

WISEGUY CAPERS, ZIG-ZAG MINDS

M I C H A E L L . S H U M A N

Smuggler's Blues: A True Story of the Hippie Mafia

By Richard Stratton

New York: Arcade, 2016

297 pp.

Cloth (ISBN 978-1-6287-2668-8): USD \$24.99

Kindle edition: USD \$14.74

Audio (ISBN 978-1-5318-8961-6): USD \$9.99

RICHARD STRATTON, AS A KID, watched *The Untouchables* on TV and wanted to be Al Capone instead of Eliot Ness. He carried a switchblade, wore a leather jacket, and hung out at Ma's Lunch, one of only two places in town that had a pinball machine. He beat up his eighth-grade Phys Ed teacher on account of some forgotten sneakers, got kicked out of Wellesley Junior High, and did soft time at Thompson Academy, a school for boys located on an island in Boston Harbor. "It was all about being tough," he writes in *Smuggler's Blues: A True Story of the Hippie Mafia*, a knockdown account of his drug-dealing days in the mid-seventies and early eighties. "As a kid, I wanted to be tough more than I wanted to be smart or popular or good in school. I hated the idea of being thought of as a wimp, a sissy, or, worst of all, a coward. I was determined to be able to beat up anybody who messed with me—or at least give them a good fight" (58). Stratton later on would provide a grateful generation of hippies, playboys, and art-school dropouts with sublime imported goods to roll inside their Zig-Zags, and he ended up serving real time for his anonymous benevolence. He also became an expert in prison law, author of the cult novel *Smack Goddess* (1990), written during his eight years in maximum security, and appropriately editor of the very-niche magazines *High Times* and *Prison Life*. Success often comes from experience and hard work, and Stratton made the best of his time in the underground trade.

Stratton's tough-guy resolve sticks with him throughout this account of his misadventures as he stares down a table of made-man New England mobsters, repeats the act with a crew of corrupt government-officials-cum-smugglers in Beirut, and lays into a Metro Drug Squad cop and his DEA nemesis, Special Agent Bernie Wolfshein, over the phone while on the lam. "I am supposed to be scared—and I am, though I won't show it," he writes of his encounter with Jimmy Chagra and Mike Capuana-rhymes-with-marijuana, two Cosa Nostra types who try to shake him down for protection money. "There is a mean, aggressive, nasty streak in me," he writes, "honed in reform school and street fights, that turns vicious when I feel threatened. I'm like a cornered animal, ready to throw the table over on Capuana and Chagra, spill food all over them, slap that crocodile smile off Capuana's fleshy face" (43). Instead, he wins over the thugs, at least temporarily, with attitude and chain saw charisma.

Such a confrontational life inevitably induces paranoia, and Stratton spends much of his waking time figuring out which of his raggedy band of players will crack under pressure, run off with the cash, or start talking loose to Wolfshein. Would it be the Wizard of ID, fabricator of those essential tools of the trade, the fake identification papers; or Jonathan Livingston Seagull, the Cessna pilot who transports Stratton's contraband but has trouble figuring out his landing gears; or the Wart Hog, attorney and original owner of Stratton's horse farm; or Jimmy D, who looks like Kris Kristofferson, or even his tanned girlfriend Val, wearer-of-granny-dresses, string-bikini underwear, and all around stone fox? The answers, eventually, are: yes, yes, yes, possibly not, and yes, in that order. Smoking dope will engender paranoia, but living the life with characters out of Gilbert Shelton's *The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers* comic strip will astronomically increase the chances that events, really, are colluding against you. "Now I'm a man on the run," Stratton reports after sixty of his associates are rounded up in Canada. "Each day when I wake up I ask myself: Will this be the day they catch me and put me in a cage? The prospect of going to prison bothers me less than the thought that by arresting me and locking me up, they will win" (281).

