

The book cover features a dark blue background with a silhouette of a person on the left. A large, full moon is visible in the upper right. In the center, the title 'PARANOIA BLUES' is written in a bold, black, distressed font. Below the title, the subtitle 'Crime Fiction Inspired by the Songs of Paul Simon' is written in a clean, white font. At the bottom right, the text 'edited by Josh Pachter' is displayed in a white font. A series of musical notes and a treble clef are overlaid on the lower right portion of the cover.

PARANOIA BLUES

Crime Fiction Inspired by
the Songs of Paul Simon

edited by Josh Pachter

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Crime Fiction Inspired by the Songs of Paul Simon

Josh Pachter, Editor

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So Beautiful or So What
Debra H. Goldstein

“You holding out on us, Johnny?” The brawny redhead pointed the branch he’d been using to stir tonight’s gumbo at me. “What you got in your pocket?”

Ignoring the men and women vying for a spot close to the garbage can fire, I focused on Red. The fact he had me by almost six inches and forty pounds—not to mention that branch, stripped of its bark and whittled to a sharp point—made me want to show him his suspicions were unfounded. The last thing I needed was trouble...and I didn’t figure the tattooed words LOVE and MAMA on the backs of his fingers indicated a secretly sweet nature.

I dug a hand into the pocket of my camouflage jacket, drew out the can of okra, and held it so Red could see it. “I didn’t realize it wasn’t one of those flip-tops when I stole it, so I kept it when I dumped my corn and peas in the pot.”

Red stuck out a beefy paw. “Give it here. Who’s got a knife?”

There was silence until the new kid piped up: “I have a Swiss Army knife, Red. It’s a doozy.”

He grinned widely, freckles spread across his face, and held his knife up for everyone to admire, close enough to the fire that flames reflected from its shiny surface.

I groaned inwardly. Thanks to me, the kid would now be a target, soon as Red returned his prize possession. This was not a screw-up an undercover cop ought to have made.

What made it worse was that the kid’s slight frame matched the body type of the three victims who’d been murdered under the bridge and in the nearby park over the past six months.

With elections coming up, the homeless and their encampments were once again in the news. The present mayor, the Queens borough president, and their respective challengers were all campaigning on platforms highlighting cleaning up the public areas that had been staked out by the homeless.

The difference between the candidates was in their management of the press after each of the murders. The incumbents dodged the headlines and touted their past accomplishments and future plans, while their opponents—noting that all three victims had been drug users—railed about crime in the streets and the incumbents’ failures. The truth lay somewhere between those two positions.

After the second murder, with the uniforms and detectives stymied in their investigation, Paul Landis had been sent in undercover as “Pete Simon.” After reconnecting with a former confidential informant, Paul reported making some headway, but the Powers That Be (and Those That Were Hoping to Be), playing on the transient nature of the homeless, thought it best after another month without an arrest to send in someone from a different station. The unspoken explanation was that Landis was what was called by some a SLAP, or “Stupid Lazy-Ass Policeman.”

I’d just finished two years undercover on another case, and I was assigned to back up the SLAP. Paul and I had been working the same turf for three days, now, but aside from a nod in passing, we hadn’t had any contact. Acting as if I were a bit of a loner, I’d

picked a spot on the edge of the encampment to sit and observe its denizens.

Red was obviously the alpha male. Paul had his own group of followers to yuck it up with, including two guys who spent a lot of time shooting hoops in the park, a few who only left their spots under the bridge for the meals offered at nearby shelters, and Larry, who alternated running petty scams with ranting against the police and the establishment. The kid with the Swiss Army knife seemed to be on the fringe of Paul's group. There were also a small number of female members of the loose-knit community—Dishtowel Molly and a couple of others.

There'd been talk around the department about Paul being dirty, but he had a history of making solid arrests. On this case, though, I didn't see any evidence of him doing anything productive, and I seriously doubted any of his hangers-on were the CI he claimed to have.

Meanwhile, now that I'd put the kid in danger over his knife, I'd have to double down on protecting him.

There was something that drew me to the youngster. He just seemed too fresh and naïve to be on the street. Maybe he reminded me of myself at that age. Maybe I thought I could do a good deed and help him turn his life around.

I'd observed Larry using him more than once as the shill in a dice grift. Before the kid continued down that path, I hoped to gain his trust and convince him to go back home—or at least take refuge in a shelter. It's not that I'm some kind of do-gooder, but we *are* supposed to protect and serve.

With a couple of well-placed thrusts, Red opened the can. He handed the knife back to the kid, poured the okra into the pot, and resumed stirring with a theatrical flourish.

