

THE HIGH-TENSION MAGAZINE

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DON MARDICK

Crime as a fine art is being sorely neglected these days, as much by its practitioners as by its authors. Newspaper embroidery fails to hide the prosaic texture of most current transgressions—usually of the hit-and-run variety, lacking the finesse, forethought or flair characterizing superior craftsmanship. The same faults mar today's output of crime stories, whether appearing in the pulps, slicks or our neighbors, the pocket-sizers. The blame? Mass production, we guess.

All the more refreshing, then, to come on a crime yarn as deft as this one. Hunted and hunter pursue their jobs with true artistry—as does the author, a Philadelphia schoolteacher who, to disguise his penchant for shockers, writes under several pseudonyms.

WHEN HE made out the car topping the distant hill, Conroy went into swift but deliberate action. He stowed the binoculars far back in the china closet, crushed out the cigarette idling in his fingers, and moved energetically through the hall. The radio still muttered along about the prison break, and the phrase "... thousand dollars in cash" floated after him.

That would be a rehash of the payroll robbery, he decided. In the gleaming kitchen the deep-freeze lid swung up at his touch, revealed tiered rows of containers to the very

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top, swung gently down again. He examined the packages thawing on the table, touched the coffee pot on the electric stove, peered through the little round window of the dishwasher at the foaming suds.

He shrugged and shook his head, as if to say: *Best I can do—let's hope it'll be good enough.* Going back through the hall, he stopped to glance into the bedroom on the right and the bathroom on the left, and to close both doors. With the hall door also closed behind him, Conroy drew up the wheelchair near the oblong table, and made a last scrutiny of the living room.

Well, he was as ready as he'd ever be, he figured. Carefully he adjusted the rough blanket around the bulge of the automatic made near his right leg, and rubbed off the slight sweating in the palms of his hands. Then he got out pipe and matches, and prepared to light up.

*A prison break—a wheelchair—a weird
brace of coppers. Mix 'em up with some
guns and you've got a recipe for frozen dough!*

TO STAND ON

He waited for a second knock and called "Come in," settling back in the chair. He was putting the flaming match to the tobacco when a man stepped in, closed the door, and leaned against it. The visitor kept his hands in his overcoat pockets, and talked slow and soft.

"Anybody go by here the last couple hours?"

Conroy waved the match into smoke. "Depends on who you're looking for. And why."

He watched the visitor's eyes, shrouded under a slouch hat, as they methodically catalogued the room. His glance rested on Conroy's close-cropped hair and sallow face under dark glasses, on his concealing blanket. He inspected the polished wheelchair and the smooth bright linoleum on the floor, his nostrils widening just a little as he caught the faint oily odor of the heater purring in the far corner.

Then he moved his head in a slow circle, taking in the rest of it: the radio-phonograph-television set now crooning a commercial, the closed hall door, the desk with the battered Sears, Roebuck catalogue on it, the dumbbells and wall-exercisers lined up beside him. He examined the window glowing with mountain sunset, and finished up with Conroy's long, powerful arms and broad chest.

The visitor's voice stayed casual. "You been listening to the news broadcasts?"

"Sure," answered Conroy. "Why?"

A board creaked warningly in the hall. The visitor's hands came out of the overcoat pockets, a revolver in one of them, and with heavy, unhurried tread he stepped across the room. Conroy smiled, in the knowing manner of a spectator watching performers in a play.

He shouted suddenly, loud enough to be heard through the door. "Get

out!" Then he reached in under the blanket for the automatic. The visitor stretched for the knob, but the door smashed in on him, knocking away his weapon and spinning him over against the desk and down on his knees. Another man jumped through the open door, the gun in his hand weaving slightly like the head of a snake.

Awkwardly, the man on the floor dove at him, and the two locked in struggle. The gun exploded, dropped to the floor. A thrashing foot caromed it across the room. Conroy, sniffing at the odor of gunpowder and smiling in the wheel chair, spoke without raising his voice.

"Break it up."

They pulled apart. Conroy cheerfully waved the automatic from one man to the other.

"Reminds me of visitor's day," he said. "Only they didn't allow guns." He studied the flushed, panting newcomer, a smaller and younger man. "Now, explain yourselves."

The second visitor glared at the radio, just then emitting low, yearning moans from a blues singer. He ran one hand through a shock of curly hair, tucked a loose-hanging muffler back under his topcoat collar, and exploded into angry speech.

