

# **Epitaph**

**Phineas Troutt**

**by Joseph A. Konrath, 1970–**

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Forsaking the cannibals, necrophiles, snuff filmers and serial killers of his Jack Daniels books, *Epitaph* revolves around a more familiar and accessible evil—street gangs. The result is something grittier, darker and more intimately violent than the series that spawned Phin. No tongue in cheek here. No goofy one-liners. Konrath has always enjoyed exploring where shadows hide when the sun goes down, but this time there's no humorous safety net. What motivates a man to drop out of society and kill for money? Is there a tie between morality and dignity? And most important of all, what is Phin loading into the shells of that modified Mossberg shotgun?

Let the body count begin.

There's an art to getting your ass kicked.

Guys on either side held my arms, stretching me out cruci-fixion style. The joker who worked me over swung wildly, without planting his feet or putting his body into it. He spent most of his energy swearing and screaming when he should have been focusing on inflicting maximum damage.

Amateur.

Not that I was complaining. What he lacked in professionalism, he made up for in mean.

He moved in and rabbit-punched me in the side. I flexed my abs and tried to shift to take the blow in the center of my stomach, rather than the more vulnerable kidneys.

I exhaled hard when his fist landed. Saw stars.

He stepped away to pop me in the face. Rather than tense up, I relaxed, trying to absorb the contact by letting my neck snap back.

It still hurt like hell.

I tasted blood, wasn't sure if it came from my nose or my mouth. Probably both. My left eye had already swollen shut.

*"Hijo calvo de una perra!"*

*You bald son of a bitch.* Real original. His breath was ragged now, shoulders slumping, face glowing with sweat.

Gangbangers these days aren't in very good shape. I blame TV and junk food.

One final punch—a halfhearted smack to my broken nose—and then I was released.

I collapsed face-first in a puddle that smelled like urine. The three Latin Kings each took the time to spit on me. Then they strolled out of the alley, laughing and giving each other high fives.

When they got a good distance away, I crawled over to a Dumpster and pulled myself to my feet. The alley was dark, quiet. I felt something scurry over my foot.

Rats, licking up my dripping blood.

Nice neighborhood.

I hurt a lot, but pain and I were old acquaintances. I took a deep breath, let it out slow, did some poking and prodding.

Nothing seemed seriously damaged.

I'd been lucky.

I spat. The bloody saliva clung to my swollen lower lip and dribbled onto my T-shirt. I tried a few steps forward, managed to keep my balance, and continued to walk out of the alley, onto the sidewalk, and to the corner bus stop.

I sat.

The Kings took my wallet, which had no ID or credit cards, but did have a few hundred in cash. I kept an emergency fiver in my shoe. The bus arrived, and the portly driver raised an eyebrow at my appearance.

"Do you need a doctor, buddy?"

"I've got plenty of doctors."

He shrugged and took my money.

On the ride back, my fellow passengers made heroic efforts to avoid looking at me. I leaned forward, so the blood pooled between my feet rather than stained my clothing any further. These were my good jeans.

When my stop came up, I gave everyone a cheery wave goodbye and stumbled out of the bus.

The corner of State and Cermak was all lit up, twinkling in both English and Chinese. Unlike NYC and L.A., each of which had sprawling Chinatowns, Chicago has more of a *Chinablock*.

Blink while you're driving west on Twenty-second and you'll miss it.

Though Caucasian, I found a kind of peace in Chinatown that I didn't find among the Anglos. Since my diagnosis, I've pretty much disowned society. Living here was like living in a foreign country—or a least a square block of a foreign country.

I kept a room at the Lucky Lucky Hotel, tucked between a crumbling apartment building and a Chinese butcher shop, on State and Twenty-fifth. The hotel did most of its business at an hourly rate, though I couldn't think of a more repulsive place to take a woman, even if you were renting her as well as the room.

The halls stank like mildew and worse, the plaster snowed on you when you climbed the stairs, obscene graffiti lined the halls and the whole building leaned slightly to the right.

I got a decent rent: free—as long as I kept out the drug dealers. Which I did, except for the ones who dealt to me.

I nodded at the proprietor, Kenny-Jen-Bang-Ko, and asked for my key. Kenny was three times my age, clean-shaven save for several black moles on his cheeks that sprouted long, white hairs.

He tugged at these hairs while contemplating me.

"How is other guy?" Kenny asked.

"Drinking a forty of malt liquor that he bought with my money."

He nodded, as if that was the answer he'd been expecting. "You want pizza?"

Kenny gestured to a box on the counter. The slices were so old and shrunken they looked like Doritos.