If the idea of losing the game concerns him, Stratton is even more motivated by the stratospheric rush he gets from his DEA-defying deals. Moments of panic and terror morph into euphoria much like that induced by the smuggled substances providing his gold-and-diamonds lifestyle. When

Seagull nearly crashes the plane on their way to Provincetown to visit Stratton's friend, author Norman Mailer, the scene is one of perfect calm:

This may be the one solid attribute I have as an outlaw. It's as though I can step outside myself to a place beyond the immediate peril, and my brain starts to focus on a way through the situation. It is a tremendously satisfying feeling and a good part of what keeps me coming back, sanctions putting myself in the crucible when that other self takes over and leads me to safety, or at least to some medium ground where all is not lost. It is, ultimately, fun. (206)

Nevertheless Stratton has his moments of double-down self-doubt and quiet introspection. Sitting in the Chelsea Hotel, after his shipment of Middle-Eastern hash buried in containers topped with dates has been marked for inspection by US customs, he re-evaluates his career choices and very nearly gets religion. "*Stratton, I tell myself, you're a fucking lunatic. It's way past time you quit this insanity. Just let me get this load in, dear Lord, let this one through and I swear I'll give it all up. . .*" But like a one-hit-wonder garage band singer hooked on the adoration of teenage girls, his options seem limited. "What would I do? How could I ever get the same rush I get from doing this?" (180).

Much of Stratton's safety net, his nearly preternatural ability to avoid going down the tubes with other, less-practiced hippie-mob kingpins, is his resolution and discipline, his ramrod dedication to making a plan and sticking with it. The key to survival, he maintains, is to keep moving:

I keep changing the game plan, altering my modus operandi. I start out each day with no idea where I will rest come night. That makes it much harder for the agents to track me. I smoke my morning joint, write out my list of things to do, people to call, and go from pay phone to pay phone, meeting to meeting, city to city, hotel room to hotel room, always ready to alter my plans based on the outcome of the next event, the next pay phone assignation (203–204).

Stratton's considered approach to success could be lessons for us all, from Walmart manager to Wall Street analyst, from Uber driver to college bio-

med student. Stay restless, remain unpredictable, and stay safe, even in a vastly different political and social landscape now, over thirty-five years removed from the author's explosive exploits.

As if to emphasize the gap between his account and today's plugged-in world, Stratton anchors his timeline with a gratifying range of seventies and early-eighties pop culture references. Here is just a bit of what we get: Jack Nicholson mugging it up in *The Shining*, playing at a movie theatre on Hamra Street; Jagger and Bowie dining at a Japanese restaurant in the East 40s right next to Stratton's table; Neil Young serving as a soundtrack, sort of, on the radio; Dr. Hunter S. Thompson, original gonzo reporter, and Jann Wenner of *Rolling Stone*, both at a laid-back weekend party; entertainer Lola Falana's taboo-breaking dance through the pages of *Playboy*; and far-out countercultural hoods with nicknames lifted from the panels of those nearly-forgotten but socially-significant artifacts, the underground comix. Even "Whitey" Bulger, wise guy extraordinaire at the apex of his influence, shows up to give Stratton some street cred among the tradition-bound mobsters. This culture was *wild*, man, and Stratton understands his duty to represent that wildness to a potential audience born in the age of cable TV and hip-hop and now locked, joyously, to their iPhones and computers in these tuned-in times. "America was wide open back then, still a gloriously free country," he writes in nostalgic wonder. "There were no security checkpoints and X ray machines at the airports, no dope-sniffing dogs, no armed soldiers" (101).

Norman Mailer is another cultural representative of these times, a shadowy character not so much by illicit action as by his imposing yet vaporous presence in the narrative. We hear of Mailer more than we see him, yet the author obviously is a governing force in Stratton's life by example and by the committed friendship between the two men. "Yes, that Mailer," Stratton writes early in the book, by way of introduction, as if there might be some other equally influential man of that name in that time. "The enfant terrible of American literature. Who lately has been calling himself Aquarius. One could argue it's all his fault. When I read his work in college, I sensed he was writing about me" (2). See, in a time of relative stability Stratton had bought a house in Provincetown with his wife Anaïs and got to know Mailer, a resident of that small town at the end of Cape Cod, pretty well. Together the two men bought a horse farm near Wheeler Hill in rural Maine. By the time Stratton was using the property as a landing strip for smuggled drugs,

Mailer's name was still on the lease, even though Stratton earlier had bought out Mailer's share of the land. Mailer thus moves through the book in subtle complicity, receiving Stratton's under-the-table gift of weed at Nicola's Restaurant on the Upper East Side, calmly fielding Agent Wolfshein's questions about the whereabouts of Stratton, then a fugitive on a failure-to-appear warrant in Portland, Maine, and suffering a suspicious burglary in his Brooklyn Heights home that, Stratton suggests, just might be the DEA's subtle hint that Mailer is in their sights. "The Feds love a big name like Norman's on the indictment even if they suspect he's not directly involved," an attorney, Hef, tells a worried Stratton. "He has accepted payments from you for that property knowing you have no legitimate source of income. That could be presented to a grand jury as money laundering and interpreted under the law as his having been a member of the conspiracy" (111).

