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4,143 words  
(short story)

## Earthy and the Moll

By John D. Harvey

Earthy painted in the humid darkness using a miner's lamp secured to his head and an old kerchief under it to minimize the flow of sweat. Above him on the Route 195 overpass, the cars speeding in and out of Providence created a slight, almost constant vibration in the four massive concrete support pilings where Earthy put the finishing touches on panoramas from another civilization where the dominant species were more plant than mammal.

Though he hadn't visited in a while, he assumed that his depiction of their floating, river-based society remained accurate. Theirs was a relatively static culture.

Gunfire knifed through the damp air and Earthy switched off his headlamp. The freeway overpass marked the border between Providence's fashionably rough-around-the-edges Fox Point area and the just-plain-dangerous Clown Town neighborhood in South Providence.

Earthy ducked behind the pillar, peeking out to see if he would have to make a hasty escape. His hand lay on the edge of

the painting, the colors turning warm and pliant under his fingers.

A hundred yards away, a young woman sprinted around a corner. Her arms pumped wildly as she raced in a straight line toward Earthy. In one hand she held her high-heeled shoes and under her other arm she gripped a plain brown shopping bag.

A great, square mass of a man pursued at an increasing distance.

#

Frank "Fists" Mafodda was 6'7" and weighed 360 pounds. He didn't need math skills to figure out that he wasn't going to catch up with Gino's step-mastering wife. He stopped, drew his gun, spat a Sicilian curse, and aimed. He wasn't a shooter; he was one of Gino's "hands-on" guys.

He squeezed off three shots, aiming at her legs. Gino would kill her anyway, but that was his decision and right. It didn't matter. None of the shots connected.

As Frank re-aimed, he saw some longhaired guy jump out from behind a pillar and grab her. Frank fired again as the guy dragged her behind the freeway support. He had them pinned down.

Frank walked toward them with his gun raised. He didn't hear sirens. Gino probably heard the ruckus and called the cops. They'd ignore any calls from this neighborhood for a while.

Frank circled the cement support at a wide distance and blinked hard. Nothing except a case of painting supplies on the

ground, and the pillar sported a mural of some frigged-out jungle. He couldn't figure it out.

The blood on the ground meant he shot someone.

#

Bullets exploded against the pillar, spraying flecks of concrete. The woman would pass less than a few feet away from Earthy and he didn't think she'd make it farther than that.

"Aw shit," he hissed and jumped into her path. She barreled into his arms as Earthy dove sideways, feeling a hot stinging in his leg and the stiletto points of her shoes connecting with the side of his head.

Earthy struck the unyielding concrete support and his shoulder lit up with white-hot pain. As he leaned against the pillar with bullets exploding around him, Earthy thought a lot about his mortality. Then, he felt that old tingling warmth as he passed through the membrane and fell into daylight and dewy long grass that explored his bleeding face.

The woman became an armful of nails, knees, and elbows. Earthy pushed her away and she jumped to her feet, ready to run, but then stood absolutely still, her mouth wide open and her eyes unblinking as she took in the scenery. Her screams peeled through the jungle, sending flocks of dismayed, orchid-like creatures flying out of the tall trees.

Earthy stood with the fragile care of an arthritic old man. He also looked around. Yep, he distantly thought, hasn't changed

a bit. His leg felt wet and tingled with blossoming pain. He also felt blood trickling down the side of his face and his shoulder throbbed to its own accelerated heartbeat.

The woman's operatic screaming grew ragged and finally stopped. Breathing hard, she slumped to the hard ground, clutching the paper bag to her chest.

"Where...am...I," she panted, shaking.

"Um...you're welcome and I'm sorry."

She just stared at him. Even pale, sweaty, and trembling, she was a looker.

"I'm sorry you're on another planet and you're welcome for saving your life." To her credit, she didn't pass out, though she reacted poorly when a long tuft of grass filched her bracelet.

#

Earthy's studio/home was located on the third floor of an old brick building in Providence's Smith Hill neighborhood. The building owner was an artist running a coffee shop/gallery on the first floor. Unlike Earthy, he wasn't a member of the Providence Street Performers or the PSP.

"We're sort of like a club or trade association," explained Earthy to Maria, the woman he'd rescued. "But most of the members are pretty special...like me."

