



MANHATTAN

NOCTURNE

COLIN

HARRISON

4

Manhattan

Nocturne

A NOVEL

COLIN HARRISON

CROWN PUBLISHERS, INC.
NEW YORK

Grateful acknowledgment is given for the excerpt from *Low Life: Lures and Snares of Old New York* by Luc Sante. Copyright © 1991 by Luc Sante. Reprinted by permission of Farrar, Straus & Giroux, Inc.

Copyright © 1996 by Colin Harrison

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Published by Crown Publishers, Inc., 201 East 50th Street, New York, New York 10022. Member of the Crown Publishing Group.

Random House, Inc. New York, Toronto, London, Sydney, Auckland
<http://www.randomhouse.com/>

CROWN is a trademark of Crown Publishers, Inc.

Printed in the United States of America

Design by Lauren Dong

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available upon request

ISBN 0-517-58492-1

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

First Edition

ALSO BY COLIN HARRISON

Break and Enter

Bodies Electric

For Lewis

The night is the corridor of history, not the history of famous people or great events, but that of the marginal, the ignored, the suppressed, the unacknowledged; the history of vice, of error, of confusion, of fear, of want; the history of intoxication, of vainglory, of delusion, of dissipation, of delirium. It strips off the city's veneer of progress and modernity and civilization and reveals the wilderness. In New York City it is an accultured wilderness that contains all the accumulated crime of past nights . . . and it is not an illusion. It is the daytime that is the chimera, that pretends New York is anyplace, maybe with bigger buildings, but just as workaday, with a population that goes about its business and then goes to sleep, a great machine humming away for the benefit of the world. Night reveals this to be a pantomime. In the streets at night, everything kept hidden comes forth, everyone is subject to the rules of chance, everyone is potentially both murderer and victim, everyone is afraid, just as anyone who sets his or her mind to it can inspire fear in others. At night, everyone is naked.

—LUC SANTE, *Low Life*

I SELL MAYHEM, scandal, murder, and doom. Oh, Jesus I do, I sell tragedy, vengeance, chaos, and fate. I sell the sufferings of the poor and the vanities of the rich. Children falling from windows, subway trains afire, rapists fleeing into the dark. I sell anger and redemption. I sell the muscled heroism of firemen and the wheezing greed of mob bosses. The stench of garbage, the rattle of gold. I sell black to white, white to black. To Democrats and Republicans and Libertarians and Muslims and transvestites and squatters on the Lower East Side. I sold John Gotti and O. J. Simpson and the bombers of the World Trade Center, and I'll sell whoever else comes along next. I sell falsehood and what passes for truth and every gradation in between. I sell the newborn and the dead. I sell the wretched, magnificent city of New York back to its people. I sell newspapers.

The mayor reads me at breakfast, and the bond traders on the train in from New Jersey have a look, as do the retired Italian longshoremen sitting on their stoops in Brooklyn, chewing unlit cigars, and the nurses on the bus down from Harlem to Lenox Hill Hospital. The TV guys read me, and steal the story sometimes. And the Pakistani sitting in his cab outside Madison Square Garden, who, intent on figuring out America, reads everything. And the young lawyers on their lunch breaks, after they've checked the ads touting the strip clubs. And the doormen in the apartment buildings on the East Side, looking up from the pages as the professional women storm past each morning, rushing brightly into their futures. And the cops—the cops all read me to see if I got it right.

Three times a week my column appears, often teased on page one: SHE DIED FOR LOVE—PORTER WREN, PAGE 5; PORTER WREN TALKS TO

colin harrison

KILLER'S MOTHER—PAGE 5; BABY WAS FROZEN SOLID—PORTER WREN, PAGE 5. It's a wonderful job. Very pleasant. Many happy people in my line of work. I talk to detectives and relatives of the victim, to reluctant witnesses and whoever happened to be standing around when the bad news arrived. I ask them to tell me what they saw or what they heard or what they imagined. In the middle of my column is a box with my name and an outdated headshot of me—clean-shaven, full of cheap confidence in a suit and tie, a certain wry lift to one eyebrow. I appear to be a genuine idiot. The managing editor chose the photo, saying I looked like “a regular guy.” Which I do. Regular haircut, face, tie, shoes. And regular appetites, although it has always been my appetites that have gotten me in trouble. My life, however, is not regular; I get calls in the night and then dress in the dark and leave my sleeping wife and kids to go wherever it happened: the car, the bar, the street, the club, the store, the apartment, the hallway, the park, the tunnel, the bridge, the deli, the corner, the loading dock, the peepshow, the rooftop, the alley, the office, the basement, the hair parlor, the offtrack betting parlor, the massage parlor, the crackhouse, the school, the church. There I gaze at the slackened faces of men and women and children who might or might not have known better. And upon my return, as I stoop down to kiss my two children good morning, as they wriggle in my arms, I am not protected from the thought that one soul's exit from life that night will be converted by me into another soul's entertainment. And that, precisely, is what the idiotic photograph of me promises: *I got another crazy story for you, pal. See if you believe this one.*

