Small Town New York City

Howard Beach, Queens, becomes home in 1989. It is an alien land.

The corner market is a throwback to the 1950s. Sal is the third-generation owner of the neighborhood grocery, supplying Vinnie the Butcher’s hand-carved meats and Freddy Fruit’s daily delivery of fresh produce. Sal’s son Joey Meats drives the Boars Head truck route handed down from his grandfather, Sal Sr., known as Pops. The deeply pious former convent cook Maria presides over the cash register, dispensing prayerful advice and tolerating no nonsense from children or profanity from anyone.

Red enjoys visiting Sal’s Market as a postscript after a day’s work in his little seaside house, where from dawn to noon he broadcasts news reports. The market for his news is Norway, six time zones ahead of New York. So his workday is over by early afternoon when he strolls to Sal’s. There he sips the market’s undrinkable coffee, exchanges neighborhood gossip with Vinnie the Butcher, flirts harmlessly with 75-year-old Maria the Nearly Nun, and buys the day’s food provisions.

This daily grocery shopping is a throwback to the days of living in Manhattan, when bread came from the East Village baker, vegetables from the greengrocer around the corner, and meats from the butcher across the street. In the early 1980s, the Lower East Side was said to be dangerous. But daily visits with neighborhood food vendors lent a village feel to the big bad city.

The Howard Beach area of Queens, 13 miles from the borough of Manhattan, is like another continent to Howard Beach neighbors who have only seen Manhattan in movies. Most homes in Howard Beach are single-family residences, unlike the apartment buildings that loom over the streets of Manhattan. Hardly anyone walks here in Queens, preferring to drive the quarter mile from home to town. People stare when Red walks the few hundred paces to Coleman Square where Sal’s Market, Howie’s Hardware, Rosie’s Bar and Carmine’s Barber Shop sit. But walking had become a habit in Manhattan, and Red continues the practice in Queens, despite the odd looks from locals.

Also, unlike Manhattan there is no visible crime here. Walking is safe. There is plenty of unseen criminal activity, as the mob boss John Gotti calls Howard Beach home. But the Mafia does not disturb ordinary citizens. As long as residents keep the peace, this is the least dangerous place on earth. John Gotti does not tolerate petty neighborhood crime.

Winters by the sea in New York City can be unpleasant. The wind blows fiercely down the frozen canal, depositing enough moisture to turn the dry sea oats crisp with ice. Red enjoys walking home from Sal’s Market on these cold days, buffeted by the wind as he crosses the bridge that separates his home from the mainland. Then he warms himself in his second-floor office while scanning the news.

Red’s house sits on the corner of two canals, protected from the street by a gated driveway. Fences separate the properties on either side. It is a private compound, almost invisible from the street. On this winter day as he sits by his office window, Red catches a flash of movement below, a figure on Red’s dock in a black leather jacket. It is a policeman, peering out across the canal toward Rat Island. Annoyed at this casual trespass, Red heads downstairs, stopping to put on his jacket and hat and striding out to confront the officer.

“What are you doing here?” Red asks with characteristic directness.

“Oh. It’s F\*\*\*in’ Paulie,” replies the stocky policeman, gesturing vaguely toward the water with his leather-gloved hand.

“You realize you’re on private property?” ponders Red, providing an opening for an apology or at least an explanation.

“Yeah, but we gotta grab up F\*\*\*in’Paulie. We got him cornered, see,” says the cop as if that were a proper explanation for his intrusion on Red’s dock.

“Is this Paul someone I should know?” asks Red reasonably.

“You’re new around here, right?” replies the cop ambiguously. “See, this is what F\*\*\*in’ Paulie does. As soon as he gets out of the joint, he does the same stupid thing that got him sent up and we have to chase him down again.”

The NYPD officer is joined on our dock by a second man in uniform, an eager young officer who parrots the older cop, “Oh yeah. F\*\*\*in’ Paulie, right?”

There is sudden activity from the boatyard across the canal. A small round man in dirty jeans and New York Jets sweatshirt launches himself from the shore and bellyflops into the ice. Immobilized by the cold for a moment, the little man revives himself with a shiver to thrash through the icy water and heave his body onto Rat Island directly opposite Red’s dock.

“Shit,” snarls the second cop. “Now we gotta go in there and get him. Shit, shit, shit. F\*\*\*in’ Paulie. Stinkin’ car thief.”

The first cop shouts across the water, “Hey! F\*\*\*in’ Paulie! Get over here, you useless bastard,” pronouncing it “bastid.”

And the man does. Apparently realizing that a return to jail is preferable to freezing on Rat Island, he plunges back into the water, making another hole in the frozen surface and splashing through the slush toward the two cops on Red’s dock.

The first cop turns to Red and asks, stonefaced, “He’s gonna be cold. You got a blanket?”

Red grins broadly. “Nope.”

“Right,” says the cop and sends his partner to the patrol car for a wrap.

Red watches as the first cop steers a shivering, weather-worn little man off the property while hissing in his ear, “F\*\*\*in’ Paulie. You are a piece of work” The hapless car thief’s face is expressionless. In this entire drama, he has not said one word.

The next day, Red makes his usual noontime visit to Sal’s Market, hoping for some incident insight from the old-timers. Neither Sal nor Vinnie the Butcher is behind the counter, but Maria the Nearly Nun greets Red with her usual placid smile and a new twinkle in her eye.

Red opens the conversation. “There was some excitement around here yesterday.”

Maria’s face becomes animated. “Oh yes, I know. F\*\*\*in’ Paulie.”

Suddenly Red begins to understand the vernacular of the neighborhood. F\*\*\*in’ Paulie is a name, not a profanity. Freddy Fruit is not an indication of sexual preference; it is the produce man’s moniker. To his friends, the local dentist is Danny Tooth, pronounced “Toot” in the Queens English. And the town’s exterminator is Bugsy Bruno.

It begins to be clear to Red that he lives in a gangster movie.