

SUICIDE SQUEEZE

VICTOR GISCHLER

DELACORTE PRESS

Suicide Squeeze

SUICIDE SQUEEZE
A Delacorte Book / April 2005

Published by
Bantam Dell
A Division of Random House, Inc.
New York, New York

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved
Copyright © 2005 by Victor Gischler

Book design by Glen Edelstein

Delacorte Press is a registered trademark of Random House, Inc., and the colophon is a trademark of Random House, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Gischler, Victor
Suicide squeeze / Victor Gischler.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-385-33725-6

1. DiMaggio, Joe, 1914–1999—Collectibles—Fiction. 2. Baseball cards—Collectors and collecting—Fiction. 3. Boats and boating—Fiction. 4. Bounty hunters—Fiction. 5. Repossession—Fiction. 6. Pensacola (Fla.)—Fiction. 7. Suspense fiction.

PS3607.I48 S85 2005

0504

2004065520

Printed in the United States of America
Published simultaneously in Canada

www.bantamdell.com

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
BVG

Also by Victor Gischler

Gun Monkeys
Pistol Poets

For Jackie

“Some people are so fond of bad luck they run half way to meet it.”

—DOUGLAS WILLIAM JERROLD

“A stout heart breaks bad luck.”

—MIGUEL DE CERVANTES SAAVEDRA

About the Author

Victor Gischler lives in the wilds of Skiatook, Oklahoma—a long, long way from a Starbucks. His wife, Jackie, thinks he is a silly individual. He drinks black, black coffee all day long and sleeps about seven minutes a night. Victor's first novel, *Gun Monkeys*, was nominated for the Edgar Award.

Prologue:

Anatomy of a Collectible

NEW YORK CITY, 1954

Horace Folger didn't have time for bullshit. He couldn't take the evening off from the hardware store for just anything. But for his son, Teddy, Horace would make the time. He put his thick hand on Teddy's shoulder, drew him close. He didn't want to lose his son in the big crowd that had gathered to watch the movie people.

But those movie people didn't seem to know their ass from a hole in the ground. The director guy kept yelling "cut" and everybody would stop what they were doing, then they'd go back and he'd yell "action" and everyone would do the exact same shit over again. The director seemed bothered by the big crowd, which was mostly men.

They all wanted to see the blonde.

And Jesus Christ what a blonde. She kept standing over this subway grille, then there'd be this whoosh of air, blowing her white dress up, and everyone got an eyeful. Whenever that dress went up, Horace's knees turned watery. *I'd never, ever cheat on Mildred, but if that blonde ever came knocking on my door late one night . . .*

Horace nudged the guy next to him. "Hey, Mac, who's the dish?"

"Are you pulling my leg?" said the guy. "That's Marilyn Monroe. What, you been lost on a desert island or something?"

"Yeah, yeah." Everyone was a goddamn wiseass.

Horace scanned the crowd, searched each face. And there he was, Joe DiMaggio. Now, here was a real man and a hell of a ball-player. Word had flashed up and down the streets, into the little neighborhood a few blocks away where Horace ran his hardware store. DiMaggio! Horace didn't have to think twice about it. He ran up to their apartment above the store, snatched up his boy Teddy, and took him down to get a look at the greatest ballplayer who'd ever lived.

And Horace was looking right at him. DiMaggio was less than a hundred yards away, standing with some people. Some working the lights, others with clipboards, microphones, everybody running around like decapitated chickens.

Except Jolting Joe. He made fists and stared at the blonde. He seemed pissed royal. Now Horace remembered. DiMaggio was married to the blonde. Ha. No wonder Joe was so bent out of shape. Horace wouldn't want a crowd of sweaty gorillas gawking at his wife either.

"Come on, Teddy." He hoisted his son up on his shoulders, pointed at the pissed ballplayer. "That's Joe DiMaggio, son. That's the greatest man in the sport of baseball." In Horace's mind, he might as well have been pointing at the president or the pope or Frank Sinatra.

Teddy didn't say anything, just held on to Dad's head, taking in the spectacle with big brown eyes.

The kid made Horace nervous. He almost never spoke, clung to his mother's dress. Wouldn't look strangers in the eye. Mildred just said he was quiet and shy. Horace didn't care to hear that. His cousin Leo had been "quiet and shy" and now he cut women's hair in the Village. So he brought Teddy to see what a man looked like.