"Listen up, yooz guys," he said. "We're going to have a good dinner tonight, and your bellies'll be so full you'll probably sleep like babies, but yooz need to keep your guard up. The cops aren't doing a stinking thing about them three murders."

"Yeah," Larry yelled, waving his hands. "The politicians want us gone, and the pigs'll look the other way until we're all dead."

A frown crossed Red's face, and I figured either he didn't agree with Larry or he wasn't about to be distracted from the point he wanted to make. He waved his stirrer past the bridge. "The first two killings were in the park, but the third one was closer to home, right under our bridge. We got to stay vigilant, yooz hear me?"

Later, with our bellies full and the fire dying, we broke into smaller groups and staked out places to sleep. I deliberately edged near the kid, who was setting up beneath the center of the bridge.

"Supposed to be cold tonight," I said. "It's warmer near the grate on the far side."

"Thanks." He picked up his backpack and followed me to one of the wing walls. I positioned my bedding so I could lean against the bridge's brace, and the kid did the same.

"Want a smoke?" I offered.

"Not that kind." He pulled a joint from his backpack. "This'll relax me more than the stew." He lit up and took a long toke, then offered it to me. As I shrugged it off, Paul materialized, as if drawn by the sweet scent.

"Good timing," the kid said.

Paul smiled. He waved a hand, and Red and Larry joined us. Larry, Paul, and the kid passed the joint around. When it was gone, Paul and Larry got to their feet, but Red stayed on the ground, one of his hands resting on the kid's backpack.

“Be careful where you put your stuff tonight.” Red’s words were addressed to the kid, but his gaze was locked onto mine. “Most of us’ve got each other’s backs, but you never know.”

Looming above us, Paul nodded. “Yeah, we’re not all saints. Come on, Larry.”

The two of them wandered off. Eventually, Red pushed himself up and sauntered away in the same direction.

Things soon quieted down in the encampment. Lying on my bedroll, I was lulled into that peaceful fullness Red had warned us about. The sky was full of stars, and—even for the homeless—the night was beautiful, so beautiful.

A noise startled me. I propped myself up on an elbow and looked around, finally convincing myself it was nothing to worry about.

So beautiful, I thought, stretching out again, *but so what? There’s loads of beauty in the world, but I get stuck dealing with the ugly...*

I woke up a couple of times during the night and checked on the kid. Other than rhythmic snoring somewhere nearby, a few guys mumbling to themselves, and the patter of raindrops on the bridge, nothing much was happening—

—until just before dawn, when a woman’s scream interrupted my dreams.

I jumped up and was second only to Red in reaching the spot where Dishtowel Molly rocked on her knees in front of a pile of rags, a stained towel clutched to her breast. I bent down to see if she was hurt, but she ignored my questions and went on screaming.

Red, I saw, was staring at the rags. When I followed his gaze, I realized that they were wearing shoes. Leaving Molly in the care of the others who’d by then joined us, I bent down to examine the dead man.

Careful not to disturb anything, I circled the body, memorizing as much as I could of the scene. Cell phone pictures would have been useful, but, since I was supposed to be homeless, I’d decided not to carry one. My memory would have to do.

When I saw that the victim was Paul, my poker face slipped for a moment. I glanced up to see if Red had noted my reaction, but he remained expressionless.

I continued my examination. There was no sign of a bullet hole—just a puncture wound in Paul’s neck. I was pretty sure the techs would conclude that, like the first three victims, Paul had been stabbed icepick style and left to bleed out.

The detectives investigating the earlier murders had hypothesized that they were drug-related robberies gone bad. Seeing Paul’s body, I disagreed. The cold-blooded preciseness of his murder suggested an intentional stabbing rather than a reactive killing. I searched for something to confirm that gut feeling.

When I took a closer look at Paul’s shoes, I knew I’d found it. Undercover work requires dressing to fit the situation, and Paul’s tattered clothes were appropriate for a homeless man—but for some reason he’d opted to wear his own shoes, an unblemished pair of black leather loafers. A robber rolling him for drugs or other valuables would certainly have taken them to wear or sell.

I was also convinced that Paul must have known the person who killed him, since his expression was peaceful, not agitated.

Sirens announced the approach of the police, and Red yelled, “Yooz all need to make yourselves scarce!”

Most of my fellow under-the-bridgers grabbed what they could and scattered. Dish-towel Molly stayed where she was. She'd stopped screaming and sat beside Paul, rocking back and forth, singing in a voice just above a whisper. Her hands still held her towel, which I now saw was stained with blood.

I squatted next to her, close enough to hear that her song was a hymn: "Savior, Pass Me Not."

