

CROOKED LITTLE VEIN

By Warren Ellis

On Sale : July 24, 2007

Chapter One

I opened my eyes to see the rat taking a piss in my coffee mug. It was a huge brown bastard; had a body like a turd with legs and beady black eyes full of secret rat knowledge. Making a smug huffing sound, it threw itself from the table to the floor, and scuttled back into the hole in the wall where it had spent the last three months planning new ways to screw me around. I'd tried nailing wood over the gap in the wainscot, but it gnawed through it and spat the wet pieces into my shoes. After that, I spiked bait with warfarin, but the poison seemed to somehow cause it to evolve and become a super-rat. I nailed it across the eyes once with a lucky shot with the butt of my gun, but it got up again and shat in my telephone.

I dragged myself all the way awake, lurching forward in my office chair. The stink of rat urine steaming and festering in my mug stabbed me into unwelcome wakefulness, but I'd rather have had coffee. I unstuck my backside from the sweaty leatherette of the chair, fought my way upright, and padded stiff-legged to the bathroom adjacent to my office. I knew that one of these days someone was going to burst into the office unannounced to find a naked private investigator taking a piss with the bathroom door open. There was a time where I cared about that sort of thing. Some time before I started living in my own office, I think.

My suit and shirt were piled on the plastic chair I use for clients. I stole it from a twenty-four-hour diner off Union Square, back in my professional drinking days. I picked up the shirt and sniffed it experimentally. It seemed to me that it'd last another day before it had to be washed, although there was a nagging thought at the back of my mind that maybe it actually reeked and my sense of smell was shot. I held up the sleeve and examined the armpit. Slightly yellowish. But then, so was everything else in the office. Noone would see it with the jacket on, anyway.

I rifled the jacket for cigarettes, harvested one and went back to my chair. I swabbed some of the nicotine scum off the window behind the chair with the edge of my hand and peered down at my little piece of Manhattan street.

Gentrification had stopped dead several doors west of my spot overlooking Avenue B. You could actually see the line. That side of the line; Biafran cuisine, sparkling plastic secure window units, women called Imogen and Saffron, men called Josh and Morgan. My side of the line; crack whores, burned-out cars, bullets stuck in door frames, and men called Father-Eating Bastard. It's almost a point of honor to live near a crackhouse, like living in a pre-Rudy Zone, a piece of Old New York.

Across the street from me is the old building that the police sent tanks into, about five years back, to dislodge a community of squatters. The media never covered the guys in the crackhouse down the street a little way, hanging out of their windows, scabs dropping off their faces onto the heads of the rubberneckers down below, cheering the police on for getting those cheapass squatter motherfuckers off their block. You think the tanks ever came for the crackhouse? Did they hell.

I was new there, back then. All tingly with the notion of being a private detective in the big city. I was twenty-five, still all full of having been the child prodigy at the local desk of the main Pinkerton office in Chicago since I was twenty. But I was going to fly solo, do something less corporate and more real, make a difference in lives.

It started going wrong on the second day, when the signpainter inscribing my name on the office door made a mistake and took off before I noticed. To the world at large I am now MICHAEL MGIL PRIVATE INVEST GATOR. It's always the first line of a consultation. "No, it's McGill."

Some asshole scraped the I out of INVESTIGATOR with their keys six months ago. I simply can't be bothered to fix that one. For all the work I get, I may as well be an invest gator. Every two days, I actually go down to the pay phone on the corner to call my own phone and leave a message on the answering machine to make sure it's all still working.

I don't have a secretary. Sometimes I flip on a phone voice-changer I got for five bucks on eBay and pretend to be my own secretary. It is very sad.

I blew stale-tasting cigarette smoke at the windowglass, looked down at people moving around the street, and debated what to do. I was fairly sure it was Saturday, so I didn't need to be there pretending I had a career. On the downside, I didn't have anywhere else to go. I could have coaxed my old laptop into life and gone on the Web to read about someone else's life, but I feared my email.

Maybe, I thought, it was time to leave the office, go out into the sunlight, and give the hell up.

Kids were playing in the street, which isn't something I ever saw often from my window. I considered, and watched, reaching for my coffee mug by reflex as I idly chased trains of thought around my head.

It occurs to me now that if I hadn't seen the man in black on the far side of the street at that exact second, I would probably still be brushing my teeth with bleach.

But I did. The absolute stereotypical man in black, with the shades and the earpiece and the stone face.

And another, down the street.

I leaned over. A third was outside the door to my building.

And they were all looking up at my window.

"Well, you always knew this could happen," I told myself, because there was no one else around to give me a hard time.

