
The Phantom Dealer

Part Nine of a Nine Part Series

by **Eric Heise**

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“Number nine, number nine number nine, number nine...”
- Revolution #9
Lennon & McCartney

Nine (nīn), *n.*
1. A cardinal number, eight plus one,
Webster’s New Universal Unabridged Dictionary

“Chains”
To see chains, brings calumny and treacherous designs of the envious.
Seeing others in chains, denotes bad fortunes for them.
“10,000 Dreams Interpreted” by Gustavus Hindman Miller

John Martinelli's gun pressed against the back of Ramon's left ear. He could feel the strong steel against him, the angry and power in the metal. His leg and shoulder pounded and throbbed from the existing bullet wounds as Martinelli held his gun to Ramon's head. "Don't even think about," he said. Martinelli snarling, watching every strand of graying hair on the top of Ramon's head wave in the breeze. Ramon lay still on the ground of the abandoned drive-in theater, his right side pressed against the dirt and pavement. He looked up to his left, his left arm up. He looked at Martinelli. He looked him in the eye.

Ramon thought about it. He thought about it long and hard. This man has no honor, Ramon thought. I can tell by the look in his eyes he is honor-less. But then again, so am I.

Ramon's gun lay at his fingertips. He could grab it, grab it and fight his way out. If he dies, he doesn't go to jail. If he lives, he'll have a chance. Ramon stared at Martinelli and Martinelli stared back. Behind Martinelli, his partner of seven years Frank Marshall still lay by the unmarked cruiser, a bullet from Ramon in his leg. Behind Martinelli was the limo. The driver was dead on the ground by the driver's door with the henchman lying dead at the rear of the car. The Bossman was still in the back of the car. He lay on the floor of the limo, just able to see the back of the topside of Martinelli's head. The Bossman stayed still, listened but was unable to hear all that was being said. A black MP5K A4, a short assault pistol sat in a case in the center console of the limo, the Bossman's own personal Justin (just in case he needed it). His crimson cap had fallen off his head and was now in the seat behind him.

The Bossman watched the cop outside and handled the weapon, chambering the first round slowly. He gripped it in his hand, eyes peering and he breathed heavily through his nostrils. Sitting up, the leather seat squeaked as he gripped it with a free hand to get himself up. Now up straight, the Bossman prepared to get himself out of this.

Martinelli moved, straddling over Ramon for a second then to the other side of him. The Bossman flinched as he watched. Martinelli gripped Ramon's .357 under his shoe and scuffed it aside, out of Ramon's reach. Ramon felt a deep burden on his chest, and wished he had that extra few seconds back to grab the weapon. Jail was no place he wanted to go.

"You fucking scumbag, I got you," Martinelli spit. "I got you, you dirty *mothahfuckah*. Don't you fucking move, not one fucking bit." Martinelli started to pulled a set of handcuffs out of his back pocket.

The Bossman had the over-sized pistol-like assault rifle in his left and was creeping towards the doorway. Martinelli's back was to him. The Bossman watched as Martinelli turned Ramon over. Ramon grunted with some pain, having his bullet wound rub against the ground.

"Yeah fuck you, slime ball. I give a fuck about how much it hurts," Martinelli said.

The Bossman edged himself more and more out the doorway, pushing the back door open now with the black two-handled weapon pointing towards Martinelli and Ramon.

A shot rang out. Martinelli wiped around, gun pointing and ready for action. Another shot rang out. Martinelli dropped to a knee. The Bossman slammed against the car and was hit a third time. The gun tumbled out of his hand and fell to the ground. Martinelli turned his head to the left and saw his partner, Frank Marshall with his .45 in hand shooting the Bossman.

The Bossman slammed down to his knees and fell to the ground on his face. Martinelli stared for a moment and then got up to check his pulse. "Still alive," he mumbled. He turned to Ramon, who was faced down on the ground. "You fucking stay put."

Marshall's arm collapsed to the ground. He was exhausted and he hurt. The bullet that Ramon had put in his leg was now screaming and throbbing. His khaki trousers were covered with blood in gushes and spits of deep red. Martinelli knelt to him, his hand on his shoulder, as if that would help ease the pain. Sirens wailed and were closing in quickly. "You hang on there partner," Martinelli said. "You just hang on and you're going to be fine." Martinelli looked back over at the Bossman and Ramon. Neither had moved. He still had his own gun in his left hand. "Jesus Christ, Frankie. I never even thought to look in the back of that limo. Shit, I was a fucking goner, I really was."

Marshall looked up at him, his eyes full disappointment and pain. He felt pity, not for himself, he knew he'd be ok one way or another. The pity was for Martinelli. He wanted to say something, he meant to say something, but all would sound like Yoda, the Jedi Master reprimanding a young student for not being able to lift a forty ton fighter jet out of a swamp with his mind. No, there wasn't anything he really could say. His mind was swimming; it had been a helluva a day and it wasn't even close to being over. He'd stood by John Martinelli, his partner for seven not so lucky years. He'd stood with him over bad busts and crummy decisions. He has put his career on the line far too many times to count and before today, before this little shoot out at the old drive-in theater he couldn't even count on being able to stay on the force long enough to collect his retirement.

But in a real ironic twist, a twist that started with the accidental death of one dealer user being hit by a car, Frank Marshall was going to retire with full pension. Better yet, the police force would actually be sad to see him go.