"Exactly like you?" asked Maria, drinking a chamomile tea.

"Not exactly. We all have our...um...specialties." He shrugged and smiled. She was beyond doubting him after watching an eight-foot tall plant creature dress Earthy's gunshot wound.

"I was probably born with some kind of dormant talent. In the late seventies I was doing photo-realistic paintings in combination with a lot of LSD, and 'shrooms...among other things. It's a good thing I stuck to photo-realism despite the drugs. Cubism would have done permanent damage, I think.

"Anyway, I used to trip out and have these waking dreams about other worlds, so I painted them. I thought the acid made me hallucinate about walking through my painting into these worlds. That was until the day I fell asleep on the other side. I woke up sans LSD and making eye contact with a tree. I go to a lot of places, but that's my favorite place. I have a lot of friends there."

"Okay," she said curtly after a long pause. "Thanks for the tea, and helping me out...uh...and the trip. I'm going now." Maria strode toward the door, clutching the paper sack, while Earthy watched without having a clue what to do.

Maria opened the door and shrieked. Earthy rushed to slam the door, expecting to see thugs with guns. Instead it was Wally Manners, a blind old-time fiddler, and his seeing-eye dog, Popeye. Wally was PSP, too.

"Can't tell you how many times a day that happens," remarked Wally as he stepped through the door, putting his fiddle case

down. He shook his finger at Earthy. "You've been bad." Then he turned toward Maria. "Sit for a while, young lady"

"Wally," said Earthy. "They were gonna kill her and there was no other way. Should I have let her get shot?"

"Naw," replied Wally. "I would'a done the same thing."

"What are you going to do to me?" asked Maria.

"Nothing," said Wally. "Who's gonna believe you?"

"We gotta help. Those guys are going to kill her."

"I'm fine," she said.

"No, you're not," said Wally. "You're just more afraid of us than you are of the guys who shot at you. Which is understandable but not right."

"I understand guns," she said. "I don't understand jumping through graffiti to another fucking planet."

"I don't do graffiti," corrected Earthy.

"What's in the bag?" asked Wally.

"How do you know I'm holding a bag?," she whispered. "You're blind."

"I see just fine," said Wally. "Just not the same way you do."

Maria's shoulders sagged. "I'm Gino Scarpa's girlfriend and I want to send that bastard to jail. I got all the evidence I need in this bag."

#

The Antonacci crime family had tentacles throughout Rhode Island into Southeastern Massachusetts and the Connecticut casinos. Gino Scarpa had been a major lieutenant for the Antonacci's for years. He had survived half a dozen indictments involving three stool pigeons (all dead), five assassination attempts, and three internal feuds over the last ten years.

Maria didn't just want to get her boyfriend. She wanted to get out of the mob life entirely. The idea started as an itch but swelled into a tumor when Gino started trafficking in little Asian girls. On the night Earthy found her trying to outrun bullets, she had been sitting in Gino's car alone while he set up a deal with a Laotian slave trader. In the seat next to her was a bag containing Gino's ledgers for a meeting with his wise guy accountant. On a desperate impulse, she grabbed the books and ran.

#

"Should we call the cops?" asked Wally.

"The Antonacci's have button men in every department," said Maria. "If we call the Providence cops we'll get shot. I was thinking of the FBI. You know, Witness Protection Program. I think they'd set me up for those ledgers."

"Ummmm..." said Earthy, paging through the ledgers. "I don't think the FBI will buy you lunch. According to everything I see here, Gino owns two towing companies, a bar, and a construction company. That's it."

Maria grabbed the books from Earthy and stared at them with tears building in her eyes. "Oh my God," she said with a shaky hand rubbing her brow. "I grabbed the dummy books."

"This just got more complex, didn't it?" asked Wally.

#

Frank Mafodda turned off the car radio as he got closer to his destination. Finding Maria wouldn't be too hard. One of Gino's inside cops took one look at the paintings on the freeway pillar and ID'ed Earthy Molloy. Molloy even matched against the Frank's vague description: late thirties, tall, lots of hair, medium build.

Molloy had pulled permits to paint walls for different festivals and events in downtown. A lot of the permits had different home addresses in crappy neighborhoods; the last one was on Smith Hill.