There are, however, certain stories I can't tell in my column. The crucial information is doubtful or incomplete, or one of the other papers or TV stations got there first. Or it's dull. Or old. Or *Get the fuck outa here, Mr. Reporter. I see ya here again Ima fuckin' shoot off your nuts.* Or the story is about a friend of mine. Or somebody has an acquaintance high up in the mayor's office or the police department: *Hey, look, ah, Wren, listen, this thing, I hear this guy was telling you something, some kind of story that's fucking full of shit.* Or the complexity of the story is irreducible, can't be pressed into thirty column inches. The paper's readers want a quick hit of news and celebrity gossip, and then

Manhattan Nocturne

on to the sports section, the car ads, the stock page. They don't have time for me to parse the human heart, shave one motivation cleanly off from another. They expect a commodity of cheap ink and cheap sensation, and they get it.

There is, of course, one other kind of story I can't put into the paper: a story that involves me. I mean really involves me. My readers would find it strange; for them I am no more than a voice, an attitude, a guy asking questions. The fixed expression in my little black-and-white headshot is uncomplicated, a smooth mask of certainty and cleverness—not a face that by turns is surprised, clenched in lust, slack with pleasure, frantic, violent, and then last—always last—furrowed by remorse.

How does any tale of misfortune begin? When you're not expecting it, when you're looking elsewhere, thinking of other problems, the *regular* problems. At the time, last January, the city lay under drifts of dirty snow, garbage trucks groaning through the slushy streets, people buying tickets to Puerto Rico, Bermuda, anywhere to escape the coldness in their bones, the hunger in Manhattan life. It was a Monday, and I had a column due in the next morning's paper. I needed to get *up*, to pop the story like one of the Knicks' guards from thirty feet out. I generally chew a lot of bubble gum, drink liter bottles of Coca-Cola, and try to ignore the pain in my hands, which are burned out from years of typing. You've got to keep proving yourself in this game, keep getting access to the main players, keep beating the TV guys, keep showing you have something the regular reporters don't, especially since many of them want a column and think they can do it better. (I certainly did, when I was a young reporter.) A guy like Jimmy Breslin, he's an institution, he doesn't have to worry anymore. Me, I'm nervous, generally, and don't take anything for granted. At thirty-eight, I'm old enough to be on top, young enough to screw it all up. My rule, for life as well as work, is this: avoid the obvious fuckups. It's good advice and I wish I followed it more often.

All that I have to tell here began later that evening, and I could well start there—a setting of wealth and social standing, of tuxedos and ten-

thousand-dollar wristwatches. A place of attractive people who are pleased to discourse on the most recent mumblings of the chairman of the Federal Reserve or the inner politics of the ABC news division. But this gathering was a far step from my regular haunts. I toil, for the most part, in New York City's saddest and most violent neighborhoods. Places where working men open their electricity bills and stare at them disconsolately for long minutes, where a parochial school uniform is purchased with great hope. Where young children accrue disturbing scars on their bodies. Where the kids carry toy guns that look real and real guns painted like toys. Where the people have vitality but no prospect, ambition but no advantage. They are poor and they suffer mightily for it. It is these people with whom I'll begin, to show where I began that day, to explain why I approached that evening's social frivolities with a certain alienated exhaustion, with a willingness to drink too heavily—with, in truth, a propensity to allow myself to be tantalized, cheap and stupid as that sounds, by a strange and beautiful woman.

I was working the phone at my desk in the paper's building on the East Side. It was just after one P.M., and many of the reporters were not in yet. When I was younger the newsroom rivalries and intrigues interested me, but by now they seemed petty and banal; all organizations—newspaper staffs, pro football teams, whatever—throb in deep patterns of formation and decay, formation and decay; the faces change, the executives march in and out, the pattern persists. In thirteen years of tabloid reporting, an eternity, I'd seen buyouts and lockouts and union strikes and three owners. My goal had become simply to do my job, and if that aim was a meager one, then at least it was based on two hard-won observations: The first was that my work had no useful function other than providing for my family. How could I believe that what I did had any importance? No one *really* learned anything, no one was wiser, no one was saved. Do newspapers even matter anymore? My second observation was that the degraded setting we identify as American urban civilization was in fact merely another form of nature itself: amoral, unpredictable, buzzing, florid, frenzied, terrifying. A place where men die the same useless deaths as did the tortoises and finches noted by Charles Darwin. A gridded battleground where I stood to the side with my paper and pen, watching the cannon fire and the flash

