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ED MC BAIN

AN 87TH PRECINCT NOVEL

GIVE THE BOYS
A GREAT BIG
HAND

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Ed McBain



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Published by Thomas & Mercer
P.O. Box 400818
Las Vegas, NV 89140

ISBN-13: 9781612181622
ISBN-10: 1612181627

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[ABOUT THE AUTHOR](#)

The city in these pages is imaginary.

The people, the places are all fictitious.

Only the police routine is based on established investigatory techniques.

It was raining.

It had been raining for three days now, an ugly March rain that washed the brilliance of near-spring with a monochromatic, unrelenting gray. The television forecasters had correctly predicted rain for today and estimated that it would rain tomorrow also. Beyond that, they would not venture an opinion.

But it seemed to Patrolman Richard Genero that it had been raining forever, and that it would continue to rain forever, and that eventually he would be washed away into the gutters and then carried into the sewers of Isola and dumped unceremoniously with the other garbage into either the River Harb or the River Dix. North or south, it didn't make a damn bit of difference: both rivers were polluted; both stank of human waste.

Like a man up to his ankles in water in a rapidly sinking rowboat, Genero stood on the corner and surveyed the near-empty streets. His rubber rain cape was as black and as shining as the asphalt that stretched before him. It was still early afternoon, but there was hardly a soul in sight, and Genero felt lonely and deserted. He felt, too, as if he were the only human being in the entire city who didn't know enough to come in out of the rain. I'm going to drown here in the goddamn streets, he thought, and he belched sourly, consoling himself with the fact that he would be relieved on post at 3:45. It would take him about five minutes to get back to the station house and no more than ten minutes to change into his street clothes. Figure a half hour on the subway to Riverhead, and he would be home at 4:30. He wouldn't have to pick up Gilda until 7:30, so that gave him time for a little nap before dinner. Thinking of the nap, Genero yawned, tilting his head.

A drop of cold water ran down his neck, and he said, "Oh hell!" out loud, and then hurriedly glanced around him to make sure he hadn't been overheard by any conscientious citizen of the city. Satisfied that the image of the pure American law-enforcer had not been destroyed, Genero began walking up the street, his rubber-encased shoes sloshing water every inch of the way.

Rain, rain, go away, he thought.

Oddly, the rain persisted.

Well, rain isn't so bad, he thought. It's better than snow, anyway. The thought made him shudder a little, partially because the very thought of snow was a chilling one, and partially because he could never think of snow or winter without forming an immediate association with the boy he had found in the basement so long ago.

Now cut that out, he thought. It's bad enough it's raining. We don't have to start thinking of creepy cadavers.

The boy's face had been blue, really blue, and he'd been leaning forward on the cot, and it had taken Genero several moments to realize that a rope was around the boy's neck and that the boy was dead.

Listen, let's not even think about it. It makes me itchy.

Well, listen, you're a cop, he reminded himself. What do you think cops do? Turn off fire hydrants all the time? Break up stickball games? I mean, now let's face it, every now and then a cop has got to find a stiff.

Listen, this makes me itchy.

I mean, that's what you get paid for, man. I mean, let's face it. A cop has every now and then got to come up against a little violence. And besides, that kid was a long time ago, all water under the...

Water. Jesus, ain't it never going to stop raining?

I'm getting out of this rain, he thought. I'm going over to Max's tailor shop and maybe I can get him to take out some of that sweet Passover wine, and we'll drink a toast to Bermuda. Man, I wish I was in Bermuda. He walked down the street and opened the door to the tailor shop. A bell tinkled. The shop smelled of steam and clean garments. Genero felt better.

the moment he stepped inside.

“Hello, Max,” he said.

Max was a round-faced man with a fringe of white hair that clung to his balding pate like a halo. He looked up from his sewing machine and said, “I ain’t got no wine.”

“Who wants wine?” Genero answered, grinning a bit sheepishly. “Would you kick me out of your shop on a miserable day like this?”

“On any day, miserable or otherwise, I wouldn’t kick you out my shop,” Max said, “so don’t make wisecracks. But I warn you, already even before you begin, I ain’t got no wine.”