As he turned onto Douglas Avenue, Frank got his handgun out of the glove box. He parked in front of a coffee shop.

#

Maria saw Frank get out of the car while checking all the windows for the hundredth time in just as many minutes. "We got problems," she said. Earthy joined her to watch a truly huge man heading toward a blue house across the street.

"I lived over there before I got this space," said Earthy.

"Are we looking at the big guy across the street?" asked Wally. Earthy nodded. "He's armed...I'm sure you're stunned."



Mafodda knocked on the door and an old woman answered. After a little chat, the old woman pointed toward the coffeehouse. Mafodda looked right at Earthy and Maria in the window.

"Okay then," said Earthy. "It's time to go." He led Maria toward the back of the house. Wally grabbed the ledgers with Popeye shadowing his shins.

"Do you have a car out back?" she asked.

"No," said Earthy. He ripped white sheet off of the wall to reveal a painting of a door on the plaster.

"Not a chance in hell," said Maria, backing away. Wally put his hand between her shoulder blades and gave Maria a good shove.

#

It was the best plan that Wally and Earthy could think up on short notice. Now that Gino knew about Earthy, it would be a matter of time before they started poking around other PSP matters. No one wanted that.

Wally and Maria waited on the dark edges of a sooty room in the abandoned Royal Little Manufacturing Complex on the North Side of town. The early evening's waning light couldn't snake its way this far into the big brick building. This complex would be demolished in a few weeks. That's why Earthy picked it.

A rickety table and chairs sat in the center of the room. A battery-powered lamp with a dim bulb provided enough light to create a dusty halo in the inky darkness.

"They're here," Wally whispered. "The car just pulled up."

Soon, they heard echoing footfalls. "He's got a half-dozen guys with him," Wally said. "I'm flattered."

"He's not afraid of us," said Maria. "He wants his buddies to see how he deals with a traitor."

#

Mafodda's flashlight beam cut through the murky, dusty air of the old building as he, Gino, and several of Gino's cronies walked to the meeting place. Gino carried leather briefcase containing \$2,000,000.

Starting at Molloy's house, Frank had developed a bona fide hinky feeling. It had been strange when Molloy and Maria vanished like smoke under the highway, but the house had been too bizarre.

When Frank saw Molloy and Maria staring at him on the street, he had run across the street and straight to the back door where he used a knob-lock to secure the door. Then he ran back to the front of the house, busted the door down, busted into Earthy's place on the third floor...and found nothing except a half-eaten hamburger and dog stink. Frank had done this kind of thing a lot and there was no way they could have escaped out the front or back door without being seen. There were no fire escapes.

Even here at the manufacturing complex, it was still hinky. Gino stationed guys all around to see when Maria would come and with who, but they never saw a single person. Yet at the agreed time, Maria called and said she was in the building.

Gino made it clear that he thought his people, and Frank in particular, were getting sloppy. He intended to set an example tonight.

#

Gino and the others entered the small room. Wally sensed the same big guy who chased them down at Earthy's. He was seriously skittish.

"'Ria," called Gino. "You here?"

"I'm here," said Maria, leading Wally out of the corner.

"Who the fuck is that?" asked Gino, grinning at the shoddy blind man and his dog.

"Wally is my friend," said Maria. "He's helping me."

"Where's your other friend?" asked Frank. "The longhair."

"Earthy's someplace else," answered Maria. "He's gonna call the cops if me and Wally don't meet up with him later." Maria and Wally sat down at the table. Gino and a couple other guys sat while the others stood.

"'Ria," said Tony. "I see why you ran off. Your new friends are a step up."

"Fuck you, Gino," said Maria. "Do you have the money?"

Gino regarded Maria with a sleepy, simmering stare. He opened the case and it was crammed with cash. Maria put the ledgers on the table, closed the briefcase, and gave it to Wally. As she and Wally stood, Frank Mafodda produced a gun with surprising speed.

#

Just shoot them, thought Frank. Fuck what the boss said.  
Just shoot them and skip the monologues. He thumbed the hammer back and aimed at Wally. Maria shook a little, but the blind guy was totally cool. His head swiveled and pointed right at Mafodda, like he could see him. The handgun's hammer jittered as Frank applied more pressure to the trigger.

