

Also By JA Konrath

Available in paperback, hardcover, mp3,
audio cd, and text downloads

Whiskey Sour

Bloody Mary

Rusty Nail

Dirty Martini

Fuzzy Navel (June 2008)

Cherry Bomb (June 2009)

Available on JAKonrath.com

Origin

The List

55 Proof

Disturb

55 PROOF

A SHORT STORY COLLECTION

by JA KONRATH

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First Edition: September 2007

For Maria.
Actually, they're all for Maria.

Introduction

I've been writing stories for as long as I've been able to hold a pen.

I *love* writing.

My love of writing stems from a love of reading, and my favorite things to read have always been short stories. Maybe because they don't demand a hefty time commitment. Maybe because, like a buffet, they offer variety and allow you to sample new things. Or maybe because some of the greatest ideas are best presented in 5000 words or less.

In my younger days I'd devour *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, visit the library to check out Alfred Hitchcock anthologies, and buy Charles Grant's *Shadows* anthologies and *Year's Best Horror Stories* paperbacks. I discovered many new writers by reading shorts, including Anthony Boucher, Ray Bradbury, Stephen King, Lawrence Sanders, Richard Matheson, Woody Allen, Bill Pronzini, Dave Barry, and John D. MacDonald, masters all.

I learned my craft by studying and imitating these authors, and did so much writing as a kid that my parents bought me a word processor as a birthday gift.

By the time I was out of college I had written over two hundred short stories, and deemed myself ready to write a novel.

From that moment until my first sale took twelve years.

Whiskey Sour, my debut Jack Daniels novel, was published in 2003. I've done four books in the series since then (*Bloody Mary*, *Rusty Nail*, *Dirty Martini*, and *Fuzzy Navel*.)

Though *Whiskey Sour* was the first thing I ever sold, it was actually my tenth book. The previous nine never found a publisher. Neither did any of my early short stories. Between 1990 and 2002 I wrote over a million words, without earning a single dime. All I earned were rejection letters. Over five hundred of them.

My early work apparently sucked.

Luckily, my new book contract allowed me to write full time. Since writing became my main source of income, and that income depended on people buying my books, I spent every waking hour trying to think up ways to enlarge my audience. It took me a years to reach this point, and I intended to do everything I could to make sure my books didn't flop.

In sales vernacular, that meant immersing myself in self-promotional marketing to spread name-recognition through increased brand awareness.

In layman's terms, I had to find readers.

One of the main things I did to promote myself was write and sell short stories. Magazines, websites, and anthologies can reach thousands, hundreds of thousands, even millions of people. And as I learned from my youthful reading experiences, there's no better advertisement for an author than a sample of his writing.

So I looked through my stack of old shorts, rewrote a select few, and sent them out. I also began to write new stories, many of them featuring characters from my novels.

In order to reach as many markets as possible, I wrote about a wide variety of subjects. Some stories were geared toward mystery and crime readers. Others, since my novels have scary parts, were aimed at horror fans. I also penned some straight comedy stories and essays, because the Jack Daniels books contain a lot of humor.

Since 2003, I've sold and/or published over fifty stories and articles. Many new readers have found me by reading my short stuff, and have gone on to become fans of my books.

Which leads us to *55 Proof*.

Over the years, a lot people have contacted me, asking where they could get copies of old magazines or anthologies I've been in.

Unfortunately, some of my published stories are out-of-print, foreign, defunct, sold out, or otherwise difficult to find.

Not anymore.

This collection brings all of my published works together in one package, and it's a lot cheaper than spending hundreds of dollars buying every single magazine and anthology that features a JA Konrath story, though bless you folks who have tried to do just that.

For reading convenience, I've divided 55 *Proof* into four sections.

JACK AND FRIENDS. These are stories that directly tie into my series novels. They stand alone, and don't need to be read in any particular order, nor do they fit into any specific timeline in the Jack Daniels universe.

CRIME STORIES. These are mystery and thriller yarns that don't have anything to do with Jack and company. They range in tone from extremely hardboiled noir, to light-hearted satire, to solve-it-yourself mini mysteries.

HORROR STORIES. Scary tales, some funny, some extremely dark. This is where you'll find monsters, vampires, ghosts, aliens, and assorted things that go *bump* in the night.

FUNNY STUFF. Shorts and essays in various genres, intended to provoke smiles.

While I enjoy writing the Jack books, I have even more fun writing shorts. The short form is liberating. It allows me to experiment, to be goofy, to take risks. I believe that within these fifty-five stories is some of my best work.

I encourage you to skip around these pages and sample the different tones and styles. Think of it as a buffet where you can pick and choose.

And thank you for reading. Thank you more than you'll ever know...

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
CONTENTS	4
JACK AND FRIENDS	6
On the Rocks	7
Whelp Wanted	19
Street Music	32
The One That Got Away	45
With a Twist	50
Epitaph	67
Taken to the Cleaners	78
Body Shots	97
Suffer	105
Overproof	115
Bereavement	125
Pot Shot	129
Last Request	140
CRIME STORIES	147
The Big Guys	148
The Agreement	150
A Fistful of Cozy	160
Cleansing	164
Lying Eyes	168
Perfect Plan	172
Piece of Cake	176
Animal Attraction	180
Basketcase	184
Urgent Reply Needed	188
Blaine's Deal	195
The Confession	198

CONTENTS

HORROR STORIES	205
Finicky Eater	206
The Screaming	211
Mr. Pull Ups	235
The Shed	243
Them's Good Eats	249
First Time	258
Forgiveness	262
Redux	269
The Bag	279
Careful, He Bites	284
Symbios	286
A Matter of Taste	303
Embrace	305
Trailer Sucks	307
Markey	317
Punishment Room	319
 FUNNY STUFF	 327
Light Drizzle	328
Mr. Spaceman	335
Don't Press That Button!	342
Piranha Pool	351
Well Balanced Meal	361
A Newbie's Guide to Thrillerfest	364
Inspector Oxnard	369
Appalachian Lullaby	372
One Night Only	374
Treatment	382
An Archaeologist's Story	386
Could Stephanie Plum Car Really Get Car Insurance?	393
Cozy or Hardboiled?	400
Addiction	403
Weigh To Go	408

JACK AND FRIENDS

The continuing cast of characters in the Jack Daniels books are one of the reasons I enjoy writing them so much. Having established early on that the series is a mixture of humor, scares, mystery, and thrills, I have complete freedom to write short stories in any and all of these sub-genres.

I use shorts to take my characters in places they wouldn't normally go in the novels. Jack can function as a traditional sleuth, solving crimes like Sherlock Holmes or Miss Marple. But she can also star in nail-biting thrillers without any element of mystery. She can even be delegated to sidekick role, letting someone else take center stage.

Harry McGlade can be even goofier in short stories than he is in the books. When I write a McGlade short, I play it for laughs and cross over into parody, which would never work in the novels.

Phineas Troutt is ideal for hardboiled tales. Because he's a criminal, I can walk on the dark side with him, and have him do things that Jack, with her moral compass, would never do.

Plus, I can get away with things in short stories that I can't in my books. I don't have to worry about having lines cut, or having my characters' motivations questioned. For a writer, it's the ultimate indulgence, and the ultimate freedom.

It also allows me to do some pretty fun shit...

On The Rocks

After landing my first three-book deal, I started writing short stories like crazy, trying to get my name out there. I always liked locked-room mysteries, and decided to do one featuring my newly published detective, Lt. Jacqueline “Jack” Daniels of the Chicago Police Department.. Here, Jack takes a break from serial killers to solve a classic whodunnit. This sold to Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine, and was placed in their Department of First Stories, which thrilled me because I’ve been a fan of EQMM since childhood.

“She sure bled a lot.”

I ignored Officer Coursey, my attention focused on the dead woman’s arm. The cut had almost severed her left wrist, a flash of pink bone peeking through. Her right hand was curled around the handle of a utility knife.

I’d been in Homicide for more than ten years, and still felt an emotional punch whenever I saw a body. The day I wasn’t affected was the day I hung up my badge.

I wore disposable plastic booties over my flats because the shag carpet oozed blood like a sponge wherever I stepped. The apartment’s air conditioning was set on freeze, so the decomposition wasn’t as bad as it might have been after a week—but it was still pretty bad. I got down on my haunches and swatted away some blowflies.

On her upper arm, six inches above the wound, was a bruise.

“What’s so interesting, Lieut? It’s just a suicide.”

In my blazer pocket I had some latex gloves. I snapped them on.

The victim’s name was Janet Hellerman, a real estate lawyer with a private practice. She was brunette, mid thirties, Caucasian. Her satin slip was mottled with drying brown stains, and she wore nothing underneath. I put my hand on her chin, gently turned her head.

There was another bruise on her cheek.

“Johnson’s getting a statement from the super.”

I stood up, smoothed down my skirt, and nodded at Herb, who had just entered the room. Detective First Class Herb Benedict was my partner. He had a gray mustache, Basset hound jowls, and a Santa Claus belly. Herb kept on the perimeter of the blood puddle; those little plastic booties were too hard for him to get on.

“Johnson’s story corroborates?”

Herb nodded. “Why? You see something?”

I did, but wasn’t sure how it fit. Herb had questioned both Officer Coursey and Officer Johnson, and their stories were apparently identical.

Forty minutes ago they’d arrived at apartment 3008 at the request of the victim’s mother, who lived out of state. She had been unable to get in touch with her daughter for more than a week. The building superintendent unlocked the door for them, but the safety chain was on, and a sofa had been pushed in front of the door to prevent anyone from getting inside. Coursey put his shoulder to it, broke in, and they discovered the body.

Herb squinted at the corpse. “How many marks on the wrist?”

“Just one cut, deep.”

I took off the blood-soaked booties, put them in one of the many plastic baggies I keep in my pockets, and went over to the picture window, which covered most of the far wall. The view was expensive, overlooking Lake Shore Drive from forty stories up. Boaters swarmed over the surface of Lake Michigan like little white ants, and the street was a gridlock of toy cars. Summer was a busy time for Chicagoans—criminals included.

I motioned for Coursey, and he heeled like a chastened puppy. Beat cops were getting younger every year; this one barely needed to shave. He had the cop stare, though—hard eyes and a perpetual scowl, always expecting to be lied to.

“I need you to do a door-to-door. Get statements from everyone on this floor. Find out who knew the victim, who might have seen anything.”

Coursey frowned. “But she killed herself. The only way in the apartment is the one door, and it was locked from the inside, with the safety chain on. Plus there was a sofa pushed in front of it.”

“I’m sure I don’t need to remind you that suicides are treated as homicides in this town, Officer.”

He rolled his eyes. I could practically read his thoughts. How did this dumb broad get to be Homicide Lieutenant? She sleep with the PC?

“Lieut, the weapon is still in her hand. Don’t you think...”

I sighed. Time to school the rookie.

“How many cuts are on her wrist, Coursey?”

“One.”

“Didn’t they teach you about hesitation cuts at the Academy? A suicidal person usually has to work up the courage. Where was she found?”

“On the floor.”

“Why not her bed? Or the bathtub? Or a comfy chair? If you were ending your life, would you do it standing in the middle of the living room?”

He became visibly flustered, but I wasn’t through yet.

“How would you describe the temperature in this room?”

“It’s freezing.”

“And all she’s wearing is a slip. Little cold for that, don’t you think? Did you read the suicide note?”

“She didn’t leave a note.”

“They all leave notes. I’ve worked these streets for twenty years, and never saw a suicide where the vic didn’t leave a note. But for some strange reason, there’s no note here. Which is a shame because maybe her note would explain how she got the multiple contusions on her face and arm.”

Coursey was cowed, but he managed to mumble, “The door—”

“Speaking of doors,” I interrupted, “why are you still here when you were given an order to start the door-to-door? Move your ass.”

Coursey looked at his shoes and then left the apartment. Herb raised an eyebrow.

“Kinda hard on the newbie, Jack.”

“He wouldn’t have questioned me if I had a penis.”

“I think you have one now. You took his.”

“If he does a good job, I’ll give it back.”

Herb turned to look at the body. He rubbed his mustache.

“It could still play as suicide,” he said. “If she was hit by a sudden urge to die. Maybe she got some terrible news. She gets out of the shower, puts on a slip, cranks up the air conditioning, gets a phone call, immediately grabs the knife and with one quick slice...”

He made a cutting motion over his wrist.

“Do you buy it?” I asked.

Herb made a show of mulling it over.

“No,” he consented. “I think someone knocked her out, sliced her wrist, turned up the air so the smell wouldn’t get too bad, and then...”

“Managed to escape from a locked room.”

I sighed, my shoulders sagging.

Herb’s eyes scanned the view. “A window washer?”

I checked the window, but as expected it didn’t open. Winds this high up weren’t friendly.

“There’s no other way in?” Herb asked.

“Just the one entryway.”

I walked up to it. The safety chain hung on the door at eye level, its wall mounting and three screws dangling from it. The doorframe where it had been attached was splintered and cracked from Coursey’s entrance. There were three screw holes in the frame that matched the mounting, and a fourth screw still remained, sticking out of the frame about an inch.

The hinges on the door were dusty and showed no signs of tampering. A black leather sofa was pushed off to the side, near the doorway. I followed the tracks that its feet had made in the carpet. The sofa had been placed in front of the door and then shoved aside.

I opened the door, holding the knob with two fingers. It moved easily, even though it was heavy and solid. I closed it, stumped.

“How did the killer get out?” I said, mostly to myself.

“Maybe he didn’t get out. Maybe the killer is still in the apartment.” Herb’s eyes widened and his hand shot up, pointing over my shoulder. “Jack! Behind you!”

I rolled my eyes.

“Funny, Herb. I already searched the place.”

I peeled off the gloves and stuck them back in my pocket.

“Well, then there are only three possibilities.” Herb held up his hand, ticking off fingers. “One, Coursey and Johnson and the superintendent are all lying. Two, the killer was skinny enough to slip out of the apartment by going under the door. Or three, it was Houdini.”

“Houdini’s dead.”

“Did you check? Get an alibi?”

“I’ll send a team to the cemetery.”

While we waited for the ME to arrive, Herb and I busied ourselves with tossing the place. Bank statements told us Janet Hellerman made a comfortable living and paid her bills on time. She was financing a late model Lexus, which we confirmed was parked in the lot below. Her credit card debt was minimal, with a recent charge for plane tickets. A call to Delta confirmed two seats to Montana for next week, one in her name and one in the name of Glenn Hale.

Herb called the precinct, requesting a sheet on Hale.

I checked the answering machine and listened to thirty-eight messages. Twenty were from Janet's distraught mother, wondering where she was. Two were telemarketers. One was from a friend named Sheila who wanted to get together for dinner, and the rest were real estate related.

Nothing from Hale. He wasn't on the caller ID either.

I checked her cell phone next, and listened to forty more messages; ten from mom, and thirty from home buyers. Hale hadn't left any messages, but there was a 'Glenn' listed on speed dial. The phone's call log showed that Glenn's number had called over a dozen times, but not once since last week.

"Look at this, Jack."

I glanced over at Herb. He set a pink plastic case on the kitchen counter and opened it up. It was a woman's toolkit, the kind they sold at department stores for fifteen bucks. Each tool had a cute pink handle and a corresponding compartment that it snugged into. This kit contained a hammer, four screwdrivers, a measuring tape, and eight wrenches. There were also two empty slots; one for needle nose pliers, and one for something five inches long and rectangular.

"The utility knife," I said.

Herb nodded. "She owned the weapon. It's looking more and more like suicide, Jack. She has a fight with Hale. He dumps her. She kills herself."

"You find anything else?"

"Nothing really. She liked to mountain climb, apparently. There's about forty miles of rope in her closet, lots of spikes and beaners, and a picture of her clinging to a cliff. She also has an extraordinary amount of teddy bears. There were so many piled on her bed, I don't know how she could sleep on it."

"Diary? Computer?"

“Neither. Some photo albums, a few letters that we’ll have to look through.”

Someone knocked. We glanced across the breakfast bar and saw the door ease open.

Mortimer Hughes entered. Hughes was a medical examiner. He worked for the city, and his job was to visit crime scenes and declare people dead. You’d never guess his profession if you met him on the street—he had the smiling eyes and infectious enthusiasm of a television chef.

“Hello Jack, Herb, beautiful day out.” He nodded at us and set down a large tackle box that housed the many particular tools of his trade. Hughes opened it up and snugged on some plastic gloves and booties. He also brandished knee pads.

Herb and I paused in our search and watched him work. Hughes knelt beside the vic and spent ten minutes poking and prodding, humming tunelessly to himself. When he finally spoke, it was high-pitched and cheerful.

“She’s dead,” Hughes said.

We waited for more.

“At least four days, probably longer. I’m guessing from hypovolemic shock. Blood loss is more than forty percent. Her right zygomatic bone is shattered, pre-mortem or early post.”

“Could she have broken her cheek falling down?” Herb asked.

“On this thick carpet? Possible—yes. Likely—no. Look at the blood pool. No arcs. No trails.”

“So she wasn’t conscious when her wrist was cut?”

“That would be my assumption, unless she laid down on the floor and stayed perfectly still while bleeding to death.”

“Sexually assaulted?”

“Can’t tell. I’ll do a swab.”

I chose not to watch, and Herb and I went back into the kitchen. Herb pursed his lips.

“It could still be suicide. She cuts her wrist, falls over, breaks her cheek bone, dies unconscious.”

“You don’t sound convinced.”

“I’m not. I like the boyfriend. They’re fighting, he bashes her one in the face. Maybe he can’t wake her up, or he thinks he’s killed her. Or he wants to kill her. He finds the toolbox, gets the utility knife, makes it look like a suicide.”

“And then magically disappears.”

Herb frowned. “That part I don’t like.”

“Maybe he flushed himself down the toilet, escaped through the plumbing.”

“You can send Coursey out to get a plunger.”

“Lieutenant?”

Officer Coursey had returned. He stood by the kitchen counter, his face ashen.

“What is it, Officer?”

“I was doing the door-to-door. No one answered at the apartment right across the hall. The superintendent thought that was strange— an old lady named Mrs. Flagstone lives there, and she never leaves her home. She even sends out for groceries. So the super opens up her door and...you’d better come look.

□ □ □

Mrs. Flagstone stared up at me with milky eyes. Her tongue protruded from her lips like a hunk of raw liver. She was naked in the bathtub, her face and upper body submerged in foul water, one chubby leg hanging over the edge. The bloating was extensive. Her white hair floated around her head like a halo.

“Still think it’s a suicide?” I asked Herb.

Mortimer Hughes rolled up his sleeve and put his hand into the water. He pressed her chest and bubbles exploded out of her mouth and nose.

“Didn’t drown. Her lungs are full of air.”

He moved his hand higher, prodding the wrinkled skin on her neck.

“I can feel some damage to the trachea. There also appears to be a lesion around her neck. I want to get a sample of the water before I pull the drain plug.”

Hughes dove into his box. Herb, Coursey, and I left him and went into the living room. Herb called in, requesting the forensics team.

“Any hits from the other tenants?” I asked the rookie.

He flipped open his pad. “One door over, at apartment 3010, the occupant, a Mr. Stanley Mankowicz, remembers some yelling coming from the victim’s place about six days ago.”

“Does he remember what time?”

“It was late, he was in bed. Mr. Mankowicz shares a wall with the vic, and has called her on several occasions to tell her to turn her television down.”

“Did he call that night?”

“He was about to, but the noise stopped.”

“Where’s the super?”

“Johnson hasn’t finished taking his statement.”

“Call them both in here.”

While waiting for them to arrive, I examined Mrs. Flagstone’s door. Like Janet’s, it had a safety chain, and like Janet’s, it had been ripped from the wall and the mounting was hanging from the door. I found four screws and some splinters on the floor. There were no screws in the door frame.

A knock, and I opened the door. Officer Johnson and the super. Johnson was older than his partner, bigger, with the same dead eyes. The superintendent was a Pakistani man named Majid Patel. Mr. Patel had dark skin and red eyes and he clearly enjoyed all of this attention.

“I moved to this country ten years ago, and I have never seen a dead body before. Now I have seen two in the same day. I must call and tell my mother. I call my mother when anything exciting happens.”

“We’ll let you go in a moment, Mr. Patel. I’m Lt. Jack Daniels, this is Detective Herb Benedict. We just have a few...”

“Your name is Jack Daniels? But you are not a man.”

“You’re very observant,” I deadpanned. “Did you know Janet Hellerman?”

Patel winked at me. Was he flirting?

“It must be hard, Lt. Jack Daniels, to be a pretty woman with a funny name in a profession so dominated by male chauvinist pigs.” Patel offered Herb a look. “No offense.”

Herb returned a pleasant smile. “None taken. If you could please answer the Lieutenant’s question.”

Patel grinned, crooked teeth and spinach remnants.

“She was a real estate lawyer. Young and good looking. Always paid her rent on time. My brother gave her a deal on her apartment, because she had nice legs.” Patel had no reservations about openly checking out mine. “Yours are very nice too, Jack Daniels. For an older lady. Are you single?”

“She’s single.” Herb winked at me, gave me an elbow. I made a mental note to fire him later.

“Your brother?” I asked Patel.

“He’s the building owner,” Officer Johnson chimed in. “It’s the family business.”

“Did you know anything about Janet’s personal life?”

“She had a shit for a boyfriend, a man named Glenn. He had an affair and she dumped him.”

“When was this?”

“About ten days ago. I know because she asked me to change the lock on her door. She had given him a key and he wouldn’t return it.”

“Did you change the lock?”

“I did not. Ms. Hellerman just mentioned it to me in the elevator once. She never filled out the work order request.”

“Does the building have a doorman?”

“No. We have security cameras.”

“I’ll need to see tapes going back two weeks. Can you get them for me?”

“It will not be a problem.”

Mortimer Hughes came out of the bathroom. He was holding a closed set of tweezers in one hand, his other hand cupped beneath it.

“I dug a fiber out of the victim’s neck. Red, looks synthetic.”

“From a rope?” I asked.

Hughes nodded.

“Mr. Patel, we’ll be down shortly for those tapes. Coursey, Johnson, help Herb and I search the apartment. Let’s see if we can find the murder weapon.”

We did a thorough toss, but couldn’t find any rope. Herb, however, found a pair of needle nose pliers in a closet. Pliers with pink handles.

“They were neighbors,” Herb reasoned. “Janet could have lent them to her.”

“Could have. But we both doubt it. Call base to see if they found anything on Hale.”

Herb dialed, talked for a minute, then hung up.

“Glenn Hale has been arrested three times, all assault charges. Did three months in Joliet.”

I wasn’t surprised. All evidence pointed to the boyfriend, except for the damned locked room. Maybe Herb was right and the killer just slipped under the door and...

Epiphany.

“Call the lab team. I want the whole apartment dusted. Then get an address and a place of work on Hale and send cars. Tell them to wait for the warrant.”

Herb raised an eyebrow. “A warrant? Shouldn’t we question the guy first?”

“No need,” I said. “He did it, and I know how.”



Feeling, a bit foolishly, like Sherlock Holmes, I took everyone back into Janet’s apartment. They began hurling questions at me, but I held up my hand for order.

“Here’s how it went,” I began. “Janet finds out Glenn is cheating, dumps him. He comes over, wanting to get her back. She won’t let him in. He uses his key, but the safety chain is on. So he busts in and breaks the chain.”

“But the chain was on when we came in the first time,” Coursey complained.

Herb hushed him, saving me the trouble.

“They argue,” I went on. “Glenn grabs her arm, hits her. She falls to the floor, unconscious. Who knows what’s going through his mind? Maybe he’s afraid she’ll call the police, and he’ll go to jail— he has a record and this state has zero tolerance for repeat offenders. Maybe he’s so mad at her he thinks she deserves to die. Whatever the case, he finds Janet’s toolkit and takes out the utility knife. He slits her wrist and puts the knife in her other hand.”

Five inquisitive faces hung on my every word. It was a heady experience.

“Glenn has to know he’d be a suspect,” I raised my voice, just a touch for dramatic effect. “He’s got a history with Janet, and a criminal record. The only way to throw off suspicion is to make it look like no one else could have been in the room, to show the police that it had to be a suicide.”

“Jack,” Herb admonished. “You’re dragging it out.”

“If you figured it out, then you’d have the right to drag it out too.”

“Are you really single?” Patel asked. He grinned again, showing more spinach.

“If she keeps stalling,” Herb told him, “I’ll personally give you her number.”

I shot Herb with my eyes, then continued.

“Okay, so Glenn goes into Janet’s closet and gets a length of climbing rope. He also grabs the needle nose pliers from her toolbox and heads back to the front door. The safety chain has been ripped out of the frame, and the mounting is dangling on the end. He takes a single screw,” I pointed at the screw sticking in the door frame, “and puts it back in the doorframe about halfway.”

Herb nodded, getting it. “When the mounting ripped out, it had to pull out all four screws. So the only way one could still be in the doorframe is if someone put it there.”

“Right. Then he takes the rope and loops it under a sofa leg. He goes out into the hall with the rope, and closes the door, still holding both ends of the rope. He tugs the rope through the crack under the door, and pulls the sofa right up to the door from the other side.”

“Clever,” Johnson said.

“I must insist you meet my mother,” Patel said.

“But the chain...” Coursey whined.

I smiled at Coursey. “He opens the door a few inches, and grabs the chain with the needle nose pliers. He swings the loose end over to the door frame, where it catches and rests on the screw he put in halfway.”

I watched the light finally go on in Coursey’s eyes. “When Mr. Patel opened the door, it looked like the chain was on, but it really wasn’t. It was just hanging on the screw. The thing that kept the door from opening was the sofa.”

“Right. So when you burst into the room, you weren’t the one that broke the safety chain. It was already broken.”

Coursey nodded rapidly. “The perp just lets go of one end of the rope and pulls in the other end, freeing it from the sofa leg. Then he locks the door with his own key.”

“But poor Mrs. Flagstone,” I continued, “must have seen him in the hallway. She has her safety chain on, maybe asks him what he’s doing. So he bursts into her room and strangles her with the climbing rope. The rope was red, right Herb?”

Herb grinned. “Naturally. How did you know that?”

“I guessed. Then Glenn ditches the pliers in the closet, makes a half-assed attempt to stage Mrs. Flagstone’s death like a drowning, and leaves with the rope. I bet the security tapes will concur.”

“What if he isn’t seen carrying the rope?”

No problem. I was on a roll.

“Then he either ditched it in a hall, or wrapped it around his waist under his shirt before leaving.”

“I’m gonna go check the tapes,” Johnson said, hurrying out.

“I’m going to call my mother,” Patel said, hurrying out.

Herb got on the phone to get a warrant, and Mortimer Hughes dropped to his hands and knees and began to search the carpeting, ostensibly for red fibers—even thought that wasn’t his job.

I was feeling pretty smug, something I rarely associated with my line of work, when I noticed Officer Coursey staring at me. His face was projecting such unabashed admiration that I almost blushed.

“Lieutenant— that was just...amazing.”

“Simple detective work. You could have figured it out if you thought about it.”

“I never would have figured that out.” He glanced at his shoes, then back at me, and then he turned and left.

Herb pocketed his cell and offered me a sly grin.

“We can swing by the DA’s office, pick up the warrant in an hour. Tell me, Jack. How’d you put it all together?”

“Actually, you gave me the idea. You said the only way the killer could have gotten out of the room was by slipping under the door. In a way, that’s what he did.”

Herb clapped his hand on my shoulder.

“Nice job, Lieutenant. Don’t get a big head. You wanna come over for supper tonight? Bernice is making pot roast. I’ll let you invite Mr. Patel.”

“He’d have to call his mother first. Speaking of mothers...”

I glanced at the body of Janet Hellerman, and again felt the emotional punch. The Caller ID in the kitchen gave me the number for Janet’s mom. It took some time to tell the whole story, and she cried through most of it. By the end, she was crying so much that she couldn’t talk anymore.

