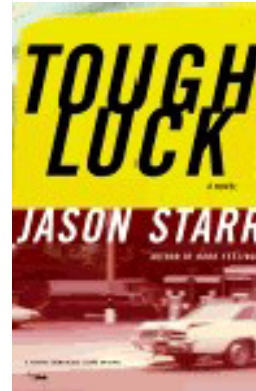


TOUGH LUCK

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ONE

When the big Italian-looking guy in the pin-striped suit came into Vincent's Fish Market on Flatbush Avenue and Avenue J, Mickey Prada put down the copy of the Daily News he'd been reading and said, "The usual, right?"

"You got it, kid," the big guy said, smiling.

As Mickey filled the order—a pound of cooked shrimp and a small container of cocktail sauce—the guy took out a piece of paper and held it up for Mickey to see.

"Can you believe this shit?" the guy said. "I gotta go into fuckin' court today."

The paper had a lot of writing on it, but all Mickey saw before the guy put it away were the big letters OC written in red in the corner.

"I can't believe they waste my time with this shit," the guy went on, shaking his head. "But I'll get off. I always do."

Mickey rang up the order. After he gave the guy his change from a fifty, the guy stuck out his hand and said, "By the way, name's Angelo. Angelo Santoro."

Mickey wiped his hand clean on his dirty white apron and shook Angelo's big hand.

"Mickey. Mickey Prada."

That night, Mickey was at his friend Chris's, watching the Islanders-Flyers game on the new color set in Chris's bedroom. During a commercial, Mickey told Chris about Angelo Santoro and the court papers.

"Don't fuck with that guy, whatever you do," Chris said.

"What do you mean?" Mickey asked.

"OC, dickhead. You know what OC stands for, don't you?"

Mickey shook his head.

"Organized crime, moron. Your friend Angelo's a wise-guy."

"Come on," Mickey said.

"Trust me," Chris said. "I know what I'm talking about."

The next time Angelo came into the fish store, a couple of days later, Mickey took a closer look at him. It was hard to tell how old Angelo was because his hair was jet-black, probably colored with Brylcreem, but he looked forty, or maybe a couple of years older. And he definitely had a Mafia way about him. It wasn't just the slicked-back hair and the snazzy clothes—it was the way he acted, always half-smiling and walking with a strut.

Mickey was nicer than usual to Angelo—smiling, asking him how his day was, adding some extra shrimp to his container. Angelo was friendly too, talking about the election next month, predicting that Reagan would kick Mondale's ass.

At the register, while Mickey was ringing up the order, Angelo said, "So you're a football fan, huh, kid?"

"Yeah," Mickey said. "How'd you know?"

"Heard you talking the other day with the black kid who works here. So you think the Jets're gonna do it this year?"

"Hope so," Mickey said.

"It'll be tough," Angelo said, "the way the Fish're playing—seven and oh—but that O'Brien kid looks pretty good out there, and they got that great D. I got season tix you know."

"Really?" Mickey said.

"Yeah, had 'em since sixty-eight."

"You saw the Jets the year they won the Super Bowl?"

"Was at every game, including the big one."

"You were there?"

"January 12, 1969. The Orange Bowl, Miami, Florida. Fifth row, forty-yard line."

"Holy shit," Mickey said.

"Shoulda seen Namath that day kid, hookin' up with Maynard and Sauer." Angelo pretended to throw a football. "Too bad his fuckin' knees went or he'd still be QB in'. Hey, I don't know if you're interested, but I can't use my tickets for the Jets-Giants game in December. If you wanna use 'em, you can."

"I don't know," Mickey said. "I mean I'd love to go, but I don't think I can afford it."

"Afford? Who said anything about afford? I'm giving you the tickets." Angelo grinned.

"That's okay" Mickey said. "I mean you don't have to do that."

"Hey, don't insult me," Angelo said, suddenly serious. "I said I want to give you the tickets, and I'm giving you the tickets. It's the least I could do for my favorite fish man."

