TAKE NO PRISONERS: The Roach

by Robert Roach

My name is Rigby. I'm a detective, a private eye, a hired dick. And I'm damn good. Though money in this damnable depression is hard to come by, my clientele is more than willing to pay my price. They know that I'm softer than a shadow's shadow and harder than a thousand diamonds. Plus, I know how to tell when each extreme is necessary. I'm damn well worth the money.

I prop my feet on my desk as I loll about waiting for a call. My box is finally ringing. And as those little bells sound out, I reach past the phone for my pack of King Edwards. Before lighting my stogie, I pause to pick up the receiver.

"Yeah?" I half-speak/half-exhale into the receiver in a nonchalant manner. It's the same muffled voice that contacted me for the job. I figured that it'd be him. The asshole thinks he's so clever. He'd shit if he found out that I've seen through his disguise. But I'll play along. Hell, for the money he's paying, I'd play Betty Boop and Kennedy the Cop at the same time.

I catch myself absent-mindedly playing with the Ace of Spades I'd found in my coat pocket Friday morning. Weird how it ended up there. I must've stashed it there the last time I played poker. Hope I won, 'cause I don't have any other explanation for the card's sudden appearance.

"Is the money ready?" I ask. "Don't worry about the report. I have enough raw information about his contacts to give you the foundation for some kind of case... You'll be by in half an hour with the balance due?... Good! The report and I will be waiting... Goodbye to you too."

My easy chair beckons and I almost succumb. But something won't let me rest. I'd seen a guy die the night before, but a death is no excuse for this spooky feeling. As I return to my desk this vague emotion hovers around my head. I almost feel wrong for doing this investigation—as if I'm touching soil better left untrod. Damn my ass for allowing emotions to enter into my job. I'm a professional. The best in the Windy City. I'm supposed to be above this sort of thing. But then again, who wouldn't—who couldn't—get personally involved when they stalked the Roach?

Snuffing out my cigar in disgust, I pick up my battered briefcase. I thumb past Tuesday's Tribune, through old notes, through yesterday's lunch, until I find my spanking new folder. A folder I bought four days ago just for this case. Just for the Roach.

I turn my desk lamp toward my papers, concentrating all of the room's light over half of my desk and my lap. As I begin going through my painstakingly typed pages I experience that vague feeling once more. Damn, am I going soft?! Or is there really more to this man—this wraith known as the Roach?

A knock breaks me from my train of thought. It couldn't be my client, it's only been three minutes since I hung up the phone. Cautiously, I cross over to the door and deliberately turn its bronze knob. Nobody's here. I look in the hallway. No one is there. I don't hear footsteps on the stairs, and the fire escape is out of the question. It's too far down the hall for someone to knock on my door, race the distance, open the window, climb out, close the window, and disappear from sight before I got to the door, and all without
making a sound. It’s those damn kids! Always looking for a cheap thrill. But I’ve got to laugh because I was the same way.

I close the door behind me and return to my desk. I pick up my report and reach for another King Edward. Damn it. Where are my matches! You can never find a light when you need one. Suddenly I find a light. A flaming match illumines the inky depths surrounding my desk. And it begins to move toward my face.

I’m a good detective— the best in Chi-town—and at that moment I proved it. Because anyone short of me would have pissed his pants. My first reaction is to go for my Colt. An iron grip prevents that move. Next, I try to punch where I think a head will be. Another hand grabs my fist—in mid-swing—and forces my hand down.

“Hello, Riggs,” a low, grave voice says. Damn! This voice is colder than the wintertime hawk when it flies off the lake. Maybe I should’ve pissed my pants—I’d have an excuse to leave.

But I’m a professional. The best. So, I conquer my feelings. I reply.

“That’s the name. Who’s abusin’ it?”

In response, the hand on my gun hand is removed. The hand finds my desk light. Slowly, the stranger tilts the lamp in his direction, the beam crawling across the ceiling like a miniature search light. The stark white beam finally halts on a well-dressed figure, donned in a deep blue three-piece pin-stripe, a trench coat, a coal grey fedora with a black band, and a thin mask over his eyes. And the black mask merely sets off two piercing grey orbs. Damn! I didn’t know he was so imposing in the flesh. I nearly shit a brick. It’s the Roach.

