

Tom Sheehan

The Gang from the Boatyard

THE GANG FROM THE BOATYARD, by God you had to love 'em, the lot of them, every man jack of them; braised, poured, scratched, abraded, welded, mucked about by all of life, you had to love 'em. Up front you have to know that those who had gotten nicknames felt honored, for that moniker stuff usually came from within, a private medal of sorts, earned without hoopla, seared forever. Those who hadn't been so acclaimed patiently waited some kind of anointment, slow in coming, taking over like a root, underneath everything seen or known. Some of them had names like Max, Slad, Wilf, Muckles, Shag, Ronnie J, Slip, a feast of designations varied as character. And the sole captain of his own boat in the lot of them was Shanklin Garuf.

To a man, you had to love 'em.

Outside of Shanklin Garuf who had the gift of property, but who stood by his buddies in all kinds of weather, they were interchangeable elements, reliable, quiet, worn in many of their parts by life... to a man. Dip Connors, friend and local detective, said any one of them looking in a mirror might see the form of any other of that crew. Dip said they were, in spite of shadows worn like vague amulets, the most real people in town. Light, he believed, sat in their eyes, a detention, an absorption only distance or knowledge allows. A compression of the ages, a mute exchange of information, like the bonding the Cro-Magnons had no word for. None of them, outside of a congruent celebratory boisterousness now and then, had ever given the citizenry of Saugus any due cause for alarm. They labored much of life. They fought a war or two, hurt a foe or two. They tired. They came on age. They were stars and stripes guys without the parade, a kind of phalanx of maturity in dungarees or corduroys, Bruins or Celtics or Patriots windbreakers, ball caps with championship logos from Saugus Little League or Saugus High hockey proudly worn. They ate apple pie with their coffee, drove Chevie or Ford pick-up trucks into or out of the lobster boat landing or the boatyard, and moved as a body into their second millennium.

And then there was murder.

Max Cargo came upon Shanklin Garuf spread-eagled on the dock and right beside his boat. It was just before 5 A.M. A ball of breath grabbed Max where it hurt the most, in the righteous neighborhood, right next door to his heart, a ball peen in a short swing. Old Shanklin was a real pal and Max's breath caught again, the old quad by-pass never far away, a scar if there ever was one. The thought leaped through him, *Not now! Not two of us and morning still coming on.* At length he breathed deeply, clearly.

The sun, still hidden behind Pine Hill in Lynn across the river from the boatyard, seemed to threaten appearance. A sudden fear hit him that Pine Hill had captured the sun, or would detain it. Salt smell rose up from the Saugus River and a breath of April air touched at Max's face with early tenderness, cool alert. Contrast overwhelmed him. One look at the prone man and Max knew he had been knocked asunder and then some. Kneeling sorely and gingerly, knowing his arm strength was still

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enormous though his knees had deserted him with cause, the swung peen known still in his chest harsh as a strident echo, he touched the captain. His fingers went electric, a shock of knowledge passing up through them. There was no rise to Shanklin's chest. No apparent breath. No detection at the wrist. The night before the captain had asked for one man's help for the morning and Max had said he'd do it. Max was an early riser but now he had this; Shanklin, *and somebody else*, had arrived at the dock ahead of Max.

Max called the cops, telling them all he had done was close the captain's eyes, put his ball cap over them. Besides calling them it was the least he could do, being a momentary salutation in its own right. Contrasts still eating him, he felt irritated at the pretty morning as it came down on him, coming with a lazy stretch out of the eastern marsh with flooding sunlight. The early chirping and signature of birds and the shadowing hover of thermal-lifted gulls bothered him, the hushing touch of swells coasting upriver and washing in against the pier supports seemed wasteful energy; morning coming odd without an old pal.

Contiguously, with clarity, with a specter of pictures, he remembered how haunting the loss of Ace Burluson was the night Ace just fell off the dock, how there was only a splash and nothing ever after to fill up Ace's space. Then, with more pictures crying for company, as if summoned from the semi-darkness, came an oblique tenderness he thought might not have come his way before. Calvin Boone rose up, a black comrade in the 31st Regiment in Korea and that association fifty years old, that kinship, blistered him with recollection; Calvin, a dark giant of a man, a unique softness, just ahead of him on the hill, stiffening, dropping, reaching one hand to touch someone, something. Calvin's hand had found Max's hand. Then that winged obliqueness hit Max frontally and found doors to all parts of his body, doors opened for the first time in years. To his feet it plummeted like a bird out of the sky, locking him up with the most excruciating tenderness he had ever known. The pictures faded immediately; Calvin went away, Ace went away, Shanklin went away, but the unmitigated tenderness found a lost home and stayed with him a long while. Even later interrogation could not dislodge its wings.