“So who wants wine?” Genero said. He moved closer to the radiator and pulled off his gloves. “What are you doing, Max?”

“What does it look like I’m doing? I’m making a plan for the White House. I’m going to blow it up. What else would I be doing on a sewing machine?”

“I mean, what’s that thing you’re working on?”

“It’s a Salvation Army uniform,” Max said.

“Yeah? How about that?”

“There’s still a few *tailors* left in this city, you know,” Max said. “I ain’t by all of us a matter of cleaning and pressing. Cleaning and pressing is for machines. Tailoring is for men. Max Mandel is a tailor, not a pressing machine.”

“And a damn good tailor,” Genero said, and he watched for Max’s reaction.

“I still ain’t got no wine,” Max said. “Why ain’t you in the street stopping crime already?”

“On a day like this, nobody’s interested in crime,” Genero said. “The only crime going on today is prostitution.”

Genero watched Max’s face, saw the quick gleam of appreciation in the old man’s eyes and grinned. He was getting closer to that wine all the time. Max was beginning to enjoy his jokes, and that was a good sign. Now all he had to do was work up a little sympathy.

“A rain like today’s,” Genero said, “it seeps right into a man’s bones. Right into his bones.”

“So?”

“So nothing. I’m just saying. Right to the marrow. And the worst part is, a man can’t even stop off in a bar or something to get a shot. To warm him up, I mean. It ain’t allowed, you know.”

“So?”

“So nothing. I’m just saying.” Genero paused. “You’re sure doing a fine job with that uniform, Max.”

“Thanks.”

The shop went silent. Outside, the rain spattered against the sidewalk in continuous drumming monotony.

“Right to the marrow,” Genero said.

“All right already. Right to the marrow.”

“Chills a man.”

“All right, it chills a man.”

“Yes, sir,” Genero said, shaking his head.

“The wine is in the back near the pressing machine,” Max said without looking up. “Don’t drink too much, you’ll get drunk already and I’ll be arrested for corrupting an officer.”

“You mean you have wine, Max?” Genero asked innocently.

“Listen to Mr. Baby-Blue Eyes, he’s asking if I got wine. Go, go in the back. Drink, choke, but leave some in the bottle.”

“That’s awfully nice of you, Max,” Genero said, beaming. “I had no idea you—”

“Go, go before I change my mind.”

Genero went into the back room and found the bottle of wine on the table near the pressing machine. He uncapped it, rinsed a glass at the sink near the small grime-smear window and poured it full to the brim. He tilted the glass to his mouth, drank until it was empty, and then licked his lips.

“You want some of this, Max?” he called.

“The Salvation Army doesn’t like I should drink when I’m sewing their uniforms.”

“It’s very good, Max,” Genero said teasingly.

“So have another glass and stop bothering me. You’re making my stitches go all *fermisht*.”

Genero drank another glassful, recapped the bottle, and came out into the shop again, rubbing his hands briskly.

“Now I’m ready for anything,” he said, grinning.

“What is there to be ready for? On a day like this, you already said there’s nothing but prostitution.”

“I’m ready for that, too,” Genero answered. “Come on, Max. Close up the shop, and we’ll go find two delicious broads. What do you say?”

“Stop giving an old man ideas. My wife should only find me with a delicious broad. A knife she’ll stick in my back. Get out, get out, go walk your beat. Go arrest the other drunkards and vagrants. Leave me in peace. I’m running here a bar and grill instead of a tailor shop. Every drunkard cop on the beat, he stops in for wine. The government should allow me to deduct the wine as part of my overhead. One day, in the wine bottle, I’m going to put poison instead of wine. Then maybe the *fercockteh* cops of the 87th will leave me alone, already. Go. Get lost. Go.”

“Ahhh, you know you love us, Max.”

“I love you like cockroaches.”

“Better than cockroaches.”

“That’s right. I love you like water rats.”

Genero pulled on his gloves. “Well, back to the bridge,” he said.

“What bridge?”

“The bridge of the ship. That’s a joke, Max. The rain, get it? Water. A ship. Get it?”

