave?”

He laughed as he pushed to his feet. “How the hell would I know, Monkey Boy?”

“Keep calling me that, douche bag,” Scorza said, “and you’re gonna wake up dead. Not kidding. Don’t care how big you are.”

The third grass cutter, Sullivan, hopped onto a nearby pipe railing.

Manley joined him. They teetered and scanned where Scorza was pointing.

“There,” Sullivan yelled. “Those?”

Without answering, Scorza dropped to the ground and took off on a steeplechase, vaulting and hurdling through a maze of grave beds, trees, headstones, and railings.

Knees flexed, Sullivan looked poised to join the hunt.

“Take it easy, College Boy,” Manley said, gripping the back of Sullivan’s denim shirt. “Too hot. That grave’s not going anywhere.” He stepped off the rail, dragging the gangly Sullivan with him like a life-sized ventriloquist’s dummy. “If it’s a cheap casket, they’ll be busy for a while. Relax.” He let go of the shirt and offered a cigarette from the pack he’d unrolled from the sleeve of his t-shirt.

Sullivan looked like he was smelling sewage. “I run. Remember?”

“Oh, yeah.” He tucked the cigarette over his ear and started walking. “Big time athlete. Scholarship.”

“Partial,” Sullivan said from half a stride behind, “and I’m not actually ‘College Boy’ until September.”

They dropped into single file on the bluestone path through the Braverman family plot.

“Hey, why do you call Scorza ‘Monkey Boy’? He really hates it.”

Manley kept walking, popped a finger into the air. “One, he looks like a monkey.” Second finger. “Two, he acts like a monkey.” Third finger. “And mostly, because he really hates it. Kinda fun watching him go into his Tasmanian Devil routine.” He bounced from boot to boot. “I’ll fuckin’ kill you, Manley,” he said in a screechy falsetto, “I’ll kill your mother. I’ll kill your fuckin’ dog.”

“That’s a pretty good Scorza,” Sullivan said, chuckling.

He stopped, rolled the cigarette off his ear, lit it. “Hey,” he said, pointing to Sarah Kontoff’s headstone, “think this one gets mispronounced once in a while?” The smoking match bounced off a cracked porcelain photograph of the dead woman.

Sullivan nodded, but said nothing.

Manley shrugged and started walking again. “Everyone else thinks it’s funny.”

“How long is this going to take?” Sullivan said as they got back onto a main road. He held his watch in front of Manley’s face. “Break’s only ten minutes. We’ve taken more than that already. Won’t Jake be making rounds pretty soon?”

“That lard-ass mutant won’t come out in this heat. Told you, relax.”

Birds whistled and twittered. Cicadas whined. Boots clomped to the rhythm set by Sullivan’s slapping arm, one whack to the leg for every second stride.

"Something bugging you, College Boy?"

"I don't know... Manley, how come Jews don't embalm?"

"Holy—" He tented a hand over his eyes. "Where do you come up with these?"

"Wouldn't that stop the rats?"

“So that’s it. You’re afraid of the rats.” He flicked Sullivan’s shoulder and hopped over a railing of the Beth Shalom Burial Society. “Short cut.”

“Wouldn’t say afraid.” Sullivan loped to catch up. “Not my favorite mammal. I’ll give you that.”

“Thought they were rodents.”

“Rodents are mammals.”

“‘Rodents are mammals’. Oh, look at me,” he said in a nasally voice. “Well, doesn’t matter. You’re afraid of them.”

“Go screw yourself.” After a few more strides, leg slapping resumed. “Cremation would work for sure. Why don’t they do that?”

“You know,” Manley said, shaking his head, “pointless crap like this is what made me quit school.”

“C’mon, you’re the one who told me visitors leave pebbles on the headstones as a sign of respect, so I know you know stuff.”

He slumped at the knees and shoulders, but kept walking. “Just not allowed. Okay? Must be a sin, or a sacrilege, or something.”

“Whose sin? I mean, the dead person can’t be blamed, and why would God care anyway? The soul’s the important part, and that’s already gone.”

“Sullivan. That’s Irish. You’re probably Catholic, right?”

“So? What’re you?”

Manley picked a pebble off Saul Meyerowitz, grunted as he whizzed it past a small clay pot resting on David Silverman. “Nothing.”

“Doesn’t mean you can’t think about stuff. Like... what about this? Rats are part of creation, too. You think God might want them to eat the bodies?”

“You’re an idiot. How the hell could anyone know that? Like being with a five-year-old. Daddy, how high is up?”