"What goes on? I heard him holler. The door was closed. You took long enough in here. I was sure you had him."

The first man seemed to understand the implied criticism in his tone, without at all resenting it. He kept his gaze on Conroy in the wheel chair, and said, "We both thought

just about the same thing, I guess."

The other man hunted around the floor until he found where the two guns lay. "If you'd moved a little faster, it wouldn't've happened." He snapped back to Conroy, standing like a coiled spring ready to unwind at the first chance. "Your name Conroy?"

"What if it is?"

"We're looking for your brother Jack. He here?"

"Nope," said Conroy.

"Was he here?"

"Nope." Conroy's replies were prompt and cheerful.

"Then what's the idea of hollering out like that? And pulling the gun?"

Conroy laughed. "You guys think because I live in a wheel chair you can parade through here like the Gestapo or something? I'll yell out and I'll pull a gun anytime I feel like it. It's *my* house, and you can't make free with it. Now, who the heck are you?"

"I represent Acme Insurance. The name is Prentice." He made it sound like the presentation of a celebrity. A slight nod served to introduce his companion. "Davidson, River City police force. Your brother Jack's busted out of prison."

"I know. Heard it on the radio. But how do I know you're really cops?"

Prentice looked disgusted. "How do you—? Say, you crazy? I got identification right here—"

"Keep your hands down," Conroy broke in. "I ain't taking chances. I don't see too well with these glasses, and I ain't letting you paw around

in your pockets, either, for maybe another gun."

Frantically Prentice turned to Davidson. "What're you standing there like a hunk of rock for? Can't you see it's a stall? Jack Conroy's been here and gone. There's traces all around the place. *He's* just trying to hold us here. Giving his brother time to bolt." He took a step forward.

"Don't either of you move," warned Conroy. Haven't fired a gun for some time, but don't suppose I'd miss at this range."

Unmoved, Davidson had been watching him all the while, from under his slouch hat, through slitted eyes that looked yellow in the fading light. Without turning his head, he spoke to Prentice. "What traces?"

"Yeah," Conroy chimed in. "Cops're supposed to be keen at clues and stuff. What traces?"

Words poured out of Prentice in an excited stream of pride in himself and contempt for the others. "There's a big deep-freeze back there in the kitchen. About a dozen packages of the frozen stuff out on the table. And some canned goods. Just like if Jack was packing up a grubstake.

"Coffee pot on the stove's still warm. Dishwasher's working. I stopped it and found *two* of everything, like he'd been eating with Jack. Bathroom's all wet from a shower, towel's damp, floor's wet. And looka there!" He pointed dramatically at the oblong table beside Conroy, but neither Davidson nor Conroy followed his finger. "That ash tray's full of *cigarette* ashes. *He* smokes a pipe!"

As if to corroborate him, Conroy calmly took the pipe from his mouth, and frowned judiciously at the curling smoke-wreaths.

"You sound like a cop at that. Only a dumb one. Can't I make coffee? Can't I thaw out frozen food for my own supper? Can't I take a shower or throw a clothes-hanger on the bed? Can't I smoke cigarettes *and* a pipe? Heck, can't I have visitors who smoke cigarettes and have coffee in my kitchen?"

Davidson stayed silent. Prentice shouted scornfully, "Then what's all the palaver about? And the gun? You're obstructing justice and you know it. You put up that automatic and stop this tom-foolishness!"

He tried to take another forward step, but Conroy's hand moved slightly over and upward, and he stopped in his tracks.

Conroy said mildly, "I'm in my rights. You fellows remember to bring along a search warrant?"

Prentice turned fiercely again on Davidson. "How come *you're* taking it so calm and quiet? Don't feel too interested in meeting up with Jack after all, eh? Well, *I* am! I ain't too old or too close to retiring. *My* record ain't about closed and I ain't made *my* pile. I aim to get Jack Conroy and get him *first*. We got to take this guy and—"

Davidson talked to Conroy right through Prentice's tirade. "Traces could be fakes."

"Fakes?" The unbelieving echo came from Prentice.

Davidson nodded slowly, talking to Conroy as if Prentice weren't

there. "That window faces west, and it's open country between here and the hilltop. You could've seen us coming. With coffee already heating and the shower running, you had plenty of time to turn them off, lay out the foods, get your pipe ready to light up just as I came in so I'd be sure to notice it. The ash trays you could've been filling up a long time in advance."