Manhattan Nocturne

and roar, recording who fell, how they writhed, and when they died. There was a time when I sought to use my limited skills to tell the stories of those who suffered unfairly or who were not worthy of the powers entrusted to them by the public, but these aims had been leached out of me (as they generally have been from the American news media, which, as the twentieth century draws to a close, seems to sense its own clamoring irrelevance, its humble subservience to a pagan culture of celebrity). Or maybe my attitude was the tattered cynicism of a man whose senses had become blunt and corroded, no longer thankful for all that he had. Yes. I was, I see now, an asshole who wanted to roll the dice.

I was also a guy who needed a column idea, and after lunch I finally got a call from one of my contacts—a Jamaican dispatcher at the Emergency Medical Service who believed I should be writing solely about the imperiled children of the city. In a breathy wheeze, she gave me the details: “You see? God, he *still* perform miracles! The lady who call nine-one-one say she never *seen* a man do that before . . .” I listened, then asked a few questions, including had she called any TV stations. She hadn’t. You get a feeling that this is going to be the one, and it was, a routine shooting and fire but with a sad twist, enough to squeeze out a column for the next day. My standards aren’t high—I’m not making art, after all—but the story has to have something about it, a wrinkle, a little kick to the heart.

So I headed over to Brooklyn in my work car, a black Chrysler Imperial. Years ago, when I first got started, I drove an old, repainted police car, which had a heavier suspension and a bigger engine. Then I had a little Ford, to get in and out of parking spots easily, but one night in Queens a thirty-ton mob garbage truck ran a red light and drove up and over my front end. The driver jumped down from the truck, arms lifted to fight, and when he realized I wasn’t getting out of the wreck, he pulled a shovel off of the truck and started whacking my door in anger. I got a column out of it, but I swore off the smaller cars. Lisa and the kids don’t use the Chrysler, are never seen in it, in fact. She drives a Volvo—leased, so I can change cars quickly, which I had written into the contract with the dealership. We decided a while back that we needed to take certain quiet precautions—an electronic security sys-

tem at home, an unpublished phone number. The school our daughter attends doesn't list our address in the parents' directory, and we've given the teacher a picture of Josephine, our baby-sitter, in case there is any question on the afternoons when she is picking up our daughter. I have two extra phone lines into the house, with a device that triggers each time a call comes in or goes out, records every number. The paper has a daily circulation of 792,000, more than a million on Sunday, so there are readers out there with stories. Angry readers. Readers claiming to know the real deal, which they sometimes do: cops buying drugs, where the body is, what the school principal is doing with the eighth-grade girls. Rat calls. Or sometimes a complaint: "I see that you neglected to mention the race of the defendant! What—you love niggers?" People figure I can do something for them. Maybe I can, but it's on my terms. The Wren family doesn't have a home address. All of our mail is delivered to the paper, where it goes through the mailroom. Anything strange—a big box, a dripping envelope, whatever—is dealt with by the guys in security. I've been sent items both ominous and pathetic: guns, bullets, a chocolate cake, a condom full of dog teeth (the significance of which I didn't understand), a damp purse with old baby pictures inside, the usual dead fish, a stack of Chinese money, a gold wedding ring with a dead man's name engraved inside, the severed head of a chicken, various pornographic photos and devices (most notably a huge, double-ended dildo), my column (torn to shreds or blacked out or covered with curses), a bag of blood (from a pig, according to the police), and, on three occasions, the Bible. I suppose I should muster a certain nonchalance about this kind of stuff, but I can't. Deep down, I'm just a kid from the country. I've always scared easily. So I take as many precautions as I can think of. Maybe they're unnecessary, but then again maybe they're not. New York City is a landscape of bad possibilities.