I gave her my home number so she could call me later.

The lab team finally arrived, headed by a Detective named Perkins. Soon both apartments were swarming with tech heads—vacuuming fibers, taking samples, spraying chemicals, shining ALS, snapping pictures and shooting video.

I filled in Detective Perkins on what went down, and left him in charge of the scene.

Then Herb and I went off to get the warrant.

Whelp Wanted

Harry McGlade dates back to 1985, when I was 15. I've been a mystery fan since I was nine years old, and I thought it would be a fun genre to parody. On a summer afternoon at my friend Jim Coursey's house, we sat at his Apple IIe (with the green phosphorus monitor) and giggled like fiends writing one stupid PI cliché after another. I picked the name Harry McGlade out of a phone book. For the next dozen years, I wrote over a hundred McGlade short stories. None of them were any good, but they did garner me my very first rejection letters, including one in 1989 from Playboy. This story was sold to the now-defunct Futures Mysterious Anthology Magazine. I wrote it just after my first novel came out in 2004.

I was halfway through a meatball sandwich when a man came into my office and offered me money to steal a dog.

A lot of money.

“Are you an animal lover, Mr. McGlade?”

“Depends on the animal. And call me Harry.”

He offered his hand. I stuck out mine, and watched him frown when he noticed the marinara stains. He abruptly pulled back, reaching instead into the inner pocket of his blazer. The suit he wore was tailored and looked expensive, and his skin was tanned to a shade only money can buy.

“This is Marcus.” His hand extended again, holding a photograph. “He’s a Shar-pei.”

Marcus was one of those unfortunate Chinese wrinkle dogs, the kind that look like a great big raisin with fur. He was light brown, and his face had so many folds of skin that his eyes were completely covered.

I bet the poor pooch walked into a lot of walls.

“Cute,” I said, because the man wanted to hire me.

“Marcus is a champion show dog. He’s won four AKC competitions. Several judges have commented that he’s the finest example of the breed they’ve ever seen.”

I wanted to say something about Marcus needing a good starch and press, but instead inquired about the dog’s worth.

“With the winnings, and stud fees, he’s worth upwards of ten thousand dollars.”

I whistled. The dog was worth more than I was.

“So, what’s the deal, Mr...”

“Thorpe. Vincent Thorpe. I’m willing to double your usual fee if you can get him back.”

I took another bite of meatball, wiped my mouth on my sleeve, and leaned back in my swivel chair. The chair groaned in disapproval.

“Tell me a little about Marcus, Mr. Thorpe. Curly fries?”

“Pardon me?”

I gestured to the bag on my desk. “Did you want any curly fries? Potatoes make me bloaty.”

He shook his head. I snatched a fry, bloating be damned.

“I’ve, um, raised Marcus since he was a pup. He has one of the best pedigrees in the sport. Since Samson passed away, there has quite literally been no competition.”

“Samson?”

“Another Shar-pei. Came from the same littler as Marcus, owned by a man named Glen Ricketts. Magnificent dog. We went neck and neck several times.”

“Hold on, a second. I’d like to take notes.”

I pulled out my notepad and a pencil. On the first piece of paper, I wrote, “Dog.”

“Do you know who has Marcus now?”

“Another breeder named Abigail Cummings. She borrowed Marcus to service her Shar-pei, Julia. When I went to pick him up, she insisted she didn’t have him, and claimed she didn’t know what I was talking about.”

I jotted this down. My fingers made a grease spot on the page.

“Did you try the police?”

“Yes. They searched her house, but didn’t find Marcus. She’s insisting I made a mistake.”

“Did Abigail give you money to borrow Marcus? Sign any contracts?”

“No. I lent him to her as a favor. And she kept him.”

“How do you know her?”

“Casually, from the American Kennel Club. Her Shar-pei, Julia, is a truly magnificent bitch. You should see her haunches.”

I let that one go.

“Why did you lend out Marcus if you only knew her casually?”

“She called me a few days ago, promised me the pick of the litter if I lent her Marcus. I never should have done it. I should have just given her a straw.”

“A straw?”

“Of Marcus’s semen. I milk him by...”

I held up my palm and scribbled out the word ‘straw.’ It was more info than I wanted. “Let’s move on.”

Thorpe pressed his lips together so tightly they lost color. His eyes got sticky.

“Please, Harry. Marcus is more than just a dog to me. He’s my best friend.”

I didn’t doubt it. You don’t milk a casual acquaintance.

“Maybe you could hire an attorney.”

“That takes too long. If I go through legal channels, it could be months before my case is called. And even then, I’d need some kind of proof that she had him, so I’d have to hire a private investigator anyway.”

I scraped away a coffee stain on my desk with my thumbnail.

“I’m sorry for your loss, Mr. Thorpe. But hiring me to bust into someone’s home and steal a dog...I’m guessing that breaks all sorts of laws. I could have my license revoked, I could go to jail—”

“I’ll triple your fee.”

“I take cash, checks, or major credit cards.”



Night Vision Goggles use a microprocessor to magnify ambient light and allow a user to see in almost total blackness.

They’re also pricey as hell, so I had to make due with a flashlight and some old binoculars.

It was a little past eleven in the evening, and I was sitting in the bough of a tree, staring into the backyard of Abigail Cummings. I’d been there for almost two hours. The night was typical for July in Chicago; hot, sticky, and humid. The black ski mask I wore was so damp with sweat it threatened to drown me.

Plus, I was bloaty.

I let the binocs hang around my neck and flashed the light at my notepad to review my stake-out report.

9:14pm—Climbed tree.

9:40pm—Drank two sodas.

10:15pm—Foot fell asleep.

Not too exciting so far. I took out my pencil and added, “*11:04pm—really regret drinking those sodas.*”

To keep my mind off of my bladder, I spent a few minutes trying to balance the pencil on the tip of my finger. It worked, until I dropped the pencil.

I checked my watch. 11:09. I attempted to write “dropped my pencil” on my notepad, but you can guess how that turned out.

I was all set to call it a night, when I saw movement in the backyard.

It was a woman, sixty-something, her short white hair glowing in the porch light.

Next to her, on a leash, was Marcus.

“Is someone in my tree?”

I fought panic, and through Herculean effort managed to keep my pants dry.

“No,” I answered.

She wasn’t fooled.

“I’m calling the police!”

“Wait!” My voice must have sounded desperate, because she paused in her race back to the house.

“I’m from the US Department of Foliage. I was taking samples of your tree. It seems to be infested with the Japanese Saganaki Beetle.”

“Why are you wearing that mask?”

“Uh...so they don’t recognize me. Hold on, I need to ask you a few sapling questions.”

I eased down, careful to avoid straining myself. When I reached ground, the dog trotted over and amiably sniffed at my pants.

“I’m afraid I don’t know much about agriculture.”

From the tree, Ms. Cummings was nothing to look at. Up close, she made me wish I was still in the tree.

The woman was almost as wrinkly as the dog. But unlike her canine companion, she had tried to fill in those wrinkles with make-up. From the amount, she must have used a paint roller. The eye shadow

alone was thick enough to stop a bullet. Add to that a voice like raking gravel, and she was quite the catch.

I tried to think of something to ask her, to keep the beetle ploy going. But this was getting too complicated, so I just took out my gun.

“The dog.”

Her mouth dropped open.

“The what?”

“That thing on your leash that’s wagging its tail. Hand it over.”

“Why do you want my dog?”

“Does it matter?”

“Of course it does. I don’t want you to shoot me, but I also don’t want to hand over my dog to a homicidal maniac.”

“I’m not a homicidal maniac.”

“You’re wearing a ski mask in ninety degree weather, hopping from one foot to the other like some kind of monkey.”

“I had too much soda. Give me the damn leash.”

She handed me the damn leash. So far so good.

“Okay. You just stand right here, and count to a thousand before you go back inside, or else I’ll shoot you.”

“Aren’t you leaving?”

“Yeah.”

“Not to second-guess you, Mr. Dognapper, but how can you shoot me, if you’ve already gone?”

Know-it-all.

“I think you need a bit more blush on your cheeks. There are some folks in Wisconsin who can’t see it from there.”

Her lips down turned. With the all the lipstick, they looked like two cartoon hot dogs.

“This is Max Factor.”

“I won’t tell Max if you don’t. Now start counting.”

I was out of there before she got to six.

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After I got back to my office, I took care of some personal business, washed my hands, and called the client. He agreed to come right over.

“Mr. McGlade, I can’t tell you how...oh, yuck.”

“Watch where you’re stepping. Marcus decided to mark his territory.”

Thorpe made an unhappy face, then he took off his shoe and left it by the door.

“Mr. McGlade, thank you for...yuck.”

“He’s marked a couple spots. I told you to watch out.”

He removed the other shoe.

“Did you bring the money?”

“I did, and I—wait a second!”

“You might as well just throw away the sock, because those stains...”

“That’s not Marcus!”

I looked at the dog, who was sniffing around my desk, searching for another place to make a deposit.

“Of course it’s your dog. Look at that face. He’s a poster boy for Retin-A.”

“That’s not a he. It’s a she.”

“Really?” I peeked under the dog’s tail and frowned. “I’ll be damned.”

“You took the wrong dog, Mr. McGlade. This is Abigail’s bitch, Julia.”

“It’s an honest mistake, Mr. Thorpe. Anyone could have made it.”

“No, not anyone, Mr. McGlade. Most semi-literate adults know the difference between boys and girls. Would you like me to draw you a picture?”

“Ease up, Thorpe. When I meet a new dog, I don’t lift up a hind leg and stick my face down there to check out the plumbing.”

“This is just...oh, yuck.”

“The garbage can is over there.”

Thorpe removed his sock, and I wracked my brain to figure out how this could be salvaged.

“Any chance you want to keep this dog instead? You said she was a magnificent broad.”

“Bitch, Mr. McGlade. It’s what we call female dogs.”

“I was trying to put a polite spin on it.”

“I want Marcus. That was the deal.”

“Okay, okay, let me think.”

I thought.

Julia had her nose in the garbage can, sniffing Thorpe’s sock. If I could only switch dogs somehow.

That was it.

"I'll switch dogs somehow," I said.

"What are you talking about?"

"Like a hostage trade. I'll call up Ms. Cummings, and trade Julia for Marcus."

"Do you think it'll work?"

"Only one way to find out."

I picked up the phone.

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"Ms. Cummings? I have your dog."

"I know. I watched you steal him an hour ago."

For someone who looked like a mime, she was sure full of comments.

"If you'd like your dog back, we can make a deal."

"Is my little Poopsie okay? Are you taking care of her?"

"She's fine. I can see why you call her Poopsie."

"Does Miss Julia still have the trots? Poor thing."

I stared at the land mines dotting my floor. "Yeah. I'm all broken up about it."

"Make sure she eats well. Only braised liver and the leanest pork."

Julia was currently snacking on a tuna sandwich I'd dropped under the desk sometime last week.

"I'll do that. Look, I want to make a trade."

I had to play it cool here, if she knew I knew about Marcus, she'd know Thorpe was the one who hired me.

"What kind of trade?"

"I don't want a female dog. I want a male."

"Did Vincent Thorpe hire you?"

Dammit.

"Uh, never heard of him."

"Mr. Thorpe claims I have his dog, Marcus. But the last time I saw Marcus was at an AKC show last April. I have no idea where his dog is."

"That's not how he tells it."

Nice, Harry. I tried to regroup.

"Look, Cummings, you have twelve hours to come up with a male dog. I also want sixty dollars, cash."

Thorpe nudged me and mouthed, "Sixty dollars?"

I put my hand over the mouthpiece. "Carpet cleaning."

"I don't know if I can find a male dog in just 12 hours, Mr. Dognapper."

"Then I turn Julia into a set of luggage."

I heard her gasp. "You horrible man!"

"I'll do it, too. She's got enough hide on her to make two suitcases and a carry-on. The wrinkled look is hot this year."

I scratched Julia on the head, and she licked my chin. Her breath made me teary-eyed.

"Please don't hurt my dog."

"I'll call you tomorrow morning with the details. If you contact the police, I'll mail you Julia's tail."

"I...I already called the police. I called them right after you left."

Hell. "Well, don't call the police again. I have a friend at the Post Office who gives me a discount rate. I'm there twice a week, mailing doggie parts."

I hit the disconnect.

"Did it work?" Thorpe asked.

"Like a charm. Go home and get some rest. In about twelve hours, you'll have your dog back."



The trick was finding an exchange location where I wouldn't be conspicuous in a ski mask. Chicago had several ice rinks, but I didn't think any of them allowed dogs.

I decided on the alley behind the Congress Hotel, off of Michigan Avenue. I got there two hours early to check the place out.

Time crawled by. I kept track of it in my notepad.

9:02am—Arrive at scene. Don't see any cops. Pull on ski mask and wait.

9:11am—It sure is hot.

9:33am—Julia finds some rotting fruit behind the dumpster. Eats it.

10:01am—Boy, is it hot.

10:20am—I think I'm getting a heat rash in this mask. Am I allergic to wool?

10:38am—Julia finds a dead rat. Eats it.

10:40am—Sure is a hot one.

11:02am—Play fetch with the dog, using my pencil.

Julia ate the pencil. I was going to jot this down on the pad, but you can guess how that went.

“Julia!”

The dog jerked on the leash, tugging me to my feet. Abigail Cummings had arrived. She wore a pink linen pants suit, and more make-up than the Rockettes. All of them, combined. I fought the urge to carve my initials in her cheek with my fingernail.

Dog and dog owner had a happy little reunion, hugging and licking, and I was getting ready to sigh in relief when I noticed the pooch Abigail had brought with her.

“I’m no expert, but isn’t that a Collie?”

“A Collie/Shepherd mix. I picked him up at the shelter.”

“That’s not Marcus.”

Abigail frowned at me. “I told you before, Mr. Dognapper. I don’t have Vincent Thorpe’s dog.”

Her bottom lip began to quiver, and her eyes went glassy. I realized, to my befuddlement, that I actually believed her.

“Fine. Give me the mutt.”

Abigail handed me the leash. I stared down at the dog. It was a male, but I doubted I could fool Thorpe into thinking it was Marcus. Even if I shaved off all the fur and shortened the legs with a saw.

“What about my money?” I asked.

She dug into her purse and pulled out a check.

“I can’t take a check.”

“It’s good. I swear.”

“How am I supposed to remain incognito if I deposit a check?”

Abigail did the lip quiver thing again.

“Oh my goodness, I didn’t even think of that. Please don’t make Julia into baggage.”

More tears.

“Calm down. Don’t cry. You’ll ruin your...uh...make-up.”

I offered her a handkerchief. She dabbed at her eyes and handed it back to me.

It looked like it had been tie-dyed.

“I think I have two or three dollars in my purse,” she rasped in her smoker voice. “Is that okay?”

What the hell. I took it.

“I’ll take those Tic-Tacs, too.”

She handed them over. Wint-O-Green.

“Can we go now?”

“Go ahead.”

She turned to leave the alley, and a thought occurred to me.

“Ms. Cummings! When the police came to visit you to look for Marcus, did you have an alibi?”

She glanced over her shoulder and nodded vigorously.

“That’s the point. The day Vincent said he brought the dog to my house, I wasn’t home. I was enjoying the third day of an Alaskan Cruise.”

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Vincent Thorpe was waiting for me when I got back to my office. He carefully scanned the floor before approaching my desk.

“That’s not Marcus! That’s not even a Shar-pei!”

“We’ll discuss that later.”

“Where’s Marcus?”

“There have been some complications.”

“Complications?” Thorpe leaned in closer, raised an eyebrow. “What happened to your face?”

“I think I’m allergic to wool.”

“It looks like you rubbed your cheeks with sandpaper.”

I wrote, “I hate him” on my notepad.

“Look, Mr. Thorpe, Abigail Cummings doesn’t have Marcus. But I may have an idea who does.”

“Who?”

“First, I need to ask you a few questions...”

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My face was too sore for the ski mask again, so I opted for a nylon stocking.

It was hot.

I shifted positions on the branch I was sitting on, and took another look through the binoculars.

Nothing. The backyard was quiet. But thirty feet away, next to a holly bush, was either a small, brown anthill, or evidence that there was a dog on the premises.

I took out my pencil and reviewed my stake-out sheet.

9:46pm—Climbed tree.

9:55pm—My face hurts.

10:07pm—It really hurts bad.

10:22pm—I think I’ll go see a doctor.

10:45pm—Maybe the drug store has some kind of cream.

I added, “11:07pm—*Spotted evidence in backyard. Remember to pick up some aloe vera on the way home.*”

Before I had a chance to cross my Ts, the patio door opened.

I didn’t even need the binoculars. A man, mid-forties with short, brown hair, was walking a dog that was obviously a Shar-pei.

Though my track-team days were far behind me (okay, non-existent), I still managed to leap down from the tree without hurting myself.

The man yelped in surprise, but I had my gun out and in his face before he had a chance to move.

“Hi there, Mr. Ricketts. Kneel down.”

“Who are you? What do...”

I cocked the gun.

“Kneel!”

He knelt.

“Good. Now lift up that dog’s back leg.”

“What?”

“Now!”

Glen Ricketts lifted. I checked.

It was Marcus.

“Leash,” I ordered.

He handed me the leash. My third dog in two days, but this time it was the right one.

Now for Part Two of the Big Plan.

“Do you know who I am, Glen?”

He shook his head, terrified.

“Special Agent Phillip Pants, of the American Kennel Club. Do you know why I’m here?”

He shook his head again.

“Don’t lie to me, Glen! Does the AKC allow dognapping?”

“No,” he whimpered.

“Your dog show days are over, Ricketts. Consider your membership revoked. If I so much catch you in the pet food aisle at the Piggly Wiggly, I’m going to take you in and have you neutered. Got it?”

He nodded, eager to please. I gave Marcus a pat on the head, and then turned to leave.

“Hold on!”

Glen’s eyes were defeated, pleading.

“What?”

“You mean I can’t own a dog, ever again?”

“Not ever.”

“But...but...dogs are my life. I love dogs.”

“And that’s why you should have never stole someone else’s.”

He sniffled, loud and wet.

“What am I supposed to do now?”

I frowned. Grown men crying like babies weren’t my favorite thing to watch. But this joker had brought it upon himself.

“Buy a cat,” I told him.

Then I walked back to my car, Marcus in tow.

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“Marcus!”

I watching, grinning, as Vincent Thorpe paid no mind to his expensive suit and rolled around on my floor with his dog, giggling like a caffeinated school boy.

“Mr. McGlade, how can I ever repay you?”

“Cash is good.”

He disentangled himself from the pooch long enough to pull out his wallet and hand over a fat wad of bills.

“Tell me, how did you know it was Glen Rickets?”

“Simple. You said yourself that he was always one of your closest competitors, up until his dog died earlier this year.”

“But what about Ms. Cummings? I talked to her on the phone. I even dropped the dog off at her house, and she took him from me. Wasn’t she involved somehow?”

“The phone was easy—Ms. Cummings has a voice like a chainsaw. With practice, anyone can imitate a smoker’s croak. But Glen really got clever for the meeting. He picked a time when Ms. Cummings was out of town, and then he spent a good hour or two with Max Factor.”

“Excuse me?”

“Cosmetics. As you recall, Abigail Cummings wore enough make-up to cause back-problems. Who could tell what she looked like under all that gunk? Glen just slopped on enough to look like a circus clown, and then he impersonated her.”

Thorpe shook his head, clucking his tongue.

“So it wasn’t actually Abigail. It was Glen all along. Such a nice guy, too.”

“It’s the nice ones you have to watch.”

“So, now what? Should I call the police?”

“No need. Glen won’t be bothering you, or any dog owner, ever again.”

I gave him the quick version of the backyard scene.

“He deserves it, taking Marcus from me. But now I have you back, don’t I, boy?”

There was more wrestling, and he actually kissed Marcus on the mouth.

“Kind of unsanitary, isn’t it?”

“Are you kidding? A dog’s saliva is full of antiseptic properties.”

“I was speaking for Marcus.”

Thorpe laughed. “Friendship transcends species, Mr. McGlade. Speaking of which, where’s that Collie/Shepherd mix that Abigail gave you?”

“At my apartment.”

“See? You’ve made a new friend, yourself.”

“Nope. I’ve got a six o’clock appointment at the animal shelter. I’m getting him gassed.”

Thorpe shot me surprised look.

“Mr. McGlade! After this whole ordeal, don’t you see what amazing companions canines are? A dog can enrich your life! All you have to do is give him a chance.”

I mulled it over. How bad could it be, having a friend who never borrowed money, stole your girl, or talked behind your back?

“You know what, Mr. Thorpe? I may just give it a shot.”

When I got home a few hours later, I discovered my new best friend had chewed the padding off of my leather couch.

I made it to the shelter an hour before my scheduled appointment.

Street Music

Street Music is my favorite story of any I've written. Phineas Trout was the hero of my first novel, an unpublished mystery called Dead On My Feet, written back in 1992. It was unabashedly hardboiled, and it helped me land my first agent. The book never sold, probably because it was unabashedly hardboiled. Phin starred in two more unpublished novels, and then I relegated him to the role of sidekick in the Jack Daniels series, which did wind up selling. I'm intrigued by the idea of a hero dying of cancer, and how having no hope left could erode a man's morality. I wrote this story right after selling Whiskey Sour, and soon after sold it to Ellery Queen.

Mitch couldn't answer me with the barrel of my gun in his mouth, so I pulled it out.

"I don't know! I swear!"

If that was the truth, I had no use for it. After three days of questioning dozens of hookers, junkies, and other fine examples of Chicago's populace, Mitch was my only link to Jasmine. I was seriously jonesing; I hadn't done a line since Thursday. Plus, the pain in my side felt like a baby alligator was trying to eat its way out of my pancreas.

I gave Mitch's chin a little tap with the butt of the Glock.

"I really don't know!"

"She's one of yours, Mitch. I thought big, tough pimps like you ran a tight ship."

His black face was shiny with sweat and a little blood. Sure, he was scared. But he wasn't stupid. Telling me Jasmine's whereabouts would put a dent in his income.

I raised the gun back to hit him again.

"She went rogue on me, man! She ditched!"

I paused. If Jasmine had left Mitch, his reluctance to talk about it made some sense. Mack Daddies don't like word to get out that they're losing their game.

“How much money do you have on you?”

“About four hundos. It’s yours, man. Front pants pocket.”

“I’m not putting my hand in there. Take it out.”

Mitch managed to stop shaking long enough to retrieve a fat money clip. I took the cash, and threw the clip—a gold emblem in the shape of a female breast—onto the sidewalk.

“You letting me go?” Mitch asked.

“You’re free to pimp another day. Go run to the bus station, see if you can find some other fresh meat to bust out.”

When I let go of his lapels, his spine seemed to grow back. He adjusted the collar on his velour jump suit and made sure his baseball hat was tilted to the correct odd angle.

“Ain’t like that. I treat my girls good. Plenty of sweet love and all the rock they can smoke.”

“Leave. Now. Before I decide to do society a favor.”

He sneered, spun on his three hundred dollar sneakers, and did his pimp strut away from me.

I probably should have killed him; I had too many enemies already. But, tough as I am, shooting fourteen-year-old kids in the back isn’t my style.

The four hundred was enough to score some coke, but not very much. I thought about calling Manny, my dealer, and getting a sample to help kill the pain, but every minute I wasted gave Jasmine a chance to slip farther away.

Pain relief would have to wait. I pressed my hand to my left side and exited the alley and wondered where the hell I should look next.

I’d already checked Jasmine’s apartment, her boyfriend’s apartment, her parent’s house, her known pick-up spots, and three local crack houses.

To rule out other options, I had to call in a marker.

It was September, about seventy with clear skies, so I took a walk down the block. The first payphone I came to had gum jammed in the coin slot. The second one smelled like a urinal, but I made do.

“Violent Crimes, Daniels.”

“Hi, Jack. Phineas Troutt.”

“Phin? Haven’t seen you at the pool hall lately. Afraid I’ll kick your ass?”

My lips twisted in a tight grin. Jacqueline Daniels was a police Lieutenant who busted me a few years back. We had an on-again-off-again eight ball game Monday nights. I'd missed a few.

"I'm sort of preoccupied with something."

"Chemo again?"

"No, work. Listen, you know what I do, right?"

"You're a freelance thug."

"I prefer the term problem solver. I keep it clean."

"I'm guessing that's because we haven't caught you in the act, yet."

"And you never will. Look, Jack, I need a favor."

"I can't do anything illegal, Phin. You know that."

"Nothing shady. I just have to rule some stuff out. I'm looking for a woman. Hooker. Name is Janet Cumberland, goes by the street nick Jasmine. Any recent arrests or deaths with that name?"

There was a pause on the line. I could only guess Jack's thoughts.

"Give me half an hour," she decided. "Got a number where I can call you back?"

I killed time at a hot dog stand, sipping black coffee mixed with ten crushed Tylenol tablets; they worked faster when they were pre-dissolved.

The phone rang eighteen minutes later.

"No one at the morgue matching that name, and her last arrest was three months ago."

"Do you have a place of residence?"

Jack read off the apartment number I'd already checked.

"How about known acquaintances?"

"She's one of Mitch D's girls. Been arrested a few times with another prostitute named Georgia Williamson, street name is Ajax. Kind of an odd name for a hooker."

"She one of Mitch's, too?"

"Lemme check. No, looks like she's solo."

"Got an addy?"

Jack gave it to me.

"There's also a note in Janet's file, says her parents are looking for her. That your angle? Even if you find her, the recit rate with crack is over 95 percent. They'll stick her in rehab and a week later she'll be on the street again."

“Thanks for the help, Jack. Next time we play pool, beer’s on me.”

“You’re on, Phin. How’s the—”

“Hurts,” I interrupted. “But my doc says it won’t for much longer.”

“The tumor is shrinking? That’s great news!”

I didn’t correct her. The tumor was growing like a weed. I wouldn’t be in pain much longer because I didn’t have much longer.

Which is why I had to find Jasmine, and fast.

She had to die first.



Georgia Williams, aka Ajax, lived on 81st and Stoney, in a particularly mean part of Chicago’s South Side. Night was rolling in, bringing with it the bangers, junkies, ballers, wanna-bes, and thugs. None of them were thrilled to see a white guy on their turf, and some flashed their iron as I drove by.

Ajax’s place wasn’t easy to find, and asking for directions didn’t strike me as a smart idea. Maybe in neighborhoods this bad, whole buildings got stolen.

Finally, I narrowed it down to a decrepit apartment without any street number. I parked in front, set the alarm on my Bronco, and made sure I had one in the chamber.

“You lost, white boy?”

I ignored the three gang members—Gangster Disciples according to their colors—and headed for the building. The front door had a security lock, but it was long broken. There was a large puddle of something in front of the staircase, which I walked around.

Ajax lived in 206. I took the stairs two at a time, followed a hall decorated with graffiti and vomit, and found her door.

“Georgia Williams? Chicago PD!”

Another door opened opposite me, fearful old eyes peeking out through the crack.

“Is Ms. Williams home?” I asked the neighbor.

The door closed again.

I kicked away a broken bottle that was near my feet, and knocked again.

“Georgia Williams! Open the door!”

“You got ID?”

A woman's voice, cold and firm. I held a brass star, \$12.95 on eBay, up to the peephole.

"Where's your partner?" asked the voice.

"Watching the car. We're looking for a friend of yours. Jasmine. She's in big trouble."

"She sure is."

"Can I come in?"

I heard a deadbolt snick back. Then another. The door swung inward, revealing a black girl of no more than sixteen. She wore jeans, a white blouse. Her face was garishly made-up. Stuck to her hip was a sleeping infant.

"Can't be long. Gotta go to work."