"Frank," said Gino, his hand on the big man's shoulder.  
"Simmer down."

Mafodda relaxed his grip. He had already screwed up two jobs; he had to do this by the book.

#

"What's going on Gino?" said Maria.

"I wanted you to see this money right before I kill you and this blind bastard. The ledgers you took...they got nothing in 'em. They're cleaner than an operating room, you dumb little bitch."

"I know," said Maria quietly. "I knew all along."

Gino's brow furrowed. "Huh?"

"Boss...?" said Frank, squeezing the trigger. Beads of sweat formed on his upper lip.

#

Who's faster? That was the big question on Wally's mind.

Wally swung the case at the lamp...the bulb shattered instantly...a bullet hissed by his ear...and with the case in one

hand, he dragged Maria out of the room at a sprint. Behind him, he heard yelling and wild gunshots.

#

After his first shot, Mafodda dug into his pocket for the flashlight. Al Dinapoli and some guy Frank knew as Louie "Scars" pulled their weapons and kept firing.

"Cut the shit!" screamed Gino. "You're gonna shoot me before you shoot them." Dinapoli and Scars laid off and Frank shined the flashlight around the room. Big, soupy lava-lamp patterns swam in his vision because of the muzzle flashes.

"We should split up and get 'em," said one of the others.

"I got the only flashlight," noted Frank.

"Don't worry," growled Gino. "I got this place surrounded. I'm a 'just-in-case' kind of guy. Good thing for Frank here." The muscles around Frank's jaw rippled.

From only a few rooms away, they heard a flurry of steps and a muffled yelp...a woman's voice. "Come on," said Gino. "Let's wrap this up."

#

Earthy heard the gunshots while using a modeling brush to add fine details to the brick surface.

This project had taken longer than he thought it would; he'd never painted on a deadline before. It was humid which was okay—for some reason this stuff worked better when the paint was a little tacky.

#

"Can't we go faster?" whispered Maria.

"We can't lose them," said Wally. "If they wander off the wrong way we're screwed." Wally heard shuffling footsteps behind them. He tugged Maria toward a flight of stairs. "Be careful." She dug her nails into his arm.

"They're getting close. I can see the flashlight."

"We're fine. Be careful of the stairs."

Maria and Wally started down the stairs with Frank gaining fast. Wally felt Maria tilt as she went off balance. She tensed instantly and fell, dragging Wally down twenty steps with her. She screamed and Wally wasn't stoic enough to hold back his own coughing yelp as they landed in a tangled heap. Only Popeye wasn't dragged down with them.

"My leg..." Marie wept, her voice fraying with panic. "I think I broke my leg." They both heard footsteps pounding toward them.

"Come on." Wally dragged her up and took most of her weight on his shoulder. "It's probably just a bad sprain. We can do this." Another ear-splitting explosion filled the stairwell and splinters of brick peppered Wally's face.

#

Earthy heard Maria scream. Whatever was happening back there, he couldn't help. He finished some touch up work near the floor. Won't get better than this, he thought.

He stuffed his gear in a burlap sack and buried it in a pile of rags. Holding only a small paint scraper, he concealed himself behind a stack of old boxes next to his latest creation and waited.

#

Popeye scouted ahead of them, whimpering impatiently. Maria struggled to walk, but Wally did most of the work. Ahead of them, Wally sensed the narrow staircase that was their destination. "Not far now," he grunted. Maria sobbed.

When Wally and Maria were still ten feet from the top of the stairs, he sensed that it would be moments before the huge mobster had a clear shot. We're not going to make it, he thought. Popeye brushed past them at a sprint, heading back the way they had come. "No Popeye!" shouted Wally. There was the sound of padded feet rushing up stairs and then chainsaw growling.

#

The dog slipped under Mafodda's flashlight beam, lunged, and locked its jaws on his gun arm, thrashing and driving sharp teeth deeper into Frank's forearm. Frank beat at the dog with his flashlight and battered its head against the wall. It was hard to tell if the blood was his or the dog's.

A shot went off and the animal slumped to the ground. Gino grabbed the flashlight from Frank. He held a smoking snub nose pistol. "You can thank me later," said Gino, glaring. "Now get to the back of the line." Frank tested his gun arm while Gino and

the others passed him. It hurt, but he could still shoot. If he wanted to live much longer, he had a notion he might have to do some shooting of his own after the boss's bimbo and the blind guy were dead.

