

A SMALL ROOM IN KOBOLDTOWN

by Michael Swanwick

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“I was an unpublished gonnabe writer back in 1977 when the first issue of Isaac Asimov’s Science Fiction Magazine appeared. Since it came out during a convention that Asimov attended, I joined the little throng that materialized about him in the hallway to get his autograph on the cover. Because I was nobody in particular and rather acutely aware of it, I was last in line. So it was just we two when the convention’s guest of honor, a writer who had rocketed up out of nowhere, but whose name I won’t mention, passed by, surrounded by sycophants and well wishers. ‘Look at that,’ Asimov said quietly, handing me back my magazine. ‘A year ago, everybody was saying, “Who is So-and-So?” And ten years from now, they’re all going to be saying, “Who is Isaac Asimov?” “ ‘Oh, bullshit!’ I said reflexively. But Asimov didn’t hear me. He was staring off into the future at his oncoming oblivion. “I realized then that if I tiptoed away immediately, I could always claim to be the man who said ‘Bullshit!’ to Isaac Asimov and left him speechless. So I did. “It’s been thirty years and in this one respect I proved a better prophet than the master. He isn’t forgotten—far from it. Not only are his books still in print, but every month the magazine that bears his name comes out and is read everywhere. I have yet to hear anybody pick it up and ask, ‘Who is Isaac Asimov?’” —Michael Swanwick

The author has just finished writing his latest book, *The Dragons of Babel*—excerpts from which have been published in Asimov’s as “The Word That Sings the Scythe” (October/November 2004), “An Episode of Stardust” (January 2006), “Lord Weary’s Empire” (December 2006), and now “A Small Room in Koboldtown.” Michael tells us, “One chapter from the end, my wife Marianne was convinced that it was all going to end miserably, as so many of my stories do. Imagine her surprise when she discovered that it all comes out happily. No, really. An honest-to-gosh happy ending. Honest. I mean it.”

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That winter, Will le Fey held down a job working for a haint politician named Salem Toussaint. Chiefly, his function was to run errands while looking conspicuously solid. He fetched tax forms for the alderman’s constituents, delivered stacks of documents to trollish functionaries, fixed L&I violations, presented boxes of candied john-the-conqueror root to retiring secretaries, absent-mindedly dropped slim envelopes containing twenty-dollar bills on desks. When somebody important died, he brought a white goat to the back door of the Fane of Darkness to be sacrificed to the Nameless Ones. When somebody else’s son was drafted or went to prison, he hammered a nail in the nkisi nkonde that Toussaint kept in the office to ensure his safe return. He canvassed voters in haint neighborhoods like Ginny Gall,

Beluthahatchie, and Diddy-Wah-Diddy, where the bars were smoky, the music was good, and it was dangerous to smile at the whores. He negotiated the labyrinthine bureaucracies of City Hall. Not everything he did was strictly legal, but none of it was actually criminal. Salem Toussaint didn't trust him enough for that.

One evening, Will was stuffing envelopes with Ghostface while Jimi Begood went over a list of ward-heelers with the alderman, checking those who could be trusted to turn out the troops in the upcoming election and crossing out those who had a history of pocketing the walking-around money and standing idle on election day or, worse, steering the vote the wrong way because they were double-dipping from the opposition. The door between Toussaint's office and the anteroom was open a crack and Will could eavesdrop on their conversation.

"Grandfather Domovoy was turned to stone last August," Jimi Begood said, "so we're going to have to find somebody new to bring out the Slovaks. There's a vila named—"

Ghostface snapped a rubber band around a bundle of envelopes and lofted them into the mail cart on the far side of the room. "Three points!" he said. Then, "You want to know what burns my ass?"

"No," Will said.

"What burns my ass is how you and me are doing the exact same job, but you're headed straight for the top while I'm going to be stuck here licking envelopes forever. And you know why? Because you're solid."

"That's just racist bullshit," Will said. "Toussaint is never going to promote me any higher than I am now. Haints like seeing a fey truckle to the Big Guy, but they'd never accept me as one of his advisors. You know that as well as I do."

"Yeah, but you're not going to be here forever, are you? In a couple of years, you'll be holding down an office in the Mayoralty. Wouldn't surprise me one bit if you made it all the way to the Palace of Leaves."