Max knew how the gang would feel, what they would know. After all, they were brothers at the core. From all he had interpreted, *this* is what he first understood.

Before noon was at hand Detective Dip Connors talked to the lot of them, counted all of them as mere background to the crime, and began his investigation. Their poker game, near forty years old and still moving on, had kept eight of the gang on the second floor of the yacht club for most of the previous night. Looking at the roster Dip knew of six knee replacements, three quad bypasses, one hint of melanoma, and two *kinda-touching-the-game* cases of arthritis. There was not a rock-lifter in the bunch. For something heavy had slammed Captain Shanklin Garuf on the top of his skull, an object such as a rock with a solid, roundhouse, over-the-head kind of swing. Dip had assured himself it was not the swing of a card player, not a poker player.

"You saw nothing. You heard nothing. You remember nothing out of the usual with Cap and any acquaintance. No arguments or ill will. Have

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I got that all straight?" Dip had them all on the first floor of the yacht club, at the small bar. They stared at him the whole time he was talking, knowing he was at his work no matter where it took him. His eyes were bright, his gaze firm, his mouth moving with a slow deliberate measure. A shine sat on his cheeks and forehead, as if the tie he wore was knotted out of place. For a dozen years he had been out of the uniform phase and into detective work. They knew he was a plodder. A draft horse. Slow but relentless. "I am going to need help on this. I am counting you all out of this and all in it with me, right up to our necks." The pause was electric. "I know he was one of you. That counts with me. It always has. I know each one of you like I know my own brothers. That counts." Dip knew he could have written a biography of each one, beginning with a deck of cards and discrete copies of DD-214 service separations.

Some of the yard dogs played 45, some Hearts, some Cribbage. The games were important to them, filled their days and nights when at them, and with talk about them when away from the tables. The games were in the back room of the yacht club, on the first floor, a most modest building scratched against the river bank. Most of the money of the yacht club, for it was a meager place to begin with, more a clubhouse than a boathouse, was on the poker table and that had to have its own protection from noise and other surprises, therefore its home was on the second floor, back end. Wilf Gamin was the only non-card player in the lot of the gamey crew. Odd, loose times for him were spent scribbling in a journal. "My mother always told me to keep a record of my life." He had sixty-two notebooks of that life. None of his pals had read a single page. No one pushed him for show.

A few days later Dip was talking to the chief: "Their hard lot is their history, not in any current malevolence. They're not thieves or murderers. They're old laborers, they're card players, they knock down nothing more than a few stiff drinks once in a while. To a man they've paid their dues of one sort or another. Seen a kind of hell that they've put behind them, until this." He pointed at the crime folder on his desk. It said *Shanklin Garuth, Boat Captain*. It also said *Murder* in capital letters. "That lot of men were all in one war or another, except Slip who was never able to do anything like that with his bad arm. Had a couple of POWs in the crowd, Europe and Korea, couple of Bronze Stars, a Silver Star too, I bet a half dozen Purple Hearts, but no story tellers. They wear their travels well as they can. The kind of guys I'd want beside me in hell or down an alley come a troubling night."

"You think this was for robbery?" said the chief. "Somebody caught in the act? Somebody hit the captain with a board or a spike or a chunk of iron? No report of anything missing, if there was anything there on the boat in the first place. What about revenge for some old cause? What about relatives in the mix?"

"That'd be pure guess work, coming up on that," Dip said. "Cap plugged along in life before and after an old aunt left him some dough to buy the boat, and that was damn good number of years ago. I think in '76. Don't know any harsh words ever spoken about him. None he said himself. They swear that to a man. Trouble is some of them don't have a hell of a lot of keen memory any more, hazy being what might describe it.

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And some of them will be gone before this gets closed for good." He filed the folder in a desk drawer, the move and the thought of mortality being punctuation at its best.

"Well, we'll see what comes out of the relative angle, what else touches on the edges."