Ajax stepped to the side, and I entered her apartment. Expecting squalor, I was surprised to find the place clean and modestly furnished. The ceiling had some water damage, and one wall was losing its plaster, but there were nice curtains and matching furniture and even some framed art. This was the apartment of someone who hadn't given up yet.

"I'll be straight with you, Georgia. If we don't find Jasmine soon, it's very likely she'll be killed. You know about Artie Collins?"

She nodded, once.

"If you know where she is, it's in her best interest to tell me."

"Sorry, cop. I don't know nothing."

I took out my Glock, watched her eyes get big.

"Do you have a license for this firearm I found on your premises, Georgia?"

"Aw, this is—"

I got in her face, sneering.

"I'll tell you what this is. Six months in County, minimum. With your record, the judge won't even think twice. And say goodbye to your baby; when I get done wrecking this place, DCFS will declare you so unfit you won't be allowed within two hundred yards of anyone under aged ten."

Her lips trembled, but there were no tears.

"You bastards are all the same."

"I want Jasmine, Ajax. She's dead if I don't find her."

I gave her credit for toughness. She held out. I had to topple a dresser and put my foot through her TV before she broke down.

"Stop it! She's with her boyfriend!"

“Nice try. I already checked Melvin Kincaid.”

“Not Mel. She found a new guy. Named Buster something.”

“Buster what?”

“I dunno.”

I chucked a vase at the wall. The baby in her arms was wiggling, hysterical.

“I don’t have his last name! But I got a number.”

Georgia went for her purse on the bed, but I shoved the Glock in her face.

“I’ll look.”

The purse was the size of a cigarette pack, with rhinestone studs and spaghetti straps. A hooker purse. I didn’t figure there could be much of a weapon in there, and was once again surprised. A .22 ATM spilled onto the bed.

“I’m sure this has a license.”

Georgia didn’t answer. I rifled through the packs of mint gum and condoms until I found a matchbook with a phone number written on the back.

“This it?”

“Yeah.”

“Can’t you shut that kid up?”

Georgia cooed the baby, rocking it back and forth, while I picked up her .22 and removed the bullets. I tossed the gun back on the bed, and put the lead and the matchbook in my pocket.

She got my evil face when I walked past her.

“If you warn her I’m coming, I’ll know it was you.”

“I won’t say a damn thing, officer.”

“I know you won’t.”

I fished out three of the hundreds I took from Mitch D, and shoved them into her hand. It was a lot more than the TV was worth.

“By the way, why do they call you Ajax?”

She shrugged.

“I’ve robbed a few tricks.”

“Meaning?”

“Ajax cleans out the johns.”

When I got back outside, the three Disciples had multiplied into six, and they were standing in front of my truck.

“This is a nice truck, white boy. Can we have it?”

My Glock 21 held thirteen forty-five caliber rounds. More than enough. But Jack was the one who gave me this address, and if I killed any of these bozos she'd eventually get the word.

Dying of cancer was bad enough. Dying of cancer in prison was not on my to-do list.

Stuck in my belt, nestled along my spine, was a combat baton. Sixteen inches long, made of a tightly coiled steel spring. Because it could bend, it didn't break bones.

But it did hurt like crazy.

The Disciples had apparently expected me to tremble in fear, because I clocked three of them across the heads before they went into attack mode.

The first one to draw was a thin kid who watched too many rap videos. He pulled a 9mm out of his baggy pants and thrust it at me sideways, with the back of his hand facing skyward.

Not only did this mess up your aim, but your grip was severely compromised. I gave him a tap across the back of the knuckles, and the gun hit the pavement. A second smack in the forehead opened up a nice gash. As with his buddies, the blood running into his eyes made him blind and worthless. I turned on the last two.

One had a blade. He held it underhanded, tip up, showing me he knew how to use it. After two feints, he thrust it at my face.

I turned, catching the tip on my cheek, and gave him an elbow to the nose. When he stumbled back, he also got a tap across the eyebrows.

The last guy was fifty yards away, sprinting for reinforcements.

I climbed in my Bronco and hauled out of there before they arrived.

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"Hi, Jack, I need one more favor."

"You already owe me a night of beer."

"I'll also spring for pizza. I need an address to go with this number."

"Lemme have it."

I read it to her, hoping Georgia was honest with me. I didn't want to pay another visit to Stoney Island.

"Buster McDonalds. Four-four-two-three Irving Park, apartment seven-oh-six."

"Thanks again, Jack."

“Listen, Phin, I asked around about Janet Cumberland. The word on the street is that Artie Collins put a contract out on her.”

“I’ll be careful.”

There was a long pause on the line. I cut off her thought.

“I don’t work for mobsters, Jack. I don’t kill people for money.”

“Watch yourself, Phin.”

She hung up.

I stopped at a drive-thru, filled up on grease, and had ten more aspirin. My side ached to the touch. I had stronger stuff, doctor prescribed, but that dulled the senses and took away my edge. I thought about scoring some coke, but the hundred I had left wouldn’t buy much, and time was winding down.

I had to find Jasmine.

Buster’s neighborhood was several rungs above Ajax’s as far as quality of life went. No junkies shooting up in the alleys, hookers on the corners, or roving gangs of teens with firearms.

There were, however, lots of kids drunk out of their minds, moving in great human waves from bar to bar. The area was a hot spot for night life, and Friday night meant the partying was mandatory.

Even the hydrants were taken, so I parked in an alley, blocking the entrance. I took the duffle bag from the passenger seat and climbed out into the night air.

The temp had dropped, and I imagined I could smell Lake Michigan, even though it was miles away. There were voices, shouting, laughing, cars honking. I stood in the shadows.

The security door on Buster’s apartment had a lock that was intact and functioning, unlike Ajax’s. I spotted someone walking out and caught the door before it closed, and then I took the elevator to the seventh floor.

The cop impersonation wouldn’t work this time; Jasmine was on the run and wouldn’t open the door for anybody.

But I had a key.

It was another online purchase. There were thirty-four major lock companies in the US, and they made ninety-five percent of all the locks in America. These lock companies each had a few dozen models, and each of the models had a master key that opened up every lock in the series.

Locksmiths could buy these master keys. So could anyone with a credit card who knew the right website.

The lock on Buster's apartment was a Schlage. I took a large key ring from my duffel bag and got the door open on the third try.

Jasmine and Buster were on a futon, watching TV. I was on him before he had a chance to get up.

When he reached for me, I grabbed his wrist and twisted. Then, using his arm like a lever, I forced him face down into the carpeting.

"Buster!"

I didn't have time to deal with Jasmine yet, so she got a kick in the gut. She went down. I took out roll of duct tape and secured Buster's wrists behind him. When that was done, I wound it around his legs a few times.

"Jazz, run!"

His mouth was next.

Jasmine had curled up in the corner of the room, hugging her knees and rocking back and forth. She was a little thing, no older than Ajax, wearing sweatpants and an extra large t-shirt. Her black hair was pulled back and fear distorted her features.

I made it worse by showing her my Glock.

"Tell me about Artie Collins."

She shrunk back, making herself smaller.

"You're going to kill me."

"No one is killing anyone. Why does Artie want you dead?"

"The book."

"What book?"

She pointed to the table next to the futon. I picked up a ledger, scanned a few pages.

Financial figures, from two of Artie's clubs. I guessed that these were the ones the IRS didn't see.

"Stupid move, lady. Why'd you take these from him?"

"He's a pig," she spat, anger overriding terror. "Artie doesn't like it straight. He's a real freak. He did things to me, things no one has ever done."

"So you stole this?"

"I didn't know what it was. I wanted to hurt him, it was right there in the dresser. So I took it."

Gutsy, but dumb. Stealing from one of the most connected guys in the Midwest was a good way to shorten your life expectancy.

"Artie is offering ten thousand dollars for you. And there's a bonus if it's messy."

I put the book in the duffle bag, and then removed a knife.

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Artie Collins was a slug, and everyone knew it. He had his public side; the restaurants, the riverboat gambling, the night clubs, but anyone worth their street smarts knew he also peddled kiddie porn, smack cut with rat poison, and owned a handful of cops and judges.

Standing before me, he even looked like a slug, from his sweaty, fat face, to the sharkskin suit in dark brown, of all colors.

“I don’t know you,” he said.

“Better that way.”

“I like to know who I’m doing business with.”

“This is a one time deal. Two ships in the night.”

He seemed to consider that, and laughed.

“Okay then, Mystery Man. You told my boys you had something for me.”

I reached into my jacket. Artie didn’t flinch; he knew his men had frisked me earlier and taken my gun. I took out a wad of Polaroids and handed them over.

Artie glanced through them, smiling like a carved pumpkin. He flashed one at me. Jasmine naked and tied up, the knife going in.

“That’s a good one. A real Kodak moment.”

I said nothing. Artie finished viewing my camera work and carefully stuck the pics in his blazer.

“These are nice, but I still need to know where she’s at.”

“The bottom of the Chicago river.”

“I meant, where she was hiding. She had something of mine.”

I nodded, once again going into my jacket. When Artie saw the ledger I thought he’d crap sunshine.

“She told me some things when I was working on her.”

“I’ll bet she did,” Artie laughed.

He gave the ledger a cursory flip through, then tossed it onto his desk. I took a breath, let it out slow. The moment stretched. Finally, Artie waggled a fat, hot dog finger at me.

“You’re good, my friend. I could use a man of your talents.”

“I’m freelance.”

“I offer benefits. A 401K. Dental. Plus whores and drugs, of course. I’d pay some good money to see you work a girl over like you did to that whore.”

“You said you’d also pay good money for whoever brought you proof of Jasmine’s death.”

He nodded, slowly.

“You sure you don’t want to work for me?”

“I don’t play well with others.”

Artie made a show of walking in a complete circle around me, checking me out. This wasn’t going down as easy as I’d hoped.

“Brave man, to come in here all by yourself.”

“My partner’s outside.”

“Partner, huh? Let’s say, for the sake of argument, I had my boys kill you. What would your partner do? Come running into my place, guns blazing?”

He chuckled, and the two goons in the room with us giggled like stoned teenagers.

“No. He’d put the word out on the street that you’re a liar. Then the next time you need a little favor from the outside, your reputation as a square guy would be sullied.”

“Sullied!” Artie laughed again. He had a laugh like a frog. “That’s rich. Would you work for a man with a sullied reputation, Jimmy?”

The thug named Jimmy shrugged, wisely choosing not to answer.

“You’re right, of course.” Artie said when the chuckles faded. “I have a good rep in this town, and my word is bond. Max.”

The other thug handed me a briefcase. Leather. A good weight.

“There was supposed to be a bonus for making it messy.”

“Oh, it’s in there, my friend. I’m sure you’ll be quite pleased. You can count it, if you like.”

I shook my head.

“I trust you.”

I turned to walk out, but Artie’s men stayed in front of the door.

If Artie was more psychotic than I guessed, he could easily kill me right there, and I couldn’t do a damn thing to stop him. I lied about having a partner, and the line about his street rep was just ego stroking.

I braced myself, deciding to go for the guy on the left first.

“One more thing, Mystery Man,” Artie said to my back. “You wouldn’t have made any copies of that ledger, maybe to try and grease me for more money sometime in the future?”

I turned around, gave Artie my cold stare.

“You think I would mess with you?”

His eyes drilled into me. They no longer held any amusement. They were the dark, hard eyes of a man who has killed many people, who has done awful things.

But I'd done some awful things, too. And I made sure he saw it in me.

"No," Artie finally decided. "No, you wouldn't mess with me."

I tilted my head, slightly.

"A pleasure doing business with you, Mr. Collins."

The thugs parted, and I walked out the door.

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When I got a safe distance away, I counted the money.

Fifteen thousand bucks.

I dropped by Manny's, spent two gees on coke, and did a few lines.

The pain in my side became a dim memory.

Unlike pills, cocaine took away the pain and let me keep my edge.

These days, my edge was all I had.

I didn't have to wait for someone to leave Buster's apartment this time; he buzzed me in.

"Jazz is in the shower," he told me.

"Did you dump the bag?"

"In the river, like you told me. And I mailed out those photocopies to the cop with the alcohol name."

He gave me a beer, and Jasmine walked into the living room, wrapped in a towel. Her face and collarbone were still stained red from the stage blood.

"What now?" she asked.

"You're dead. Get the hell out of town."

I handed her a bag filled with five thousand dollars. She looked inside, then showed it to Buster.

"Jesus!" Buster yelped. "Thanks, man!"

Jasmine raised an eyebrow at me. "Why are you doing this?"

"If you're seen around here, Artie will know I lied. He won't be pleased. Take this and go back home. Your parents are looking for you."

Jasmine's voice was small. The voice of a teenager, not a strung-out street whore.

"Thank you."

"Since you're so grateful, you can do me one small favor."

“Anything.”

“Your friend. Ajax. I think she wants out of the life. Take her with you.”

“You got it, Buddy!” Buster pumped my hand, grinning ear to ear. “Why don’t you hang out for a while? We’ll tilt a few.”

“Thanks, but I have some things to do.”

Jasmine stood on her tiptoes, gave me a wet peck on the cheek. Then she whispered in my ear.

“You could have killed me, kept it all. Why didn’t you?”

She didn’t get it, but that was okay. Most people went through their whole lives without ever realizing how precious life was. Jasmine didn’t understand that.

But someday she might.

“I don’t kill people for money,” I told her instead.

Then I left.



All things considered, I did pretty good. The blood, latex scars, and fake knife cost less than a hundred bucks. Pizza and beer for Jack came out to fifty. The money I gave to Ajax wasn’t mine in the first place, and I already owned the master keys, the badge, and the Polaroid camera.

The cash would keep me in drugs for a while.

It might even take me up until the very end.

As for Artie Collins...word on the street, his bosses weren’t happy about his arrest. Artie wasn’t going to last very long in prison.

I did another line and laid back on my bed, letting the exhilaration wash over me. It took away the pain.

All the pain.

Outside my window, the city sounds invaded. Honking horns. Screeching tires. A man coughing. A woman shouting. The el train rushing past, clackety-clacking down the tracks louder than a thunder clap.

To most people, it was background noise.

But to me, it was music.

The One That Got Away

Brilliance Audio does the books on tape for the Jack series, and every year they let me read an extra short story to include with the audio version. Sort of like a DVD bonus. This was included on the audio of Whiskey Sour. I thought it would be interesting to revisit the Gingerbread Man, the villain from that book, through the point-of-view of a victim.

A steel crossbeam, flaking brown paint.

Stained PVC pipes.

White and green wires hanging on nails.

What she sees.

Moni blinks, yawns, tries to turn onto her side.

Can't.

The memory comes, jolting.

Rainy, after midnight, huddling under an overpass. Trying to keep warm in hot pants and a halter top. Rent money overdue. Not a single john in sight.

When the first car stopped, Moni would have tricked for free just to get inside and warm up.

Didn't have to, though. The guy flashed a big roll of twenties. Talked smooth, educated. Smiled a lot.

But there was something wrong with his eyes. Something dead.

Freak eyes.

Moni didn't do freaks. She'd made the mistake once, got hurt bad. Freaks weren't out for sex. They were out for pain. And Moni, bad as she needed money, wasn't going to take a beating for it.

She reached around, felt for the door handle to get out.

No handle.

Mace in her tiny purse, buried in condoms. She reached for it, but the needle found her arm and then everything went blurry.

And now...

Moni blinks, tries to clear her head. The floor under her is cold. Concrete.

She's in a basement. Staring up at the unfinished ceiling.

Moni tries to sit up, but her arms don't move. They're bound with twine, bound to steel rods set into the floor. She raises her head, sees her feet are also tied, legs apart.

Her clothes are gone.

Moni feels a scream building inside her, forces it back down. Forces herself to think.

She takes in her surroundings. It's bright, brighter than a basement should be. Two big lights on stands point down at her.

Between them is a tripod. A camcorder.

Next to the tripod, a table. Moni can see several knives on top. A hammer. A drill. A blowtorch. A cleaver.

The cleaver is caked with little brown bits, and something else.

Hair. Long, pink hair.

Moni screams.

Charlene has long pink hair. Charlene, who's been missing for a week.

Street talk was she'd gone straight, quit the life.

Street talk was wrong.

Moni screams until her lungs burn. Until her throat is raw. She twists and pulls and yanks, crying to get free, panic overriding the pain of the twine rubbing her wrists raw.

The twine doesn't budge.

Moni leans to the right, stretching her neck, trying to reach the twine with her teeth.

Not even close. But as she tries, she notices the stains on the floor beneath her. Sticky brown stains that smell like meat gone bad.

Charlene's blood.

Moni's breath catches. Her gaze drifts to the table again, even though she doesn't want to look, doesn't want to see what this freak is going to use on her.

"I'm dead," she thinks. "And it's gonna be bad."

Moni doesn't like herself. Hasn't for a while. It's tough to find self-respect when one does the things she does for money. But even though she ruined her life with drugs, even though she hates the twenty-dollar-a-pop whore she's become, Moni doesn't want to die.

Not yet.

And not like this.

Moni closes her eyes. She breathes in. Breathes out. Wills her muscles to relax.

“I hope you didn’t pass out.”

Every muscle in Moni’s body contracts in shock. The freak is looking down at her, smiling.

He’d been standing right behind Moni the whole time. Out of her line of sight.

“Please let me go.”

His laugh is an evil thing. She knows, looking at his eyes, he won’t cut her free until her heart has stopped.

“Keep begging. I like it. I like the begging almost as much as I like the screaming.”

He walks around her, over to the table. Takes his time fondling his tools.

“What should we start with? I’ll let you pick.”

Moni doesn’t answer. She thinks back to when she was a child, before all of the bad stuff in her life happened, before hope was just another four-letter word. She remembers the little girl she used to be, bright and full of energy, wanting to grow up and be a lawyer like all of those fancy-dressed women on TV.

“If I get through this,” Moni promises God, “I’ll quit the street and go back to school. I swear.”

“Are you praying?” The freak grins. He’s got the blowtorch in his hand. “God doesn’t answer prayers here.”

He fiddles with the camcorder, then kneels between her open legs. The torch ignites with the strike of a match. It’s the shape of a small fire extinguisher. The blue flame shooting from the nozzle hisses like a leaky tire.

“I won’t lie to you. This is going to hurt. A lot. But it smells delicious. Just like cooking bacon.”

Moni wonders how she can possibly brace herself for the oncoming pain, and realizes that she can’t. There’s nothing she can do. All of the mistakes, all of the bad choices, have led up to this sick final moment in her life, being burned alive in some psycho’s basement.

She clenches her teeth, squeezes her eyes shut.

A bell chimes.

“Dammit.”

The freak pauses, the flame a foot away from her thighs.

The bell chimes again. A doorbell, coming from upstairs.

Moni begins to cry out, but he guesses her intent, bringing his fist down hard onto her face.

Moni sees blurry motes, tastes blood. A moment later he's shoving something in her mouth. Her halter top, wedging it in so far it sticks to the back of her throat.

"Be right back, bitch. The Fed-Ex guy is bringing me something for you."

The freak walks off, up the stairs, out of sight.

Moni tries to scream, choking on the cloth. She shakes and pulls and bucks but there's no release from the twine and the gag won't come out and any second he'll be coming back down the stairs to use that awful blowtorch...

The blowtorch.

Moni stops struggling. Listens for the hissing sound.

It's behind her.

She twists, cranes her neck around, sees the torch sitting on the floor only a few inches from her head.

It's still on.

Moni scoots her body toward it. Strains against the ropes. Stretches her limbs to the limit.

The top of her head touches the steel canister.

Moni's unsure of how much time she has, unsure if this will work, knowing she has less than a one-in-a-zillion chance but she has to try something and maybe dear god just maybe this will work.

She cocks her head back and snaps it against the blowtorch. The torch teeters, falls onto its side, and begins a slow, agonizing roll over to her right hand.

"Please," Moni begs the universe. "Please."

The torch rolls close—too close—the flame brushing Moni's arm and the horrible heat singeing hair and burning skin.

Moni screams into her gag, jerks her elbow, tries to force the searing flame closer to the rope.

The pain blinds her, takes her to a place beyond sensation, where her only thought, her only goal, is to make it stop make it stop **MAKE IT STOP!**

Her arm is suddenly loose.

Moni grabs the blowtorch, ignoring the burning twine that's still wrapped tightly around her wrist. She points the flame at her left hand, severs the rope. Then her feet.

She's free!

No time to dress. No time to hide. Up the stairs, two at a time, ready to dive out of a window naked and screaming and—

“What the hell?”

The freak is at the top of the stairs, pulling a wicked-looking hunting knife out of a cardboard box. He notices Moni and confusion registers on his face.

It quickly morphs into rage.

Moni doesn't hesitate, bringing the blowtorch around, swinging it like a club, connecting hard with the side of the freak's head, and then he's falling forward, past her, arms pinwheeling as he dives face-first into the stairs.

Moni continues to run, up into the house, looking left and right, finding the front door, reaching for the knob...

And pauses.

The freak took a hard fall, but he might still be alive.

There will be other girls. Other girls in his basement.

Girls like Charlene.

Cops don't help whores. Cops don't care.

But Moni does.

Next to the front door is the living room. A couch. Curtains. A throw rug.

Moni picks up the rug, wraps it around her body. Using the torch, she sets the couch ablaze, the curtains on fire, before throwing it onto the floor and running out into the street.

It's early morning. The sidewalk is cold under her bare feet. She's shaken, and her burned arm throbs, but she feels lighter than air.

A car stops.

A john, cruising. Rolls down the window and asks if she's for sale.

“Not anymore,” Moni says.

She walks away, not looking back.

With a Twist

Another locked room mystery, this one even more complicated. What's fun about Jack is that I can put her in different sub genres without changing her character. She can function as Sherlock Holmes, or Spenser, or Kay Scarpetta, depending on the story. This won 2nd place in the Ellery Queen Reader's Choice Contest.

“His skull is shattered, and his spinal column looks like a Dutch pretzel.” Phil Blasky straightened from his crouch and locked eyes with me, his expression neutral. “This man has fallen from a great height.”

I glanced up from my notepad, not having written a word. “You’re positive?”

“I’ve autopsied enough jumpers in my tenure as ME to know a pancake when I see one, Jack.”

I stared at the body, arms and legs akimbo, splayed out on a living room carpet damp with bodily fluids. On impulse I looked up, focusing on a ceiling that couldn’t be any higher than eight feet.

“Maybe he jumped off the couch.” This from my partner, Detective First Class Herb Benedict. His left hand scratched his expansive stomach, his light blue shirt dotted with mustard stains. It was 11am, so how the mustard got there was anybody’s guess.

I frowned at Herb, then located a patch of dry beige carpeting and knelt next to the corpse, careful not to stain my heels or pants. The victim was named Edward Wyatt, and this was his house. He was Caucasian, 67 years old, and as dead as dead can be. The smell wasn’t too bad—this was a fresh one—but the wake would definitely be a closed casket.

“What do you make of the blood spatters, Phil?”

“Unremarkable star-configuration, arcing away from the nexus of the body in all directions. Droplets coating the walls and ceiling.

Notice the double pattern—see the large spot here, next to the body? It has it's own larger radius of spatters.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning he bounced once, when he hit the carpet. Consistent with jumpers, leaving a primary then a secondary spatter.”

Benedict cleared his throat. “You’re telling us this is authentic? That he fell five stories into a living room?”

“I’m telling you it looks that way.”

I’ve been with the Chicago Police Department for twenty years, half of those with the Violent Crimes unit, and have seen a few things. But this was flat-out weird. I almost ordered my team to do a house sweep for Rod Serling.

“Could somebody have dumped him here? After he died someplace else?”

“That seems reasonable, but I don’t notice any tissue or fluid missing. If he were scraped off the street, there would be blood left behind. If anything, there’s too much blood in this room.”

I would have asked how it was possible for him to know that, but Phil knew more about dead people than Mick Jagger knew about rock and roll.

“Also,” Phil motioned us closer, “take a look at this.”

He crouched, holding some tweezers, and used a gloved hand to gently lift the corpse’s head. After some prodding and poking, he removed a small fiber.

“Beige carpeting, deeply embedded in his flesh. The deceased has hundreds of these fibers in the skin, consistent with...”

I finished the sentence for him. “...falling from a great height.”

“However improbable it seems. It’s as if someone took off the roof, and he jumped out of a plane and landed in his living room. And don’t forget about the doors.”

I felt a headache coming on. The house had two entry points, the front door and the rear door. Each had been dead-bolted from the inside—no outside entry was possible. The locks were privacy locks, similar to the ones on hotel rooms; there were no keyholes, just a latch. The first officers on the scene had to break through a window to get in; the windows had all been locked from the inside.

“Lt. Daniels?” A uniform, name of Perez, motioned me over to a corner of the room. “There’s a note.”

I watched my step, making my way to the room-length book shelf, crammed full of several hundred paperbacks. Their spines were splashed with blood, but I could make out some authors: Carr, Chandler, Chesterton. Perez pointed to a pristine sheet of white typing paper, tacked to the shelf between Sladek and Stout. The handwriting on it was done in black marker. I snugged on a pair of latex gloves I keep in my blazer pocket, and picked up the note.

God doesn't understand. Eternal peace I desire. The only way out is death. Answers come to those who seek. Can't get through another day. Let me rest. Until we meet in heaven. Edward.

I pondered the message for a moment, then returned to Benedict and Blasky.

"What about a steamroller?" Herb was asking. "That would crush a body, right?"

"It wouldn't explain the spatters. Also, unless there's a steamroller in the closet, I don't see how..."

I interrupted. "I'm looking around, Herb. When the techies get here, I want video of everything."

"That a suicide note?" Herb pointed his chin at the paper I held.

"Yeah. Strange, though. Take a peek and let me know if you spot the anomaly."

"Anomaly? You've been watching too many of those cop shows on TV."

I winked at him. "I'll let you know if I find the steamroller."

Notebook in hand, I went to explore the house. It was a modest two bedroom split-level, in a good neighborhood on the upper north side. Nine-one-one had gotten an anonymous call from a nearby payphone, someone stating that he'd walked past the house and smelled a horrible stench. The officers who caught the call claimed to hear gunshots, and entered through a window. They discovered the body, but found no evidence of any gun or shooter.

I checked the back door again. Still locked, the deadbolt in place. The door was old, its white paint fading, contrast to the new decorative trim around the frame.

I checked the linoleum floor and found it clean, polished, pristine.

Running my finger along the door frame, I picked up dust, dirt, and some white powder. I sniffed. Plaster. The hinges were solid, tarnished with age. The knob was heavy brass, and the deadbolt shiny steel. Both in perfect working order.

I turned the deadbolt and opened the door. It must have been warped with age, because it only opened 3/4 of the way and then rubbed against the kitchen floor. I walked outside.

The backyard consisted of a well-kept vegetable garden and twelve tall bushes that lined the perimeter fence, offering privacy from the neighbors. I examined the outside of the door and found nothing unusual. The door frame had trim that matched the interior. The porch was clean. I knelt on the welcome mat and examined the strike panel and the lock mechanisms. Both were solid, normal.

I stood, brushed some sawdust from my knee, and went back into the house.

The windows seemed normal, untampered with. There was broken glass on the floor by the window where the uniforms had entered. Other than being shattered, it also appeared normal.

The front door was unlocked; after breaching the residence through the window, the uniforms had opened the door to let the rest of the crew inside. I examined the door, and didn't find anything unusual.

The kitchen was small, tidy. A Dell puzzle magazine rested on the table, next to the salt and pepper. Another sat by the sink. The dishwasher contained eight clean mason jars, with lids, and a turkey baster. Nothing else. No garbage in the garbage can. The refrigerator was empty except for a box of baking soda. The freezer contained three full trays of ice cubes.