Again I regain my composure. Damn it, I’m a professional—and I have to deep reminding myself of that fact.

“Light?” he asks, motioning toward my cigar and his still-burning match. So as not to seem awed, I accept.

“Let’s sit down,” he says, “I think we’ll be more comfortable.” I nod in a nonchalant manner, but, damn it, I wish he’d quit staring at me.

I sit down behind my desk and he pulls a chair along side it. His hat creates an eerie kind of shadow that half hides, half highlights his face. In a slow, deliberate action, he reaches into his coat’s inner pocket and withdraws a cigarette. I have no fear. I know that he wears his gun on his right hip. In my profession you have to know these things.

“Why’d you come?” I finally ask. No comment. Damn, is this guy deaf or what?! His silence is getting on my nerves. I asked him a direct question, the least he could do is answer. And suddenly I realize that his silence has put me on the psychological defensive. So, as I try to calm down, he speaks.

“I just came by to see how the investigation turned out,” he states in his stone cold manner.

I must look like ice water’s been thrown into my face. Denying the fact would be the height of stupidity.

As much as I hate to admit it, this guy is the ultimate. He’s the Roach. And nobody bullshits the Roach. County morgue has been full of examples of this basic fact.

“It went pretty good,” I say, proud that I kept a level voice and that my eyes never left his.

I notice a slight smile shadowing his face as I answer. Is this it? Is this mother gonna turn my lights out? No, he isn’t. It isn’t a malicious smile, just a smile. Thank God! Because if he decided he wanted me dead, how could I stop him?

“I was right,” he mutters, still smiling.

“Say what?” I ask since his statement didn’t make sense. His smile fades
and he merely shakes his head.

"Not important," he replies. In other words, case closed.

"Then your client should be here in about twenty-five minutes to pick it up," he continues.

"Twenty-six," I correct.

"Okay. You started the report Wednesday, right?"

"Right." I'm getting nervous again.

"That begins and ends with my last adventure—the one dealing with 'Rhinestone' Washington."
"Yeah," I concur.

"Did you go into the streets to find out the 'whats' and 'whys' or did you just record the 'whos' and 'wheres'?"

He's referring to the depth of my investigation. Did I merely record what happened, or did I try to ascertain the motives and the particulars of situations.

"I did what I was paid to do," I answer, sidestepping the question.

I must have said the wrong thing. Surely Satan couldn't eyeball a saint with as much loathing as he turned on to me.

"I just took the notes. No particulars."

"And you have in your notes, then, that Rhinestone was in constant contact with me from Wednesday until he was killed."

"Yeah," I reply.

"And that's all you have about his death?" he demands. For some reason he seems hardly able to control himself.

"Get off it!" I exclaim. "Rhinestone was a pimp and a pusher. He was a worthless piece of slime—a waste of human flesh. If any asshole deserved to die—"

Suddenly a vice grip clamps onto my throat. The back of a hand hits my face like a concrete slab. My head jerks east to west so fast that it seems unattached to my shoulders. And if the hand choking off my air hadn't also been holding me up, I'd be lying on the floor.

In disgust, the Roach throws me back into my chair. What's up? I simply said the truth about a lowlife with whom we were both acquainted—and disliked. Hell, the Roach himself has offed a dozen or more just like Rhinestone.

So why the reaction? Is there something more? There must be for him to come back so violently.

"Then what's the story? I ask as soon as I can.

"That's what I came here to tell," he says as he reseats himself. So I kick back and listen.

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The word was out. Rhinestone wanted some of me. Strange for a slime to want to see the Roach—I give most of them nightmares. But I don't go out of my way to see scum on hearsay or rumor. So I didn't go to see Rhinestone.

That was Wednesday morning. Hours, like any facet of time, can change the course of a lifetime. The afternoon hours changed the course of Rhinestone's. And of his brother's.

(What brother of Rhinestone's is the Roach talking about? And how does it relate to me? More than ever, he has my attention.)

I'd just broken up a crooked craps game operated out of a shack in the alley behind 49th and South Parkway. These guys would pick the folks clean as they went for a bit of night life up around 47th. Dirty bastards. I didn't need to fire any shots, but I'd give odds none of the assholes got up for a while.

