

Do Not Pass Go...



James Blakey

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All characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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Cool salt air blows on my face. Above, dark purple neon lights buzz like angry mosquitoes and proclaim BALTIC AVENUE DINER. One of the *n*'s is burned out and the *l* flickers every couple of seconds. Dull green plastic siding encases the building and cardboard covers one window. My stomach rumbles. Haven't eaten since breakfast.

I push open the door, ringing the bell duct taped to the handle. Inside, a dozen people pick at their meals. One or two glance up, dismiss me, and return to their conversations. I grab a stool at the counter and drop my duffle bag on the floor.

A plump, gray-haired waitress with Fran on her nametag pours me a cup of coffee. "How do you take it?"

"Black is fine."

"You're not from around here, are you?" she asks.

"Nope. Thought maybe I'd try a new start in a new town." I sip my coffee. Strong. "If a man were looking for work, where would he go?"

She thinks for a moment. "The Electric Company is looking for folks with lineman experience."

I shake my head. "I have trouble enough changing a light bulb."

"The Water Works needs more manual labor."

I smile. "That's more my speed."

"And there's always the casino," she says with a frown. "They've sucked this town dry, but they always seem to be hiring."

"I'll keep that in mind as a last resort." I've been on the road for months. Perhaps now is time to stop. I'm not allergic to physical labor. And I've never lived by the ocean.

My stomach rumbles again. "What kind of pie do you have?"

"Best pie in the city. Apple, cherry, and peach."

"Let's go with cherry."

Fran returns with my pie, and the bell on the door rings. The diners go silent. I turn to see a cop as wide as the doorway. Stains cover his blue-black uniform; the gold buttons are tarnished. The billy club hanging from his belt displays plenty of scratches and dents.

"Officer Callahan." Fran's smile disappears.

"Cup of coffee and two donuts, Darling." He raises his voice so the whole diner hears. "Can't stay long. Just making the rounds collecting the tax."

A diner groans. "We're all taxed out, Callahan. Income tax. Luxury tax. School tax. What's it this time?"

"Poor tax," he says in a gleeful Irish brogue. He ambles down the aisle, stopping at each booth, collecting from reluctant patrons. He works his way around the diner and comes to a stop next to me. A crooked smile creeps across his face.

"I don't recognize you, fellow."

I take a bite of pie. The cherries are tart and the crust sweet and flaky. Count to ten while chewing. "Just got into town."

"A vagrant?" His eyes light up, and his hand reaches for the club.

"No," Fran says. "He's renting one of the rooms in back."

He looks to her, then me. "Is that so? Well, Mr. Cherry Pie, residency makes you subject to the tax. That will be fifteen dollars."

I glance at the waitress.

She presses her lips together and nods.

I pull out a twenty and hand it to the cop.

"Andy Jackson!" He holds the bill up and examines it. "Haven't seen one of these in months. You *are* from out of town." He adds the twenty to his roll. In return, he gives me a pink slip of paper, smaller than a regular bill with 5 printed on it.

I wave the slip in the air. "What the Hell is this?"

The cop shrugs. "The local scrip. It's all anyone uses in the city. If you plan on staying, you best get used to it."

Callahan gulps the rest of his coffee. He shoves one donut in his mouth, wraps the other in a napkin, tips his hat to Fran, and leaves.

"Nice friendly town you have here," I tell Fran, while contemplating the pink scrip. "About that room?"

"It's actually just a cot in the back with a shower down the hall."

"How much?"

"Four dollars a night."

I slide the pink bill across the counter to her. "I guess I have use for this after all."



The room is small, but acceptable. A pleasant change from sleeping on the ground.

The next morning, after a hot shower and a breakfast of eggs, hash browns and orange juice, I'm ready to conquer the world. Or, at least, find a job. A younger waitress, Lori, gives me directions to the Water Works.

I walk a couple of miles across town, passing house after house with same green plastic siding.

At the Water Works offices, a balding man with wire-rim glasses asks, "Ready to roll?"

"What?"

"Roll for your bill." He hands me a pair of dice.

"Uh, I'm looking for work."

He scowls at me. "The foreman is outside."

Heading out the door, I bump into a young man clutching an envelope.

I linger long enough to hear him tell the bald man. "I want to roll."

The Water Works foreman is a towering Pole with a mop of blond hair. He has a tattoo of a battleship on his left bicep and a handshake like a vise.

"I can handle front loaders, back loaders, bulldozers. Any piece of equipment you got," I say, pointing at the collection of earthmovers.