The director yelled "action," and Monroe's skirt flew up again. DiMaggio looked like he could spit nails.

Horace loved his son, but he worried like lots of fathers worried. All the kid seemed to do was read Superman comics. Teddy wouldn't play with the ball and bat Horace had gotten him for Christmas. But he loved the Buck Rogers ray gun. The kid took it to bed at night, clutching it to his chest like a stuffed animal.

And then one day Horace came upstairs from the store and found Teddy on the floor in front of the big radio. He was arranging little rectangular cardboard cards with pictures on them. Horace had knelt next to his son, seen they were baseball cards. Baseball! Now, this was more like it. And right in the middle was a Joe DiMaggio card. Teddy had sorted them all by team, lining them up on the knotted rug. That weekend, Horace had taken the kid to a Yankees game. Teddy had been bored.

At least the kid wasn't playing with dolls.

Horace watched the director throw up his hands and tell everyone to take five. Monroe went to her husband on the sidelines. It looked like they were having words. Horace edged closer, found himself in a milling crowd, some leaving, others trying to edge in and get a look at the starlet.

If Horace hurried, he could get the autograph. Maybe DiMaggio would shake Teddy's hand. It might make all the difference, make some kind of important, lasting impression on the kid.

Somebody held up a hand, big guy, maybe a teamster, halted Horace in his tracks. "Not through here."

"I wanted my son to meet—"

The teamster shook his head. "Trying to shoot a picture here, pal. Got to keep everyone back."

Then the sailors. Three of them, reeking like a brewery, tried to surge past the line. The teamster caught one, grabbed at the others, yelled, "Jesus, Pauley, get over here. We got some wise guys."

Another teamster the size of a battleship leapt in front of the sailors. They wrestled, the sailors cursing and throwing feeble punches, one calling for "Marilyn, baby."

Horace saw his chance, slipped around the fracas, Teddy still bobbing on his shoulders and holding on to his hair.

Horace beelined for DiMaggio and Monroe. Monroe had turned away from the ballplayer, but Joe latched on to her wrist, pulled her back. Horace winced. It was obviously a private moment, and it wasn't like Horace to stick his nose in where it didn't belong. But he'd come too far to turn back. His son was going to meet Joe DiMaggio and that was all there was to it. He pressed on, got within five feet of the couple.

DiMaggio looked up abruptly, released Monroe, and put his hands in his pockets. Horace stood right in front of them now. He was nervous, but knew he couldn't stand there all day staring at the man.

"Mr. DiMaggio, I'm a big fan." He put out his hand, and DiMaggio shook it.

"Thanks," DiMaggio said.

"My son too." He pushed Teddy forward. "Shake the man's hand, son."

Teddy raised his hand like a zombie. He seemed to be in some kind of trance, eyes not quite focusing on DiMaggio.

DiMaggio managed to summon half a smile, took the kid's hand. "How're you doing, slugger?"

Teddy's mouth hung open slightly. He pulled his hand back.

Horace touched his son on the shoulder. "Give it to him. Go on."

In his other hand, Teddy held the Joe DiMaggio card. He handed it to the ballplayer, who looked at it and laughed.

"I remember sitting for this one." DiMaggio patted his jacket pockets, looking for a pen.

Horace was ready. He handed DiMaggio a fountain pen, watched as DiMaggio signed his name right under his face. Horace realized he was far more excited about the whole situation than his son was. DiMaggio handed the card back to Teddy, who took it quietly. But he wasn't looking at the ballplayer, seemed not even to realize he'd gotten the autograph.

Teddy stared with wide-eyed awe at Monroe. The movie lights

lit her hair up like a blond halo. She seemed to glow—white skin, lips wet and red.

Monroe saw she was now the object of the child's attention. Her face transformed, smile suddenly warm and gleaming. "Well, hello, honey. How's my little man?"

Teddy stepped forward, a hazy, lopsided grin turning up the corners of his mouth. Inexplicably, he handed Monroe the Joe DiMaggio card.

Monroe took it, then snatched the fountain pen, which was still in DiMaggio's hand. "I'll sign this too, okay?" She shot DiMaggio a sideways glance before turning up the volume on her smile and looking Teddy in the eyes. "Joe doesn't mind. That's because he knows we're a team, right, Joe?"

