

Noir in cadence

by Mathew Paust

More immediately dreadful than all else was the *hup hup hup* deep in my captor's throat as he frogmarched me toward the brownstone. For most of the way those were the only words between us after a brief exchange at the start: "Hey! My neck," shouted reflexively when the iron grip on the back of my T-shirt jerked me to my feet, was met with an inarticulate guttural snarl I understood as a demand to shut up, which I obeyed forthwith. The grip twisted my shirt into a painful knot and pushed me forward. A second jab of the hard object, now into my back over the right kidney, added sickening emphasis to the futility of my situation. The pain was excruciating, but I managed to tamp down another outburst into a primal shriek, which the thug evidently found allowable, for there were no more kidney punches along the march. Instead there came the barely audible *hup hups* that quickly grew from curious to a disquieting torment as we approached our rendezvous with an outcome of unknown, unthinkable possibilities. It was becoming clear my captor was psychotic.

Were he calling the cadence loudly I could have accepted him as at best an oaf with an oafish sense of humor. Tolerable in the circumstances. At some point I'd have a chance to talk with him or with his leader, for obviously there were negotiable points, and with my legal training and theater experience that chance likely would succeed in some measure. But with these *hup hups* under his breath I sensed a programmed operative, a human robot with nary a millimeter of flexibility. Ordered to capture and kill, this is precisely what he would do. He and probably an accomplice had, doubtless without a blink or any certainty of the connection with us, pushed Danny off the road to a fiery death. They'd then followed us. Somewhere they must have attached a tracking device to our SUV, or—hell, they're feds, they might well have been using some kind of satellite surveillance on Jamie and me from the get-go. But then why watch *us*? If they have the *Mission Impossible* technology, why not

just lock it onto Jasper Mundaigh and skip the go-betweens? Maybe they did. The black truck did beat us here. Fever notions whirling around my recognition of a helplessness that went way past day-to-day complications. Not quite *Twilight Zone*, but I could hear the dissonance behind those muffled *hup hups*.