An ambulance followed the traffic of marked and unmarked police cruisers to the scene of the shoot out. Among the attendance was the Captain who had warned Martinelli and Marshall not to screw up. He looked the scene over and counted five bodies down, two dead: The driver of the limo, who Martinelli got right away had taken a bullet wound in the chest and wasn't going to ever survive that one and the Bossman's lieutenant Jeremy who took a wound in the throat from Ramon. One of the five was one of his own, Detective soon to be promoted to Lieutenant Frank Marshall who was responsible for taking out known drug pusher Ramon Enriquez and known big time crime boss, Manuel "Bossman" Fernandez, a guy the cops have wanted for sometime. All three shootings were justified; the captain knew it right away. He walked Frank Marshall into the ambulance, Marshall on a stretcher, sedated with an IV in his arm. The Captain held Marshall's forearm and tapped it. "You're going to be all right, Frank. Just fine." Marshall gave a weary and light-headed nod. "This one makes

you a star, anything you want you'll get." Marshall moved his mouth around, moistening it. He nodded backwards to the captain, gesturing for him to come closer. Marshall's lips started to move.

"A transfer," he grunted in a whisper. Marshall glanced over at Martinelli who was filling other officers in on the events. Martinelli happened to look over to his partner and gave to shaking fist and grimaced.

The Captain looked behind him and then back to Marshall. He nodded. "Yeah."

Marshall nodded the whole way into the ambulance and then disappeared behind closed doors. The Captain, a twenty-eight year veteran of the force thought and wondered at the white doors of the ambulance. He was clear to what he assumed for the past few years: Marshall was not the problem in the scenario, Martinelli was. Martinelli jumped the gun today and didn't wait for back up. It got his partner wounded, who later saved his life single handedly by taking out the driver and taking Ramon and the Bossman down. Marshall has not been the one screaming about some *Phantom Dealer*, some little Chinese kid with a stash of coke for sale. Murphy had a pretty good idea Marshall doesn't even believe the story of this dealer and thinks it's a pile of shit like the rest Martinelli's actions. Everything in the force was fine until -.

"Martinelli!" The Captain yelled over the sounds of sirens and radios. His hands were on his hips and he could feel his heart race. The hot sun set on his face, a blaze of orange signifying a scorcher again tomorrow.

John Martinelli finished his sentence with a couple of the uniforms and ran over to the Captain. "What's up cappy Frankie's gonna be ok, right? I mean it's still early and hey, I'm no doctor, but I think he's gonna make it. Make it just fine in fact. We'll have to throw him a big party when he gets out of the hospital, huh? After a day like today, that's the least we can do huh? Whatdoya think?"

"I think you ought to shut the fuck up, John," the Captain said. He sneered at his detective and stood only inches from him. "Let's take a walk." The Captain started towards the other end of the parking lot and John Martinelli, detective, followed him in tow.

Mira finished buttoning her black blazer. She didn't bother with any eyeliner since she figured it was going to run like crazy. I haven't stopped crying in days, she thought. The last thing I need is black streaks to match my blood shot eyes. There was a knock at the door. Mira looked towards it and saw Jessie poke her head in. "Hi, can I come in?"

Mira sighed to settle herself. "Sure." She looked at herself in the mirror, wiping her cheek with heel of her palm.

"How ya doing?" Jessie asked with some caution.

"Oh, ok." Mira shrugged. "Can't stop crying by that's par for the course these days." She stood for a moment looking at herself in the mirror and then broke down again. Jessie walked over

and wrapped her arm around her shoulders. Mira shrugged at herself in the mirror. "I just can't stopped crying," she sobbed. "It's like someone turned the water on and left it on. All I do these days is cry and sometimes I can't even remember why." She wiped her eyes and nose with a tissue. "And then I remember Martin and I just go on crying. It's like it never ends."

Jessie tightened her embrace. "It'll be ok, you'll be all right. Just try to remember some happier times."

Mira blew her nose. "That's just it. The last six months have been nothing but miserable," she said. "If I had only been there more for him, with him, may be he wouldn't have needed to take drugs to get through it all."

"Oh come on, Mira, you can't blame yourself."

"I know, but that's how I feel," Mira said still sobbing. "And I haven't even seen his parents yet. God knows what his mother is going to say."

Jessie let go of her and went into the bathroom off to the right. She ran the water and filled a glass. She came back out and handed the water to Mira. "Hold on, I have something for you."

"And I can't wear any make up because it'll just run all over my face and make me look like some tired old slut," Mira said and blew her nose again. Jessie was rummaging through her purse and found a small bottle. She removed a tablet and handed it to Mira. "What's this?"

"It's just a mild relaxant. It'll help you calm down," Jessie said. Mira popped the pill in her mouth and took a drink of the water. Jessie started to put the bottle back in her purse.

"You'd better give them to me, God knows if I'll need another one later," she said. Jessie smiled and handed her the bottle. Mira slipped it into her blazer pocket and looked at herself in the mirror. "Ok, I think I'm ready now." She nodded and hugged Jessie before the two women left for the funeral home.

"I had to move, Cap," John Martinelli told his Captain Murphy. "If we didn't move then we would have lost the bust. They were going to have a big shoot out right then and there."

