



SMUGGLER'S BLUES

A TRUE STORY OF THE HIPPIE MAFIA

Chapter 3: FOOL'S PARADISE

RICHARD STRATTON

Chapter Three: *Fool's Paradise*

They missed the load. They had me—for a minute. They impounded the Toronado with California plates. (I call my friends in San Francisco, who tell me not to worry. It's registered to a dead guy.) They searched the farm over the course of a workday while I sat in the local lockup. All they came up with was an unindictable couple of ounces and the sheriff's hat. Not only did they miss the load—they missed my stash.

It seems almost too good to be true, and it is because there is also the Fearless Freddy factor. I don't even want to contemplate what they found when they raided the Barnswallow's nest. You name it. And phone numbers. Financial records. Paperwork connecting him to a plane and hanger. People—strippers and gofers—who know way too much about Fred's operation. And they shot and killed his loyal companion Bear, the one true friend Fred had.

Shit. Poor Fred. And me—what an asshole to have involved him in the first place. How many times have I told myself and the people I work with to stay away from anyone who uses or deals cocaine? Then I turn around and do exactly what I tell others *not* to do. Fucking brilliant. I violate my own principles. If that isn't self-sabotage, I don't know what is.

Now I'm in damage control mode. There is a little over two hundred thousand dollars in U.S. and Canadian currency, and maybe fifteen Mason jars full of different strains of cannabis, plus my financial records and business phone numbers—exactly the kind of evidence Wolfshein would have salivated over—hidden in the stash. It's built into a space in the central chimney that comes up through the middle of the old farmhouse and supports two fireplaces, one in the dining room and the other in the living

room. In my study there is a bookcase built against what appears to be a solid brick wall, but is actually the chimney. I'm told the settlers who built these old farmhouses left a space between the fireplaces, a kind of alcove in the center of the chimney, where they would hide in case of an Indian attack. That may be apocryphal; the space may be designed for storing firewood. But to the untrained eye, looking at that wall, you would think that the bricks continue all the way down behind the bookcase, through the floor, and onto the granite foundation in the basement. If you remove the books and adjust one of the shelves, the wooden back of the bookcase slides open to reveal my stash.

There it is. Relief. The money, in ten thousand dollar stacks in vacuum-sealed plastic bags, I pack into my suitcase and load into the trunk of a rental car parked out front. The financial records and business phone numbers I put in my brief case. I grab a couple of jars of weed and close the stash back up. Karamazov never leaves my side. He knows something is wrong. Strangers with weapons invaded his home. His boss has been gone for days. And he understands the signs: suitcases, strange cars, a lot of hurried activity. I'm leaving, going away—again. I take the dog for a long walk on the property, beside the brook up the steep hill behind the house where he often disappears chasing bears. Sometimes he comes home whimpering with a mouth full of porcupine quills.

Today there is a mystical tranquility to the hills and valley below. I sit among a pile of boulders deposited here millions of years ago when the glacier carved these mountains and rivers and valleys, and I feel the history of the place coursing through my veins like the ageless water bubbling in the brook by my side. There is a town twenty miles from here, on the way to the Canadian border, named Stratton. My great-great-great-great grandfather, Hezekiah Stratton, came to this part of Maine in 1768. He

cleared a farm in the primeval forest on the banks of the Sebasticook River near a small settlement called Kingsfield. Besides being a farmer, good Hezekiah was a hunter and trapper. In the fall of 1775, during the Revolutionary War, Benedict Arnold and his troop of one thousand soldiers, chosen from the ranks of the Continental Army in Cambridge, marched through these parts on their way to fight British forces encamped in Quebec. Hezekiah Stratton was asked to join the expedition as its guide.