"Okay," Mickey said. "I mean if you really wanna do that."

Angelo smiled widely again. "The game's not till December—I'm sure I'll see you a lot before then. I'll bring the tickets in with me one of these days."

"Thanks," Mickey said.

"You take it easy, now," Angelo said.

The following Monday afternoon Mickey was working at the countertop behind the fish stands, cutting flounder fillets. After he scraped off the scales, he made one short cut under the front fin, just behind the gills, then a longer cut down to the tail. He did the same thing to the other side of the fish, then he scooped out the carcass, pushed the fillets off to the side, and started on the next one.

As Mickey was cutting flounder, Mrs. Ruiz came into the store.

"How are you today, Mrs. Ruiz?"

"Very good, Mickey."

"What can I get for you?"

"You got mussels?"

Mickey rolled up the sleeve on his right arm, flexed his biceps, and said, "Yep."

When Mrs. Ruiz left the store with her usual two pounds of mussels and two pounds of clams for her paella, Charlie came in from the back, holding a big boom box up on his shoulder.

"Turn that shit off," Mickey said.

"Come on," Charlie said, "even white people like this music."

"I'm serious," Mickey said.

Charlie lowered the volume.

"I forgot—you Italian," Charlie said. "You like that John Travolta, Bee Gees shit. On weekends you probably dress up like Deney Terrio and start crankin' the Donna Summer. Come on, it's the truth. You can't hide it."

Mickey couldn't help smiling as Charlie sang along, "And don't ever come down . . . Freebase!"

Charlie continued to sing as Mickey cut into another flounder.

"Mickey Prada, how's it going?"

Mickey turned around and saw Angelo standing there on the other side of the fish stands, wearing one of his pin-striped suits. Angelo hadn't been to the fish store in about a week, and Mickey was surprised Angelo remembered his name.

"How's it goin'?" Mickey said. "Hey, Angelo, this is Charlie."

Charlie and Angelo said hi to each other, then Charlie lowered the music and went to help another customer who'd just come in.

"You know why I'm here," Angelo said to Mickey.

"Coming right up," Mickey said.

As Mickey was putting the cooked shrimp into a one pound container, Angelo said, "Prada. That's not Sicilian, is it?"

"Nah, my grandfather was from up north," Mickey said.

"Milano?"

"Somewhere around there."

"Eh, what's the difference?" Angelo said. "North, south, you're still from the old country that's what counts. So tell me something else, kid. What do you want to do with your life?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean here you are, working at a fish store. You go to school?"

"I'm taking a year off, then I'm gonna go to college at Baruch in the city."

"College?" Angelo said like he'd never heard the word before. "What're you gonna learn there?"

"I want to be an accountant," Mickey said.

"Accountant?" Angelo said. "You're not gonna become an IRS agent, are you?"

Mickey laughed. "Nah, I'm just gonna get a job for a company. You know, Ernst and Young or someplace like that."

"Yeah, that sounds good," Angelo said, "I guess. But if you're ever lookin' for something else to do, you come talk to me, all right? If you're good with numbers I can set you up at something, you'll make a good living for yourself. You know anything about numbers?"

"You mean betting numbers?" Mickey said.

Angelo nodded.

"I know a little," Mickey said. "I mean I don't play the numbers myself but—"

"That's okay," Angelo said, "better you don't. The odds of hitting the number are what, a thousand-somethin' to one? I got a better chance of dying today than I got of hitting

the number. I'm talking about the other side of the business. You're good with math, you can work on the odds, that kind of thing, right?"

"Thanks," Mickey said. "But I think I'll probably just keep working here . . . until I start school again."

"Hey, it's up to you," Angelo said. "You do whatever you want to do. I'm just saying you're a good kid—I think you're gonna go places. I don't think you need school to get there, neither. I think you can get there right now if you wanted to. But you think about it, you let me know, okay?"

"I will," Mickey said.

Mickey weighed Angelo's shrimp then closed the container. At the register, Angelo said, "So who do you like in the game tonight?"