“Already the television world lost a great comic when you decided to be a cop,” Max said, shaking his head. “Back to the bridge.” He shook his head again. “Do me a favor, will you?”

“What’s that?” Genero asked, opening the door.

“From the bridge of this ship...”

“Yeah?”

“Jump!”

Genero grinned and closed the door behind him. It was still pouring outside, but he felt a lot better now. The sweet wine fumed in his stomach and he could feel a warm lassitude seeping through his limbs. He sloshed through the puddles in an almost carefree manner, squinting through the driving rain, whistling tunelessly.

The man—or perhaps the tall woman, it was difficult to tell—was standing at the bus stop. The tall woman—or perhaps the man, it was impossible to see clearly in the rain—was dressed entirely in black. Black raincoat, black slacks, black shoes, black umbrella, which effectively hid the head and hair. The bus pulled to the curb, spreading a huge canopy of water. The doors snapped open. The person—man or woman—boarded the bus and the rain-streaked doors closed again, hiding the black-shrouded figure from view. The bus pulled away from the curb, spreading another canopy of water that soaked Genero’s trouser legs.

“You stupid...” he shouted, and he began brushing water from his trousers, and that was when he saw the bag resting on the sidewalk alongside the bus stop sign.

“Hey! Hey!” He yelled after the bus. “You forgot your bag!”

His words were drowned in the gunning roar of the bus’s engine and the steady drumming of the rain.

“Damn it,” he muttered, and he walked to the sign and picked up the bag. It was a small, blue overnight bag, obviously issued by an airline. In a white circle on the side of the bag, stenciled there in red letters, were the words: CIRCLE AIRLINES.

Beneath that, in white script lettering, was the slogan: *We circle the globe.*

Genero studied the bag. It was not very heavy. A small leather fob was attached to the carrying straps, and an identification tag showed behind a celluloid panel. But whoever owned the bag had neglected to fill in the

NAME and ADDRESS spaces. The identification tag was blank.

Sourly, Genero unzipped the bag and reached into it.

He drew back his hand in terror and revulsion. An instant thought rushed across his mind—God, not again—and then he gripped the bus stop sign for support because he was suddenly dizzy.

In the detective squadroom of the 87th Precinct, the boys were swapping reminiscences about their patrolman days.

Now you may quarrel with the use of the word “boys” to describe a group of men who ranged in age from twenty-eight to forty-two, who shaved daily, who went to bed with various and assorted mature and immature women, who swore like pirates, and who dealt with some of the dirtiest humans since Neanderthal. The word “boys,” perhaps, connotes simplicity, an innocence that would not be entirely accurate.

There was, however, a spirit of boyish innocence in the squadroom on that dreary, rainy March day. It was difficult to believe that these men who stood in a fraternal knot around Andy Parker’s desk, grinning, listening in attentiveness, were men who dealt daily with crime and criminals. The squadroom, in effect, could have been a high-school locker room. The chatter could have been that of a high-school football team on the day of the season’s last game. The men stood drinking coffee from cardboard containers, completely at ease in the grubby shopworn comfort of the squadroom. Andy Parker, like a belligerent fullback remembering a difficult time in the game against Central High, kept his team huddled about him, leaned back in his swivel chair, and shook his head dolefully.

“I had a pipparoo one time, believe me,” he said. “I stopped her coming off the River Highway. Right near Pier Seventeen, do you know the spot?”

The boys nodded.

“Well, she crashed the light at the bottom of the ramp, and then made a U-turn under the highway. I blew the whistle, and she jammed on the brakes, and I strolled over to the car and said, ‘Lady, you must be the

Mayor's daughter to be driving like that.'"

"Was she?" Steve Carella asked. Sitting on the edge of the desk, a lean muscular man with eyes that slanted peculiarly downward to present an Oriental appearance, he held his coffee container in big hands and studied Parker intently. He did not particularly care for the man or his methods of police investigation, but he had to admit he told a story with gusto.

"No, no. Mayor's daughter, my eye. What she was—well, let me tell you the story, will you?"

