



JEFF SOMERS

**THE
BOUNCER**
a novel

The Bouncer

2.

I knocked, waited a few seconds, then pounded on the door with authority. A moment passed, and then the deadbolt was undone and the door opened as far as the chain inside would allow.

Two green eyes, puffy and crusted with unfortunate mascara, squinted out at me. “If it ain’t The Mad King, in the fuckin’ flesh.”

The Mad King. Jill had called me that a lot during high school.

“You straight?” I asked.

“Not since Althea Ramirez kissed me in eighth grade,” Pills said. Then she sighed. “Straight-ish. What’s up?”

“Work.”

“What do you need?”

“Company, mainly,” I said. “But a second set of eyes. It pays, a little.”

She bit her lip. “One minute.”

She walked away. A moment later, a pair of blue eyes replaced hers. “Mads. Good to see you.”

I nodded. “Damien.”

“I have a nick-name, Mads,” he said.

I nodded. “I will never call you by that ridiculous, self-awarded name.”

The door shut. A moment later the chain was undone and it swung open. Damien was wearing an extremely fluffy pink bathrobe. His hair was unnaturally blonde and spiky, and he had the bloated, breathless look of someone who hadn’t thought deeply about their diet or level of exercise. I was conscious of being one of those born-again sober assholes who’d started eating right and doing push-ups and so thought he’d solved the mysteries of the universe, so I’d learned not to start conversations about someone else’s lifestyle. They never went well.

He swept an arm and said “Welcome!”

I stepped inside. The apartment was a one-bedroom I always thought of as a Divorced Dad Standard. It opened into a combination kitchenette and living area that ambitious real estate agents would call ‘open concept’ with their fingers crossed behind their backs. It was sparsely furnished and filthy, with ancient take-out containers piled on the kitchen counters and empty bottles and full ashtrays everywhere.

I contemplated Damien. Some men gain nicknames through feats of strength and heroism. Some gain nicknames through squalid, humiliating acts of self-debasement. And some men, like Damien, acquired nicknames through the simple expediency of asking you politely to use the

name of their choice, which in this instance was, for some goddamn reason, *Trim*. This struck me as a name someone thought was pretty cool when they were stoned in high school.

He looked awful; his skin was waxy, he was barefoot, and the hair was a little extra for a middle-aged guy living in a shitty apartment in Bergen City with a girl he'd met because she sold him drugs.

A stack of papers, eye-level on a bookshelf, caught my eye. They looked like they'd been typed on an old-fashioned manual typewriter. I leaned over and glanced at the top page:

'Pica'

how much lip balm have I eaten, do you think

gumming up the works

combining with crayons and pennies consumed over years

forming a machine of random purpose

powered by the wave-like undulations of my

bowels

Trim thought he was a poet. The two things Trim told everyone he met was that he'd once robbed an office, and that he was a poet who someday planned to spark revolution with sixteen perfect lines of verse.

"So," he said, pushing his hands into the frayed pockets of his robe, "did we come here to measure our criminal exploit dicks, or is Jill the Pill finally coming to her senses about the sexual

proposition I made to her—” he paused to make a show of doing calculations in his head “—twelve years ago?”

From the other room, Jill deadpanned “That’s why I brought Maddie.”

Trim threw himself into an old, dusty-looking couch and picked up a video game controller. “So what are we plotting? Crimes? Are we plotting crimes? I hope it’s a robbery. That’s my specialty.”

“Do *not* tell that story again!” Jill shouted.

“Did she tell you I once organized a robbery?” Trim said. “I’m hard core.”

“No time for this bullshit,” I said.

“Boy, did you come to the wrong place,” Trim said. “Bullshit is pretty much what I do.”

