

# SHOPPING FOR DEATH IN POUGHKEEPSIE

Love is all, it gives all, and it takes all  
– Soren Keirkegaard

## 1.

Two black men stand at the corner of Academy Street and Church Street. One is very tall, well over six feet, and has dark, leathery skin. The other, even with his puffed-out retro 'fro, comes only to his friend's shoulder. His skin is splotchy, a combination of light and dark patches. The two men talk calmly, without animation, enjoying the warm autumn sun that seems to feed color to the orange and yellow leaves that drop like rain from the oak and chestnut trees.

A hundred yards away, parked in the municipal lot, a white man sits in a turquoise Saturn, watching them. His window is rolled down because of the heat. He is wearing a sweat-stained white shirt and green-and-black tie. He might have been athletic once, but the beer gut now makes his clothes fit badly. He watches the two black men for five minutes. They don't seem to notice him.

The short man, whose name is Ke, is drinking from a bottle in a paper bag. He keeps offering it to his friend, who repeatedly shakes his head. It's mid-afternoon, mid-week, and the street is fairly quiet. Occasionally, one of the black men will hoot out a laugh, but otherwise they are inconspicuous – just two guys hanging out on a street corner.

The white man gets out of the Saturn, which is at least ten years old, and starts walking across the nearly empty parking lot. The black men pay him no mind until it becomes obvious that he's heading right toward them. They stop their conversation and

stare at him. He is bald, head cleanly shaven, with a salt-and-pepper goatee several years out of style. He stands in front of them and says nothing.

“What?” Ke asks finally.

The white man’s face turns bright red. “I ... this is gonna sound strange, but I was hoping you could help me.”

“Us help you?” Ke elbows his friend and says, “Hear that, Calvin? White man needs some help from us.”

Calvin can see the white man is distressed. There are dark lines under his eyes and sweat is pouring from the folds in his neck. Instinctively, he knows this is something he does not want to get involved in.

“What’s your name, boy?”

“Just call me Mike.”

“Well, what can a couple of brothers do for you, *Mike*?”

Again the white man hesitates. He fumbles for words. Ke laughs at him. “I need somebody with a gun,” Mike says finally.

Ke and Calvin spit derisive laughter at him. “So, what, you stop the first two niggers you see on the street, figurin’ we’re gonna be carrying?” Calvin says, biting down on his anger. “You got no white friends with guns?”

“Get the fuck lost,” Ke says.

“I’m not a cop,” Mike says. “Look at me. Do I look like a cop?”

“Even cops don’t wear ties that fuggin’ ugly,” Ke says.

Calvin towers over both of them and says, “I don’t got time for this shit.”

Mike's voice hushes below the fall sunlight, but carries force. "Listen. I can get my hands on \$5,000. Neither of you interested in that kind of money?"

Ke says, "I'm listenin'."

But Calvin shakes his head. "We don't stand out on the street talkin' this kinda shit."

"There's this new Irish bar around the corner," Ke says. "Let's go have a drink and figure out what the fuck we talkin' about."

The three of them walk up the block and turn right onto Main Street. The bar, dressed in orange and green, is quiet. All of Main Street is calm. The three men go inside and take a table in the deepest corner. Fewer than half a dozen patrons ring the bar. They're all white except for Ke and Calvin. The place stinks of newness, of polished wood and chrome.

"I'll grab the drinks," Mike says. Ke wants a gin and tonic and the other two take beers, Guinness with a nice frothy head. Nobody seems to pay particular attention to the white man with two black drinking buddies. They sit at their table and sip for a while, listening to horrible '80s music. "This shit suck," Ke grumbles as he downs his gin in a couple gulps.

Calvin is talking softly, but it's obvious he is in control of the conversation. "OK, white boy, what the hell is up? No more fuckin' around. What you want with the gun?"

Mike doesn't seem intimidated by Calvin's anger. His face is pink but otherwise unaffected. "It's not just the gun," Mike says. "I want someone who's got the balls to use it."

"And you think that's me?"

Mike nods, takes a couple sips of his Guinness. "Maybe you. Maybe somebody you know. I'm not that particular."

"Let me clue you, man. I don't got no gun. I'm on probation. They find me with a gun, I'm back inside before I can fuck your old lady. So forget it. Go home to your nice little house and leave me be."

Ke finishes his drink and says, "What a nice white boy like you want with a gun anyway? Even if I could get you a gun, whatcha gonna do with it anyway?"

Mike downs the rest of his beer and slams the glass on the table. "Motherfucker, you ain't listenin'. I don't just want a gun, I want someone with the balls to use it."