Sullivan stopped walking. “Manley, if you don’t know, just say so. People learn by asking questions. I like to understand things, and this place is like a different planet to me. You’re here the longest. Why wouldn’t I ask you?”

After squinting at Sullivan for a few seconds, he exhaled noisily. “From what I can tell, their book says if they die before noon, they have to be planted the same day. If it’s after noon, then it’s the next day. Either way, I’m pretty sure a body’s gotta be buried. In three years, I never seen an urn in this dump.” He spread his arms and started walking again. “Happy, College Boy?”

Sullivan took one stride and halted again. “This ‘College Boy’ stuff. Is that because I’m some outta place Poindexter? Or is it a half-assed congratulations for trying to improve my life?”

“You figure it out.” He detoured to a nearby gravebed, fished through clumps of earth. After tossing several aside, he picked up a baseball-sized nugget and hefted it. Grinning, he nodded at Scorza, who was now visible, sitting lotus style on a chest-high tombstone.

They began walking again.

“Tell me something, Manley. How many girls you met here in the last three years?”

“What?” He stopped, jaw hanging.

“When you go to a club or a bar, or wherever you spend your paycheck, what do you tell them you do? The girls, I mean. Ever thought about what you’re gonna tell them in five years? Ten years?”

He stared, chewed his lips, floated the dirt bomb from hand to hand. On one of the catches, he cocked his arm, then whirled and side-armed it. “Heads up, Monkey Boy.”

The grenade burst against the polished granite, right below Scorza's butt. Sandy clay washed onto his white t-shirt and shielding arms. He shook the grit from his shirt and hair, turned toward them. A smile stretched above and below his braces. “They went in there,” he said, pointing backwards. “Small hole in the corner. Don't know how many's down there, but I saw four.” He turned and locked his eyes on the grave. “Manley, they're eating that dead Jew right now, aren't they?”

Bent onto the monument, he rested his chin on his forearms, stared at the mounded earth twenty feet away. “I guess. They come and go for a few days.”

“Oh, man.” Scorza snapped his fingers. “Be right back.” He balanced himself off the top of the gravestone, then launched into the air with a pop of his legs. Before he even hit the ground, his feet were running back to where they left their mowers.

Sullivan jumped onto the vacancy Scorza left on Sarah Kleinerman.

Manley wandered over to the new grave and read the paper card in the temporary marker. “Tovah Finkelstein. Seventy-six.” He smiled as he jogged toward Sullivan and hopped onto Harriet Warshafsky. “Not something I'd consider prime eating material.”

“Why are we waiting?” Sullivan said after a brief quiet. “Jake’s gonna catch us.”

“Wanna go? Go.”

Hands rubbing hard on his thighs, Sullivan scanned the area non-stop. He froze. “Someone’s coming.”

Scorza, grunting and laughing, appeared from behind Isaac Ishker. “This is gonna be great.” He lowered his spare jug of gasoline to the ground and flexed his fingers. “Goddam thing’s a load.”

“You’re messed up, Monkey Boy,” he said. “You know that?”

“Eat me. This is gonna be un-fuckin-believable.”

Sullivan looked puzzled. “What’s going on?”

Excitement glittered on Scorza's face. "Gonna give those furry little fuckers a taste of hell."

Sullivan's face went blank. "You gonna let him do this, Manley?"

"Go fuck yourself," Scorza said as he waddled to the grave, two hands lugging the fuel between his legs. "Faggot."

"Manley," Sullivan's voice got louder, "this isn't right. It's not just rats down there."

"Ain't my call," he said with a shrug.

Scorza reached the grave, dropped onto all fours, guided the spout into the hole. He bit his lower lip as gasoline glugged into the tunnel.

"That's enough!" Manley jumped from Harriet Warshafsky and charged a few steps. He stopped advancing when Scorza scrambled in retreat and dragged the can with him.

"I already got a mother, Manley" Scorza said, stuffing a stopper into the hose. "How 'bout you eat shit and die."

Middle finger held high, Manley returned to Harriet Warshafsky, ducked behind. "College Boy," he said, pointing to the rear of Sarah Kleinerman, "you may want to be back there. That was a lot of gas."

"Please, stop this. He does what you say."

Manley crouched behind the monument, said nothing, kept his eyes on the grave.

Squatting in an escape position, Scorza lit the torch he'd made by cramming a scrap of newspaper onto a dead branch. He touched the flaming tip to the soaked hole.

The earth shuddered.