Parker scratched his heavy beard. He had shaved that morning, but five o'clock shadow came at an earlier hour for him, so that he always looked somewhat unkempt, a big shaggy man with dark hair, dark eyes, dark beard. In fact, were it not for the shield Parker carried pinned to his wall, he could easily have passed for many of the thieves who found their way into the 87th. He was so much the Hollywood stereotype of the gangster that he'd often been stopped by overzealous patrolmen seeking suspicious characters. On those occasions, he immediately identified himself as a detective and then proceeded to bawl out the ambitious rookie, which was a pastime—though he never admitted it to himself—gave him a great deal of pleasure. In truth, it was possible that Andy Parker purposely roamed around in other precincts hoping to be stopped by an unsuspecting patrolman upon whom he could then pull his rank.

"She was sitting in the front seat with a two-piece costume on," Parker said, "a two-piece costume and these long black net stockings. What the costume was, it was these little black panties covered with sequins, and this tiny little bra that tried to cover the biggest set of bubs I ever seen on any woman in my entire life I swear to God. I did a double take, and I leaned into the car and said, 'You just passed a stop light, lady, and you made a U-turn over a double white line. And for all I know, we got a good case against you for indecent exposure. Now how about that?'"

"What did she say?" Cotton Hawes asked. He alone of the detectives surrounding Parker's desk was not drinking coffee. Hawes was a teetotaler, a habit he'd picked up as a growing boy. His father had been

Protestant minister, and having members of the congregation in for tea had been a daily routine. The boy Hawes, for reasons best known to his father had been included in the daily congregational tea-drinking visits. The tea was hefty, hot, and hearty, had not stunted his growth at all. The man Hawes stood six feet two inches in his stocking feet, a redheaded giant who weighed in at 190 pounds.

“She looked at me with these big blue eyes set in a face made for a doll,” Parker said, “and she batted her eyelashes at me and said, ‘I’m in a hurry. If you’re going to give me the goddamn ticket, give it to me!’”

“Wow!” Hawes said.

“So I asked her what the hurry was, and she said she had to be on stage in five minutes flat.”

“What kind of stage? One of the burly houses?”

“No, no, she was a dancer in a musical comedy. A big hit, too. And I was just about eight-thirty, and she was breaking her neck to catch the curtain. So I pulled out my fountain pen and my pad, and she said, ‘Would you prefer two tickets to the biggest hit in town?’ and she started digging into her purse, those bubs about to spill out of that tiny little bag and stop traffic away the hell up to the Aquarium.”

“So how was the show?” Carella asked.

“I didn’t take the tickets.”

“Why not?”

“Because this way I had a private show of my own. It took me twenty minutes to write that ticket, and all that time she was squirming and wiggling on the front seat with those gorgeous pineapples ready to pop. Man, what an experience!”

“You’re not only mean,” Carella said, “you’re also horny.”

“That I am,” Parker admitted proudly.

“I caught a guy once on Freeman Lewis Boulevard,” Carella said. “He was doing eighty miles an hour. I had to put on the siren before he’d stop. I got out of the squad car and was walking over to his car when the door popped open, and he leaped out and started running toward me.”

“A hood?” Hawes asked.

“No, but that’s just what I thought. I figured I’d stumbled on a guy who was running from the law. I expected him to pull a gun any minute.”

“What *did* he do?”

“He came up to me hopping up and down, first one leg, then the other. He said he knew he was speeding, but he’d just had an acute attack of diarrhea, and he had to find a gas station with a men’s room in a hurry.”

Parker burst out laughing. “Oh, brother, that takes it,” he said.

“Did you let him go?” Hawes asked.

“Hell, no. I just wrote the ticket in a hurry, that’s all.”

“I’ll tell you one I let go,” Hawes said. “This was when I was a patrolman with the 30th. The guy was clipping along like a madman, and when I stopped him he just looked at me and said, ‘You going to give me a ticket?’ So I looked right back at him and said, ‘Damn right, I’m going to give you a ticket.’ He stared at me for a long time, just nodding his head. Then he said, ‘That’s it, then. You give me a ticket, and I’ll kill myself.’”

“What the hell did he mean?”

