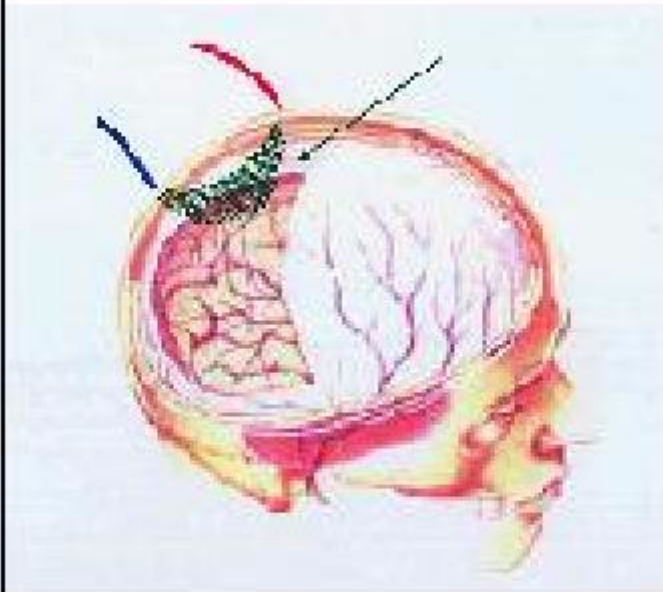


Deadlihood



Virgil Allen Wulff

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Also by Virgil Allen Wulff
www.VirgilAllenWulff.com

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PART ONE

Chapter 1

["My God! Oh my God! What am I?"]

Romano knelt and brashly whispered in Clyde's ear, "This gonna hurt BAD, old man."

Chicago's Skid Row was once a cesspool for hopeless thousands, some whose only crime was being poor. In those days gone by, wasted derelicts shuffled and forgotten drunks staggered along West Madison amongst flophouses, saloons, and cathouses. Now, the street has been rejuvenated with stylish high-rise complexes, loft apartments, corner bars, and assorted shops squeezed in-between, but the imageries of gloom and despair lingered on.

On this street of wretched memories, one of the few remaining indigents was an aged, frail Clyde Miller. One forsaken morning he had awakened to find himself slouched in an abandoned stairwell. He had no memory of the past--and could find neither wallet, nor other evidence of it. Clyde looked to be past seventy, a pathetic amnesiac with a body emaciated from garbaged food and cheap wine.

Now, several months later, on that ominous street in the eerie stillness of pre-dawn, Clyde nervously watched as two shadows, vaguely outlined by streetlights, darted toward him. He knew from experience that this was going to be trouble as they approached through the shadows of solemn. One was tall and sinewy, with a collared black jacket and eyes half-closed from an obvious high. The other, a pudgy teen, clad in a tattered Levi outfit, was following apprehensively.

"Hey CREEP!" the tall one, called Romano, belted. "Whatcha got, Creep?"

Clyde knew the routine and remained still as Romano contemptuously checked all his pockets.

"One fucking dollar!"

Clyde glared at him with feeble defiance: "Go ahead--take it and go--rotten punk!"

"Punk? Punk!" Romano ripped the bill to pieces with a fury--to some extent, intended to impress Jeter. "Nobody Calls me that--NOBODY!"

Abruptly, as if a switch had been thrown, Romano's eyes bulged. He began to tremble, his head quivering. With a flagrant rage, he screamed, **"PUNK!!!"**

Clyde turned to run, but Romano swiftly grabbed him, savagely chopping the back of his neck and sending him to the ground in a clump. As Clyde, gasping in pain, rolled slightly, he was kicked deeply in the groin. Curled up in agony, Clyde caught sight of the toe of Romano's silver-tipped boot just before it pierced his face, jolting him hard against the jagged pavement. In a ferocious fervor, Romano stomped and stomped again, breaking Clyde's nose and jaw. With tightened lips and squinting eyes, the little old man curled sideways into a fetal position, grasping his battered skull.

Romano would slyly take glances at Jeter during this nauseating romp, in furtive attempts to seek approbation. Jeter sat nervously on the curb, wondering why Romano seemed to enjoy it so terribly much, appearing almost to be shrouded in machismo sadism. He had known Romano for only a few months, looked up to him most of the time. Romano seemed confident, fearless, and, to some extent, protective of Jeter.

Jeter was living with his older sister in south Chicago. He had come from a foster home in St. Louis. His lowlife father had been contemptuously paying for his keep. Hence, the old man, knowing that the foster parents were financially troubled, eventually contrived a solution. He told them that Jeter's mother, who resided in Chicago, wanted him to come live with her. Debt ridden, they most obligingly put Jeter on a Greyhound and whisked him off to Chicago. When Jeter arrived, he found that his father had lied. His mother was not at the address given, and there was nowhere for Jeter to go. He found himself alone on the streets. It was during those frightening days that Jeter had met Romano, who helped him survive and, ultimately, find his sister. Jeter moved in with her and a low-level, drug dealing boyfriend. He stayed away, since they were both too often high and accordingly unpredictable.

Phillip Romano lived with his portly, unwed mother who chose to provide intimate favors for financial support. Romano was never told who his father might be. During his adolescence, a succession of callous men had been with his mother. Too many had found it expedient to beat the shit out of Romano--often forcing him out on the streets, to render sexual privacy in the small tenement. Romano hated the intruders, and steadily acquired a sordid compulsion to get revenge upon his elders.

