

Fiction

The Rough Boys

By Harlan Ellison


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Vince and Terry had to go underground after they'd iced the fink. They had been hired in from Detroit to help Gongo and the outfit. Hired to put the silence on a creep named Robbison; they'd done it; smooth, nice, like always.

Two days after they'd left the 707 at JFK, they'd bushwhacked Robbison in a midtown parking lot and blown him all over a brick wall with .357 Magnum efficiency.

The job was done, but the payment was forthcoming. It wasn't a matter of doublecross—Gongo knew better than that and he always paid off promptly for a job properly done—but Vince and Terry had gotten word the D.A. was really pissed-off about this one: Robbison had been ready to spill. So ... underground.

Vince and Terry were professionals, they could see the big picture: hot cop breath down Gongo's neck from an anxious D.A. and the cooling had come just in time. So *much* in time, perhaps, that the D.A. saw a beautiful indictment going up in smoke. So the heat was on.

Gongo couldn't take a chance on sending someone over with the payoff, and they couldn't telephone him because the line was probably spooked. So it was a matter of staying here in this greasy Broadway furnished room till the word came through that the heat was off.

It wouldn't be much longer, they knew, but still, being cooped up with just each other—meals being sent in with the papers—was making Vince and Terry jumpy.

"How far'd you get with that MacElhone girl?" Vince said, from the broken-down armchair.

"Far? She wouldn't know from far. A real dummy, that one," Terry answered from the bed. He grinned and waved all thoughts of the girl from his head.

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"Far, schmar, I couldn't wish any harder that she was here, locked up with us for a week or so. It'd kill the time a little better than two-handed poker, which is abysmal, and reading these miserable paperbacked novels." He kicked at a stack of badly-thumbed books on the floor.

They looked alike, in the smooth, efficient way all syndicate assassins looked smooth and efficient.

Vince was tall and slim; dark, wavy hair and an unlined, almost adolescent face. He looked more like a college senior than a hired killer. He wore a charcoal-gray, single-breasted Brooks Brothers suit, with a white button-down shirt, conservative gray rep tie and black shoes.

Terry was darker-complexioned, but his hair was almost blond. He wore turtle-shell glasses, and had a tiny white scar at the corner of his mouth. He had gotten it in Nam, shortly before he'd cut away seven men in a bunker with a flame thrower. He had won a medal for that. He wore a charcoal-gray, single-breasted Brooks Brothers

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suit, with a white button-down shirt, conservative blue challis tie, and black shoes.

Neither one looked like what he was. A paid killer. But they earned their money, and had been doing so, in Vince's case for eight years, and in Terry's for five. They were the top rough boys in the syndicate's stable, and they knew it.

There wasn't anyone in the organization who would dispute it. For this reason, they wore their handsome composesures as they wore their suits: almost as if they had been born with them; pressed, sharp, and casual.

Vince sighed deeply, smacked his lips loudly. "Want to take a chance on seeing a movie?" He looked over at Terry on the bed.

Terry bit the inside of his cheek, swung his legs off the bed and sat up. "Don't know," he said slowly, thoughtfully. "Might not be a bad idea. Take the edge off us, at any rate. Anything good in the neighborhood?"

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"We can always hop the subway to Times Square if there isn't," Vince reminded, turning to the movie pages of the *Daily News*. He caught Terry's shake of the head with the corner of his eye.

"Uh-uh," said Terry, reaching over to the bureau for his cigarettes. "No sense fouling it up now. We can wait. If there's anything good up the block, we'll take it in. If not—" he waved his hand in resignation, "—then it's another night of playing ostrich."

Vince agreed in silence. "Here's a Wayne flick at Loew's 83rd. That's just up in the next block. Supposed to be a pretty fair piece of work, cops and robbers thing, not a Western."

Terry shook his head, blowing a thin plume of smoke at the floor between his feet. "Saw it in Detroit. Lousy picture."

Vince nodded understanding, turned his attention back to the newspaper. A minute later he said, "Place called the Thalia on 95th off Broadway. They've got Fernandel in *The Sheep Has Five Legs* and something else with Trintignant. I suppose this is one of those little art theaters where they serve black coffee in the lobby.

"I'd like to take those in. I'm getting sick of shoot-'em-ups."

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Terry looked up with frank amusement on his face. "Violence doesn't agree with you, right?"

Vince smiled, tossing a mock blow at his companion. "Don't push me, friend. You want to go or not? If you're too lowbrow, say so now and I'll go edjakate myself alone."

Terry chuckled deep in his throat, got off the bed.

They were very literate, these ex-college boys turned professional. Their tastes were very refined.

"Sounds okay to me," said Terry. He walked over to the mirror, began tightening his tie. "What if we get spotted?"