"Either you're just busting my chops, or else you're a fool. Because if you meant it, you'd be a fool to be ragging on me about it. If Toussaint were in your position, he'd make sure I was his friend, and wherever I wound up he'd have an ally. You could learn from his example."

Ghostface lowered his voice to a near-whisper. "Toussaint is old school. I've got nothing to learn from a glad-handing, pompous, shucking-and-jiving—"

The office door slammed open. They both looked up.

Salem Toussaint stood in the doorway, eyes rolled up in his head so far that only the whites showed. He held up a hand and in a hollow voice said, "One of my constituents is in trouble."

The alderman was spooky in that way. He had trodden the streets of Babel for so many decades that its molecules had insinuated themselves into his body through a million feather-light touches on its bricks and railings, its bars and brothel doors, its accountants' offices and parking garages, and his own molecules had in turn been absorbed by the city, so that there was no longer any absolute distinction between the two. He could read Babel's moods and thoughts and sometimes—as now—it spoke to him directly.

Toussaint grabbed his homburg and threw his greatcoat over his arm. "Jimi, stay here and arrange for a lawyer. We can finish that list later. Ghostface, Will—you boys come with me."

The alderman plunged through the door. Ghostface followed.

Will hurried after them, opening the door and closing it behind him, then running to make up for lost time.

Ghostface doubled as Toussaint's chauffeur. In the limo, he said, "Where to, Boss?"

"Koboldtown. A haint's been arrested for murder and we got to get him off."

"You think he was framed?" Will asked.

"What the fuck difference does it make? He's a voter."

Koboldtown was a transitional neighborhood with all the attendant tensions. There were lots of haints on the streets, but the apartment building the police cars were clustered about had sprigs of fennel over the doorway to keep them out. Salem Toussaint's limousine pulled up just in time for them to see a defiant haint being hauled away in rowan-wood handcuffs. The beads at the ends of his duppy-braids clicked angrily as he swung his head around. "I ain't done nothin'!" he shouted. "This is all bullshit, you fuckers! I'mna come back an' kill you all!" His eyes glowed hellishly and an eerie blue nimbus surrounded his head; clear indicators that he'd been shooting up crystal goon. Will was surprised the haint was even able to stand.

The limo came to a stop and Will hopped out to open Salem Toussaint's door. Toussaint climbed ponderously out and stopped the guards with an imperious gesture. Then he spoke briefly with their captive. "Go quietly, son. I'll see you get a good lawyer, the best money can buy." Will flipped open his cell, punched a number, and began speaking into it in an earnest murmur. It was all theater—he'd dialed the weather and Jimi Begood had doubtless already engaged a defender—but, combined with Toussaint's presence, it calmed the haint down. He listened carefully as the alderman concluded, "Just don't get yourself killed, that's the important thing. Understand?"

The haint nodded.

In the lobby, two officers were talking with the doorman. All three stiffened at

the sight of haints walking in the door, relaxed when they saw Will restoring the twigs of fennel, and smiled with relief as they recognized Toussaint. It all happened in a flicker, but Will saw it. And if he noticed, how could his companions not? Nevertheless, the alderman glided in, shaking hands and passing out cigars that the police acknowledged gratefully and stowed away in the inside pockets of their coats. “What’s the crime?” he asked.

“Murder,” said one of the cops.

Toussaint whistled once, low and long, as if he hadn’t already known. “Which floor?”

“Second.”

They waited for the elevator, though the stairs were handy and it would have been faster to walk. Salem Toussaint would no more have climbed those stairs than he would have driven his own car. He made sure you understood what a big mahoff he was before he slapped you on the back and gave your nice horse a sugar cube. As the doors opened, Toussaint turned to Ghostface and remarked, “You’re looking mighty grim. Something the matter?”

Ghostface shook his head stiffly. He stared, unblinking, straight ahead of himself all the way to their destination.

There were two detectives in the frigid apartment, both Tylwyth Teg, golden-skinned and leaf-eared, in trench coats that looked like they had been sent out to be professionally rumped. They turned, annoyed, when the cop standing guard at the door let the three of them in, then looked resigned as they recognized the alderman.

“Shulpae! Xisuthros!” Toussaint slapped backs and shook hands as if he were working the room at a campaign fundraiser. “You’re looking good, the both of you.”