He uttered each sentence with care, like a man walking up stairs and testing every step. "You knew there were two of us. You yelled because you knew we'd think the other man was Jack Conroy. Pulling the gun is just another part of the act. We're *supposed* to think you want to hold us here. We're *supposed* to try to get away fast after Jack."

Conroy kept his arm steady on the rest, his blanketed legs immobile. But he knew he was puffing more deeply and sweat was again moistening his palms. He said, "Why the heck would I do all that?"

Davidson talked on, ignoring the question, ignoring the way Prentice blinked his eyes and dropped his lower jaw in surprise. "Prentice didn't mention clothes-hangers, but you did. So you knew they were out on the bed. You'd have removed traces like that if you were really protecting your brother. But you just left them around, every last clue and suggestion you'd had a visitor, and *pretended* to be lying about it."

Conroy's eyes glittered with challenge, but he only said, "So?"

"So there are several possibilities. You could be expecting your brother,

and trying to get rid of us by making us think he's already been here."

Conroy leaned back, relaxed, rubbing his free hand gently along the smooth, polished armrest, registering surprise.

"Jack? He wouldn't come here. He knows the insurance people've been watching me ever since the payroll robbery three years ago. Hoping Jack left the loot with me, maybe. But he didn't." His voice became confidential, friendly. "I'll tell you. Jack and me, we never did get along. This'd be the last place he'd ever come to after breaking out of stir. No, sir. No fatted calf waiting for Jack around here!"

"Trying to put one over on us, eh?" It was Prentice speaking. "I thought there was something flukey around here. That means we stay right here and wait for him."

Conroy said, "You'll have a long wait, boys. A *mighty* long wait. Jack's *never* gonna come here. I told you that already."

Davidson moved one thick arm in a slow, embracing movement. "All this modernizing. Ramps front and back, dishwasher, freezer, radio-television, exercisers, heater. Runs into money. Jack broke out of stir right after these injuries of yours. Heard you were making a splash since you left the hospital, and came up here to see if you'd crossed him up."

Conroy pityingly clucked his tongue. "More pipe-dreams, copper. Fellow drove the car that hit me, *he's* paying for all this. All I know is, the bank notified me a man deposited fifty grand in my name. Con-

science money, see? He doesn't want a hit-and-run rap, but he does want to go to heaven. So he works it so I can live in clover." Conroy looked down at the automatic, shrugged, dropped it into his lap. "Cops or not, I told you fellows to get out of my house and I mean it. You can do your waiting for Jack outside."

Prentice scurried across the room to grab at the fallen guns, and tossed one to Davidson, who caught it and held it loosely.

"Then again," said Davidson in the same matter-of-fact tone, "Jack might still be here, hiding some place, and that's why you tried to get rid of us."

Conroy, leaning abruptly forward, waved his pipe at Prentice. "He rummaged through my place. Where you think Jack could be hiding?"

"He ain't in this house," Prentice said angrily, as though in self-defence. "I looked." He eyed both the other men now, in turn, the squat figure with the shadowed face and the erect body and pale face in the wheel chair, like a spectator at a duel.

Davidson said, "Or, you might be Jack Conroy yourself."

Prentice cried, "What?"

Conroy relaxed again with a twisted smile. "You're talking through your hat. You got pictures of Jack, don't you? And a description?"

The persistent voice probed on. "You could fit. Shaved head, prison-pallor, dark glasses on your eyes, sitting in a chair with half of you under a blanket."

"Holy cow!" cried Prentice. "Then

where's—? That's it! You could've disposed of a cripple easy. Anywhere out there, dead and planted, maybe. You could've figured his chair'd be a good hideout." He strode over to the wheel chair. "I know one way to find out."

Conroy offered no resistance. "You're gonna eat crow, copper. I can't move below my waist."

Prentice's hand yanked away the blanket, flipping the automatic in a wide arc through the air and onto the smooth floor near Davidson's legs.

Conroy's legs were thin and withered. For a long moment, the only sound was the radio pleading for an early visit to an advertising dentist. Conroy, watching Davidson, noticed no sign of disappointment in the broad, blank face.