“That’s just what I said. I said, ‘What do you mean, mister?’ But he just kept staring at me, and he didn’t say another word, just kept staring and nodding his head, over and over again, as if this ticket was the last straw, do you know what I mean? I had the feeling that this had just been one of those days where everything in the world had gone wrong for him, and I knew—I just knew as sure as I was standing there—that if I slapped a summons on him, he would actually go home and turn on the gas and jump out the window or slit his throat. I just knew it. I could just sense about the guy.”

“So you let him go. The Good Samaritan.”

“Yeah, yeah, Samaritan,” Hawes said. “You should have seen that guy’s eyes. You’d have known he wasn’t kidding.”

“I had a woman once,” Kling, the youngest of the detectives started, and Patrolman Dick Genero burst into the squadron carrying the small

blue overnight bag. One look at his eyes, and anyone would have known he wasn't kidding. He carried the bag in his right hand, far away from his body, as if afraid to be contaminated by it. He pushed his way through the gate in the slatted railing that separated the squadroom from the corridor outside, went directly to Parker's desk, and plunked the bag down in the middle of it with a finality that indicated he had done his duty and was now glad to be rid of it.

"What have you got, Dick?" Hawes asked.

Genero could not speak. His face was white, his eyes were wide. He swallowed several times, but no words came from his mouth. He kept shaking his head and pointing at the bag. Hawes stared at the bag in puzzlement, and then began to unzip it. Genero turned away. He seemed ready to vomit momentarily.

Hawes looked into the bag and said, "Oh, Jesus, where'd you get this?"

"What is it?" Kling asked.

"Oh, Jesus," Hawes said. "What a goddamn thing. Get it out of here. Jesus, get it out of the squadroom. I'll call the morgue." The rugged planes of his face were twisted in pain. He could not look into the bag again. "I'll call the morgue," he said again. "Jesus, get it out of here. Take it downstairs. Get it out of here."

Carella picked up the bag and started out of the room.

He did not look into it. He did not have to.

He had been a cop for a long time now, and he knew instantly from the expression on Hawes's face that the bag must contain a segment of human body.

Now that's pretty damn disgusting.

But let's get something straight. Death *is* pretty damn disgusting, and there are no two ways about it. If you are one of those people who like motion pictures where a man fires a gun and a small spurt of dust explodes on the victim's chest—just a small spurt of dust, no blood—then police work is not the line for you. Similarly, if you are one of those people who believe that corpses look “just like they're sleeping,” it is fortunate you are not a cop. If you are a cop, you know that death is seldom pretty, that it is in fact the ugliest and most frightening event that can over take a human being.

If you are a cop, you have seen death at its ugliest because you have seen it as the result of violent upheaval. You have, more than likely, puked more than once at the things you have seen. You have, more than likely, trembled with fear, because death has a terrifying way of reminding the strongest human that his flesh can bleed and his bones can break. If you are a cop, you will never get used to the sight of a corpse or a part of a corpse—no matter how long you deal with them, no matter how strong you are, no matter how tough you become.

There is nothing reassuring about the sight of a man who has been worked over with a hatchet. The skull, a formidable piece of bone assuming the characteristics of a melon, the parallel wounds, the crisscrossing wounds, the bleeding ugly wounds covering the head and the face and the neck, the windpipe exposed and raw, throbbing with color so bright, but throbbing only with color because life is gone, life has fled beneath the battering rigidity of an impersonal hatchet blade; there is nothing reassuring.

There is nothing beautiful about the post-mortem decomposition of body, man or woman, child or adult, the gas formation, the discoloration of head and trunk tissues, the separation of epidermis, the staining of veins, the protrusion of tongue, decomposed liquefied fat soaking through the skin resulting in large yellow-stained areas; there is nothing beautiful.

There is nothing tender about bullet wounds, the smeared and lacerated flesh of contact wounds, the subcutaneous explosion of gases, the tissue seared and blackened by flame and smoke, the embedded powder grains, the gaping holes in the flesh; there is nothing tender.

If you are a cop, you learn that death is ugly, and frightening, and disgusting. If you are a cop, you learn to deal with what is ugly, frightening, and disgusting or you quit the force.

The object in the overnight bag was a human hand, ugly, frightening and disgusting.