Which I was driving through twenty minutes later—passing the hunched brick buildings, the girls pushing strollers, the bodegas and newsstands and flower shops, discarded Christmas trees frozen into the snow, the old women carrying groceries, worrying each step. I headed toward the Brownsville Houses, a well-meant act of architectural savagery carried out in the 1940s by some wealthy white New Yorkers who

Manhattan Nocturne

decided that poor blacks from the South might enjoy living in squat, faceless apartment buildings with cinder-block walls and sheet-metal doors. The Houses sat a couple of blocks off East New York Avenue, and I eased the car along, watching for potholes. The sun was out, the temperature close to thirty. A few teenaged boys on a stoop (who should have been in school but were probably safer as truants) checked out my car. When it was new the kids didn't mess with it because they figured that a black Imperial could only belong to a detective or a politician. By now, however, the car had been rammed and scraped and sideswiped and impounded; it had been sprayed with graffiti and broken into and pissed on and had the bumper ripped off. But only stolen twice. I tried to discourage interest by letting a lot of junk wash around in the front and back seats—empty Coke bottles, food wrappers, crumpled pages from reporter's pads, block maps of the city. I once kept a Club on the steering wheel but the kids sprayed aerosol Freon on it, freezing the steel, then broke it with a hammer. I suppose I could have driven something prettier, a Sentra perhaps, but it would have been on a container ship to Hong Kong in three days.

I found the Houses. They were identical six-story brick buildings, and above the loopy scrawls and stylized threats and nicknames appended with RIP rose window upon window with bars on them—to prevent the young from falling out and the criminal from climbing in. Rap music pounded outward from all directions, cut through by the sound of dogs barking across the snowy mud at other dogs in other buildings. Elsewhere mattresses hung out like tongues, or the windows were decorated with old Christmas lights, some on, some off, or more graffiti, or rotting shelves of flowerpots, or riggings of clothesline from which flapped socks or panties or babies' pajamas. The scene was bizarre and ominous and in no way unusual.

Then I spotted the police and the firemen and the kids on bicycles. It's the kids that tell you whether the scene is still hot—they lose interest quickly, especially when the gore is not as good as what they see on TV, and if they're milling around, starting to argue and rough-house, then the situation is getting cold, the bodies gone, the witnesses hard to find. This scene looked like it had only about ten minutes left in it. I stepped through to get the story and was glad to see no TV vans

around. The regular cops don't usually recognize me, but when somebody's been killed, a homicide detective is there soon, and often we've talked before. (I should admit right here, early on, that I've been sewn in with the cops for a while now—one of the deputy police commissioners under Mayor Giuliani, Hal Fitzgerald, is my daughter's godfather, which is good and not good: you start trading favors, you forget what the sides are, you forget you're playing on opposite teams. This was another obvious fuckup that I didn't avoid.) The captain in charge, a tall guy with red hair, told me what had happened: a young father living on the fourth floor of one of the buildings had not paid his cocaine tab; some nice people had forced their way into his apartment to scare him or to whack him—it wasn't clear—and ended up setting the place on fire. The captain recounted the incident duly, his eyes holding the brick horizon, thinking, it would seem, of anything else—his children, his wife, his boat—anything other than another case of what cops sometimes call "misdemeanor homicide." You got anything more? I asked. Maybe there was a fight, he shrugged, or one of the bullets hit the gas stove. Or maybe the two shooters lit the fire on purpose—the details were as yet unknown, since the girlfriend was in shock and had been taken to the hospital, and of the three other adults who had seen what happened, two were nowhere to be found (probably nervously drinking in a bar in another borough by now) and the third was dead. What was certain was that after the shooters left the apartment they had jammed an old bed frame between the blue metal apartment door and the hallway wall. The door opened *outward*, in violation of all relevant New York City public-housing codes, and thus the woman had been trapped in her burning apartment with her baby and a shot-up boyfriend.

I walked into the project's common area and scrounged around long enough to find one of the neighbors, a woman in her late twenties in a black winter coat. She lived across from the apartment in question. The interview wouldn't take long, just a few questions. So people will know what happened, I usually say, accompanied by some scribbling in a notebook (only rarely do I use a tape recorder—it scares people into silence, and besides, I always remember the good quotes—they stick in your ear). The woman held a baby in a snowsuit on her shoul-

Manhattan Nocturne

der, a baby most interested in this man who was a funny color. The black eyes in the tiny brown face searched mine, and for a moment the world was redeemed. Then I asked the woman what she had witnessed. Well, I wasn't expecting nothing to happen, she said, 'cause it was still morning and usually things like that don't happen in the morning, everybody be sleeping. She possessed a handsome face with strong features, but when she lifted her gaze up to the apartment, the windows of which had been shattered from the inside by the firemen's axes, I saw that her eyes were rheumy and tired. The fire had smudged the brick wall of the building, and the firemen had hurled charred household items out of the window: a kitchen table, clothing, a few chairs, clothes, a baby's crib, a television, a box spring. Flung into the snow, the blackened wreckage looked like some of the assemblages you see in the galleries in Soho, an artist's pessimistic statement about whatever age we now live in.

