

Knock-Out Whist

Dark City Lights New York Stories

by David Levien, 1967-

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THE PHONE RANG AND JERRY Riser crossed his office and answered it. “Your friends are coming up.” It was Rodman, the green-jacketed, bow-tied doorman from downstairs.

“My friends,” Riser said. He didn’t have any.

“Two of ’em,” Rodman said. Rodman also knew he had no friends. He was doing Riser a solid. They hung up in time for him to hear the old fashioned elevator’s brass accordion-type gate open and heavy footfalls land on the steps.

Riser was out the glass door that let onto the roof and was climbing a fire ladder down to the neighboring building's parapet when he chanced a glance back. There were two of them and they were big, with dark suits and darker looks on their faces. They stalked around his office, trying to open locked file cabinets and log into his computer. One tapped the other with a ham hock hand and pointed at the fleeing Riser as he made it over the ledge to the roof of the next building and disappeared from their view. He took once last look back and saw that the bookends weren't pursuing, but leaving his office, going back down to the street, no doubt, to try and intercept him there instead.

North, south, or east, Riser had three choices in which to run, based on the neighboring buildings' roof doors he knew he could access. His pursuers could only cover two directions. The math was simple—for a guy who knew math. Riser chose north. He entered that building's fire door and hurried down the stairs.

TWO HOURS EARLIER JERRY RISER had been on top of the world, almost literally. He'd been standing in Ken Lewinter's office on the fifty-seventh floor of the MetLife building, taking in the view of the city while waiting to get paid.

"I don't know how the hell you do it..." Lewinter said of the job Riser had done for him. But Riser knew he was just saying it and didn't actually want to know. Sixty-five, with steel-gray hair and wiry eyebrows that evoked a horned owl's, Lewinter had run his investment fund with a penurious and iron fist for the last three decades and had plenty of enemies—he had multitudes—and as such, was a good source of employment for private investigators, security men, and various other operatives of Riser's ilk. This time around it had been Sheldon "Shelly" Kipniss. Kipniss was a rival Wall Streeter who was just starting a run for mayor on a platform of regulation and reform. If he won, he was going to raise taxes, specifically on the city's top earners. Riser was no fan of big gov or higher taxes, but in his mind they couldn't tax what he didn't have; it was nothing personal. Ken Lewinter and his cronies hated Kipniss, however, and everything he stood for. They wanted Kipniss out, so Riser had put him out.

"We're done here, Riser. If I need you, you'll hear from me," Lewinter said, and that was that. Jerry Riser was dismissed. If one was looking for an attaboy, this Park Avenue office, with windows so large and clean they looked like television show trans-lights, was the wrong place. Riser wasn't there for that. It was his third time around with the titan, so he knew better. A barrel-bodied woman nearing retirement age appeared at his elbow holding an envelope. The check's memo line read: RESEARCH SERVICES. Riser took in the view for another moment—the city was a hive from this height, the people and the yellow cabs moving about in the street below like pre-programmed insects—then saluted Lewinter, who no longer recognized his presence, before turning and walking out across carpet so thick it swallowed all sound.

Once outside Riser walked over to Fifth Avenue and uptown, a row of palatial apartment buildings looming to his right and Central Park spreading out to his left. He had a cup of French press in his hand. There was an autumn crispness to the air and the leaves were just starting to go amber. He had just done a piece of work and had gotten paid for it, and for a moment Riser felt rich. He was the king of the city.

Then the M3 flatulated a black cloud of bio-diesel in his face by the gates to the zoo and corrected his impression. He wasn't a king, or even an heir to a minor dukedom. He was barely hanging on.

Riser kept walking. At times like these, he tended to get philosophical and try to parse the un-parsables like: who belonged to the City, and to whom did it belong? And how did a guy live in New York City nowadays? Not the Bronx, not Long Island City, not Staten Island, but the actual City herself, Manhattan island, the one they bought for a bag of beads, the one Frank sang about, the Apple. And not some corporate lawyer or doctor or Wall Street raider, but a regular guy. How does that guy pay the rent now that there is no Hell's Kitchen anymore, but just another row of glass luxury condo towers for investment bankers called "Clinton"? And if he lucked into a place he could afford, how the hell did he keep an office, too?