The chief patted Dip on the back, then said, "I know I've been here a lot less than you, and I can't always agree with you, but someone would think you think the sun rises and sets on a bunch of boatyard turkeys. They are not the end of the world, Dip. They are not hero class in the purest sense. I don't know how all this wraps up in you. You and them." He nodded at wherever in the outside world, but was signifying the boatyard and the quintessential gang without a doubt.

"Come time, chief," Dip said, "and you'll know the difference."

It was a month later, Phil's Nearby Restaurant was dim, Timmy's Pipe Shop shuttered, the boat yard and docks quiet, the yacht club downstairs empty late at night, the crew of them in the back room upstairs. Not at poker but at talk.

Sledge Crafton, noted for his strength and mostly inertia of the mouth, his eyes deeper than normal, said, "Old Dip's been through us and marked us clean, but he's that known bloodhound he swore he'd be. If he keeps getting stumped he'll be back. Appears like he's got no where yet and nowhere to go, so he'll go over the whole track." He nodded his head and added, "Time and again. Time and again." To a man it was acceptable bitching.

"Christ, Sledge," advised Slad Glasko, "he knows none of us had a hand in Cap's death. What's he coming back for if we ain't got nothing for him?"

"Way he works, Slad, knocking things together. We saw that when old Henry was robbed and knocked around a year or so ago. He got to those wise-ass kids because he wouldn't let go. So we know he's going to be around. It started here and will probably end here, whatever the route takes him. What we got to do, and why we said we'd come here, is to do the same thing ourselves. Hell, we owe it to Cap to do anything we can, what he's done for us over the years. All I know is I know nothing but I'm here. If it's only to shake something out of the damn trees, I'm for it. We're all for it. Does anybody know more than the nothing I know? Sheet, I feel so damn ignorant it hurts my balls."

Long into the night they talked and never came past their ignorance of the whole situation, and especially the night in particular, all at their games and then all at their sleep. None of them, except Max, ever scratched at daylight without an effort for a good number of years, Max the morning insomniac.

"Cap could get most things from me," said Tyledge Bracknus, "except the goodness from my laying in in the morning. Couldn'ta got me out of the sack with dynamite that day, way we played that night." He looked at Slip, remembered the look on his face that night and offered, "You gotta remember that last draw, Slip. I been thinking about luck ever since, way they came up for you the last hand out, was all of 2 A.M. by then. That

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was shit luck, man, shit luck of the highest order. You must be paying for it yet outta the winnings.”

Slip nodded his agreement and said, “Lady Luck with the cards always takes a turn where you might never expect her, so you don’t brag on her or ask her to dance with you more than you ought. More often than not it’s Ladies’ Choice.” For the sprinkling of smiles he nodded in self-agreement, an adage coined in the boatyard.

They talked for hours. Nothing clear, open, or previously undisclosed came out of their communal efforts. Dawn was threatening. They split and went to their sleep. Some of them into dreams as quick as a snore. Some rumbled thinking about Cap being slipped in from behind by an unknown person, the hand swinging hard, the crunch on the head. Nothing came from memory or dream.

And so it was with Dip Connors, two additional months parked on top of the case, as if it is to be buried as deep as Captain Shanklin Garuth. At the station he tells the chief he is buried with nothing all atop him, him and his case. “There’s no clue, no recognition, no witness, absolutely nothing to even get hold of. Buried under nothing. It’s all so clean, so damn clean. There has got to be the first piece of the puzzle just lying around waiting to get picked up by thumb and forefinger. Snapped up. I know it.” His eyes narrow their sudden intensity. “Guess I’ll go back again. Them boys be mad as hell seeing me come back so soon, nothing in my hand.”

Dip entered the boat yard from the parking lot. He stepped onto the small dock again, the evening sun bouncing off the small swells of the river, the clear smell of the ocean alive on the river. He swore he could hear Shanklin Garuth trying to talk to him.

Muckles Brown, looking out the window onto the river, said, “Dip’s back, boys. He’s coming in again.” They turned as Dip slipped in the side door like a man hunting deer, soft shoed, quiet, not looking to startle anybody.