"You cops are too suspicious." Conroy carefully replaced the blanket, smoothing away its wrinkles with his palms. "My head was shaved in the hospital. That's where I got my complexion and my glasses. This wheel chair I got from Sears, Roebuck. I ain't my brother Jack, and I ain't disposed of or planted." His voice took on edge. "I ain't an easy mark, either. I got a trainer coming in here twice a week. I know a little judo. I do plenty exercising. I can make it tough for anybody gets inside my reach." He pounded his clenched fists once on the arm of the chair, decisively. "Make up your minds, boys. If Jack's been here and gone, you lost twenty minutes, and the sun's down. If he's coming, you can go camp outside all night or all year, for all I care."

Prentice turned again to Davidson. "Quite an egg you laid there," he said bitterly. "Now we're right back where we started from."

Conroy nodded in matter-of-fact agreement. "And wasted lots of time. You'll need floodlights and bloodhounds to find Jack now." He emptied his pipe, clacking it against the ash tray in a kind of final punctuation. "Mind if I get my supper now? Kinda late. Sorry I can't invite you to join me. Just show yourselves out."

His touch on the guide-wheels sent his chair rolling smoothly forward toward the hall door. Prentice moved aside for him, but Davidson didn't budge.

Conroy pressed the hand-brake, stopping the chair inches from Davidson's feet. "Well?" Conroy challenged him.

With disgusted finality, Prentice spoke over Conroy's head. "Looks like a wash-out. I guess we'll make tracks."

He put up his gun and swung around to the front door. Davidson stayed where he was, the revolver dangling at his side, Conroy waiting in the wheel chair for him to move. The radio was issuing organ-music now, deep and mournful. Slowly, stubbornly, Davidson shook his head.

He said, "Or—one other angle. I think I'll take a look around myself."

Before Conroy could head him off, Prentice himself objected. "Oh, come on. Jack Conroy's hot-footed it outa here long ago, even if he was hiding when we came. Besides, he wasn't here. I looked."

Davidson repeated, without emphasis, "I think I'll look myself. Keep your eyes open."

He turned his back on them and moved slowly into the hall.

Prentice, with a what's-the-use look on his face, gloomily eyed the darkening window, then went over to the front door to press the light-switch. Amber light flooded the room, but left the hall still in shadow. Prentice moved back to where Conroy sat motionless.

Down the hall, Davidson's broad, squat figure seemed to stoop to the floor a moment, then it disappeared into the kitchen. Conroy tried to listen for noises from the kitchen. Sad organ sounds from the radio made an irritating background for his thoughts. He tried to swallow normally, to forget his sweating palms.

Behind him, Prentice muttered, "These old dicks, you can't teach them a thing. Takes a year for something to sink in. Why the heck they teamed *me* up with *him*!"

Davidson loomed in the hall and came toward them. Conroy backed his wheel chair, and Prentice took a step back, to give Davidson space to re-enter the living room. Davidson's expression hadn't changed, and he still had the revolver hanging from one hand.

Without speaking, he went leisurely to the telephone stand, and seated himself solidly. He shifted the gun to his left hand, reaching out with his right for the receiver. Conroy moved with sudden speed.

He twirled one wheel, jamming

the back of his chair hard into Prentice's stomach. Prentice doubled over with a grunt and Conroy's hands heaved him over on top of him in a writhing heap, tightening around him in a crushing grip that pinned Prentice in his lap.

Prentice went limp, a living shield across Conroy's body, and Conroy yanked the gun out of Prentice's holster. He looked at Davidson, who hadn't moved except to drop his right hand back into his coat pocket. He still sat at the telephone table, the gun in his left hand hanging toward the floor, his face unchanged, his eyes boring into Conroy's.

Davidson said, "What do you expect to gain by that?"

"Drop the gun," Conroy panted.

Davidson's fingers opened and the weapon clattered to the floor. Conroy released the unconscious Prentice with a slight shove, the limp body sliding out along the floor near Davidson's feet. Conroy backed up a little, leaning forward with the gun in his fist thrust out ahead of him.

"Never expected this, did you?"

Conroy said, "I got plenty muscle *above* the waist, see? And some in my head too." He chuckled. "A *cripple* like me getting the drop on two able-bodied coppers—twice!"