"The game?" Mickey said.

"Monday Night Football."

"Oh, the Seahawks," Mickey said.

"The Seahawks?" Angelo said. "Come on, Dan Fouts's got the best arm in football. The Chargers are a fuckin' lock tonight."

"I don't know," Mickey said. "The 'Hawks beat up the Chargers last time pretty good, and now they're getting a point. You gotta go with the 'Hawks."

"Oh, so you like to bet on football, huh?" Angelo said, smiling.

"I just bet a few dollars with a bookie every once in a while," Mickey said. "It's no big deal."

"You gotta be careful," Angelo said. "Don't get me wrong—I like a little action every now and then myself, but you don't wanna get in too deep. Guys I know lose their families, lose everything from gambling. One guy I know, old friend of mine, liked playing the numbers. Bet a few bucks a week, thought, What's the worst that could happen? Year later he's broke, his wife and kids're gone, he has nothing."

"That won't happen to me," Mickey said.

Angelo stared at Mickey for a few seconds, then said, "You're a smart kid, you know that? Got a good head on your shoulders is what I mean. Do me a favor, my bookie's out of town this week. Can you put in a little action for me tonight too?"

Mickey hesitated then said, "I usually don't put in other people's bets. No offense but—"

"But in my case you'll make an exception, right?" Angelo smiled.

"Sure," Mickey said. "I mean I don't see why not. What do you want?"

"What'd you say the line was?"

"San Diego minus one."

"What're they giving away money tonight? Gimme ten times Chargers."

"That's fifty dollars," Mickey said.

"I know what it is," Angelo said. "It's not a problem, is it?"

"I guess not," Mickey said. "I mean I usually don't bet that much—"

"Like I said, I'd call my own bookie but he's away this week on vacation—West Palm Beach. So you'll put the bet in for me, right? Just as a favor."

Mickey hesitated, remembering what Chris had told him about not getting involved with the mob, but he couldn't think of a way to say no. Besides, this wasn't really getting involved.

"Yeah, sure," he said. "No problem."

"Good," Angelo said.

"But the thing is," Mickey said, "I don't know what my bookie's line is. I mean, the Chargers might be laying more than one point or—"

"It don't matter," Angelo said, smiling. "I trust you, kid."

About half an hour before kickoff, Mickey called his bookie and put in Angelo's bet. The line had drifted to one and a half points, but it didn't matter because the Seahawks crushed the Chargers 24—zip. Mickey won his own "five time," or twenty-five-dollar bet, but Angelo lost fifty-five bucks—fifty for the bet and five for the bookie's vig.

When Angelo came into the store the next day he didn't mention football. He just bullshitted with Mickey about the cold weather in New York and how he wanted to move to Miami someday.

Ring up Angelo's order, Mickey said, "So, did you see the game last night?" hoping Angelo would hand over the fifty-five bucks.

"Yeah, I saw it," Angelo said. "Tough loss, huh, kid?" Then he said, "So long," and left the store with his shrimp.

At around noon on Wednesday Angelo came into the fish store, wearing a black sweater, black pants, and shiny black shoes.

"Mickey Prada," he said, smiling. "How's my favorite fish man?"

As Mickey filled Angelo's order, Angelo talked about how they should put Reagan's picture on the dollar bill someday and how the city needed to get Koch out of office. He didn't mention anything about football until right before he left when he said, "Don't forget, I'm giving you those Jets-Giants tickets, kid."

Angelo didn't come to the store on Thursday but he showed up on Friday at his usual time. After he ordered his pound of cooked shrimp, he said to Mickey, "Oh, I meant to ask you, you got the lines on Sunday's games?"

"I didn't call yet," Mickey said, hoping Angelo wouldn't want to bet again.

"Yeah? Well, when you do call, put this in for me." Angelo slid a folded-up piece of paper across the counter,

"I was gonna say something to you about that," Mickey said. "I need to pay off my bookie before I can put in any more action for you."

"But the Chargers lost," Angelo said.

"I know," Mickey said.