I checked cabinets, found a few glasses and dishes, but no food. The drawers held silverware, some dishtowels, and a full box of Swedish Fish cherry gummy candy.

I left the kitchen for the den, sat at the late Edward Wyatt's desk, and inched my way through it. There was a bankbook for a savings account. It held \$188,679.42—up until last month when the account had been emptied out.

I kept digging and found a file full of receipts dating back ten years. Last month, the victim had apparently toured Europe, staying in London, Paris, Rome, and Berlin. Bills for fancy restaurants abounded. The most recent purchases included several hundred dollars at a local hardware store, a dinner for two at the 95th Floor that cost over six-hundred dollars, a one week stay at the Four Seasons hotel in Chicago, a digital video recorder and an expensive new stereo, and a bill for

wall-to-wall carpeting; the beige shag Mr. Wyatt was currently staining had been installed last month.

I also found several grocery lists, and the handwriting seemed to match the handwriting on the suicide note.

Next to the desk, on a cabinet, sat a Chicago phonebook. It was open to BURGLAR ALARMS.

The den also had a cabinet which contained some games (*Monopoly*, chess, *Clue*, backgammon) and jigsaw puzzles, including an old *Rubik's Cube*. I remember solving mine, back in the 1980s, by pulling the stickers off the sides. This one had also been solved, and the stickers appeared intact.

I left the den and found the door to the basement. It was small, unfinished. The floor was bare concrete, and a florescent lamp attached to an overhead beam provided adequate light. A utility sink sat in a corner, next to a washer and dryer. On the other side was a workbench, clean and tidy. The drawers contained the average assortment of hand tools; wrenches, hammers, screwdrivers, saws, chisels. Atop the workbench was an electric reciprocating saw that looked practically new.

A closet was tucked away in the corner. Inside I found an old volleyball net, a large roll of carpet padding, a croquet set, some scraps of decorative trim, and half a can of blue paint. Also, hanging on a makeshift rack, were three badminton rackets, an extra-large super-soaker squirt gun, and a plastic lawn chair.

After snooping until there was nothing left to snoop, I met Herb back in the living room.

"Find anything?" Herb asked.

I described through my search, ending with the Swedish Fish.

"That was the only food?" Herb asked.

"Seems to be."

"Are we taking it as evidence?"

"I'm not sure yet. Why?"

"I love Swedish Fish."

"If I poured chocolate syrup on the corpse, would you eat that too?"

"You found chocolate syrup?"

I switched gears. "You figure out the note?"

Herb smiled. "Yeah. Funny how the note is perfectly clean when everything around it, and behind it, is soaked in blood."

“Find anything else?”

“I tossed the bedrooms upstairs, found some basics; clothes, shoes, linen. Bathroom contained bathroom stuff; towels, toiletries, a lot of puzzle magazines. Another bookshelf—non-fiction this time. Some prescription meds in the cabinet.” Benedict checked his pad. “Diflucan, Abarelix, Taxotere, and Docetaxel.”

“Cancer drugs,” Phil Blasky said. He held Wyatt’s right arm. “That explains this plastic catheter implanted in his vein and this rash on his neck. This man has been on long term chemotherapy.”

A picture began to form in my head, but I didn’t have all the pieces yet.

“Herb, did you find any religious paraphernalia? Bibles, crucifixes, prayer books, things like that?”

“No. There were some books upstairs, but mostly philosophy and logic puzzles. In fact, there was a whole shelf dedicated to Free-Thinking.”

“As opposed to thinking that costs money?”

“That’s a term atheists use.”

Curiouser and curiouser.

“I found receipts for a new stereo and camcorder. Were they upstairs?” I asked.

“The stereo was, set-up in the bedroom next to that big bay window. I didn’t see any camcorders.”

“Let me see that note again.”

The suicide letter had been placed in a clear plastic bag. I read it twice, then had to laugh. “Quite a few religious references for a Free-Thinker.”

“If he was dying of cancer, maybe he found God.”

“Or maybe he found a way to die on his terms.”

“Meaning?”

“The terms of a man who loved mysteries, games, and puzzles. Look at the first letter of each sentence.”

Herb read silently, his lips moving. “G-E-T-A-C-L-U-E. Cute. You know, I became a cop because it required very little lateral thinking.”

“I thought it was because vendors gave you free donuts.”

“Shhh. Hold on...I’m forming a hypothesis.”

“I’ll alert the media.”

Phil Blasky snorted. "You guys have a drink minimum for this show?"

Herb ignored us. "Wyatt obviously had some help, because the note was placed on top of the blood. But was his help in the form of assisted suicide? Or murder?"

"It doesn't matter to us—they're treated the same way."

"Exactly. So if this is a game for us to figure out, and the clues have been staged, will the clues lead us to what really happened, or to what Wyatt or the killer would like us to believe really happened?"

The word 'game' made me remember the cabinet in the den. I returned to it, finding the Parker Brothers classic board game, *Clue*. Inside the box, instead of cards, pieces, and a game board, was a cryptogram magazine.

"I'm going out to the car to get my deermilker cap," Herb said.

"It's deerstalker. While you're out there, call the Irregulars."

I removed the magazine and flipped through it, noting that all of the puzzles had been solved. Nothing else appeared unusual. I went through it again, slower, and noticed that page 20 had been circled.

"Herb, grab all puzzle magazines you can find. I'll meet you back here in five."

I did a quick search of the first floor and gathered up eight magazines. Each had a different page number circled. Herb waddled down the stairs a moment later.

"I've got twelve of them."

"Did he circle page numbers?"

"Yeah."

We took the magazines over to the dining room table and spread them out. Herb made a list of the page number circled in each issue.

"Let's try chronological order," I said. "The earliest issue is February of last year. Write down the page numbers beginning with that one."

I watched Herb jot down 7, 19, 22, 14, 26, 13, 4, 19, 12, 16, 13, 22, 4, 7, 12, 12, 14, 6, 24, and 19.

Herb rubbed his mustache. "No number higher than twenty-six. Could be an alphabet code." He hummed the alphabet, stopping at the seventh letter. "Number seven is G."

"Yeah, but nineteen is S and twenty-two is V. What word starts with GSV?"

“Maybe it’s reverse chronological order. Start with the latest magazine.”

I did some quick calculating. “That would be SXF. Not too many words begin like that.”

“Are you hungry? I’m getting hungry.”

“We’ll eat after we figure this out.”

“How about reverse alphabet code? Z is one, Y is two, and so on.”

I couldn’t do that in my head, and had to write down the alphabet and match up letters to numbers. Then I began to decode.

“You nailed it, Herb. The message is T-H-E-M-A-N-W-H-O-K-N-E-W-T-O-O-M-U-C-H. *The Man Who Knew Too Much*.”

“That Hitchcock movie. Maybe he’s got a copy lying around.”

We searched, and didn’t find a single video or DVD. My hands were pruned in the latex gloves. I snapped the gloves off and stuffed them in my pocket. The air felt good.

“Was it based off a book?” Herb asked. “The guy’s got plenty of books.”

“Could have been. Let me ask the expert.” I pulled out my cell and called the smartest mystery expert I knew; my mother.

“Jacqueline! I’m so happy to hear from you. It’s about time I get out of bed.”

I felt a pang of alarm. “Mom, it’s almost noon. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, dear.”

“But you’ve been alone in bed all day...”

“Did I say I was alone?” There was a slapping sound, and my mother said, “Behave, it’s my daughter.”

I felt myself flush, but worked through it.

“Mom, do you remember that old Hitchcock movie? *The Man Who Knew Too Much*?”

“The Leslie Banks original, or the Jimmy Stewart remake?”

“Either. Was it based off a book?”

“Not that I’m aware of. I can check, if you like. I have both versions.”

“Can you? It’s important.”

Herb nudged me. “Can I have that Swedish Fish candy?”

I nodded, and Herb waddled off.

“Jacqueline? On the Leslie Banks version, the back of the box lists the screenwriter, but doesn’t mention it is based on a book. And...neither does the Jimmy Stewart version.”

Damn.

“Can you give me the screenwriter’s name?”

“Two folks, Charles Bennett and D.B. Wyndham-Lewis. Why is this so important?”

“It’s a case. I’ll tell you about it later. I was hoping *The Man Who Knew Too Much* was a book.”

“It is a book. By G.K. Chesterton, written in the early 1920s. But that had nothing to do with the movie.”

“Chesterton? Thanks, Mom.”

“Chesterton was a wonderful author. He did quite a few locked-room mysteries. Not too many writers do those anymore.”

“I’ll call you tonight. Be good.”

“I most certainly won’t.”

I put away the phone and went to the blood-stained bookshelf. The Chesterton book was easy to find. I put the gloves back on and picked it up. Wedged between pages sixty-two and sixty-three was a thin, plastic flash video card, a recent technology that was used instead of film in digital video cameras. And camcorders...

I met Herb in the kitchen. He had his mouth full of red gummy candy. I held up my prize.

“I found a video card.”

Herb said something that might have been, “Really?” but I couldn’t be sure with his teeth glued together.

“Is your new laptop in your car?”

He nodded, chewing.

“Do you have a card reader?”

He nodded again, shoving the candy box into his pants pocket and easing though the back door.

Two minutes later Herb’s laptop was booting up. I pushed the flash card into his reader slot, and the appropriate program opened the file and began to play the contents.

On Herb’s screen, a very-much-alive Edward Wyatt smiled at us.

“Hello,” the dead man said. “Congratulations on reaching this point. I thought it fitting, having spent my life enjoying puzzles, to end my life with a puzzle as well. Though I commend you for your brainpower thus far, I regret to say that this video won’t be providing you with any clues as to how this seemingly impossible act was committed. But I will say it has been done of my own, free will. My

oncologist has given me less than a month to live, and I'm afraid it won't be a pleasant month. I've chosen to end things early."

"Pause it," I said.

Herb pressed a button. "What?"

"Go back just a few frames, in slow motion."

Herb did. I pointed at the screen. "See that? The camera moved. Someone's holding it."

Herb nodded. "Assisted suicide. I wonder if he moved the camera on purpose, to let us know he had help."

"Let it finish playing."

Herb hit a button, and Wyatt began again.

"Undoubtedly, by this point you know I've had help."

Benedict and I exchanged a look.

"Of course," Wyatt continued, "I wouldn't want to put my helper in any legal jeopardy. This friend graciously helped me fulfill my last wish, and I'd hate for this special person to be arrested for what is entirely my idea, my wishes, my decision, and my fault. But I also know a little about how the law works, and I know this person might indeed become a target of Chicago's finest. Steps have been taken to make sure this person is never found. These steps are already in motion."

Herb paused the recording and looked at me. "I'm fine stopping right here. He says it was suicide, I believe him, let's clear the case and grab a bite to eat."

I folded my arms. "You're kidding. How did the body get inside when everything was locked? How could he have jumped to his death in his living room? Who's the helper? Don't you want answers to these questions?"

"Not really. I don't like mysteries."

"You're fired."

Herb ignored me. I fire him several times a week. He let the recording play.

"However," Wyatt went on, "all good mysteries have a sense of closure. With me dead, and my helper gone, how will you know if you've figured out everything? There's a way. If you're a sharpie, and you've found all the clues, there will be confirmation. Good luck. And don't be discouraged...this is, after all, supposed to be fun."

Benedict snorted his opinion on the matter. The recording ended, and I closed my eyes in thought.

“Herb—the stereo upstairs. Was it on or off?”

“Off.”

“Fully off? Or on standby?”

“I’ll check.”

Benedict wandered out of the kitchen, and I went back into the basement. I found a hammer in the workbench drawer and brought it to the back door. Once again, when I opened the door, it caught on the linoleum flooring. The floor remained shiny, even where the door touched it.

The lack of scuff marks struck me as a pretty decent clue.

Since the door looked old, but the decorative trim around the frame appear new, I decided to remove a section of trim. After a full thirty seconds of searching for a nail to pull, I realized there were no nails holding the trim on.

How interesting.

Using the claw end of the hammer, I wedged off a piece of side trim. And in doing so, I solved the locked-room part of the mystery.

Three gunshots exploded from the floor above, shattering my smugness. I tugged my .38 from my shoulder holster and sprinted up the stairs, flanked by Perez.

“Herb!”

Three more gunshots, impossibly loud. Coming from the room at the end of the hall. I crouched in the doorway, my pistol coming up.

“Jack! All clear!” Herb stood by the stereo, a CD clutched in one hand, the other grasping his chest. “Damn, you almost gave me a heart attack.”

I put two and two together quickly enough, but Officer Henry Perez wasn’t endowed with the same preternatural detecting abilities.

“Where’s the gun?” he croaked, arms and legs locked in full Weaver stance. “Who’s got the gun?”

“Easy, Officer.” I put a hand on his elbow and eased his arms down. “There is no gun.”

Perez’s face wrinkled up. “No gun? That sounded just like...”

Herb finished his sentence, “...the gunshots you heard when you arrived on the scene. I know. It’s all right here.”

Herb held up the CD.

“It’s a recording of gunshots,” I told Perez. “It was used to get you to break into the house. Probable cause. Or else you never would have

gone in—the 911 call talked about a bad smell, but the corpse is fresh and there is no smell.”

Perez seemed reluctant to holster his weapon. I ignored him, holding out my hand for the CD. It was a Maxell recordable CD-R. On the front, in written black marker, was the number 209. I held the disc up to the light, checking for prints. It looked clean.

“Maybe this is one of those clues the dear, departed Edward Wyatt mentioned in his video.” Herb said. “You ready to get some lunch?”

“I figured out how the doors were locked from the inside,” I said.

We went downstairs and I showed Herb the fruits of my labors, prying off another piece of trim.

“Smart. What made you think of it, Jack?”

“The trim is glued on, rather than nailed. Which made me wonder why, and what it covered up.”

“Impressive, Oh Great One. Did you also happen to notice the number?”

“What number?”

“Written on the back of the trim, in black marker.” Herb pointed at the number 847.

“What did Wyatt say in his recording? About being a sharpie? What’s the most popular black marker?”

“A Sharpie.” Herb grunted his disapproval. “Wyatt’s lucky he’s dead, because if he were still alive I’d smack him around for making us jump through these hoops.”

“Are you saying you’d rather be interviewing a domestic battery?”

“I’m saying my brain hurts. I’m going to need to watch a few hours of prime time to dumb myself back down. Isn’t that reality show on tonight? The one where the seven contestants eat live bugs on a tropical island to marry a millionaire who’s really a janitor? My IQ drops ten points each time I watch that show.”

I stared at the black marker writing. “Eight four seven is a local area code. The two zero nine could be a prefix.”

“Almost a phone number. Maybe there’s another clue with the last four digits.”

We went back to the game of Clue, but nothing was written on or inside the box. Another ten minutes were wasted going through the pile of puzzle magazines.

“Okay, what have we figured out so far?” I said, thinking out loud. “We figured out the gunshots that brought us to the scene, and we

figured out the locked room part. But we still don't know how he fell to his death in the living room."

"He must have jumped off a building somewhere else, and then his partner brought the body here and staged the scene."

I rubbed my eyes, getting a smudge of eyeliner on my gloves.

"It's a damn good staging. ME said the blood spatters indicate he fell into that room. Plus there are carpet fibers embedded in his face."

"Maybe," Herb got a gleam in his eye, "he jumped onto that carpet at another location, then both the carpet and the body were put back into the room."

"The entire living room is carpeted, Herb."

"Maybe the helper cut out a section, then put it back in."

We went back into the living room, wound plastic food wrap around our shoes and pants, and spent half an hour crawling over the damp carpet, looking for seams that meant it had been cut out. It was a dead end.

"Damn it." Herb stripped off some bloody cling wrap. "I was sure that's how he did it."

I shrugged. My neck hurt from being on all fours, and some of the blood had gotten through the plastic and stained my pants. "Maybe the fibers embedded in the body won't match the fibers from this carpet."

Herb sighed. "And maybe the blood found squirted all over the room won't match, either. But we both know that everything will match. This guy was so meticulous..."

"Hold it! You said 'squirted.'"

"It's a perfectly good word."

"I think I know why the living room looks that way. Come into the kitchen."

I opened the dishwasher, showing Herb the mason jars and turkey baster. Herb remained dubious.

"That turkey baster wouldn't work. Not powerful enough."

"But what about one of those air-pump squirt guns? The kind that holds a gallon of water, and can shoot a stream twenty feet?"

I led Herb into the basement closet, holding up the squirt gun I'd seen earlier. Written on the handle, in black marker, was the word 'Charlie.'"

"Okay, so we've got two three-digit numbers, and a name. Now what? We still don't know how the fibers got embedded in the victim."

Herb rubbed his chin, thinking or doing a fair imitation of it. "Maybe the helper embedded the fibers by hand after death?"

"Phil would have caught that. I think Wyatt actually leapt to his death and landed on carpeting."

"I've got it," Herb said. He explained.

"Herb, that's perfect! But there's no way you can put black marker on something that isn't here. What else do we have?"

"Got me. That revelation taxed my mental abilities for the month."

"The only other obvious clue is the Swedish Fish candy."

Herb pulled the box out of his pocket. The package, and contents, seemed normal. So normal that Herb ate another handful.

I racked my brain, trying to find something we'd missed. So far, all the clues made sense except for that damn candy.

"I'm going back upstairs," Herb said. "Want to order a pizza?"

"You're kidding."

"I'm not kidding. I have to eat something. We might be here for the rest of our lives."

"Herb, you can't have a pizza delivered to a crime scene."

"How about Chinese food? I haven't had Mu Shu Pork since Thursday. You want anything?"

"No."

"You sure?"

"I'm sure."

"You're not getting any of mine."

"Get me a small order of beef with pea pods."

"That sounds good. How about a large order and we split it?"

"What about the Mu Shu pork?"

Herb patted his expansive belly. "I'll get that too. You think I got this fat just looking at food?" He turned, heading for the stairs. "Where's Wyatt's phone book?"

"It's on his desk." Insight struck. "Herb! That might be another clue!"

"Chinese food?"

"The phone book! It's open to a page."

I squeezed past my portly partner and raced up the stairs. The phone book was where I left it, BURGLAR ALARMS covering the left-hand page. I went through each of the listings, but there was no black marker. I checked the other page, and didn't see anything unusual. But on the very top of the right hand page was spillover from

the previous entry. A listing called CHARLIE'S, with the phone number 847-209-7219.

When I noted what subject came alphabetically before BURGLAR ALARMS in the phonebook, I grinned like an idiot. Then I pulled out my cell and called the number. After four rings and a click, a male voice answered.

"This is Charlie."

"This is Lieutenant Jack Daniels of the Chicago Police Department."

"That was fast. Edward would have been pleased."

"You helped murder him?"

"No. He killed himself. I helped set up all of the other stuff, but I had nothing to do with killing him. I've got proof, too. Footage of him jumping to his death."

"Off of your crane. Or platform. What is it you use?"

"A hundred foot platform. He went quick—in less than four seconds. He preferred it to the agony of cancer."

Herb sidled up to me, putting his ear next to the phone.

"How did Wyatt find you?" I asked Charlie.

"The want ads. He saw I was selling my business. I guess that's how he came up with this whole idea. Pretty clever, don't you think? He bought me out, plus paid me to assist in setting up the scene. Nice guy. I liked him a lot."

"You know, of course, we'll have to arrest you."

"I know. Which is why my office phone forwarded this call to my cell. I'm on my way out of the country. Edward paid me enough to lay low for a while."

"One hundred and eighty-eight thousand dollars." I remembered the number from the empty bank account.

"No, not nearly. Edward lived very well for the last month of his life. He spent a lot of money. And good for him—what good is a life savings if you can't have some fun with it?"

"Not much," Herb said.

I shushed him.

"Can I assume, Lieutenant, that you're figured everything out? Found all the clues? If you know everything, I'm supposed to give you a reward. Edward has this list of questions. Are you ready?"

Not knowing what else to say, I agreed.

“Okay, question number one; how were the doors locked from the inside?”

“You removed the entire door and frame while the door was already locked. Edward, or you, used a reciprocating saw to cut around the door frame. Then one of you glued new trim to the inside of the frame. When the door was pulled back into place, the trim covered the inside cut marks. Then you nailed the frame in place from the outside, and put more trim around the edges to cover the outside cut.”

“What gave it away?”

“Sawdust on the outside matt, a receipt from the hardware store, a new electric saw in the basement, and extra trim in the closet. Plus, the door didn’t open all the way.”

“Edward purposely left all the clues except that last one. The door was heavy, and I couldn’t fit it back in the hole perfectly. Question number two; how did it appear Edward jumped to his death in his living room?”

“He’d been drawing his own blood for a few weeks, using the catheter in his arm, and saving it in the refrigerator in mason jars. Then he used a turkey baster to fill a super soaker squirt gun with his blood, and sprayed the living room. I assume he read enough mysteries to know how to mimic blood spatters. He even faked the bounce that happens when a jumper hits.”

“Excellent. How did the carpet fibers get on the body?”

“He visited Charlie’s Bungee Jumping Emporium in Palatine and did a swan dive onto a pile of carpet remainders. We found carpet padding in the basement, but no remainders, and usually the installers give you all the extra pieces. A clue by omission.”

“Very good. Question number three; where did the gunshots come from?”

“The stereo upstairs. That was also a new purchase. The stereo faced the window, so you must have hit the PLAY button from the street, using the remote.”

“I did. The remote is in a garbage can next to the payphone I called from, if anyone wants it back. Did you find anything else interesting?”

I explained the suicide note, the Clue game, and the puzzle magazines.

“How about the Swedish Fish candy?” he asked.

“We have no idea what that means.”

“That was Edward’s favorite clue. I’d tell you, but I’m sure you’ll figure it out eventually. Anyway, there’s a surprise for you in John Dickson Carr’s book *The Three Coffins*. Don’t bother calling me back—I’m throwing away this phone as soon as I hang up. Good-bye, Lieutenant.”

And he was gone.

We found the Carr book without difficulty. In the pages were a folded cashier’s check, and another flash card. We played the card on Herb’s computer.

Edward Wyatt, standing atop a large bungee platform, smiled at the camera, winked, and said, “Congratulations on figuring it out. In order to make absolutely, positively sure that there’s no doubt I’m doing this of my own free will, without assistance or coercion, I give you this proof.”

He jumped. The camera followed him down onto a pile of beige carpet remainders. I winced when he bounced.

“So that’s it?” Herb whined. “We spend our entire afternoon, without any food, on a plain, old suicide?”

“I don’t think this one qualifies as plain or old. Plus, a twenty grand check for the KITLOD Fund is a nice return for our time.”

“I think I’d rather be killed in the line of duty than forced to go through one of these again. And he didn’t tell you the reason for the Swedish Fish?”

“No. It doesn’t seem to fit at all. Almost as if...” I began to laugh.

“What’s funny?”

“Don’t you get it? Wyatt planted a box of little red candy fish, knowing it would confuse us. It was meant to throw us off the trail.”

“I still don’t get it.”

“You need to read more mysteries, Herb.”

“So, you’re not going to tell me?”

“You’ll figure it out. Now let’s go grab that Chinese food.” I smiled, pleased with myself. “Preferably a place that sells herring.”

Epitaph

I've been a longtime David Morrell fan, so when he co-founded the International Thriller Writers organization and asked me to join, I complied even though I'm not much of a joiner. I'm glad I did, because they published an anthology called Thriller, edited by James Patterson, and I won a wild card spot among the many bestselling authors in the collection. This story was later nominated for a British Dagger award, but what excited me most was to share the covers with F. Paul Wilson's Repairman Jack, Phin's literary ancestor.

There's an art to getting your ass kicked.

Guys on either side held my arms, stretching me out crucifixion-style. The joker who worked me over swung wildly, without planting his feet or putting his body into it. He spent most of his energy swearing and screaming when he should have been focusing on inflicting maximum damage.

Amateur.

Not that I was complaining. What he lacked in professionalism, he made up for in mean.

He moved in and rabbit-punched me in the side. I flexed my abs and tried to shift to take the blow in the center of my stomach, rather than the more vulnerable kidneys.

I exhaled hard when his fist landed. Saw stars.

He stepped away to pop me in the face. Rather than tense up, I relaxed, trying to absorb the contact by letting my neck snap back.

It still hurt like hell.

I tasted blood, wasn't sure if it came from my nose or my mouth. Probably both. My left eye had already swollen shut.

"Hijo calvo de una perra!"

You bald son of a bitch. Real original. His breath was ragged now, shoulders slumping, face glowing with sweat.

Gang-bangers these days aren't in very good shape. I blame TV and junk food.

One final punch—a half-hearted smack to my broken nose—and then I was released.

I collapsed face-first in a puddle that smelled like urine. The three Latin Kings each took the time to spit on me. Then they strolled out of the alley, laughing and giving each other high-fives.

When they got a good distance away, I crawled over to a Dumpster and pulled myself to my feet. The alley was dark, quiet. I felt something scurry over my foot.

Rats, licking up my dripping blood.

Nice neighborhood.

I hurt a lot, but pain and I were old acquaintances. I took a deep breath, let it out slow, did some poking and prodding. Nothing seemed seriously damaged.

I'd been lucky.

I spat. The bloody saliva clung to my swollen lower lip and dribbled onto my T-shirt. I tried a few steps forward, managed to keep my balance, and continued to walk out of the alley, onto the sidewalk, and to the corner bus stop.

I sat.

The Kings took my wallet, which had no ID or credit cards, but did have a few hundred in cash. I kept an emergency fiver in my shoe. The bus arrived, and the portly driver raised an eyebrow at my appearance.

“Do you need a doctor, buddy?”

“I’ve got plenty of doctors.”

He shrugged and took my money.

On the ride back, my fellow passengers made heroic efforts to avoid looking at me. I leaned forward, so the blood pooled between my feet rather than stained my clothing any further. These were my good jeans.

When my stop came up, I gave everyone a cheery wave goodbye and stumbled out of the bus.

The corner of State and Cermak was all lit up, twinkling in both English and Chinese. Unlike NY and LA, each of which had sprawling Chinatowns, Chicago has more of a Chinablock. Blink while you’re driving west on 22nd and you’ll miss it.

Though Caucasian, I found a kind of peace in Chinatown that I didn’t find among the Anglos. Since my diagnosis, I’ve pretty much

disowned society. Living here was like living in a foreign country—or at least a square block of a foreign country.

I kept a room at the Lucky Lucky Hotel, tucked away between a crumbling apartment building and a Chinese butcher shop, on State and 25th. The hotel did most of its business at an hourly rate, though I couldn't think of a more repulsive place to take a woman, even if you were renting her as well as the room. The halls stank like mildew and worse and the plaster snowed on you when you climbed the stairs and obscene graffiti lined the halls and the whole building leaned slightly to the right.

I got a decent rent; free—as long as I kept out the drug dealers. Which I did, except for the ones who dealt to me.

I nodded at the proprietor, Kenny-Jen-Bang-Ko, and asked for my key. Kenny was three times my age, clean-shaven save for several black moles on his cheeks that sprouted long, white hairs. He tugged at these hairs while contemplating me.

“How is other guy?” Kenny asked.

“Drinking a forty of malt liquor that he bought with my money.”

He nodded, as if that was the answer he'd been expecting. “You want pizza?”

Kenny gestured to a box on the counter. The slices were so old and shrunken they looked like Doritos.

“I thought the Chinese hated fast food.”

“Pizza not fast. Took thirty minutes. Anchovy and red pepper.”

I declined.

My room was one squeaky stair flight up. I unlocked the door and lumbered over to the bathroom, looking into the cracked mirror above the sink.

Ouch.

My left eye had completely closed, and the surrounding tissue bulged out like a peach. Purple bruising competed with angry red swelling along my cheeks and forehead. My nose was a glob of strawberry jelly, and blood had crusted black along my lips and down my neck.

It looked like Jackson Pollack kicked my ass.