Scorza toppled back onto his elbows. Flames spurted into the air, followed by gushes of black smoke and a quick series of smaller flare-ups. After the eruptions ended, a steady fire burned weakly in the hole.

"Jesus Christ!" Scorza scrambled to his feet. "Jesus Christ!" His arms and legs bounced like a dancing marionette. He raced in ragged circles and figure eights, whooping, laughing, eyes dazzled.

"Shit." He raced to the snaking column of smoke, snatched Scorza by both arms and shook him. "Knock it off and listen."

"Manley. Holy fuck."

"Shut up. Grab that can and get back to your mower. Jake shows up? You don't know anything."

“Again. “ Scorza said, legs jiggling, eyes ablaze. “Wanna do it again.”

“Do what I tell you!” His open hand cracked against the side of Scorza’s head, launching him onto one hopping leg.

“Hey!” Scorza rubbed above his ear as he backed away. “Who do you think— You’re fuckin’ dead, pal.”

One quick step toward him made Scorza grab the container and scurry into the sea of gravestones.

“Start kicking dirt on the fire,” he told the wide-eyed Sullivan. “I’ll make sure there’s nothing left to show we were here.”

“Manley,” Sullivan’s hand cupped over his mouth and nose, “Smell that? Is that her?”

“Have to smack you, too?” He shoved him toward the grave.

Sullivan approached the fire from upwind. Small kicks quickly grew to furious side-swipes that heaped waves of earth onto the hole. Even after the smoke was capped, he scraped more on top, panting and mumbling.

He yanked the still-kicking Sullivan away from the grave and broke into a trot toward their mowers. “Gotta go. Now.”

Sullivan took one step toward safety, but immediately returned to the grave.

“You’re on your own, genius,” he shouted over his shoulder.

“I’m coming. It’s just—” Sullivan dropped to one knee and made a speedy sign of the cross. “Dear God, Mrs. Finkelstein, and rats, forgive us for sinfully, or sacrilegiously, or cruelly interfering with any part of your divine plan in this place today. Amen.” After another quick sign of the cross, he took off.

Manley was already jogging, but when Sullivan reached him, the pace clicked up to a jailbreak. “That was...pretty weird...,” he said between gasps, “you praying...to the rats...like that.”

“You know, Manley,” he said, eyes forward, no trace of effort in his voice, “I think it’s too late for you already. You violate that woman, but I’m weird?” He shook his head, shifted into a new gear, and left him far behind.

“Me?” he screamed with his last bit of breath. Feet slapping, arms flailing, he staggered to a stop. After a few steps on jelly-legs, he propped his hands on his knees, took breaths in groaning, open-mouthed heaves.

Ahead, Sullivan had reached his mower and was already working.

“It was Scorza,” he shouted toward the droning machine.

Sullivan sliced a path down an embankment and disappeared.

“Wasn’t me,” he hollered through cupped hands at the fading hum of the engine. He paced, panted through bared teeth, jabbed a finger in Sullivan’s direction. “Was you, too. Think that stupid prayer saved you? Huh, you stupid asshole? And all those questions. Supposed to make you look smarter than everyone? Smarter than me? Better than me?”

Still wobbly, he tottered into some nearby shade, swept a pile of pebbles off Deborah Weintraub before sitting. “‘Already too late’. Oughta kick his ass.” Elbows on his knees, head dangling, he fished out a cigarette, lit it, left it hanging on his lip, cocked his head so only one eye had to close against the stinging slither of smoke. After only a few drags, he ground the butt under his boot. “Son of a bitch,” he whispered as he fell onto all fours and groomed through the grass for pebbles. Once the tiny pyramid was restored, he stood, slapped the knees and seat of his jeans, returned to the road.

The tree-canopied rises, dips, and curves of Hirsch Steinman Cemetery brought him to the white clapboard ranch house that served as the office. He angled across the lawn toward the small front porch. Under its cover, he paused and stared at the knob of the half-glass door, the one he'd gone through every payday for three years.

“Screw ‘em. They’ll know soon enough.” He pivoted and headed up the concrete walk. Before getting halfway to the street, he heard the door open.

“Want something, Manley?” Jake’s bass voice boomed at his back.

His stride never changed.

“Boy, I’m talking to you. What are you doing here? Why aren’t you working?”

No slowing or turning. When he reached the short pillars at the end of the walk, instead of taking the left that led back to his mower, he went right.

“Where the hell you going, goddammit? You sick or something? Manley, you want to get fired?”

The office door slammed as he strolled under the fancy ironwork spanning the exit. “No more questions today,” he said, pulling the baseball cap low over his eyes.