"I thought the Chinese hated fast food."

"Pizza not fast. Took thirty minutes. Anchovy and red pepper."

I declined.

My room was one squeaky stair flight up. I unlocked the door and lumbered over to the bathroom, looking into the cracked mirror above the sink.

Ouch.

My left eye had completely closed, and the surrounding tissue bulged out like a peach. Purple bruising competed with angry red swelling along my cheeks and forehead. My nose was a glob of strawberry jelly, and blood had crusted black along my lips and down my neck.

It looked like Jackson Pollock had kicked my ass.

I stripped off the T-shirt, peeled off my shoes and jeans, and turned the shower up to scald.

It hurt but got most of the crap off.

After the shower I popped five Tylenol, chased them with a shot of tequila and spent ten minutes in front of the mirror, tears streaming down my face, forcing my nose back into place.

I had some coke, but wouldn't be able to sniff anything with my sniffer all clotted up, and I was too exhausted to shoot any.

I made do with the tequila, thinking that tomorrow I'd have that codeine prescription refilled.

Since the pain wouldn't let me sleep, I decided to do a little work.

Using a dirty fork, I pried up the floorboards near the radiator and took out a plastic bag full of what appeared to be little gray stones. The granules were the size and consistency of aquarium gravel.

I placed the bag on the floor, then removed the Lee Load-All, the scale, a container of gunpowder, some wads and a box of empty 12-gauge shells.

Everything went over to my kitchen table. I snapped on a fresh pair of latex gloves, clamped the loader onto my countertop and spent an hour carefully filling ten shells. When I finished, I loaded five of them into my Mossberg 935, the barrel and stock of which had been cut down for easier concealment.

I liked shotguns—you had more leeway when aiming, the cops couldn't trace them like they could trace bullets, and nothing put the fear of God into a guy like the sound of racking a shell into the chamber.

For this job, I didn't have a choice.

By the time I was done, my nose had taken the gold medal in throbbing, with my eye coming close with the silver. I swallowed five more Tylenol and four shots of tequila, then lay down on my cot and fell asleep.

With sleep came the dream.

It happened every night, so vivid I could smell Donna's perfume. We were still together, living in the suburbs. She was smiling at me, running her fingers through my hair.

"Phin, the caterer wants to know if we're going with the split-pea or the wedding-ball soup."

"Explain the wedding-ball soup to me again."

"It's a chicken stock with tiny veal meatballs in it."

"That sounds good to you?"

"It's very good. I've had it before."

"Then let's go with that."

She kissed me; playful, loving.

I woke up drenched in sweat.

If someone had told me that happy memories would one day be a source of incredible pain, I wouldn't have believed it.

Things change.

Sun peeked in through my dirty window, making me squint.

I stretched, wincing because my whole body hurt—my whole body except for my left side, where a team of doctors had severed the nerves during an operation called a chordotomy. The surgery had been purely palliative. The area felt dead, even though the cancer still thrived inside my pancreas. And elsewhere, by now.

The chordotomy offered enough pain relief to allow me to function, and tequila, cocaine and codeine made up for the remainder.

I dressed in some baggy sweatpants, my bloody gym shoes (with a new five-dollar bill in the sole) and a clean white T-shirt.

I strapped my leather shotgun sling under my armpits and placed the Mossberg in the holster. It hung directly between my shoulder blades, barrel up, and could be freed by reaching my right hand behind me at waist level.

A baggy black trench coat went on over the rig, concealing the shotgun and the leather straps that held it in place.

I pocketed the five extra shells, the bag of gray granules, a Glock 21 with two extra clips of .45 rounds and a six-inch butterfly knife. Then I hung an iron crowbar on an extra strap sewn into the lining of my coat, and headed out to greet the morning.

Chinatown smelled like a combination of soy sauce and garbage. It was worse in the summer, when stench seemed to settle in and stick to your clothes. Though not yet seven in the morning, the temperature already hovered in the low nineties.

The sun made my face hurt.

I walked up State, past Cermak, and headed east. The Sing Lung Bakery had opened for business an hour earlier. The manager, a squat Mandarin Chinese named Ti, did a double take when I entered.

"Phin! Your face is horrible!" He rushed around the counter to meet me, hands and shirt dusty with flour.

"My mom liked it okay."

Ti's features twisted in concern. "Was it them? The ones who butchered my daughter?"

I gave him a brief nod.

Ti hung his head. "I am sorry to bring this suffering upon you. They are very bad men."

I shrugged, which hurt. "It was my fault. I got careless."

That was an understatement. After combing Chicago for almost a week, I'd discovered the bangers had gone underground.