"You put yourself in danger," the Captain said. "You put your partner in danger and he's now off to the hospital for a bullet wound that could have been avoided if you had waited for backup." The captain was turning red and his hands were still on his hips.

"At no time, Captain, did I put either one of us in danger," Martinelli defended himself. "We proceeded under regulations. There was illegal activity going down and we took measures to stop it."

"Leave the 'we' out if it, John," the Captain said. "This was your idea, your stakeout and your partner was the one who got dirty and cleaned up the mess. You nearly fucked everything up."

“Whatdoya think I was wrong, Cap?” Martinelli asked. “Come on, we got the bad guys. We’ve got Bossman Fernandez.”

Murphy looked at Martinelli. “With what?” Martinelli choked on his breath and his heart skipped a beat, but all Murphy saw was his eyes fill with confusion. “Gonna get him on an illegal gun possession charge for that automatic? Ok, since Fernandez has a pretty clean record *on the record* he should get sixty days with a suspended sentence, maybe twenty four months probation, but if we’re lucky he’ll get thirty and be off that in eighteen with good behavior. In the meantime, the DA will be breathing up our assholes for delivering such a pile of fucking shit.” The Captain was breathing heavily by now. Martinelli looked at him blankly and then had an idea.

“Enriquez.”

“Who?”

“The other guy, Ramon Enriquez.”

“What about him, John?” the Captain asked. “We got as much on Fernandez as we got on him: A shit weapons charge and I’ll bet Enriquez has a permit for that fucking wheel gun.”

“He can think we have more on him than that,” Martinelli said. “Didn’t a couple of our guys already visit him?”

“Yeah, so what? They fucked up, too and both are out of the picture,” Murphy said.

“We use that as leverage.”

“Come on, give me a break with that shit, John,” Murphy said shaking his head.

“Enriquez doesn’t know they had shit on him, Cap,” Martinelli said. “Let’s use it to get some answers, get some proof.”

“Proof for what, John, that there’s a fucking Chinese dealer out there? That this is the guy who has been supplying this fantasy of yours? Enough John, enough!”

“Tell you what, Cap, I’ll make you a deal -.”

“No John, I’ll make *you* a deal,” the Captain said. “You find this *phantom dealer* and you can keep your job because all you have here is a shit bust with two dead and three wounded, including your partner. Deal?” The Captain didn’t wait for an answer. He looked at Martinelli just long enough to convince he was serious and then walked away. Martinelli stared out at the darkening eastern sky, the tops of the trees glowed with dim light from the sunset behind him. Martinelli started to think real hard.

Melanie had to convince the custodian that she had left her purse in the Accounting Office before he'd find the right key and unlock the office for her. She promised him she'd close up for the man, but he insisted to do it. After a few minutes in the office, he mumbled what the hell to himself and left to get some coffee.

Melanie had in fact not left her purse in the office; actually it was on the front seat of her car in the parking lot. But she needed Hu's home address. He hadn't been around very much in the past few days, not since that night after the library and the short visit in the campus center. He'd seen something in the newspaper that bothered him. The headlines read something about an overdose and Melanie could only assume it was someone Hu knew, a friend or possibly a relative. He had left her abruptly that night, and she hadn't seen him since.

Melanie had never been to this part of town where Hu Jia lived, the China Town portion of the city where you had to go through the black section and the Hispanic section before getting there. For Hu, he would travel the shadows through both of these, mostly the Hispanic section. Most blacks had no beef with the Chinese, but on occasion, the Italians on the outskirts might cause some problems. Hu avoided that section when he could by cutting through the Mall, which wasn't always safest either. Considered a neutral ground, the Mall was also where a lot of fights occurred and getting in the middle of someone else's conflict was dangerous. It had happened to Chi, Hu's mentor growing up. Chi was five years older and knew the streets better than any other Chinaman "because I choose to learn the culture of my new country," he always told Hu. "Learn the culture, then you survive."

But Chi had not survived, and in fact had been killed by a Hispanic's survival knife he had bought for \$40 at the Army Navy store two doors down from R's Appliance and Seconds. It was Rambo-type with a hollow handle and a Made in China 440 stainless steel blade. It was a piece of junk as far as knives go – survival or otherwise, but was enough to take Chi out, even though he was just cutting through the Mall to avoid Johnny Lagosi, an Italian hood with more mouth than brains. Johnny was a flashy dresser and a flashy talker and liked to bully. His punching bag lately had been Chi, because he had caught Chi talking to his ex-girlfriend Sandi at the summer carnival. Members of his gang had razed Johnny about "letting some fortune cookie finger your ol' lady". So, to maintain his manhood, Johnny stepped up and tried to step on Chi, a good five inches shorter and ninety pounds smaller than Johnny Lagosi. The truth between Johnny's old girlfriend Sandi and Chi was that a girl friend of Sandi's liked Chi. That was all.

That night Chi was killed, he had had a bad day. Getting chased down through Little Italy by Johnny Lagosi and his cronies wasn't going to improve it, so he went home through the Mall instead and found himself smack in the middle of a gang fight. The guy who killed him, Eddie Sanches was the only one there with a knife that night. The rest of them were armed with nothing more than brass knuckles.