Red grabbed my arm and jerked me to my feet. "Johnny, we got to get out of here."

I hesitated. "What about her?"

"She'll be okay. If she did this, she'll end up someplace warm. They'll feed her three meals a day and give her a bed with clean sheets. More likely, they'll try to take her to a shelter. She'll refuse to go and end up back here. Come on!"

With a mock salute and an "Aye-aye, sir," I made a beeline for my bedding. It wasn't much—a couple of sheets and a towel that did double duty as a pillow—but it was mine.

As I bent down to collect my goods, the kid stepped in front of me, holding his backpack.

"My knife is missing," he said.

I didn't react—until I saw the tip of a plastic baggie peeking out from between my two sheets.

Either someone was trying to set me up, or my bedding had just happened to be the most convenient place to stash whatever it was that someone didn't want the cops to find. Didn't matter: at that moment, a deluge of blue uniforms blocked any means of escape.

Once the officers separated us as best they could, I had no choice but to huddle under the bridge with the rest of the stragglers, where they wouldn't even let us talk amongst ourselves.

I wound up in the back of a paneled truck with several people—Red, the kid, and Larry—for the journey to the station house for questioning.

Larry again began to rant, and Red tried to calm him down. I backed away from them and found myself next to the kid.

"What am I going to do?" he whispered, clearly terrified. "What if it was *my* knife that killed Paul? Everyone knows I had it. They'll think I did it."

"Did you?"

"No!"

"Then," I said, cupping my hand on his shoulder, "all you have to do is tell the truth."

I knew that my being embedded with this group of homeless men and women would result in my receiving different treatment in the private parts of the station, but that knowledge didn't make the way I was manhandled in and out of the van any easier to take. As we walked into the station, I smelled my own sweat, as pungent as if I'd peed in my pants. No matter how many assurances were made that this was a custodial non-arrest situation, and we were simply being questioned as material witnesses to a homicide, the sugarcoating didn't change the reality that we weren't free to leave.

I kept my face averted from those we passed as we were guided to the elevator bank used to take detained "guests" to the second-floor interrogation and conference rooms.

One flight up, I was the first one out of the elevator. A detective held the automatic doors open for us, and a clerical I'd worked with in the past gave me a big "Hey" as she

strolled by. It didn't take a clairvoyant to interpret her realization of her mistake. Her face said it all.

I ignored her and stayed in character, praying Red and company were still far enough behind me to have missed the exchange.

We were brought to separate interrogation rooms for questioning, and the detective assigned to my room—once he'd confirmed my identity—brought me a decent cup of coffee. He debriefed me, then ushered me back to an unsecured area where others waited to be returned to the encampment.

Red sat on one of the benches.

"Can I join you?" I took his grunt as acquiescence. "How'd it go?"

"Probably about the same as it went for you."

"There wasn't much I could tell them," I said. "I was sound asleep. When I woke up enough to realize Dishtowel Molly was really screaming and it wasn't just a bad dream I was having, you and I were the first to react. I stopped to check on Molly, and you checked out the pile of rags and found Pete."

"Well, at least our stories matched."

"They should. That's what happened."

"On the surface, anyway."

"What are you getting at? If you've got something to say, say it."

"Getting touchy, Johnny?"

"No more than you." I braced myself in case Red got physical.

He did, but not in any way I would have expected. He threw his head back and laughed.

It took a while before he got himself under control. He leaned closer to me and lowered his voice. "Do you know why Pete died?"

I shook my head.

"Because it was his time."

The hairs on the back of my neck prickled. "And you decided that?"

"Not me, Johnny boy." He pointed toward the ceiling. "Somebody up there called Pete home."

"You believe that?"

He nodded his large head. "We're only given so much time on Earth, and we make of it what we will."

I shrugged. "I don't know if I buy into that."

"I believe existence is a miracle," Red said. "And once I accept that premise, I have to assume that everything happens as planned—or at least within the limits of the choices we can make. Pete made some bad choices."

I dropped my gaze to the floor. Where was this philosophical stuff coming from? And why was Red opening up in the middle of the station house? Was something on his conscience from last night?

I asked him outright, and he laughed again.

"Nah. Never even thought of it that way. Johnny, do you know why I stay on the street?"

"Because it's your home?"

"Not just my *home*." He looked at his hands. "Being out there every day is my *calling*. My mission. Years ago, addiction cost me everything, until a Southern Black gentleman

years older than me took me under his wing. He was fired up by the speeches of Martin Luther King, he told me, but it was that picture on the balcony, the one where King's friends are pointing out where the kill shot came from, that led him to realize the power he had. From the moment he saw that picture, he knew he could either live in the past, or he could live the words Dr. King had preached."