Jill emerged from her room in her usual uniform: Black jeans and boots, black too-big leather jacket she’d stolen from a party ten years before. Her shirt said SINCERE ENGINEER. Her hair looked like she’d cut it herself using a kitchen knife and a toaster as a mirror, the white streak hanging over her left eye. She looked fucking haggard. When I’d met her, we’d been sixteen years old and I remembered thinking she was the hottest girl I’d ever seen, her dark skin flawless, the white streak so goddamn cute. Now she looked faded and stretched tight, like everything inside her was too hot, cooking her from the inside out.

She walked over to Trim. “Keys.”

Trim began fishing in his robe’s pockets. He pulled a huge automatic handgun from one and set it casually on the coffee table. “There’s a rental fee.”

Jill snorted. “That piece of shit? You should pay me *not* to bring it back.”

He produced a set of keys and held them out. “The Blue Ruin is a classic. It’s also going through a complicated period in regards to its wiring, so none of the idiot lights mean anything. Be careful.”

She grabbed the keys and whirled, stalking towards me. Jill Pilowsky walked like she was angry at the ground. It was intimidating.

“When was the last time you slept?” I asked. “Last month?”

“Sleep’s for closers,” she said. “Come on.”

“Have fun committing crimes!” Trim shouted.

Jill shut the door with an irritated grunt. “I don’t know how you stand that guy,” I said.

She shrugged as we walked down the hallway. “He pays the rent. Like, literally: It’s his place, and he lets me crash.” She sighed. “And there’s a weird charm, I gotta admit. He grows on you. So, what’s the job?”

“Delivering a brick,” I said. “Shouldn’t be hard.”

We headed down the dark, narrow stairs. “Carrie know you’re still calling me in on these things? She’s not my biggest fan. Meaning she thinks we used to fuck and she thinks we *still* fuck.”

I didn’t answer, because Jill was right on all counts. We walked to The Blue Ruin, a rusted and sagging old Nova, the late 1970s clinging to it like moss, and climbed in. It was never locked. Trim liked to say it was because of his fearsome reputation as a crime lord, but the truth

was some cars simply couldn't be stolen. Thieves would get in and just feel silly about the whole thing. Damien could leave it running with the keys in the ignition somewhere and come back a week later to find it untouched. It was the sort of car that people would return to you if you abandoned it in their neighborhoods, a nasty note left under the windshield wiper.

It started up surprisingly smooth. On the radio, they were talking about some town where the kids had all gone crazy and started tearing everything apart, taking down street signs and setting buildings on fire.

“Where to?”

“Down by the tunnel.”

She put the Ruin in gear. Bergen City on a cold night was calm and quiet, lights blazing from windows. I felt the weight and bulk of the envelope in my jacket and imagined for a moment I was still seventeen, eighteen years old and we were headed to a party. Some City University party where Jill would make a scene and distract everyone while I broke into the bathroom and cleaned out all the scrips. We'd pre-game in the car listening to NOFX and show up raging.

As we drove, I thought it was incredible that for three years, maybe four, I'd seen Jill Pilowsky every day, and spent most of that day with her. We'd meet up before school to smoke a bowl and sit together in most classes. We ate lunch together, we napped through fifth and sixth periods, we sat in the park until it was dark, we raided each other's fridges and sat in each other's basements, ignoring and avoiding our parents and guardians. My basement, when there was one in the shitty building we were in, was better, even if it was a dirty shared space. At her house her stepfather Frank was forever coming down the stairs to get beers from the fridge, always making

a show of counting them, always making a joke he obviously thought was hilarious, always studying Jill in a way that made her quiet, that made her stare at the carpet. A fucking cliché.

At my house, we were always alone. My father making the rounds at the bars and clubs, laying bets, rolling over debts, running whatever grifts and cons he could manage, my mother always out with someone else, sometimes for days or weeks, until Mats went to retrieve her, throwing punches while she cackled, a sheet wrapped around her, or until she got kicked out and came home, humming, red hair up in a messy-but-precise way, scrubbing the kitchen like a real person, like a normal mother. Or what I imagined a normal mother was like, having had no direct experience.