“Welcome to our humble crime scene, Salem,” Detective Xisuthros said. He swept a hand to take in the room: One window, half open, with cold winter air still flowing in through it. Its sill and the wall beneath, black with blood. The burglar bars looked intact. A single dresser, a bed, a chair that had been smashed to flinders. A dribble of blood that led from the window to a tiny bathroom with the door thrown wide. “I should have known you’d show up.”

A boggart sprawled lifeless on the bathroom floor. Its chest had been ripped open. There was a gaping hole where the heart should have been.

“Who’s the stiff ?” Toussaint asked.

“Name’s Bobby Buggane. Just another lowlife.”

“I see you hauled off an innocent haint.”

“Now, Salem, don’t be like that. It’s an open and shut case. The door was locked and bolted from the inside. Burglar bars on the window and a sprig of fennel over it. The only one who could have gotten in was the spook. He works as a janitor here. We found him sleeping it off on a cot in the basement.”

“Haint.” Salem Toussaint’s eyes were hard. “Please.”

After the briefest of pauses, the detective said, “Haint.”

“Give me the story.”

“About an hour ago, there was a fight. Bodies slamming against the wall, furniture smashing. Everybody on the hall complained. By the time the concierge got here, it was all over. She called us. We broke in.”

“Why didn’t the concierge have a key?”

“She did. Buggane put in a deadbolt. You can imagine what the old bat had to say about that.”

“Why wasn’t there a haint-ward on the door?”

“Didn’t need one. Doorman in the lobby. Only one haint in the building.”

Will squinted at the wall above the door. “There’s a kind of pale patch up there, like there used to be a ward and somebody took it down.”

Detective Shulpae, the quiet one, turned to stare at him. “So?”

“So what kind of guy installs a deadbolt but takes down the ward? That doesn’t make sense.”

“The kind who likes to invite his haint buddy over for a shooting party every now and then.” Detective Xisuthros pointed toward the dresser with his chin. A set of used works lay atop it. “The concierge says they were so thick that some of the neighbors thought they were fags.” He turned back to Toussaint. “Alderman, if you want to question our work here, fine, go ahead. I’m just saying. There’s not a lot of hope for the boy.”

“Will’s right!” Ghostface said. He went to the window. “And another thing. Look at all the blood on the sill. This is where it happened. So how the hell did he get all the way into the bathroom? Somebody ripped his heart out, so he decided to wash his hands?”

Now both detectives were staring at him, hard. “You don’t know much about boggarts,” Xisuthros said. “They’re tough. They can live for five minutes with their heads ripped off. A heart’s nothing. And, yeah, that’s exactly what he did—washed his hands. Old habits go last. One of the first things we did was turn off the water. Otherwise, I thought the concierge was going to have a seizure.”

Ghostface looked around wildly. “What happened to the heart? Why isn’t it here? I suppose you think the haint *ate* it, huh? I suppose you think we’re all cannibals.”

In a disgusted tone, Detective Xisuthros said, “Get Sherlock Holmes Junior the fuck out of here.”

Salem Toussaint took Ghostface by the elbow, led him to the door. “Why don’t you wait outside?”

Ghostface turned grey. But he stamped angrily out of the room and down the hall. Will followed. He didn’t have to be told that this was part of his job.

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Outside, Ghostface went straight to the alley below Buggane’s window. There were no chalk marks or crime scene tape, so the police obviously hadn’t found any evidence there. Nor was there a heart lying on the pavement. A dog or a night-gaunt could have run off with it, of course. But there was no blood either, except for a stain under the window and maybe a stray drop or two that couldn’t be seen in the dark.

“So what happened to the heart?” Ghostface paced back and forth, unable to keep still. “It didn’t just fly away.”

“I don’t know,” Will said.

“You be Buggane.” Ghostface slapped a hand against the brick wall. “Here’s the window. You stand here looking out it. Now. I come up behind you. How do I rip your heart out in a way that leaves all that blood on the windowsill? From behind you, I can’t get at your heart. If you turn around to face me, the blood doesn’t splash on the sill. Now, those ignorant peckerwood detectives probably think I could shove my hands through Buggane’s back and *push* his heart out. But it doesn’t work like that. Two things can’t occupy the same space at the same time. If I make my hands solid while I’m inside your chest, I’m going to fuck them up seriously. So I didn’t come at you from behind.”