"So what're you telling me?" Angelo said. "You saying you won't give me a chance to get even?"

"It's not me," Mickey said.

"Look, I don't have time for a headache right now, all right?" Angelo said. "I'm in the middle of taking care of some trouble with this landscaping company. They moved in on our turf and now I have to go and straighten things out. So you can imagine I got more important shit on my mind than some fucking fifty-dollar football bet. So just be a good kid and put this action in for me before you start to get me upset."

Mickey didn't look at the paper until Angelo was gone. Angelo had written down bets for four different games. All together the new bets came to \$138.

Charlie, who had been working at the other end of the store, came over to Mickey and said, "What was that all about?"

"Nothing," Mickey said, and he walked through the doors to the back of the store to be alone.

Mickey didn't know what to do. He didn't want to put in any more action for Angelo, but he didn't want to get stuck for the money, either. If he didn't place the bets and the teams won, Angelo would expect his winnings, and Mickey didn't want to have to pay him out of his own pocket.

Finally Mickey decided to put the bets in. It was only \$138 and Angelo was probably good for it.

On Sunday Mickey rooted for Angelo's teams, but it didn't help. Only one of Angelo's teams won, and he now owed a total of \$140.

Monday afternoon, Angelo came into the store while Charlie was on his lunch break, and there were no other customers around. He told Mickey a story about a friend of his, "another made guy," but he didn't mention anything about the bets. Then, when Mickey was checking out Angelo at the register, Angelo said, "Jesus, I almost forgot," and he reached into the inside pocket of his suit jacket, and Mickey saw the handle of a black handgun sticking out. From behind the gun Angelo removed a folded-up piece of paper.

"I don't care what the lines are," Angelo said, handing the paper to Mickey, "just put this in for me, will ya, kid?"

Angelo left the store, lighting a cigarette like he didn't have a worry in the world. Mickey looked at the sheet of paper:

20 TIMES FALCONS IF OVER

20 TIMES FALCONS

20 TIMES OVER

"Shit," Mickey said.

Including the vig the new bets came to \$330. If the bets lost, Angelo would be \$470 in the hole.

Mickey couldn't afford to lay out so much money—he only had about two thousand dollars in the bank, and that was for expenses while he went to college in the fall—but he knew he had to put the bets in anyway. If the bets won, Angelo would expect his money and Mickey would have no choice but to pay him.

At eight o'clock, Mickey called Artie to find out the line on the game. He had known Artie forever—at least ten years. When Mickey was growing up, his father used to take him to the racetrack almost every Saturday; Artie was one of the regulars at Aqueduct, hanging out on the ground floor under the tote board near the Bagel Nook. Artie wasn't a bookie himself; he worked for a bookie, a guy named Nick whom Mickey had only met a couple of times. In junior high and high school, Mickey hustled football betting sheets for Artie in all of his classes. The sheets had pro and college games with odds stacked heavily in favor of the house. Artie paid Mickey 10 percent on all the profits, which usually meant about fifty bucks a week.

"Line's twelve, forty-three," Artie said. "Been drifting up all day. Everybody loves the 'Skins tonight."

Artie said the phone lines were busy and he couldn't talk long, so Mickey put in Angelo's bets on the Falcons right away.

"Who is this Angelo, anyway?" Artie asked.

Mickey was embarrassed to tell Artie that he barely knew the guy.

"Friend of mine," Mickey said.

"And he has this kind of dough?"

"Yeah," Mickey said confidently.

"If Angelo loses, he knows he's gotta pay by Friday."

"He knows."

"You sure?"

"Sure I'm sure."

That night John Riggins rushed for one hundred yards and the Washington Redskins beat the Atlanta Falcons 27-14. All of Angelo's bets had lost, and now he owed Mickey's bookie 470 bucks.