"Sure."

Monroe signed her name right under DiMaggio's.

Horace said, "We don't want to take any more of your time."

"Nonsense," Monroe said. "Joe and I love to visit with the people. Don't we, Joe?"

DiMaggio frowned. Teddy continued to gawk at the starlet, naked worship on his face.

Horace felt uncomfortable now. "We'd really better be going. My wife probably had supper ready an hour ago and—"

The director came over, took Marilyn by the elbow. "We're ready to start again. Up for another take?"

Monroe said, "Oh, Billy, we're all signing one of Joe's cards for this charming young man. Here, you sign too."

The director signed "Billy Wilder" underneath Monroe's name, then handed the card back to Teddy.

DiMaggio's face was the color of a stoplight. Furious.

"I can see you need to get back to work," Horace said. "Thanks a lot, folks." Horace scooped Teddy up under his arm and retreated quickly. The chaos of the movie shoot resumed behind them.

When they'd made it through the crowd, Horace set his son on the sidewalk. Strolled back toward the hardware store. Teddy held

the baseball card delicately, took special care not to smudge the ink. The encounter had not gone quite as Horace had planned, but Teddy seemed to have enjoyed it.

"Daddy, what was that lady's name?"

Horace stopped walking, blinked at his son. It was the first thing the kid had said in five hours. "Marilyn Monroe. She's in pictures."

"Marilyn Monroe," Teddy repeated with wonder, like the words to a magic spell. Like a prayer.

MARCH 11, 1962

Dear Miss Monroe,

My name is Teddy Folger, and I am your biggest fan. Ha. I have to laugh because I just bet every letter you get starts out with some guy saying he's your biggest fan. Well, for me it happens to be true. I don't know if you remember me, but I met you when I was six years old while you were doing *The Seven Year Itch*. My dad took me to see Joe DiMaggio and you were there too and you signed my DiMaggio card. I will never forget that day. I have seen every one of your pictures ten times. I think you are the most beautiful woman in the world. I don't mean that in a dirty way or like a come-on. You probably get lots of fellows writing you with some kind of pitch. I'm not like that. I'm just a fan who thinks you're about the greatest movie star that ever lived.

Three days ago I went to my dad's funeral. He was hit by a cab. I don't know why I'm telling you this. I think my dad wanted me to be different than I am. He never said anything. He never got mad at me, but I could tell he wanted me to be different. He always took me to your movies.

Usually a matinee. I just wanted you to know that my dad was the greatest. He wanted me to be happy, so he took me to every one of your movies even though I don't think he really cared about movies too much. I hope you have a new movie coming out soon.

Your biggest fan,

Teddy Folger

JULY 30, 1962

Dear Teddy,

I'm sorry it took me so long to write back. I get so many letters, and I'm just so very busy. Of course I remember you, honey. I'm so happy that you find my films so enjoyable. It makes my heart happy to hear it. To tell the truth, I've been a little blue, so your letter was a much-needed pick-me-up.

I can't tell you how sorry I am to hear about your father. People are funny. They all want us and expect us to be a certain way. Sometimes people never know the real us. It sounds like your father knew you pretty well. He might have had some very different expectations from you, but I'm sure he loved and accepted you just how you are. You seem a special and sensitive young man. Thanks so much for your letter.

Love,

Marilyn Monroe

NEW ORLEANS, 2002

"Welcome back to *Antiques Road Show*," said the host. "This week, we're in New Orleans, the Big Easy, and we have another amazing assortment of antiques and collectibles. Let's continue now with Arlo Watts, curator of the San Diego Museum of Pop Culture. He's looking at an item that combines baseball and Hollywood. Arlo."

The camera switched to Arlo, a middle-aged man decked out in tweed, little half glasses. He stood next to a stout man with gray hair, midfifties. On the table between them was a large picture frame.

Arlo said, "We're here with Teddy Folger, who's driven from Pensacola to show us this piece of not only baseball memorabilia, but also an extraordinary piece of Hollywood history. Mr. Folger, tell us how you came to possess such a special item."

