

ONE TIME RIGHTS

4300 WORDS

THE SNOW PLOW

BY JAMES J. COLLINS

New York City is at war City but only a small army threatens. One man is involved, and his avowed enemy is the Department of Sanitation. A tenuous truce is presently in place, as he freed the single hostage taken, but there are people in city government who remember the initial episode and hope it does not reoccur. They have kept this event secret from the public but this report will rectify that.

The Roman Legions conquered the world, and if you saw Nunzio Fortunata, the bricklayer, you understood why. At twenty-six, he stood five feet ten, strong and sturdy, and built like a barrel, a dramatic remnant of the peasant stock that, at one time, ruled the entire known world. He had a big beaming smile and tight dark curly hair, which set off his large brown eyes and his Roman nose. The only thing that seemed out of place was the little mustache, which made him look a little, like a gigolo, and reinforced his reputation with the women.

Nunzio had grown up in an area called Arthur Avenue, the equivalent of "little Italy" in the northwest Bronx. This was a tight knit neighborhood consisting of a large number of Italian immigrants and their families. Like Italians everywhere, the family ties were extremely strong and it was heart wrenching for Nunzio's mother when he and his quiet wife, Carmella, after the arrival of their second child, bought a new home in Queens, and moved fifteen miles away. On the moving day, the family members acted as if the little family was going to South Africa or Australia and would never be seen again. Needless to say, the

family survived this traumatic separation, and Nunzio and his brood came home to momma's cooking every weekend from the wilds of Queens.

The Fortunatas acclimated very quickly to the new neighborhood in Bayside, an enclave of one and two family homes in the outer reaches of Queens. Like most of his fellow Italian-Americans, Nunzio was very cautious with his money. Generations before him had encountered hard times and the warnings were drummed into him at his mother's knee. "Get property. Pay it off. Get rental income to help. Start a garden and grow your own food." Nunzio learned well. The house he bought in Bayside, was a nice, two storey, brick fronted, attached house with a rental apartment, that had a back yard large enough for a family garden. It needed work, but that never intimidated Nunzio. Within one year, he had, with the help of two uncles, rebuilt the interior, incorporated a beautiful garden, a fig tree, a patio and a brick wall to keep his privacy. Nunzio also had acquired tenants, a nice young business couple who spent most of their time away at work. He had arrived. He was a property owner; a man who deserved respect, he was, by every measure that his family used, a success. Overall, it was a very nice beginning.

Winter arrived and with it the snows. The city government in New York knows where the political power is centered. It is in midtown Manhattan where apartments and condominiums sell for well over a million dollars. The people who own them have political influence; they have power and their streets are cleared of snow. Eastern Queens, on the other hand, is primarily populated by working class families who vote but who do not have large amounts of surplus money to donate to the politicians. They have limited power, so when a massive snowstorm strained the snow removal assets of the city to the limits, Queens was abandoned to the elements. Fortunata's block was never plowed. Nunzio, who was a man of action, tried to get the city politicians to do their job. He called the Department of Sanitation. He called the Borough President's office. He called the mayor's office. He called the Police Department. He went through every known agency in the City

of New York. The only answer he got was, "It's the responsibility of the Sanitation Department and their working as hard as they can. I'm sure they will get to your block in a couple of hours."

Three days passed and Fortunata was getting very frustrated. He could not get out of his driveway. He could not get to work out in Nassau County, and as a result, he would not be paid. The city was ignoring him and he felt he was not getting the respect that a property owner was due. When this had happened to his ancestors, they had taken matters into their own hands and subjugated all of those peoples who did not give them enough respect. If nobody is willing to do the job, you go in and do it for them. Fortunata was starting to seethe.

Nunzio calmed down; decided to give the entrenched bureaucracy one last chance, and so he trudged the eight blocks from his house to the Department of Sanitation truck impoundment for a personal discussion with the man in charge. All along his trip, Nunzio observed that none of the streets had been plowed once you got off the main bus lines.