Hu now traveled the Mall even more carefully. The cops had it out for a dealer and Hu knew it was him they were looking for, phantom or not. That cop saw him a couple of times and it was certainly in some police report. The cops are all over the Mall area, patrolling for arms deals to prostitution to drug deals. Between the hoods and the pigs, there ain't no constitution on Earth that'll save yo' ass, as the street saying went.

Hu was in his room preparing the last of the heroin, the “street poison” as he referred to it for one last and final sale. That newspaper report of the overdose scared Hu, he’d been shaking for days and if he was a user, he’d have overdosed on Valium by now. Or worse. But Hu kept clean, kept it cool like Billy Conley would have said it. Billy the Crack Messenger had called Hu about a buyer for the remainder of the stuff.

“*Whojah*, ma’ mang, ‘dis be yo’ time for cashin’,” Billy had said. “Yo, mang, you look like some sort o’ shit. You need sum’tin’ to ease the ill pains of life as it is?” Billy produced several dozen colorful pills. Billy’s hobby was pills, and lots of them. His angle was hooking you on the pretty pills and they get you on something with a sharp edge, like the crack. He was pretty successful at using this method on women, especially if they were quite young, but that was all.

Hu shook his head and took the information on the buyer, who wanted more than Hu had in stock, but would take whatever he had, and this buyer had the cash to back it all up.

He pulled the worn out backpack from the closet and laid it out on the bed with the stash. He was about to get the gun from that shoebox on the floor of the closet when the knock at the door came.

“Li, I told chu I no want bother,” Hu said not caring about his broken English for once. The door kept opening and he fired at it in Chinese. Instead of his sister Li’s head, Melanie’s blonde hair came from behind the door. Hu flipped the blankets over the stash.

“Hi,” Melanie said holding the edge of the door with both hands. She had a cautious look in her face walking in, like she had just traveled Normandy Beach to the Mekong Delta to get there. Her eyes darted to the bed as the blankets flipped. Hu stood still, breathless. “Is it ok for me to come in, or are you busy?” Her voice became stronger towards the end.

Hu felt small. “No,” was all he could say.

“I haven’t seen you around in a while,’ Melanie said. “Thought you might have gone on vacation.”

Hu shook his head slowly. “No, just busy.” He looked away toward his desk and the stack of papers and textbooks upon it. “Um, how you find me here?” He felt the air being sucked out of him and if he didn’t do something and quick to get himself back on edge, he’d be sorry. He went to the desk and started a mock search and reorganization.

“I looked up your address in the Accounting Office the other day. I hope you don’t mind. I was worried,” she said sliding her hands into her jean pockets. “You seemed upset the last time I saw you and I wanted to know that you were ok.”

“I fine,” Hu replied. “Just lots to do.”

Melanie nodded and looked at the lump in the bed. “Yeah, people get busy.”

Hu shifted papers and piles around, looking busy “I many things to do,” Hu said. “School, take care of muddah and sistah. Then there is school work -.”

“Hu what’s under the blankets?” Hu froze in thin air. He stopped breathing but Melanie’s picked up speed. Neither moved nor spoke for several moments. Hu finally turned and looked at her. Her eyes blazed wide open, full hurt, full of anger. “Hu? What is it?” She asked again. Hu said nothing. She nodded and frowned, starting to cry. “Ok, I’ll tell what I think it is. I think it’s something very bad and very illegal. Is it?” She was breathing heavily now. “Is it, Hu?”

“You no idea about my life,” he said.

Melanie shook her head. “No, you’re right I don’t.” She was crying by this time. A knock came at the door and Li popped her head in.

Hu looked at the door, but Melanie kept her back to it, looking at the floor. “What?”

“I am taking Mamma up to see Mrs. Gambriolli, ok?”

Hu nodded his head. “Yes, that’ fine.” The door closed and Melanie’s breathing filled the dead space once again.

She looked up at him. “You’re right I don’t know a thing, except what that is, is wrong,” she said pointing to the bed. “What is it, marijuana? Cocaine?”

“Heroin,” he said looking straight at her. He was firm and straight.

“Heroin, oh that’s great. My boyfriend is a – a – a fucking heroin addict.” Melanie broke down and tears and anger flowed from her face.

Hu shook his head. “No, you are wrong.”

“Wrong? Wrong, Hu? Then what’s that?” She pointed to the bed.

“That,” he said pointing to the bed himself, “is the rent until next July.”

“Oh don’t lie to me, Hu,” she said. “Just don’t lie -.”

“It’s true!” He looked right at her, getting her to make eye contact. “You want truth, you want to know who I am? I deal. I deal to get by.”

“I don’t deal and I get by,” she said.

“I not you!” Hu fired back. “I not have what you have.” He pointed to the door. “Look. You meet muddah, sistah. They all I got. Dhem and ‘dis, ‘dis shithole! We live here alone and alone I pay all bills. Yes, me. Hu Jia or *Whojah* if you like beddah! Me! I no got good job. I have had honest job, but honest job pay no money. Not enough to pay all bills.

“Muddah vedy sick. She need lots of pills. She has asthma and arthritis. She always fall asleep in front of TV at night and every night I have to put her to bed.

“I have young sistah, just 10 years old and I no want her to have life like I have. I try; I try hard to get out of here. I go to school, but school cost money. Lots of money I not have at honest job with no honest pay. You think life easy? Do you? It not! It hard, vedy hard and it get harder all the time. Dhere no father, he leave ten year ago and never come back.