“Okay.”

“But if you turn around so I can come at you from the front, the blood’s not going to spray over the sill, is it? So I’ve got to be between you and the window. I don’t know if you noticed, but Ice didn’t have any blood on him. None. Zip. Nada. Maybe you think I could rip somebody’s heart out and then make myself insubstantial fast enough that the blood would spray through me. I don’t think so. But even if I could, the blood’s going to spatter all over the floor too. Which it didn’t. So you tell me—how could I rip your heart out and leave the blood all over the sill like that?”

“You couldn’t.”

“Thank you. *Thank* you. That’s right. I couldn’t.”

“So?” Will said.

“So there’s something fishy going on, that’s all. Something suspicious. Something wrong.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know.” Abruptly, Ghostface’s hands fell to his sides. Just like that, all the life went out of him. He slumped despondently. “I just don’t know.”

“Ghostface,” Will said, “why does all this matter? You called this guy Ice. What’s he to you?”

The haint’s face was as pale as ash, as stiff as bone. In a stricken voice, he said, “He’s my brother.”

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They went to a diner across the street and ordered coffee. Ghostface stared down into his cup without drinking. “Ice always was a hard case. He liked the streets too much, he liked the drugs, he liked the thug life. That’s why he never made anything of himself.” He picked up a spoon, looked at it, set it down. “I dunno. Maybe he did it. Maybe he did.”

“You know he didn’t. You proved he couldn’t have.”

“Yeah, but that’s not going to convince a judge, now is it?”

Will had to admit it would not. “You guys keep in touch?”

“Not really. I saw him a few months ago. He was all hopped up and talking trash about how he’d finally made a big score. He was going to be smoking hundred-dollar cigars and bedding thousand-dollar whores. Maybe he stole something. I told him to get the hell out, I didn’t want to know anything about his criminal activities. My own brother. The last time I saw him, I told him to go to hell.”

They were silent for a bit. “Nobody said anything about finding anything valuable,” Will observed.

“Sometimes the cops will pocket that kind of stuff.”

“That’s true.” Will dipped a finger in his coffee and drew the Sigil of Inspiration on the linoleum counter. Nothing came to him. He sighed. “What would the Big Guy do in this situation?”

“Him?” Ghostface said bitterly. “Probably hand out cigars.”

“Hey.” Will sat up straight. “That’s not a half bad idea. It’s pretty cold out there.” He counted cops through the window. Then he called the waitress over.

“Give me four large coffees, cream and sugar on the side.”

Leaving Ghostface hunched over the counter, Will carried the cardboard tray out to where the police stood stamping their feet to keep warm. They accepted the gift with small nods. All four had dark skin, short horns, and the kind of attitude that came from knowing they'd never, ever make detective. The oldest of the lot said, “Working for the spook, are you?”

“Oh, Salem's okay.”

The cop grinned on one side of his oak-brown face. “You're what the micks would call his Hound of Hoolan. You know what that is?”

“No, sir.”

“It means that if he says he wants to drive, you bend over and bark.”

The cops all laughed. Then three of them wandered away, leaving only the rookie. Will took out a pack of Marlboros, offered one, took one for himself, then lit both. They smoked them down to the end without saying much. Will flicked his butt away. The rookie pinched the coal off of his and ate it.

Finally Will said, “This Buggane guy—you know him?”

“Everybody knew him. A real bad character. In jail as often as not. His girlfriend's cute, though. Used to come to the station to bail him out. Skinny little thing, no tits to speak of. The big lugs always like 'em petite, you ever noticed?”

“Some of the neighbors thought he was queer.”

“They sure wouldn't of said that to his face. Buggane was a bruiser. Used to fight some, under the name of Dullahan the Deathless.”

“No kidding,” Will said. “His gym anywhere around here?”

“Down the street and over a couple of blocks. Place called the Sucker Punch. You can't miss it.”

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Ghostface was still in the diner, so Will left a note on the dash of the limo. A few minutes later, he was at the Sucker Punch A.C. If there was one thing Will had learned working for Toussaint, it was how to walk through any front door in the world and act as if he had a perfect right to be there. He went in.