Ke's splotchy face erupts in a Crayola box of colors. He reaches across the table to grab Mike, but Calvin snatches Ke's wrist and paralyzes it.

"You graduate from Poughkeepsie?" Calvin asks.

"Yeh."

"What year?"

"1973."

"No shit. That woulda been my year. 'Cept I quit that shit soon as I turned 16. Back then I thought learnin' was for chumps. But two times upstate taught me some things. Smart motherfuckers survive. Calm motherfuckers survive."

"What'd you do?"

"Huh?"

"To go to prison."

Calvin finishes his beer, relishing the last drops of the dark liquid. "Getting' kinda personal, ain't we?" Before Mike can apologize, he says, "First time was drugs. Got

nabbed three or four times before the judge finally put me away. He kept giving me warnings, letting me join rehab programs, but I wasn't listenin' to nobody back then, so I got sent up for three-to-five. Twenty-fuckin'-two years old."

Mike tries to imagine what spending three years in prison must be like, but he can't read the story on Calvin's black black face. There is nothing there but a frightening tranquility. Mike reaches into his wallet, pulls out a twenty dollar bill and lays it on the table. "We need more drinks," he says.

Calvin grabs the bill and hands it to Ke. "Man's buyin'. Least you can do is go fetch 'em for us."

Ke gives him a nasty look, but gets up, squeezing the twenty in his right fist. He seems capable of violence and that makes Mike hopeful there's still a chance. Calvin he is not so sure about. Calvin seems to have found God or some other internal peace and this worries Mike.

"You married?" Mike asks, although he has no idea what makes him say the words.

"Used to be," Calvin says. "Wife divorced me when I was up at Auburn the last time."

"Another drug rap?"

Calvin's dark face almost disappears into the shadows. He hates answering questions, but something about this hopeless white boy makes him talk. "Nah. I set up this convenience store heist. It was perfect. I knew they had a load of cash going out every Monday after the weekend haul. Only problem was, I didn't count on this fat fuck of a superhero who came chargin' at me even though I had a gun aimed at his flabby gut.

I didn't want to hurt the stupid sonofabitch – he was just a goddamn clerk – but he came at me and the gun went off and blew his fuckin' kneecap right off. He came flappin' on top of me, screamin' and bleedin' all over me and I couldn't get him offa me. Next thing I know, cops are slappin' the cuffs on."

"I remember that story," Mike says. "The company gave him a big reward and he was a hero for about a month." Mike laughs bitterly. "Bet if you asked a hundred people now, nobody'd know who he was."

"I see him around the city sometimes. His leg is still fucked up. He walks with a cane and can't hardly get around. Fat, stupid fuck. For what? You think that company give a damn about him? Anyway, I done some serious time for that. Armed robbery, assault, you name it."

Ke returns with the drinks, grumbling about how long it took the bartender to serve him. He sucks at his gin and tonic. "Listen, this conversation all pleasant and whatnot, but let's get back to the five K and whatever job you got in mind."

Mike takes a huge gulp of the Guinness, the foam sticking to his mustache. He looks at Ke, then Calvin. "I'm willing to pay you \$5,000 to kill me. Right now. Today."

There is silence for several seconds. Then Calvin huffs out a laugh. "You crazy, white boy. Honest to fuckin' god."

Mike is not smiling. He is staring into Calvin's black eyes. "I'm deadly serious. You don't want the job, I'm sure I can find somebody who does."

Ke is leaning forward on the table, practically drooling. "You got the money on you right now?"

"Why the hell you wanna die so bad?" Calvin asks.

“That’s my business.”

“You askin’ me to go back inside for the rest of my life, now that’s my business.”

Mike stares out the window, the golden light of autumn fading into a yellowish gray. His stomach roils like the Atlantic City surf. He wants to articulate the problem, but it seems too complex. Words start spilling out of his mouth because he has no way to stop them.

“I work for the newspaper. At least, I used to. I just got laid off. This morning. Corporate cuts. It’s all about getting the stock prices up.” Mike picks up his beer, downs half of it in one gulp. “I busted my ass for these fuckers for years, workin’ fifty, sixty hours a week. For what?” He grunts. “So those corporate dogs can give themselves million-dollar bonuses. Motherfuckers.”

“You an editor?” Calvin asks.

“Yeh, I was. A dumb-ass editor. I worked my ass off and at the end of the day I end up with nothin’.”

“This all interestin’ and all,” Ke says, “but what it got to do with blowin’ your brains out?”