He was thinking to himself, as he looked at them looking at him: *I know each one like I know my brothers. I’d trust each one like I’d trust my brothers. Is there anything I never knew about my brothers? Anything unknown about these guys who I really like?* There was nothing unknown. At least of a value in this case. It was only when he looked at Wilfred Gamin that he knew at least one thing was unknown... how Wilf had looked at life in the pages of his journals. *What secrets were there? What secrets could be shared? What small tidbit might come alive from his years of observation? He had to try, he vowed. There’s nothing else.*

Again, as it had before, the thought came that he could write a biography for each one of them. Obviously at the moment Wilf Gamin was the prime object of a ready portrayal, and Dip could remember drawing him easily and carefully out of a car wreck a good dozen years earlier, both ears torn, his jaw broken, part of his scalp peeled back as if a skilled tomahawk had done its work. Wilf’s words came back as clear as the night they were uttered. “Don’t blame Briggs, Dip. It wasn’t his fault. Some jerk crossed the road right in front of him. He yelled to me to look out. It wasn’t his fault.” Then Wilf had fainted dead-away and was unconscious for most of two days. Wilf, he also remembered, had come out of high

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school and went right into the army, Korea on the horizon like a dirty word and some of his pals over there mixing with the Chinese.

The night in front of the church, just before Wilf left for the army, came back to Dip. "It's better me than some of them, Dip." He motioned to some of their pals down the street waiting for the dance to get over and the girls to come out. They were making crazy noises, making gestures at the sky, then in sudden embarrassment cooling abruptly as though people were looking at them. "I'm more ready than they are." The stance was not bluster; it was concrete.

And Wilf was right. All of 20 at the time, Wilf came home with a Bronze Star and a Purple Heart with a cluster pinned on his chest. Never once had Dip ever heard Wilf Gamin talk about his service in the army, about Korea, about firefights, about the Chinese. And it was at that exact instant that Dip Connors realized full well that everything the man knew was most likely entered into his journals. Dip was willing to bet the whole Korean scene was included in the journals, every battle or engagement no matter the size, every comrade at his side, every remnant scar; it would have been the way the man did it. Rather than breathing it, boasting of it, he had applied it with ink.

And if there was anything out of the past concerning Shanklin Garuf, Dip was willing to bet it was there, part of history, entered by hand, in Wilf Gamin's journals, in one or more of the known 62 journals the man had created.

Dip asked Wilf to step aside, into a corner of the yacht club. "I need some talk with you, Wilf. It's damned important to me and to Cap, but I need you agreeing up front with it. Maybe I'm coming at you odd or you might think out of reason, perhaps an invasion of privacy, but I'd like to take a peek at your journals. I want to know if there are any leads there I can follow up. Any wild ass connections you've forgotten that might give me a clue, maybe something trivial to you but a sparkler in my eyes." The first sense of imploration came from his puckered lips. "God, man, I have to start someplace. I'm getting nowhere as it is." He looked back over his shoulder at the gang of them, like a cluster of warm pleasant ashes from an old fire. "No need to share what I know with anybody. Strictly twixt you and me." Dip's hand fell on Wilf Gamin's shoulder as strong and as sure as a handclasp might have been between the pair.

Wilf nodded. "You're the boss, Dip. I don't play games with that stuff. Don't share it because it's mine, even though all of them are in it." He nodded his head back over his shoulder to the boatyard gang. "That's most of my life right there, Dip. Just about most of it. That takes some kind of appreciation. If you think going through my stuff can help, be my guest, but it's all between you and me. There are a few observations I'd rather not share, if you know what I mean." He nodded over his shoulder again. Dip could feel the robust squeeze of promise, demanding promise, in Wilf Gamin's words. "And then again, there are things in there I can hardly remember writing, never mind the thing happening itself. It's weird but it's like I've been a stranger my whole life."

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Wilf turned his face fully to Dip. Deepness came with his voice and that sudden depth filled with both reach and annunciation. "You ever feel you're not quite what you think you are, Dip? Ever get that feeling down in your boots that somebody else is wearing them? I mean, honest to God, do you?"

The most honest facial expression Detective Dip Connors ever saw came to him from the quiet man standing beside him, looking back at a group of fast friends, looking back at his whole life. At once, from some distant point within or without, he was not sure of the point of origin, the small town detective had a sense of unknown proportions smashing through him. And he knew a sudden clarity, that a true observation had come from the mouth of a quiet man he never would figure for such a conviction. Here was an Adam and Eve man, a representative man, the core of his pals locked into his own being; he was one and all. The thought staggered the veteran detective yet he could feel a resolve as hard as a rock.