He asked the question absently, bending over to get a clear spot in the mirror. The quicksilver had worn off its back, and leprous spots covered most of the glass.

"What if we get spotted?" he heard Vince repeat. He saw Vince's reflection in the mirror as it dipped a hand to its belt. The reflection came up with a .32 with smoked sights. "Then we get *unspotted*. Like Gongo said the other night, we're real rough boys." He smiled boyishly.

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"That clod," Terry replied, grinning back, pulling the knot high between the points of his collar.

"He's not far wrong though. We *are* rough," Vince persisted, carrying the gag a bit.

"Well, *bang bang!*" joked Terry, making a gun with his left hand, straightening the tie with his right. "Yeah. Rough. Now will you *please* get your goddamn coat on so we can go see some Fernandel?"

On a slab downtown, a guy named Robbison lay caked with his own blood—let out through eight direct hits in his chest and face.

* * * *

They walked slowly down Broadway, back toward 82nd Street. Keeping to the shadows, smoking carelessly, their nubby tweed topcoats collared-up, their heads bare, conversing casually. Typical. Two typical men walking on Broadway.

"Good show," said Terry, lighting a cigarette.

"Mmm," Vince agreed. Then he changed the subject quickly:

"Lord, but I'm hungry. Want to stop in at Schrafft's?"

Terry shot him a quick glance, the smoke from his cigarette blowing back in a fine, vaporous trail. "You must be losing your mind. That's the second time tonight you've suggested something as ridiculous as that. Why don't we just walk into the 20th precinct station and turn ourselves—"

"Okay, okay!" Vince cut him off with a smile. "Sorry, my stomach blocks off my brain sometimes.

"But listen, it's too late for anyone at that flea circus to go out for us. They all go off at ten. We'll have to wait till tomorrow morning, and frankly, friend, you know what a splitting headache I get when I'm hungry. In fact," he said, licking his lips in seriousness, "I'm starting to throb a little right now."

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They turned into a crosstown street—88th, it was—toward Amsterdam. As if the talk about being spotted had driven them off the main artery.

The streets were almost pitch-black, with the feeble yellow of a distant lamppost casting a watery pool of light on the front of a tenement halfway up the block.

The wind had risen off the Hudson, was whispering up the hill into the crosstown streets. Vince and Terry hunched lower in their topcoats. A young boy was sitting on the tenement's steps, hunched forward, toying with an identification bracelet on his right wrist, his hands down between his legs.

The boy looked in their direction, and his head came up abruptly. He stared at the two men as they approached. Terry nudged Vince with an elbow. "There's our bus boy," he said.

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"Should have thought of that myself," Vince grinned back. They walked toward the boy.

He seemed to be about seventeen, short for his age, with a face full of blemishes. His cheekbones were hardly noticeable, and his mouth was a tight, thin line. His hair was black and long. He slouched easily in the tight-fitting blue jeans and Ike jacket, and continued to finger the chain bracelet on his wrist.

He watched them carefully as they moved in on him.

"Want to earn yourself five bucks?" Terry asked, leaning against the stone railing of the stairway. The kid looked up at him with caution in his eyes.

"On the up-and-up," Vince added, moving closer. "All we want is for you to pick us up some food."

"Maybe," the kid said shortly.

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“Okay,” Terry said, sitting down next to the boy. He took a long, thin leather wallet from an inside jacket pocket, and drew a pen from the holder within. He scribbled something on a piece of paper. “Here's the address.”

He handed the paper to the boy; the kid took it without hardly noticing it. The boy stuck out his hand. “Dough,” he said. Terry looked at Vince; this kid was a quiet one.

Terry fished out a five-dollar note, tore it neatly in half. He stuck one half back in the wallet, gave the other to the boy. “You got any money of your own?” he asked the kid.

“A couple bucks,” the kid said warily.

Terry gave him three dollars more. “Use your two bucks, and these, and you get the other half of that fiver when you show. We only gave you three, so it's worth your while to bring the stuff—that way you make two more on the deal.”

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“What if it runs more than three bucks?” the kid asked.

“Pay for the balance out of your money. Bring along a check, and we'll give you the difference—plus the other half of the five. Okay?”

The kid nodded his head silently for a moment, then, “Okay. What do you want?”

They gave the boy the order—a couple of grilled cheeses, beer, slaw—and moved on. They looked back as they turned the corner onto Amsterdam. The kid was already gone. The steps were empty.

* * * *

Time seemed to have contracted. They were back in the dismal room, brown stains on the wallpaper near the ceiling, from someone's radiator on the floor above. They were back in the same positions they had been in hours ago.

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Terry was in his stocking feet, stretched out on the bed with eyes closed and a curling pillar of smoke rising from his cigarette.