I stripped off the T-shirt, peeled off my shoes and jeans, and turned the shower up to scald.

It hurt, but got most of the crap off.

After the shower I popped five Tylenol, chased them with a shot of tequila, and spent ten minutes in front of the mirror, tears streaming down my face, forcing my nose back into place.

I had some coke, but wouldn't be able to sniff anything with my sniffer all clotted up, and I was too exhausted to shoot any. I made do with the tequila, thinking that tomorrow I'd have that codeine prescription refilled.

Since the pain wouldn't let me sleep, I decided to do a little work.

Using a dirty fork, I pried up the floorboards near the radiator and took out a plastic bag full of what appeared to be little gray stones. The granules were the size and consistency of aquarium gravel.

I placed the bag on the floor, then removed the Lee Load-All, the scale, a container of gunpowder, some wads, and a box of empty 12 gauge shells.

Everything went over to my kitchen table. I snapped on a fresh pair of latex gloves, clamped the loader onto my counter top, and spent an hour carefully filling ten shells. When I finished, I loaded five of them into my Mossberg 935, the barrel and stock of which had been cut down for easier concealment.

I liked shotguns—you had more leeway when aiming, the cops couldn't trace them like they could trace bullets, and nothing put the fear of god into a guy like the sound of racking a shell into the chamber.

For this job, I didn't have a choice.

By the time I was done, my nose had taken the gold medal in throbbing, with my eye coming close with the silver. I swallowed five more Tylenol and four shots of tequila, then laid down on my cot and fell asleep.

With sleep came the dream.

It happened every night, so vivid I could smell Donna's perfume. We were still together, living in the suburbs. She was smiling at me, running her fingers through my hair.

"Phin, the caterer wants to know if we're going with the split pea or the wedding ball soup."

"Explain the wedding ball soup to me again."

"It's a chicken stock with tiny veal meatballs in it."

"That sounds good to you?"

"It's very good. I've had it before."

"Then let's go with that."

She kissed me; playful, loving.

I woke up drenched in sweat.

If someone had told me that happy memories would one day be a source of incredible pain, I wouldn't have believed it.

Things change.

Sun peeked in through my dirty window, making me squint. I stretched, wincing because my whole body hurt—my whole body except for my left side, where a team of doctors severed the nerves during an operation called a chordotomy. The surgery had been purely palliative. The area felt dead, even though the cancer still thrived inside my pancreas. And elsewhere, by now.

The chordotomy offered enough pain relief to allow me to function, and tequila, cocaine, and codeine made up for the remainder.

I dressed in some baggy sweatpants, my bloody gym shoes (with a new five dollar bill in the sole), and a clean white T-shirt. I strapped my leather shotgun sling under my armpits, and placed the Mossberg in the holster. It hung directly between my shoulder blades, barrel up, and could be freed by reaching my right hand behind me at waist-level.

A baggy black trench coat went on over the rig, concealing the shotgun and the leather straps that held it in place.

I pocketed the five extra shells, the bag of gray granules, a Glock 21 with two extra clips of .45 rounds, and a six inch butterfly knife. Then I hung an iron crowbar on an extra strap sewn into the lining of my coat, and headed out to greet the morning.

Chinatown smelled like a combination of soy sauce and garbage. It was worse in the summer, when stench seemed to settle in and stick to your clothes. Though not yet seven in the morning, the temperature already hovered in the low 90s. The sun made my face hurt.

I walked up State, past Cermak, and went east. The Sing Lung Bakery had opened for business an hour earlier. The manager, a squat Mandarin Chinese named Ti, did a double-take when I entered.

"Phin! Your face is horrible!" He rushed around the counter to meet me, hands and shirt dusty with flour.

"My mom liked it okay."

Ti's features twisted in concern. "Was it them? The ones who butchered my daughter?"

I gave him a brief nod.

Ti hung his head. "I am sorry to bring this suffering upon you. They are very bad men."

I shrugged, which hurt. "It was my fault. I got careless."

That was an understatement. After combing Chicago for almost a week, I'd discovered the bangers had gone underground. I got one guy to talk, and after a bit of friendly persuasion he gladly offered some vital info; Sunny's killers were due to appear in court on an unrelated charge.

I'd gone to the Daly Center, where the prelim hearing was being held, and watched from the sidelines. After matching their names to faces, I followed them back to their hidey-hole.

My mistake had been to stick around. A white guy in a Hispanic neighborhood tends to stand out. Having just been to court, which required walking through a metal detector, I had no weapons on me.

Stupid. Ti and Sunny deserved someone smarter.

Ti had found me through the grapevine, where I got most of my business. Phineas Troutt, Problem Solver. No job too dirty, no fee too high.

I'd met him in a parking lot across the street, and he laid out the whole sad, sick story of what these animals had done to his little girl.

"Cops do nothing. Sunny's friend too scared to press charges."

Sunny's friend had managed to escape with only ten missing teeth, six stab wounds, and a torn rectum. Sunny hadn't been as lucky.

Ti agreed to my price without question. Not too many people haggled with paid killers.

"You finish job today?" Ti asked, reaching into his glass display counter for a pastry.

"Yeah."

"In the way we talk about?"

"In the way we talked about."

Ti bowed and thanked me. Then he stuffed two pastries into a bag and held them out.

"Duck egg moon cake, and red bean ball with sesame. Please take."

I took.

"Tell me when you find them."

"I'll be back later today. Keep an eye on the news. You might see something you'll like."

I left the bakery and headed for the bus. Ti had paid me enough to afford a cab, or even a limo, but cabs and limos kept records. Besides, I preferred to save my money for more important things, like drugs and hookers. I try to live every day as if it's my last.

After all, it very well might be.

The bus arrived, and again everyone took great pains not to stare. The trip was short, only about two miles, taking me to a neighborhood known as Pilsen, on Racine and 18th.

I left my duck egg moon cake and my red bean ball on the bus for some other lucky passenger to enjoy, and then stepped out into Little Mexico.

It smelled like a combination of salsa and garbage.

There weren't many people out—too early for shoppers and commuters. The stores here had Spanish signs, not bothering with English translations: *zapatos, ropa, restuarante, tiendas de comestibles, bancos, teléfonos de la célula*. I passed the alley where I'd gotten the shit kicked out of me, kept heading north, and located the apartment building where my three amigos were staying. I tried the front door.

They hadn't left it open for me.

Though the gray paint was faded and peeling, the door was heavy aluminum, and the lock solid. But the jamb, as I'd remembered from yesterday's visit, was old wood. I removed the crowbar from my jacket lining, gave a discreet look in either direction, and pried open the door in less time than it took to open it with a key, the frame splintering and cracking.

The Kings occupied the basement apartment to the left of the entrance, facing the street. Last night I'd counted seven—five men and two women—including my three targets. Of course, there may be other people inside that I'd missed.

This was going to be interesting.

Unlike the front door, their apartment door was a joke. They apparently thought being gang members meant they didn't need decent security.

They thought wrong.

I took out my Glock and tried to stop hyperventilating. Breaking into someone's place is scary as hell. It always is.

One hard kick and the door burst inward.

A guy on the couch, sleeping in front of the TV. Not one of my marks. He woke up and stared at me. It took a millisecond to register the gang tattoo, a five pointed crown, on the back of his hand.

I shot him in his forehead.

If the busted door didn't wake everyone up, the .45 did, sounding like thunder in the small room.

Movement to my right. A woman in the kitchen, in panties and a Dago-T, too much make-up and baby fat.

"Te vayas!" I hissed at her.

She took the message and ran out the door.

A man stumbled into the hall, tripping and falling to the thin carpet. One of mine, the guy who held my right arm while I'd been worked over. He clutched a stiletto. I was on him in two quick steps, putting one in his elbow and one through the back of his knee when he fell.

He screamed falsetto.

I walked down the hall in a crouch, and a bullet zinged over my head and buried itself in the ceiling. I kissed the floor, looked left, and saw the shooter in the bathroom; the guy who held my other arm and laughed every time I got smacked.

I stuck the Glock in my jeans and reached behind me, unslinging the Mossberg.

He fired again, missed, and I aimed the shotgun and peppered his face.

Unlike lead shot, the gray granules didn't have deep penetrating power. Instead of blowing his head off, they peeled off his lips, cheeks, and eyes.

He ate linoleum, blind and choking on blood.

Movement behind me. I fell sideways and rolled onto my back. A kid, about thirteen, stood in the hall a few feet away. He wore Latin Kings colors; black to represent death, gold to represent life.

His hand ended in a pistol.

I racked the shotgun, aimed low.

If the kid were old enough to be sexually active, he wasn't anymore.

He dropped to his knees, still holding the gun.

I was on him in two steps, driving a knee into his nose. He went down and out.

Three more guys burst out of the bedroom.

Apparently I'd counted wrong.

Two were young, muscular, brandishing knives. The third was the guy who'd worked me over the night before. The one who called me a bald son of a bitch.

They were on me before I could rack the shotgun again.

The first one slashed at me with his pig-sticker, and I parried with the barrel of the Mossberg. He jabbed again, slicing me across the knuckles of my right hand.

I threw the shotgun at his face and went for my Glock.

He was fast.

I was faster.

Bang bang and he was a paycheck for the coroner. I spun left, aimed at the second guy. He was already in mid-jump, launching himself at me with a battle cry and switchblades in both hands.

One gun beats two knives.

He took three in the chest and two in the neck before he dropped.

The last guy, the guy who broke my nose, grabbed my shotgun and dove behind the couch.

Chck chck. He ejected the shell and racked another into the chamber. I pulled the Glock's magazine and slammed a fresh one home.

"Hijo calvo de una perra!"

Again with the bald son of a bitch taunt. I worked through my hurt feelings and crawled to an end table, tipping it over and getting behind it.

The shotgun boomed. Had it been loaded with shot, it would have torn through the cheap particle board and turned me into ground beef. Or ground *hijo calvo de una perra*. But at that distance, the granules didn't do much more than make a loud noise.

The banger apparently didn't learn from experience, because he tried twice more with similar results, and then the shotgun was empty.

I stood up from behind the table, my heart a lump in my throat and my hands shaking with adrenalin.

The King turned and ran.

His back was an easy target.

I took a quick look around, making sure everyone was down or out, and then went to retrieve my shotgun. I loaded five more shells and approached the downed leader, who was sucking carpet and

whimpering. The wounds in his back were ugly, but he still made a feeble effort to crawl away.

I bent down, turned him over, and shoved the barrel of the Mossberg between his bloody lips.

“You remember Sunny Lung,” I said, and fired.

It wasn’t pretty. It also wasn’t fatal. The granules blew out his cheeks, and tore into his throat, but somehow the guy managed to keep breathing.

I gave him one more, jamming the gun further down the wreck of his face.

That did the trick.

The second perp, the one I’d blinded, had passed out on the bathroom floor. His face didn’t look like a face anymore, and blood bubbles were coming out of the hole where his mouth would have been.

“Sunny Lung sends her regards,” I said.

This time I pushed the gun in deep, and the first shot did the trick, blowing through his throat.

The last guy, the one who made like Pavarotti when I took out his knee, left a blood smear from the hall into the kitchen. He cowered in the corner, a dishrag pressed to his leg.

“Don’t kill me, man! Don’t kill me!”

“I bet Sunny Lung said the same thing.”

The Mossberg thundered twice; once to the chest, and once to the head.

It wasn’t enough. What was left alive gasped for air.

I removed the bag of granules from my pocket, took out a handful, and shoved them down his throat until he stopped breathing.

Then I went to the bathroom and threw up in the sink.

Sirens wailed in the distance. Time to go. I washed my hands, and then rinsed off the barrel of the Mossberg, holstering it in my rig.

In the hallway, the kid I emasculated was clutching himself between the legs, sobbing.

“There’s always the priesthood,” I told him, and got out of there.

□ □ □

My nose was still clogged, but I managed to get enough coke up there to damper the pain. Before closing time I stopped by the bakery, and Ti greeted me with a somber nod.

“Saw the news. They said it was a massacre.”

“Wasn’t pretty.”

“You did as we said?”

“I did, Ti. Your daughter got her revenge. She’s the one that killed them. All three.”

I fished out the bag of granules and handed it to her father. Sunny’s cremated remains.

“Xie xie,” Ti said, thanking me in Mandarin. He held out an envelope filled with cash.

Ti looked uncomfortable, and I had drugs to buy, so I took the money and left without another word.

An hour later I’d filled my codeine prescription, picked up two bottles of tequila and a skinny hooker with track marks on her arms, and had a party back at my place. I popped and drank and screwed and snorted, trying to blot out the memory of the last two days. And of the last six months.

That’s when I’d been diagnosed. A week before my wedding day. My gift to my bride-to-be was running away so she wouldn’t have to watch me die of cancer.

Those Latin Kings this morning, they got off easy. They didn’t see it coming.

Seeing it coming is so much worse.

Taken to the Cleaners

Harry is my favorite character to write for. I love the idea of an idiotic, selfish jerk as a protagonist. He's too obnoxious and unsympathetic to carry a book on his own, but I think he makes a great foil for Jack, so he appears in every novel. Some readers hate him. Some readers adore him. This story sold to The Strand Magazine in 2005.

"I want you to kill the man that my husband hired to kill the man that I hired to kill my husband."

If I had been paying attention, I still wouldn't have understood what she wanted me to do. But I was busy looking at her legs, which weren't adequately covered by her skirt. She had great legs, curvy without being heavy, tan and long, and she had them crossed in that sexy way that women cross their legs, knee over knee, not the ugly way that guys do it, with the ankle on the knee, though if she did cross her legs that way it would have been sexy too.

"Mr. McGlade, did you hear what I just said?"

"Hmm? Yeah, sure I did, baby. The man, the husband, I got it."

"So you'll do it?"

"Do what?"

"Kill the man that my husband—"

I held up my hand. "Whoa. Hold it right there. I'm just a plain old private eye. That's what is says on the door you just walked through. The door even has a big magnifying glass silhouette logo thingy painted on it, which I paid way too much money for, just so no one gets confused. I don't kill people for money. Absolutely, positively, no way." I leaned forward a little. "But, for the sake of argument, how much money are we talking about here?"

"I don't know where else to turn."

The tears came, and she buried her face in her hands, giving me the opportunity to look at her legs again. Marietta Garbonzo had found

me through the ad I placed in the Chicago phone book. The ad used the expensive magnifying glass logo, along with the tagline, Harry McGlade Investigators: We'll Do Whatever it Takes. It brought in more customers than my last tagline: No Job Too Small, No Fee Too High, or the one prior to that, We'll Investigate Your Privates.

Mrs. Garbonzo had never been to a private eye before, and she was playing her role to the hilt. Besides the short skirt and tight blouse, she had gone to town with the hair and make-up; her blonde locks curled and sprayed, her lips painted deep, glossy red, her purple eye shadow so thick that she managed to get some on her collar.

"My husband beats me, Mr. McGlade. Do you know why?"

"Beats me," I said, shrugging. Her wailing kicked in again. I wondered where she worked out. Legs like that, she must work out.

"He's insane, Mr. McGlade. We've been married for a year, and Roy always had a temper. I once saw him attack another man with a tire iron. They were having an argument, Roy went out to the car, grabbed a crow bar from the trunk, then came back and practically killed him."

"Where do you work out?"

"Excuse me?"

"Exercise. Do you belong to a gym, or work out at home?"

"Mr. McGlade, I'm trying to tell you about my husband."

"I know, the insane guy who beats you. Probably shouldn't have married a guy who used a tire iron for anything other than changing tires."

"I married too young. But while we were dating, he treated me kindly. It was only after we married that the abuse began."

She turned her head away and unbuttoned her blouse. My gaze shifted from her legs to her chest. She had a nice chest, packed tight into a silky black bra with lace around the edges and an underwire that displayed things to a good effect, both lifting and separating.

"See these bruises?"

"Hmm?"

"It's humiliating to reveal them, but I don't know where else to go."

"Does he hit you anywhere else? You can show me, I'm a professional."

The tears returned. "I hired a man to kill him, Mr. McGlade. I hired a man to kill my husband. But somehow Roy found out about it,

and he hired a man to kill the man I hired. So I'd like you to kill his man so my man can kill him."

I removed the bottle of whiskey from my desk that I keep there for medicinal purposes, like getting drunk. I unscrewed the cap, wiped off the bottle neck with my tie, and handed it to her.

"You're not making sense, Mrs. Garbonzo. Have a swig of this."

"I shouldn't. When I drink I lose my inhibitions."

"Keep the bottle."

She took a sip, coughing after it went down.

"I already paid the assassin. I paid him a lot of money, and he won't refund it. But I'm afraid he'll die before he kills my husband, so I need someone to kill the man who is after him."

"Shouldn't you tell the guy you hired that he's got a hit on him?"

"I called him. He says not to worry. But I am worried, Mr. McGlade."

"As I said before, I don't kill people for money."

"Even if you're killing someone who kills people for money?"

"But I'd be killing someone who is killing someone who kills people for money. What prevents that killer from hiring someone to kill me because he's killing someone who is killing someone that I...hand me that bottle."

I took a swig.

"Please, Mr. McGlade. I'm a desperate woman. I'll do anything."

She walked around the desk and stood before me, shivering in her bra, her breath coming out in short gasps through red, wet lips. Her hands rested on my shoulders, squeezing, and she bent forward.

"My laundry," I said.

"What?"

"Do my laundry."

"Mr. McGlade, I'm offering you my body."

"And it's a tempting offer, Mrs. Garbonzo. But that will take, what, five minutes? I've got about six loads of laundry back at my place, they take an hour for each cycle."

"Isn't there a dry cleaner in your neighborhood?"

"A hassle. I'd have to write my name on all the labels, on every sock, on the elastic band of my whitey tighties, plus haul six bags of clothes down the street. You want me to help you? I get five hundred a day, plus expenses. And you do my laundry."

"And you'll kill him?"

“No. I don’t kill people for money. Or for laundry. But I’ll protect your guy from getting whacked.”

“Thank you, Mr. McGlade.”

She leaned down to kiss me. Not wanting to appear rude, I let her. And so she didn’t feel unwanted, I stuck my hand up her skirt.

“You won’t tell the police, will you Mr. McGlade?”

“Look, baby, I’m not your priest and I’m not your lawyer and I’m not your shrink. I’m just a man. A man who will keep his mouth shut, except when I’m eating. Or talking, or sleeping, because sometimes I sleep with my mouth open because I have the apnea.”

“Thank you, Mr. McGlade.”

“I’ll take the first week in advance, Visa and MasterCard are fine. Here are my spare keys.”

“Your keys?”

“For my apartment. It’s in Hyde Park. I don’t have a hamper, so I leave my dirty clothes all over the floor. Do the bed sheets too—those haven’t been washed since, well, ever. Washer and dryer are in the basement of the building, washer costs seventy-five cents, dryer costs fifty cents for each thirty minutes, and the heavy things like jeans and sweaters take about a buck fifty to dry. Make yourself at home, but don’t touch anything, sit on anything, eat any of my food, or turn on the TV.”

I gave her my address, and she gave me a check and all of her info. The info was surprising.

“You hired a killer from the personal ads in Famous Soldier Magazine?”

“I didn’t know where else to go.”

“How about the police? A divorce attorney?”

“My husband is a rich and powerful man, Mr. McGlade. You don’t recognize his name?”

I flipped through my mental Rolodex. “Roy Garbonzo? Is he the Roy Garbonzo that owns Happy Roy’s Chicken Shack?”

“Yes.”

“He seems so happy on those commercials.”

“He’s a beast, Mr. McGlade.”

“The guy is like a hundred and thirty years old. And on those commercials, he’s always laughing and signing and dancing with that claymation chicken. He’s the guy that’s abusing you?”

“Would you like to see the proof again?”

“If it isn’t too much trouble.”

She grabbed my face in one hand, squeezing my cheeks together.

“Happy Roy is a vicious psycho, Mr. McGlade. He’s a brutal, misogynist pig who enjoys inflicting pain.”

“He’s probably rich too.”

Mrs. Garbonzo narrowed her eyes. “He’s wealthy, yes. What are you implying?”

“I like his extra spicy recipe. Do you get to take chicken home for free? You probably have a fridge stuffed full of it, am I right?”

She released my face and buttoned up her blouse.

“I have to go. My husband gets paranoid when I go out.”

“Maybe because when you go out, you hire people to kill him.”

She picked up her purse and headed for the door. “I expect you to call me when you’ve made some progress.”

“That includes ironing,” I called after her. “And hanging the stuff up. I don’t have any hangers, so you’ll have to buy some.”

After she left, I turned off all the office lights and closed the blinds, because what I had to do next, I had to do in complete privacy.

I took a nap.

When I awoke a few hours later, I went to the bank, cashed Mrs. Garbonzo’s check, and went to start earning my money.

My first instinct was to dive head-first into the belly of the beast and confront Mrs. Garbonzo’s hired hitman help. My second instinct was to get some nachos, maybe a beer or two.

I went with my second instinct. The nachos were good, spicy but not so much that all you tasted was peppers. After the third beer I hopped in my ride and headed for the assassin’s headquarters, which turned out to be in a well-to-do suburb of Chicago called Barrington. The development I pulled into boasted some amazingly huge houses, complete with big lawns and swimming pools and trimmed bushes that looked like corkscrews and lollipops. I double-checked the address I’d scribbled down, then pulled into a long circular driveway and up to a home that was bigger than the public school I attended, and I came from the city where they grew schools big.

The hitman biz must be booming.

I half expected some sort of maid or butler to answer the door, but instead I was greeted by a fifty-something woman, her facelift sporting a deep tan. I appraised her.

“If you stay out in the sun, the wrinkles will come back.”

“Then I’ll just have more work done.” Her voice was steady, cultured. “Are you here to clean the pool?”

“I’m here to speak to William Johansenn.”

“Billy? Sure, he’s in the basement.”

She let me in. Perhaps all rich suburban women were fearless and let strange guys into their homes. Or perhaps this one simply didn’t care. I didn’t get a chance to ask, because she walked off just as I entered.

“Lady? Where’s the basement?”

“Down the hall, stairs to the right,” she said without turning around.

I took a long, tiled hallway past a powder room, a den, and a door that opened to a descending staircase. Heavy metal music blared up at me.

“Billy!” I called down.

My effort was fruitless—with the noise, I couldn’t even hear myself. The lights were off, and squinting did nothing to penetrate the darkness.

Surprising a paid assassin in his own lair wasn’t on the list of 100 things I longed to do before I die, but I didn’t see much of a choice. I beer-belched, then went down the stairs.

The basement was furnished, though furnished didn’t seem to be the right word. The floor had carpet, and the walls had paint, and there seemed to be furniture, but I couldn’t really tell because everything was covered with food wrappers, pop cans, dirty clothing, and discarded magazines. It looked like a 7-Eleven exploded.

William “Billy” Johansenn was asleep on a waterbed, a copy of *Creem* open on his chest. He had a galaxy of pimples dotting his forehead and six curly hairs sprouting from his chin.

He couldn’t have been a day over sixteen.

I killed the stereo. Billy continued to snore. Among the clutter on the floor were several issues of *Famous Soldier*, along with various gun and hunting magazines. I poked through his drawers and found a cheap Rambo knife, a CO2 powered BB gun, and a dog-eared copy of the infamous *How to be a Hitman* book from Paladin Press.

I gave the kid a shake, then another. The third shake got him to open his eyes.

“Who the hell are you?” he said, defiant.

“I’m your wake-up call.”

I slapped the kid, making his eyes cross.

“Hey! You hit me!”

“A woman hired you to kill her husband.”

“I don’t know what you’re—”

He got another smack. “That’s for lying.”

“You can’t hit me,” he whined. “I’ll sue you.”

I hit him twice more; once because I didn’t like being threatened by punk kids, and once because I didn’t like lawyers. When I pulled my palm back for threesies, the kid broke.

“Please! Stop it! I admit it!”

I released his t-shirt and let him blubber for a minute. His blue eyes matched those of the woman upstairs. Not many professional killers lived in their mother’s basement, and I wondered how Marietta Garbonzo could have been this naive.

“I’m guessing you never met Mrs. Garbonzo in person.”

“I only talked to her on the phone. She sent the money to a P.O. Box. That’s how the pros do it.”

“So how did she get your home address?”

“She wouldn’t give me the money without my address. She said if I didn’t trust her, why should she trust me?”

Here was my proof that each new generation of teenagers was stupider than the last. I blame MTV.

“How much did she give you?”

He smiled, showing me a mouth full of braces. “Fifty large.”

“And how were you going to do it? With your BB gun?”

“I was going to follow him around and then...you know...shove him.”

“Shove him?”

“He’s an old guy. I was thinking I’d shove him down some stairs, or into traffic. I dunno.”

“Have you shoved a lot of old people into traffic, Billy boy?”

He must not have liked the look in my eyes, because he shrunk two sizes.

“No! Never! I never killed anybody!”

“So why put an ad in the magazine?”

“I dunno. Something to do.”

I considered hitting him again, but didn’t know what purpose it would serve.

I hit him anyway.

“Ow! My lip’s caught in my braces!”

“You pimple-faced little moron. Do you have any idea what kind of trouble you’re in right now? Not only did you accept money to commit a felony, but now you’ve got a price on your head. Did Mrs. Garbonzo tell you about the guy her husband hired to kill you?”

He nodded, his Adam’s apple wiggling like a fish.

“Are-are you here to kill me?”

“No.”

“But you’ve got a gun.” He pointed to the butt of my Magnum, jutting out of my shoulder holster.

“I’m a private detective.”

“Is that a real gun?”

“Yes.”

“Can I touch it?”

“No.”

“Come on. Lemme touch it.”

This is what happens when you spare the rod and spoil the child.

“Look kid, I know that you’re a loser that nobody likes, and that you’re a virgin and will probably stay one for the next ten years, but do you want to die?”

“Ten years?”

“Answer the question.”

“No. I don’t want to die.”

I sighed. “That’s a start. Where’s the money?”

“I’ve got a secret place. In the wall.”

He rolled off the bed, eager, and pried a piece of paneling away from the plaster in a less-cluttered corner of the room. His hand reached in, and came out with a brown paper shopping bag.

“Is it all there?”

Billy shook his head. “I spent three hundred on a wicked MP3 player.”

“Hand over the money. And the MP3 player.”

Billy showed a bit of reluctance, so I smacked him again to help with his motivation.

It helped. He also gave me fresh batteries for the player.

“Now what?” he sniffled.

“Now we tell your parents.”

“Do we have to?”

“You’d prefer the cops?”

He shook his head. "No. No cops."

"That blonde upstairs with the face like a snare drum, that your mom?"

"Yeah."

"Let's go have a talk with her."

Mrs. Johansenn was perched in front of a sixty inch television, watching a soap.

"Nice TV. High definition?"

"Plasma."

"Nice. Billy has something he wants to tell you."

Billy stared at his shoes. "Mom, I bought an ad in the back of Famous Soldier Magazine, and some lady gave me fifty thousand dollars to kill her husband."

Mrs. Johansenn hit the mute button on the remote, shaking her head in obvious disappointment.

"Billy, dammit, this is too much. You're a hired killer?"

"Sorry," he mumbled.

"You're father is going to have a stroke when he hears this."

"Do we have to tell Dad?"

"Are you kidding?"

"I gave the money back."

"Who are you?" Billy's mom squinted at me.

"I'm Harry McGlade. I'm a private eye. I was hired to find Billy. Someone is trying to kill him."

Mrs. Johansenn rolled her eyes. "Oh, this gets better and better. I need to call Sal."

"You husband?"

"My lawyer."

"Ma'am, a lawyer isn't going to do much to save Billy's life, unless he's standing between him and a bullet."

"So what then, the police?"

"Not the cops, Mom! I don't want to go to jail!"

