

## [Both Will Kill a Man]

Roaldus Richmond and Mari Tomasi Recorded in Writers' Section Files

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BOTH WILL KILL A MAN

In the back room of the Lambs' Club, a gambling and drinking den, the little man lay on a disheveled bed and stared at the ceiling— a granitecutter on a periodic drunk. The screened-in gambling room, thick with smoke and rough voices, was crowded with truck-drivers, stonecutters, bootleggers, professional gamblers, and loafers. Sinewy and grimy hands held the cards at the rim of the large round table. The little man was no longer young, but his hair was thick and dark; sweat glistened on his forehead, under the eyes, along the upper lip.

Arturo said, "I don't know how long I been drunk. I don't know when's the last [time?] I ate something. All I know is I'm seeing things now. And hearing them. All kinds of things. So bad I'm afraid to close my eyes. God! So I leave the light on and look at the ceiling. Once in a while I drink another bottle of beer. But it don't help me much any more."

He rubbed forehead and eyes with the knuckles of one hand, Arturo had always been immaculate. Even during a drunk he kept himself neat and clean.

"I cut stone all my life and I drank all my life. Both will kill a man in his forties. And I've done plenty of both. It don't matter much which way you go. I'm over fifty now. I feel it inside. I'm a letter-cutter — when I work. You got to have a sharp eye and steady hand to cut letters. It's 2 nervous work. After eight hours of that you need a drink, all right. You need a dozen drinks.

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"I don't know why I drink this way. I go along a year or so all right. Take a few at night, go to work in the morning. Then —I don't know — all at once I get started like this. God, it's awful. Three-four months, sometimes longer. Don't work, don't eat, nothing but drink. Can't got away from it.

"I guess I got nothing to hold me from drinking. This is the only home I got since my wife left me. The boys that run this place have been good to me. People say they're bad, but they're good to me. If you're down and out they ain't kicking in your teeth — I ought to know.

"My wife was a good woman but what a talker. What a tongue! My God, Maddalena's tongue! She got it from her old lady. Maddalena was a knockout though. The old lady didn't want her to marry me. We had to run away and do it. We had two daughters — I ain't seen them since they was small kids. Both grown up and married now. And I'm a grandfather. My wife married another stonecutter. She was always after me to quit the sheds, then she up and marries another stonecutter. God, I feel sorry for him! A woman with a tongue like that in bad for any man. It goes all the time. Drives a man crazy.

"I'd like to see the girls. I think I saw the oldest one when Joe Ricardelli died. A lot of Italians came up from Quincy. I was at the station when these people got off the train. I saw this girl and I got a funny feeling. In my throat, up my back. It must have been Nina, the oldest. My own daughter 3 walking by not knowing me, not even seeing me. I felt bad. For a long time I felt bad over that.

"I saw my wife two-three years ago at a wake. She was fat. She tried to talk with me, but there was nothing to say. I got away quick as I could. I went out and got drunk with her husband.

"I come from Montigli, near Turin. I was young when my father and mother died. They left a little money. Everyone was going to America, so I went, too. I had relatives in Barre and I

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came to live with them — thirty-seven years ago. Some of them were cutting stone. I went into the sheds to learn the trade. The older men are dead now. The younger ones kept away from stonemasonry — all except one boy. He cuts stone because he's got a wife and kids to support.

“I never went back to the old country. Hell, why should I? I came over so young I feel this is my only country, even though I've got three brothers, and nephews and nieces over there. My father's house was left to me and my brothers, but it don't do me no good. I wrote ten-fifteen years ago and told them to split it three ways. I don't want it. I'm glad to be here. This war. Only this noon when I'm trying to sleep young Pete Parotti come in drunk, drunk from last night, and he turns on that radio. All I hear is how the English are bombing Turin.”

Arturo turned on his side and reached for a half-empty beer bottle. “God, I'm glad my father and mother are dead. It'd drive me crazy knowing they was over there with bombs dropping all around them. They loved their home. Lived in 4 the same house from the day they was married. Brought up all us kids there. Not like me and Maddalena. Renting three rooms, here, renting four rooms somewhere else, so the kids never knew one place for home. The last time I heard from my brothers was a few years ago during the Ethiopian war. Each one had a son in the service. If they didn't get killed then they'll probably get it this time. And all for nothing. You wait. Mussolini plays sucker and helps Hitler, but in the end Hitler'll turn on him. You wait and see. I feel sorry for my brothers and their boys, but not so much as if it was my father and mother. The brothers and nephews can take care of themselves.

“They tell me the high, level stretches above Montigli are air bases now. They were fine plains. Us kids used to run races there. I don't dream much about the old country. But after that damn Pete turned on the radio I dreamed I was up on those plains, and I could see the road winding down to Turin. All ripped up it was by bombs. And the little roadside chapels were in splinters, and the ground covered with plaster pieces of St. Joseph, Christ,

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and the Blessed Virgin Mary. And beside one of the bigger pieces my father and mother were crying. My God! I woke up in a sweat.” Arturo shivered. His head rolled back to the rumpled pillow.

“When I got married I was only nineteen — too young. I thought I was a big shot, earning twelve-fifteen bucks a day. Imagine a kid nineteen making that money? I couldn't settle down. I wasn't made for married life. The more Maddalena nagged the more I drank. Finally, she took the two girls and left me. I had to laugh once — my folks wanted me to be a 5 musician. And I land in a stonished. I don't mind the work. I don't mind the dust. It's the noise drives me crazy — it's hell's own racket busting around my ears. They still call me a good letter-cutter. It'll take a few days to get onto my feet again, but I'll do it. I always have. I'm going to sober up and cut plenty of stone. You wait and see.”

Arturo let the brown bottle fall to the floor. The tremors had stopped. But his eyes were still wide open and staring at the ceiling.