When Mailer and Godfried offered me the farm, I knew nothing of my ancestral connection with this part of the land. I was born in Boston, grew up in suburban Wellesley, Massachusetts. Maine meant little more to me than Vacationland—stamped on the license plates—a place where kids went off to summer camp, and lobster. It's cold up here; my blood draws me nearer the equator, to Arizona, Texas, Mexico and the Caribbean islands. My plan was to spend maybe a year here fixing up the place, then decamp for warmer climes. But the border held me in thrall. There are places near here where you can drive across old logging roads into Canada and never encounter a customs and immigration checkpoint. When I first came to Maine a decade ago there were only two DEA agents in the whole state. The coast, with its deepwater coves and active fishing and lobstering industries, became popular with seafaring smugglers after the Coast Guard clamped down on South Florida and the Mid-Atlantic states. Like Hezekiah, I was something of a pioneer here. The crash landing of the DC-6 was certainly a first for Franklin County. Now it feels like time to move on.

In my meditative state, I'm time traveling. Tramping along beside the river with Hezekiah and General Arnold. Flying up the river with Yogi Bear in the danger bird. Indians and British troops are massing at the frontier. Federal agents and State cops sniff

around the valley trying to pick up my trail. Is it all coincidence that I am here now, traversing these same routes? Putting myself in harm's way? Or is there no such thing as time? It's a man-made construct. All that ever really changes is the outward appearance of things. We repeat myriad patterns ad infinitum...

One thing I know for sure: As soon as they are able to regroup, Wolfshein and the federal drug cops are going to be all over us. Their investigation is ongoing. They will need more evidence to secure an indictment and conviction. Wolfshein is smart, he knows he doesn't have enough on me, and he is a formidable adversary, nothing like how I imagined my DEA counterpart. I never expected to like the guy, and I am grateful to him for not letting them kill Karamazov. Still I know his professional purpose is to lock me up for a long, long time. And who knows how many others within our outlaw family?

This is where the kernel of my guilt lives like a cyst, in the small hard horrors of this life. An estranged wife. A broken home. A dead dog. Jail is merely the arrest of movement, a halt in the frantic activity that distracts me from contemplating failure and regret. Some time ago I sent a guy who worked for me to Houston. Euvelga Rebofat, we called him, a sad, handsome drunk. Curse of the Irish. He brought his girlfriend with him. She was a beautiful young woman not involved in the business. They had only been there a month when she was brutally murdered. It had nothing to do with me or with why they were there. It was a random killing, and the murderer was caught and ultimately executed. But I could not help thinking that I had participated in her death and in her killer's execution.

Shit happens, I tell myself and stand and stretch. Today, all I know is I must and will give Bernard Wolfshein and his men with the DEA a worthwhile good run for their time and energy. It's the game, after all, the chase, the matching of wits and the energy I get from danger that drives me. I could be selling insurance, like my father, taciturn Emery Stratton. Neglecting my family, like my father. Playing golf and cribbage with harmless, time bandit friends at the country club, instead of engaged in a life-threatening game of catch-me-if-you-can with armed federal agents.

I'm miserable as I tie the great white Karamazov to one of the three maple trees in front of the house to keep him from chasing after me. His big majestic head is held high, watching me go. The caretakers will take good care of him. But he's no pup. I have a melancholy inkling I may never see him again. Or this farm. My fool's paradise.

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Boston: The Athens of America, a city upon a hill with limpid blue skies arched above the gold dome and cupola of the State House, in spring this town is a feast for men's eyes. Nature bursts forth in flower. Everything is in bloom. Trees blossom along Commonwealth Avenue and in Boston Common gardens. The streets are full of budding coeds. Females shed their winter wraps and reveal their inner beauty. The air is fresh off the Atlantic. Pheromones carried on the soft breeze like pollen arouse my desire for something more than adventure. I want tenderness. I want stability, someone to hold me and assure me that I am a good man with a purpose and not just a wandering criminal.

As much as I love Boston, I have always felt confined here, trapped by the past. As a teenager I was drawn to the anonymity of New York City. All my life I have been running away from what was expected of me: Go to school, get good grades. Go to college, get a good job. Marry a local girl, preferably a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant. Have two kids. Move into a home in the suburbs. Buy a station wagon and shop at the mall—Shopper’s World, actually, one of the first malls in America. It’s the American way. But I flipped the script and became an outlaw. I ran away from all that, escaped the air-conditioned nightmare. And I am still running, looking over my shoulder. As I move about the city, I sense the ominous presence of a thick miasma of federal law enforcement bureaucracies—IRS, DEA, FBI—weighing on my spirit.