#

Wally pulled Maria down the last flight of steps. The stairs terminated in a small room, probably a supply closet at one time. Wally dropped Maria behind the stairs and pulled a canvas sheet over them. "You gotta stay quiet," he whispered. Maria, after a few seconds of struggling, stifled her sobs.

#

Gino fumed as he went down the rest of the stairs. Nothing had gone right. His bitch stole from him. His best enforcer couldn't kill a painter or a blind guy. Two million of his dollars were running away.

Rounding the corner of the last flight of stairs, Gino saw an open doorway. Bright moonlight streamed in and he could see a grassy lot. Shit, he thought. They got outside.

#

Frank followed the others and swore when he saw the open door leading out of the factory. He pulled the hammer back on the gun and figured he'd kill Gino outside, take out as many as he could after that, and run for it...or die. He figured his odds were a hundred to one, which was better than zero if he waited for Gino to have him shot in bed.



The other men ran through the door with their guns drawn. Frank stopped just short of going outside, figuring the doorway would make good cover when the shooting started. The white-hot moonlight made it easy to draw a bead on Gino's bald, shiny head.

It was overcast when we came in here, he thought, seeing how bright it was outside. It was going to rain. Then he noticed that there was no city out there. It was all trees and two big moons loomed high in the sky.

#

Earthy slammed into Mafodda for his first ever football-style tackle. It was like trying to knock over a telephone post. Still, Mafodda was off guard and staggered forward through the door, landing on one knee.

Earthy landed face first on the ground, half in and half out the door, which was bad. He watched Mafodda get up, turn, and stare at Earthy lying on the threshold of a door that floated in the middle of a big field. The other gangsters, recovering from the initial shock, turned to run back to more familiar territory. Rage pulled Frank's lips back against his teeth and he raised his gun. At the same time, Earthy felt hands grab his ankles and drag him backwards.

With his head barely inches inside the doorway, he lunged at the painting with the scraper at the same time Frank's gun fired. Earthy watched a thin sheet of paint peel away from the wall and

land on the floor, and something that felt like a large, angry bug whizzed by his ear and shattered a bone in his calf.

Then it was quiet.

For a long time, the three of them remained absolutely still. Earthy lay on his stomach biting his lip in pain. Wally sat behind him, holding Earthy's ankles. Maria sobbed under the stairs.

Earthy eventually turned on his electric lamp to reveal the doorway he had painted at the bottom of the stairs.

It was completely solid now that a chunk of it was missing. In the painting, they saw a rendering of five terrified men rushing back to the door. A bald man had fallen to the ground and reached out to them, screaming, but no one showed a sign of going back. Frank "Fists" Mafodda filled most of the doorway, feral with rage, pointing his gun at them. The surrounding trees leaned toward them with extended, clutching branches.

#

Earthy sat in his apartment with his leg raised. He would eventually recover from being shot twice in the same leg, but it would take time.

Wally rapped on the door and came in. He had a key so Earthy didn't have to get up. "How's it feeling?" Wally asked.

"Hurts," said Earthy. "Drugs help."

"They always do," said Wally, grinning. "Maria gone?"

"Yeah. She stayed here last night, but hobbled out this morning before I woke up." Maria's broken leg had in fact turned out to be a badly sprained ankle. With some icing and about five Advil tablets, the swelling had come down and her mobility went up...more than Earthy expected.

"I guess Gino's still got friends in town who could come looking for her. Are we okay?"

"I think so," said Earthy. "As far as anyone is concerned, I'm just some artist who helped her under the highway. Now that Gino and his gang are missing, everyone probably thinks she fell in with another family and had them killed. I don't think we're on anyone's radar. They'll go after Maria." Earthy grimaced.

"Don't look so worried, Eagle Scout," said Wally. "She's got plenty of cash to get away. Start a new life. Change her looks."

"Not as much as you think." Earthy reached under his chair and pulled out an old paint box. "I hadn't used this in years, but I found it on the kitchen table this morning." He opened the top and it was filled with cash.

"Ummm...?"

"About a million," answered Earthy. "You wanna go downstairs for a bagel and coffee. I'm buying."

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