"It all started when my father wanted me to meet Joe DiMaggio." Folger told the tale succinctly, all facts, no embellishments. The story was already good. It needed no exaggeration. Folger finished the story, then said, "And if you want to see this wonderful treasure of American history, I'll have it on display at my store, Pan-Galactic Comics & Collectibles on Davis Highway, in Pensacola, Florida." Folger waved at the camera.

Arlo ignored the plug and dove into a lengthy and tedious story about the filming of *The Seven Year Itch*. Folger smiled, tried to appear patient and interested, but what he really wanted to hear—what *everyone* wanted to hear on this show—was all about how much the damn thing was worth. *Get to the money, egghead!*

Now Arlo was yakking on and on about Monroe's marriage to DiMaggio. Folger knew all this already. He supposed the TV audience found it interesting. In the last forty years, Folger had read every word written on the subject. He'd even written a short book on Monroe, but twenty New York agents had turned it down, claiming the subject was exhausted.

Finally, Arlo asked the golden question. "Mr. Folger, do you have any idea what this item is worth?"

Folger had seen the show many times, knew what he was supposed to say. "Oh, I really have no idea. Its sentimental value is more important as far as I'm concerned." *A million dollars. Say it. It's worth a million if it's worth a penny. Say it, you nerd.*

"First, let's review what we have here," Arlo said. "The presentation is very nice. You've taken a full-size *Seven Year Itch* film poster and framed it nicely in glass. The poster features Marilyn in her famous pose, the skirt flying up. On either side of Marilyn, you've encased the two artifacts. Individually, each artifact would probably bring a nice price, but the letter and the card are connected by a personal story. This all adds value."

Get on with it, thought Folger. He felt sweat under his arms.

"The card," Arlo continued, "is a wonderful example of an Apex brand Joe DiMaggio baseball card in mint condition. Signed by Joe DiMaggio, Marilyn Monroe, and film director Billy Wilder. These are the key players in one of Hollywood's great stories. Really the quintessential American marriage between one of the nation's great baseball athletes and perhaps the nation's greatest movie star. It all comes together on this one baseball card."

Folger nodded along with Arlo's lecture, but in his mind, he was spending money.

Arlo said, "Then we have the letter. It goes without saying that Monroe got millions of fan letters, so the fact you received a return letter is in itself pretty amazing. But notice the date." He pointed to the corner of the letter. "This letter was written less than a week before Monroe was tragically found dead in her home. I haven't had a chance to check this yet, but it may very well be the last letter she ever sent. Certainly *one* of the last."

Arlo scratched his chin. Folger held his breath.

Arlo said, "Unfortunately . . ."

Folger's heart stopped.

" . . . it's difficult to predict how much such an item would fetch at auction," Arlo said. "It all depends how eager collectors would be to get their hands on such an item. Certainly the rarity and importance of the item would drive the price up a good bit, but one never can tell."

Folger felt sick. His fake smile hurt so much, he was afraid his face was going to detach and fall on the floor. He cleared his throat. "Well . . . that's interesting."

"It is an irreplaceable item," Arlo said. "For obvious reasons. For insurance purposes, I'd value the card and the letter together at close to a hundred thousand dollars. At auction, it would be anyone's guess, but I'd certainly get this insured without delay."

"Thanks," Folger said. "I'll look into some insurance right away."

TOKYO, TODAY

Ahira Kurisaka was a fat billionaire in a leather jacket. Kurisaka stood in front of a full-length mirror, turning from side to side, admiring himself even though the jacket was clearly five sizes too small.

Billy Moto watched, trying to suppress the disgust he felt. It was sometimes difficult to maintain respect for his employer. The newspapers were kind in merely referring to him as eccentric, but Billy knew Kurisaka more completely than perhaps any other person in the world. Ahira Kurisaka was one of the strangest, most paranoid people Moto had ever met.

"How does it look?" Kurisaka asked.

"It's too small." There was no point in lying. His boss would know. Lying wasn't something Billy Moto would do anyway.

"Perhaps," Kurisaka said. "And this was actually worn by Fonzie during the television series?"

"Our sources are positive. The Smithsonian would not sell us the one they have on display, but it was simple enough to contact the studio people and purchase another."

Kurisaka looked in the mirror, slicked back his hair, and stuck his thumbs out. "Aaayyy."

In the past five years, Billy Moto had performed a variety of services for his master. The most trivial of which, in Billy's opinion, was