It was something Jerry Riser had asked himself many, many times before he'd finally come up with his answer. As a private investigator on what he couldn't deny was the low end of the scale, he charged a hundred bucks an hour. The equation was simple: he had to work a lot of hours in order to make rent on apartments that ran in the thousands, even for the shitboxes, and he didn't work that many hours. He couldn't really raise his rates and as far as *more* hours went, he was happy to book the ones he did.

The problem was: Riser wasn't one of those superstar ex-Feds who charged lawyers' numbers and hung out with the Commissioner, who wasn't just a friend but a personal rainmaker. No, Riser was what could only be called "a disgraced former cop." In fact, he had been called that in little known organs such as *The New York Times*. *The Post* had called him worse. He wasn't that disgraced cop who got drunk and left his gun on the sink in a men's room at a bar and only remembered it later when he woke up and it was gone. No, he wasn't that asshole. But he was like him.

He'd lost his gun in a slightly different way, on a slightly different drunk, and it had taken him three brutal days to get it back before it ended up gone for good or someone got shot with it. He hadn't had a drink stronger than coffee since then, but he also hadn't told his bosses while it was going down and then word had leaked out. And that was something a cop just didn't do. Then some grainy black-and-white security footage of him in a strip club acting in a manner unbecoming had emerged. So just after he'd recovered it, the NYPD had taken that gun away at the same time they'd taken his badge and had thanked him for coming and told him not to let the door hit him...

But that was then and this was now, and even though a cop who'd been stripped of his badge became invisible, that condition wasn't without its upsides. It went back to his question about the city and to whom it belonged. If certain people were asked, like those who lived between Sixtieth and Seventy-ninth, from Park to Fifth, they might say: Just us. When they saw someone like Riser, they saw a servant, or most likely they didn't see him at all. That's why it had been so easy to pick up a loose foot tail on Shelly Kipniss when he left his limestone mansion on Fifth and walked to the bank on Madison. Kipniss hadn't noticed Riser loitering around the table where deposit slips were filled out as Kipniss made a large cash withdrawal from the preferred client window. Riser wanted to be out

on the street by the time Kipniss left the bank in order to resume his tail, but had gotten tangled up with some customers at the exit and actually ended up holding the door for his subject. Again, Kipniss hadn't really seen him. He thought it was his due that doors be held open for him as he went about town.

Riser followed Kipniss back to Fifth Avenue and a dozen blocks further south, to the Sherry-Netherland hotel, which Kipniss entered. He went to the desk, checked in and got a key, before disappearing into an elevator. Riser couldn't go up after him without attracting attention, so he dawdled around in the lobby and watched the floor counter as the elevator ticked its way up and stopped at eleven. Riser had an idea about what was coming. Rich men only checked into plush hotels just blocks from their homes for a few reasons, and it didn't look like Shelly Kipniss planned on jumping.

A few minutes later she crossed the lobby. Maybe twenty-two years old, she was five foot ten, one hundred-and-fifteen pounds with a whippet's body and a mane of mahogany hair. She wore a tan raincoat even though it wasn't raining and dark Jackie Os. She'd seen *Breakfast at Tiffany's* a few too many times, it seemed, but likely hadn't read it. She crossed to the elevator while the desk staff studiously looked the other way. It didn't take a clairvoyant to know the car would be stopping at eleven, and it did. There was no need to wait, it was going to be about two hours, because her kind had a minimum, so Riser went out and found himself a little café and bought a French press and a prosciutto panini that cost him a quarter of an hour's wages.

He was waiting on the corner ninety-five minutes later when the young lady emerged from the hotel, with slightly bed-ruffled hair, and undoubtedly four thousand dollars the richer for her trouble. She belted her trench coat and disappeared into the back of a black Uber car. Five minutes later Kipniss emerged looking steam cleaned and pressed with an expression of Dalai Lama calm on his face. Riser trailed the man to his office, and the hard part was done.