Vince slouched in the ratty, overstuffed armchair, one leg thrown over its worn and padded arm: he was still reading the *News*. "We should have bought the *Times*," he said to the room in general.

Sounds of cars passing in the street below floated to their ears. The shades were pulled down, and because of the stiff spring breeze from the river, the windows were tightly closed.

Signs of previous meals were scattered about the room in the form of paper cups and plates.

"Kid's late," Terry remarked, around the cigarette. His voice was a toneless statement. He didn't bother opening his eyes.

"Yeah, I know," Vince replied, letting the paper fold itself onto the floor. He sat up in the chair. "Well, looks like you're out of a fiver—"

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The sentence was left hanging. The knock came twice, softly. Terry snapped upright, his .32 in his hand, the cigarette dumping ashes on his pants.

Vince was out of the chair, back flattened against the wall next to the door, pistol ready. The knock came again, more urgently this time. They waited. If it was anyone that they wanted in the room, okay, let *them* make the first move.

"Hey!" It was the kid's voice. "Hey! Better open up. This crap is gettin' cold!" Vince tossed a smile over his shoulder, shoved the .32 into his belt, moved to unbolt the door.

"Guess we misjudged the kid," he said.

He turned the key, threw the bolt, and let the door open on its own. The kid appeared in the doorway, holding a paper bag at an awkward angle. "Hot," he explained, starting to come in.

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He shoved the door open completely with his foot, took three quick steps that brought him next to Terry, and suddenly there were six boys in the room.

They stepped in quickly, all of them, as though they were on strings. Another instant and the door was closed, locked, bolted. They stood in a row, backs to the door.

Terry had started to bring the gun up as they stepped into the room. As the revolver rose, the kid with the bag dropped it on Terry's hand. The coffee was scalding—he screamed with the pain.

The kid chopped down with his free hand, and the gun dropped to the rug. The boy scooped it up, took a step back, and made a queer shaking movement with his arm. He shook the arm toward the floor.

A knife dropped into his hand. An instant later the blade was switched open, the tip slightly denting the smooth skin of Terry's

neck. "Don't like guns," he explained. "They wake people." The knife hand was steady and rigid.

Vince stood petrified, so suddenly had it all happened. Now abruptly he was galvanized into action. His hand yanked the .32 from his waistband, and the gun swung in an arc. "Get away from him!" he snapped, pointing the revolver at the kid's.

"So shoot, sharp guy," the kid said, leaning a bit toward Terry. The knife dented the skin even more; an angry spot of red appeared beneath the point. "So shoot, and your *compañero* gets my steel in his windpipe." His blemished face broke into a thin sneer.

The other five boys laughed. Vince started to swivel the gun in their direction, but a boy wearing an ornate poncho stepped out of the line and brought a bottle down across his wrist.

The gun hit the floor, and another boy scooped it up, shoving it into his pocket. The click of its opening was clear in the room.

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"Whatta ya think, Rafe? They holding?" The boy addressed the question to the blemish-faced kid holding his knife at Terry's throat.

"What do you want?" Terry gasped, his face dead white, his body leaning away from the first boy's knife.

"Man," said Rafe, "when I saw that wad you was toting, I knew you was the ripest ever. I don't know what you two dudes got hiding in here, but I know you got enough chips to keep us happy for a long while. Cough!"

Terry looked across at Vince. He knew the message the other man's eyes were screaming: *What the hell is going on here? We're grown men—we're paid to handle people—and these are a bunch of kids. We're supposed to be rough boys, so why the hell are we letting them do this to us?*

"Okay, kids," said Terry, starting to rise. "This is it. Pile out of here before we sic the cops on you, or tan your tails ourselves."

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The first boy placed his hand against Terry's chest, shoved hard. Terry fell over onto the bed. "Sit down, hard rock. We'll tell you when to talk."

"Hey, Rafe," said one of the boys, from the clothes closet. "I think I found this one's roll." He came out of the closet, carrying Vince's wallet. He opened it before the rest of the gang, took out a sheaf of bills.

Rafe whistled. "Nice, nice! How much there?"

The other boy continued counting. In a moment he looked up. "Seems to be eight hundred bucks."

The other four boys whistled, almost in unison.

One of them advanced on Vince, backing him against the wall.

"Who *are* you, buddy? What're you doin' holed-up in here?"

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Vince shot a sharp look at Terry. It didn't seem real, this entire scene. Here they were, the two top men in the syndicate kill-squad, held at bay by a half-dozen street punks.

"What makes you think we're holed-up, you little snotnosed..."

The kid's hand came up, arced across and caught Vince a vicious crack under the eye. Vince slid along the wall, came into contact with the radiator, and straightened up quickly, his face flame-red.