Mailer goes a bit further, too, recommending his friend Biff, an actor in Mailer's film projects, as someone Stratton could use for menial tasks in his expanding business. Biff turns out to be an anxious mess, nearly always bordering on paranoiac collapse during assignments of even moderate demand, and Mailer's advice to cut Biff loose resonates with Stratton in an all-too-personal way. "He's a man whose talents never measured up to his ambitions," Mailer says at one point, and Stratton imagines that the candid evaluation also could be applied to his own personality. Yet Stratton remains sympathetic to the aspirations of someone whose accomplishments seem overwhelmed by those of a mentor. "I feel for Biff," he maintains. "It can't have been easy being so close to Mailer these many years, seeing him triumph while Biff wilted in the long shadow Mailer cast. I saw how Biff eyed Mailer's new wife hungrily the other night, as if he were wondering why she was with Mailer and not with him" (79).

Regardless of these momentary self-doubts, Stratton's relationship with Mailer remains one of mutual admiration and trust. When Stratton advises Mailer to stay away from Jack Abbott, the notorious criminal whose letters about prison violence were published in book form as *In the Belly of the Beast* (1981), Mailer is both receptive and gratified. He suggests that real friends do not have to agree and reminds Stratton that great art is predicated upon great risk. Mailer would go on to advocate for Abbott's release, and the criminal ended up murdering a waiter outside an East Village restaurant just weeks after his parole. Stratton's intuition about shady characters proves spot-on, as does his assessment that Mailer's brilliance sometimes

obscures his judgment. Despite the tragic outcome, this lesson on the nature of friendship, along with Mailer's exemplary dedication to hard work and meaningful accomplishment, informs Stratton's writing to this day. "There are a few men in my life I can honestly say I love," Stratton confesses:

Men I believe would lay down their life for me, and I want to believe I would do the same for them. Men to whom friendship and loyalty mean everything . . . Friends of this rare caliber are bound together in some vista of the soul where past, present, and future events are clearly understood without need to express where one stands. (222)

Stratton has other moments of insight into personal relationships and the proper way to conduct a meaningful life. He is a committed "serial monogamist" who tries his best to avoid ruining a good thing even with persistent temptation; he refuses to deal in smack out of an abundance of caution and respect for his counterculture customers, however far removed they may be from his arcane supply chain; he ultimately accepts responsibility for his actions and refuses to whine as he waits, in 1982, in the LA City Jail, for arraignment on a multitude of bad-guy charges. "I know I deserve it," he admits in the book's Epilogue. "I brought it upon myself. It was inevitable, given the way I chose to live my life. I could have quit the smuggler's life a long time ago and retired rich. You push your luck . . . and ultimately you will lose" (296).

If you come to Stratton's book to find insight, philosophy, or self-help to get you through the day, you had better look elsewhere. What you get, here, is post-Mickey Spillane intrigue with enough artery-bending action and hippie-era nostalgia to keep the lamp burning at your bedside for one night, at least. His hard-won advice about living for the moment, accepting the consequences of your actions, and being faithful to the ones you love, man or woman, after all may be enough.

But caution: reading Stratton's exhilarating account of his high-flying exploits as a drug smuggler will make you want to break the law. You'll want to go to Mexico and get triple your money back. You'll want the adrenaline rush of staring down international thugs in Beirut, reading the riot act to your accomplices, outwitting cocky local police and DEA agents, and hiding out in hotel penthouses one day and fleabags the next. You'll want friends

with airplanes, sex with hippie goddesses, ranches in Texas and, yes, outlaw writer buddies like Mailer. You won't do that; who but Stratton does? And when? Only in those dazed-out golden days of the seventies and early eighties, that's when. But what you can do is this: pour a stiff Jack Daniels, take 'em if you got 'em, and hold out for Stratton's sequel, *Gulag America: The Prison Years*, out in April. Much safer route, that.