I check into a pyramid-shaped hotel on the banks of the muddy Charles River in Cambridge, and consider that my phony identification is probably blown. It’s time to become someone else. I make a few calls, go from pay phone to pay phone. The residential phones I’ve been using—my parents’ home phone in Wellesley; my local partner, Benny’s phone; the phone at my office and crash pad in Cambridge; the office phone at a body shop we own in Lowell—from now on it’s best to assume they are all tapped. At the body shop, I pick up my vehicle—a black GMC Suburban with tinted windows like the Feds drive. My friend scans it to make sure DEA has not installed a tracking device. The car has a built-in stash under the rear seat, where I hide most of the money. That is one rule I adhere to religiously: Protect the money.

My first meeting is at a hotel with a mysterious character known as the Wizard of ID. He manufactures and sells false identification. I leave the Suburban parked in the hotel garage, call the Wizard’s room on the house phone. “Come on up,” he tells me. “I

want to show you something.” He’s a slim blond in his thirties with big teeth, a lantern jaw and a paranoid, suspicious nature. He insists on patting me down. “Nothing personal.” he says. “It’s business.” Then he leads me into an adjoining room where he has one of those photo machines used by the Department of Motor Vehicles.

“Have a seat,” he tells me and points to the photo machine. “I can make you as many licenses as you need while you enjoy a beverage from the minibar. Then I meet my contact at the DMV, I give them the information, they enter it into the computer and... you’re good to go.” He flashes me a toothy grin.

“How much?”

“Ten grand each. Three for twenty-five. I take care of my person at the DMV.” He shows me one of the licenses, a perfect Massachusetts driver’s license. “It will hold up under any kind of traffic stop. You need passports, birth certificates, I have matching birth and death certificates... for fifteen thousand a set.”

The Wizard brings out a three-ring binder with several clear plastic inserts holding birth and death certificates. “We find some guy who would be around your age if he hadn’t died as a child... Here’s one. Canadian. We like Canadians. Good passport, especially in the Middle East.” He grins. He has been pressing me to set him up with my connection in Lebanon. He says he has a catch—a secure method of entry—at the Port of Miami, and he and his Miami-based partners want to bring in a big load of hash. Tons.

Another rule of thumb in the dope-dealing trade I have violated at my own disadvantage is: Keep your contacts to yourself. People have a way of jumping connections. The Wizard wouldn’t turn me on to his guy at the DMV. It doesn’t make

sense for me to hook him up with my people in Beirut. I offered to broker him a load in Lebanon if he can assure me of the money and the security of the catch.

“With these documents, there is no cross-referencing,” he explains, referring to the birth and death certificates. “You assume the identity of the dead guy. You get a Social Security card. Driver’s license. Credit cards. Establish a residence where you can receive mail, then apply for a passport. Take you a few weeks. Maybe a month or two. But by then you’ll have new ID that will hold up under anything short of an FBI fingerprint check.”

I opt for the three-license package deal and one set of birth and death certificates. After I sit for my photo, the Wizard tells me to wait for him downstairs in the restaurant while he makes the licenses and meets with another client. “Where are you parked?” he asks.

“In the garage.”

“So you’re cool. Take me fifteen, twenty minutes. We’ll grab lunch. Talk about our other business. You got the money?”

I give him four packs of ten grand each and head down to the lobby restaurant.

The one thing that rankles, as I sit having coffee waiting for the Wizard to appear with my new identities, is that he knows who all these phony people really are. He could always sell or trade that information to the Feds. Ordinarily I would not do anything this risky with someone I don’t entirely trust. But the urgency of the situation demands that I make my move now.

