Prologue

Absolution. Forgiveness’s big brother. A pain in the ass to seek, a pain in the ass to find. Sooner or later, everybody needs it because everybody screws up. If you think that this doesn’t apply to you, you either live in deep denial or you need to get thee to a nunnery, pronto. The problem with most people seeking absolution is that they bark up all the wrong trees. God. Ex-wives. The brand-new, shiny Internal Revenue Service. Any and everyone they’ve victimized by their selfishness, avarice, or poor judgment. Others can forgive, but, in the end, can’t absolve.

Absolution comes from within.

It’s a hell of a thing to absolve yourself when your soul is weighed down by a badge and a .38. There are no black hats and white hats in the real world. There are only gray hats with brims stained yellow by nicotine and cold sweat. My world is an Elysian throw rug of pretty colors covering a minefield of false hopes and ulterior motives: Honolulu, Territory of Hawaii. Cops don’t bring home the bacon here; we bring home the char siu. Sticky-sweet, fragrant pork to make the bland starch of existence palatable enough to swallow. The most addictive vice of them all. Free money.

At first, you convince yourself that extorting the extorters is not only acceptable, it’s righteous. That taking crooks’ money keeps them in line, and that you deserve what you take as a reward for pruning the racketeering hedge so that it doesn’t grow out of control.

It’s fine, isn’t it? After all, it’s nobody’s money.

Nobody’s when you shook it out of some dissolute gambler’s pocket. But it used to be somebody’s. A bride’s dowry from the old country, some mom and pop’s life savings. It used to be a dream house or some kid’s college tuition. But human weakness brought it into some den of iniquity and placed it in your hot little hand.
Char siu can pay a lot of bills, but it moves absolution further out of your reach. The more you take, the more distant it gets, until you have to put your life on the line to close the gap.

For you, most wicked sir, whom to call brother would even infect my mouth, I do forgive thy rankest fault.

My rankest fault I will absolve at the business end of a Colt automatic.

Editors’ note: In the story that follows, Hawaiian place names, street names, and the names of royalty do not include diacritical marks and appear as they would have been printed in English language newspapers in the 1950s.
Hell is empty, and all the devils are here. Shakespeare. *The Tempest*. Act I, Scene 2. All the devils *are* here, I thought. Right here in Chinatown on Maunakea Street. And most of them weren’t even at the pai kau tables. They were sprawled on the red sofas, stuffing complimentary gau gee in their flush faces, shiny with desperation and cheap beer. A short respite from the big money games and the whores and the opium pipes beyond the beaded curtain. The Bard of Avon knew: even devils needed a break from hell.

Honolulu’s Chinatown. January 1954. Hell’s waiting room. I was standing right in it, leaning on a Formica counter, looking at the second hand on my wristwatch running another lap around the face. I didn’t bother removing my porkpie hat. I never did on those pickups. Gentlemen doffed their chapeaus when coming to call, and this was no place for gentlemen. The upstairs “lounge” of Jade Garden Chop Suey was littered with devils in shirtsleeves and aloha shirts and pomaded black hair. They puffed away on their cigarettes and filled the room with a dull yellow-gray miasma that clung to the walls mixed in with the peanut oil, dust, and shit of roaches that migrated from the kitchen downstairs. Some were nursing the wounds to their wallets from the gaming tables and the silk-clad hookers. Some were slowly finding their way out of their sickly-sweet opium dreams. Some were just basking in the sanctuary, hiding out just a moment longer from nagging bosses, nagging
wives, nagging brats, and a nagging world. None of them paid any attention to me.

Of the devils there, maybe I was the worst of them all: Detective Sergeant Francis Hideyuki Yoshikawa, Honolulu Police Department, Homicide Detail. That’s what the cards in my pocket said. Nobody actually called me Francis except my tenth-grade math teacher at McKinley High School. My parents couldn’t even pronounce the name they gave me so they called me Hide-kun, a diminutive of Hideyuki, like a Japanese Bobby or Billy. To my sisters, my friends, and my wife, I was Frankie. To my fellow cops and bagmen, I was The Sheik. Maybe my cards should have said “Part-time Bagman,” too. It was a new function I took up. I loved the task about as much as a root canal. In a place like the one I was in, I was probably called something much worse, but never to my face.