The work done, I strolled north to see if any other business needed attending. East of the Savoy I ran into a close friend who—somehow—always knows how to find me. And with her was another streetwalker. Introductions were swiftly made and the situation was quickly sketched. I went away with my new acquaintance, an extremely attractive black girl named Cybil, who, interestingly, was the main meat in Rhinestone's stable.
By the way, I believe it was here that you picked up my trail.
(He's right. But I'll be damned if I give him the satisfaction of knowing he's right. The over-observant sonofabitch.)

Cybil was messed up. Not high. Not drunk. But something bad was messin' with her mind.

"We're away from Sadie now," I said. "What's the problem?"
"Didn't you hear nothin' about Rhinestone? He needs you bad. Real bad."
"I don't do nothin' for cheap-ass bastards like that pimp you've got. The most amount of attention I'd give him is a bullet in the brain."
"Nawl! It ain't nothin' like that. He needs your help 'cause there ain't nobody else he can turn to. He wants to go clean and git outta Chicago. But he's got folks on his ass. Mean white boys that're part of Bugs's gang."
"Why'd your squeeze get a sudden change of heart? Seems to me he was makin' money off of his brothers' misery."
"Hey, I only know what I been told and what I seen. The boy's serious. All this other shit you gonna have to find out on your own. Hell! You the Roach, ain't you?"

I told her to have Rhinestone meet me over at Poro College in an hour. This adventure had gone beyond another punk wanting something for free from the Roach. It had become interesting.

Rhinestone stood in the deepest shadow that he could find behind the college beauty shop. I'd never seen him that nervous—constantly fidgeting and taking quick, shallow drags off of his cigarette.

"Here for a perm" I asked. He nearly jumped out of his shoes. I guess he didn't like my joke. Maybe he didn't like the fact that I didn't smile. Or maybe the fact that I was able to sneak up beside him without him even having a clue that I was there shook him the most.

"Damn, Man!" he exclaimed. "I thought that was my ass!"

"It may be if you don't tell me somethin' good."

"Yeah! Yeah!" he said, crushing his cigarette butt with his heel in a spastic manner.

"Why you smellin' your piss? I asked him.
"I gotta get out, man. Y'know, sometimes we all need a change of life and atmosphere. That's what we gonna do."

I hate being bullshitted. I'd give him one more chance before wringing the truth out of him. The truth about his motives—and the truth about his pronoun "we."

"Try it again," I stated.

"Whatcha mean, man?"

I don't think he knew what hit him. If I'd wanted, I could have broken his jaw, but that could wait. I wanted the truth, not a corpse. But the choice was his alone.

I reached down and grabbed him by the lapel, jerking him to his feet. Washington wiped away the blood from his nose and mouth, gasping to find his breath.

"Okay, my man, okay. I shoulda known better than to bullshit the Roach," he paused, I supposed to gather his thoughts, and then he looked at me. His face had changed. I knew he'd no longer front me. No more bullshit.

"I gotta secret I've kept for the longest time. Ain't nobody who knows it. Not even you—and they say you know everything. I've got me a kid brother. His name's Spat. When we was little and livin' in St. Lou, Daddy ran away. And Momma died when I was seventeen. But she made me promise to take care 'a Spat. I swore to her I would. So I moved us to Chi. Spat was nine."

"You remember when I used to relay the numbers? Shit, I knew bein' a
damn runner wasn’t the way to the cash. I knew you had to be pullin’ the strings instead ‘a bein’ a string. I also knew street life was one way to a dead end. I knew what it took to turn a buck and I was ready to do it. And I was damn good. I am damn good. But not Spat. Spat had a brain. I’d get him some schoolin’. I’d make enough to put him through Cookman or Jackson or Tuskegee or some other black folks’ school. And I’d make enough to put me on easy street.

“But damn monkey see, damn monkey do. Nigger couldn’t see where this world’ll take you. Stupid fucker had to celebrate his eighteenth birthday by holding up a money boy in Bugs Moran’s gang. Lucky bastard took down the runner but not the witness. And since he don’t know the streets, he made a bee line home. Never even thought o’ them trailin’ his ass.”