The approaching police car was on a slow-moving patrol of West Madison. Using the beam from a manual spotlight, two patrolmen searched for trouble. Officers George Kelly and Zeke Gomez were routinely making the rounds on their uncommonly serene graveyard shift. Zeke drove while Kelly scanned.

Jeter, already in panic, was the first to see it. "Romano! COPS! Come on--come on now, let's BLOW!"

Romano, still filled with compulsive wrath, smirked, knelt down, and whispered that gruesome threat in Clyde's ear, "This gonna hurt BAD, old man."

He then stuck fingers deep into each of Clyde's nostrils and yanked up. Blood spurted like from a spigot.

Romano derisively looked up at the moon and shouted in macho glory, "Okay! OKAY, JETER BOY! We outta here!"

Two shadowy profiles, with echoing boots, ditched down West Madison--quickly fading into the dead of night.

Clyde squirmed until he was spread-eagled, with blood splotching his blackened, hands-covered face. He mumbled words through swelling, bloodied lips over and over, so as to force them deep into memory: "Romano, Romano, Romano...Jeter, Jeter, Jeter."

The beam of light from the police car caught Clyde's wretched figure lying on the street. Kelly nudged Zeke and pointed.

Wonder if this one's drunk or dead, thought Kelly. The patrol car pulled up close and brawny Kelly rolled out. As he neared Clyde, he thought he recognized him. Clyde was unconscious and the darkness made it difficult to be certain.

Kelly routinely checked for signals, assuring the victim to be alive, but in ghastly shape. Then, when Zeke shone his flashlight on the recumbent figure, Kelly knew who it was.

"Damn it Clyde--now what?" As Zeke shifted the beam onto Clyde's face, Kelly reacted with revulsion: "Oh my God!" He turned aside and vomited.

Officer George Kelly, a blond, brash, Irish version of Sylvester Stallone, had dealt with Clyde before. He had gotten to know Clyde, and to see him differently from any of the other street people. He would try to take care of him as best he could, by escorting him to any mission or shelter that might accept him. But, in a short time, Clyde would end up back on West Madison--free of the rules and discipline required of the shelters.

Kelly was captivated by something about Clyde that always left him feeling confused. How could he be so brilliant, yet not even remember his own name, or where he came from? Kelly knew that Clyde Miller was not his real name--because it had been he who'd jokingly labeled him as Clyde.

Kelly had taken risks to get Clyde out of trouble many times, but Clyde never expressed gratitude, nor asked for anything--especially advice.

Clyde had an undaunted pride, and fiercely resented charity. Thus Kelly, a low-income altruist, in order to help, had to find ways without Clyde knowing. He would leave fast food in the back alley garbage can of a shoddy diner--the one that Clyde regularly searched. Kelly devised similar ploys with clothes and, sometimes, even money. He could never understand why he felt such a compulsion to do these things--because at times, when Clyde was being so stubborn, Kelly was truly sorry he had ever laid eyes on him. Nevertheless, gradually, and reluctantly, Kelly became Clyde's watchful and caring protector.

George Kelly's powerful arms scooped Clyde's slender unconscious carcass up and gently placed him on the back seat of the police car. He got in and put Clyde's bloody head on his lap, using a rag to stop the bleeding from the ripped-open nose and puffed-up, purple lips. Blue/white lights spun and the siren blared as they sped south, then west on the Eisenhower Expressway, faster than an ambulance and due to Kelly's camaraderie. They were heading for Polk Street.

Zeke, a remarkably able driver, radioed ahead as he snaked at high speed through pre-dawn traffic. A gurney was waiting at

the emergency entrance of the Cook County Hospital. Clyde remained unconscious as paramedics rolled him into the Emergency Room.

* * *

A week later, Officer Kelly was at Clyde's bedside watching as the senior surgical resident unwrapped Clyde's head bandage. First, they saw blackened eyes--then a large, purple, sutured nose--and finally, the swollen, cracked lips, with two braces attached to the teeth and secured tightly together.

Clyde looked up and saw Kelly.

Kelly quipped, "You look marvelous, simply marvelous."

Clyde, quite flustered, gestured with his arm, indicating his want for a mirror. The nurse understood, lifted one from the nightstand drawer, and handed it to him. Clyde took one look, shuddered, and then sullenly dropped his chin to his chest. Through clenched, wired teeth, Clyde raised his head and mumbled, "Marvelous, huh? Very funny! Very funny!"

The surgeon, remaining calm and business-like, looked closely around Clyde's face, lightly fingering the welts, bumps, and stitches: "Well, hmm, let's see now. It feels like the cuts are healing quite satisfactorily. My, my, my--that nose--it needs to be re-broken and straightened."

As the surgeon penned his clipboard, he commented. "Well now--all I can say is, we did as required in putting you back

together. Best we could do--considering. It'll take a month or so for the jaw to heal. Guess you'll be here for observation at least another week."

Clyde grabbed his can of liquid nutritional supplement from the nightstand and placed the straw deep into the side of his wired teeth, so as to sip and dampen his dry mouth. He then gestured violently with his left arm: "Please leave. I don't need anyone here right now." He slumped back in sorrow, hiding his face. "Christ, I'm not only old, now I'm *grotesque*. Go away."

Kelly leaned over close to Clyde: "One quickie, Clyde. Uh, didcha get a look at 'em? Maybe--maybe hear one call the other by name?"

Clyde chose to keep that knowledge to himself.

One last time, he spluttered through wired teeth, "GO AWAY! LEAVE ME ALONE!"

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