Did you know the family involved? I asked the woman. Yes, I be in that apartment a hundred times. How did you find out what happened? I didn't need nobody to tell me, 'cause I saw the whole thing myself. I be washing the dishes and I seen the smoke and everything out the window, and I told myself that don't look good, that look like Benita. So I call the emergency, and then I went downstairs. The woman glanced at me. She had more to tell me, and I waited. I don't usually press. People will say what they have to say. But when they get stuck, you can go back to the chronology. What time was this? I asked. Almost twelve o'clock noon. Okay, you were washing the dishes; what did you do when you saw the smoke, were you surprised? I was so surprise I drop a dish, matter of fact. What happened when you got outside? I was looking up at the window hoping that the fire department gonna make it pretty soon and then I'm looking up there when Demetrius, he come jumping through that window. He on fire, burning like, all over his shirt and hair and pants, and he holding Benita's kid, uh, Vernon, he only four months, and then Demetrius *fall*, he just fall and fall and *fall*, and I can tell that he gonna land *on top* of the baby, and I was worrying about *that*, and then just before Demetrius land, then he like, he do this little kind of *flip*, and he land on his back holding the baby *up*, like, I could see he did that on purpose so the baby

be okay. Like, that was the last thing Demetrius ever did in his life, do that little flip and hold that baby up, 'cause then Demetrius, he land on his back, just like *that*—and here the woman slapped one black hand smack flat on top of the other—and he lay real still like, and I go running over and pick up Vernon 'cause I see Demetrius, *he* not gonna make it, and I check that baby over *good*, and then I thank the Lord, 'cause Vernon, he not hurt. Little shook up's all. He cry only a little bit and I put him up in my arms. But Demetrius look *bad*. He got blood coming out of his ears and then I saw how he was all shot up by them boys. Then I just hope that Benita, don't *she* come jumping . . .

The woman stopped and looked away, back toward the window. She shifted her baby, gave the bundle a pat on the rear. Anything else? I asked. Nuh-uh. I waited a moment more, looking her in the eyes. Thank you for your time, I said. The woman just nodded. She was not shocked or distraught, at least not apparently. The events in question did not violate her view of the universe, they were just further proof thereof.

I see a lot of this, to be honest, and there was no time to stand around and be mystified by the brutalities of urban life; the story was due in the paper's computer system by 5:30 P.M.—about three hours. I had what I needed and was heading back toward the car, already composing the lead paragraph in my head—when my beeper trilled against my leg. GIVE THE CHICK A CALL, it said. Lisa, phoning from St. Vincent's Hospital, where she operates. A lot of reporters carry cellular phones, but I hate them; they tether you to other people's agendas and can interrupt you at the worst moment, ruin interviews. I walked around the corner to a little Dominican luncheonette, and when the bell on the door tinkled, a couple of the regulars turned around, and one boy of about eighteen slunk coolly out the back, just in case I was somebody he needed to worry about. They see a big white man who isn't afraid to be someplace, and so maybe I'm a cop.

There was a pay phone on the wall.

"You're due at that cocktail party tonight," Lisa reminded me. "I put your tuxedo in the trunk."

The annual party, thrown by Hobbs, the billionaire Australian who owned the newspaper. As one of its columnists, my presence was oblig-

Manhattan Nocturne

atory. If he was the circus, I was one of the trained monkeys wearing a tight little red collar.

"I can't go," I said.

"You said yesterday you *have to*."

"You're sure it's tonight?" I checked my watch, anxious about the time.

"You said six-thirty."

"All the management people will be there, sucking up to Hobbs."

"What can I tell you?" she said patiently. "You told me you had to go."

"Kids are fine?"

"Sally has a play-date. You're up in the Bronx?"

"Brooklyn. Fire. Guy jumped out the window with a baby." I noticed the restaurant regulars watching me. *Yo, white motherfuck, what you doin' here spittin' fuckin' whiteboy saliva on my pay phone?* "Anyway, I'll see you tonight."

"Late or early?" Lisa asked.

"Early."

"If you get home early enough, there's a chance," she said.

"Oh? A chance of what?"

"A chance you'll get to make out."

"Sounds good."

"Oh, it's *good* all right."

"How do you know?"

"I know," Lisa said.

"How?"

"Certain testimonials have been entered into the records."

"Whose was the last one?" I asked.

"Oh, some strange man."

"Was he good? Did he float your boat?"

"You lose your chance after eleven," she said. "Drive safely, okay?"

"Right." I was about to hang up.

"No! Wait! Porter?"

"What is it?"

"Did the baby live?" Lisa asked worriedly. "The baby who went out the window?"