Mike laughs. He laughs so hard tears start spilling out of his eyes and he can’t stop them. Ke looks away, embarrassed, but Calvin keeps focused on him. His question is: Is this guy for real? Mike wipes his face with his sleeve. The laughter is gone now and all that’s left is the water, still pooling in the corners of his eyes.

“I got nothin’,” he says. “Thirty goddamn years working for newspapers, and I got nothin’. No savings, a big mortgage, a car that barely runs. At my age, where am I gonna find another job? I got one thing: a \$250,000 life insurance policy from the



company. I get to keep my benefits for three months. That's the kindness they show me after all I've done. So if I die now, my family gets that money."

Calvin sits back and puts both of his long hands on the table. He has not touched his second beer. He stares at the foam that sits at the top. After a minute, he lets out a low whistle. "This the craziest shit I ever heard. You doin' this for your family, but what *about* your family?"

"What about 'em? They get taken care of. That's the deal. That's a man's fuckin' job, Calvin, to take care of his family."

"Your wife love you?"

The question catches Mike so off guard he can't reply. A million thoughts seem to whirl through his mind like leaves caught on the wind. Calvin can only imagine what he is remembering. After a while, Mike says, "She did once, I think. I'm pretty sure. But it's been almost thirty years and, look at me, am I something to love?"

"You love her?"

Mike doesn't answer. He stands, goes to the bar and orders a double shot of Jack Daniel's, which he downs in one voracious gulp. When he returns to the table, he appears renewed with sour mash courage.

"We here to do a deal or what?" he asks Calvin. He ignores Ke purposely, hoping that will spur the little man to action.

"What's your hurry?" Calvin says in a voice that's almost a serene hum. "It's still light out. You want to die today, there's still plenty of time."

"You so hot to die, why not just jump off the bridge?" Ke says. "Or that new walkway. You be the first to take a flier off that thing."

"I don't have the guts," Mike says.

"You wanna die, you better muster up some guts," Calvin replies. He seems angry. "Pussy like you wouldn't last a week in prison. Go home, white boy. Go home and figure out how you gonna find another job or how you gonna borrow money from your rich brother-in-law or something. You don't want to die."

Mike reaches across the table, snatches Calvin's untouched beer and empties the glass in a few voracious gulps. He holds the glass in front of Calvin's face as if he intends to smash him with it. "You know nothin' about me. Talk about a pussy. I'm offering you five K to do me, no questions asked, and you're too much of a pussy to take the money."

"We ain't seen no money," Ke says.

"Fuck you," Mike snaps. "Anybody gonna pull this off, it sure as shit won't be you."

"You wanna see?"

"Show me, little man. Do it."

A few more people have entered the bar and the noise level has climbed. Calvin raises his hands like a preacher calling the congregation to order. "We need to keep it cool," he says softly. "Last thing we want is for folks to remember we was here. Get it? This here is just a friendly conversation about the Giants playing the Cowboys." He looks directly at Ke. "Don't be stupid." Ke grinds his teeth but says nothing.

Mike leans into the table. His face is drawn and he looks like he might vomit. "I got no friends who'll do this for me. They'll try to talk me out of it, call the cops, even, and send me to the psycho ward. I'm not crazy. I just want out of all this and I want to leave my family with something. Is that crazy? Is that so hard to understand? I'm not a

jumper and pills, shit, they're not reliable. Half the time you end up getting your stomach pumped. Anyway, this can't look like suicide. I want a sure thing. Two shots in the back of the head. And then nothing. All gone."

"All that very touching and all," Ke says, "but how we know we gonna see this money once the job's done?"

Mike nods slowly, reaches into his front pants pocket, pulls out a fat envelope. He hands it to Calvin. The tall man opens the flap and starts flipping through a series of bills, mouthing amounts to himself. After several minutes, he closes the flap again and hands the envelope back to Mike.

"All there," he tells Ke.

"I know where we get a gun in, like, ten minutes. My cousin ..."

"Fuck your cousin. Motherfucker never came through with a *damn* thing." His dark face is empty of emotion as he looks at Mike. Outside the window, the sun is practically gone and everything is a watercolor of purple and blue. "I remember my paps used to take me fishin' on days like this. That's about the only thing I remember about him now. How many kids you got?"

Mike isn't sure, at first, that Calvin is talking to him. Then he says, "Two. Two daughters. One of them's in college. Smart kid. She's gonna take care of herself just fine."

"You know, when I was upstate, I missed a lotta shit, man. Birthdays, graduations, birth of my first grandchild. You gonna miss everything with a bullet in your head."