There were only two agencies in the city that provided the level of talent that Riser had seen, and he knew them both and their price. He'd been authorized plenty of slush to spread around in order to get the girl's name. The story hit the *Post* six days later, their photographer having camped out and gotten shots of both parties leaving the Netherland after a repeat performance. "Married Mayor Wannabe Sacked," read the headline, and the *News's* "Shelly Caught With His Pants Down." The girl's name was Natalie. She was shocked and horrified to be revealed as an escort; she'd had plans to be a Knicks City Dancer. She liked Shelly, she admitted, but not the hard spankings he was partial to dishing out and receiving, nor the fact that he smelled like old feet. She had recently gotten engaged and had a new lingerie line to announce. Kipniss's run for mayor was dead in the starting gate.

RISER'S FRENCH PRESS WAS DONE and deposited in a garbage can by the time he was through the mid-sixties and had cut right, toward his answer to the riddle that was New York City: the Windsor Whist. The Windsor Whist was a fancy card club housed in a stately brownstone and populated by a moneyed set of what used to be called blue haired ladies. The old manse had a bar and a dining room that he couldn't frequent, not being a social member; it had that old cage

elevator that ran from the lobby to the fifth floor, and there was a little spiral staircase that led up to his digs on the sixth. The place had high ceilings, and marble floors and fire places in most every room and was maintained by a half-dozen attendants all in bright green jackets cut down at the waist, with gold buttons and silk lapels, that had them looking like refugees from a Hollywood back lot in the 1950s. And then there was Rodman at the front, who was kind enough to give him a ring when trouble was coming up and always laughed when Riser congratulated him for winning the Master's.

Riser entered the club and gave Rodman a nod while moving through some of the duplicate players whose bridge games had just broken up. Fifteen years younger than the average member, male, and less than perfectly dressed, Riser stood out and caught some quizzical looks. Not everyone knew there were offices on six above the card rooms. Management had certain restrictions on his space, like no more than three meetings a week attended by no more than three outside people. It limited who would take the space but didn't present a problem for Riser who only wished he had that much business walking in. He had a suspicion that they liked a man in the security field on the premises, so they put up with him. He headed to the elevator when Rodman told him: "Elevator is being serviced. The guy is upstairs." The thing was a hundred years old, it was always being serviced. Riser gave Rodman a shrug and took to the stairs. Five flights and then the spiral staircase; fortunately he still had the legs for it. As he ascended, he passed the main card room on two, which had a few tables going.

"That's a dog's life for you, Janet," one of the doyennes announced to her partners, and Riser knew they were playing Knock-Out Whist, which was perhaps the most popular game spread at the club. He took a look inside and saw the old ladies, vicious as bull terriers, playing for pennies but acting like it was their entire estate. It was a pretty simple plain trick card game, Knock-Out Whist was. The Brits called it Trumps. The players are dealt seven cards and the uppermost undealt card is turned over and that indicates the trump suit. The highest trump wins each trick, and the players keep on with six cards in their hand, and then fewer and fewer. A player who takes no tricks at all in a hand is eliminated, is dealt no more cards, and takes no further part in the game, which was a pretty painful condition for the old gals. Getting put out seemed to hurt them even more than losing their money. The exception is the first player during the game that takes no tricks on a hand; she's not knocked out immediately but is awarded a "dog's life," or a second chance—which was what Riser supposed everyone was looking for—and gets to keep playing. It goes on from there. The rest of the rules, if they matter, can be found in Hoyle's. The winner of the trick on the final hand wins the game. Or if all but one of the players is knocked out before this, the surviving player is the winner. Surviving, that was the thing.

Riser climbed the spiral staircase and reached the landing to his office and was glad he'd quit smoking. Then he heard a man's voice speaking Dominican-accented Spanglish too loudly. He entered his office, and discovered it was occupied by the elevator repairman. There was a little locked trapdoor behind his desk that housed the elevator mechanicals, so Riser saw plenty of the repairmen over the last few years, though he'd never met this one before. They were usually expert technicians who kept the intrusion to a minimum, did their jobs and moved

on. But not this time. No, this time the burly, sweaty guy barking into his cell phone wasn't really working at all. Instead he was sitting in Riser's desk chair and picking his fingernails with a letter opener while conducting his call through headphones. The gent had the name JOSE embroidered on the pocket of his grease-stained work shirt and didn't acknowledge Riser's presence whatsoever.

Live in New York long enough and you'll see all kinds, Riser thought, then crossed to the man, delicately relieved him of the letter opener and let it clunk to his desk. "Jose" looked up, seeming to notice Riser for the first time.