"He won't survive in prison," I said. "The lifers will pass him around like a bong at a college party. They'll trade him for candy bars and cigarettes."

"I don't want to be traded for candy bars, Mom!"

Mrs. Johansenn frowned, forming new wrinkles. "Then what should we do, Mr. McGlade?"

I paused for a moment, then I grinned.

“I get five-hundred a day, plus expenses.”

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I celebrated my recent windfall with a nice dinner at a nice restaurant. I was more of a burger and fries guy than a steak and lobster guy, but the steak and lobster went down easy, and after leaving a 17% tip I headed to Evanston to visit the Chicken King.

Roy Garbonzo’s estate made the Johansenn’s look like a third world mud hut. He had his own private access road, a giant wrought iron perimeter fence, and a uniformed guard posted at the gate. I was wondering how to play it when the aforementioned uniformed guard knocked on my window.

“I need to see Roy Garbonzo,” I told him. “My son choked to death on a Sunny Meal toy.”

“He’s expecting you, Mr. McGlade.”

The gate rolled back, and I drove up to the mansion. It looked like five mansions stuck together. I parked between two massive Doric columns and pressed the buzzer next to the giant double doors. Before anyone answered, a startling thought flashed through my head.

How did the guard know my name?

“It’s a set up,” I said aloud. I yanked the Magnum out of my shoulder holster and dove into one of the hydrangea bushes flanking the entryway just as the knob turned.

I peeked through the lavender blooms, finger on the trigger, watching the door swing open. A sinister-looking man wearing a tuxedo stepped out of the house and peered down his nose at me.

“Would Mr. McGlade care for a drink?”

“You’re a butler,” I said.

“Observant of you, sir.”

“You work for Roy Garbonzo.”

“An excellent deduction, sir. A drink?”

“Uh—whiskey, rocks.”

“Would you care to have it in the parlor, sir, or would you prefer to remain squatting in the Neidersachen?”

“I thought it was a hydrangea.”

“It’s a hydrangea Neidersachen, sir.”

“It’s pretty,” I said. “But I think I’ll take that drink inside.”

“Very good, sir.”

I extricated myself from the Neidersachen, brushed off some clinging leaves, and followed Jeeves through the tiled foyer, through

the carpeted library, and into the parlor, which had wood floors and an ornate Persian rug big enough to park a bus on.

"Please have a seat, sir. Mr. Garbonzo will be with you shortly. Were you planning on shooting him?"

"Excuse me?"

"You're holding a gun, sir."

I glanced down at my hand, still clenched around my Magnum.

"Sorry. Forgot."

I holstered the .44 and sat in a high-backed leather chair, which was so plush I sank four inches. Waddles returned with my whiskey, and I sipped it and stared at the paintings hanging on the walls. One in particular caught my interest, of a nude woman eating grapes.

"Admiring the Degas?" a familiar voice boomed from behind.

I turned and saw Happy Roy the vicious misogynist psycho, all five foot two inches of him, walking up to me. He wore an expensive silk suit, but like most old men the waist was too high, making him seem more hunched over than he actually was. On his feet were slippers, and his glasses had black plastic frames and looked thick enough to stop a bullet.

"Her name is Degas?" I asked. "Silly name for a chick."

He held out his hand and I shook it, noticing his knuckles were swollen and bruised.

"Degas is the painter, Mr. McGlade. My business advisors thought it was a good investment. Do you like it?"

"Not really. She's got too much in back, not enough up front, and her face is a double-bagger."

"A double-bagger?"

"I'd make her wear two bags over her head, in case one fell off."

The Chicken King laughed. "I always thought she was ugly too. Apparently, this little lady was the ideal beauty hundreds of years ago."

"Or maybe Degas just liked ugly, pear-shaped chicks. How did you know I was coming, Mr. Garbonzo?"

He sat in the chair across from me, sinking in so deep he had trouble seeing over his knees.

"Please, call me Happy Roy. I've been having my wife followed, Mr. McGlade. The man I hired tailed her to your office. Does that surprise you?"

"Why should I be surprised? I remember that she came to my office."

“What I meant was, are you surprised I’m having my wife followed?”

I considered it. “No. She’s young, beautiful, and you look like a Caucasian version of one of the California Raisins.”

“I remember those commercials. That’s where I got the idea for the claymation chicken in the Chicken Shack spots. Expensive to produce, those commercials.”

“Enough of the small talk. I want you to call off your goon.”

“My goon?”

“The person your wife hired to whack you, he’s a teenage kid living in the suburbs. He’s not a real threat.”

“I’m aware of that.”

“So you don’t need to have that kid killed.”

“Mr. McGlade, I’m not having anyone killed. I’m Happy Roy. I don’t kill people. I promote world peace through deep fried poultry. I simply told my wife that I hired a killer, even though I didn’t.”

“You lied to her?”

Happy Roy let out a big, dramatic sigh. “When I found out she wanted me dead, I was justifiably annoyed. I confronted her, we got into an argument, and I told her that I’d have her assassin killed. I was trying to get her to call it off on her own.”

I absorbed this information, drinking more whiskey. When the whiskey ran out, I sucked on an ice cube.

“Tho wmer mmmpt wooor—”

“Excuse me? I can’t understand you with that ice in your mouth.”

I spit out the ice. “She said you abuse her. That you’re insane.”

“The only thing insane about me is my upcoming promotion. Buy a box of chicken, get a second box for half price.”

I wondered if I should tell him about the bruises she had, but chose to keep silent.

“What about divorce?”

“I love Marietta, Mr. McGlade. I know she’s too young for me. I know she’s a devious, back-stabbing maneater. That just makes her more adorable.”

“She wants you dead.”

“All spouses have their quirks.”

I leaned forward, an effort because my butt was sunk so low in the chair.

“Happy Roy, I have no doubt that Marietta will kill you if she can. When this doesn’t pan out, she’ll try something else. Eventually, she’ll hook up with a real assassin.”

Happy Roy’s eye became hooded, dark. “She’s my wife, Mr. McGlade. I’ll deal with her my way.”

“By beating her?”

“This conversation is over. I’ll have my butler show you to the door.”

I pried myself out of the chair. “You’re disgustingly rich, powerful, and not a bad looking guy for someone older than God. Let Marietta go and find some other bimbo to play with.”

“Good bye, Mr. McGlade. Feel free to keep working for my wife.”

“Are you trying to pay me off, so I drop this case?”

“No. Not at all.”

“If you were thinking about paying me off, how much money would we be talking?”

“I’m not trying to pay you off, Mr. McGlade.”

I got in the smaller man’s face. “You might be able to afford fat Degas and huge estates, but I’m a person, Happy Roy. And no matter how rich you get, you’ll never be able to buy a human being. Because it’s illegal, Happy Roy. Buying people is illegal.”

“I’m not trying to buy you!”

“I’ll find my own way out.”

I stormed out of the parlor, through the library, into the dining room, into another parlor, or maybe it was a den, and then I wound up in the kitchen somehow. I tried to back track, wandered into the dining room, and then found myself back in one of the parlors, but I couldn’t tell if it was the first parlor or the second parlor. I didn’t see that painting of the naked heifer, but Happy Roy may have taken it down just to confuse me.

“Hello?” I called out. “I’m a little lost here.”

No one answered.

I went back into the dining room, then the kitchen, and took another door which led down a hallway which led to a bathroom, which was fine because I needed to go to the bathroom anyway.

When the lizard had been adequately drained, I discovered some very interesting prescription drugs, just lying there, in the medicine cabinet.

And then it all made sense.

Forty minutes later I found the front door and headed back to my apartment.

Time to drop the truth on Little Miss Marietta.

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At first, I thought I had the wrong place. Everything was so...clean. Not only were all of my clothes picked up, but the apartment had been vacuumed—a real feat since I didn't think I owned a vacuum cleaner.

"Mrs. Garbonzo? You here?"

I walked into the bedroom. The bed had been made, and the closet door was open, revealing over a dozen shirts on hangers.

In the kitchen, the sink was empty of dishes for the first time since I rented the place fifteen years ago. There was even a fresh smell of lilacs and orange zest in the air.

The door opened and I swung around, hand going to my gun. Mrs. Garbonzo entered, carrying a plastic laundry basket overflowing with my socks. She flinched when she saw me.

"Mr. McGlade. I didn't expect you back so soon."

"Surprised, Marietta? I thought you might be."

"Did you take care of the guy?"

"Sit down. We need to talk."

She set the basket down on my kitchen counter, and seductively perched herself on one of my breakfast bar stools. Her blouse had been untucked from her skirt, the shirt tails tied in a knot around her flat stomach.

"You lied to me, Marietta."

"Lied?" She batted her eyelashes. "How?"

There was a bottle of window cleaner next to the sink that I'd never seen before. I picked it up.

"How about opening up that shirt and letting me squirt you with this?"

"Is that what turns you on? Spraying women with glass cleaner?"

I grabbed her blouse and pulled, tearing buttons.

"I was thinking more along the lines of washing off those fake bruises. They're so fake, the purple has even rubbed off on your collar. See?"

I shot two quick streams at the marks, then used my sleeve to wipe them off.

They didn't wipe off.

I tried again, to similar effect.

Marietta sneered at me. "Are you finished?"

"So what's that purple stuff on your collar?"

"Eye shadow." She pointed at her eyes. "That's why it matches my eye shadow."

"Big deal. So you gave yourself those bruises. Or paid someone to give them to you. I met your husband today, Mrs. Garbonzo. All ninety pounds of him. He couldn't beat up a quadriplegic."

"My husband abuses me, Mr. McGlade."

"Yeah, I saw his swollen knuckles. At first, I thought they were swollen from hitting you. But he didn't hit you, did he Marietta? Roy has rheumatoid arthritis. I saw his medication. His knuckles are swollen because of his disease, and they undoubtedly cause him great pain. So much pain, he'd never be able to hit you."

Marietta put her hands on her hips.

"He beats me with a belt, Mr. McGlade."

"A belt?"

"These bruises are from the buckle. It also causes welts. See?"

She turned around, lifting her blouse. Angry, red scabs stretched across her back.

I gave them a spritz of the window cleaner, just to be sure.

"Ow!"

"Sorry. Had to check."

Marietta faced me. "I've paid you, I've done your laundry, and I've cleaned your apartment. Did you take care of the assassin for me?"

"Your husband didn't hire an assassin."

"Is that what he told you?"

"I know it for a fact. The guy you hired is a sixteen-year-old pimply-faced kid. He couldn't whack anyone. He couldn't even whack a mole."

I smiled at my pun.

Marietta made a face. "I thought he sounded young on the phone. He really won't do it?"

"He lives in his parent's basement."

The tears came. "I gave him a lot of money. Everything I've been able to hide from Roy during six years of marriage."

I thought about mentioning I got the money back, but decided against it.

“Look, Marietta, just divorce the guy.”

“I can’t. He threatened to kill me if I divorced him.”

“You can run away. Hire a lawyer.”

She sniffled. “Pre-nup.”

“Pre-nup?”

“I signed a pre-nuptial agreement. If I divorce Roy, I don’t get a penny. And after six years of abuse, I deserve more than that.” She licked her lips. “But if he dies, I get it all.”

“Don’t you think killing the guy is a little extreme?”

She threw herself at me, teary-eyed and heaving. “Please, Harry. You have to help me. I’ll give you half—half of the entire chicken empire. Help me kill the son of a bitch.”

“Marietta...”

“I cleaned your place, you promised you’d help.” She added a little grinding action to her hug. “Please kill him for me.”

I looked around the kitchen. She did do a pretty good job. I wondered, briefly, if I’d make a decent Chicken King.

“I’ll tell you what, Marietta. I don’t do that kind of thing. But I know someone who can help. Do you want me to make a phone call?”

“Yes. Oh, yes.”

I pried myself out of her grasp and picked up the phone, dialing the number from memory.

“Hi, partner. It’s me. Look, I’ve got a woman here who wants to kill her husband. I told her I’m not interested, but I thought maybe you’d be able to set something up. Say, tomorrow, around noon? You can meet her at the Hilton. Rent a room under the name Lipshultz. No, schultz, with a U-L. Okay, she’ll be there.”

I hung up. “Got it all set for you, sugar.”

She squeezed me tight and kissed my neck. “Thanks, Harry. Thank you so much. Is there anything I can do to repay you?” Her breath was hot in my ear. “Anything at all?”

“You can start by folding those socks. And maybe some dusting. Yeah, dusting would be good.”

She smiled wickedly and caressed my cheek. “I was thinking of something a little more intimate.”

“I was thinking about dinner.”

“Dinner would be wonderful.”

“I’m sure it will be. Have the place dusted by the time I get back.”

Marietta Garbonzo called me the next night, around eight in the evening.

“You son of a bitch! You set me up! You didn’t call a hitman! You called a cop!”

“You can’t go around murdering people, sweetheart. It’s wrong on so many levels.”

“But what about all of the washing? The cleaning? The dusting? And what about after dinner? What we did? How could you betray me after that?”

“You expect me to throw away all of my principles because we spent five minutes doing the worm? It was fun, but not worth twenty to life.”

“You bastard. When I get out of here I’ll...”

I hung up and went back to the Sharper Image catalog I’d been thumbing through. I had my eye on one of those massaging easy chairs. That would set me back two grand. Earlier that day, I bought a sixty inch plasma TV. The money I took from William “Billy” Johansenn was being put to good use.

I plopped down in front of the TV, found the wrestling channel, and settled in to watch two hours of pay-per-view sports entertainment. The Iron Commie had Captain Frankenbeef in a suplex when I felt the gun press against the back of my head.

“Hello, Mr. McGlade.”

“Happy Roy?”

“Yes. Stand up, slowly. Then turn around.”

I followed instructions. Happy Roy held a four barreled COP .357, a nasty weapon that could do a lot of damage at close range.

“How’d you get in?” I asked.

“You gave a key to my wife, you moron. I took it from her last night, when she got home.” His face got mean. “After you slept with her.”

“Technically, we didn’t do any sleeping.”

The gun trembled in Happy Roy’s hand.

“She’s in jail now, Mr. McGlade. Because of you.”

“She wanted to kill you, Happy Roy. You should thank me.”

“You idiot!” Spittle flew from his lips. “I wanted to kill her myself. With my own two hands. Now I have to get her out of jail before I can do it. Do you have any idea what Johnny Cochrane charges an hour?”

“Whatever it is, you can afford it.”

Happy Roy’s voice cracked. “I’m practically broke. Those damn claymation commercials are costing me a fortune, and no one is buying the tie-in products. I’ve got ten thousand Happy Roy t-shirts, moldering away in a warehouse. Plus the burger chains with their processed chicken strips are forcing me into bankruptcy.”

“Those new Wendy’s strips are pretty good.”

“Shut up! Put your hands over your head. No quick moves.”

“What about your mansion? Can’t you sell that?”

“It’s a rental.”

“Really? Do you mind if I ask what you pay a month?”

“Enough! We’re going for a ride, Mr. McGlade. I’m going to introduce you to one of our extra large deep fryers, up close and personal.”

“You told me I could keep working with your wife.”

“I said you could work with her, not set her up!”

“Six of one, half a dozen of...”

“I’m the Chicken King, goddammit! I’m an American icon! Nobody crosses me and gets away with it!

I’d had enough of the Chicken King’s crazy ranting, so I reached for the gun. Happy Roy tried to squeeze the trigger, but I easily yanked it away before he had the chance.

“Let me give you a little lesson in firearms, Happy Roy. A COP .357 has a twenty pound trigger pull. Much too hard to fire for a guy with arthritis.”

Happy Roy reached for his belt, fighting with the buckle. “You bastard! I’ll beat the fear of Happy Roy into you, you son of a bitch! No one crosses...”

I tapped him on the head with his gun, and the Chicken King collapsed. After checking for a pulse, I went for the phone and dialed my Lieutenant friend.

“Hi, Jack. Me again. Marietta Garbonzo’s husband just broke into my place, tried to kill me. Yeah, Happy Roy himself. No, he doesn’t look so happy right now. Can you send someone by? And can you make it quick? He’s bleeding all over my carpet, and I just had it cleaned. Thanks.”

I hung up and stared down at the Chicken King, who was mumbling something into the carpet.

“You say something, Happy Roy?”

“I should have stayed single.”

“No kidding,” I said. “Relationships can be murder.”

Body Shots

Amazon.com introduced a program in 2005 called Amazon Shorts, where customers could download short stories for 49 cents. I wrote this story specifically for Amazon. It was an attempt to really take Jack to the brink, by making the situation get worse and worse no matter how hard she tried to fix things. It's as dark as Jack has gotten, so far...

"And can you mega-size that meal deal?"

I reach over from the passenger seat and give my partner, Sergeant Herb Benedict, a poke in the ribs, except I don't actually feel his ribs because they're encased in a substantial layer of fat—the result of many years of mega-sizing his fast food meals.

"What?" he asks. "You want me to mega-size your fat-free yogurt?"

"No. You told me to point it out whenever I saw you overeating."

"How am I overeating?"

"You just mega-sized a triple bacon cheeseburger and a chocolate shake."

Herb shrugs, multiple chins wiggling.

"So? It's just one meal."

"The mega-size french fries come in a carton bigger than your head. The shake is the size of a rain barrel."

"Be realistic here, Jack. It's only 49 cents. You can't buy anything for 49 cents these days."

"How about another heart attack? How much is that—"

My words are cut off by two quick *pops* from the drive-thru speaker. Though October, Chicago has been blessed with unseasonably warm weather, and my passenger window is wide open, the sound reaching me through there as well. It's coming from the restaurant.

Only one thing makes a sound like that.

Herb hits the radio. “This is Car 118, officer needs assistance. Shots fired at the Burger Barn on Kedzie and Wabash.”

I beat Herb out of the car, pulling my star from the pocket of my jacket and my .38 from my shoulder holster. I’m wearing flats and a beige skirt. A cool wind kicks up and brings goosebumps to my legs. The shoes are Kate Spade. The jacket and skirt are Donna Karan. The holster is Smith and Wesson.

As I near the building, I can make out screams, followed by another gunshot. A spatter of blood and tissue blossoms on the inside of the drive-thru window, blocking my view of the interior.

I hold up my pinky—my signal to Herb that there are casualties—and hurry past the window in a crouch, stopping before the glass doors. I tug the lanyard out of the badge case and loop it over my head. On one knee, I crane my neck around the brick jamb and peek into the restaurant.

I spot a single perp, Caucasian male, mid-thirties. I can’t make out his hair color because he’s wearing a black football helmet complete with face gear. Jeans, black combat boots, and a gray trench coat complete the ensemble. And under the trench coat...

An ammo belt.

Two strips of leather crisscross his chest, bandolero style. Instead of bullets in the webbing, I count eight clips. Four more clips are stuck into his waistband. I assume they’re for the 9mm Beretta in his hand, currently pointed at a family cowering under a plastiform table.

A mother and two kids.

Before my mind can register what is happening, he fires six times. The bullets tear through the table and into the mother’s back. Blood sprays onto the children she’s been shielding, and then erupts from the children in fireworks patterns.

I tear my eyes away from the horror and scan for more hostiles, but see only potential victims—at least twenty. Behind me, I hear footfalls and Herb’s labored breathing.

“At least four down. One perp, heavily armed.”

“You want to be old yeller?”

I shake my head and swallow. “I want the shot.”

“On three.”

Herb flashes one, two, three fingers, then I shove through the door first, rolling to the side, coming up in a shooting position just as Herb yells, “POLICE! DROP THE WEAPON!”

The gunman swings toward Herb, I let out a slow breath and squeeze—angle up to discourage ricochets, aiming at the body mass, no ricochet because the shot is true, squeeze, the perp recoiling and stepping back once, twice, dropping the green duffle bag that's slung over his shoulder, squeeze, screams from everywhere at once, Herb's gun going off behind me, squeeze, watching the impact but not seeing blood—

Vest.

I scream, "Vest!" and roll to the side as the gunman takes aim, firing where I was, orange tile chips peppering the side of my face like BBs.

I come up in a kneeling position behind a rectangular trash can enclosure, look at Herb and see that he's out of the line of fire, gone to ground.

I stick my head around the garbage island, watch as the perp vaults the counter, shooting a teenaged cashier who's hugging the shake machine and sobbing. The back of the teen's head opens up and empties onto the greasy floor.

"Everybody out!" I yell.

There's a stampede to the door, and I glance back and see Herb get tackled by a wall of people, then I take a deep breath and bolt for the counter.

The gunman appears, holding a screaming employee dressed in a Burger Barn uniform, using the kid as a human shield. Her face is streaked with tears, and there's a dark patch in the front of her jeans where she's wet herself. The Beretta is jammed against her forehead.

The perp says, "Drop the gun, Jack."

His voice is a low baritone, and it's eerily calm. His blue eyes lock on mine, and they hold my gaze. He doesn't seem psychotic at all, which terrifies me.

How does he know my name?

I stand up, adopt a Weaver stance, aiming for the face shot.

The gunman doesn't wait for me. He fires.

There's a sudden explosion of blood and tissue and the girl's eyes roll up and the perp ducks behind some fryers before her body hits the floor.

Too fast. This is all happening too fast.

I chance a look at the door, don't see Herb among the panicking people. I can't wait—there are probably more employees in the back. I

dig into my blazer pocket and find some loose bullets, jamming them into my revolver. When I leap over the counter, my gun is at full cock.

No one by the grill. I glance left, see a body slumped next to the drive-thru window. Glance right, see a dead man on his back, most of his face gone. Stare forward, see a long stainless steel prep table. There's a young guy hiding under it. I tug him out and push him toward the counter, mouthing at him to "Run."

Movement ahead. The freezer door opens, and my finger almost pulls the trigger. It's another employee. Behind him, the perp.

The perp is grinning.

"Let's try this again," he says. "Drop the gun or I shoot."

I can't drop my gun. I'm not allowed to. It's one of the first things they teach you at the police academy.

"Let's talk this through," I say, trying to keep my voice steady.

"No talk."

He fires, and I watch another kid die in front of me.

I aim high, putting two rounds into the gunman's helmet, where they make dents and little else. He's already running away, pushing through the emergency exit, the alarm sounding off.

I tear after him, slipping on blood, falling to my hands and knees but holding onto my weapon. I crawl forward, my feet scrambling for purchase through the slickness, and then I'm opening the door, scanning the parking lot left and right.

He's standing ten feet away, aiming his Beretta at me.

I throw myself backward and feel the wind of the shots pass my face.

"Jack!" Herb, from the front of the restaurant.

"He went out the back!"

My hands, slippery with blood and sweat, are shaking like dying birds. I force myself to do a slow count to five, force my bunched muscles to relax, then nudge open the back door.

He's waiting for me.

He fires again, the bullet tugging at my shoulder pad, stinging like I've been whacked with a cane. I scoot backward on my ass, turn over, and crawl for the counter, more shots zinging over me before the back door closes under its own weight, having to climb over the girl he just killed, the scent of blood and death running up my nostrils and down the back of my throat.

I lean against the counter, pull back my jacket, feeling the burn, glancing at my wound and judging it superficial.

A soft voice, muffled, to my right.

“Hey!”

I see the green duffle bag that the perp dropped.

“Hello? Are you there, Jacqueline?”

The voice is coming from the bag. I go to it, tug back the zipper.

Gun. Another Beretta. Loose bullets, more than a hundred. And a walkie-talkie.

“Jack,” the walkie barks.

How the hell does he know my name?

“Can you hear me, Jacqueline?”

I look around, find some napkins on a table, pick up the radio and hit the talk button.

“Who is this?”

“I’m doing this for you, Jacqueline. This is all for you. Do you remember Washington?”

Thoughts rush at me. Seven dead so far. He knows me. The perp has over a hundred bullets left. I don’t know this guy. I’ve never been to Washington, the state or the capitol. He knows me. Someone I arrested before? Who is he?

I press talk. “If it’s me you want, come and get me.”

“I can’t right now,” the walkie says. “I’m late for class.”

I race for the front doors. When I step onto the sidewalk, I see the perp darting through traffic and running full sprint down the sidewalk.

Heading for Thomas Jefferson Middle School.

I don’t hear any sirens. Too soon. Look left and right, and don’t see Herb.

I rush back into the restaurant, drop the radio into the perp’s bag, grab the handle and run after him.

Three steps into the street I’m clipped by a bike messenger.

He spins me around, and I land on my knees, watching as he skids down the tarmac on his helmet, a spray of loose bullets from the gunman’s bag jingling after him like dropped change. A car honks. There’s a screech of tires. I manage to make it to my feet, still holding the bag, still holding my gun, too distracted to sense if I’m hurt or not.

The school.

I cross the rest of the street, realize I've somehow lost a shoe, my bare right foot slapping against the cold concrete, pedestrians jumping out of my path.

An alarm up ahead, so piercing I feel it in my teeth. The metal detector at the school entrance. It's followed by two more gunshots.

"Jack!"

Herb, from across the street.

"Cars in the parking lot!" I yell, hoping he'll understand. Guy in a football helmet and ammo belts didn't walk in off the street. Must have driven.

The school rushes up at me. I push through the glass doors, the metal detector screaming, a hall monitor slumped dead in her chair, blood pooling black on the rubber mat.

I drop the bag, pocket the Beretta and a handful of brass, hit talk on the radio.

"Where are you?"

Static. Then, coming through the speaker, children's screams.

Followed by gunshots.

I run, trying to follow the echo, trying to pinpoint the cries for help, passing door after door, rushing up a staircase, hearing more gunshots, seeing the muzzle flashes coming from a classroom, going in low and fast.

"Drop the gun," he says.

His Beretta is aimed at the head of a seven-year-old girl.

A sob gets caught in my throat, but I refuse to cry because tears will cloud my vision.

I can't watch anyone else die.

I drop my gun.

The perp begins to twitch, his face wet behind the football helmet.

"Do you have children, Jack?"

I'm not able to talk, so I just shake my head.

"Neither do I," he says. "Isn't...isn't it a shame?"

He pats the girl on the head, crouches down to whisper.

"You did good, sweetheart. I don't need you anymore."

I scream my soul raw when he pulls the trigger.

The little girl drops away, her pink dress now a shocking red, and I launch myself at him just as he turns his weapon on the children cowering in the corner of the room and opens fire.

One.

Two.

Three.

He manages four shots before I body-tackle him, both hands locking on his gun arm, pushing it up and away from the innocents, my head filled with frightened cries that might be from the children but might also be mine.

I grip his wrist and tug hard, locking his elbow, dropping down and forcing him to release the gun. It clatters to the ground.

His free hand tangles itself in my hair and pulls so hard my vision ignites like a flashbulb. I lose my grip and fall to my knees, and he jerks me in the other direction, white hot pain lacing across my scalp as a patch of hair rips free.

I drive an uppercut between his legs, my knuckles bouncing off a plastic supporter, then I'm being pushed away and he's leaping for the door.

My jacket is twisted up, and I can't find my pocket even though I feel the weight of the gun, and finally my hand slips in and I tug a Beretta free and bury three shots into his legs as he runs into the hallway.

I chance a quick look at the children, see several have been hit, see blood on the wall covering two dozen construction paper jack-o-lantern pictures, then I crawl after the perp with the gun raised.

He's waiting for me in the hall, sitting against the wall, bleeding from both knees. I hear him sobbing.

"You weren't supposed to drop your gun," he says.

My breath is coming quick, and I blow it out through my mouth. I'm shaking so bad I can't even keep a bead on him. I blink away tears and repeat over and over, "he's-unarmed-don't-shoot-he's-unarmed-don't shoot-he's-unarmed-don't shoot..."

Movement to my left.

Herb, barreling down the hall. He stops and aims.

"You okay?" Herb asks.

I think I nod.

"Hands in the air!" he screams at the perp.

The perp continues to moan. He doesn't raise his hands.

"Put your hands in the air now!"

