

DON MCLELLAN

## TURF WAR

THE BOTTOM OF THE ELEVATOR SHAFT, towards which our protagonist plunged headlong that fateful day, had for years served as a boneyard to both the hapless and the deserving. Without a hackneyed plot device to intervene, some weary but serviceable literary contrivance, the gang leader Milan Kobek, a Chechen, was destined to join them.

It just so happened, however, that a ledge jutted out from the second-floor landing. (Ah, you're thinking: *the ledge*.) Let's just say that in the abandoned warehouse where our story is set, this narrow concrete slab was just ... *there*. And that it broke the Chechen's involuntary descent.

We don't want Kobek brushing himself off just yet, so let's snap a leg and bruise a few ribs ... He regained consciousness just as a flashlight's snoopy beam was surveying his crippled remains.

"Still breathing, Kobek?"

The voice came from the third floor where, moments earlier, he'd felt a pair of hands on his back, a nudge. Its tone and inflection were familiar to him, but the gang leader was immobilized with pain and unable to identify the speaker.

"That the money there beside ya?"

Kobek swept an arm out to one side. The cash-stuffed satchel, the proceeds of a heist, had preserved his skull. His cellphone, and with it any opportunity to summon reinforcements, had, like his leg, shattered.

"I'm gonna toss down a rope. Attach the bag to it, hear?"

But the gang leader feigned termination, which didn't stop the voice from urging compliance.

"You pass me up the money," it said, "and I'll get a doctor."

Kobek hadn't risen to prominence in the underworld accepting assurances without collateral. He liked to tell his crew that promises were like wicker furniture and fat women: the former were easily disabled by the latter.

Despite blood pooling into his eyes, he could make out dust motes dancing through a ray of light. He could hear resident rock doves flapping indignant wings.

And what sounded like the assassin, descending.

Upon conviction of money laundering and assault with a deadly weapon, Milan Kobek had been advised that while incarcerated he would be wise to attend group therapy sessions and self-help courses, of which, in today's penal system, there is a generous menu. Such efforts to better understand his incorrect ways would be favourably viewed at a parole hearing.

"Of course it's bullshit," said his lawyer. "Its lap dogs sit on parole boards. But you best toss them something to chew on."

But the Chechen refused, and as a consequence, endured the full term of his sentence. He also declined to declare Christ his personal saviour, a common but rarely successful inmate calculation. The only creed Milan Kobek adhered to was this: first there is betrayal, then retribution.

To commemorate his liberation after four years in the penitentiary, his associates threw a party at a swanky downtown hotel. Rival warlords—a temporary truce was customary—praised his defiance. Afterwards, two of the city's finest whores were delivered to his suite.

In the morning, Hong, Kobek's trusted lieutenant, joined him in the coffee shop.

"While you were away, boss, some of the others have been sharpening their knives. Guys you thought were friends."

There was also the matter of Frankie Choo. Gangs conduct their business like nations: they remain within designated demarcations ... most of the time. Problem was, Hong explained, Frankie and his Red Dragons had been muscling in on neighbouring enterprises while Kobek was in the slammer.

Frankie had been the reason for Hong. Though some of the boys were apoplectic that "a slant" had been allowed on the team, Kobek ignored their objections. He needed someone who knew the way of the Red Dragons. In the Chechen's absence, their noodle shops had spread like a head cold.

"All that meth, Frankie's hard to figure, boss," Hong said. "He might be somebody else's problem now. We do nothing, he becomes ours."

This corroborated other sources, each of whom urged that someone step up and burn Frankie before a turf war erupted. As the longest surviving leader, Kobek accepted the responsibility. But first he had another score to settle.

Fast Eddie Meeker was what wise guys referred to as pocket lint. He supplied info and swapped favours—whatever was necessary to fill his next spike. The biggest mistake he ever made—let's have Eddie exiting a restaurant, whistling down a cab—was ratting out Milan Kobek.

The cops had nabbed Eddie in a sting; he was looking at a lengthy bit. The offer? A Get-Out-Of-Jail-Free card in exchange for everything he had on the Chechen. Eddie didn't figure he had much choice.

"Drop me off anywhere here," he told the cabbie, a Sikh. Eddie wanted to fix before joining a pal at The Cellar, an after-hours jazz club. A lot of peelers hung out there after the taverns closed, and Eddie had a thing for peelers.

At the crest of a bridge the cab pulls over. It was a secondary route into town and traffic that time of night was sparse. The driver jumps out, runs to the rail and unzips.

Feint with the sickness, Eddie rolls down the window.

"We ain't on no curry farm in the Punjab!" he hollers.

"Very sorry, sir," the cabbie giggles. "Bapu makes water."

Eddie had a length of pipe he wanted to try out, so he slips from the back seat and crosses the road. But before he can take a swing, Bapu turns to face his impatient passenger.

"Remember me, Eddie?" The turban and whiskers rested at their feet.

"You—!"

A gelatinous goo connected to a spine was found floating in the harbour a few days later. The pilot of a passenger ferry had heard a thud. The cops wrote it up as a jumper.

There was a wave of drive-bys that summer, just as Hong had predicted. The newspapers were reporting unidentified human remains being dumped, diced, buried or, in one case, still smouldering. Bits and pieces were washing up on the popular swimming beaches, the reason the police chief called a news conference.

"We think we know who's responsible," he said. "The size of the task force has been beefed up."

The chief didn't say what many suspected: that as long as thugs knocked off thugs, the police would look the other way. Taxpayers were quietly thankful.

With Frankie Choo the probable catalyst, Kobek's recruitment of Hong seemed prescient. Nevertheless, some of the soldiers, especially the older ones, continued to protest his presence.

