

The Maximum Security Book Group

by Con Chapman

An alternative sentencing program in Massachusetts allows felons to choose between going to jail or joining a book club.

The New York Times Book Review



Tiny and me--excuse me--Tiny and *I*--had been circling the block on Oakridge Road for probably half an hour, casing the joint where our book club was meeting.

"Pretty nice neighborhood," Tiny says as he looked out his window at the houses that *started* at a million-three, easy.

"You betcha. The kinda guys who live around here, they got good grades in between when you and me was beatin' em up in school, slammin' em up against lockers in the hall."

"Hmph," Tiny grunted. "We gonna go in pretty soon? 'Cause I gotta take a leak."



I slowed the car to a stop. "Tiny"--his name was an example of

"irony," as he weighed about 300 pounds--"don't youse know nothin'?"

"What?" he rejoined, with more than a little umbrage I might add.

"The first thing you do when you walk into a nice house is *not* ask to go to the bathroom."



"Fine," he said. "I'll go on the lawn."

"And have us both end up in back in the big house? Unhuh, pal. You go in, greet the hostess, tell her how nice her place looks. We drop off the pear tart in the kitchen, say hello and nice-to-meet-you's all around. Then *and only then* do you ask to use 'the facilities'."

"What facilities?"

"It's a euphemism, you mook. You gotta use a euphemism for the bathroom."

We'd been sitting there maybe a minute at most, and wouldn't you know it, somebody had already called the cops about a suspicious car parked on the street. That's the way it is in nice neighborhoods. There's always somebody lookin' out their blinds to make sure nobody's doin' nothin' to bring down property values.



"Everything okay, gentlemen?" the cop said after he rolled down his window.

"Yes, officer, we were . . . uh . . . just looking for 37 Oakridge Road. We got book group tonight."

The guy didn't buy it, not for a second. I knew we were in for the third degree.

"Book group," he said, his left eyebrow arching upwards with skepticism. "Whatcha reading?" He figured he had us, but I didn't get a record as long as my arm without wrigglin' out of a few.



"*The Namesake*," I shot back.

It was like I'd hit the bull with a lead pipe. He was stunned, and it took him a while to recover. "By Jhumpa Lahiri?" he asked, struggling a bit with the name.

"On the nosey," Tiny said. "She's got a collection of short stories out now--*Interpreter of Maladies*."

The cop looked at Tiny, all 6'2" of him. "Isn't that kind of chick lit?" the cop asked, curling his lip in an expression of contempt.

Me and Tiny

"I'm comfortable with my sexuality," Tiny said, looking straight ahead, completely unabashed. As Norman O. Brown might have put it, Tiny was polymorphously perverse.

The guy looked us over like we was a mismatched pair of socks. He didn't have probable cause for nothin'. We were just sitting there, minding our own business, in a parked car. "Oh look," I said to Tiny, putting on my best *faux* surprise demeanor. "There's 37--that's where Sally Henderson lives! It was right in front of us all this time!"



"Yeah," said Tiny, picking up on my verbal cue. "I think the place is darling."

We got out, shut the car doors--not too loud--and I clicked the remote entry key to our rented Toyota Highlander. If we had to make an escape, it would help us blend in with all the other SUVs.

"You gentlemen be careful," the cop said out his window, apparently conceding. "Not too much chardonnay--okay?"

"We'll be on our best behavior," I said with a poop-eating grin.

"Yeah," Tiny added. "Maybe we'll bring a slice of cheesecake down to the station."

The guy gave us a nasty little smirk that said we'd better be able to pass a field sobriety test when we walked out, stuffed with Trader Joe's frozen hors d'oeuvres and hoarse from all our high-toned literary conversation.



Tiny held the dessert while I rang the bell. "Well hello there!" Sally said as she flung the door wide open. She was resplendent in a tailored sweater-skirt combo from Talbots. "I'm so glad you could make it!"

"Thanks for having us," Tiny replied, rallying a bit. "You can't imagine how much nicer your place is than the Norfolk County House of Corrections!" So he *did* have some social skills, way down deep behind that grim, psychopathic mask that he wore whenever he knocked off a pharmacy for Oxycontin.

"Come in and meet the gals!" Sally said. "You'll know most of them if you belong to the Junior League or the PTO."

We were ushered into her living room, which was really quite charming. A lot of "chintz and prints" as they say, but you won't hear me complain. Frankly, I find the "Brutalist" style of my cell--the plastic bench and exposed toilet--a bit tiresome after three years, two months and twenty-four days.

Sally introduced us to everyone--the names buzzed by me in a blur but I recall a Tori, a Deirdre, a Liz and a Staci "with an 'i'." After we filled our wine glasses with Kendall-Jackson, we got down to the business of the evening in earnest; admiring the hostess's taste, and gossip.



"Are you still using that decorator--what was her name--Lisa?" Tori asked.

"Yes, she's a little expensive, but who has time to shop for fabric, what with soccer, and ballet and hockey for the kids!" Sally said, plainly overwhelmed by the demands of her busy suburban lifestyle.



"I know I don't," Tiny said, as he stuffed two mini-quiches in

his mouth. "I barely have time to get any exercise in," he added, and two of the other housewives nodded in sympathy.

"They've added a Saturday morning spinning class at HealthPointe!" Liz said enthusiastically. She keeps herself in *terrific* shape.



"Where's Stephanie?" Deirdre asked.

"Uh, she's not going to be coming for awhile," Sally said, somewhat cryptically.

"What's the matter?" Tori asked.

"She and the kids have moved to Colorado, to be closer to her parents."

"What about Greg?" Liz asked. Her brain is never quite as toned as her body.

"You didn't hear? He came home two days late from his office Christmas party," Sally said. "She traced him by his credit card. He had checked into a room at the hotel with his administrative assistant."

"Oh, dear!" Tiny said, oozing sympathy.

"I told her I wouldn't say anything to anybody," Sally added with a cautionary tone.



"Jeez, that's awful," I said as I finished my chardonnay in a gulp. "He's gonna regret it. Someday he'll want somebody to talk to about literature, not just a hot piece of ass."

Tiny cleared his throat--I thought he was maybe choking on one of them quiches, but he gave me a disapproving look. Perhaps I was just a bit tacky, so I changed the subject.

"So what about this week's selection?" I asked cheerfully. "What did everybody think?"

"I liked it!" says Liz. She always does--her tastes aren't very discriminating.

"I didn't really fall in love with the characters," Tori says.

"Well, let's think about that," I say. "Does anyone ever really *like* Iago?"

"Who's E-AH-go?" Deirdre asks.

"Yeah," Liz says, a bit defensively. "I don't remember any character with that name."

"He isn't in the book," I say, trying to explain. "He's in *Othello*."

"Then why bring him up?" Liz asks airily. "I have enough trouble keeping track of characters as it is!"



The others laugh, and Sally offers everyone more wine. Deirdre holds out her glass, and Tori coos at the new David Yurman bracelet that hangs from her friend's wrist.

"That is so pretty!" she exclaims. "You must have done some extra duty to get that little bauble, missy!"

The others gather round, and I give Tiny a nod of my head. He follows me out to the kitchen, and we look at each other-hard.

"Whadda ya think?" I ask him.

"I dunno. What's next week's selection?"



"*The Memory Keeper's Daughter*, by Kim Edwards," I say grimly.

He inhales, and I know which way he's gonna come out.

"Do what you gotta do."

I pick up the phone, and dial 9-1-1. The operator answers, and asks the nature of the emergency.

"We're convicted felons," I say. "We want to turn ourselves in."

Available in print and Kindle format on amazon.com as part of the collection "Boston Baroques."