He laughs. "You dig with shovel. We have guy who runs machines."

I nod my ascent.

"You work hard for week and we pay you two hundred," the Pole says.

I confirm it's \$200 in the local scrip.

I start that same day. The foreman isn't kidding about working hard. I spend eight back-breaking hours wielding a pickaxe and filling a wheelbarrow in the scorching sun, wondering if the ocean breeze will ever come.

Ten of us are assigned to dig a trench along North Carolina Avenue for a new sewer line. Looks to be a high rent neighborhood. We are told not to bother the locals. Not a backhoe or caterpillar in sight.

I fall into a routine. Work, eat and sleep. Build up my stash. Avoid Callahan. Begin to think about sticking around for a while.

Jackson, a black guy in his early 40s, becomes my best friend on the work crew. We grab lunch from the taco truck and find a shade tree to sit under.

"What's with all the folks that come into the office?" I ask.

"Paying their bills," Jackson says.

"In person?" I ask.

"Roll low, get a smaller bill. Roll high and pay even more. Electric Company does the same thing. Course it's rigged. The dice are loaded." He wolfs down a taco. "This town is mad for gambling." Jackson points to the bright red hotel set against the ocean. "Boardwalk Casino. The Parker Brothers, George and Charles, own it. Hell, they own this town: the hotels, most of the land, even the railroads."

"From what I've heard, the brothers, or at least the casinos, aren't popular with the locals," I say.

"No one has seen Charles in years. Some claim he's a recluse, living on the penthouse at the Boardwalk. Another rumor says he fell in love with one of the cigarette girls from the casino and moved to Rio."

"Not a bad life," I say.

"If it's true," says Jackson. "George is a little guy. Bald with an over-sized mustache. Always dressed up in a tux with a stick pin and a top hat. If you ever do meet him, don't make fun of his size. Guy made a crack about George's height, bank foreclosed on his home the next day."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"You know, we should go," Jackson says.

"Go where?"

"The casino! My old lady is visiting her mother up in Millville, and I'm feeling lucky. Let's hit the tables tonight."



I meet Jackson on Atlantic Avenue, down by the beach. He's wearing a double-breasted jacket, two-tone black and white Oxfords, and a Panama hat. I give him a double-take.

"These are my Sunday-go-to-church clothes," he explains.

"But it's Thursday, and this ain't church," I say.

He smiles. "I won't tell, if you won't."

At the hotel entrance, valets race back and forth as sharp-dressed gentlemen and their fashionable ladies step out of BMWs, Jaguars, and Land Rovers.

"Where do these people live? I haven't seen any cars like that around the city," I ask Jackson.

"New York, Philly, Princeton. Don't you know? This city is the playground for the one percenters."

The lobby is no less busy with a line of guests checking-in and an army of bellhops carrying their luggage. On the casino floor, every slot machine is occupied, playing a jingle. The aisles by the table games are thick with gamblers.

"What's your poison?" Jackson asks.

"Craps," I say distractedly. My attention is held by a flame-haired cocktail waitress who passes by.

Her uniform is a copper-colored, low-cut top matched with a black miniskirt, fishnets, and black knee-high boots. She balances a dozen drinks on her tiny tray while navigating through the masses to a blackjack table.

I follow close enough to hear the conversation.

"Two Jack Daniels shots and two Heinekens." She places the drinks before a couple of fraternity boy types who don't look old enough to drink.

One fumbles with his chips and asks his buddy, "Should I tip her?"

"Nah," says the other. "We gave her a dollar last time."

Under her breath, she mutters, "Eight drinks for one dollar." She turns and finds me standing in her way.

She begins to sigh.

Before she can finish, I drop a yellow ten in her tip cup. "Amanda," I say, reading her name badge, "I know things are hectic tonight. But when you get a chance, can I get a vodka and cranberry juice? I'll be playing craps over there." I point to the table where Jackson has stationed himself.

She smiles, displaying a dazzling set of white teeth. "Sure thing. Thanks."

"Amanda, please don't dawdle," says a nasally voice from behind. "This is a busy evening. Lots of guests."

Her smile disappears. "Yes, sir."

I turn to see what could only be George Parker. Shorter than I expected. Shiny bald head peeking from under his top hat. And wearing an eye-watering neon blue tuxedo. On his arm is a leggy blonde spilling out of her gown. In her heels, she towers over him.