"Well?" Riser said.

Put out, the man got up out of the chair and went back to the trapdoor, sticking his head into the shaftway, but continuing his call.

"*Ai, mama guevo*. What do you mean *who's that?* Some fucking guy, that's who," he said, taking out a vise grip pliers. "You just worry about you. I'm going out tonight and I'll see you late. I said: I'll see you fucking late, *cuero*." The man clicked off the call.

"*Hijo de la gran puta*," he said to himself, and then louder, for Riser's benefit, "fucking bitches, you know?"

"Jose" was some piece of work. Riser just shook his head, crossed his arms, and watched in silence for ten minutes while the man checked and adjusted the sheave, motor, counterweight, and cables, hoping the repairman felt the glare on his back. "Why you gots to eye bang me? I'll be done in a sec," he said.

Finally, the man pulled his head out of the shaft and closed the door, leaving a grease smudge on the paint. He noticed but left it, instead wiping his hands on his shirt and putting his tools away in a satchel.

"Yo, bro," the man said, as if he had nowhere else to be, "you live here or what?"

"No," Riser said. Technically, according to the terms of his lease, Riser could not and did not use his office as a dwelling.

"Okay, bro, whatever you say..."

"You have a point?"

"I saw that pillow and blanket on the couch and shit."

"Maybe I like to take naps."

"Isn't that sweet," he said, and then muttered "*pajero*..."

Riser was familiar enough with Dominican slang to know that he'd just been branded an onanist.

"You all set?" he asked, the invitation to leave clear in his tone.

"Thing's a piece of shit," the repairman said, "but yeah, it's all set."

He trundled down the stairs leaving Riser alone. Despite the boorish manner, the repairman had sized up the situation correctly. Riser lived there alright and had for the past two-and-a-half years. The office space had once been the porter's quarters, when there were such things as live-in porters. It had a tiny stall shower in the bathroom and a kitchenette with a full-sized refrigerator and a microwave. Riser would exit the club around closing time and make his way back later, when it was empty. He slept on the couch, and would be out in the morning before the staff arrived, so they could see him show up each morning. He took most of his meals out and his shirts went back and forth to the cleaner's in his briefcase. He'd even had a lady or two up for a visit when fortune smiled upon him. The system was a bit labored, but he had one rent and he'd been able to make it so far and he

got to be right in the middle of it all. That's when Rodman had called to warn him about the pair coming up for him and he'd lit out.

RISER MADE THE STREET, CHECKING his impulse to run because it would cause him to stand out too much, and went north on Madison two blocks toward the Gucci store, where he intended to cut left and disappear into the park. It was a solid plan and he felt good about it, right up until he felt a hand, heavy and strong, on the back of his neck. The hand spun him around and drove him into the window of a high-priced optical shop.

"Who do you work for?" the big man asked. The garlic on his breath suggested he'd eaten Italian for lunch.

"Who do you?" Riser asked, though he knew the answer. This was Kipniss trying to find out which of his foes had gotten him. Riser wondered for a moment whether a deskman at the Netherland had described him or if it was the madam at the agency who'd sold him out and collected a second payday. But the hand on his throat chased away his musings.

"I'm doing the asking," the man said. "Who do you work for?"

"We all serve God and the IRS, don't we?" Riser said, but the man wasn't going in for bright repartee. Then the other half of the team loped around the corner, spotted them, and slowed to a menacing walk. Up close, the men were twin towers of beef, each well over six feet tall and north of two hundred pounds.

"Look, we can pay you off or hurt you, but you're going to tell us," the man holding him said. "What are you holding out for anyway, what would the guy really do for you?"

He made a good point. Lewinter wouldn't stamp him out if he passed by and Riser were smoldering. He could also use the cash. On the other hand it was a question of honor, the old vintage. There were still a few bottles of it left around, and once it was uncorked, it was sticky stuff.

"There are just some things a gal doesn't talk about," Riser said, wondering for how much longer he'd have teeth. The man let Riser's arm brush against the gun at his waist.

"You want to tell me now, or should I do it right here in the street?" the man offered. That was when Riser saw one of those uniformed Upper East Side guards who walk around with walkie-talkies in order to make the shoppers feel safe. Riser took his chance and slumped for a moment, as if his will had been broken, before ripping his arm free and cutting over to the guard.