The impoundment covered a large block and contained dozens of garbage trucks, sweeper trucks, and dump trucks. All of these were enclosed behind a large chain link fence with barbed wire liberally sprinkled over all the edges. In New York, you have to lock up the garbage trucks at night, otherwise, they will disappear. Visitors find out the hard way, that there are people living in New York who will steal a red-hot stove. If you believe the papers, many of them are quite capable and work their way up into positions of influence in the city government.

As he got to the gate opening, he had to step back to let a garbage truck with a plow attached to the front go by. He was frantically waving and hollering at the truck but it ignored him as it turned at the corner into a side street and started to proceed back along the path that he had just completed.

"Son of a gun," he said to himself, that's going right toward my house. That last phone call must have done it". With that, he turned around and pursued the truck, following its tracks in the snow figuring that they would lead him back in front of his house.

As he rounded, a corner four blocks away, he came across the truck parked at the curb. He climbed up to look inside. There was nobody on board. The keys were in the ignition but the truck was just sitting there, as if it had been abandoned. On the corner, there was a neighborhood bar, and he figured that the driver might have stopped in there for lunch. Therefore, Nunzio went over to the bar, opened the door and went in.

There were three members of the Sanitation Department inside. Two were sitting at a table with sandwiches and beers while the third was standing at the bar nursing a shot of whiskey. The T.V. blared a commercial and the jukebox mourned a blues tune.

"Hi fellas, how're you doin'. I live down on two hundred and eight avenue, and I've been calling for the last three days for you fellas to come down with a plow and clear my street. You're almost there. When are you guys going to finish the job?"

Turning to face Nunzio, the eldest of the trio, a balding man in his mid-fifties with a well-developed paunch, and a beer in his hand to help maintain that profile, slid back the chair he was sitting on. "Hell, we're all done for the day. We've been out working for the last fourteen hours and we're not planning to do any more. We're just having a bite to eat here, and then we're going to go back and turn the truck in. Maybe we'll be back tomorrow."

"Hey, c'mon fellows, its only four blocks over. You can drop the plow; drive through the street on your way back. Just clear the street and the job is done. No fuss, no bother."

"Forget it, we got a union. We just don't do things like that. We're under orders from our supervisor. He tells us to clear a street. We clear that street. He don't tell us to clear a street, we don't clear that street. Why don't you just ease on out of here. Don't bother us; we're tired and irritated. It's been a long day. We're six crews understaffed and we're overworked. Tomorrow we might be told to do your street, or we might be sent to Manhattan. It's all in the luck of the draw."

Nunzio felt his blood pressure rising, and his face started to turn color. He was an intimidating sight. However, he kept his

cool. Besides the three Sanitation men, there was a bartender and two others in the bar. Obviously, they all knew each other. It was difficult to know what the odds would be if the discussion got heated, so discretion got the better part of valor, and Nunzio, though furious, left the bar.

As he retraced his steps, he came abreast of the truck, and stopped as he muttered to himself. "I go by the book. I call everybody in authority. They tell me they will do the job as soon as they can. The truck is here, less than four blocks away, and these lazy bastards won't come down and do the street. If they had to work one day on a construction job laying brick, they would probably collapse for a month. They don't know about hard work. I think it's time I took things into my own hands. Just like a citizen's revolt." With that, he pulled himself up on the running board, opened the door and slid into the driver's seat. The pungent odor, which seemed to permeate the truck, struck his senses like a blow. He hesitated for only a second, shrugged his shoulders, turned the key, and started it up.

AAAAARRRRRRROOOOOOOWWWWWW

The sound was so loud he thought it could be heard back in the Bronx. Looking in the rear view mirror at the bar entrance, he saw no movement. Quickly he shifted the gears, and let out the clutch. Ponderously, the big rig started to move. The heavy chains started to clatter as they bit into the packed snow and Nunzio pulled away from the curb. Luckily, the garbage truck was facing away from the bar so the inhabitants did not see him leave. At the end of the street, he took a right to get out of the line of sight and moved onto a major street so that he could test the plow mechanism. He reached down, engaged the lever on the floor and pushed it forward

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"Well that's how you turn on the garbage grinder," he told himself as he disengaged the lever. "It's got to be this other set of controls".