Three days later, cored to the task, oblivious to all else around him, Dip was digging. *His handwriting is so difficult, probably thinks it's coded he does, or wants any reader to think so, but I have fathomed it:* Dip Connors muttering under bright light working hard, three days at it beginning to take its toll, being assessed.

He read. He screwed his eyes down to the vast pages. *Damn, he muttered, I thought I knew everything;* the lights lit up the back of his head, the icons of men at the world, of it. *I thought I knew this band of brothers, this cement between men. I thought I knew! Oh my God, I thought I knew!*

He was whirling through all their lives, privy to pains and glories, and he knew it, as if he were in on a birth. *Fragments of other lives whirling through my mind. The serials of them, the scraps of bark. Elements. Pure and simple, the elements!* He paused. *There they are,* he muttered again, *caught forever in the rhythm of the river, subject to the tide, the coming and the going, and I am now part of that rhythm, Wilf and me.*

Salvi's mother, in the dead of night, the Calabrese dictate hard on her soul, swinging the razor on her husband's ear. "Sumnabitch, sumnabitch! No more you play the waitress. No more you bring her smell inna my kitchen. Bastid! Now you hear me ever and ever!"

Before him, stripped bare, was Brittan losing a son and his wife in the one accident. The drunk oblivious until early morning in jail of what he had done. Wilf had plied it with his own pain, the words about Brittan, the love the man knew and espoused. They came across the pages to Dip, seven pages damp as dew. He felt the caricature of the drunk, heard the sound of metals impacting souls, and knew at last the lingering pain on Brittan's face, where a pair of lips held forever an unannounced curse. Dip knew Brittan as he had never known him. And so, he knew Wilf.

Then Bent Crilson leaped his humanity into his eyes; limping through the Death March at Bataan, throwing his life aside with a dash into the jungle, finding escape. *It must have been a secret night between the two of them,* Dip thought, *for I've never heard word one from Bent about his time in the Philippines.* Dip could picture the two of them, Bent and Wilf, late, at the back end of the bar, letting out a lifetime of secrets without an audience in

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attendance, *Taps* coming out of a Luzon jungle as faint as silent airs. Dip thought he saw a Philippine moon, low, against a tattered cloud, hanging its paleness over them.

It is all staggering, this core of revelation, this endless exposure, and it finds a revulsion in the measures of my soul, this personal affront, this breach of sibling parapets. How could Wilf stand to make such a record? How could he bear so much pain and so much glory? What manner of man could contain all this knowledge and never, never once, spill his guts, air out the whole world of being? Oh, what courage, he thinks. What resistance. What boon companionship. What dread.

He is crowded by this knowledge; his breast beats.

"She was pregnant," Muckles said, "and tried to rid herself of it. God, man, I killed her. It was all my fault." A hundred years of memory, it seems, collapsed down on Dip as he read. Sweet but revolutionary Carrie Thurbitt at the turn of the river, her dress snagged on the bank by an old car bumper, a classmate in her last turn at water. Out of the dim past he remembered the ceremony, knew the exact temperature of the chill wind at Riverside Cemetery coming through the trees and up the narrow avenues as Carrie was put down to rest, her aborted child someplace in the other world. Muckles to this day toting that barge-like weight across his back almost fifty years worth.

Dip Connors at a library of lives.

There were reams of revelations; some made him bow his head, some creased him with a smile, and then, on his third late night, deep in the journal begun in January of 1996 he sat straight up in his chair. A small remark, an aside of sorts, that painted the scene of animosity, of threat, around Shanklin Garuth. Dip shuddered to think it might have been said by one of the boatyard gang, and when he turned the page the culprit was named, a Townie but not one of *them*. A known bad-ass guy that had given Dip fits a number of times. But not one of *them*! Not one of *them*!

It was, he knew, a place to start.

All it took, after reading the journals of a quiet man, was for Detective Dip Connors, Saugus stalwart, to start his walk down the front walkway of the troublesome Townie, who broke and ran at the sight of the bulldog detective descending on him.

And Wilf Gamin, ever quiet, never said anything about what he couldn't remember writing, not wanting anybody to know that he had already forgotten some names. *That* was terror enough.