

Grand Fury

by Neil Serven

At some point, Spiro thinks, everyone must look like a sniper. He is sitting in his plumber's van, parked beneath an elm tree near the courthouse square, watching the pedestrians avoid eye contact. The radio reported another shooting this morning, in broad daylight, not two blocks from where he spent close to an hour trying to budge a fussy showerhead.

He winds down his window to welcome the October air—the city has started to sink into an autumn chill—and touches the pop-out lighter from his dashboard to the tip of his cigarette. Spiro rolls his own. The butt's tapered ends make it look like those paper stomps his wife uses for her drawing classes. It's not all tobacco, though: last week his brother, an anesthesiologist with connections out in Eureka, came through with a modest share of Humboldt County. Spiro uses a tiny bit of the stuff to shush the arthritis in his knees so he can work through the afternoon. Stooping, squatting, lying flat on his back on a dirty floor under a stranger's sink: he is getting too old for this.

Right now, even, pain creeps into his fingers, tight from fighting with the showerhead. He extracts his slim flask from the lining of his denim jacket, unscrews the silver cap, and perks up his thermos of coffee with a hit of sourmash whiskey. His newspaper sits folded on the passenger seat. He made it through half the crossword.

Yesterday it was a bus driver. Poor guy was on break, waiting by his empty bus. They caught him standing still. Seven grandchildren. At home this morning, Sophia held her coffee mug to her face as she watched the news, a recent photo of the victim on the screen. With a severe look she urged her husband to stay home, and when Spiro proceeded to shrug on his jacket, she said nothing. He kissed her goodbye, his steel wool moustache scratching her face, and grumbled, "See you tonight. Turn that shit off."

What else can you do? There are still pipes to flush. And he knows that staying home all day would drive him mad.

Not to mention: he enjoys people-watching from the van. Those folks emerging from the courthouse now are nervous: you can tell from their hurried strides, and by the way they reach for their keys when they're not even close to the cars yet and their heads oscillate like electric fans. Don't slow up. This is Friday afternoon: the ones that aren't coming back from long lunches are leaving work early, already packed for the Poconos, safely out of range.

There is something old-fashioned about a sniper, and that's the part that has piqued his interest. In his idle time he has taken to sleuthing; it is a bygone skill, now best left to men in labs. Where gaps remain, try a little elementary psychology. Used to be a killer would drop the gun and slip away. Flee to Mexico. Now they're all pride on the line, street cred. Take out a guy, got to stand over him in triumph. Like a gladiator. Pose for a picture.

Wouldn't you know, now they have a real mystery, and Metro's finest go and muck it up. It took the cops a month to register their first useful clue, and that one was mailed to them. Spiro has been sickened by the incompetence—the sniper, in his taunting letter, even used that exact word, *incompetent*, and well, shit, the guy is right.

After the first week of shootings, when it became clear they weren't going to stop, Spiro bought his first tools: a foldout map of the metro area and a red felt-tip marker. You never know, he might see a pattern. Any kind of sign so he can snap his fingers and say, *I got it*. He imagined calculating the time and place of the next shooting and staking out the scene in the van, this clumsy old family man with his arthritis, but then what would he do? He can't run half a block. Doesn't even own a gun.

Sophia's been making him come to church again, a hard enough pill, though Reverend Peter has been kind not to ask where he's been. The congregation is thinner now even with him back, what with people's fears of being shot and all, so his reemergence was more noticeable to the other parishioners than he would have liked. Going back reminded him that he still believes in God—amazingly easy, even in a relentless urban rain of death and disillusion and the

range of related psychoses—and gave him new faith that even the idiocy of police does not keep evil men from getting their due. Then this asshole goes and holds up God for himself, like a weapon, in a note dropped at one of the crime scenes: *Dear policeman: I am God, and you will feel my wrath.* The generic noun, *policeman*, sounding so elementary and polite, and the tarot card on which it was scrawled, a poor try at mysticism, to spook us out. Spiro's first deduction: the guy never finished school. He even found his little memo pad in the glove compartment so he could write this down, like a real old detective, and review it for the investigation later, when more pieces fell into place. Tarot cards: sold in gift shops and near universities. It made him believe the person was young. An expert would have avoided the obviously cryptic and sinister. David Berkowitz, in contrast, went right for the red devil, not just unpredictable but purely mad, a quiet, cloddish man wandering the night streets like a monster. Spiro lived in New York that year; maybe that's why he feels he can hum along with this tune. He stayed indoors for most of that summer while Reggie Jackson led the Yankees to the pennant with a stickball team of wiry dopes with mullets and afros that poofed out like dying shrubbery from under their caps. They were faceless white shadows on his snowy TV, Phil Rizzuto's voice competing with the din of the window fan while Sophia sat at the kitchen table making calls for Bella Abzug's mayoral campaign. The heat brought people outside, and the Son of Sam drove them back in, alone with their thoughts, so they could all go mad just like him.