“You ask, do I deal heroin, I say yes! I have to. You not know what it is like to have to get up every day and look in the mirror and see a mountain to climb. Every day. I not proud of what I do, I not! But dhere no choice! Until now.”

“Until now, what? To sell, sell drugs?” Melanie was crying hard.

“Yes!” Hu replied. “Yes, to sell drugs.” He held her upper arms gently and she shrugged away. Tears swelled in his eyes for the first time in many years. “Dis not what I wanted. I never use, ever.” He sat on the bed and flung the covers back to reveal five packages of smack. He looked at it and then at her, straight to her face. “I been dealing mostly cocaine for sometime. Some say I vedy good at it. I say, I just want money so I can pay rent. Then I was able to make money to go to school. Dis big dream for me, and muddah. She and I and father come to America when Li was just baby and I young boy. She want me and Li to have American dream, American education. Dhen, father leave and tings vedy hard. Muddah work three job dhen get sick. Dhen I have to work, but no one want to pay me any money, not money I need.

“I got into dealing kicking and screaming, but with no other responsible choices,” he said and looked at the floor, ashamed. “I deal coke, never heroin. Heroin street poison, but I lost a bunch that would have put me ahead until next year and get me out of dis life. I had opportunity to sell dis stuff, dis street poison and it would put me ahead and out of it. I able to pay rent and go to school, dhen I hoped to get good job next summer and maybe muddah well enough to work. Or we move, whatever.” He looked up at Melanie, tears streaming down his narrow cheeks. “I never wanted to be thug or scumbag,” Hu said with a solid and straight tone, offended by his own life’s choices. “I just want to survive, provide for family. Can’t you understand that?”

Melanie wiped her face. She looked at him and their eyes locked. She stared into his eyes, seeing and then feeling the pain of living along the rice paddies of China and being stowed away on a rickety barge underneath the hull with a hundred others trying to cross the Pacific. She saw the old woman who told Hu stories of dragons and warriors die with her head in his lap and remain there for three days until someone noticed the smell had become worse. She saw his father leave and his mother get sick. Her face weakened and her heart pierced. “What was it in the paper that bother you?” She asked. “Who was it that died?”

Hu looked her in the eyes. “Someone I killed with this horrible poison.”

Melanie looked up to the ceiling and smiled a painful smile. “Great Hu, that’s great,” she said sobbing. “And yet you still want to sell this stuff.”

“No,” he said immediately. “No, there is a vedy big difference between wanting and needing. If I didn’t need to sell, I wouldn’t.” She looked at him and saw one more pain, this one happening right now. It was the pain Hu got every time he made a sale and a little part of him was killed off after each deal. “Dis a different world dhan you know. Vedy different world.”

“What happens after this one?”

Hu shook his head. “I not know if I can do dis one,” he said honestly. “I have to, I need to, and I not want and not sure if I can.”

Melanie sat next to him on the bed and looked straight ahead, then back at him. “What will you do?”

“I will do what I have to,” Hu said. “Once I commit, I do ok. I go into auto mode and I do ok. But it harder and harder to get dhere, especially now.” He placed his hand on hers. “I no make any more excuses, no more to be had. Dis who I am, but not what I want to be. I make no apologies, but I do regret, every day I regret. Sometime, I almost wish I do get caught, dhen I can never do it again, but dat no good for muddah and sistah. I go away to state prison, *pfft*. Dat it. Sistah end up on street, muddah die. I no one after dat.”

“What about next time?” She asked.

“I no think I can not do next time,” Hu said. “I am almost used up. I barely got enough for one more, dhen dis it.”

Melanie looked at him. “How can I trust you?”

Hu looked at her puzzled. “I not ask you to. Either you believe or you don’t, but I still have family to provide for,” he said. “I like you a lot, I do, but I make no apologies to you for trying to survive.” He stood up. “And I make no promises to anyone but myself. Dat much I owe to only me. You not understand. Dis not about social standing. Dis not about getting into fraternity or dating right people to look good. Dis about living. Nothing more. Understand?”

Melanie looked at him; her blues eyes blood shot and her face relaxed and sad. She nodded slowly and then got up, going to the door. She turned before opening it. “I really like you Hu, and I am here for you, but I can’t have you in my life knowing that you might not be there tomorrow. That’s too much pain to go through on a daily basis. Do you understand?”

Hu nodded. He did understand, more than she could imagine. Pain was something he could understand. “I make no promises, only to myself.”

“I know, and I love you most for that,” she said and looked to the floor. “Hu, I need you to promise that -.” She couldn’t finish and instead shook her head.

“You will be the first person I see after it is over,” Hu finished for her. “Dhen, I tell you everything.” He whispered these last words. Melanie broke down and went to Hu, crying and holding him. After several minutes, she pulled away and didn’t look at him, but just left.

Hu stood in the middle of the room and cried.

Mira hadn't been able to see Martin's parents at the Wake. His mother, a staunch conservative southern educated woman who liked to think of herself as a spokesperson for High-brow had given both her and Jessie a dirty look when they came in. Jessie didn't care; she had never met Martin's parents, but Mira had cared. Martin's mother had never fully approved over Mira, his father hadn't totally cared one way or the other, but the mother was a different story. She thought her son could have done a lot better than Mira and the city he lived in and the job he had. Mira, Margaret Emerson always considered, was the blame for Martin's humble living. The truth of it all was that Mira pushed Martin to be better at who he was. Martin was not the overachiever his mother thought him to be, but he was the fair-haired boy and God forbid he gets anything less than perfection.