“So what am I to do when these mothers bust in wantin’ Spat? I iced ‘em. And I knew right then that Chi’d got too hot. We booked. But they was already watchin’ the stations and stuff. They’d put it out on the street that the guilty party was in their custody.’ They had to save face somehow, else that shit’d be happenin’ all the time.”

“What else was I to do? You’re my last hope. But if you don’t help me, fine. At least get Spat out. We got kin in Atlanta and I’ve sent them four thousand seven hundred dollars. It don’t mean shit if I don’t make it, but I swore to my momma about Spat. He’s gotta make it.”

What was I to say? This was a totally different Rhinestone—trying to go straight, trying for a new life and deeply caring about someone.

“l’ll help,” I said.

You and I resumed our respective cases Thursday in the early evening. I caught up with Cybil hot-leggin’ it over by the Boulevard Apartments. I d decided that she’d be my relay to Rhinestone. I could’ve gone myself because I’d figured out his hiding spot, but I couldn’t just take you there. As it turned out, you found it without too much of a problem anyway.

I told her to have Rhinestone meet me in Chinatown behind the city hall at midnight. Funny how hookers become attached to their pimps. Good thing for Rhinestone that she still cared—it helped uncomplicate matters.

I had hours to kill and so I decided to test your tracking ability. You’re good, too. There are some things you might have done a little better. I’m sure you’d smirk at such a comment—you’re a pro—but I’ll prove what I just said.

At midnight I sucked on my tobacco stick so that its glow would give away my presence. Or else he’d never have found me.

“What’s happenin’? he asked. He looked haggard. For good reasons.

“I’ve got a chance for you. It requires risk. You could end up dead. It’s just a chance, but if you’ve got the balls we’ll give it a go.”

“Is it our best shot?”

“It’s your only shot.”

“Then run it down.”

“Yeah—in a minute. First, let’s ease out of the shadows a little. And then you count to sixty.”

“What?!”

I didn’t reply. Why should I? I didn’t like having a decision questioned. Least of all from someone I was helping.

I guess he got the message because he backed out of the shadows.

I smiled, anticipating his surprise—and yours. I disappeared. I heard him gasp and hoped that he wouldn’t panic. Then, as I slipped away from his location, he began to count.

The building caddy-corner to our meeting place rushed up on me as I dodged evening lights and raced time. I was just playing a game that—if
things had been different—would have become a game of death. A nightunseen silhouette sat in the building's deepest shadow—on the fire escape between the second and third floors. As softly as possible I circled above the watcher and swiftly descended upon him. But it seemed this shadow was occupied by other shadows—it didn't know I was there. In a split-second I ascertained that it meant no harm. But, as an example, and because I couldn't resist, I'd let the stalker know I'd been there. So I left him my calling card—an Ace of Spades.

(He's watching my eyes. I must look surprised—what an understatement. He could've offed me right then—Thursday night—and I'd've never known what hit me. The thought sends a chill down my spine.)

At the count of fifty-nine, I tapped Rhinestone on his shoulder and he almost collapsed. After he regained his composure, he asked me to outline my plan.

"Tomorrow night at ten I'll be by to pick up Spat—"

"Whaddayou mean you'll be by to get Spat when you don't even kn--"

I suppose my smile answered his question. "Spat and I'll go to the Lincoln Centre where, at 10:15, your lift to Atlanta will pick us up. You be at Temple Isaiah at 10:30 and we'll pick you up. It'd be too obvious and too vulnerable to have you both at the same place. I'll ride along till we hit Gary," I said. "Then you're on your own. If you make it, let me know," I concluded, handing him a note with an address.

"Yeah, thanks, but what ride, if you don't mind me askin'?"

"Have you ever heard of Van Huens' Trucking?"

"Hell, who in Chi ain't? Those folks is big time—own grocery stores, shipping, land—near everything I can think of they own part of."

"Well, that's your ride to Dixie."

"Van Huens' Truckin'? Ain't no way. Those people are rich and legit. What'd they want with my black ass? You gotta be bullshittin'."

"You should know better than anybody—I don't bullshlt."

"But—but how'd you do somethin' that big? The Van Huens never heard of me and could care less if they ever would. How'd you get them to help us?"

"My influence doesn't stop at the river," I replied. And he took that as my final comment on the subject.

"We'll be ready, man. And thanks."