Homicide dicks didn’t normally do bagman work. We were considered too ivory tower to get our hands dirty like the Vice dicks. We did do stand-in collections, though, for a smaller cut as “favors” to the usual guys who couldn’t do the job themselves for whatever reason—normally because they had too many other collections to make, and occasionally because they had actual police work to do. I was a regular stand-in lately.

My rounds as a stand-in bagman brought me to the upstairs den of iniquity that Nappy Lin operated above his restaurant. The restaurant was a front, a convenient enterprise to wash the dirty gambling, pimping, and opium coin for the benefit of the Treasury men who came sniffing around on occasion. The food really was good. Nappy knew how to roast a duck.

The Jade Garden was a surreal place. Prospero’s island. I was shipwrecked there with all the treacherous characters waiting to be blindsided by whatever schemes and madness the place wanted to torment us with. Most of them were clearly already in the throes of
enchanted agony, lost to the civilized world, rubbing their eyes red and stuffing their faces with free Chinese food.

The beaded curtain parted. It made noise like a sudden downpour as a Stetson hat with a pheasant lei around the crown pushed through the strands. The brown face under the wide silver-gray brim cracked open in a foul smile full of gold teeth. Peter Ah Lo. Nappy’s strongarm. All the Pake gambling bosses had one: the enforcer who kept the rabble in the organization in line, the collector who squeezed every last drop owed to the house out of the resident addicts. Ah Lo was better known as Paniolo Pete, so named for his penchant for dressing up like a cowboy. He always wore the Stetson with a bright Gene Autry shirt, a belt buckle the size of a hubcap, and a pair of two-toned Tony Lama boots—complete with the spurs—though I was fairly certain the only horse Paniolo Pete ever rode had a brass pole stuck in its wooden midsection and went around in circles under a little red-and-white tent.

He strode up to me, spurs jingling, a reminder of the Christmas season not long past. The green tinsel and red glass ornaments that still hung behind the counter from the previous month. Or the previous year. Someone even made a handwritten sign and posted it under the Formica counter. It read “MELE KLIKIMK.” Jesus. Too busy raking in the bucks to even spell the whole damn thing out.

The jingling stopped as Paniolo Pete came to a halt about a foot away from me. The brim of his Stetson was practically touching the brim of my porkpie hat. I could smell the Sen-Sen on his breath barely masking the reek of beer and green onions.

“Hey, Pard. Where’s Johnny D? Don’t tell me you Homicide guys found some time in your busy day to drop in on us and say hi.”

“Howdy Doody called. He wants his clothes back.”

“Always the smartass, huh, Yoshikawa? Why are you here?”
“Why do you wonder, Pete? Did you shiv someone lately with that Bowie knife in your boot? Johnny’s busy,” I said. I stared at a green chive plastered to one of his gold teeth. “Just give me the package so I can get the hell out of here.”

“Keep your pants on, Pard. Nappy’s getting it together. Jesus, Yoshikawa. Johnny D’s never in a hurry. Nappy told me to tell you to help yourself while you wait. We got a new girl in the back. Susie’s from Kwangtung but she’s spent some time in Hong Kong. And she knows how to fill a brassiere.”

“I didn’t think that filling a brassiere required any knowledge. It’s not a thinking occupation, like breaking some welsher’s legs.”

“Smartass. That’s not all she knows. Interested?”

“No thanks. Just tell Nappy the meter’s running. Believe it or not, some of us collectors have real work to do.”

“How about a bowl?”

“Are you kidding? So I can end up like the stellar citizens on the couches here?” All of the pairs of ears in the room must have heard my comment, but none of the heads attached to them so much as turned our way. Opium use had all but disappeared from Honolulu during the war when supplies were cut. Nappy’s Upstairs was one of the last holdouts for all the middle-aged addicts who happened to also be the same folks who liked pai kau and fresh-off-the-boat girls in heavy face paint and short cheongsams. The Immigration Act of ’52 opened the floodgates from Asia after America told the world it didn’t want any yellow peril on its shores. Fifty years of no new Chinese in Hawaii, twenty-five of no new Japanese or Koreans. Now there was a shitload of them, but they weren’t coming to cut cane. They were a new class of opportunists from the old countries, including a crop of women for rent by the hour.