A black car pulled up under my window. My office is five stories up. Takes me six minutes, in my shattered condition, to ascend the stairs to my door. Call it three for someone in basic human condition. I had exactly that long to get dressed and think of something clever.

But I wasted another terrified thirty seconds watching the car disgorge three more people who headed directly into my building.

I almost put my foot through the crotch of my pants in my hurry to dress. No idea who they were or what they wanted but a very basic sense of self-preservation said Mike, you need to be running in the general direction of Away now. Three buttons of the shirt done up, fuck the other three, stuff the tie in the pocket, pull on the jacket, practically break your fucking ankle getting the

shoes on. Half-run, half-fall for the door. Left the gun back in my desk. I needed the gun. I thought I needed the gun. Ran back into the office, sat down on my sticky chair, pulled at the lower left drawer where the gun sits, and the door opened. The outer door to my office.

Two men in black swept through the small reception room and in, looking down extended arms and two-handed grips full of large gun at me. They bobbed and pivoted around my office like gangster marionettes. One of them broke the effect by bringing his right hand up and talking into his sleeve. "All clear. Needle can enter at will."

A bony man with skin like leather in a suit that seemed to not quite fit him walked quickly into my office. The men in black deferred to him and swept out, closing the door behind them. I was suddenly alone with the bony man, whose face was vaguely familiar to me.

The bony man sat in my client's chair, eyed me sourly. "Do you know who I am, son?"

The voice fitted to the deathly presence. I'd seen him on the news, but this was not a man made for television. "You work for the president, don't you?"

He nodded once. "I'm the chief of staff to the office of the President of the United States. And you are Michael McGill. Can I call you Mike?"

"No, I'm ..." Reflex. Swallowed, changed tracks. "Mike is fine." I slumped in my chair. "I really need to be more awake than this." The square inch of my brain that was working properly blitzed through possibilities. It's a gag. No, that's the guy. Why is the chief of staff alone in a room with a man whom they must know has a gun in the drawer? No, no, that's the cart before the horse: why is he here looking at me like that? With those eyes, so pale

they're almost white-on-white? Jesus, he's a creepy old fart in real life...

"You're looking at me strangely, son."

I smiled, shook my head. "It's just what TV does to us. You say 'chief of staff' and I expect John Spencer from *The West Wing*, you know? I don't suppose you're a genial man of Chicago with a drink problem, right?"

"Hell, no. I take heroin, son."

"Okay."

"I have a stressful job. This is how I like to relax. I like to go to a small hotel and take heroin. Just lay on the bed and feel my bowels slowly unclench."

He leaned back and sighed with relish, as if he were sinking into a warm bath.

"I like to lay on the bed, naked, with my guts oozing onto the sheets, nodding out and watching the Fashion Channel. All those skeletal smacked-out girls. The faces of angels and the bodies of Ethiopians. I find that sexy, son. It's not like I have an easy job, and I feel I should be cut some slack in this area. Heroin angels, strutting around for me. With Enya playing. They play a lot of Enya on the Fashion Channel. Great regiments of heroin angels lined up in endless long dressing rooms elegantly banging smack between their delicate toes to the soundtrack of British TV shows about Celtic people. You should try it. It's a poetic thing, you know?"

His eyes closed, a beatific grin spreading across his weathered face like an old wound opening.

"In that moment, son, I am as beautiful as they, and you are to ignore the rabbit droppings steaming on my bed: interior chocolates placed on the pillow by the solicitous maids of my bowel. Sometimes I get up and dance, scattering

the gifts of my intestines across the Edwardian carpet, ignoring the shrieking of the housekeepers and the priests they call in. 'Phone the White House,' I sing to them. 'I control the nuclear bombs.' All of which is to say: I am a functioning heroin addict and also the most powerful man in the world, and you should pay attention now."

He hadn't opened his eyes. The gun was in the desk drawer. Five, six inches away from my hand. It was tempting. I hadn't decided which of us to use it on, though.

"Oh, I am. Insofar as I'm wondering what the hell you're doing here."

"I'm here because you're a shit magnet, son."

It was one of those unusual moments where I couldn't think of a swearword bad enough.

"The world just kind of happens to you, son. The worst things we could possibly imagine just up out of nowhere and piss on your shoes, don't they? It's a special talent. It gets you work as an investigator, and in certain circles you are reknowned for plucking diamonds from that skyscraper of blood-flecked turds that is the American cultural underworld."

"Don't you have a divorce case for me? A lost dog? Missing doorkeys?" I don't think there was a sob in that last bit.

"Those are for ordinary people, son. You are special."

"What I am is unlucky," I snarled. "You know I got an adultery case last year? You know what the husband turned out to be doing at night? He had formed a sex cult that broke into an ostrich farm at midnight three times a week. You know what it's like, finding eight middle-aged guys having tantric sex with ostriches?"