"Not to mention your brother Jack," said Davidson. "That was smart work, but you overplayed it. You faked the traces, you bragged about your strength, you told us what would happen to Jack if he ever came here, you were too darn cocky and satisfied with yourself. Only thing bothered you was when

I said you were Jack taking your own place. That showed I was warm, even if I did have things bollixed up.

"Seemed like only one place for Jack to hide, and only one way for him to hide there. Especially when the deep-freeze was full up and *extra* packages on the table. Pretty smart, putting him down the freezer, all covered over with food and stuff. Everybody'd think Jack was on the lam and nobody'd wonder about his being missing. You could bury or burn him later on. Only now you got two more of us to dispose of."

Conroy smiled crookedly. "You came in the front door. You heard him on the other side of the door. He came in the back way, he heard you. You took each other for Jack. Conroy, you both tried to open the door at the same time, you killed each other. It really happened that way, almost. Remember?"

Davidson sighed. "Take my advice, and let me bring you in peaceable. Right now you got one body you can maybe justify. Way you're doing, you'll have *three* you can't possibly justify."

Conroy hesitated, a little flame of doubt licking at his self-confidence. "Justify?"

"Look at the commonwealth's case. You hid a corpse, lied, resisted arrest. Makes it look premeditated. You heard Jack escaped, on the radio. You expected him. You were spending the payroll money. You wanted to keep on spending it. You planned to kill Jack when he got here if you couldn't stall him off."

Conroy considered him in silence. Davidson crossed his legs, buried both hands comfortably in his pockets.

"Which way do your finger-marks go on Jack's throat where you choked him? From the front, back, or upside down like this boy here? And was he dead *before* you put him in the cooler, or only unconscious and froze to death? Autopsy shows lots of angles you don't figure."

Conroy waited, gripping the gun tightly in his sweating palm. Davidson went on, in the same reasonable manner.

"Now, think what a good lawyer could make of it in court. Jury'll have only *your* word for what happened between you and Jack. Defenseless invalid, already in a wheel chair prison for life, hit-and-run accident, vicious criminal for a brother, wanted by the law. You got brains, guts, you defend yourself. You got panicky, tried to cover up. You throw yourself on the mercy of the court, jury lets you off." He paused. "Want to toss me that gun?"

Conroy snarled "No!" and ran his chair up close, with Prentice's body lying between them. "Getting talkative all of a sudden ain't you? But I'm not buying any of it. I can take care of myself, good as any man with two legs, and I don't beg from nobody!"

Davidson sighed again. His right hand came up out of his pocket with the automatic already spitting fire. Conroy's gun exploded once, then fell from his shattered, bleeding hand. Stupefied, he stared through

gunsmoke at a spreading crimson spot on Davidson's left cheek.

Davidson's slow, unchanged voice boomed maddeningly in Conroy's ears. "You forgot about your automatic," said Davidson. "I picked it up in the hall."

It was silent again, except for the radio. Outside, darkness had come. Prentice stirred slightly, uttered a soft groan.

"You should have done it my way," said Davidson. "We had our car radio tuned to the same station you got. Just as we came over the hill, they finished up the news broadcast. You said you heard it, but you lied. That's what tipped me off first. You *didn't* hear it, otherwise you'd've handled the whole thing different."

Conroy found himself licking his lips. "What broadcast?" he asked hoarsely.

"Your brother Jack slugged a guard on the way out. Fellow died. Announcer mentioned a reward. Ten thousand in cash for Jack, dead or alive. Insurance company added another five, hoping to find the payroll loot. That's what got this kid here so excited. You were probably so busy setting up a false trail, you missed it. Too bad. Once you had Jack in your hands, even as a corpse, you could've turned him in and claimed the reward. Fifteen grand for you, and still no proof you had the payroll money, and you're in the clear. This way—!"

He shook his head, and reached again for the phone. "You young fellows just don't take your time to see things or listen to them." He be-

gan to dial as Prentice sat up jerkily, rubbing his neck. "Or think them through. Jim?" into the mouthpiece: "This is Davidson, up at Walt Conroy's cottage. . . . Yeah, he's here. Send up the ambulance. One corpse, two injuries. . . No, no trouble."

Conroy watched Prentice scramble

up off the floor, reach automatically to straighten out his muffler and topcoat, under Davidson's sober gaze.

"I'd've called you sooner," Davidson was saying. "Only this insurance man they sent along with me, he wasted lots of time and slowed me up considerable."