The man who received it at the morgue was an assistant medical examiner named Paul Blaney, a short man with a scraggly black mustache and violet eyes. Blaney didn't particularly enjoy handling the remains of dead people, and he often wondered why he—the junior member on the medical examiner's staff—was invariably given the most particularly obnoxious stiffs to examine, those who had been in automobile accidents or fires, or whose remains had been chewed to ribbons by marauding rats. But he knew that he had a job to do. And that job was—given a human hand that has been severed at the wrist from the remainder of the body, how can I determine the race, sex, age, probable height, and probable weight of the person to whom it belonged?

That was the job.

With a maximum of dispatch, and a minimum of emotional involvement, Blaney set to work.

Fortunately, the hand was still covered with skin. A lot of bodies he received simply weren't. And so it was quite simple to determine the race of the person to whom the hand had belonged. Blaney determined that race rather quickly, and then jotted the information on a slip of paper.

RACE: White.

Sex was another thing again. It was simple to identify the sex of an individual if the examiner was presented with remains of the breasts or sexual organs, but all Blaney had was a hand. Period. Just a hand. In general, Blaney knew, the female of the species usually had less body hair than the male, more delicate extremities, more subcutaneous fat and less musculature. Her bones, too, were smaller and lighter, with thinner shafts and wider medullary spaces.

The hand on the autopsy table was a huge one. It measured twenty-five centimeters from the tip of the middle finger to the base of the severed wrist, and that came to something more than nine and a half inches when translated into laymen's English. Blaney could not conceive of such a hand having belonged to a woman, unless she were a masseuse or a female wrestler. And even granting such exotic occupations, the likelihood was remote. He had, nonetheless, made errors in determining the sex of a victim from sex-unrelated parts in the past, and he did not wish to make such an error now.

The hand was covered with thick, black, curling hair, another fact that seemed to point toward a male identification; but Blaney carried the examination to its conclusion, measuring the bone shafts, studying the medullary spaces, and jotting down his estimate at last.

SEX: Male.

Well, we're getting someplace, he thought. We now know that this gruesome and severed member of a human body once belonged to a white male. Wiping his forehead with a towel, he got back to work again.

A microscopic examination of the hand's skin told Blaney that there had been no loss of elasticity due to the decrease of elastic fibers in the dermis. Since he was making his microscopic examination in an effort to determine the victim's age, he automatically chalked off the possibility of the man's having been a very old one. He knew, further, that he was not likely to get anything more from a closer examination of the skin. The changes in skin throughout the growth and decline of a human being were

seldom provide accurate criteria of age. And so he turned to the bones.

The hand had been severed slightly above the wrist so that portions of the radius and ulna, the twin bones that run from the wrist to the elbow, were still attached to the hand. Moreover, Blaney had all the various bones of the hand itself to examine: the carpus, the metacarpal, the phalanx.

He mused, as he worked, that the average layman would—just about now—begin to consider all of his devious machinations as scientific mumbo jumbo, the aimless meanderings of a pseudo-wizard. Well, he thought, the hell with the average layman. I know damn well that the ossification centers of bones go through a sequence of growth and fusion and that this growth and fusion takes place at certain age levels. I know further that by studying these bones, I can come pretty close to estimating the age of this dead white male, and that is just what I am going to do. Average layman be damned.

The entire examination that Blaney conducted on the bones took close to three hours. His notes included such esoteric terms as “proximal epiphysial muscle” and “os magnum” and “multangulum majus” and the like. His final note simply read:

AGE: 18-24.

When it came to the probable height and weight of the victim, Blaney threw up his hands in despair. If he had been presented with a femur, humerus, or a radius in its entirety, he would have measured any one of them in centimeters from joint surface to joint surface with the cartilage in place, and then made an attempt at calculating the height using Pearson's formula. For the radius, if he'd had a whole one and not just a portion of one, the table would have read like this:

MALE	FEMALE
86.465 plus 3.271 times length of radius.	82.189 plus 3.343 times length of radius.

Then, to arrive at an estimate of the height of the *living* body, he'd have subtracted one and a half centimeters from the final result for a male and two centimeters for a female.

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