Mira and Jessie had spent a few moments at the funeral home before Mira had had enough. "Let's go."

"What? We just got here," Jessie said. "We can't just leave like that. You haven't even spoken to his parents."

"Yes we can," Mira said. "The old witch doesn't want me here and everyone is staring at me."

Jessie looked around and saw people talking to one another in low tones. No one was looking at either one of them. "What are you talking about? No one is looking at you."

"Can we please just go?" Mira headed for the door and Jessie followed her in tow.

Mira put on the same black clothing for the funeral. She had the bottle of Valium on her dresser; a bottle that was full the day before was now filled a little more with empty air. She looked in the mirror and fiddled at her hair. Jessie came in once again.

"All set?" Jessie asked.

Mira nodded. "Yeah, I think so."

"You should say something to them," Jessie said to Mira as they walked to the cemetery plot where Martin was to be buried. Mira had survived the funeral and the procession without the aid of any of the Valium now in her purse. She held on to Jessie's arm.

"I know, I just don't know what," Mira said through sobs. The two stood in the back of the crowd, heads down and when the priest was finished, Mira went up to the casket and placed a rose on top. Then she turned to Martin's parents who stood a few feet away. She walked up to them cautiously, waiting in line to see them. Mira approached his mother, her head down and then she raised it.

“Um, Missus Emerson,” Mira started. “I don’t know what to say.” Mira started to cry, hoping Martin’s mother would embrace her. Instead, Margaret’s face turned black and she slapped Mira’s cheek hard enough to turn everyone’s head, *whack!*

Mira looked up suddenly, stunned. Her grief ceased for a moment and confusion swept over her. Margaret Emerson lifted her head higher, her husband holding her shoulders and trying to settle his wife down. Then she spoke. “I blame you for my son’s death.” Her voice was stern and solid. Her husband whispered that it was time to go and guided her away. Margaret Emerson went, but stared at Mira with her ugly and dark face. Jessie held Mira’s arm, asked if she was ok, but Mira heard nothing, nothing but screams in the back of her head.

Martinelli had heard from a street contact about a deal. It was a big deal, worth thousands and the seller was none other than some Chinese dealer looking for a payday. Perfect, he thought. After tonight, they’ll beg me to take a promotion. Martinelli went into the Captain’s office with the news.

“Can this contact be trusted, John,” the Captain asked exasperated. “Seems awfully convenient don’t you think?”

“This is legit, all I need is enough guys and this is a done deal, Cap,” Martinelli said. Murphy sat back and sighed, looking at him. Then he abruptly leaned forward and tossed the report make to him.

“Fine, get it done.”

Martinelli smiled. “You got it, Cap.”

Hu Jia packed the backpack for the final time with the five packages of smack. He thought of Melanie quickly and then set her aside. He thought of his mother and his sister, Li, who was to turn eleven in just a few weeks and then set them aside as well. Then he thought of himself after tonight and finished packing. He went to the closet and got the .38 from the shoebox on the floor. He flipped opened the cylinder and loaded it with the original six bullets her bought when he purchased the gun. Hu looked at it briefly, noticing how shiny it still was have spent years wrapped in a towel and stored in a shoebox. Then, he slid the gun into another pocket of the backpack away from the merchandise. He took a sharp, deep and quick breath, slung the backpack over his shoulder and left his apartment building. He headed towards the east side of town and the docks.

Martinelli had the docks lined up with undercover surveying the whole area. He sat in a cruiser with Carole Lindy in the driver's seat. Martinelli looked through a set of binoculars and scanned the area. Carole rested her head on her hand, slumped up to the door. They'd been sitting there for several hours.

"Maybe he ain't coming tonight, John," Carole suggested with a city accent. She turned and looked at him. "You know it is possible the snitch fucked up."

Martinelli continued to look through the binoculars. "He didn't fuck up, we're just early." Carole sighed and looked at her watch, then looked out the windshield. Something caught her eye.

"What was that?" She sat up in the seat.

"Where?"

"Left side, behind those big crates." Martinelli pulled his binoculars towards the left and saw a dark figure creep in and out of the shadows.

"Oh yeah, I wonder if that's my chink," he said and then picked up the radio. "Watson?"

The radio chirped and then spoke. "Yeah John."

"You see something crawling around those big huge crates to the left of me?"

A moment passed and then the radio chirped again. "That's a negative."

"Check again."

Another moment and then, "I got something moving around, very slippery, but it could be anything, over."

"Anything could be our guy."

"John, I'm seeing something move in there, but I can't tell if it's a cat or a Mack truck."

The radio chirped again, this time a different voice came on. "All units, I got a set of headlights coming in the south entrance. Tan sedan, late model." Martinelli looked through his binoculars again and caught the headlights. The radio chirped in with Watson.

"John, I got a fix on that dark shadow," Watson said. "Who ever it is, is going into Building 3A."

Martinelli picked up the radio. "All units hold you position, I want to get these guys very hot. Wait for my call." He watched the late model sedan pull up to the building and three figures got out. He couldn't tell who they were exactly, only that they all went into the building.