I met the Wizard through my long-time local partner, Benny, a fellow Wellesley guy who I’ve known since high school. Benny first ran into the Wizard at his

chiropractor's office. They struck up a conversation after being introduced as having "a lot in common." Benny usually paid his chiropractor's bill with bags of weed. Benny handles all our Boston area wholesale distribution and has a thriving retail business. Before long he was showing the Wizard samples of Lebanese hash. The Wizard wants to do quantity. He says he and his people can handle multi-ton loads of quality hashish. Benny bought some ID from him. I met with the Wizard in New York and Miami, he introduced me to his partners; I sold them a couple of hundred kilos of hash. So far, so good. I have no reason to suspect him other than my high paranoid state and a slightly creepy vibe he gives off.

There is no fault to be found in his work. He's a perfectionist. The licenses he hands me as we sit together in the restaurant are faultless. I am now three new people with a fourth about to be resurrected from the dead. "So," he says after I inspect the licenses and return them to the manila envelope with the birth and death certificates, "when do we leave for Beirut?"

"I didn't know that was part of the deal."

"C'mon, man. Share the wealth. There's more hash over there than you can handle."

"I tell you what. I'll go over and put together a load for you. Give me the money and the particulars of how you want it sent."

"No, no. We don't do anything unless we know who we're dealing with."

I tell him, "You're dealing with me."

We finish our lunch and part company.

“I’ll get back to you,” he says, with an enigmatic smirk. “Enjoy your new selves.”

It’s his skull-like smile that unsettles me. I don’t know his real name or where he lives. Pierre, he calls himself lately, but he switches identities like most people change clothes. His partners in Miami are cocaine cowboys—a French Canadian from Montreal and a Colombian from Medellín. But the Wizard is from no discernable location, has no identifiable roots. All I have on him is a phone number for an answering service. When I ask him where he’s from, he blows me off. He has one of those broad American accents like a newscaster. From his appearance I would guess that he is a WASP. There is a preppy aspect to the way he dresses: loafers with no socks, a pastel sweater draped over his shoulders, pleated slacks. He looks like he would be more at home at a garden party in the Hamptons than drifting from hotel to hotel selling phony ID. But who am I to talk? I am as much of an anomaly as the Wizard.

My people on both sides of the family come from old New England stock dating back to before the Revolution—a dying breed. I should have been a lawyer or a banker, a pillar of the community. Yet from an early age I was drawn to the dark side. Too much TV. Watching episodes of *The Untouchables*, I wanted to be Al Capone, not Eliot Ness. The Lone Ranger, Robin Hood, ex-con detective Boston Blackie, enemy to those who make him an enemy, friend to those who have no friend. These were my heroes.

Not that I could have been a bank robber or even a bookmaker. That seemed like real crime to me. Had pot not been illegal, I probably would have gone straight.

Wolfshein was at least partly right when he remarked that it is the politics of the drug war—and particularly the war on plants—that engages me intellectually. That and the

rush of getting over on the Man. I try to assure myself that what I do is in defense of the American notion of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. As an American, I tell myself, I have a moral obligation to defy tyrannical authority and break the laws that are wrong. After all, it is a plant we are talking about, created by God, and what should be an inalienable right in a free society: to alter our consciousness as we please so long as we do not harm others. With this reasoning I attempt to console my restless conscience. Yet there is the nagging suspicion that what really moves me is the glamour of being an outlaw.

In the parking garage, I slip the manila envelope with the new ID under the front seat of the Suburban and drive out to my partner, Benny's stash pad in Wellesley. Benny lives a few miles from my parents' home. I take the back roads, keeping a look out to make sure I am not being followed. These streets are as familiar to me as the scars on my body—many of those scars I got on these streets. My parents moved to a big house in the exclusive Cliff Estates section of Wellesley Hills when I was in first grade. In elementary school and junior high I had a paper route delivering the *Boston Herald* and the *Globe* to the stately homes in this bastion of white Anglo-Saxondom.