“Suit yourself. Have whatever you want behind the counter instead, then. Nappy’ll be with you soon.”
“Shake a leg . . . Pard.”

Paniolo Pete snorted and jingled his way back behind the beaded curtain. I took a quick glance at the bottles behind the counter lined up on a glass shelf under the Christmas tinsel. Old Grand-Dad. Bottled in Bond. There was something I could use. I decided to avail myself of Nappy Lin’s hospitality and poured myself a double in a reasonably clean glass. Paniolo Pete, despite his ridiculous taste in clothing, was a dangerous character. I wasn’t joking about his Bowie knife. Peter Ah Lo did five years Territorial time for cutting a rival Pake gambler’s ear off. He probably cut the jugular of another one, Isaac Kam, one of Tuck Yee “Little Ox” Low’s muscle boys, but we couldn’t make that stick to him. The botched case always made him cocky around Homicide dicks.

Having to deal with scum like Paniolo Pete as if they were potential buyers of an insurance policy I was trying to sell was one of the reasons I hated doing bagman work, even stand-in stuff. We couldn’t close the case on his killing of Isaac Kam because we didn’t have the opportunity to beat a confession out of him. It rankled to have to look at the bits of food on his gold teeth and not be able to put the heel of my shoe in his smug, craggy face. We weren’t like the Vice guys. We didn’t have the gift or the stomach for treating these lowlifes as if they were our equals, schmoozing them for information and squeezing them ever so gently for protection money. We didn’t have to. The righteousness of our mission allowed us to be blatant with the likes of Paniolo Pete. These pickups were killing me. I hated doing the dirty work of the crooked cops I detested. The bank that held the note on my new house gave me no choice.

I never told my wife about these jobs. She would have burst a vein in her head yelling at me if she ever found out. This was the irony. I made these collections for her and our soon-to-be family, to
keep tongue-and-groove walls around them and an asphalt shingle roof over their heads and a mango tree in front of the whole thing.

When I was halfway through my drink, Nappy emerged from behind the beaded curtain. Napoleon Kit Fai Lin. *Restaurateur Extraordinaire*. Racketeer. Opium Peddler. Pimp. He was the proprietor of one of Chinatown’s most prosperous gaming establishments, simply called “Upstairs” by his regulars and those who wished they were. Upstairs had class. Upstairs now had girls fresh off the slow boat from China. Upstairs had opium and some of the best chop suey on Maunakea Street; both were complimentary for the high rollers. The girls could be had for “tips.”

Yet Upstairs wasn’t any more immune to the rumors of throat slashing, blackjack beatings, and general mayhem over ill-gotten proceeds than any other Chinatown den. In fact, one might say Nappy’s esteemed establishment set the standard for violence that all the other houses aspired to. Upstairs was full of the same kind of animals behind the gilded bars. They just executed the dirty work with more panache.

Nappy was in shirtsleeves and a red silk necktie with a grease-stained white apron over his tailored get-up. He loved to portray a workman-like image. King of the Fry Cooks. He ran his right hand through his pomade-slick hair and flashed a pinky ring set with a piece of jade the size of a dinner roll. Nappy was small and wiry and smelled like sandalwood and lavender cologne doused over carrion. He was about fifty years old but looked a spry forty-nine. He carried a pink butcher-paper-wrapped bundle and a fat manila envelope in his left hand. He bowed in an overwrought, obsequious gesture. Nappy Lin played the mysterious mandarin to the hilt as a marketing ploy.

“Detective Sergeant Yoshikawa of the celebrated Homicide Detail. This is a serendipitous honor. What an unexpected pleasure.
What could be next? A visit from the illustrious Gideon Hanohano himself?”

“Gid wouldn’t set foot within a block of this place,” I said. I thought of my straight-arrow lieutenant and mentor. “Unless, of course, somebody got himself killed here. Come to think of it, maybe you can expect a business call from him soon.”

“You have the singularly magnificent gift of levity, Detective. How refreshing for a man from Homicide.”

_Singularly magnificent gift of levity._ Shit. Nappy was laying the Charlie Chan on thick, like I was one of his haole diners.

“I’m a regular Milton Berle,” I said. “One needs a sense of humor when the body count starts climbing.”

“Then I guess the fact that you’re here making a collection in Johnny D’s stead is a grand joke of some kind.” Nappy grinned an inscrutable grin. I wanted to sink my knuckles in it.

