



# POINT BLANK

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# ONE

When a fresh-faced guy in a Chevy offered him a lift, Parker told him to go to hell. The guy said, ‘Screw you, buddy,’ yanked his Chevy back into the stream of traffic, and roared on down to the tollbooths. Parker spat in the right-hand lane, lit his last cigarette, and walked across the George Washington Bridge.

The 8 a.m. traffic went *mmmmmmmm mmmmmmm*, all on this side, headed for the city. Over there, lanes and lanes of nobody going to Jersey. Underneath, the same thing.

Out in the middle, the bridge trembled and swayed in the wind. It does it all the time, but he’d never noticed it. He’d never walked it before. He felt it shivering under his feet, and he got mad. He threw the

used-up butt at the river, spat on a passing hubcap, and strode on.

Office women in passing cars looked at him and felt vibrations above their nylons. He was big and shaggy, with flat square shoulders and arms too long in sleeves too short. He wore a grey suit, limp with age and no pressing. His shoes and socks were both black and both holey. The shoes were holey on the bottom, the socks were holey at heel and toe.

His hands, swinging curve-fingered at his sides, looked like they were molded of brown clay by a sculptor who thought big and liked veins. His hair was brown and dry and dead, blowing around his head like a poor toupee about to fly loose. His face was a chipped chunk of concrete, with eyes of flawed onyx. His mouth was a quick stroke, bloodless. His suit coat fluttered behind him, and his arms swung easily as he walked.

The office women looked at him and shivered. They knew he was a bastard, they knew his big hands were born to slap with, they knew his face would never break into a smile when he looked at a woman. They knew what he was, they thanked God for their husbands, and still they shivered. Because they knew how he would fall on a woman in the night. Like a tree.

The office men drove by, clutching their steering wheels, and hardly noticed him. Just a bum walking on the bridge. Didn't even own a car. A few of them

saw him and remembered themselves before they'd made it when *they* didn't have a car. They thought they were empathising with him. They thought it was the same thing.

Parker walked across the bridge and turned right. He went down that way one block to the subway hole. All down the street ahead of him were the blacktop and the sidewalks and the grey apartment buildings and the traffic lights at every intersection going from red to green to red. And lots of people, on the move.

He trotted down the steps into the subway hole. The spring sun disappeared, and there were fluorescent lights against cream-shaded tile. He went over to the subway-system map and stood in front of it, scratching his elbow and not looking at the map. He knew where he wanted to go.

The downtown train pulled in, already crowded, and the doors slid back. More people pushed on. Parker turned, yanked open the NO ADMITTANCE door and went on through. Somebody behind him shouted, 'Hey!' Ahead, the subway doors slid at each other. He jumped, ran into the people standing in the car, and the doors met behind him.

He went all the way downtown, got out at Chambers and walked over to the Motor Vehicle Bureau on Worth. On the way, he panhandled a dime from a latent fag with big hips and stopped in a grimy diner for coffee. He bummed a cigarette from the counter girl. It

was a Marlboro. He twisted off the filter, threw it on the floor, and stuck the cigarette between his bloodless lips. She lit it for him, leaning over the counter toward him with her breasts high, like an offering. He got the cigarette fired, nodded, dropped the dime on the counter, and went out without a word.

She looked after him, face red with rage, and threw his dime into the garbage. Half an hour later, when the other girl said something to her, she called her a bitch.

Parker went on to the Motor Vehicle Bureau and stood at the long wooden table while he filled out a driver's licence form with one of the old-fashioned straight pens. He blotted the form, folded it carefully, and stuck it into his wallet, which was brown leather and completely empty and beat to hell.

He left the Bureau and walked over to the post office, where the federal government was in charge and they had ball-point pens. He took out the licence and stood hunched over it, sketching with small quick strokes in the space reserved for the state stamp. The ball-point pen had ink of almost the right colour, and Parker's memory of the stamp was clear.

When he was finished, it looked all right for anybody who didn't inspect it closely. It just looked as though the rubber stamp hadn't been inked well enough or had been jiggled when it was pressed to the paper or something. He smudged the damp ink a bit more with his finger, licked the finger clean, and returned the licence to his wallet. Then he crumpled

and bent the wallet in his hands before putting it back in his hip pocket.

He walked up to Canal Street and went into a bar. It was dark in there, and clammy. The barman and his one customer stopped mumbling down at the end of the bar and looked at him, their expressions like those of fish looking out through the glass wall of a tank.

He went on down, ignoring them, and pushed open the spring door to the men's room. It slammed behind him.

He washed his face and hands in cold water without soap, because there wasn't any hot water and there wasn't any soap. He got his hair wet and pushed it around with his fingers until it looked all right. He stroked his palm up his jawline and felt the stubble, but it didn't show bad yet.