The next morning Mickey was in a shitty mood. When Mrs. Ruiz came in and said, "You got mussels?" Mickey didn't feel like playing the game, and he snapped, "Of course we got mussels. How much you want?" Distracted the rest of the day, he screwed up a couple of orders—giving a lady fluke fillets instead of flounder fillets, giving some guy butterfish who'd asked for kingfish, filling a bag with mussels instead of clams. Mickey's boss, Harry, warned Mickey to get his head out of his ass or he was going to send him on a "permanent vacation."

Harry Giordano co-owned Vincent's Fish Market with his brother Vincent, who lived in Florida. Harry had a huge beer gut, a thick handlebar mustache, and was one of the biggest morons Mickey had ever met. Mickey figured Vincent must have put up the money for the store, because there was no way Harry could have been smart enough to save up the money to start a business on his own. Besides, it was called Vincent's Fish Market, not Harry's Fish Market, or even Giordano's Fish Market.

When Mickey started working at Vincent's, he didn't think he would last at the job for more than a couple of weeks. Mickey was sensitive about the size of his nose—sometimes he would stare at himself in the three-way mirrors in the dressing room at Alexander's, amazed at how big it was—and Harry always made jokes about it, especially when other people were around. One day a guy was placing an order, and Mickey was talking to someone else and didn't hear what the guy was saying. Harry said, "Hey Pinocchio, take this guy's order." Another time the same thing happened, and Harry said, "Hey Big Bird, get your beak out of the clouds, will ya?" The worst part was that, since Harry was his boss, Mickey could never talk back to him. Mickey was dying to crack jokes about Harry's big beer gut, but Mickey knew Harry would fire him if he did. Mickey could have found some other job, but he was making decent money at the fish store—seven-fifty an hour—and the location was convenient, only six blocks from his house. So every time Harry insulted him, Mickey just ignored it, hoping Harry would eventually get tired of being a dick and leave him alone.

Harry had no schedule. Usually he just came to the store to open and close, but once in a while he stuck around all day.

Today Harry left at about eleven and, since there were hardly any customers in the store, Mickey hung out most of the time, reading the Daily News and talking to Charlie.

At one o'clock, Charlie left for lunch. Then, at around one-fifteen, Angelo strolled in.

"The usual," he said to Mickey. Then he said, "You know what? I think I'll mix it up for once. How're the fried-fish sandwiches?"

"Pretty good," Mickey said.

"Yeah? Lemme get two of 'em," Angelo said.

As Mickey fried the cod fillets on the skillet, he felt the sweat building on his back. He didn't care if Angelo was in the mob and carried a gun. He wanted his 470 bucks.

"About those bets you made," Mickey said to Angelo as he was putting the sandwiches in a paper bag. "You know your figure is up to four-seventy now."

"Is that what it is?" Angelo said casually. "Now I see why you wanna be an accountant—you're good at keeping track of numbers."

Angelo blew his nose into a handkerchief then replaced the handkerchief inside the jacket pocket of his pin-striped suit.

Mickey smiled, only because he was nervous. He didn't think there was anything funny about possibly getting stuck owing \$470.

"Anyway," Mickey said, "I'm kind of short on cash, and I was hoping I could, you know, see some of that money today."

"I'll get you the money," Angelo said. "Don't worry about it. What do you think, I'm a thief?"

Angelo glared at Mickey then he took the bag of fish sandwiches and strutted toward the register. There were a couple of other people on line, but Mickey left them there and walked behind the counter to the front of the store, meeting Angelo.

"Sorry, Angelo, I really am, but I need to know like when you're planning to give me that money. It's not me, it's my bookie. He makes me keep a two-hundred-fifty-dollar pay-or-collect number, and you're already way over it. He said he needs his money by Friday."

"Needs?" Angelo said, his face suddenly pink. "Did I hear you say needs? I don't need to do anything except die. You got that?"

"Yes," Mickey said.

"I said I'll get you the money didn't I?"

"When?"

"When I give it to you," Angelo said.