The gym was dark and smelled serious. Punching bags hung from the gloom. Somebody grunted in a slow and regular fashion, like a mechanical pig, from the free-weight area. There was a single regulation ring in the center of the room. A trollweight bounced up and down on his toes, shadow-boxing.

“Go home, little boy,” an ogre in a pug hat said. “There ain't nothing here for

you.”

“Oh, it’s not about that, sir,” Will said quickly. By *that* meaning whatever the ogre thought it meant. The alderman had schooled him never to meet aggression head-on.

“No? You don’t wanna build yourself up, get the girl, and beat the crap out of whoever’s pushing you around?” The ogre squeezed Will’s biceps. “You could use it. Only not here. This is a serious club for serious fighters only.”

“No, sir, I’m with Alderman Toussaint.” By the ogre’s expression, Will could see that he recognized the name and was not impressed. “I was hoping you could tell me something about Bobby Buggane.”

“The bum. What’s he done now?”

“He was murdered.”

“Well, I ain’t surprised. Buggane was no damn good. Coulda worked his way up to the middle of the card, but he wasn’t willing to put in the effort. Always jerking off somewhere with his spook buddy when he shoulda been working out.”

“Somebody said they got into doing crimes together.” It was a shot in the dark, but Will figured the odds were good

“Yeah, well, like I said, I wouldn’t be surprised. There’s a lot of crap a gorilla like Buggane can pull off if he’s got a haint accomplice. You go into a jewelry store and pinch the ward when the guy ain’t lookin’ and replace it with a sprig of plastic fennel. Looks just like the real thing. Then that night the spook slips in and shuts off the alarm. If you’re like Buggane, and can rip a safe door off its hinges, you can walk off with a bundle. Somebody pulled something like that at a warehouse down in the Village about six months ago. Got away with a fortune in slabs of raw jade. I remember it because Buggane quit the gym right after that, and I always wondered.”

“Raw jade’s got to be hard to sell, though,” Will said. “I mean, in bulk.”

“Not if you got connections. Even if you don’t, something big like that could be moved through your regular fence, provided you waited until things had cooled down some. Not that I’d know personally. But you hear things.”

“Huh,” Will said. “This girlfriend of his—you remember her name?”

“Naw. Daiera, Damia, something like that. Maybe Danae. Only reason I recollect at all is that I asked Buggane once was she a pixie or a russalka or what and he said she was a diener. Deianira the Diener, that was it. That’s a new one on me. I thought I knew all the ethnics, but I ain’t never heard of a diener before. Listen, kid, I really have got work to do.”

“I’ll be out of your way, then,” Will said. “Thanks for your help.” He took

one last look around the gym. “I guess Buggane should have stayed in the ring.”

“Oh, he wasn’t a ring boxer,” the ogre said. “He was a pit boxer.”

“What’s the difference?”

“Pit boxing’s strictly death-match. Two fighters climb down, only one climbs out. Buggane had a three-and-two record when he quit.”

“How the fuck,” Will said, “can somebody have a three-and-two record when he’s fighting to the death?”

The ogre grinned. Then he explained.

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Less than an hour later, Will, Salem Toussaint, and Ghostface stood waiting in the shadows outside the city morgue. “Okay,” Ghostface said. “I thought I knew all the racial types from Litvak night-hags to Thai shit demons, but you say this girl is a *what?*”

“A diener. It’s not a type, it’s a job. A diener is a morgue attendant who’s responsible for moving and cleaning the body. She also assists the coroner in the autopsy. I made a few calls and Deianira’s on night duty this week. Though I’m guessing she might take off a little early tonight.”

“Why’s that?”

“This is where Bobby Buggane’s body wound up.”

“I think, boy,” Toussaint said firmly, “you’d best tell us the whole story.”

“All right,” Will said. “Here’s how I put it together. Buggane and Ice steal a truckload of jewelry-grade jade together and agree to wait six months before trying to fence it. Buggane keeps possession—I’m guessing it’s stashed with his girlfriend, but that’s not really important—and everyone has half a year to reflect on how much bigger Buggane’s share will be if he stiffes Ice. Maybe Ice starts worrying about it out loud. So Buggane goes down to the basement to talk it over with his good buddy. They have a couple of drinks, maybe they smoke a little crack. Then he breaks out the crystal goon. By this time, your brother’s lost whatever good judgment he had in the first place, and says sure.”