I got one guy to talk, and after a bit of friendly persuasion he gladly offered some vital info; Sunny's killers were due to appear in court on an unrelated charge.

I'd gone to the Daly Center, where the prelim hearing was being held, and watched from the sidelines. After matching their names to faces, I followed them back to their hidey-hole.

My mistake had been to stick around. A white guy in a Hispanic neighborhood tends to stand out. Having just been to court, which required walking through a metal detector, I had no weapons on me.

Stupid. Ti and Sunny deserved someone smarter.

Ti had found me through the grapevine, where I got most of my business. Phineas Troutt, Problem Solver. No job too dirty, no fee too high.

I'd met him in a parking lot across the street, and he laid out the whole sad, sick story of what these animals had done to his little girl.

"Cops do nothing. Sunny's friend too scared to press charges."

Sunny's friend had managed to escape with only ten missing teeth, six stab wounds and a torn rectum. Sunny hadn't been as lucky.

Ti agreed to my price without question. Not too many people haggled with paid killers.

"You finish job today?" Ti asked, reaching into his glass display counter for a pastry.

"Yeah."

"In the way we talk about?"

"In the way we talked about."

Ti bowed and thanked me. Then he stuffed two pastries into a bag and held them out.

"Duck egg moon cake, and red bean ball with sesame. Please take."

I took.

"Tell me when you find them."

"I'll be back later today. Keep an eye on the news. You might see something you'll like."

I left the bakery and headed for the bus. Ti had paid me enough to afford a cab, or even a limo, but cabs and limos kept records. Besides, I preferred to save my money for more important things, like drugs and hookers. I try to live every day as if it's my last.

After all, it very well might be.

The bus arrived, and again everyone took great pains not to stare. The trip was short, only about two miles, taking me to a neighborhood known as Pilsen, on Racine and Eighteenth.

I left my duck egg moon cake and my red bean ball on the bus for some other lucky passenger to enjoy, then stepped out into Little Mexico.

It smelled like a combination of salsa and garbage.

There weren't many people out—too early for shoppers and commuters. The stores had Spanish signs, not bothering with English translations: *zapatos, ropa, restaurante, tiendas de comes-tibles, bancos, teléfonos de la célula*. I passed the alley where I'd gotten the shit kicked out of me, kept heading north, and located the apartment building where my three amigos were staying. I tried the front door.

They hadn't left it open for me.

Though the gray paint was faded and peeling, the door was heavy aluminum and the lock solid. But the jamb, as I'd remembered from yesterday's visit, was old wood. I removed the crowbar from my jacket lining, gave a discreet look in either direction and pried open the door in less time than it took to open it with a key, the frame splintering and cracking.

The Kings occupied the basement apartment to the left of the entrance, facing the street. Last night I'd counted seven—five men and two women—including my three targets. Of course, there may be other people inside that I'd missed.

This was going to be interesting.

Unlike the front door, their apartment door was a joke. They apparently thought being gang members meant they didn't need decent security.

They thought wrong.

I took out my Glock and tried to stop hyperventilating. Breaking into someone's place is scary as hell. It always is.

One hard kick and the door burst inward.

A guy on the couch, sleeping in front of the TV. Not one of my marks. He woke up and stared at me. It took a millisecond to register the gang tattoo, a five-pointed crown, on the back of his hand.

I shot him in his forehead.

If the busted door didn't wake everyone up, the .45 did, sounding like thunder in the small room.

Movement to my right. A woman in the kitchen, in panties and a Dago-T, too much makeup and baby fat.

*"Te vayas!"* I hissed at her.

She took the message and ran out the door.

A man stumbled into the hall, tripping and falling to the thin carpet. One of mine, the guy who'd pinned my right arm while I'd been worked over. He clutched a stiletto. I was on him in two quick steps, putting one in his elbow and one through the back of his knee when he fell.

He screamed falsetto.

I walked down the hall in a crouch, and a bullet zinged over my head and buried itself in the ceiling. I kissed the floor, looked left, and saw the shooter in the bathroom; the guy who had held my other arm and laughed every time I got smacked.

I stuck the Glock in my jeans and reached behind me, unslinging the Mossberg.

He fired again, missed, and I aimed the shotgun and peppered his face.

Unlike lead shot, the gray granules didn't have deep penetrating power. Instead of blowing his head off, they peeled off his lips, cheeks and eyes.

He ate linoleum, blind and choking on blood.

Movement behind me. I fell sideways and rolled onto my back.

A kid, about thirteen, stood in the hall a few feet away. He wore Latin Kings colors; black to represent death, gold to represent life.