"You lousy little bastard!" he yelled, reaching for the boy.

Before he could reach the kid, two of the others were on him. In a minute—a minute of leather gloves filled with coins and the sharp edge of flattened hands—Vince was stretched on the dirty carpet, his head bleeding.

Rafe stepped away from the bed, gave Vince a kick in the side of the head. He rolled, and the bleeding got worse.

"Real rough character," Rafe said. "Real rough."

"Look, kid, what the hell do you want with us? You've got our money, now why don't you beat it?" Terry's face had hardened, the scar at his mouth standing out in sharp white relief.

"We only got *part* of your money, *pocho*. You got a wallet too. I saw it, remember?" He stepped back to the bed, hand outstretched.

Terry reached into the inner pocket of his jacket, hung on the bedpost, and handed the boy his wallet. "Now scram, will you?"

"Rafe," said one of the other boys, "I don't dig the way this *cabrón* talks to us."

He stepped over and flat-handed Terry across the mouth, twice. The syndicate man's head snapped back, and cracked against the bedpost.

Vince made a mewling sound from the floor. He started to sit up. One of the boys moved toward him, stepping carefully, bringing his booted foot back for a vicious kick.

"Nix!" said Rafe. "Let him be."

Vince got up, clutching his bleeding face, staggered to the big chair and fell into it. "Now," said Rafe, "how about telling us who you are."

Terry looked at Vince. The other assassin was doubled over in the chair, trying to stop the flow of blood with an initialed handkerchief. "W-we're two buyers from a company in Detroit—" he began, but Rafe cut him off.

"With guns? Nah, that don't figure—not even a little bit."

Bubbling sounds came from Vince. "We're rough boys from the syndicate," he mumbled, with sarcasm still coming through.

One of the other boys stumbled back against the closet door, clutching himself as he shook with laughter. "Oh, *no!* Dig *them*, will ya!" The others all laughed.

Abruptly, Terry felt the fear and humiliation that had come with these kids mount to a frenzy point. He had never been held down like this—not since he was a kid himself. And it wasn't going to happen now.

With one fluid movement he was off the bed, slamming into Rafe as hard as he could. The knife went into the air and he caught it on the fly, stepping back and dragging the boy in front of him.

It was a calculated move, and one that would have worked had Rafe not brought his booted foot down as hard as he could on Terry's instep.

The assassin howled, and Rafe spun around quickly, his hand darting out. Two straightened, stiff fingers, close together, went into Terry's windpipe, and the syndicate man's eyes went glazed.

He started to fall back, clawing at the air.

Rafe chopped again, and the knife dropped to the floor.

"You little punks!" Vince screamed, and was out of the chair, fists doubled, about to strike.

A boy moved in swiftly, tripped Vince as he started toward Rafe. Rafe picked up the knife.

Another boy whipped Vince's gun out of his pocket, leveled it. "You're more trouble than you're worth," he said evenly. "Who gives a damn *who* you are!"

He fired once, carefully. The bullet caught Vince just below the collarbone, spun him hard. He dropped to his knees, and the boy fired again. The second bullet shattered Vince's right cheek. Rafe watched silently.

Vince spat twice, blood spilling down the front of his white button-down shirt. He moaned off-key, and pitched onto his face, twitching.

The boy fired again.

"You're making a helluva racket," Rafe said slowly.

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"Yeah, loud, ain't it?" the other boy answered.

"Now we'll have to check out," Rafe said resignedly.

Terry stepped toward them, his eyes wide. "Vince..." he began.

Rafe turned carefully, and thrust the knife into Terry's stomach.

The syndicate man settled onto the blade, then pitched sidewise with a muffled shriek. He slid off the blade, clutching his stomach, fell into a heap next to Vince.

"Like *that*, you should waste them," Rafe explained to the boy with the gun.

"Not noisy like you done." The other boy nodded his head solemnly.

They heard doors opening in the building, down the hall.

"Fire escape here," one of the boys announced, opening a window.

"Let's go!"

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They began piling out the window, clanking down the fire escape and vanishing in the night. Rafe was the last to leave, the captain remaining on the bridge till the last moment. He thrust one leg over the sill, then stopped.

He turned his head and looked back into the room, at the carnage. It was starting to smell warm and nasty, like old, bad beer. There was a thumping from the hall and then something hit the door, bowed it slightly as someone tried to break in.

Rafe grinned down at the two bodies. Terry's eyes were open, staring past Rafe at the ceiling. The boy snapped the lock on his knife, breaking it smoothly and almost in the same motion sliding it back up his sleeve where a leather thong snugged it against his forearm.

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“If I'd known you were so tough, I never woulda fucked with you,” he said, stepping out onto the fire escape and carefully closing the window.

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