Red stared at me. "I was a broken man, but he awakened something in me. I've been clean and sober ever since—and, like him, I took an oath to stay on the street, helping others to find their paths, making sure bellies are full, a bed in a shelter or a treatment program is found, sometimes simply lending a nonjudgmental ear. That's how I interpret redemption."

I didn't know what to say. Either Red truly *had* found redemption, or he was for some reason feeding me the biggest cock-and-bull story I'd ever heard. But why? Had *he* been Paul's CI? That would make sense: he was always out there, observing. But wouldn't ratting people out to a SLAP like Paul be anything *but* redemptive?

My thoughts were interrupted by an announcement that we were being bussed to a nearby shelter for dinner. Nothing was said about what would happen after the meal.

The kid caught up to me while the bus was being loaded. "Thanks," he said. "I took your advice and was honest about going to sleep with my knife but finding it missing when I woke up. Gotta get me another one." He winked at me and strode away from those of us lined up for the bus. Something bothered me about his leaving, but, rather than go after him, I chose to follow the others to dinner.

The meal flew by, with everyone relishing the fried chicken and mashed potatoes, and most of us chattering about Pete's murder and our questioning by the men in blue. After vanilla ice cream and coffee, a good many of us took advantage of the shelter's offer of a shower and a night out of the cold, but some—including Red, Larry, and me—walked back to the bridge.

By the time we got there, I was beat. It would soon be dark, so I headed off to stake out my warm spot by the grate. The kid was already there, with his backpack and some other junk. Before I could get mad, he slid his things to the side, making room.

My bedding was gone. As I tried to figure out how I was going to stay warm, the kid reached into what I'd thought was a pile of trash and handed me a rolled yoga mat. "I always like a little padding," he said, "so I skipped dinner and did some shopping." He patted a second mat. "I figured these would make us both a bit more comfortable tonight."

I didn't have to ask what else he'd picked up while "shopping," because he opened his backpack and pulled out two packaged camp-sheet sets, the store tags still attached. He gave me one. "Sorry, though, no pillows."

I smiled. "I think I can make do without a pillow."

Larry appeared, and he and the kid shared another joint. I stretched out on my new bedding and was asleep almost immediately.

Scuffling and a woman's voice shouting "Not this time!" woke me to the sight of the kid, knife in hand, crouched over me. Dishtowel Molly was straddling his back, riding him like a bucking bronco and pounding him with her tiny fists.

He twisted and turned, trying to throw her off, and finally swatted her, hard, with his free hand.

My body broke her fall, but her weight pinned me in place. As the kid came in for the kill, Red jumped onto him from behind. They crashed to the ground, the kid coming out on top.

As I lifted Molly off me, the kid raised his knife.

“Red,” I screamed, “look out!”

Red rolled the kid over with an old-fashioned wrestling move and dropped onto him with his full weight. The kid went limp.

Releasing his hold, Red backed away. Blood gushed from where the knife—a new one, bigger than the Swiss Army knife, probably stolen from the same store where he’d lifted the yoga mats and sheets—had penetrated the kid’s stomach.

I snatched up a sheet to staunch the flow, but Red grabbed my arm. “Forget it, Johnny. He’s gone.”

“He was going to do it again,” Molly gasped. “He didn’t like cops like Paul and you.”

I stared at her, realizing that she’d used Paul’s real name. “*You* were the CI,” I said.

She smiled. “The kid was dealing.”

Sirens sounded in the distance.

“Marijuana?”

“That and more. Paul was sure the other three victims were customers who got on the kid’s wrong side, so he made examples of them. Then Paul tried to muscle in on the action, but the kid had him figured for a cop.”

The shoes.

“Paul thought he’d scared the kid into taking him on as a partner, but the kid didn’t want a partner and killed him. When I saw him make a move on *you* just now, I couldn’t let it happen again.”

“You knew *I* was a cop, too?”

“We all did,” Red said, “as of this afternoon. You were made getting out of the elevator at the station.” He held out his beefy hands, fists clenched. “Your brethren will be here in a minute. I’d prefer to have *you* take me in.”

I looked for Molly, but she was gone, blended into the crowd of onlookers.

“I don’t see why,” I said. “Way I read it, he fell on his own knife. Must have been a drug deal gone bad—I understand the officers found another knife and a stash right around this spot last night.”

Red’s hands dropped to his sides, and he gazed at me with a respect I hadn’t gotten from him before.

“So,” I said, “you making your beautiful gumbo again tomorrow night, or what?”