Taking his tie from his inside jacket pocket, he ran it taut through his fingers, to get the wrinkles out of it, and put it on. The wrinkles still showed. He had a safety pin attached to the lining of his jacket. He took it and pinned the tie to the shirt, where it wouldn't show. Pulled down that way, and with the jacket closed, it looked pretty good. And you couldn't see that the shirt was dirty anymore.

He wet his fingers at the sink again, and forced the approximation of a crease into his pant legs, stroking down again and again until a vague line showed and stayed there. Then he looked at himself in the mirror.

He didn't look like any Rockefeller, but he didn't

look like a bum either. He looked like a hard worker who never got out of the mailroom. Good enough. It would have to do.

He got out the driver's licence one last time and dropped it on the floor. He squatted beside it, and patted the licence here and there on the floor till it was reasonably dirty. Then he crumpled it some more, brushed the excess dirt off, and put it back in his wallet. One last rinsing of his hands, and he was ready to leave.

The bartender and his customer stopped mumbling again as he went by, but he didn't notice. He went back out into the sunlight and headed uptown and west, looking for just the right bank. He needed a bank that would have a lot of customers of the type he was faking.

When he found the one he wanted, he paused for a second and concentrated on rearranging his face. He stopped looking mean and he stopped looking mad. He kept working at it, and when he was sure he looked worried he went on into the bank.

There were four desks to his left, two of them occupied by middle-aged men in business suits. One of them was talking to an old woman in a cloth coat who was having trouble with English. Parker went straight over to the other and added a smile to the worried expression.

'Hello,' he said, making his voice softer than usual. 'I got a problem, and maybe you can help me. I've lost my

chequebook, and I can't remember my account number.'

'No problem at all,' said the man, with a professional smile. 'If you'll just give me your name . . .'

'Edward Johnson,' said Parker, giving him the name he'd put on the licence. He hauled his wallet out. 'I've got identification. Here.' He handed over the licence.

The man looked at it, nodded, handed it back. 'Fine,' he said. 'That was a special account?'

'That's right.'

'One minute, please.' He picked up his phone, talked into it for a minute, and waited, smiling reassurance at Parker. Then he talked a few seconds more and looked puzzled. He capped the phone mouthpiece with his hand and said to Parker, 'There's no record of your account here. Are you sure it's a special account? No minimum balance?'

'Try the other kind,' said Parker.

The man continued to look puzzled. He talked into the phone a while longer, then hung up, frowning. 'There's no record of any account at all under that name.'

Parker got to his feet. He grinned and shrugged. 'Easy come, easy go,' he said.

He walked out, and the man at the desk kept staring after him, frowning.

In the fourth bank he tried, Edward Johnson had a special cheque account. Parker got the account number and the present balance, and a new chequebook to replace the one he'd lost. Edward Johnson only had

six hundred dollars and change in his account. Parker felt sorry for him.

He left the bank, went into a men's clothing store, and bought a suit and a shirt and a tie and socks and shoes. He paid by check. The clerk compared his signature with the one on his driver's licence, and called the bank to see if he had enough cash in his account to cover the check. He did.

He carried the packages up to the bus terminal on 40th Street, and went up to the men's room. He didn't have a dime to open a stall door, so he crawled under it, pushing his packages ahead of him. He changed into the new clothes, transferred his wallet and chequebook, and left all the old clothes in the stall.

He walked north till he came to a leather-goods shop. He bought a hundred and fifty dollars' worth of good luggage, a matched set of four pieces. He showed the driver's licence for identification, and they didn't even call the bank. Two blocks he carried the luggage, and then he got thirty-five dollars for it at a pawn shop. He went crosstown, and did it twice more – luggage to pawn shop – and got another eighty dollars.

He took a cab up to 96th Street and Broadway, and worked up and down Broadway for a while, this time buying watches and pawning them. Then he went to Lexington Avenue, mid-town, and did it some more. Four times all told, somebody called the bank to see if he had enough money in his account. Not once was his driver's licence questioned as valid identification.

By three o'clock, he had a little over eight hundred dollars. He used one more check, to buy a medium-sized suitcase of excellent quality, and then he spent half an hour shopping, paying cash for his purchases. He bought a razor and lather and lotion, a toothbrush and paste, socks and underwear, two white shirts, three ties, a carton of cigarettes, a pint of hundred-proof vodka, a comb and brush set, and a new wallet. Everything except the wallet went into the suitcase.

When the suitcase was full, he quit shopping and went to a good restaurant for a steak. He undertipped, and ignored the waiter's dirty look as he went out, still carrying the suitcase. He took a cab to a medium-priced hotel, where they believed his driver's licence and didn't make him pay in advance. He got a room and bath, and overtipped the bellboy.

He stripped out of the new clothes and took a bath. His body was hard and rangy and scarred. After the bath, he sat up naked in bed and slowly drank the pint of vodka straight from the bottle, grinning at the far wall. When the bottle was empty, he threw it at the wastebasket and fell asleep.