His hand ended in a pistol.

I racked the shotgun, aimed low.

If the kid was old enough to be sexually active, he wasn't anymore.

He dropped to his knees, still holding the gun.

I was on him in two steps, driving a knee into his nose. He went down and out.

Three more guys burst out of the bedroom.

Apparently I'd counted wrong.

Two were young, muscular, brandishing knives. The third was the guy who'd worked me over the night before. The one who'd called me a bald son of a bitch.

They were on me before I could rack the shotgun again.

The first one slashed at me with his pig-sticker, and I parried with the barrel of the Mossberg. He jabbed again, slicing me across the knuckles of my right hand.

I threw the shotgun at his face and went for my Glock.

He was fast.

I was faster.

*Bang bang* and he was a paycheck for the coroner. I spun left, aimed at the second guy. He was already in midjump, launching himself at me with a battle cry and switchblades in both hands.

One gun beats two knives.

He took three in the chest and two in the neck before he dropped.

The last guy, the guy who'd broken my nose, grabbed my shotgun and dived behind the couch.

*Chck chck.* He ejected the shell and racked another into the chamber. I pulled the Glock's magazine and slammed a fresh one home.

*"Hijo calvo de una perra!"*

Again with the *bald son of a bitch* taunt. I worked through my hurt feelings and crawled to an end table, tipping it over and getting behind it.

The shotgun boomed. Had it been loaded with shot, it would have torn through the cheap particleboard and turned me into ground beef. Or ground *hijo calvo de una perra*. But at that distance, the granules didn't do much more than make a loud noise.

The banger apparently didn't learn from experience, because he tried twice more with similar results, and then the shotgun was empty.

I stood up from behind the table, my heart a lump in my throat and my hands shaking with adrenaline.

The King turned and ran.

His back was an easy target.

I took a quick look around, making sure everyone was down or out, and then went to retrieve my shotgun. I loaded five more shells and approached the downed leader, who was sucking carpet and whimpering. The wounds in his back were ugly, but he still made a feeble effort to crawl away.

I bent down, turned him over and shoved the barrel of the Mossberg between his bloody lips.

"You remember Sunny Lung," I said, and fired.

It wasn't pretty. It also wasn't fatal. The granules blew out his cheeks and tore into his throat, but somehow the guy managed to keep breathing.

I gave him one more, jamming the gun farther down the wreck of his face.

That did the trick.

The second perp, the one I'd blinded, had passed out on the bathroom floor. His face didn't look like a face anymore, and blood bubbles were coming out of the hole where his mouth would have been.

"Sunny Lung sends her regards," I said.

This time I pushed the gun in deep, and the first shot did the trick, blowing through his throat.

The last guy, the one who made like Pavarotti when I took out his knee, left a blood smear from the hall into the kitchen. He cowered in the corner, a dishrag pressed to his leg.

"Don't kill me, man! Don't kill me!"

"I bet Sunny Lung said the same thing."

The Mossberg thundered twice; once to the chest, and once to the head.

It wasn't enough. What was left alive gasped for air.

I removed the bag of granules from my pocket, took out a handful and shoved them down his throat until he stopped breathing.

Then I went to the bathroom and threw up in the sink.



Sirens wailed in the distance. Time to go. I washed my hands, and then rinsed off the barrel of the Mossberg, holstering it in my rig.

In the hallway, the kid I emasculated was clutching himself between the legs, sobbing.

“There’s always the priesthood,” I told him, and got out of there.

My nose was still clogged, but I managed to get enough coke up there to damper the pain. Before closing time I stopped by the bakery, and Ti greeted me with a somber nod.

“Saw the news. They said it was a massacre.”

“Wasn’t pretty.”

“You did as we said?”

“I did, Ti. Your daughter got her revenge. She’s the one that killed them. All three.”

I fished out the bag of granules and handed it to her father.

Sunny’s cremated remains.

“*Xie xie*,” Ti said, thanking me in Mandarin. He held out an envelope filled with cash.

He looked uncomfortable, and I had drugs to buy, so I took the money and left without another word.

An hour later I’d filled my codeine prescription, picked up two bottles of tequila and a skinny hooker with track marks on her arms, and had a party back at my place. I popped and drank and screwed and snorted, trying to blot out the memory of the last two days. And of the last six months.

That’s when I’d been diagnosed. A week before my wedding day. My gift to my bride-to-be was running away so she wouldn’t have to watch me die of cancer.

Those Latin Kings this morning, they got off easy. They didn’t see it coming.

Seeing it coming is so much worse.