"I'm sorry, sir," I say in mock apology. "But you must be at least this tall," I hold my hand horizontally a few inches above his head, "to ride the blonde."

His face flushes, the blonde smirks, and I head to the craps table taking a spot to Jackson's right.

The shooter, a tall Texan in a ten-gallon hat, takes the table for quite a ride. By pressing my bets I'm up a few hundred by the time he craps out and the dice pass to me.

I'm even hotter, making three quick points. Spreading the wealth around, I place bets for the stickman and dealers. I make money; they make money, even as the boxman glares at me.

Amanda stops by with my drink as I am about to come out. I drop twenty-five on the pass line and toss chips at one of the dealers. "Five on each of the hard ways, for the lovely Amanda." I hold the dice to Amanda's lips. "For luck."

"Dice over the table, sir," the boxman cautions.

Amanda puckers up and blows. The players roar. I shake the dice and let them fly.

"Eight, the hard way!" the stickman cries.

He hands me a stack of chips that I pass to Amanda. "Keep my drinks coming."

"Absolutely," she says. Again with the smile, and this time her blue eyes sparkle. I take triple odds, bet another ten on Any Craps, and roll again.
"Box Cars!"

The Texas lets out a yee-haw. A young Asian lady in a Harvard sweatshirt high-fives a Steve Buscemi look-alike. Jackson laughs and slaps my back. The crowd around the table grows larger.

I let my Any Craps bet ride.

"Snake eyes!" the stickman cries.

"Huzzah!" the gamblers shout.

The dealers stack up my winnings, over \$1000.

I feel a tap on my shoulder. "Excuse me, sir."

"Hey, don't bother the man," Jackson says with a glare. "He's on a roll."

"Yeah, I'm rolling." I stack my bets. "For the dealers: two dollars each on hard four, hard ten and Any Craps." I toss the chips at the stickman.

The tapping persists. "Sorry, sir, but we're concerned about your play."

Hands grab my shoulders and yank me around. I am face-to-face with a security guard in a two-sizes too-small magenta blazer and a radio receiver in his ear.

Magenta Blazer says, "Got your attention now?"

"What's the problem? I'm trying to gamble here."

He says, "As I explained, we have concerns about your play. Come with us and answer a few questions. This will only take a moment."

"Concerned because I'm winning?" I give him my craziest stare.

The boxman calls for me to roll.

"Did you hear that, everyone?" I shout to the table. "The casino wants me to stop playing because I'm winning."

The gamblers boo.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see another magenta blazer coming at me fast. I start to turn. He raises his fist.

Everything goes black.



My head hurts. It smells like the inside of a gym bag. I open my eyes and see metal bars.

I groan.

"Good morning," a voice says. He's the only other person in the cell. Skinny guy with a pale complexion and greasy hair wearing just one boot.

"Jail?" I ask.

"Yep. What did they get you for?"

"Not sure. I was at the casino. Had a slight disagreement with a security guard and the next thing I know, I'm here."

"Were you winning?"

I nod as I rub my jaw.

"That will do it." His smile showing off a gold tooth. "The casino has an aversion to winners."

"That's an interesting business plan they have."

He shakes his head. "But only for us salt-of-the-earth types. If you're an athlete, rock star, or politician, the rules are different."

"Aren't they always?" I stand. My head spins. I lean against the wall. "I also insulted George Parker."

"You are a precocious one."

I rattle the bars. "So, when do I get out of here?"

"Anytime you want. Just post bail. Fifty dollars and you're free to go."

I check my pockets. "They took all my money."

Greasy Hair chuckles. "Yeah, they do that. And don't count on getting it back. The cops never log it. Just keep it for themselves."

"If I can't post bail, what do I do?"

"Wait." He sucks on his teeth. "New folks arrive and the cells get crowded. The city will realize they aren't going to make any money on you. Actually, lose money counting meals, and they'll let you go."

"Pretty passive plan. How long does that usually take?"

He shrugs. "Three weeks."

"Three weeks!"

"Could be more. Could be less. Usually it's three weeks."

"You seem awfully calm considering you're in here as well," I say.

"Oh, I like it here." He taps the wall. "Three squares a day. Roof over my head."

"And what about those of us who aren't so enamored with the luxurious accommodations the city has provided for us?"

"In that case, there's one other option." He pulls a bright orange card out of his pocket and waves it.

"What's that?"

He smiles. "This is what I like to call my 'Get out of Jail Free' card."