“The grandest,” I replied without smiling. “I hope you find it as amusing as I do.”

“Indeed. I understand your father-in-law is in the same line of work that I am. I know Pohaku Park. He has a reputation for running an honest game from his shop in Kapalama. He’s highly thought of as far as Koreans go. Do you collect from him as well? That would be amusing, no?”

My wife’s stepfather, Junghoon Johnny “Pohaku” Park, ran a craps-and-cards game out of the back of his little grocery on the Kapalama Canal. Most of the Vice guys knew about it, but it was really a private affair and didn’t generate a whole hell of a lot of coin for Pohaku, so they generally ignored him. Small potatoes. His livelihood was really the store.

“Pohaku doesn’t have your star power. He’s off the map. He doesn’t have the same magnetic personality that you do, so he doesn’t command the same attention.”
Nappy Lin laughed low and stupid, like an idling Packard.
“You crack me up, Detective! You are like Milton Berle! I suppose you and your in-laws are getting along fine—Japanese and Koreans are almost the same. The food is the same. Sugar and shoyu. Except the Koreans add chili peppers and garlic.”

“Yeah, you’re right. It’s kind of boring. We don’t have the magic touch of making dog shit taste like a wedding feast like you people.”

The low rumbling laugh came back. “Milton Berle,” he repeated. “Why don’t you sit down and have a cup of tea with me?” he asked.

“Just hand it over, Nappy.”

“As you wish. Enjoy the char siu.”

Nappy handed me the pink bundle and the manila envelope. Char siu. Sweet barbecued pork. It was the euphemism employed by Vice Squad bagmen and their “patrons” for the pay off. The money always came with a gift of food. It was a suitable pretext for visiting a chop suey house. The pink bundle was heavy and warm and sweet through the paper. So was the envelope.

I hefted the envelope. “Business must be good,” I remarked.

“We’re expanding. New restaurant in Kapahulu. Closer to your house. Drop in when we open. Bring the wife. Have some gon lo mein on the house.”

“Save your resources and buy Paniolo Pete an adult’s wardrobe.”

Nappy went into his low chuckle again then shook his head and bowed low. “My apologies, Detective,” he said. “I must leave you. Business waits for no man.”

“No shit.”

“Please feel free to linger a while, though, and help yourself to anything. Johnny D always does.”
He turned on his heel like a cat and slipped through the beaded curtain. I stuffed the envelope in my coat pocket and felt the warmth of the pink package, tossed it in the air and caught it. It was a lot of pork. Just like the envelope. I looked at my watch. I had ten more minutes before I had to meet Johnny D at the corner of Hotel and Nuuanu. It would only take me three minutes to walk there. Help yourself to anything, Nappy said. I knew what he meant. I wouldn’t touch his opium or his women, but another double of his Old Grand-Dad wasn’t beneath me. I pulled the cork and sloshed another two fingers into my glass.

I let the bourbon do its magic and grabbed a piece of gau gee off one of the fake-Ming platters on a low koa table. It was salty and oily and sat in my stomach like gravel. I was contemplating grabbing another, ensuring the onset of heartburn, when the beaded curtain clacked violently as a shirtless gambler tore through it like a howitzer round. He was stumbling like a drunk or a hophead, but he was also clutching his neck with his left hand. Hot crimson gushed from beneath his palm, running down his bare chest. His right hand held an open switchblade red with gore. His eyes were wild and he made low growling noises through clenched teeth. He barreled past me and down the stairs.

I dropped my glass on the counter and plunged after him. I nearly twisted an ankle in my flight down the stairs and managed to grab a handful of his slick black hair. He yelled and tore free of my grasp with fierce desperation and launched himself out into the middle of Maunakea Street. I was about to step off the curb and into the street after him when I felt a sudden hot breeze brush my face and I involuntarily stopped and shut my eyes to keep the dirt out of them. In my momentary blindness I heard the roar, the screech, and what could have been an explosion.

I opened my eyes.
It wasn’t an explosion.

It was the sound of a Mack truck slamming into a human body and launching it almost ten yards into the windshield of a mint-green Chrysler New Yorker parked on the other side of Maunakea Street.

*Our revels now are ended.*

Exit, stage left.

Poor bastard.