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The first lever started to move the outer blade up. "O K! Now

I know what that's for," he said to himself.

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The second lever dropped the main blade; snow started to fly. First, he ran a pass at an empty block and was thankful that no parked cars were in evidence. Parking was prohibited on these streets before a snowstorm was predicted so that the plows could do their thing. Before he tackled his own block, he needed all the open space he could get, to practice. His street was narrow with lots of trees, and would be tricky to clear.

Twenty minutes later, Nunzio had perfected his technique and did a passable job of plowing. Before he dared tackle his own block, three streets that had minimum obstacles, were cleared. Four small trees had been cut down in their prime, and two old women had been scared half out of their wits during this learning phase. Well you always have to break some eggs if you're going to make an omelet, he thought. As he expected, the job was simple once you got the hang of it. In the side streets, most of the people kept their cars in the driveways before a storm so that they would not be buried by the plows when they went by. This helped considerably.

Two hours later, Nunzio pulled the large white garbage truck over to the curb on a quiet side street that had industrial buildings on both sides. Climbing down from the cab, he put the key in his pocket and left, as he felt the tension drain away from his arms and neck. He had completed his self-appointed job. Not only was his street cleared, but also the surrounding streets for three blocks around were done. Fortunata was not one to forget his neighbors. When they got Nunzio, they also got his loyalty. It is an Italian trait.

Fortunata had proven to himself that the job itself was easy, but he was still incensed at the city. Therefore, he decided that he better let them know what he had done. On the other hand, he did not want to be locked up for stealing a garbage truck so he had to do it anonymously. His first call was to the Department of Sanitation.

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"Department of Sanitation, Tonatta here, how can I help you?"

"I'm a concerned citizen who hasn't had his streets cleared, and I wanted to let you know that I have taken a garbage truck hostage. If you want your garbage truck back, you're going to have to go to the newspapers and explain to them why you haven't done your job in Queens. Tell the people that the citizens have revolted and are taking matters into their own hands. Once I see that in the papers, I will call you back and tell you where I'm keeping your truck."

Holding his hand over the mouthpiece, Nick Tonatta called over to the next desk. "Mike get on the extension. I have some nut on the line. He claims he stole one of our garbage trucks and he is holding it hostage. How should I handle this lunatic?"

"We got no trucks missing to the best of my knowledge. Probably some kind of kook out loose from Bellevue. Humor him. It could be good for a couple of laughs." said Mike as he picked up the extension and listened in.

"Well sir, we don't appear to have a garbage truck missing. Maybe you could describe it to me."

"Hey it's a standard garbage truck, about twenty feet long, twelve feet high, and ten feet wide. It's painted white, and it's got an orange plow attached to the front and is marked Department of Sanitation number 4876."

"Well sir, how did you manage to acquire this garbage truck?" asked Nick.

"A couple of your guys were in drinking. They weren't doing their job, so I appropriated it. Consider it a civilian complaint against the incompetency of your department."

Covering the phone again, Nick said, "Mike he says he's got truck 4876. Put it on the computer and find out if it is a real number and where it is. He might have seen it drive by and he's pulling our chain."

Mike, who also covered his phone, was smiling. "This could be real funny. String him along and see where he takes it from here."

"Well sir I'm really not at liberty to discuss ransoming our garbage truck for two reasons. First, I am not empowered to do

that, and second, I do not know that one is missing. We will check up on this and call you back. What is your number?"

"C'mon, c'mon your not dealing with a fool here I'll call you back in an hour. That should be enough time for you to find out that I'm telling you the truth."

CLICK

"Hey Nick what's with the turkey on the phone?"

"He says he's holding the truck for ransom."

"What's he going to do? Feed it back to us a piece at a time? Send us a fender today, cut off the radiator tomorrow, and send us the plow the next day. What the hell's he going to do with a garbage truck? He can't joy ride in it. First, it is big and white; stands out like a sore thumb, and smells to high heaven. In fact, he won't know what it really smells like in this cold weather. However, wait until it warms up. You spent your time on the trucks. Did you ever shake the smell? How is he going to get it serviced? Pull into your local service station and say "Fix my garbage truck'. C'mon what is it with this turkey?"

