

The First Two Pages: “Shuffle Off to Buffalo” by David Edgerley Gates
From *Murder, Neat: A SleuthSayers Anthology*,
edited by Michael Bracken and Barb Goffman (Level Short Books)

An Essay by David Edgerley Gates

All the titles of the Mickey Counihan stories start with the letter S, and “Shuffle Off to Buffalo” was a title in search of a story. (It was a hit song in the 1930’s, from the musical *42nd St.*) It came immediately to mind when the SleuthSayers anthology *Murder, Neat* was first floated, not least because the unifying theme was setting the story in a saloon. Mickey was in the heavy, back when, and he knows where the bodies are buried. These days, he’s the old guy at the end of the bar who’ll spin a yarn if you stand him a drink. It’s a voice that shares confidences.

The next thing is that in fact there is or was a roadhouse up the Hudson River valley called Farley’s—the running gag was actually “Chuck You, Farley”—many moons ago, and a few of us kids from Massachusetts (where the drinking age was 21) would drive west out the Turnpike and across the state line into New York (where the age was 18) and drink pitchers of draft beer like a dumb-ass until someone had to go out and puke in the azaleas.

And the third part is the murder of Legs Diamond. Legs was an Irish bootlegger, and muscle for Arnold Rothstein—the guy who fixed the World Series. Legs survived at least four assassination attempts, on the record, until finally

somebody put three bullets in the back of his head. It happened in Albany, but for my purposes, I say it took place in the little river town of Hudson, forty miles south. This is because Hudson *was*, in a previous lifetime, a junction on the New York Central line, and both the 20th Century and Lake Shore Limited passed through on their way upstate. Hudson was also a sinkhole of vice, and the local fleshpots didn't get cleaned up until the early 1950s.

So, these are the elements that led to the *setting*, and the story followed from there. Here's the opening.

When the heat was on, it was common practice among some in our trade to absent themselves from their regular environs and rusticate awhile in more temperate climes. I'm not talking about the weather, mind, but the ebb and flow of moral vigilance and the hasty alarm of the powers that be.

In the event, I was on my way upriver as companion to a fine broth of a boy named Gerry Tyrone, himself having attracted the unwelcome attentions of the Italians, and it was thought best to get him out of the city for the time being. This was in the wake of the Five Families gang war, in '48, when the Mafia clans had settled a bitter dispute betwixt themselves with brute violence, and no small cost in political capital.

Why not throw him to the wolves? you might ask. Piece him out to Frank Costello or Joe Bananas in return for goodwill or future favors. A ready answer is that such would countenance betrayal. A more thoughtful one is that Young Tim Hannah, who bossed the Irish mob on the West Side, wasn't one for short-term gain. He played a deeper game.

"Mickey," he told me, "keep the lad safe from harm."

He meant long enough to see if his investment matured.

Now, first, the way Mickey chats you up. You recognize a familiar, whiskey-roughened inflection, with a touch of the blarney. He invites you in, he

trails a lure, the hook hidden below. Mickey's got an Irish manner of speech, but it betrays an Irish habit of mind, past grudges. For all the Begorrah, you should hear some ground glass at the back of his throat.

Secondly, he puts you wise. He establishes the place and time, and in passing, the threat environment. He addresses it as a commonplace, like weather, or furniture. Mickey lives in a world of shifting advantage, and while his loyalties clearly lie with his own clan, the Hannahs, he suggests the Irish maintain an uneasy balance in the shadow of the more powerful and exacting Italian crime families.

Lastly, we know something's coming. It isn't simply narrative convention, or storyline, but the *voice*, again. Mickey is an omniscient narrator. He already knows the punchline. How much is he keeping back? Is he turning it over, in his mind's eye, and if he sees it from a different angle, will it come out differently? Mickey's got an ear to the ground, listening for the Devil's footsteps, walking on his grave.

I'm not sure all this is expressly present in the opening lines of the current story, at least for the *reader*, but I know that it's there for *me*. Each of the Mickey stories begins with a similar set-up, taking a deep breath, yawning and stretching, and then sliding in on the oblique. It's the old guy at the end of the bar, warming to the task, or as a character remarks in Synge's *Shadow of the Glen*, "I've a great thirst on me, and the night is young."

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David Edgerley Gates lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico. His short fiction appears regularly in *Alfred Hitchcock* and *Ellery Queen* and has been widely anthologized, including the annual *Best American Mystery Stories* four times. He has been nominated for the Edgar, the Shamus, and the International Thriller Writers awards. He's recently written a WWII spy novella, *The Kingdom of Wolves*, and is now working on a Western gothic, *The Misfortunes of Octavio Medina*.