We smoked and drank and talked, and talked, and talked. She'd showed me the cuts on her arms and told me she didn't know why she did it, she didn't want to die, not really, and the cuts weren't going to do that job anyway.

We'd kissed, once, a long, lingering touch. I'd rolled on top of her, and I could remember the light feel of the hairs on her face, soft and invisible but not to me, not in that moment.

And then she'd burst into tears, wracking, anguished sobs, and that had been that. Fucking scarring. You don't come back from that. I'd rolled off and sat hunched over, miserable, until she crawled the one foot over to me and pushed herself into my lap, her arms going around my neck, her face pressed into my shirt, her body quaking with every fresh wave of tears.

We'd never kissed again.

"All right," she said. "Why am I here, your highness? What's tonight's adventure?"

"Mick and Queenies, you know he's got silent partners."

“If you’re telling me that Queenies, a bar that’s been in continuous operation in Bergen City since the 1500s, is connected to organized crime, I refuse to believe it.”

“Fucking hilarious. Mick’s 49 percenter is Abban Spillaine. This goes back to when the Spillaines ran this town. But the Spillaines run shit, now. Abban’s eighty years old and he’d basically retired. Esmundo Brusca and the Dominican syndicate have carved up everything. The Spillaines can’t really protect Mick, so he cuts Brusca in on the side.” I put one hand out the window to feel the cold air.

This is secret. The Spillaines—who are thugs in nice clothes who think because they murdered their way into money they’re a rare breed—wouldn’t be amused if they found out about Mick’s side deal. It could start a war. This was always how it was with criminals; they were worse than high school kids, insanely jealous. Mick knows if he uses someone connected to pay his tax to Brusca, word would get back to Abban Spillaine, and there would be very many tear-stained diary entries and he’d find himself disinvited from all of the Spillaines’ birthday parties.

“You’re not a soldier, but you’re an idiot,” Jill said. “You’re doing a soldier’s work without the hazard pay.”

I nodded. “Mick’s been good to me.” I looked at her. “And that’s why you’re here.”

“Yayy!” she sing-songed, steering the boat onto Kennedy and heading downtown. “This is a paying gig, right?”

That was my girl. “Of course. You’re in for a note.”

She nodded, pulling out a vape and sending a cloud of sweet smoke out the window. I cleared my throat. "I heard about Frank," I said.

She didn't say anything for several seconds, her eyes on the road. Then she nodded. "Yup. Frank, he dead."

"You go to the funeral?"

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Her mouth worked, as if words were trying to worm their way out. "Lydia called, of course, and asked me to. I told her the same thing I said ten years ago. You *stayed* with that piece of shit. She can continue to go fuck herself." She drove with white knuckles for a bit, then suddenly laughed. "She told me I'm in that motherfucker's will, which is hilarious, the idea that guy has anything to give. Or that I'd want it. He can eat *alllll* the dicks."

I smiled a little, remembering a conversation. "He's down there right now with a conveyor belt of dicks being shoved into his mouth."

She smacked the steering wheel, a little too animated, too manic, too charged up to be sober. "Fuckin' *right*."

We drove in silence, then, imagining Jill's dead stepfather eating all the dicks the universe had ever created. No traffic, we slid down Bergen City's gullet and turned left on Newark, then took the turns as they came, worming our way close to the Tunnel. I read out the address again, and she found her way to a an old brick warehouse, broken windows and a single light over a battered metal door. The rusted sign outside read *O'Harrihan's Pest Control*. If I had any respect for the humor and self-awareness of your average criminal, I would have been impressed. As it was, I chalked it up to coincidence.

“O’Harrihan,” Jill said, opening the car door. “That sign is fifty years old if it’s a day.”

I patted the brick in my jacket and nodded. “Hang back,” I said. “This is supposed to be friendly.”

She nodded, pulling what looked like the world’s tiniest gun from her jacket and checking it over.

“Jesus, did you make that yourself? From a bar of soap or something?” It was delightful.