The three buyers walked into the building, led by Delmonde. His two cronies, Jacobs and Simmons scanned either side for their contact. Delmonde stopped in his tracks. "Hello?" He asked the building that seemed empty except them and stacks of boxes.

"Maybe no one's here," Simmons suggested.

"He'll be here," Delmonde said. "This guy is reliable." A figure emerged from the dark twenty feet in front of him. Jacobs noticed first and pulled his gun, Simmons followed. Delmonde held his hand up. "Hold still, boys. You *Whojah?*"

Hu Jia stepped closer and into the light coming from the large windows that lined the very top of the sheet metal ceiling. He nodded. "Yes. You friend of Billy's?"

Delmonde, shrugged, offended. "Friend's an odd way to put it," he said sharply. "You his friend?"

Hu slid the bag off his shoulder and placed it on a nearby box that was waist high. "No, Billy only friend is green paper and powder. I do business wit him." Hu turned his head and looked at Delmonde. "Like you."

Delmonde smiled a *goodfella* smile and nodded. "All right." He looked at his cohorts. "This guy's all right. Ok, Billy says you got five packages for me."

"Five. Dat is right." Hu started to open the bag and Simmons cocked his gun. Hu froze.

Delmonde turned around. "Cool it fellas, this guy's ok. You're ok, right *Whojah?*"

Hu nodded, but didn't move otherwise. Simmons put his gun away and smirked. Hu continued to open his backpack.

"Hey, what's your name, anyways?" Delmonde asked.

"*Whojah,*" Hu answered sounding a little more like Billy than Melanie.

Delmonde nodded. "Ok, sounds all right to me." He watched Hu stack the five packages up next to the bag. Hu turned and looked at him.

"You have cash, yes."

Delmonde snapped his fingers and Jacobs produced a money belt and unloaded stacks of twenties next to the stack of heroin. When he was finished, Jacobs stepped away. "Go ahead and check if it's all there. Fredo, check the shit." Hu picked up the money and thumbed through the bills, while Simmons opened each package and sampled the heroin. When both were finished, the stacks had traded positions, the money now closer to Hu and the heroin closer to Delmonde, who asked Simmons, "Are we good?" Simmons nodded his head. Delmonde turned to Hu who was starting to load the money in his pack. "We're good?" Hu looked at him and nodded, loading the money. "Well then let's not stand around this fucking place all night. Good doing business with you, *Whojah.* Hope we can do it again real soon."

Hu nodded, but didn't bother trying to get into his plans of not doing this ever again. His heart was racing and he couldn't wait to get out of there. His heart stopped as the bullhorn rung out.

"Police, we have you surrounded. Come out with your hands up."

"Aw, what the fuck?" Delmonde asked and when he turned to Hu for an answer, Hu was gone. The three pulled their guns out as the front door slammed open. All three started to fire wild shots and take cover behind crates. The police stormed in one by one.

Martinelli stood outside on the radio, ordering the helicopter to secure the area with the spotlight. His radio chirped. "We have a suspect on the north end of the docks. I saw a dark figure move in and out of the shadows." That's him, Martinelli thought. He started to move quickly.

"Hold his position, hold that motherfucker," Martinelli ordered and raced to the northern part of the docks.

Carole Lindy moved evenly in the warehouse, her gun held up in front of her. Cops were all around her. "Come out now," she ordered and then saw a figure race to the back of the building. "Freeze!" She told the figure, and Jacobs turned and fired a wild shot. Carole returned it and shot Jacobs in the leg. He fell and screamed in agony. She raced up to him and kicked the gun away, flanked by cops with rifles pointing at Jacobs' head. "Don't move!"

Simmons watched from a few feet away and panicked. He threw his hands up in the air and cried, "Don't shoot, don't fucking hoot, don't shoot!" Five cops covered him and secured to the weapon before placing him under arrest.

Delmonde was further back in the warehouse. He tried to follow Hu when the bullhorn went off, but lost him in the dark. That little fucking chink, he thought. He set me up. Delmonde crawled along the floor and knocked over a heavy metal object trying to get in between a couple of crates. The metal crashed against the concrete and four cops pointed their flashlights and weapons to the sound.

"Don't move!" One ordered.

Delmonde flipped over on his back and screamed, then fired his weapon. The cops took cover and Delmonde pushed on towards the far end of the warehouse, knocking over more stuff. He found an opening and stood up. Flashlights wand all over the area and one finds his head.

"Freeze! Don't move!"

Delmonde swings his gun towards the light and pulls the trigger, but all he gets is a dead click. Four shots fire from the cops hitting Delmonde and he falls to the floor.

Martinelli crept through the maze of metal containers, chasing the wandering helicopter light. Then he sees the figure. "I got a fix," he tells the helicopter. "Get that light in him!" Martinelli moves quicker towards his target and trips on a barrel.

Hu turns quickly and sees the follower. He starts moving faster through the maze, intending to get to the edge of the warehouse area where he can hide in the apartment buildings until the heat cools down. Hu hears a voice over the helicopter.

"Freeze, maggot!"

Hu doesn't turn and ducks behind a corner. A spark flares off a wall to his right and realizes he's being shot at. Hu moves, tossing whatever he can into the path he has traveled.