"No problem," Mickey said. "I don't care one way or another. It's not me, it's just my bookie, like I was saying. I mean to him you're just a name, like any other name and—"

"You tell your bookie, Angelo Santoro makes up the rules when it comes to his bets, and nobody else. Before your bookie sees any money, I want a chance to get even. I'm going to the Knicks game Thursday night. Gimme a hundred times Knicks."

"That's another five hundred fifty dollars," Mickey said.

"I know what the fuck it is," Angelo said.

"I can't put in any more action for you," Mickey said.

"Can't?" Angelo said. "I don't think you heard me right, because I know you wouldn't tell me 'can't.' You better put that action in for me unless you wanna kiss your skinny little ass good-bye."

On Thursday night Mickey wasn't in the mood to go bowling, but he had no choice. Mickey, Chris, and two of Chris's friends, Ralph and Filippo, were in a money league at Gil Hodges Lanes in Canarsie. They each had put up fifty dollars at the start of the season, with a chance to win two hundred apiece if their team won the championship.

Mickey arrived at the bowling alley with his bowling ball, wearing his uniform—an extra-large white T-shirt with the team's name, "The Studs," written in script across the chest. Chris had come up with the team's name, and Mickey always felt like a big idiot whenever he wore the shirt.

Chris, Filippo, and Ralph were waiting for Mickey by the shoe-rental counter. Chris and Filippo worked together, unloading and shelving groceries at Waldbaum's on Nostrand and Kings Highway, and Ralph and Filippo were good friends; but Mickey was only friends with Chris.

Chris used to be a shy, quiet kid who never got into any trouble, then his father took off when he was ten years old. His mother, who'd always liked to drink, became an alcoholic, and Chris started getting into fights at school, getting suspended all the time. One night, during the summer after sixth grade, Chris and some other kids tried to rob a drug store on Avenue U. One kid pulled a knife and slashed the owner's face, and Chris was sent to juvenile detention for two years. When he came out he was still short, but he had big, bulging muscles and he became one of the most popular kids in the neighborhood. He dropped out of high school during eleventh grade when he got the job at Waldbaum's.

Filippo was tall, about six-two, and he'd had the same military-style crew cut since he was a few years old. When he wasn't wearing his Studs T-shirt he dressed like a real cugine, in white tank tops and gold chains. Filippo and Mickey had never gotten along. In kindergarten, Filippo always teased Mickey and he convinced other kids not to like him. In elementary school, whenever Filippo passed Mickey in the hallway, he would slap him on the head or punch him in the arm as hard as he could, and he even beat him up a few times after school. In junior high, Filippo busted the lock on Mickey's locker, just for the hell of it, and one day in gym class he snuck up behind Mickey and pulled down his gym shorts, and all the girls laughed. In high school, Filippo continued to pick on Mickey all the time, and Mickey was glad when Filippo dropped out of school to work with Chris.

Ralph was an older guy, around thirty. Mickey didn't know much about him except that he had done time at Attica for armed robbery and had gotten out about two years ago. He was a big guy, with more fat than muscle, and he had clumps of black hair on his back and shoulders that spread out over the neckline of his Studs T-shirt. His lower lip always hung down, exposing the tip of his tongue and his crooked bottom teeth, and he made gurgling sounds in the back of his throat when he breathed. Ralph was friends with Filippo, so when Chris started hanging out with Filippo he started hanging out with Ralph too. Ralph had never said a word to Mickey, and Mickey had only heard him speak a few times, to Filippo and Chris. Mickey thought there was something seriously wrong with Ralph, but whenever Mickey asked Chris about it, Chris always said, "Nah, Ralph's just like that."

Mickey's bowling average was 145, but he was so distracted in the first game, thinking about his trouble with Angelo, that he only bowled a 97. Afterward, Filippo said to him, "Hey, Mickey Mouse, what's wrong, you got a dick up your ass?"

In the first two frames of the second game, Mickey didn't get a single mark, and in the third frame he threw two gutter balls. After the second ball bounced off the alley Filippo yelled, "That's it! I don't want this faggot on the team no more! He fuckin' stinks!"