“My freakin’ kids, they don’t need me no more. I’m just a joke to them. The older one, I never see her, and the younger one don’t say two words to me. I try to talk to her and she just grunts at me and plugs into her laptop. They’ll be happier with the money. ... What about your kids? They shower you with affection?”

Calvin laughs. He locks eyes with the white man and shakes his head. “Not even sure how many kids I got. Rumor has it at six or seven. I know about four for sure. Three with my wife and one with this other bitch. Now I wish I done better by all of ’em.”

The bartender comes around and asks if they want another round. Calvin asks for a glass of water, Ke another gin, Mike a double Jack no ice.

“What about your wife?” Calvin asks.

“What about her?”

“You love her?”

“Yeh. I mean, I used to, but time makes everything old. We tolerate each other. She used to try to make me happy and I tried too, I think, but now it’s just ... believe me, she’ll get along fine without me. They get the money and they get to keep the house and everybody’ll be happy.”

“That what you think?”

“Yeh.”

The bartender returns with the drinks and Mike pays. Ke gulps down some gin and says, “This shit’s all very sad, but are we here to do business or not?”

Calvin ignores him. “So what you do man, like, for fun?”

Mike gives him a twisted smile. "Fun? I work and then go home and drink until I fall asleep. I used to have a lot of fun. Cards with my friends. Concerts. Goin' down to Shea to watch games."

"Poor bastard, you a Mets fan," Ke interjects.

"So why you don't still do that shit?"

Mike tries to articulate what has happened, but the words escape him. Finally, he says, "Everything just got squeezed down to nothin'. All I could think about was work, about tomorrow's paper. But it wasn't just work. My dad died and my favorite uncle died and people I really like and respected got hacked from the paper and pretty soon I felt like I was ... just standing alone in the middle of the newsroom. That's a scary place."

Ke grabs Calvin by the arm and says, "Look, you done with your motherfuckin' therapy session now or we gonna get down to some business?"

Calvin shakes Ke's arm away and says to Mike, "I might know someone who do this thing for you. I get a thousand for settin' it up and Ke get a thousand just 'cause his ass lucky enough to be around and this other guy get three K."

Mike shrugs. "However you want to set it up. I don't give a god damn who gets what."

"All right, we go to B-boy's while I get this set up. Nobody bother us there."

Ke looks at his friend over the rim of his glass. "B-boy?"

Calvin gives him a cold smile. The dark eyes seem to turn in on themselves. "Yeh, B-boy. You got a problem with B-boy?"

"I just surprised," he mutters.

"You keep quiet and let me handle this deal, boy."

## 2.

Mike throws a few dollars on the table as a tip, then follows Calvin out the door. Ke, sulking and half drunk from the gin, walks with his head down. It is dark now, not black but that deep, glowing blue of early fall evenings. Mike's heart is pounding so hard he feels he might pass out. His knees are shaking. He feels a strange mixture of terror and euphoria, like when he and his daughter would get strapped into a death-defying roller coaster. He wonders if he is really going to die tonight and believes he wants it, believes dying will give him the sleep he craves so much.

He is barely aware of where Calvin is leading him. They are walking behind The Chance, where Mike has seen so many great shows – Tower of Power, Little Feat, Tony Williams – and finds himself scrambling around Dumpsters and over short concrete barriers. He feels like he is in a dream with the cool air blowing up from the river and the crescent moon smiling down at him. I remember I remember his mind keeps repeating, but he's not sure what it is he's supposed to remember.

They cross Main Street and he can see the barber shop where Darnelle "Iggy" Twigs got stabbed to death so many years ago. Then they're on South Clinton and laughter and music are pouring out of the Cabin and he wants to stop in for a couple more shots of Jack but Calvin is hurrying them along, up the stairs of a lopsided wooden two-family. The building looks empty. There are no lights on.

On the porch, Mike looks back at the Cabin. He breathes in the joy spilling out of the bar, but realizes immediately it's not joy at all – it's the same misery he is feeling masked by alcohol and music and greasy burgers fat enough to fill a hole in your heart. But joy ... that's pure. That's kissing his wife for the first time. That's seeing his

daughter's head squirm out from between her mother's legs into the world. That's hearing his sister say the lump on her breast is not cancer. All of this, the tunes, the clinking bottles, it's all a bandage for the pain that clings to the back of his neck – to everyone's neck.

"I'm tired," he says out loud.

"No sweat, white boy, we here," Ke tells him.

But Calvin seems to understand. Mike can barely see his black face in the shadows; it's all eyes and teeth. He puts his ostrich-claw hand on Mike's shoulder and says, "We all tired."