The card is actually a list Greasy Hair has compiled of illegal activity (fencing, prostitution, loan-sharking, etc.) taking place around the city.

Faced with an inmate who won't (or can't) post bail, but offers a more profitable criminal, the police will exchange freedom for information.

Not wanting to be indebted to my new cellmate, I make my own deal. I rat out the Electric Company for their illegal gambling operation. Figure I'll keep the Water Works in business until I can pick up my pay. With the cops taking everything I won at the casino, all I have left is a few dollars back in my room.

My jailers let me go with a stern warning not to cause any more trouble for Mr. Parker and his casino. That is a promise I intend to keep.

Back at the diner, I pack up my things.

"I heard what happened," Fran says.

"Think it's time for me to pass on this town," I tell her.

I stop by the Water Works to pick up my pay.

"No pay," the foreman says.

"But I worked four days. That's one-sixty."

"I pay by week. You make it through whole week, you get two hundred. I don't pay for days."

He stands and looms over me.

My head is still sore. This town has me beat, and I don't need another beating. Time to leave.

I walk downtown to the train station, a giant concrete cube with a black locomotive painted on the side. The building is mostly deserted. A train arrives and three people step off. No one waiting for a departure.

At the ticket window for the Pennsylvania Railroad, the agent has his head down in a paperback.

"One-way ticket to Philadelphia," I say.

"That will be \$200," he answers without looking up.

"Two hundred dollars?" I don't have close to that kind of cash.

"That is correct." Still not looking up.

I glance at the train line schedule. "How about Hammonton?"

"Also two hundred."

"Egg Harbor City?"

"Two hundred." He closes his book, looks up, and sneers. "All tickets are two hundred dollars."

"I think I'll take my business elsewhere."

"Suit yourself." He goes back to reading.

I walk down the concourse to the window for the B&O and ring the bell. The window slides up. The guy from the first window smiles at me with crooked teeth.

"You sell the tickets for this line, too?"

He shrugs. "The railroads consolidated operations to save on expenses."

"How much for a one-way ticket to Philadelphia?" I ask.

"Two hundred dollars."

I look at the other ticket windows: Reading and The Short Line. "I suppose they are also part of the consolidation."

He nods.

"Is there a bus that stops in this city?"

He cackles and slams the window shut.



Darkness is falling. Baltic Avenue is a long journey back uptown.

I figure I have to walk out of the city, same way I got here. Too late to start today. I'll find a place to sleep and leave in the morning.

The streets are lined with more green houses with rents I can't afford.

I find a secluded spot to sleep between two rows of hedges, but a Scottish Terrier catches my scent and yips. The dog will not shut up. I move on.

I come across an empty lot between New York and Kentucky Avenues. Using my bag as a pillow, I make a place for myself in the brush. I'm asleep in less than five minutes.

The sounds of a backfiring car wake me from a dream.

I rub my eyes and crawl through the brush to look.

A police car! My old friend, Office Callahan, steps out.

Is he going to arrest me for vagrancy?

How does he even know I am here?

I gather up my bag and take five silent steps in the opposite direction. Headlights appear, the car heading right for me. I hit the dirt, roll, and freeze.

The second car drives past, stops, and the door opens. I hear shouting. I circle back and peer through the bushes. George Parker, still wearing that damn top hat, is having an animated discussion with Callahan.

I creep closer.

Parker opens the trunk of his car.

"Who's that?" Callahan asks.

"It *was* the Special City Building Inspector," Parker says. "Would have ordered me to make repairs to the hotels that would have bankrupted me."

"You couldn't just bribe him?"

"Not everyone is morally bereft like you, Callahan. Now help me drag him out, and we'll bury him next to Charles."

"Another body. That's going to cost you."

"You know I don't carry cash. I'll arrange a bank error in your favor, like last time."

"That was only two hundred. I deserve a lot more for taking this kind of risk," the cop says.

"I don't like demands, Callahan. Do you want me to replace you with O'Doul?"

"Hey, you can't threaten me. We're in this together. You take me down, you take yourself down."

Parker sighs. "Fine! I'll make it a thousand. Now let's get this body buried."

Callahan and Parker heft the body out of the trunk. Parker pulls a couple of shovels out of his back seat, and the pair begin to dig, though Callahan does most of the work. They dump the body in and fill up the hole.

"Remember," Callahan says. "You said one thousand."

"I remember," Parker says.

They get in their respective cars and drive off as rain begins to fall.