"Excuse me, sir, can you tell me where the Hermes store is?" The guard pointed and started to explain. "Maybe you can show me, I'm not too strong with directions." The guard shrugged and started walking with Riser, who was steering him by the elbow.

The pair of hired men bumped past them and gave Riser a hard look. "You're a dead man the next time we meet, Riser," the one who hadn't previously spoken said. Riser believed him.

The guard's eyes bulged.

"Just some old fraternity buddies," Riser said with a smile that probably looked as weak as it felt, and he walked south with the guard for a few blocks before they reached the store and Riser peeled off.

BACK IN HIS OFFICE AN hour later, Riser sat and sipped his coffee, which had gone cold, and felt alone. He needed a drink, and a rent-controlled apartment, a week at the beach, and a good retirement plan and protection. What he had was an office with a couch and some wits. He hoped they'd be enough. He had an idea and a call to make. He made it and was still sitting there an hour and a half later, as afternoon came and went, when his phone rang like bad news.

It was Rodman from downstairs. "Those friends of yours are coming up again."

"Are you sure?"

"They're in the elevator now."

"You're positive?"

"Saw them get in myself."

"Alone?"

"Just the two of them."

Riser hung up, stood, and worked quickly. He wasn't running this time.

There is a legendary story from the late seventies, perhaps apocryphal, when the rock band the Eagles was at the height of its fame. At an after-show party, Joe Walsh pushed a grand piano out a hotel's penthouse window on a lark, because he "wanted to know what it sounded like when it landed." The band's manager cleaned up the ensuing mess so efficiently that it was barely reported. The crash downstairs at the Whist was stupendous as well. It shook the building louder than when the rich guy in the townhouse next door did demolition to put a swimming pool in his basement. There may not have been any strings or keys inside the elevator, but the noise was musical to Riser just the same.

RISER WENT DOWN THE STAIRS, slipping his tension tool and lock pick and grease-stained handkerchief back into his pocket. He'd watched very closely when old "Jose" had done his work earlier. Riser shook his head at the mess in the lobby and went out and got himself a French press. He took his walk on Fifth, along the park, and sipped his coffee as the sun dropped behind the trees.

As he walked, Riser pulled out his cell phone and dialed Shelly Kipniss's office.

"Tell him it's Jerry Riser," he said to the executive assistant, and lo and behold, Kipniss took the call.

"Yes?"

"Surprise," Riser said.

"What do you want?" Kipniss asked, his voice flat and tight.

"When this gets looked into and the reports are written up, they're going to find that the maintenance on that elevator hadn't been done correctly. The governor cable was disconnected and the motor failed, which left the brake off."

"I see."

"Yeah, modern elevators have lots more redundancies, but this one was an oldie. It was a tragedy waiting to happen," Riser said. The tech was surely going to lose his license. It was a real shame.

"And now?" Kipniss asked, livid.

"You're not going to learn what you were hoping to, not from me. Now, I know a man like you isn't accustomed to not getting what he wants, but this time you'd better get used to it. When the cops track me down and ask what your men were

doing in my building I can tell them one of two things, depending on whether you leave me alone: one is the truth, about everything, right up until the accident...”

“Or?” Kipniss asked. That was pretty much it. After Riser told him, the line went dead. He and Kipniss were done with one another.

WHEN THE COPS FINALLY CAUGHT up with him later that night to ask why the pair of dead men in the elevator had been coming to see him, Riser had his answer:

“Job interview.”

He had phoned Kipniss’s firm and applied for a job in security that very afternoon, right after the men had come and threatened to kill him on the street, and if the call hadn’t been logged, that was okay, because he’d gotten the names of the receptionist and the HR person to whom he’d spoken.

Riser didn’t imagine Lewinter would be coming to him with more work anytime soon. He got things done, but he was going to be too hot for the near future. Maybe word about what had happened would leak in the right way, though, and another whale with a problem would give him a call. He sipped his coffee and walked. Deep down Riser believed the city belonged to everyone, if they could survive it. Surviving, that was the thing. He may have been just hanging on, but at least he was doing it in the best place in the world.