The sob becomes a howl, and the perp reaches into his trench coat.

Herb and I empty our guns into him. I aim at his face.

My aim his true.

The perp slumps over, streaking the wall with red. Herb rushes up, pats down the corpse.

"He's clean," Herb says. "No weapons."

I can hear the sirens now. I manage to lower my gun as the paramedics storm the stairs. Kids flood out of the classroom, teachers hurrying them down the hall, telling them not to look.

Many of them look anyway.

I feel my vision narrow, my shoulders quake. I'm suddenly very cold.

"Are you hurt?" Herb asks, squatting down next to me. I'm covered with the blood of too many people.

I shake my head.

"I found the car," Herb says. "Registered to a William Phillip Martingale, Buffalo Grove Illinois. He left a suicide note on the windshield. It said, 'Life no longer matters.'"

"Priors?" I ask, my voice someone else's.

"No."

And something clicks. Some long ago memory from before I was a cop, before I was even an adult.

"I think I know him," I say.

William Phillip Martingale. Billy Martingale. In my fifth grade class at George Washington Elementary School.

"When we were kids. He asked me to the Valentine's Day dance." The words feel like stale bread crust stuck in my throat. "I turned him down. I already had a date."

"Jesus," Herb says.

But there was more. No one liked Billy. He had a bad front tooth, dark gray. Talked kind of slow. Everyone teased him. Everyone including me.

I crawl past the paramedics, over to the perp, probing the ruin of his face, finding that bad tooth he'd never bothered to get fixed.

The first body is wheeled out of the classroom, the body bag no larger than a pillow.

I begin to cry, and I don't think I'll ever be able to stop.

Suffer

Another Phin story. Phin comes from a long tradition of anti-heroes, and was influenced by Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer, Max Allan Collins' Quarry, and Richard Stark's Parker. But he's mostly a direct descendant of F. Paul Wilson's Repairman Jack, with decidedly less humanity. I wrote this story at the request of the editor for the anthology Chicago Noir. He rejected it. So I sold it to EQMM and wrote another Phin story for him, Epitaph. He rejected that as well, and I sold it to James Patterson for the ITW Thriller anthology. I'm happy how things worked out.

"I want you to kill my wife."

The man sitting across from me, Lyle Tibbits, stared into my eyes like a dog stares at the steak you're eating. He was mid to late thirties, a few inches taller than my six feet, wearing jeans and a button down shirt that pinched his thick wrists.

I sipped some coffee and asked why he wanted his wife dead.

"Do you care?" he asked.

I shrugged. "No. As long as I get paid."

Lyle smiled, exposing gray smoker's teeth.

"I didn't think it mattered. When I called you, I heard you did anything for money."

I rubbed my nose. My nostrils were sore from all the coke I'd been snorting lately, and I'd been getting nosebleeds.

"Any particular way you want it done?"

He looked around Maxie's Coffee Shop—his choice for the meeting place—and leaned forward on his forearms, causing the table to shift and the cheap silverware to rattle.

"You break into my house, discover her home alone, then rape and kill her."

Jaded as I was, this made me raise an eyebrow.

"Rape her?"

“The husband is always a suspect when the wife dies. Either he did it, or he hired someone to do it. The rape will throw the police off. Plus, I figured, with your condition, you won’t care about leaving evidence.”

He made a point of glancing at my bald head.

“Who gave you my number?” I asked.

“I don’t want to say.”

I thought about the Glock nestled between my belt and my spine, knew I could get him to tell me if I needed to. We were on Damon and Diversey in Wicker Park, which wasn’t the nicest part of Chicago. I could follow him out of the diner and put the hurt to him right there on the sidewalk, and chances were good we’d be ignored.

But truth be told, I didn’t really care where he got my number, or that he knew I was dying of cancer. I was out of money, which meant I was out of cocaine. The line I’d done earlier was wearing off, and the pain would return soon.

“I get half up front, half when it’s done. The heat will be on you after the job, and you won’t have a chance to get the money to me. So you’ll put the second half in a locker at the train station, hide the key someplace public, and then give me the info when I’m done. Call from a payphone so the number isn’t traced. You fuck me, and I’ll find you.”

“You can trust me.”

Like your wife trusts you? I thought. Instead I said, “How would you like me to do it?”

“Messy. The messier the better. I want her to suffer, and suffer for a long time.”

“You’ve obviously been living in marital bliss.”

“You have to hurt her, or else we don’t have a deal.”

I made a show of thinking it over, even though I’d already made my decision. I assumed this was a way to cash in on life insurance, but what life insurance policy paid extra for torture and rape?

“You have the money on you?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“Pass it under the table.”

He hesitated. “Trust goes both ways, you know.”

“I could just walk away.”

Like hell I could. I needed a snort worse than Wimpy needed his daily hamburger. But I’m a pretty decent bluffer.

Lyle handed me the paper bag he'd brought with him. I set it on the booth next to me and peeked inside. The cash was rubber-banded in stacks of tens and twenties. I stuck my fingers in and did a quick count.

Six grand, to take a human life.

Not bad for a few hours work.

"When?" I asked.

"Tomorrow night, after 10pm. I'll be out, and she'll be home alone. I'll leave the front door open for you. I'm at 3626 North Christiana, off of Addison. Remember, rape and pain."

He seemed to be waiting for a reply so I said, "Sure."

"And Mr. Troutt..." Lyle smiled again, flashing gray. "Have fun with it."



After the diner meeting, I called a guy about securing some fake ID. Then I called my dealer and scored enough coke to keep me high for a while. I also bought some tequila and refilled my codeine prescription.

Back at my ratty apartment, Earl and I had a party.

Earl is what I call the tumor growing on my pancreas. Giving my killer a name makes it a little easier to deal with. Each day, Earl eats a little more of my body. Each day, I try to prevent Earl from doing that. There's chemo, and radiation, and occasional surgery. And in the off-times, there's illegal drugs, pharmaceuticals, and alcohol.

Earl was winning.

Luckily, being a drug abuser has some excellent side benefits, such as not caring about anything, erasing all emotion, and helping to forget the past.

Just a few months ago I had a well paying job in the suburbs, a beautiful fiancée, and a life most would be envious of. Earl changed all that. Now, not even the roaches in my tenement building were envious of me.

I drank, and popped, and snorted, until the pain was gone. Until reality was gone. Until consciousness was gone.

Earl woke me up the next morning, gnawing at my left side with jagged, rabid teeth.

I peeled myself from the floor, stripped off the jeans and underwear I'd soiled, and climbed into a shower slick with mildew. I turned the water as hot as it would go, and the first blast came out rusty

and stung my eyes. I had no soap, so I used shampoo to scrub my body. I didn't eat well, if I remembered to eat at all, and I could count the ribs on my hairless chest. I made a note to eat something today. Who would hire a thug that weighed ninety pounds?

After the shower I found some fresh jeans and a white t-shirt. I did a line, choked down three painkillers, and dug out an old Chicago phone book.

"Walker Insurance."

"I had a couple questions about life insurance."

"I'll transfer you to one of our agents."

I took my cell over the fridge and listened to a Musak version of Guns N Roses while rummaging through the ice box. Nothing in there but frost.

"This is Brad, can I help you?"

"I'm thinking of taking out a life insurance policy on my wife. We live in a nice neighborhood, but she has this unrealistic fear—call it a phobia—of being raped and killed. I'm sure that would never happen, but do you have policies that cover that?"

"Accidental death includes murder, but not suicide."

"And rape?"

"Well, I've heard of some countries like India and Africa that offer rape insurance, but there's nothing like that in the US. But if she's afraid of being attacked, a good life insurance policy can help bring some peace of mind."

"What if she doesn't like the idea of insurance? Could I insure her without her knowing it?"

"For certain types of insurance, the person covered doesn't need to sign the policy. You can insure anyone you want. Would you like to schedule an appointment to talk about this further?"

I thought about asking him if he covered people dying of cancer, but I resisted and hung up. My next call was to the 26th District of the Chicago Police Department.

"Daniels."

"Hi, Jack. It's Phineas Troutt."

"Haven't seen you at the pool hall lately. What's up?"

"I need a favor. I'm looking for paper on a guy named Lyle Tibbits."

"And I should help you because?"

“Because you’re a friend. And because he owes me money. And because I probably won’t live to see Christmas.”

Jack arrested me a few years back, but she’d been cool about it, and we had an on-again-off-again eight ball game on Monday nights. I’d missed a few lately, too stoned to leave my apartment. But I’d helped Jack out a few times, and she owed me, and she knew it.

“Let’s see what Mr. Computer has to say. Lyle Tibbits. Prior arrest for—it looks like trafficking kiddie porn. Did a nickel’s worth at Joliet. Paroled last year.”

“Anything about a wife or kids?”

“Nope.”

“Address?”

“Roscoe Village, on Belmont.”

She gave me the numbers, and I wrote them down.

“Nothing on Addison?”

“Nope.”

“Can you give me his vitals?”

Jack ran through his birth date, social security number, mother’s maiden name, and some other choice info cops are privy to.

“You coming this Monday?” she asked when the litany ended. “I finally bought my own cue.”

“A Balabushka?”

“A custom stick on my salary? More like Wal-Mart.”

“I’ll try to make it. Thanks, Jack.”

“Take care, Phin.”

I tucked the Glock into my pants, pocketed my set of master keys and a pair of S & W handcuffs, and hit the street. It was cool for July, in the low seventies, the sun screened by clouds or smog or both. I grabbed some sweet and sour chicken at a local shop, and then spent an hour at a place on Cermak filling out paperwork. When I finished, I hopped in a cab and took it to Roscoe Village.

Lyle’s apartment had a security door, which I opened on the fourth try. One of my first acts as a criminal had been to rob a locksmith, earning me a set of sixty master keys. They opened ninety percent of the locks in the US. It was much easier than learning how to use picks and tension wrenches, which is something I didn’t have the time to learn anyway.

The halls were empty, befitting midday. I found Lyle’s apartment number and knocked twice, holding my pistol behind my back.

No answer.

I got through this door on the second try, set the security chain so no one could pop in on me, and began my search.

In the living room were six double DVD recorders, all which seemed to be running. In a box next to the TV were a hundred plastic clamshell boxes, and a spindle of blank recordable DVD-Rs. In the corner of the room were three digital camcorders and a PC. I powered up the computer, spent ten minutes trying to get his password, then gave up and turned it off.

The kitchen revealed a smorgasbord of junk food—he had enough sugar in here to put an elephant into a diabetic coma. On the counter, next to the phone, was a receipt for a glazier, the total more than five hundred bucks. Stuck to the fridge with a banana-shaped magnet was a picture of Lyle drinking a beer. I put the picture in my pocket.

In the bedroom, I found an extensive collection of porno DVDs. Bondage, watersports, S/M, D/s, extreme spanking, and even a kink new to me; latex vacuum mummification. All legal.

I found his illegal stuff in a padlocked trunk, in the back of the bedroom closet. The lock opened with the seventh key I tried.

Child porn. Movies with titles like “*See Billy Cry*” and “*Maxie’s Birthday Surprise*.” Some of the covers had pictures.

I tried not to look.

There were also a few other illegal movies, along with a bag full of cash. Over twenty grand worth.

I took the money, locked the trunk back up, and left the apartment.

Satisfied that I knew who I was dealing with, I bided my time until 10pm.

Then I could finish the job.

□ □ □

As promised, Lyle had left the door open for me.

The house was dark and quiet, just like the neighborhood. I walked down Christiana and up the porch stairs without encountering a soul. Once inside, I locked the door behind me and held my breath, listening for sounds of life.

Nothing.

The lights were on in the living room, and I held my Glock before me and did a quick search of the first floor. The furnishings leaned towards the feminine side; pink drapes and flower patterns on the couch. On the end table, copies of *Glamour* and *Cosmo*. In the kitchen,

a half-eaten container of lowfat yogurt sat on the counter, a spoon alongside it. I checked the back door, found it locked, and then crept over to the staircase.

The stairs were carpeted, but they squeaked with my weight. I paused after every two steps, ears open. I didn't hear a damn thing.

The second floor revealed an empty bathroom, an empty guest room, and a bedroom.

The bedroom was occupied.

A woman was tied to the bed, naked and spread-eagled. She was white, late twenties, her blond hair tangled up in the red leather ball gag buckled around her mouth. Leather straps around her ankles and wrists twisted around the four bedposts. Her eyes were wide with terror, and she screamed when she saw me, the sound lost in her throat.

There was a note next to her head.

Give it to her. And leave the gag in, or she'll wake the neighbors.

The room was unusually well-lit. Besides the ceiling light, there were lamps on either side of the bed, one in the corner next to the mirrored closet, and an extra work-light—the portable kind that clips to things—attached to the bed canopy.

“Hello,” I said to the woman.

She screamed again.

“Shh. I'll be with you in just a minute.”

I took two steps backwards, toward the closet, and then spun around, facing the mirrored sliding door. My free hand pulled back the handle while my business hand jammed the Glock into the closet, into the chest of Lyle Tibbits.

Lyle yelped, dropping the camcorder and trying to push me away. I brought the gun up and clipped him in the teeth with the butt.

He fell forward, spitting blood and enamel. I gave him another chop on the back of the head, and he ate the floor.

“Dontkillmedontkillme!”

I put my foot on his neck and applied some weight, glancing back to check the rest of the closet. Empty. The mirror was one-way, and I could see the bed through the door's glass. The original mirror rested against the rear wall.

“Who is she, Lyle?”

He yelled something, the carpet muffling his words. I eased up some of the pressure from my foot.

"I just met her last week!"

"She's not your wife."

"No! She's just some chick I'm dating!"

"And you hired me to rape and kill her so you could videotape it. I saw the other films back at your apartment. Does snuff sell for more than kiddie porn?"

Lyle wiggled, trying to crane his neck around to look at me.

"It's worth a fortune! I'll cut you in, man! It's enough money for both of us!"

I glanced at the woman, tied up on the bed.

"How much money?" I asked.

"I've got over half a mil in advance orders! We'll be rich, man!"

"That's a lot of money, Lyle. But I'm not greedy. I don't need that much."

"How much do you want? Name the price!"

"You're worth eighty grand to me."

"Eighty grand? No problem! I can—"

I knelt on his back, cutting off his breath. Pressing the Glock to the back of his head, I yanked the handcuffs out of my pocket.

"Put your left hand behind your back, Lyle."

He complied. I yanked his arm back in a submission hold, slapped on the cuffs, then climbed off.

"Let's go into the bathroom, Lyle."

I was a bit too eager helping him to his feet, because I hyper-extended his arm and felt it snap at the elbow.

Lyle howled loud enough to hurt my ears, and I gave his broken arm a twist and told him to shut the hell up. In the bathroom, I chained him to the drainage pipe under the sink, then I went back into the bedroom.

"You're safe," I told the woman. "No one can hurt you now. I'm going to call the police. Are you okay to talk to them?"

She nodded, frantic. I took off her gag.

"He was gonna kill me."

"I know." I picked up the phone next to the bedside and dialed 911, then placed it on the bed next to her mouth.

I walked out of the room as she began talking.

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I was in a drugged haze when Jack called on my cell.

"Missed you on Monday."

“Sorry. Been busy.”

“Remember that guy you called me about? Lyle Tibbits? He got picked up a few days ago.”

“Is that a fact?”

“It seems as if Mr. Tibbits was planning on making a snuff film, but someone came and rescued the snuffee.”

I wiped some blood off my nose. “Sounds like she got lucky.”

“She said it was a bald man.”

“Poor guy. It’s tough being bald. Society discriminates.”

“It would help the case if this mysterious bald man came forward and testified.”

“If I see him, I’ll let him know. But you probably don’t need him. If you check out Lyle’s apartment, you might find plenty of reasons to lock him up for good.”

“We did that already. Mr. Tibbits will be eligible for parole when he’s four hundred years old.”

“So why the call?”

“The woman who was saved wants to thank her hero. In person.”

An image flashed through my head of Linda, my fiancée. I’d left her because I didn’t want her to see me suffer and die.

No one should be subjected to that. To me.

“That’s not possible,” I told Jack.

“I’ll let her know. Pool Monday?”

“I’ll try to make it. Jack?”

“Yeah?”

“They holding Tibbits over at Cook County?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“General population?”

“I think so. He’s in for kidnapping and attempted murder. The State’s Attorney is putting together the illegal porn case.”

“Thanks, Jack.”

I staggered to the bathroom and rinsed the blood and powder off my face. Then I threw on some clothes, left my apartment, and staggered to the corner news vendor. The daily paper set me back a buck. I sat on the curb and read the police blotter until I found what I needed. Then I picked up three cartons of Marlboros and took a cab to Cook County Jail on 26th and California.

I spent two hours waiting before I was able to see Jerome Johnston. He was black, twenty-two years old, a member of the Gangsta Disciples. Jerome was being held for first degree murder.

"Who the hell are you, cracker?" he said upon meeting me in the visitation room.

"I've got a deal for you, Jerome. A good deal." I handed him the three cartons of smokes that the guards had already searched. "This is for your valuable time."

"What do you want?"

"There's a white boy in your division. Name of Lyle Tibbits. He's a baby raper. Likes to have sex with five-year-old boys and girls." I stared hard into Jerome's lifeless eyes. "I want you to spread the word. Anyone who takes care of him will get twenty cartons of cigarettes. He'll be an easy mark—he's got a broken arm. Here's a picture."

I handed him the photo I'd taken from Lyle's apartment.

"How do you know me?" Jerome asked.

"I don't. Just read about your drive-by in the paper. Thought you'd be the right man for the job. Are you, Jerome?"

Jerome looked at the picture, then back at me. "Hell yeah, dog."

"One more thing. It can't happen until tomorrow. Okay?"

"I'm straight."

I left the jail and cabbied it back home. In my room I did more coke, ate some codeine, and stared at the eighty-thousand dollar life insurance policy I'd taken out on Lyle Tibbits, which I'd bought posing as his brother, using fake identification. It would become effective tonight at midnight.

Eighty grand would buy a lot of pain relief. It might even be enough to help me forget.

I drank until I couldn't feel Earl anymore, and then I drank some more.

When Monday rolled around I cashed my policy and met Jack at Joe's Pool Hall and whipped her butt with my new thousand dollar Balabushka custom-made pool cue.

Overproof

My friend Libby Fischer Hellmann edited an anthology called Chicago Blues, published by Bleak House in 2007. I wrote a Jack story for her, based on a premise I thought of while stuck in traffic downtown. Why do cars get gridlocked? Here's one possible answer...

The man sat in the center of the southbound lane on Michigan Avenue, opposite Water Tower Place, sat cross-legged and seemingly oblivious to the mile of backed-up traffic, holding a gun that he pointed at his own head.

I'd been shopping at Macy's, and purchased a Gucci wallet as a birthday gift for my boyfriend, Latham. When I walked out onto Michigan I was hit by the cacophony of several hundred honking horns and the unmistakable shrill of a police whistle. I hung my star around my neck and pushed through the crowd that had gathered on the sidewalk. Chicago's Magnificent Mile was always packed during the summer, but the people were usually moving in one direction or the other. These folks were standing still, watching something.

Then I saw what they were watching.

I assumed the traffic cop blowing the whistle had called it in—he had a radio on his belt. He'd stopped cars in both directions, and had enforced a twenty meter perimeter around the guy with the gun.

I took my .38 Colt out of my purse and walked over, holding up my badge with my other hand. The cop was black, older, the strain of the situation heavy on his face.

"Lt. Jack Daniels, Homicide." I had to yell above the car horns. "What's the ETA on the negotiator?"

"Half hour, at least. Can't get here because of the jam."

He made a gesture with his white gloved hand, indicating the gridlock surrounding us.

"You talk to this guy?"

“Asked him his name, if he wanted anything. Told me to leave him alone. Don’t have to tell me twice.”

I nodded. The man with the gun was watching us. He was white, pudgy, mid-forties, clean shaven and wearing a blue suit and a red tie. He looked calm but focused. No tears. No shaking. As if it was perfectly normal to sit in the middle of the street with a pistol at your own temple.

I kept my Colt trained on the perp and took another step toward him. If he flinched, I’d shoot him. The shrinks had a term for it: suicide by cop. People who didn’t have the guts to kill themselves, so they forced the police to. I didn’t want to be the one to do it. Hell, it was the absolute last thing I wanted to do. I could picture the hearing, being told the shooting was justified, and I knew that being in the right wouldn’t help me sleep any better if I had to murder this poor bastard.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Paul.”

The gun he had was small, looked like a .380. Something higher caliber would likely blow through both sides of his skull and into the crowd. This bullet probably wasn’t powerful enough. But it would do a fine job of killing him. Or me, if he decided he wanted some company in the afterlife.

“My name is Jack. Can you put the gun down, Paul?”

“No.”

“Please?”

“No.”

That was about the extent of my hostage negotiating skills. I dared a step closer, coming within three feet of him, close enough to smell his sweat.

“What’s so bad that you have to do this?”

Paul stared at me without answering. I revised my earlier thought about him looking calm. He actually looked numb. I glanced at his left hand, saw the wedding ring.

“Problems with the wife?” I asked.

His Adam’s apple bobbed up and down as he swallowed. “My wife died last year.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. You married?”

“Divorced. What was your wife’s name, Paul?”

“Doris.”

“What do you think Doris would say if she saw you like this?”

Paul’s face pinched into a sad smile. My Colt Detective Special weighed twenty-two ounces, and my arm was getting tired holding it up. I brought my left hand under my right to brace it, my palm on the butt of the weapon.

“Do you think you’ll get married again?” he asked.

I thought about Latham. “It will happen, sooner or later.”

“You have someone, I’m guessing.”

“Yes.”

“Does he like it that you’re a cop?”

I considered the question before answering. “He likes the whole package.”

Paul abruptly inhaled. A snort? I couldn’t tell. I did a very quick left to right sweep with my eyes. The crowd was growing, and inching closer—one traffic cop couldn’t keep everyone back by himself. The media had also arrived. Took them long enough, considering four networks had offices within a few blocks.

“Waiting for things to happen, that’s a mistake.” Paul closed his eyes for a second, then opened them again. “If you want things to happen, you have to make them happen. Because you never know how long things are going to last.”

He didn’t seem depressed. More like irritated. I took a slow breath, smelling the cumulative exhaust of a thousand cars and buses, wishing the damn negotiator would arrive.

“Do you live in the area, Paul?”

He sniffled, sounding congested. “Suburbs.”

“Do you work downtown?”

“Used to. Until about half an hour ago.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“No.”

“Can you give me more than that?”

He squinted at me. “Why do you care?”

“It’s my job, Paul.”

“It’s your job to protect people.”

“Yes. And you’re a person.”

“You want to protect me from myself.”

“Yes.”

“You also want to protect these people around us.”

“Yes.”

“How far away are they, do you think? Fifteen feet? Twenty?”
 A strange question, and I didn’t like it. “I don’t know. Why?”
 Paul made a show of looking around.

“Lot of people here. Big responsibility, protecting them all.”

He shifted, and my finger automatically tensed on the trigger. Paul said something, but it was lost in the honking.

“Can you repeat that, Paul?”

“Maybe life isn’t worth protecting.”

“Sure it is.”

“There are bad people in the world. They do bad things. Should they be protected too?”

“Everyone should be protected.”

Paul squinted at me. “Have you ever shot anyone, Jack?”

Another question I didn’t like.

“When I was forced to, yes. Please don’t force me, Paul.”

“Have you ever killed anyone?”

“No.”

“Have you ever wanted to?”

“No.”

Paul made a face like I was lying. “Why not? Do you believe in God? In heaven? Are you one of those crazy right-to-lifers who believe all life is sacred? Do you protest the death penalty?”

“I believe blood is hard to get off of your hands, even if it’s justified.”

He shifted again, and his jacket came open. There was a spot of something on his shirt. Something red. Both my arms were feeling the strain of holding up my weapon, and a spike of fear-induced adrenalin caused a tremor in my hands.

“What’s that on your shirt, Paul? Is that blood?”

He didn’t bother to look. “Probably.”

I kept my voice steady. “Did you go to work today, Paul?”

“Yes.”

“Did you bring your gun to work?”

No answer. I glanced at the spot of blood again, and noticed that his stomach didn’t look right. I’d first thought Paul was overweight. Now it looked like he had something bulky on under his shirt.

“Did you hurt anyone at work today, Paul?”

“That’s the past, Jack. You can’t protect them. What’s done is done.”

I was liking this situation less and less. That spot of blood drew my eyes like a beacon. I wondered if he was wearing a bullet proof vest under his business suit, or something worse.

"I don't want to go to jail," he said.

"What did you do, Paul?"

"They shouldn't have fired me."

"Who? Where do you work?"

"Since Doris died, I haven't been bringing my 'A Game.' That's understandable, isn't it?"

I raised my voice. "How did you get blood on your shirt, Paul?"

Paul glared at me, but his eyes were out of focus.

"When you shot those people, did they scream?" he asked.

I wasn't sure what he was after, so I stayed silent.

He grinned. "Doesn't it make you feel good when they scream?"

Now I got it. This guy wasn't just suicidal—he was homicidal as well. I took a step backward.

"Don't leave, Jack. I want you to see this. You should see this. I'm moving very slow, okay?"

He put his hand into his pocket. I cocked the hammer back on my Colt. Paul fished out something small and silver, and I was a hair's breadth away from shooting him.

"This is a detonator. I've got some explosives strapped to my chest. If you take another step away, if you yell, I'll blow both of us up. And the bomb is strong enough to kill a lot of people in the crowd. It's also wired to my heartbeat. I die, it goes off."

I didn't know if I believed him or not. Explosives weren't easy to get, or to make. And rigging up a detonator—especially one that was hooked into your pulse—that was really hard, even if you could find the plans on the Internet. But Paul's eyes had just enough hint of psychosis in them that I stayed put.

"Do you doubt me, Jack? I see some doubt. I work at LarsiTech, out of the Prudential Building. We sell medical equipment. That's where I got the ECG electrode pads. It's also where I got the radioactive isotopes."

My breath caught in my throat, and my gun became impossibly heavy. Paul must have noticed my reaction, because he smiled.

"The isotopes won't cause a nuclear explosion, Jack. The detonator is too small. But they will spread radioactivity for a pretty good distance. You've heard of dirty bombs, right? People won't die

right away. They'll get sick. Hair will fall out. And teeth. Skin will slough off. Blindness. Leukemia. Nasty business. I figure I've got enough strapped to my waist to contaminate the whole block."

All I could ask was, "Why?"

"Because I'm a bad person, Jack. Remember? Bad people do bad things."

"Would Doris...approve...of this?"

"Doris didn't approve of anything. She judged. Judged every little thing I did. I half expected to be haunted by her ghost after I shot her, telling me how I could have done a better job."

I didn't have any saliva left in my mouth, so my voice came out raspy.

"What happened today at LarsiTech?"

"A lot of people got what was coming to them. Bad people, Jack. Maybe they weren't all bad. I didn't know some of them well enough. But we all have bad in us. I'm sure they deserved it. Just like this crowd of people."

He looked beyond me.

"Like that woman there, pointing at me. Looks nice enough. Probably has a family. I'm sure she's done some bad things. Maybe she hits her kids. Or she stuck her mom in a nursing home. Or cheats on her taxes. We all have bad in us."

His Helter Skelter eyes swung back to me.

"What have you done that's bad, Jack?"

A cop's job was to take control of the situation, and somehow I'd lost that control.

"You're not thinking clearly, Paul. You're depressed. You need to put down the detonator and the gun."

"You have five seconds to tell me something bad you've done, or I press the button."

"I'll shoot you, Paul."

"And then a lot of people will die, Jack. Five..."

"This isn't a game, Paul."

"Four..."

"Don't make me do this."

"Three..."