Mickey bowled two strikes on his next two balls and ended the game with a respectable 134. Between games, he went into the bathroom.

"You all right tonight, buddy?" Chris said, coming in behind him.

"Fine," Mickey said.

"You sure?" Chris said. "I don't know, you seem kind of out of it. What's the matter, your old man acting up again?"

"Nah, it's not that." Mickey didn't feel like talking about his problem with Angelo, but then he decided it might be good to get some advice.

So Mickey told Chris about the bets he'd put in for Angelo and how much Angelo had lost. When Mickey finished, Chris, who was trying to pop a zit on his forehead in the mirror above the sink, said, "Didn't I tell you to be careful with that guy?"

"That's not the point," Mickey said. "The point is he lost this money and I don't know what the hell to do about it."

"That's a tough one," Chris said. "I mean, on the one hand, the guy owes you the money. On the other hand, you can't fuck with the mob. I guess you gotta pay."

"But I don't have that kind of money."

"What do you mean? I thought you've been putting away."

"No fuckin' way. I've been saving that money for college since I was nine years old. I'm not giving it away now, not for this bullshit."

"Then I guess you gotta hope Angelo comes through," Chris said. "How's my hair look?"

When Chris and Mickey left the bathroom, they passed two girls, walking in the opposite direction. They were wearing tight jeans and tube tops, and their hair was big and frizzy. The odor of their strong perfumes made Mickey nauseous.

"Jesus, you see the knockers on that short one?" Chris said. "What a fuckin' set."

"What if he doesn't pay?" Mickey said.

"What? You don't like that?" Chris said, still staring at the girl.

"I don't have that kind of money to shell out," Mickey said.

"You want to know what I'd do?" Chris said. "I'd sit down and talk to Artie. You know the guy a long time, right? Explain him the situation. Maybe you can work out some sort of payment plan or something. . . . Man, I gotta get laid tonight."

Another girl passed by and Chris turned around to look at her ass.

"Hello, Lucy" he said. The girl kept walking, then he said, "Karen . . . Lisa . . . Amy . . . Barbara . . . Helen . . ."

Finally, the girl turned around, sticking up her middle finger.

"Your name's Helen, I knew it," Chris said. "Marry me, Helen. Come on, have my babies!"

Chris laughed, his tongue hanging out of his mouth.

"Do me a favor," Mickey said, "don't say anything to the other guys about this."

"About what?" Chris said.

"About Angelo," Mickey said.

"Why not?" Chris asked.

"Because I just don't want you to."

"Whatever," Chris said.

Mickey bowled an 89 in the third game, the lowest score on the team. Now if The Studs didn't win next week, there would be no chance of finishing in first place.

While Mickey was turning in his bowling shoes at the counter, he heard Filippo say to Chris, "I don't want that fuckin' faggot on the team no more."

"He'll get better," Chris said.

"He fuckin' sucks," Filippo said. "My grandmother in a wheelchair can bowl better than that pussy."

Ralph was looking at Mickey as if he wanted to kill him, his left eye narrowed and his lower lip hanging down farther than ever.

"Don't worry about them," Chris whispered to Mickey. "They're just fuckin' retards." Then Chris said out loud, "Hey you wanna come out with us tonight? We're gonna hit some tit joints in the city, and then we're gonna cruise the West Side for whores. Come on, if you wanna be on The Studs, you gotta act like one."

"No thanks," Mickey said.

"You're wasting your time," Filippo said to Chris. "I told you a million times, the guy's a fuckin' flame thrower. He saw a naked girl, he wouldn't know what to do with her. Ain't that right, Mick?"

"Have a good time," Mickey said to Chris, and walked away.

Later, driving down Ralph Avenue in his beat-up '76 Pinto, Mickey turned on the radio to an all-news station. The sportscaster came on and said that the Chicago Bulls and their rookie guard Michael Jordan had beaten the Knicks 121-106, meaning that Angelo now owed Mickey's bookie 1,020 bucks.

Mickey pounded the dashboard with the bottom of his fist as he stepped on the gas.