A lot of things had happened before Rhinestone and I spoke—things which would affect my operation. Word had leaked out about Rhinestone and Spat, and Moran's gang had lost some respect. Another attempted hit cost them two men. So they were livid to find my charges to make examples of them. Also, word was out that Riggs was on the street. Nobody knew that you were stalking me, but you were noticed eyeballin' Rhinestone. You and I know you were actually tailing me, but all the regular people saw were those occasions when I—and consequently you—would stop. And those times were only when Rhinestone and I met. So word was out that you were bounty hunting for Moran and that Rhinestone was the meat.

All of this wouldn't have meant shit if the dominoes hadn't fallen the way that they did.

I figured you'd be with me on Friday so I purposely made myself visible. As soon as I was sure that you were on my hip, I shook you loose. And I made conclusively sure that you were lost for good.

But I've got to give you credit, Rigby, you're a pro—and you're good. What I eventually figured out is that after you lost my trail you picked up Cybil's. Smart thinking. Since Cybil led me to Rhinestone she could probably lead you
to Rhinestone. And Rhinestone would inevitably lead you to me. Just so that you could complete that damnable report for that cheap-ass politician-client who hired you.

But what you didn't know—what you could've easily found out if you'd put your ears in the streets—was that Moran had put a tail on you, hoping you'd lead his boys to Rhinestone. So, when Cybil dropped by that little shack opposite of Pershing Road on Michigan, you weren't the only asshole patting himself on the back for being so smart. Luckily she cruised by a little after ten or else they'd've got both Spat and Rhinestone.

As it was, Spat and I got to the Lincoln on time and Van Huen was good to his word. The truck eased up a little before 10:15. Simultaneously, as I estimate, Rhinestone was leaving for the temple with you in his pocket, hoping for me, and Moran's boys in your pocket, waiting for a chance.

We drove as quickly and cautiously as possible toward the temple. And as we did I got a sick feeling at the pit of my stomach. Everything was going right—and that worried me. Especially since lives were directly involved. And then, as if on cue, something did happen. As we turned east off of Drexel onto 47th, we ran into a traffic cop redirecting the flow. The delay cost us five minutes—and Rhinestone Washington his life.

As we turned south onto Greenwood, I noticed a Duesenberg squealing onto 47th—off of University—and head toward the lake.

"Move this thing!" I shouted to the driver. We arrived there in just under two minutes and I raced to the spot I expected to find Rhinestone—Spat just a step or two behind me.

I knew what to expect so I didn't slip in the pool of blood. As I helped Spat back to his feet I looked into his eyes. They seemed older—and wiser. They seemed to realize that the street was a dead end. They also seemed to accept responsibility for his brother's death and of Rhinestone's dream for a better life for him.

I threw Spat back into the truck and told the driver not to stop till they hit Georgia. About three minutes had gone by since the Duesenberg had spun onto 47th. I was cold rage. I'd given my word to Rhinestone and I'd made a promise to myself—to get them out. Circumstances screwed that up, but I then swore to avenge Rhinestone's death. And, I reasoned, no time was like the present.

Providence provided me with the means to take up the chase immediately. A Studebaker presented itself at the corner of University and 51st, and I seized the opportunity. And I swore to myself not to scratch, dent or injure the car in any way—especially after I'd abruptly left its rightful owner, confused and stranded, on that corner.

The assholes had a four minute lead on me. Half by knowing their modus operandi= half by hunch—I sped my borrowed wheels toward Erikson Drive. The assassins would probably take the lakeshore route toward the Loop to get lost in the downtown area. Where they'd go after driving north on the lakefront, I had no idea. So I had to catch them as soon as possible, pinning my plans on the hope that they'd feel secure and slow down.

I raced at break-neck speed along the waterfront and caught the Duesey at the point where Leif Erikson became Columbus Drive. But how could I stop them? I didn't want to hurt the car so I couldn't run them off the road. But I couldn't let them go. I wouldn't let them go. Their lives were mine. I'd take no prisoners.

I drew my gun and switched it to my left—and obviously less accurate—hand. Whereas my right hand had over a 98 percent accuracy rate, my left barely had over 92.
My first shot was true. It shattered the rear window and splattered a rear seat passenger's head. Only four assholes left.

