

Lady Luck
by Dietrich Kalteis

Got a tough one? Call Manny. That's the word among the blue suits. They even have a pool, pushing the craziness to folkloric proportions. Subpoenas, summons, divorce papers, skip traces: If your man is breathing, Manny will serve him; if he isn't, Manny will show you where he is planted.

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The G button

The address put Manny in the part of Surrey best visited in daylight. Ten-story ratholes loomed above him, lots of eyes looking down.

Leaving the Caddie running behind a delivery van stifling on its own funk and terminal rust, Manny locked the doors with his fob and slipped into the FedEx jacket.

He felt for it, but Lady Luck wasn't with him - seventeen years doing this gig - from New York, to Toronto, to Vancouver - she kept him sharp. Somewhere along the line, she went missing.

Clipping the envelope to the clipboard, Manny held the door for some grey-hair taking her Bichon to the park. Not a cloud in the sky, but she stood in the doorway, opening her umbrella, then she waved him in; everybody trusts a guy in uniform.

Stepping off the elevator on four, Manny slid the metal bar in the track, keeping the elevator door from closing while he found apartment sixteen. Walking through a reek of cabbage, he wondered if it was time to call it quits, wondering what else there was

for him.

His ear against the door of sixteen, Manny heard voices that turned to whispers after he knocked. Giving the peephole a full-on FedEx smile, he heard shuffling, then the chain sliding back.

It was a big guy with stick-up hair, decomposing teeth and an epic belly veiled by a gravy-spotted t-shirt. Eyes of suspicion darted to Manny's clipboard. "What you got?"

"You Nelson Delicroix?"

"What you think?" The eyebrows bunched.

Manny slid the envelope from the clipboard - the court order four others failed to deliver - and slipped it past the chain. "You've been served, big guy." Wheeling before the words were out of his mouth, Manny made for the elevator, its door banging against the bar, chimes going off.

"Goddamn you." Nelson threw his hands away from the envelope like it had leprosy, like if he didn't touch it, it didn't count. It fluttered down, and he gave it a stomp, then he ripped the door open, chain and all. "What the fuck are you ... you fuck ... you sneaking fuck. Get back here. I curse you, you sneaking fuck ..."

Nelson reached inside his door, and chased after Manny with a bat. "When you get out of the hospital, get yourself a real job." He hurled the bat, it sailing end over end, taking out a wall sconce and bouncing by a diving Manny.

Manny grabbed at the bar, frisbeeing the clipboard at Nelson for that extra second. Nelson punched it out of the air. Nelson's better half, a woman like Alice the Goon, ran out of sixteen, tying up her bathrobe with one hand, a barbecue fork in the other.

Rolling on his back, Manny tucked his feet like a kangaroo, letting fly against Nelson's shin. The crack sent the big man hopping and groaning. Alice the Goon was shrieking, English coming out Chinese, spearing the fork at the air. Manny stabbed morse code with his thumb against the G button, Nelson cursing and crawling after the bat.

#

Not a stitch

The firm sent the regulars before they called Manny. One was a flop, one was roughed up, one never come back. Manny was studying a travel brochure, thinking a week in Rio might get Lady Luck back, when the phone rang.

Luck or no luck, Manny was a sucker for the tough ones. He found himself walking into some office before he knew it, an envelope and a bunch of flowers in hand. The nameplate said the receptionist was Millie, Manny's eyes saying she was a knockout.

She brightened at sight of the roses. "Mr. Melnick never comes in on Mondays, but I can sign ..."

"They're not for him, they're for you." Manny liked her looks, turning on what he called the George Clooney.

"For me?"

"This Melnick, he at home?"

"Oh, I can't say." She glanced at the envelope and got Manny's game.

"Means an easy twenty if you can." Manny reached into his pocket, bringing up a roll of bills, replacing the Clooney with a green

Jackson.

Millie's eyes shifted to it, eyes that glittered like the sea.

Manny let a bill flutter.

"What is it you're after?" she asked.

"Just want to hand him this."

"He going to want it?" She dragged a finger over the bill, her eyes on the envelope.

"Not likely, but either way, I'm going to serve him."

"Pretty sure of yourself."

"I'm good at what I do."

"And if it gets rough?"

"Always give them the option of taking it the easy way, but like I said, either way."

The bill disappeared into her drawer. "You sure you're not a cop?"

"Do I look like a cop?"

"Could be, but probably not. Just here I am taking ... what do you call it?"

"I call it helping out." Manny held out another bill. "But, now you got to give me something."

"Like telling you Mr. Melnick doesn't come in Mondays, or he

doesn't golf?" Her eyes were teasing.