The chief of staff made a sympathetic noise he'd probably learned off a talk show. "I'm not sure I can even imagine how to do that."

"I had that image in my head for two months. I couldn't have sex. My girlfriend came to bed one night in a feather boa and I started crying. She left me for a woman named Bob who designs strap-ons shaped like dolphin penises."

"That's very sad, son."

"Bob had a hair transplant procedure on her nipples. They email me photographs."

"I'm sorry for your pain. But this only illustrates how you are the right man for this job."

"I'm not the right man for any job. You want to call me a shit magnet, fine, I'm a shit magnet. But what I am is the unluckiest bastard you ever met. I have to take this work because it's all I can do, but please. I don't look for this stuff."

"No. It finds you. Which is why you are perfect for this job. We have something we need you to find, and we have exhausted all our orthodox operations. Somewhere out there is a book we need."

"Lost and found?" I said, hopeful.

And right there is where I needed a time machine, so I could go back and shoot myself.

"Lost and found. Lost in the 1950s, in fact. Nixon traded it for the favors of a Chinese woman living on a houseboat in San Francisco Bay. It's moved from person to person ever since. Now we need it back in the White House."

A cold fifty-year-old trail. That was some real detective work right there. This had a weird appeal to me. It seemed like what the job should be about. As opposed to

waving a flashlight over a fat bank manager hunched over an ostrich full of Rohypnol.

"I'll need to know what the book is."

"Yeah. This is the tricky part. Technically, this is high codeword stuff. I've had your name signed to a document that allows you to know the following, on pain of death if the information exits your train of investigation."

"Excuse me?"

"You talk about this, the Office of Homeland Security turns you into pink mist. There will be Shock and Awe, do you understand?"

That took me a minute. Getting my head around their having apparently forged my signature on a White House document. In my experience, people in positions of overwhelming power don't lie. They don't have to. I shifted in my chair, sketched a small smile, and tried to speak, but all that came out was a choking sound. The chief of staff seemed to take this as a yes. Or simply decided that I was scared enough.

"We need you to find the other Constitution of the United States."

I carefully kept my face neutral and composed. You know, professional.

"This is a secret document privately authored by several of the Founders. It details the real intent of their design of American society, and twenty-three Invisible Amendments to be read and adhered to only by the presidents, vice-presidents and chiefs of staff.

"It is a small, handwritten volume reputedly bound in the skin of the extraterrestrial entity that plagued Benjamin Franklin's ass over six nights in Paris during his

European travels. Benjamin Franklin wasn't some nancy-boy novelist who wrote sensitive books about aliens sticking things up his rectum, you know. On the seventh night he got right up and killed the little bastard with one punch."

I didn't want to move. It felt like I was trapped in a room opposite a mad weasel with paintstripper daubed on its nipples. One false motion and it'd stop ripping itself to shreds right in front of you and go straight to chewing your head into a stump.

He just wouldn't stop talking. It was horrible.

"The book binding is weighted with meteor fragments. The design is such that the sound of the book being opened onto a table has infrasonic content, too low for human hearing. The book briefly vibrates at eighteen hertz, which is the resonant frequency of the human eyeball."

He lurched forward, fixing me with a fanatic gaze. "Do you *understand*, son? Do you *see*? *It's a book that forces you to read it*. It prepares your eye for *input*."

I met his eyes and mirrored his pose to try and calm him a little, make him know I was on his side. I was abstractly aware of my hand shaking and I needed to bring this back down to earth any way I could.

"Okay, sir. You've lost a valuable private historical document--"

"It's more than that. I want you to *comprehend*. We need this book. How can I put it? Do you like living in America, Mike?

"Sure, I guess. Never lived anywhere else."

"You don't think America's changed? That maybe it was once a better place to live?"

"Well. I've seen America change, certainly. Whether it was better or not, I don't know. I don't recall the eighties as being much fun, and the nineties were just kind of there, you know?"

"Yeah. You're young. You don't see it. When I was young, Mike, this country was pure, and righteous. Secure in the knowledge that we had fought pure evil and won. Furthermore, every able-bodied man in America had been trained in killing people with dangerous firearms. I could walk home from school without fear of being set upon by testicular saline infusion fetishists. Those people, by the way, are not to be trusted. You need to remember that.

"The country has changed, Mike, year by year, day by day. Look at what's on television now. Look at the magazines and newspapers. Look at what people put on the Internet. These aren't hidden perversions, Mike. This isn't like Dr. Sawyer and the collection of black men's tongues he kept in that weird little house on the outskirts of town when I was twelve. This is the mainstream now, Mike. This is how life in America *is*. Moment by moment, our country has grown sicker. Our borders, Mike, have come to encompass the nine circles of Hell."