As soon as there is enough light from the sunrise, I scale the fence at the Water Works. My pant cuff catches on a barb at the top. I slice my hand freeing myself, then the pants rip, and I tumble to the ground. But I'm inside.

Bulldozers and front loaders are no good. Both require a key and I have no idea how to hot-wire them. The twenty-plus year-old mini-excavator doesn't have a key. But the battery has been removed to prevent someone from just driving away.

Not a problem. I steal the battery from the front loader, drop it into place and power up. The engine belches black exhaust.

The gate is chained. A bulldozer could knock it down on the first try. The mini-excavator (not counting the attachments) isn't much larger than a compact car.

I ram the gate. No luck.

Second attempt. Nothing doing.

I back up as far as I can, floor the accelerator, and hit the gate at top speed, maybe twenty mph. The chain snaps and the gates fly open.

Still early, there's not a lot of traffic as I maneuver onto the road. I wave to an early morning dog-walker too sleepy to return the favor. A jogger gives me a sideways glance. A paperboy grins at the excavator and gives me a thumbs up. Fifteen minutes later, I'm back at the empty lot.

But I'm not sure where Parker and Callahan buried the body. Plenty of patches of scrubby brush where I could have been hiding. The rain from last night has washed away any evidence of recent digging.

I take my best guess, lower the excavator's claw and tear open the ground. When I'm convinced I have the wrong spot, I pick another. That isn't it either. I pick a third.

Two hours and ten holes later, a woman approaches the excavator. I can't hear what she's saying, but I can read her lips.

"This is supposed to be parkland," she mouths.

I shake my head.

She motions to me to shut down the engine.

I shrug my shoulders.

"I'm calling the police." She harrumphs off.

A dozen kids, including the paperboy, have shown up attracted by the noise. Some play in the holes or mounds of dirt. Others watch me randomly dig up the ground.

A police car pulls up, two cops got out, one is Callahan. The kids gather around waiting for a show. Callahan shouts for me to stop. I pretend I don't understand. He unholsters his gun. I kill the engine.

"If it isn't Mr. Cherry Pie?"

"You know this guy, Callahan," the other cop asks.

"Yeah, he's been trouble since I saw him at the diner."

"Just doing my job, Officer," I say. "I work at the Water Works. Foreman told me to dig these holes."

"Bull! The land is a park, you don't have a job anymore, and this equipment was reported stolen." He points his service revolver at me. "Come down from there."

I say to the other cop, "There's dead bodies buried on this land. You've got to find them."

Callahan says, "Don't pay him any mind, O'Doul. This fellow's a real menace, and a jailbird, too. Got hisself arrested down at the Boardwalk."

"That thing at the casino was a misunderstanding," I say.

Callahan pats me down and handcuffs me. In my ear he whispers, "I'm going to put you in a cell for a long time."

He pushes me to the car. Hand on top my head, he forces me down and into the backseat.

"He's not lying!" the paperboy shouts.

"What?" O'Doul asks.

The kid points to the hole. "There's a dead body down there."



"That body I dug up was a tax assessor from the Streets Department that went missing a few years ago," I tell Amanda. We're sitting in a booth in the rear of the Baltic Avenue Diner. I'm working on a tuna melt; she has the French onion soup. "The city came out with a full excavation team and found Charlie Parker and the building inspector."

"I remember when that guy went missing. Heard that he had skipped town to avoid a bad debt."

"A rumor circulated by George Parker, no doubt."

"No doubt." She sips her coffee. "I have a girlfriend who works down at the courthouse. Word is Officer Callahan is taking a deal testify against Parker."

"Three murders, plus bribery charges. Yes, I would say things don't look good for our Mr. Parker." I crack a smile. "What about you? How are things at the work?"

"Parker has to sell, but the casino's finances are solid. My job is on no jeopardy."

"Sounds like I should take a chance and stick around?"

"I'd like that." She has that twinkle in her eyes. "You could even get a job at the casino. Supposedly there's a real estate mogul from New York City going to buy the place, spruce it up and turn it around. Some guy named Trump."

"Sounds great. What could go wrong?"

The End

About the Author

James Blakey lives in the Shenandoah Valley where he writes mostly full-time. He's a three-time finalist for the Short Mystery Fiction Society's Derringer Award, winning in 2019 for his story 'The Bicycle Thief'. He leads critique groups in Harrisonburg, Charlottesville, and Shenandoah County. His paranormal thriller SUPERSTITION will be published by City Owl Press in 2024. Find him at JamesBlakeyWrites.com