She held up the peashooter. “The Mosquito has served me well, *hombre*. She’s like me: So small big strong idiots like yourself never notice her, but she has a mighty roar.” She shoved it back into place and smiled at me, wide and bright, offering up a big thumb’s up. I’d made many mistakes in my life, but I’d never underestimated Jill Pilowsky. I’d known her for fifteen years and I still checked my pockets every time we were in the same room.

Everything was still. You could hear the tunnel traffic a few blocks away like ocean waves, but otherwise we might have been alone in the world. I pounded on the door. In the stillness it sounded like shotgun blasts.

A moment later an enormous man in a balloon-like winter coat opened the door. I remembered him from previous visits. He was round and breathed with his mouth open. Everyone called him *Choko* and he had a lot of gold in his teeth. He glanced at me, then at Jill, and jerked his head by way of invitation.

Inside was a tiny little entryway area, then another doorway that opened up to the cavernous interior. It was dark and freezing, just like outside. A few dozen feet inside a couple of folding tables had been set up under the one light bulb burning. Four or five guys sat at them, counting

enormous piles of cash. They would grab a stack with rubber-gloved hands and run it through a counter, write down the result, then hand it to the next guy who did the same thing. Then they handed the stack and both numbers to the guy at the end of the table. He made an entry on his laptop and pushed the stack into a garbage bag.

There were six garbage bags already tied off and stacked off to the side. The problem with being a criminal wasn't that it didn't pay well. The problem was it paid *too* well. Curiously, money was useless when you didn't have enough and equally when you had absolutely enormous amounts of it.

"Where's Ricky?" I said, loud. In my experience you had a few seconds after you walked into a room to set the tone. If you stood around waiting to be noticed, people thought you were a punk.

A new guy, wearing a luxurious-looking cream turtleneck and a pair of tight leather pants, his arms and neck inked up in bold, comic book colors, stood up. "Ain't here. What you got?"

The counters didn't pause, but they all looked at each other, and I got that hinky feeling. I smiled. "I'll wait. When's he back?"

The new guy walked around the tables and came towards me. "What you got? I'll take it. Ricky's not here tonight. I am."

I nodded. The two keys to dealing with criminals were: Remember that they will always rob you if they thought they could, and never stop smiling. Smile even if they've stabbed you in the balls. "Nah, I'll wait. Ricky knows I'm coming."

Now the new guy glanced at Jill. I'd sown the seed of doubt—maybe I *did* know Ricky, maybe I *was* expected. Maybe robbing me blind wouldn't be a great idea.

I followed his gaze. Jill was just staring at him, her posture relaxed. “Hola chica,” the new guys said, grinning. “How you doin’?”

“Don't fucking talk to me,” she said.

His smile took over his whole face, and almost made him charming. “Oh, okay, it's like that, huh?” He gestured at me. “Well, what if I take whatever your boyfriend's holding? You talk to me then, I put him on his ass?”

The other guys laughed, and the new guy turned to throw a grin at them. I kept smiling.

Jill, never one to pass up an opportunity to throw a chaos grenade into any situation, smiled brightly. “Let's find out!”

The new guy looked back at me. “Problem is, I don't know you,” he said. “So I don't trust you.”

I nodded. I could have explained that I only dealt with Ricky because that's who I was told to deal with, that Mick's arrangement with Brusca was off-book so we didn't offend anyone, that as a result the participants were kept to a minimum. But I didn't bother. Instead, I said “Problem is, you don't know me. Which means Ricky don't trust *you*.”

Mission accomplished: That pissed him off. He glanced at the counters—who didn't pause or bat an eye—then started walking towards me. I dropped my hands and spread my legs to get a

better center of gravity, but before he took three steps Jill moved. She leaped, sweeping his legs out from under him, then straddled him as she reached into her jacket.

I took a half step forward, reaching out towards her. “Jill! Don’t—”

She pulled the peashooter, pushed it into the new guy’s face, and pulled the trigger.