Martinelli heads for the corner, putting on the pressure. He trips on a metal frame and lands on his hands, scraping his left palm and ripping open his pants on the frame. He looks at his hand and sees a gash in between his index finger and thumb, a gash that would scar and not too many years from now when he is a fisherman on a shrimp boat down off the coast of Louisiana, Martinelli see the scar pulling up nets from a catch and be reminded of this night.

He swore and as he got up to stand, something heavy and hard crashed on his head. Martinelli hit the pavement again, hard and tried to get up before the world became too dark to see.

Hu ran a few feet before stopping and looking back. A shadow covered the right half of his face while a street lamp brightened his left side. He watched Martinelli for a moment, waiting for him to moment. When he didn't, Hu left and headed for the north end of the docks.

The hotel bar was closing and the waitresses were putting up the chairs to vacuum. Mira gathered her cigarettes and purse and then the pill bottle. She rattled it and guessed there to be only one pill. She opened the bottle and emptied the one pill in her hand. She popped it in her mouth and chased it with the last of her wine. She left the hotel and got in her car and started to drive.

The car slammed hard and she jolted awake. Mira looked around and saw confusion. She opened the door and got out of the car on the lonely dead road. Another car was with her, wrecked and mangled. Mira held her head and shook herself awake. She saw the other car and walked to it, looking inside. A body lay inside dead, mangled and bloody in the front seat. The woman with the blonde hair was covered with blood on her face and on her clothes, which looked like a nurse's outfit of lavender and baby blues.

"Hello!" Mira said and then screamed it again. She begged for the body to move, pleaded and when it didn't she moved away.

Oh God, what have I done, she thought. Oh dear god what has happened?

Hu raced through the dark alleys of the street, avoiding lights and people. The sirens at the warehouse disappeared and he found himself alone. He turned towards a hill and found the Commercial Street Bridge. The street was dark and empty. He opened his bag and pulled out the revolver. Looking around, he opened the cylinder and emptied the bullets. Gripping them in his hand Hu threw them as hard as he could down the river and when he was satisfied with the six plops in the water, Hu dropped the revolver into the drink.

A few blocks away, Hu stuffed the cash in his pockets and found a few bums huddled around a fire in a fifty-five gallon drum. Hu walked up to it and tossed the bag into the flames. He didn't acknowledge any of the winos, nor did they him.

Hu walked away and started his life over.

- the end -

Author's Afterword

I think aside from the title of this collection, *Chains*, I would say this little exercise is a success. And it has been enjoyable at that. I was a bit apprehensive about doing an online series for a number of reasons. One in particular because I didn't have a story to write about, and even though this one ended up pretty successful (actually, in all honesty, I'm *real* happy with it), I wasn't sure where it was going dark until somewhere in the middle of Part 3. The story, or collection was intended to be something quite different.

A number of years ago, another writer friend of mine and I were using each other as a sounding board for stories and ideas and that sort of stuff. We had both just graduated from Bridgewater State and were looking to get published. She had had one of her stories critiqued by a co-worker, whose feedback was that they liked the story, but would have liked to see it from another point of view.

Pam no less was devastated; she thought the story was one of her best to date, but the comment gave me an idea: A multipoint of view exercise. The concept would deliver eight or nine short stories on the same thing, just from a different point of view. The possibilities are endless with this genre, but I had just one problem. I didn't know what to write about.

The idea of a car accident was far too easy for me, but unable to get a better idea, I decided to go with it and see where it led me. It just so happens that it led me to my third novel, which you have now read the first cut of it.

I started off with the notion of writing nine separate stories about nine different people and how this car accident, the death of Carlos Quimby effects everyone, but I ran into too many problems that caused the story to tighten up. For one thing, I left Part 1 hanging at the end. Another was I ran out of viable ideas during Part 3 (I have to admit, I *hated* writing about Martin and Mira and I was glad to rid the both of them). But the biggest of them all was Hu Jia. If you haven't guessed, this is my favorite character not only of the story, but favorite I've ever written.

The idea of Hu Jia, and much of this story came during the Summer Games of Sydney in 2000. There's platform diver on Team China with the name Hu Jia. The commentator (like most sports commentators) showed a bit too much enthusiasm saying his name, making it sound *Al Pacino*, you know? *Hoo-hah! Whojah!* There I had it all. And just in a nick of time too. I had promised this thing to be out in September and didn't get it until October.

The problem with Hu Jia was what to do with him at the end. I didn't want to kill him; I want to write more about Hu Jia and his life. I want to see if he gets himself out of trouble in a better life, the one he desires.

Will he? Dunno. I haven't written any more about him.

Would I do this exercise again? You betcha. In fact, I think I will do this with my first novel, *Wilson* very soon. Stay tuned...

I want to thank my "editor" Kim for reading every story, telling me Part Six "sucked" and I had to rewrite it and encouraging me to go on with the series, even though *Whojah* was a private joke between her, me and the cat. But that's why I love her. I also want to thank my electronic imprint Unestone Press for standing by me throughout all of this. And I want to thank you, Reading Followers, thank you for your attention to an unpublished writer and his small piece of work.

What's going to happen to this story now? Well, sometime in early 2002 I think I will let New York publishing in on our little secret. Until then, some rework needs to be done. As always, suggestions and comments are welcome. Oh, and if you have a better title for this novel, please let me know.

Eric Heise
3 June 2001
North Attleboro, MA