The rest returned fire as the wheelman tried to pull away. I wasted a couple of shots, unintentionally, but wasted nonetheless. Then one of the punks in the back seat pulled out a Tommy. I knew my next shot would have to perfect or I wouldn't get another chance. As I squeezed the trigger the car hit a bump and slightly spoiled my aim. But not enough for the hood. The machine gun flew from his grasp and into the street as the bullet exploded into his arm.

The driver wheeled onto Jackson Blvd. and headed west. As we raced through the Loop, I wasted another bullet. So I knew the next—the last—shot would have to count. I would have to stop them. As we passed the Monadnock building I again squeezed my trigger in a cold, deliberate manner. This time no bump altered my aim and I got great satisfaction from seeing the rear left wheel's rubber disintegrate.

Forced afoot, the four emerged from their car, guns blazing and leather flying. And one fucker put a bullet hole through the Studebaker's front windshield. Another promise shot to Hell.

Moran's boys gained a little time on me as I reloaded and ran straight for the Board of Trade Building. Within seconds I was on their heels, but still too slowly. As I followed their path—bursting through the lobby doorway—I saw their elevator door closing.

I had no time to waste cursing my poor luck. It was time to see if I was all that the street folks made me out to be. So I hit the stairway.

Taking three steps at a time, I began gaining on the ascending box. I was only a floor behind it when I hit the fourth floor. I just hoped the sum-bitches weren't taking it all the way to the observatory—forty-four stories from the ground.

On the eighth floor I again left the staircase to check my progress. As I shoved the stairway door open I heard a light click—as if metal had met metal. Something was wrong. Just then I heard a slight hum in the air and saw a wire swiftly descending toward my neck. Faster than thought, I separated the wire from my neck with my gun's barrel. A quick elbow jab to my assailant's solar plexus loosened his hold on the strangling wire. Pivoting on a dime, I followed up my jab with a right to the bridge of his nose—a blow that crushed his cartilage. The punk probably figured that he'd be some sort of hero—be the "man" to ice the Roach. I put a bullet between his eyes. Only three assholes left.

The scum had served a purpose for the others. He'd bought them time. I glanced at the elevator's floor count. It was almost on the top floor. Time to gamble again. Another elevator was two stories beneath me when I summoned it, but it seemed years away. Finally the mouse trap got to my floor. I pressed 44 and checked my weapons—my gun and me. After next to forever, the elevator doors slid open. I knew what to expect. They were waiting. Why else would they ride to the top floor?

I took off my trench coat and tossed it out of the elevator. Instant fireworks. And while their fire was concentrated on my coat—before they could react—I dove out of the box. Rolling across the floor as fast as possible, I finally brought my legs underneath me and I was ready to return fire. One of the fools, the one I had shot in the arm, was slow to cease firing at my coat. The flame of his gun made him an easy target. I blew a hole through the low-life's chest. Only two assholes left.

I guess one of the hoods couldn't handle the pressure. A big guy with a scar from his left ear to below his mouth. After I shot Mr. Tommy Gun, I moved away from the elevator's light and back toward a wall. Maybe I made too
much noise in moving or maybe the punk made a lucky guess—I don't know. Nevertheless, the big guy began to run in my direction, screaming like a banshee. Perhaps it was supposed to scare me. It didn't work. He did squeeze off a shot before I did. A nice shot, in fact. I could feel the breeze from the bullet as it passed near my left cheek. I aimed my gun at my fast-approaching target and blew his right knee to Hell.

He began begging me for his life. I was sure Rhinestone begged for his. But Rhinestone was dead. So too would this sumbitch be. I shot scarface in the throat. Only one asshole left.

It was the wheel man. As soon as he realized that he was alone he began to negotiate.

"Is it the Roach out there?" he asked. When he got no answer he knew it was me.

"I just drove the car," he said. "I'm sure we can work something out. Shit!
I'm not even emotionally involved."
Still he got no response.
"Damn it, answer me!"
Only silence.
"Damn you ass! Talk to me!"
No reply.
But as he ranted I began to calculate, I'd heard nine shots fired at my trench coat. Seriously doubting that the dispersal of the rounds was significantly lopsided, I guesstimated the wheel man had three shots left before needing to reload.