"You know we could have a little fun with him. Why don't we have him put the garbage truck on the phone so that we know it is our garbage truck? They do that in all kidnappings. See how he responds to that. This guy could be a real Looney Tunes fresh out of the rubber ward."

Mike walked over to the computer and keyed in the number. Low and behold, the truck number was legitimate, and was listed as assigned to the depot in Eastern Queens. He called the supervisor for that depot and said, "We got a nut on the phone who claims that he has hijacked truck 4876 and he's holding it for ransom. That truck is listed as being in your depot. Can you tell us where it is?"

"Wait I'll look it up." said the supervisor. "Yeah Alfonso and Robinson are listed as being out with that truck. They're on a double shift and they have a trainee with them for the day. They're clearing the streets in this area but I've got no record that the truck is missing."

"Where would they be? Can you reach them?"

"No they're circling around doing the streets. I will put a call in to the supervisor's car to see if they can find them. Let me call you back."

Forty minutes later;

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"Department of Sanitation, Tonatta here, how can I help you?"

"It's Danny Smith, the supervisor over in Queens. You called me about one of my trucks. We checked into that. The truck really is missing. The supervisor found the three workers running around looking for their truck. He asked the driver how they managed to lose it, but he doesn't think he is getting a straight story. According to them, they were on a lunch break around the corner and when they came back, it was missing. They don't have the key, and he thinks they left it in the truck, but they all swear the driver took it with them and put it in his pocket. They claim he must have had his pocket picked, but the supervisor is sure they're lying. He thinks they were goofing off in a gin mill and running up the overtime, but he won't be able to prove it."

"So, did you report it to the cops?"

"What, are you crazy? Report that someone stole a garbage truck while our crew had it out clearing streets? No way! First of all we'll be the laughing stock of the city; second of all, I'll be back riding on the trucks. I'm too old for that. I can retire in three years and this inside job is very comfortable. Look, our people cover every street in this city at least once a week. We'll just pass the word among the department to look for the truck and tell us where it is. In the mean time, we'll just write it off as out of service. It'll turn up. Where are they going to go with a garbage truck?"

"This guy claims he's holding it for ransom. Maybe he's going to chop it up and send it back to us a piece at a time."

"Fine then I just juggle some paper work and keep a clunker that we're scheduled to junk and switch the numbers. Nobody will ever know, and we'll keep our jobs. Because if we report this the Commissioner is, going to look bad; I'm going to look bad and you're going to look bad. We'll all probably be demoted or fired."

In fact, anyone who touches this will be burned, and you can be sure the big guys will throw us to the dogs if the newspapers get a hold of this. The best thing to do is to stonewall the whole affair. It never happened."

Twenty minutes later Nunzio decided to call again.

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"Department of Sanitation, Tonatta here, how can I help you?"

"This is the guy who called before. The guy who's holding your garbage truck for ransom. Did you check out my story?"

"Oh yeah, we looked into that, we don't have a garbage truck missing."

"What do you mean you don't have a truck missing. I've got the damn thing right outside here."

"Where is here?"

"C'mon, we've been thru' this before. You're not dealing with a dummy."

"How do we know you got one of our garbage trucks? We ain't got one reported missing."

"The guys I lifted it from, were in a bar, they may still be there. They sure weren't clearing the streets. "

"Well, I don't have a lot of experience in this ransom business, but I know that it's important to know that the hostage is all right. Usually the people want to talk to the hostage before negotiations are undertaken."

"How am I going to do that...Wait a minute, I got an idea. I'll call you right back."

CLICK

Ten minutes later;

RRRRRRRIINNNNNNNGGGGG

"Department of Sanitation, Tonatta here, how can I help you?"

"Hey, it's me again. Can you hear me?"

"Yeah."

"Wait a second

CLAAAANNNNNNGG GGG RRRRRUUUUUMMMMMBBBBBLLLLLLLL

"Can you hear that?" asked Nunzio.