Spiro plucks the last of the roach from his lips, and with a final sigh of smoke, crushes the hot butt in his calloused fingers. He shifts in his driver's seat and the old springs groan under the big man's weight. He has a four o'clock, a Jacuzzi with clogged jets, up in the hill district. The ones with money are the ones he likes to make wait, lest they think they can make him dance with a plunger in his hand.

From his pocket comes the muffled electronic tune of his cell phone. The Greek national anthem, programmed in by his daughter. The call comes from home.

"Kosta's mad at me because I made him come straight home after school," Sophia says. Spiro can hear arguing in the kitchen between their two youngest children, seventeen and fifteen. The house is somehow louder now than when all six of their kids were living there. More echoing space. "Kid wanted to play basketball in the park. I told him he had a death wish."

"Well, they haven't been shooting kids, thank God." He surprises himself with the plural pronoun. We are truly fucked if there's more than one.

"Not *yet*. If you're gonna take his side then *you* can take him to the park." Sophia gets pulled away when the boy asks something. In the meantime Spiro's attention is drawn to the street corner up ahead, where a young woman unchains her bicycle from a parking meter. She has come from the library, he can tell; her canvas tote bulges with books. As she works the lock the bag's strap begins to slide down off her shoulder. Her knees buckle under the weight shift and she has to set down the bag to try the lock again. It has taken her thirty seconds so far and she has not moved from her spot. Wide open on three sides. Does she not read the news? These people, they have no idea; this is how tragedy keeps happening.

"When are you coming home?" Sophia asks when she comes back on. "Spanakorizo tonight. We need butter."

"I've got a four. I'll be there when I can." Still, he makes the executive decision, upon clapping the phone shut, that the Jacuzzi people can live with their clog. He is not in the mood to go up into the hills. This is what he started his own business for.

The van fires up with a grunt. Spiro maneuvers it into the street carelessly, cutting off a black sedan that angrily blares its horn. Something metal falls off a shelf in the back of the van. As his eyes focus on the road, narrowed by cars packed in on both sides, his head begins to feel woozy. Strange for the pot to kick in this way. He realizes he hasn't eaten a thing since breakfast. He reaches the next corner, where outside the Gas 'N Go friendly young men in red t-shirts—Good Samaritans, they call themselves, he read about them in the paper—are offering to pump gas for the drivers waiting in

line. Spiro remembers he needs to get the butter, and pulls into the lot at the side. People look up as the van bumps oafishly over the curb.

Boys on skateboards, out of school, congregate by the door to the lit market, armed with paper confidences and cigarettes they hold but do not smoke. Inside the colorful store, people are conversing at the cash counter and lottery table. A television set, perched on a high shelf in the corner, is tuned into one of the cable news channels. The story went national almost as soon as it unfolded, and it has amused him to watch reporters up from Atlanta tour neighborhoods he recognizes by sight and pronounce the names of their streets wrong. Cops and witnesses are interviewed. At the bottom of the screen races that endless streaming ticker, annoying to keep up with. Nobody reads that fast but it's hard to turn away, because there is always something new. Criminals get caught and young minds, once innocent, get corrupted and grow brave enough to take their places, and you need to be reminded every half hour just what kind of person you shouldn't trust. The ones who die, they're the ones who couldn't keep up.

His hands fill with items: the butter, cold and oddly slick in his palm; a packaged crumb pastry, to tide him over until he gets home; a cup of their cheap coffee, to refill his thermos; and why not, a new sailing magazine. Spiro does not own a boat. He's never even asked Sophia if she liked to sail, but wonders what she would think about voyaging around the Greek islands, just the two of them, once the kids are all gone from the house. Opening their arms to the Mediterranean breeze. Where everything is already beautifully ruined, the water is clear, and you can see all around you for miles and miles.