Suddenly, I leaped to my feet. In a seemingly irrational move, I raced through the moonlight that bathed half of the observatory in that eerie, blue nighttime light. The driver came up firing. Two shots came close—the third I think was in desperation. It was drastically off. I stopped in my tracks. He drew a bead and pulled the trigger. The hammer fell. The gun went "click."
Slowly, I began walking across the chamber floor for him.
"Bugs made us do it!" he shouted. Still I approached.
"Damn you! Don't you see we hadda do it?! We had to make an example of the freakin' nigger!"

Fine, I said to myself. Then I'll make an example of you.

As the last straw, the gangster pitched his gun at my face. It was an easy object to dodge. The wheel man fought like a cornered rat once he realized persuasion wouldn't save his skin. He went straight for my throat. And he might have been a good rival if I'd been in the mood to fight. But I wasn't.

I kneed the scum in the nuts and then pumped a right and a left into his stomach. He began to reel and I grabbed his lapel to steady him. Then I put the chump down for good with an upper-cut to the chin. Still smouldering, I took the low-life by the throat and the belt and swung him above my head. I'd heard somewhere that if somebody falls from a high place, they usually pass out by a hundred feet. The hood would soon find out.

The observatory window was three steps away and I used the distance to build up momentum. The wheel man woke up just as he crashed through the glass. He began screaming and falling—all the way to Hell. I didn't care. I was sure Rhinestone screamed but they hadn't seemed to mind. At least he was avenged. No more assholes left.

I picked up my coat and exited quickly, quietly and unobserved. The next morning I walked away from a non-descript home in Garfield Park. A Studebaker sat outside of it. A Studebaker with a shattered windshield—and a $100 bill lying on the front seat to pay for repairs and any inconvenience.

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He ends his story there.
"So that's it," I say to him. "Then what's the purpose in all of this?"
The Roach stares back. No emotion—just a blank stare. And the absence of emotion is unnerving.
"Are you still so blind? Maybe I made a mistake Thursday night. You merely look at things from the outside—the people, the places, their situations. Why? This world we're in is a combat zone. Your screw-up cost a life—a life I'd sworn to protect. And you ask me the purpose behind this meeting?!!"

He has a point. I guess it's time I did open my eyes a little.
"I don't expect you to be like me," the Roach continues, "but don't keep me from helping these people. In most cases, I'm all they've got."

He steps back. And suddenly, he's gone. Vanished. Damn!

A knock at my door snaps me back to reality. I know who it is.

"Come in, Jacks," I say.

The mousy assistant D.A. enters in a near-catatonic state.

"How did you know it was me?" he asks. I merely laugh.

I have more important things to deliberate than his surprise. The Roach is right. And even more importantly, I've been wrong. And yet he let me live—on two occasions. Why?

Nonetheless, I was contracted to do a job and I did it to the best of my ability. And it was done well. Hell, I'm the best in this town at what I do.

I have a dilemma.

"We're going to nail that low-life scum thanks to you, Rigby," Jacks says enthusiastically. "His time has come. We are better suited to deal with the under-privileged."

I don't like the way he said that.

"Here's your money," Jacks announces as he pulls an envelope from his pocket. "Now give me the report."

I pick up my matches but ignore my King Edwards.

The Roach hadn't made a mistake Thursday night—nor tonight.

"Here it is," I reply, dangling it over the edge of my desk—above my trash can. Jacks eyes it greedily. And maliciously.

I strike a match against the sole of my shoe and apply the flame to my brand new folder—and the report.

Jacks freezes for a moment. Then he puts the money back into his pocket and leaves. Fuck him.

I'm a pro—the best in the Windy City. I can always get another job.

Samson and Delilah at Night
by S. J. Sutherlin

When we tie ourselves into the knot of night
Exhalation of mystery and repose,
You scarcely feel the cut and pull of the scissors,
The smile of the blades lying in the sheath.
You ask will we never leave this temple?
The vessels have been drained and contain only fetid wine.
Your frankish curls tighten around your head.
Samson, together we will weave a bright wreath of hair.
Birch ladders are thrown against heaven to balance your weight.
Our footfalls ascending like topaz coils on an Egyptian neck.
Each night I walk in the backs of stars
You follow me to the place we will never leave.