He suddenly seemed very small and lonely.

"Since the book was lost, Mike. It's all happened since the book was lost. We need the book back. We need to study it and apply it and make America beautiful again."

I took a deep breath. The next thirty seconds were either going to save me or kill me, I figured. "You realize I couldn't care less about that, right?"

I wanted him to, I dunno, react like he was shot, or call his creatures in to shoot me, or anything that was going to get me off this hook I'd been spiked on.

He wasn't supposed to smile like that.

"We know," the chief of staff said happily. "This clinched your selection. You see, Mike, what we really need is a human shit-tick, swimming through the toilet bowl of America. We don't need someone who's going to crawl to the edge and demand a blue-block and a flush. We need someone content to paddle through the droppings. Someone who doesn't care about anything but doing their job. That you are some kind of moral mutant who bears no love for the country that gives them life is, amazingly, what suits you best to the task at hand."

My face sank down into my hands. "Oh, good," I mumbled. Or "Oh, God." One of the two.

"Smile, son. In five minutes' time, there will be half a million dollars in your bank account, available for immediate withdrawal. Yours, nonrecoupable. Tax-free, too."

I could feel my face involuntarily twisting into a wonky grin. My mom had a regular saying: "I don't know whether to laugh or cry." It usually came out when the police came to tell us dad had turned up naked someplace again. Sometimes it made me laugh, sometimes it made me cry, but I never felt torn between the two, and sometimes I thought mom was crazier than dad for saying it. But this was it. I didn't know whether to laugh out loud (because it was true, or because he was full of shit) or burst into tears right there and then (because he'd really done it, or because he was lying). I didn't know what to believe and I didn't know how to react. I wasn't scared so much anymore. I just resented the old bastard for making me feel like that.

He reached into his jacket pocket, withdrew a flat black plastic thing that he handed over to me. I took it, suspiciously, and gingerly explored the seam my fingertips found on the long side. A catch snicked, and it unfolded into a clamshell-style handheld computer.

"That's yours," the chief of staff said as it hissed into life in my hand, its long screen flaring clean white. "It contains all the leads we currently have, and is fitted for wireless Internet access. It goes into a secure system at Treasury, which pushes continuing updates into your machine."

"You're just sending me into the wild with half a mill and this?"

"Oh, I will come to see you from time to time, when I have new information. Or perhaps just to see how you're doing and where you are. Consider me Virgil to your Dante." This notion amused him no end. His laugh was a dry, raspy, high thing, the sound of skeletons giggling.

He stood up, arranging his baggy suit on his pointy frame. "Smile, son. You are engaged in a great work. Everything is different now. You have the most glorious of goals. You are going to help us save America."

His eyes glittered like new coins.

"From itself."

I realized the chief of staff was preparing to leave. I surged out of the chair. "Hold on. I don't accept commissions just like this. I need, I need, some way to contact you, a longer briefing, something ..."

"It's all in the machine. In a few minutes, you'll have all the expense money you could want. You contact me through a secure email system, I contact you when I deem it appropriate. Let's be men here: you know I'll be watching."

He extended one long tough hand. "Good hunting, Mr. McGill." I shook it. I could feel the little bones of his hand moving under my grip, like he was nothing but thin leather and sticks.

He did that curt nod again, spun on his heel and left.

I looked at the closed door for about a minute. Then sat down again, heavily, and looked out the window. The men in black were melting away. I watched the street a while longer. The chief of staff and his security team came out of my building. He stopped. Looked up at me. His face split open in an awful grin. His team gathered him into his car, and they were off, gone, disappeared, like they were never there.

Except I had a brand new handheld computer on my desk.

I had a thought. Opened the thing up again, tapped the icon for Internet access with my fingernail, and put a Web site address into it with the QWERTY thumbpad. My bank has an online service that I use in preference to the bank tellers laughing at my balance in front of me. I thumbed in the security number and waited.

I had half a million dollars in my bank account. In fact, I had five hundred thousand and three dollars and forty-one cents. The three forty-one was the sum total of my worldly wealth when I woke up that day.

The handheld thumped down on the desk, next to the cooling mug of rat piss. That was it. I had the biggest single-job expense account I'd ever seen, and the most insane job I'd ever heard of. Finding a book that had been lost for fifty years. If it had ever existed. A secret Constitution of the United States. Invisible Amendments. Hell, I couldn't tell you how many *visible* Amendments there were.

I had half a million dollars. For a complete wild-
goose chase. Half a million dollars that were mine and
never to be spent on anything remotely useful.