"Okay, that narrows it down." Manny smiled. "I won't go to the fairways."

"Uh uhn."

"What does Melnick do when he's not golfing on Mondays?"

"He likes to watch."

Manny put his palm over the bill. "Go on."

She walked her fingers over the top of his hand. "You ever hear of Wreck Beach?"

"Sure, the nudey beach."

"Uh huh." She pinched the bill from between his fingers.

The third twenty got Manny a time, a description of Melnick's tattoo, along with Millie's home number. Maybe he'd call her; maybe he couldn't afford to call her, but maybe those sea eyes would have him up nights, gawking at the phone.

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Wreck beach

He threw it in park next to the 'clothing optional' sign. The people on the strand were pink as flamingos, not a stitch among them. There was no disguise for this one. Nothing on and no Lady Luck, but the boardroom chat this one would bring stoked him. He folded his shirt and pants on the seat, setting his underpants and socks on top. He allowed himself the sneakers, picking up his keys and the envelope.

By the time Manny spotted Melnick among the pink and naked, both sneakers were brimming with sand. Looking for a tattoo of a parrot on Melnick's shoulder meant getting close to a lot of naked people. Melnick turned out to be an old guy, the tattoo matted by a chaos of body-hair made greasy by sun block. Manny figured another twenty and Millie might have mentioned the no-neck goon standing over Melnick, blocking his sun. Manny approached, his empty hands held wide to the scowling goon. Reaching behind, Manny took the envelope from between his cheeks and flung it at Melnick, then let his sand-filled sneakers fly, the goon's flip flops proving no match over the coral and driftwood shore.

#

Touché

The boardroom became a schoolyard of laughter. A chant, "from Manny's cheeks to Melnick's hands," going around the room. Two of the partners reenacted the scene on the beach, and an intern aped Manny sprinting ahead of the bodyguard. Some of Manny's best work, right up there with nailing the Donald at his own gala birthday back in the Big Apple. 'Ivana wants, Ivana gets,' Manny said to the Donald's face, pinching a hors d'oeuvre from a passing tray, before heading into the night.

Manny was drinking it in when someone brought up this Susan: a process server up from L.A. Talk was she was a player, and damned good at it. Maybe even as good.

Her first serve for the firm was on a gynecologist that had dogged the regulars for months. Susan booked herself an exam, and by the week's end, served up the divorce papers with her feet in stirrups. Lickety-split. Even submitted the exam fee as part of her expenses.

Everyone in the room tried, but Manny didn't get suckered into a duel, but by time the chatter died, he was drawing pictures of this Susan, eager to meet her.

#

Dog eat dog

"So, you're the legend. Heard about you."

Her handshake was solid and her smile was winning; Manny liked that. Susan was what his old man would have called *zaftig* and five years past drop-dead, but she had a head on her; anyone could see that.

"Heard about your annual check up," he said, "now, that showed class."

"You liked that?" She took her hand back, the smile staying.

"And getting the suits to pick up your expenses, that was the cherry." Manny was laughing.

"Can't blame a girl for trying."

"I loved it."

"We settled on half."

Manny laughed some more, looking for the waiter. "They are cheap bastards."

"Let me get you one of these." She jiggled her glass, and nodded at the next stool. "We can swap a few tales."

"You got more like that one?"

"That was easy, really, just some doc talking Pap smears. Best part was when I asked him what was harder to find than the meaning of life." She searched Manny's eyes; he didn't get it either. "That's when I nailed him."

"Another one?" The bartender leaned on the bar, sliding a dish of peanuts between them.

"Make it two," Susan said, watching the bartender reach for a bottle.

"What is it I'm drinking?" Manny asked.

"Dewars straight up."

"I would have guessed ... I don't know, something more ..." He shrugged.

"Don't go for the girlie stuff, you know, pink panty droppers, buttery nipples, none of that."

"I was thinking exotic."

"Me? No, just a simple girl from L.A."

"Never been."

"Not missing much." She waved her nails.

"Same line of work?"

"What else is there?"

The bartender set their drinks down and strolled down the bar.

"Really into it, huh?"

"Sure," she said, "how about you?"

"Don't know. Always had this feeling, call it Lady Luck, had it ever since I started. Lately, I don't know ..."

"I call it my buzz," she said, "happens, I guess."

"First time in seventeen years."

"Maybe we can do a couple, might help you get it back."

"How would that go?"

"I don't know; how about we go as Jehovahs?"

"Might be fun. Think anyone would buy it?"

"Maybe." She picked up her glass and clinked his. "What is it they say about you, 'if the guy's breathing, you'll serve him; if he isn't, you'll show him where he's planted'."

'Something like that." Manny sipped his drink.