"Yeah it sounds like a garbage truck in the distance. Is that

a recording?"

"Recording BULLSHIT! That's your truck. I brought it up to the phone so you could hear it."

"How did you get it into your house?"

What? Are you pulling my chain? It's at an outside pay phone. I think I'd like to speak to your supervisor."

"Gee I'm terribly sorry, he's away on vacation. I'm the person in charge and I can't help you because we don't have a truck missing. Your truck must belong to someone else. You had better try somewhere else. I'd like to talk to you some more but the phone is busy and I've got to answer the calls. Have a nice day." CLICK "Hey Mike that was our friend. He's really cracked. He put the truck on the phone."

"How'd he do that?"

"Apparently, he's at an outside pay phone, and he drove the truck up and turned on the grinder."

"What did you do?"

"I stonewalled him. Told him 'we ain't got a truck missing'. My guess is that he will get real pissed, but I don't think we'll hear from him again."

They were right. Nunzio was steaming, but he couldn't get the city to take notice. So he tried his last card. He would call the Daily News.

RRRIINNNGGGG

"City desk, Murphy"

"Mister Murphy, I'm a concerned taxpayer out in Queens. As you have been reporting in the paper, sections of Queens haven't been cleared of snow. I took matters into my own hands and stole a plow from a sanitation crew who were drinking in a bar in Eastern Queens. Then I went and plowed my neighborhood personally. Now, I'm holding the garbage truck hostage until Sanitation admits they did a lousy job. I'll give you the story, but I have to be guaranteed that my name won't be disclosed. Are you interested?"

"Sure if you can back it up. It sounds like a good story. I'll have to check a few facts first. Can I call you back? Give me your number."

"Sorry, I'll call you back. You won't be able to reach me. How about in an hour?"

"Sure that's fine. You have the number. Just ask for the city desk and give them my name." CLICK "Hey Franklin, call over to Sanitation in Queens and to the police. Find out everything about a stolen garbage plow and get back to me in half an hour."

Twenty five minutes later, Franklin, a young cub reporter came up to Murphy's desk to report. "Sorry 'Murph' nobody knows nothing about any stolen truck. Sanitation says nothing is missing, and the police have no report about any theft."

"O K Danny, it's probably some college kid playing a prank. We won't hear from him again. He's in some bar laughing over the idea, and figuring he has us jumping through hoops after some phantom, stolen, garbage truck. Go back to your other story. I still expect it for the early edition, so hop to it."

Forty minutes later, Nunzio called again.

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"City desk, Murphy"

"Hi mister Murphy, it's the guy about the garbage truck. Did you check it out?"

"Hey kid, I don't have time for these pranks. This is a working newspaper and we have a job to do. We checked on your story, and there's nothing to it Sanitation doesn't have a truck missing, and the police have no stolen truck report. You had your little fun now don't bother me any more." CLICK

Nunzio had been beaten. The bureaucrats knew how to hide a problem. They were experts at it. They got experience on how to do it every day. He was an amateur messing with professionals who were willing to sacrifice the truck rather than be embarrassed. He was not in the same league with these players and he finally realized it.

Each day, out of curiosity, Nunzio would walk past the truck, which was ignored by all. The back seemed to fill up with garbage over night as passersby contributed to its massive maw. On the fourth day, it mysteriously disappeared from the curb as it had

been reclaimed by its rightful owners. The only change they noticed was the graffiti sprayed on the sides of the truck.

Homeowners demand respect.

A place of honor holds a key on a four-inch metal disc inside a frame over the mantle piece at the Fortunata's. Engraved on the disc are the numerals 4876. It was the only souvenir of the guerilla war waged by Nunzio against the city bureaucracy. Like many skirmishes, the underdog doesn't always win, but legends grow around their daring and their rebellion.

A few members of the Sanitation Department remember the truck that was held for ransom, and Nunzio gives any garbage truck he sees an old-fashioned Italian curse and an obscene hand salute. It's so they can remember that he is a landowner; a man of action, and he deserves respect.

THE END

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