My senior year in high school there was one black family in this town, one black kid in Wellesley Senior High. He played halfback on the football team, I was the fullback. My best friend was a Jew from one of half a dozen Jewish families that moved into town but were not allowed to join Wellesley Country Club. His father owned a successful wool company. Judge W. Arthur Garrity Jr. who ordered forced busing to desegregate Boston schools, lives in Wellesley Hills. Home to Wellesley College, Babson College, and Dana Hall School, Wellesley ranks first in the United States in

percentage of adults who hold at least one college degree. Dumb people don't live here. Just elitists. Snobs. Closet racists.

I rebelled against all that. In the sixth grade at Brown Elementary School, I formed the first and probably the only gang the town has ever known—the Pink Rats, named after a gang of juvenile delinquents I saw in an episode of *Dragnet*. I was the kid parents warned their children to stay away from. At nineteen, I was hanging out in black jazz clubs in Boston and beat coffeehouses in Cambridge selling nickel bags of commercial Mexican weed. Now the New England family of the hippie mafia is based here, supplying the nation with quality cannabis.

When I pull up in Benny's driveway and park, reach in the rear for my briefcase, I can't find it. I turn around in the seat and look on the floor. It's not there. My guts wrench. Gone. Vanished. *This can't be*. Panic. I'm stymied. *How?* Or better still: *Who?* The first thought that comes to mind is that DEA agents must have broken into the car and made off with the briefcase. I see Wolfshein's hand in this. It had to be him. The car appeared untouched back at the hotel parking garage. The doors were still locked, there were no signs of forced entry. It had to be agents. This was a professional job with a definite objective: *Get the briefcase*.

In that briefcase are my books—seriously incriminating financial records of major drug trafficking—and my address book with my contacts, all the shit I just cleaned out of my stash at the farm. *I am fucked*. This is a disaster. Illegally obtained for evidentiary purposes, true, but nevertheless the contents of that briefcase comprise a wealth of investigative intelligence.

Shit! How the fuck—?

—Could this happen? They followed me to the hotel and while I was in the room with the Wizard, they broke into the car and stole my briefcase. That’s the only explanation. Now I take it one step further. The agents will lie, say they seized the briefcase from the Toronado and use the contents against me. These guys are serious. It may be a game to me—and to them—but the consequences are real. People go to prison. People die. In 1980 they changed the law, it used to be no matter how much weed they busted you with, the maximum sentence the Feds gave out was five years. Then they upped it to fifteen. I feel like a fucking idiot. Worse than a fool. Why did I leave the briefcase in the car? Why didn’t I take it into the hotel with me? I climb in back and check the stash under the seat. The money is still there. Thank God for that. Then I remember, as I was putting the money in the stash, the little voice within said: *Why not put your books and phone numbers in there as well?* But I didn’t listen. I got lazy, sloppy. I figured I would need them to go over the numbers with Benny and never imagined Wolfshein would have the balls and the initiative to pull off something like this. My fuck-up. Never underestimate the enemy.

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That evening Val, my running partner and girlfriend, flies in from Aspen. When I pick her up at Logan Airport, she has more bad news. “Fucking Fred, your asshole friend,” she says.

“What?”

“He drove Judy to the airport. On his way home, he fell asleep at the wheel driving his truck and ran head-on into another car. Killed the driver and a fourteen year old kid.”

“Oh, Jesus, no.”

“Yes!”

“Where is he?”

“He’s okay... They took him to the hospital and let him go. The cops were there like immediately.” She glares at me. “What’re you doing with that guy anyway? You know he’s a fucking Heat score.”

All I can do is shake my head.

Val takes my face in her hands, looks me in the eye. “Listen, pal,” she tells me. “You’ve got to get out of town. This isn’t going away.”

“What about you?”

“Me? Honey—I’m already gone.”

And she is, she has been a fugitive for as long as I have known her. We had been doing business together for two years and been lovers for half that time before I knew her real name. Val is a founding member of the Brotherhood of Eternal Love, the original hippie mafia family based in Laguna Beach, California. Acid guru Timothy Leary was the Brotherhood’s nominal godfather. After a massive bust in the mid-seventies, they scattered to the far corners of four continents.

“Really, guy,” Val says. “You think you can trust Fred?” And she answers her own question. “No way. You need to split. *Pronto.*”