Ghostface nodded glumly.

“Ice shoots up first, then Buggane. Only he shoots up pure water. That’s easy to pull—what druggie’s going to suspect another druggie of shortchanging *himself*? Then, when Ice nods off, Buggane goes back to his room, takes down the ward, and flushes it down the toilet. That way, when he’s found dead, suspicion’s naturally going to fall on the only individual in the building able to walk through a locked door. One who he’s made certain will be easy to find when the police come calling.”

“So who kills Buggane?”

“It’s a set-up job. Buggane opens the window halfway and checks to make sure his girlfriend is waiting in the alley. Everything’s ready. Now he stages a fight. He screams, roars, pounds the wall, smashes a chair. Then, when the neighbors are all yelling at him to shut up, he goes to the window, takes a deep breath, and rips open his rib cage with his bare hands.”

“Can he *do* that?”

“Boggarts are strong, remember. Plus, if you checked out the syringe on his dresser, I wouldn’t be surprised to find traces not of goon but of morphine. Either way, with or without painkiller, he tears out his own heart. Then he drops it out the window. Deianira catches it in a basket or a sheet, so there’s no blood on the ground. Nothing that will direct the investigators’ attention outside.

“She leaves with his heart.

“Now Buggane’s still got a couple of minutes before he collapses. He’s smart enough not to close the window—there’d be blood on the outside part of the sill and that would draw attention outward again. But his hands are slick with blood and he doesn’t want the detectives to realize he did the deed himself, so he goes to the bathroom sink and washes them. By this time, the concierge is hammering on the door.

“He dies. Everything is going exactly according to plan.”

“Hell of a plan,” Toussaint murmured.

“Yeah. You know the middle part. The cops come, they see, they believe. If it wasn’t for Ghostface kicking up a fuss, we’d never have found all this other stuff.”

“Me? I didn’t do anything.”

“Well, it looked hinky to me, but I wasn’t going to meddle in police business until I learned it mattered to you.”

“You left out the best part,” Toussaint said. “How Buggane manages to turn killing himself to his own advantage.”

“Yeah, that had me baffled too. But when a boxer picks up a nickname like ‘the Deathless,’ you have to wonder why. Then the ogre at the gym told me that Buggane had a three-two record pit boxing. That’s to the death, you know. It turns out Buggane’s got a glass heart. Big lump of crystal the size of your fist. No matter how badly he’s injured, the heart can repair him. Even if he’s clinically dead.”

“So his girlfriend waits for his body to show up and sticks the heart back in?” Ghostface said. “No, that’s just crazy. That wouldn’t really work, would it?”

“Shhh,” Will said. “I think we’re about to find out. Look.”

A little door opened in the side of the morgue. Two figures came out. The smaller one was helping the larger to stand.

For the first time all evening, Toussaint smiled. Gold teeth gleamed. Then he put a police whistle to his mouth.

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After Buggane and his girlfriend had been arrested, Ghostface gave Will a short, fierce hug and then ran off to arrange his brother's release. Will and the alderman strolled back to the limousine, parked two blocks away. As they walked, Will worried how he was going to explain to his boss that he couldn't chauffeur because he didn't have a license.

"You done good, boy," Salem Toussaint said. "I'm proud of you."

Something in his voice, or perhaps the amused way he glanced down at Will out of the corner of his eye, said more than mere words could have.

"You *knew*," Will said. "You knew all the time."

Toussaint chuckled. "Perhaps I did. But I had the advantage of knowing what the city knows. It was still mighty clever of you to figure it out all on your own."

"But why should I have had to? Why didn't you just tell the detectives what you knew?"

"Let me answer that question with one of my own: Why did you tell Ghostface he was the one who uncovered the crime?"

They'd reached the limo now. It flickered its lights, glad to see them. But they didn't climb in just yet. "Because I've got to live with the guy. I don't want him thinking I think I'm superior to him."

"Exactly so! The police liked hearing the story from a solid boy better than they would from me. I'm not quite a buffoon in their eyes, but I'm something close to it. My power has to be respected, and my office too. It would make folks nervous if they had to take me seriously as well."

"Alderman, I..."

"Hush up, boy. I know everything you're about to say." The alderman opened a door for Will. "Climb in the back. I'll drive."

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