Calvin rattles open the door to the hallway and they climb slowly to the second floor, the stairs feeling as if they'll barely hold together. At the top of the steps, Calvin takes a key out of his pocket and opens a scarred wooden door. Inside there is nothing, just a few folding chairs and a naked lightbulb in the center of the ceiling. Full ashtrays lay scattered over the floor.

"Who is this B-boy?" Mike asks.

"Oh, he one a our boys," Ke says. "Right now, he doin' six months over to county. So we use the place to party, you know. He don't mind."

Mike finds he has no interest in asking why B-boy is doing six months in county jail. What difference does it make? "Can we get this over with?" he asks Calvin. "I just want it to be done." There is such a heavy weight inside his chest he thinks it might be a heart attack. But there is no pain, just weight.

"Never met a boy in such a hurry to die," Calvin says. "You not afraid?"

"Afraid of what?"

“I dunno. God. The devil. The end of the line. Must be somethin’ you want to live for. Everyone want that one last thing.” Calvin’s smoldering dark eyes fix him like nails to the wall. “I seen people die. Ain’t none of ’em didn’t want another breath. So relax. Your time will come.”

“I’m just tired,” Mike says again.

Ke reaches into his shirt pocket and pulls out a slim, tightly wrapped joint. “Bet back in the day you done a few a these,” he says.

Mike laughs softly. “A few,” he says.

“One last time, then,” Calvin says.

“Be careful, old man,” Ke warns him as he lights the joint. “This ain’t like the shitweed you smoked in your day. This shit got a kick onto it.”

“I’ll take my chances,” he says.

Ke takes a long, slow toke on the joint, holds in the smoke, smiles at Calvin. He hands the joint to Mike, who accepts it and carefully sucks in smoke. He tries to keep it in his lungs, but spits it out with a loud cough. Ke laughs and slaps the white man on the back.

“I warned you, bro,” he says.

Calvin declines the smoke, so Ke takes it back and draws in another smooth hit. Mike takes a second toke and even before he can spew out the smoke his head is detaching itself from his spine. The room is swimming. Mike feels like he might vomit. “Moth-er-fucker,” he says.



“This ain’t that Mexican shit you dudes used to smoke,” Ke says, laughing. But Mike can’t be sure it’s him because the voice sounds far away. Everything is spinning and Mike wants it to end.

“Finish your fuckin’ job,” he says to Calvin.

The big black man stands up and walks into the other room. He returns with something heavy and metallic in his hand. Mike can’t seem to focus on anything. The booze and pot and emotion have sent him somewhere he can’t get away from. He tries to grab the front of Calvin’s shirt, but misses and falls to the floor.

“You done, white boy,” Ke says without emotion.

Mike is slurring his words, but says something that sounds like, “Make it quick.”

Calvin kneels on Mike’s shoulders so that he is pinned, unable to do anything but flail his legs. “You want it over, so now it’s gonna be over,” Calvin says. He presses the revolver behind Mike’s right ear. “Pray to whatever God you pray to.”

“Fuck God,” Mike screams at the top of his lungs.

Calvin shoves the gun more fiercely against Mike’s head. Mike feels his bowels turning over and thinks *please don’t let me shit myself please* before he closes his eyes and prepares for the nothingness. Calvin pulls the trigger and Mike hears the click and realizes it’s over *what have I done what have I done*. But nothing happens. A misfire? Calvin pulls the trigger again and Mike’s head is filled with a million images of love and anger and the smell of the Hudson River on a warm spring morning. But nothing happens. He is still breathing.

Calvin pulls the gun away from his head and says, “Go home, Mike.”

Understanding now what has happened, Mike begins to thrash violently against Calvin's grip, screaming, "You lying sonofabitch, you bastard, you promised."

"Shut up," Calvin says, pushing Mike's face gently to the floor.

Mike's world shimmers with dizziness, with bourbon and pot and years of accumulated pain. He feels no impetus to stand. Were everything to end now, he would not be afraid. He would not protest.

"Go home and hug your wife," Calvin says. "Tell your daughters you love 'em. Put on some music real fuckin' loud and dance around the room. That's all there is, white boy. There's nothin' else."

"You promised me," Mike says meekly.

"You thank me tomorrow," Calvin says.

Mike swoons, closes his eyes.

Ke bends down and reaches into Mike's pants pocket, where the money-filled envelope sits.

"Leave it," Calvin says.

Ke's mouth drops open. He ignores Calvin's order and begins to rifle through Mike's pocket again.

"I said leave it," Calvin growls. He levels the gun at Ke's face. "Maybe all these chambers empty, maybe not."