“He’s a Chink!” said one longtime associate. “We don’t trust them, they don’t trust us.”

But Kobek had a soft spot for the Canton native. And an appetite for sweet and sour anything. He reminded the troops of Hong’s first assignment, a haberdasher and his overdue loan. The new enforcer was asked for proof he’d visited the man’s shop, a standard request of an untested recruit. Others would have turned over to the boss whatever cash was in the register.

“You recall how Hong handled the matter?” Kobek said. “He turned over a wad of bills ... and the poor bugger’s thumb. We had the balance inside a week.”

Kobek was also a sucker for an adventure story. Hong’s escape from China reminded him of the tales his grandfather told of the last big war in Europe. Hong and a cousin were crossing the Pearl River one night; they were clinging to an inner tube. A shark appeared. Hong made it to shore. His cousin didn’t.

“Why should we believe you?” queried one of the boys. “I saw that movie.”

Hong hoisted a pant leg. Everybody leaned in for a look-see.

“Fish come for me first,” he said

The scar extended from the ankle to mid-thigh.

The Chechen gang leader arranged a confab with Chico Fernandez, the ruler of Los Diablos. They met on neutral territory, a poolroom on Kingsway.

“You wan me to take out Frankie?” the Dominican said. “No problemo, Milan. I never like that guy.”

The Diablos kingpin had something of the sewer about him. Word was that he practised voodoo, which didn’t bother Kobek. The Italians practised Catholicism.

“Gang leaders are like diapers,” said Fernandez, who’d recently authored a successful putsch against his own. “They should be changed often.”

As was his habit, Fernandez snacked on sunflower seeds. Shells covered the floor like bullet casings after a reckoning.

“You and Frankie have an arrangement,” Kobek reminded him. “It gonna bother you switching sides, Chico?”

“We did some things together,” Fernandez acknowledged. “But all your friends become enemies if you live long enough. Looking for loyalty in this business is like looking for a turtle with a moustache.”

Deliberations dragged on through the afternoon and into the evening. Fernandez was holding out for a massage parlour; with Frankie Choo out of the way, A Touch of Class would revert to Kobek. The Los Diablos warlord was sweet on one of the girls there, an enormous Rwandan Tutsi named Choco.

Blunts were circulated and bottles emptied. There were toasts to the new allegiance, to integrity and longevity, to everyone's mother.

Finally Kobek relented.

"Okay," he told Chico. "We have a deal."

Frankie Choo was found at the wheel of his Porsche, a single bullet in the temple. Kills talk to those who know how to listen, and this one said, Ain't gonna break a sweat roughing you up, Frankie. Ain't gonna waste a second bullet. Milan Kobek heard Chico did the job himself. The volume of sunflower seed shells below the driver's window suggested the killer stuck around a while, savouring the moment.

Meanwhile (as storytellers are fond of saying), inside the elevator shaft, Kobek is shaken by a racket from up above. The sound of brick separating from brick, of wood from wood, the hiss of matter soaring through dead air. Something lands on the ledge beside the wounded gang leader.

Semi-conscious, Kobek assumes construction material tossed into the shaft by a man impatient for the satchel. But then it moans. Kobek opens his eyes.

"I don't believe it!"

One side of Hong's face is already beginning to swell.

"Nothing personal, boss. Just business."

"All that I did for your career? I shoulda listened to the boys."

Kobek attempts to force the injured assassin over the ledge, but Hong crawls out of reach.

"Let me explain ..."

"I don't want to hear it! We're both finished."

"My sister's baby is sick ..."

"I don't give a—!"

"What choice did I have? The runt needs surgery."

Hong unknots his necktie and rigs a sling for his shattered arm. Kobek offers a Demerol, a habit he picked up in the joint. He always packed a vial for such eventualities.

“Take it,” Kobek says. “You might as well leave this world with a smile on your face.”

Hong washes down the pill with a swig from a flask.

Of all his underlings, Hong was the last Kobek would have suspected of treachery. He believed the man who dog-paddled across the Pearl River had, like himself, entered the life reluctantly, a victim of circumstance.

“Anybody in this with you?”

Hong names a few others upset by their share of the spoils. Of promotions denied and slights unforgiven. They include those who’d earlier called for Hong’s ouster. It was another lesson Kobek had learned: when coups are hatched, plotters are colour-blind.

“They should arrive any minute,” Hong says.

“If my guys show first,” Kobek returns, “you’re rat food.”

What the gang leader did next might have been playing the odds. Or it could have been a softening that in some appears with age—the need for atonement. The Demerol likely had something to do with it.

“I say we have an armistice,” Kobek says.

“You’re always using big words, boss.”

“If my boys arrive first, we drop you at the hospital. Your guys get here before mine, you do likewise for me.”

But Hong falls silent, and Kobek notices for the first time blood leaking from the Chinaman. In the fading light it spreads like an oil spill.

“Agreed,” Hong finally says.

Kobek slides the satchel to Hong.

“Either way,” he says. “You take the cash. For the kid.”

Our story concludes with rain drumming on the roof of the warehouse.

“Listen!” Kobek says. “You hear that?”

Hong opens his eyes.

“It’s probably just the wind, boss.”

At the sound of voices, both stiffen.

“Our deal still good?” Kobek asks.

“You have my word.”

“Hello down there!”

They became cognizant of a substance drifting like ash after a volcano through the stale, dank air of the elevator shaft. It brushes their faces and snags in their hair.

“Must be bird crap,” Kobek says.

A demolition crew found the bodies and called the cops. An empty vial was found at the scene. But there was no satchel and no money. The officer processing the scene didn't think the sunflower seed shells were worth mentioning in his report. Kills talk, but only to those who speak the language.