Was he bluffing? Did I have any options? My .38 pointed at his shoulder. If I shot him, it might get him to drop the detonator. Or it

might kill him and then his bomb would explode. Or it might just piss him off and get him to turn his gun on me.

“Two...”

It came out in a spurt. “I cheated on my boyfriend with my ex husband.”

The corners of Paul’s eyes crinkled up.

“Does your boyfriend know, Jack?”

“Yes.”

“He found out, or you told him?”

I recalled the pained expression on Latham’s face. “I told him.”

“He forgave you?”

“Yes.”

Paul chewed his lower lip, looking like a child caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

“Did it feel good to hurt him, Jack?”

“No.”

Paul seemed to drink this in.

“You must have known it would hurt him, but you did it anyway. So some part of you must not have minded hurting him.”

“I didn’t want to hurt him. I just cared more about my needs than his.”

“You were being selfish.”

“Yes.”

“You were being bad.”

The word stuck like a chicken bone in my throat. “Yes.”

His thumb caressed the detonator, and he licked his lips.

“What’s the difference between that and what I’m doing right now?”

The gun weighed a hundred pounds, and my arms were really starting to shake.

“I broke a man’s heart. You’re planning on killing a bunch of people. That’s worse.”

Paul raised an eyebrow. “So I’m a worse person than you?”

I hesitated, then said, “Yes.”

“Do you want to shoot me?”

“No.”

“But I’m bad. I deserve it.”

“Bad things can be forgiven, Paul.”

“Do you think your boyfriend would forgive me if I killed you?”

I pictured Latham. His forgiveness was the best gift I'd ever gotten. It proved that love had no conditions. That mistakes weren't deal breakers.

I wanted to live to see Latham again.

Regain control, Jack. Demand proof.

"Show me the bomb," I said to Paul. My tone was hard, professional. I wasn't going to neutralize the situation by talking. Paul was too far gone. When dealing with bullies, you have to push back or you won't gain their respect.

"No," he said.

Louder, "Show me the bomb!"

At the word bomb a collective wail coursed through the crowd, and they began to stampede backward.

He began to shake, and his eyes became mean little slits. "What did I say about yelling, Jack?"

Paul's finger danced over the detonator button.

"You're bluffing." I chanced a look around. The perimeter was widening.

"I'll prove I'm not bluffing by blowing up the whole—"

I got even closer, thrusting my chin at him, steadying my gun.

"I'm done with this, Paul. Drop the gun and the detonator, or I'm going to shoot you."

"If you shoot me, you'll die."

"I'm not going to believe that unless you show me the goddamn bomb."

Time stretched out, slowed. After an impossibly long second he lowered his eyes, reaching down for his buttons.

I was hoping he was bluffing, praying he was bluffing, and then his shirt opened and I saw the red sticks of dynamite.

Son of a bitch. He wasn't bluffing.

I couldn't let him press that detonator. So I fired.

Thousands of hours on the shooting range meant the move was automatic, mechanical. His wrist exploded in blood and bone, and before the scream escaped his lips I put one more in the opposite shoulder. He dropped both his gun and the detonator. I kicked them away, hoping I hadn't killed him, hoping he'd be alive until help came.

I stared at his chest, saw two electrode pads hooked up to his heart. His waist was surrounded by explosives, and in the center was a black box with a radiation symbol on it.

Paul coughed, then slumped onto his back. His wrist spurted, and his shoulder poured blood onto the pavement like a faucet. Each bullet had severed an artery. He was doomed.

I shrugged off my jacket, pressed it to the shoulder wound, and yelled, "Bomb! Get out of here!" to the few dozen idiots still gawking. Then I grabbed Paul's chin and made him look at me.

"How do I disarm this, Paul?"

His voice was soft, hoarse. "...you...you killed me..."

"Paul! Answer me! How can I shut off the bomb!"

His eyelids fluttered. My blazer had already soaked through with blood.

"...how..."

"Yes, Paul. Tell me how."

"...how does..."

"Please, Paul. Stay with me."

His eyes locked on mine.

"...how does it feel to finally kill someone?"

Then his head tilted to the side and his mouth hung open.

I felt for the pulse in his neck. Barely there. He didn't have long.

I checked the crowd again. The traffic cop had fled, and the drivers of the surrounding cars had abandoned them. No paramedics rushed over, lugging life-saving equipment. No bomb squad technicians rushed over, to cut the wires and save the day. It was only me, and Paul. Soon it would be only me, and a few seconds later I'd be gone too.

Should I run, give myself a chance to live? How much contamination would this dirty bomb spread? Would I die anyway, along with hundreds or thousands of others? I didn't know anything about radiation. How far could it travel? Could it go through windows and buildings? How much death could it cause?

Running became moot. Paul's chest quivered, and then was still.

I knew even less about the inner working of the human body than I did about radiation. If I started CPR, would that trick the bomb into thinking Paul's heart was still beating?

I didn't have time to ponder it. Without thinking I tore off the electrodes and stuck them up under my shirt, under my bra, fixing them to my chest, hoping to find my heartbeat and stop the detonation.

I held my breath.

Nothing exploded.

I looked around again, saw no help. And none could get to me, with the traffic jam. I needed to move, to get to the next intersection, to find a place where the bomb squad could get to me.

But first I called Dispatch.

“This is Lieutenant Jack Daniels, from the 26th District. I’m on the corner of Michigan and Pearson. I need the bomb squad. A dirty bomb is hooked up to my heartbeat. I also need someone to check out a company downtown called LarsiTech, a medical supply company in the Prudential Building. There may have been some homicides there.”

I gave the Dispatch officer my cell number, then grabbed Paul’s wrist and began to drag him to the curb. It wasn’t easy. My grip was slippery with blood, and the asphalt was rough and pulled at his clothes. I would tug, make sure the electrodes were still attached, take a step, and repeat.

Halfway there my cell rang.

“This is Dispatch. The bomb squad is on the way, ETA eight minutes. Are you sure on the company name, Lieutenant?”

“He said it several times.”

“There’s no listing for LarsiTech in the Prudential Building. I spelled it several different ways.”

“Then where is LarsiTech?”

“No place I could find. Chicago had three medical supply companies, and I called them all. They didn’t report any problems. The phone book has no LarsiTech. Information has no listing in Illinois, or the whole nation.”

I looked down at Paul, saw the wires had ripped out of the black box. And that the black box had a local cable company’s name written on the side. And that the radiation symbol was actually a sticker that was peeling off. And that the dynamite was actually road flares with their tops cut off.

Suicide by cop.

I sat down in the southbound lane on Michigan Avenue, sat down and stared at my hands, at the blood caked under the fingernails, and wondered if I’d ever be able to get them clean.

Bereavement

In 2005 I decided that I knew so many thriller authors I should edit an anthology. It developed into a collection of hitman stories called These Guns For Hire. I'm hugely proud of that antho, which was published in 2006 by Bleak House. I also discovered that the easiest way to get published is to stick one of your own stories in the anthology that you're editing.

“Why should you care? Guys like you got no scruples.”

If I had any scruples, I would have fed this asshole his teeth. Or at least walked away.

But he was right.

“Half up front,” I said. “Half at the scene.”

He looked at me like flowers had suddenly sprouted out of my bald head, Elmer Fudd-style.

“At the scene?”

I’d been through this before, with others. Everyone seemed to want their spouse dead these days. Contract murder was the new black.

I leaned back, pushing away the red plastic basket with the half-eaten hot dog. We were the only customers in Jimmy’s Red Hots, the food being the obvious reason we dined alone. The shit on a bun they served was a felony.. If my stomach wasn’t clenched tight with codeine withdrawal spasms, I might have complained.

“You want her dead,” I said, fighting to keep my voice steady. “The cops always go after the husband.”

He didn’t seem to mind the local cuisine, and jammed the remainder of his dog into his mouth, hoarding it in his right cheek as he spoke.

“I was thinking she’s home alone, someone breaks in to rob the place, gets surprised and kills her.”

“And why weren’t you home?”

“I was out with friends.”

He was a big guy. Over six feet, neck as thick as his head so he looked like a redwood with a face carved into it. Calloused knuckles and a deep tan spoke of a blue collar trade, maybe construction. Probably considered killing the little lady himself, many times. A hands-on type. He seemed disappointed having to hire out.

Found me through the usual channels. Knew someone who knew someone. Fact was, the sicker I got, the less I cared about covering my tracks. Blind drops and background checks and private referrals were things of the past. So many people knew what I did I might as well be walking around Chicago wearing a sandwich board that said, *"Phineas Troutt—He Kills People For Money."*

"Cops will know you hired someone," I told him. "They'll look at your sheet."

He squinted, mean dropping over him like a veil.

"How do you know about that?"

The hot dog smell was still getting to me, so I picked up my basket and set it on the garbage behind out table.

"Let me guess," I said. "Battery."

He shrugged. "Domestic bullshit. Little bitch gets lippy sometimes."

"Don't they all."

I felt the hot dog coming back up, forced it to stay put. A sickening, flu-like heat washed over me.

"You okay, buddy?"

Sweat stung my eyes, and I noticed my hands were shaking. Another cramp hit, making me flinch.

"What are you, some kinda addict?"

"Cancer," I said.

He didn't appear moved by my response.

"Can you still do this shit?"

"Yeah."

"How long you got?"

Months? Weeks? The cancer had metastasized from my pancreas, questing for more of me to conquer. At this stage, treatment was bullshit. Only thing that helped was cocaine, tequila, and codeine. Being broke meant a lot of pain, plus withdrawal, which was almost as bad.

I had to get some money. Fast.

"Long enough," I told him.

“You look like a little girl could kick your ass.”

I gave him my best tough-guy glare, then reached for the half-empty glass bottle of ketchup. Maintaining eye contact, I squeezed the bottle hard in my trembling hands. In one quick motion, I jerked my wrist to the side, breaking the top three inches of the bottle cleanly off.

“Jesus,” he said.

I dropped the piece on the table and he stared at it, mouth hanging open like a fish. I shoved my other hand into my pocket, because I cut my palm pretty deep. Happens sometimes. Glass isn’t exactly predictable.

“You leave the door open,” I told him. “I come in around 2am. I break your wife’s neck. Then I break your nose.”

He went from awed to pissed. “Fuck you, buddy.”

“Cops won’t suspect you if you’re hurt. I’ll also leave some of my blood on the scene.”

I watched it bounce around behind his Neanderthal brow ridge. Waited for him to fill in all the blanks. Make the connections. Take it to the next level.

His thoughts were so obvious I could practically see them form pictures over his head.

“Yeah.” He nodded, slowly at first, then faster. “That DNA shit. Prove someone else was there. And you don’t care if you leave any, cause you’re a dead man anyway.”

I shrugged like it was no big deal. Like I’d fully accepted my fate.

“When do we do this?”

“When can you have the money ready?”

“Anytime.”

“How about tonight?”

The dull film over his eyes evaporated, revealing a much younger man. One who had dreams and hopes and unlimited possibilities.

“Tonight is great. Tonight is perfect. I can’t believe I’m finally gonna be rid of the bitch.”

“Till death do you part. Which brings me to the original question. Why don’t you just divorce her?”

He grinned, showing years of bad oral hygiene.

“Bitch ain’t keeping half my paycheck for life.”

Ain’t marriage grand?

He gave me his address, we agreed upon a time, and then I followed him outside, put on a baseball cap and some sunglasses,

escorted him down a busy Chinatown sidewalk to the bank, and rammed a knife in his back the second after he punched his PIN into the enclosed ATM.

I managed to puncture his lung before piercing his heart, and he couldn't draw a breath, couldn't scream. I put my bleeding hand under his armpit so he didn't fall over, and again he gave me that look, the one of utter disbelief.

"Don't be surprised," I told him, pressing his *CHECKING ACCOUNT* button. "You were planning on killing me tonight, after I did your wife. You didn't want to pay me the other half."

I pressed *WITHDRAW CASH* and punched in a number a few times higher than our agreed upon figure.

He tried to say something, but bloody spit came out.

"Plus, a large ATM withdrawal a few hours before your wife gets killed? How stupid do you think the cops are?"

His knees gave out, and I couldn't hold him much longer. My injured palm was bleeding freely, soaking into his shirt. But leaving DNA was the least of my problems. This was a busy bank, and someone would be walking by any second.

I yanked out the knife, having to put my knee against his back to do so because of the suction; gravity knives don't have blood grooves. Then I wiped the blade on his shirt, and jammed it and the cash into my jacket pocket.

He collapsed onto the machine, and somehow managed to croak, "Please."

"No sympathy here," I told him, pushing open the security door. "Guys like me got no scruples."

Pot Shot

A lot of my readers like Herb, but for some reason I don't enjoy using him in shorts as much as Jack, Harry, and Phin. This is a rare exception. I originally wrote this as a chapbook, to give away at writing conferences. It deals with Herb's retirement, a topic later covered in greater detail in my novel Dirty Martini.

"How did you know pot roast is my favorite?"

Detective First Class Herb Benedict stepped into the kitchen, following the aroma. He gave his wife Bernice a peck on the cheek and made a show of sniffing deeply, then sighing.

"I've been making pot roast every Friday night for the past twenty-two years, and you say that every time you come home."

Herb grinned. "What happens next?"

"You pinch me on the bottom, change into your pajamas, and we eat in the family room while watching HBO."

"Sounds pretty good so far." He gently tugged Bernice away from the stove and placed his hands on her bottom, squeezing. "Then what?"

Bernice gave Herb's ample behind a pinch of its own.

"After HBO we go upstairs, and I force you to make love to me."

Herb sighed. "A tough job, but I have to repay you for the pot roast."

He leaned down, his head tilted to kiss her, just as the bullet plinked through the bay window. It hit the simmering pot with the sound of a gong, showering gravy skyward.

Herb reacted instinctively. His left hand grabbed Bernice and pulled her down to the linoleum while his right yanked the Sig Sauer from his hip holster and trained it on the window.

Silence, for several frantic heartbeats.

"Herb..."

"Shh."

From the street came the roar of an engine and screaming tires. They quickly blended into Chicago traffic. Herb wanted to go have a look, but a burning sensation in his hip stopped him. He reached down with his free hand, feeling dampness.

“Herb! You’re been shot!”

He brought the fingers to his mouth.

“No—it’s juice from the pot roast. Leaked down the stove.”

Motioning for his wife to stay down, Herb crawled over to the window and peered out. The neighborhood was quiet.

He turned his attention to the stove top. The stainless steel pot had a small hole in the side, pulsing gravy like a wound.

Herb wondered which was worse; his Friday night plans ruined, or the fact that someone just tried to kill him.

He looked into the pot and decided it was the former.

“Dammit. The bastards killed my pot roast.”

He tore himself away from the grue and dialed 911, asking that they send the CSU over. And for the CSU to bring a pizza.



Officer Dan Rogers leaned over the pot, his face somber.

“I’m sorry, Detective Benedict. There’s nothing we can do to save the victim.”

Herb frowned around a limp slice of sausage and pepperoni. Over two dozen gourmet pizza places dotted Herb’s neighborhood, and the Crime Scene Unit had gone to a chain-store. The greasy cardboard box the pie came in probably had more flavor.

“You might think you’re amusing, but that’s an eighteen dollar roast.”

“I can tell. Look at how tender it is. It’s practically falling off the bone. And the aroma is heavenly. It’s a damn shame.”

Officer Hajek snapped a picture. “Shouldn’t let it go to waste. When you’re done, can I take it home for the dog?”

Herb watched Roberts attack the roast with gloved hands and wanted to cry at the injustice of it all. Another slice of pizza found its way into Herb’s mouth, but it offered no comfort.

“And...gotcha, baby!”

Rogers held up his prize with a pair of forceps. The slug was roughly half an inch long, shaped like a mushroom and dripping gravy.

It looked good enough to eat.

“I think it’s a 22LR. Must have been a high velocity cartridge. Punched a hole through the window without shattering it.”

Herb and Rogers exchanged a knowing look, but didn’t speak aloud because Bernice was nearby. Your typical gang member didn’t bring a rifle on a drive-by shooting. Twenty-two caliber long range high speeds were favored by hunters.

And assassins.

Herb’s mind backtracked over his career, of all the men he’d put away who held a grudge. After thirty-plus years on the force, there were too many to remember. He’d have to wade through old case files, cross-reference with recent parolees...

“Herb?”

“Hmm? Yes, Bernice?”

His wife’s face appeared ready to crack. Herb had never seen her so fragile before.

“I...I called the glazier. They’re open twenty-four-hours, so they’re sending someone right away to fix the window, but they might not be here until late, and I don’t know if—“

Herb took her in his arms, rubbed her back.

“It’s okay, honey.”

“It’s not okay.”

“You don’t have to worry. Look how big a target I am, and they still missed.”

“Maybe we should put an APB out for a blind man,” Hajek offered.

Bernice pulled away, forcefully.

“This isn’t a joke, Herb. You don’t know what it’s like, being a cop’s wife. Every morning, when I kiss you before you go to work, I don’t know if...”

The tears came. Herb reached for her, but Bernice shoved away his hands and hurried out of the kitchen.

Herb rubbed his eyes. No pot roast, no HBO, and certainly no nookie tonight. The evening’s forecast; lousy pizza and waiting around for the glass man.

Being a cop sure had its perks.

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The alarm went off, startling Herb awake.

Bernice’s side of the bed remained untouched. She’d stayed in the guest room all night.

He found her in the kitchen, frying eggs. The stainless steel pot with the hole in it rested on top of their wicker garbage can, too large to fit inside.

“Smells good. Denver omelet?”

Bernice didn’t answer.

“The glass guy said that homeowner’s insurance should cover the cost. If you have time later today, can you give our agent a call? The bill is by the phone.”

Bernice remained silent, but began to furiously stir the eggs. They went from omelet to scrambled.

“There will be a squad car outside all day. Let me give you their number in case...”

“In case of what?” Bernice’s red eyes accused him. “In case someone tries to kill me? No one’s after me, Herb. I don’t have any enemies. I’m a housewife.”

Herb wanted to get up and hold her, but knew she wouldn’t allow it.

“I’ll also have an escort, all day. It’s standard procedure.”

“I don’t care about procedure.”

“There’s nothing more I can do, Bernice.”

“Yes there is. You can retire.”

Herb let the pain show on his face.

“I’ve got six more years until full pension.”

“Forget the full pension. We’ve got our savings. We’ve got our investments. We can make it work.”

“Bernice...”

“This isn’t about money, and you know it. You’ll never leave the Force. Not until they kick you out or...”

Bernice’s eyes locked on the holey pot.

Herb had no reply. He skipped breakfast, showered, shaved, and began to dress. Normally, Bernice laid out an ironed shirt for him.

Not today.

“I’ll be at the Center all day.”

Her voice startled Herb. She stood in the bedroom doorway, arms folded.

“I’d prefer if—”

“If I stay home? You go on with your life, and I have to hide in the house?”

Herb sighed.

“It’s my job, Bernice.”

“I see. Volunteering doesn’t count as a job because I’m not getting paid.”

“I didn’t say that.”

Bernice walked away. Herb took a shirt from the hanger and put it on, wrinkles and all. He instructed the team outside to follow Bernice wherever she went, and then waited for his escorts to arrive to take him to work.



“It could be a thousand different people.”

Herb’s partner, Lt. Jacqueline Daniels, looked up over the stack of printouts. Jack wore her brown hair up today, revealing gray roots. Her hands cradled a stained coffee mug.

“You only have yourself to blame, Herb. If you were a lousy cop, this pile would be a lot smaller.”

Herb blinked at the case files, a career’s worth, propped on the desk. Though the amount was substantial, it didn’t seem big enough. He opened another Twinkie and eased it in, wishing it was a Denver Omelet.

“I always wanted to be a cop. Even as a kid. I blame Dragnet. Joe Friday was my hero. I used to talk like him all the time. Drove my parents crazy.”

“You’ve got some Twinkie filling in your mustache, Mr. Friday.”

Herb wiped at his face. “Maybe I should transfer to Property Crimes. They never get death threats.”

“You just pushed it over two inches.”

Herb used his sleeve.

“What do you think, Jack?”

“Better, but now some of it is up your nose. Want to use my hand mirror?”

“I meant about the transfer.”

Jack set aside the report she’d been reading. “Seriously?”

“I’m a fin away from retirement. These are supposed to be my golden years. I should be golfing and taking cruises.”

“You hate golf. And the ocean.”

“I also hate getting shot at.”

Herb picked up a case file from a few years ago, gave it a token glance, and tossed it in the maybe pile. He could feel Jack staring at him, so he met her gaze.

“You think I’m crazy, don’t you? You think after two weeks at Property Crimes I’ll be going out of my mind with boredom.”

Jack smiled, sadly.

“Actually, I think Property Crimes will be very lucky to get you.”

Herb let her reply sink in. The more he thought it over, the more confident he felt. This was right.

“I’m going to tell Bernice.”

“Good idea. But before you do, wipe the sugar out of your nose.”



The Burketold Center was a dirty, crumbling building many years older than the senior citizens it catered to. Funded by tax dollars, the Center served as a game room/social area/singles mixer for the area’s ten-plus nursing homes. Buses came several times a day, dropping off seniors for bingo, swing dancing, and craft classes.

The Center provided these services free of charge, the only condition being attendees had to be over sixty years old.

Herb walked through the automatic doors and took everything in.

To the left, four elderly men sat around a table as rickety as they were, noisily playing cards. In the pot, along with a pile of chips, were a set of dentures.

To the left, a solitary old woman twisted the knobs on a foosball table. She mumbled to herself, or perhaps to an imaginary opponent.

A TV blared in the corner, broadcasting the Food Network to three sleeping ladies. To the right, an ancient man with pants hiked up to his chest repeatedly kicked a Coke machine. Herb approached him.

“Did the machine take your money, sir?”

The old man squinted at Herb with yellow eyes.

“No, it did not take my money. But if you kick it in the right spot, it spits out free sodas. I’ve gotten six Mountain Dews so far today.”

Herb left the guy to his larceny. In just a few short years, Herb would be turning sixty. Then he, too, would be able to join the fun for free. The thought didn’t comfort him.

He located the front desk and found a cheerful-looking man holding down the fort. The man wore a loose fitting sweater with a stag’s head stitched into the pattern, and his smile was so wide it looked to crack his face. Herb placed him in his early fifties.

“May I help you?”

“I’m looking for Bernice Benedict.”

“Oh. And you are...?”

“Her husband, Herb.”

Smiling Guy hesitated, then extended a hand.

“Pleased to meet you, Herb. Bernice has told me a lot about you. I’m Phil Grabowski.”

Herb took the hand and found it plump and moist. He vaguely recalled Bernice mentioning the name Phil before.

“Hi, Phil. Great work you’re doing here.”

“Thanks. We try to do our part. It’s a real heartbreaker reaching the autumn years and finding there’s no one to share them with.”

Phil chuckled, but it sounded painfully forced. Perhaps being around geriatrics all the time wrecked havoc on one’s social skills.

“Is Bernice around?”

“She’s calling bingo in room 1B, through that door and down the hall.”

“Thanks.” Herb nodded a good-bye and began to turn away.

“Bernice...she mentioned what happened last night. Terrible thing.”

Herb’s first reaction was annoyance. Bernice shouldn’t have been relating police matters. But shame quickly overcame irritation.

Of course Bernice would mention it to her friends at work. As she should. What other outlet did she have?

Herb could feel himself flush. Bernice had worked at the Center for seven years, and he’d never visited once. This man, Phil, was obviously a close friend of hers, and he didn’t know a thing about him.

Herb wondered how much harm he’d done to his marriage by putting his job first.

He also wondered if it was too late to make it up to her.

“Yeah, well, that won’t be happening anymore.”

Phil offered another face-splitting smile. “Really?”

It went against Herb’s private nature to share his intentions with a stranger, but he thought it was a step in the right direction.

“I’m transferring to a different division.” He almost bit his tongue. “I’m also reducing my hours.”

“Why, that’s wonderful. Bernice will be thrilled. She’s...she’s quite the trophy, you know.”

“Nice to meet you, Phil.”

Phil grinned wildly. Herb headed off in search of 1B, his wife’s voice guiding him.

“G-15. That’s G-15. You’ve got a G-15 on your card there, Mrs. Havensatch. Right under the G, dear. There it is.”

Herb paused in the doorway, watching her. Love, pride, and responsibility all balled-up together to form a big lump in his throat. He rapped his knuckle on the frame and walked in.

“Bernice?”

“Herb?” His wife appeared surprised, but the anger from this morning had gone from her face. “What are you doing here? Is everything okay?”

“Look, honey, can we talk for a second?”

“I’m in the middle of bingo.”

Herb felt a dozen pairs of eyes on him. He rubbed the back of his neck.

“I’m transferring to Property Crimes. And reducing my hours.”

Bernice blinked.

“You’re kidding.”

“I’m not.”

“When are you going to do this?”

“I already talked to Jack. Tomorrow morning, first thing.”

Herb had expected a dozen different reactions from his wife, but crying wasn’t one of them. She took several quick steps to him, and folded herself into his arms.

“Oh, Herb. I’ve wanted this for so long.”

“So you’re happy?”

“Yes.”

“Bingo!”

A geriatric in the front row held her card above her head and cackled madly.

“I’ll be with you in just a moment, Mrs. Steinmetz.”

Herb stroked her hair. All of his indecision melted away. He’d made the right choice. Her friend Phil was right. Bernice was a real trophy.

Trophy. The word snagged in his mind. People won trophies in sports, but they also shot trophies. Like that ten point buck on Phil’s sweater.

“Bernice—your friend Phil. Is he a hunt...”

The bullet caught Herb in the meaty part of his upper shoulder, spinning him around. Before hitting the floor, he glimpsed Phil, clutching a rifle in the doorway.

Screams filled the room, Bernice's among them. Herb tugged at his hip holster, freeing his Sig. His left arm went numb from his finger tips to his armpit, but he could feel the spreading warmth of gushing blood, and he knew the wound was bad.

"Drop the gun, Herb!"

Phil had the .22 pointed at Herb's head. Herb hadn't brought his gun around yet. Maybe, if he rolled to the side...

Too late. Bernice stepped in his line of fire.

"Phil! Stop it!"

"I'm doing it for you, Bernice! He's no good for you!"

Herb chanced a look at his shoulder wound. Worse than he thought. If he didn't stop the bleeding soon, he wouldn't make it.

"I love him, Phil."

"Love him? He's never home, and when he is, you said it's just the same, boring routine!"

"I like the same, boring routine. And I like my husband. Stop acting crazy and put down the gun."

Bernice took a step towards him, her hands up in supplication.

"Bernice..." Herb's voice radiated strength. "He won't shoot you. Walk out and call the police."

"Shut up!"

Bernice turned and looked at Herb. He nodded at his wife, willing her to move.

"I'll kill her! I'll kill both of you!"

Bernice stepped to the side. Phil's gun followed her.

Herb's gun followed Phil.

Detective First Class Herb Benedict fired four shots, three to the chest and one to the head.

All of them hit home.

Phil dropped, hard. Bernice rushed to her husband.

"Herb! Herb, I'm so sorry!"

Herb's eyes fluttered twice, and then closed.

"Bingo!" Mrs. Steinmetz yelled.

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The food redefined horrible, but Herb ate everything. Even the steamed squash. Assuming it was steamed squash.

"I can't wait to get out of here and eat some real food."

Bernice stroked his arm, below the IV.

"We need to talk, Herb."

Herb didn't like the tone of her voice. She sounded so sad. He shook his head, trying to clear the codeine cloud, trying to concentrate.

"Bernice, honey, I'll make it up to you. I know I haven't been there. I know I've been spending too much time at work. Give me a chance, and I'll change."

Bernice smiled.

"That's what I want to talk to you about." Bernice took a deep breath. "I don't want you to transfer to Property Crimes."

Herb did a damn good impression of confused.

"But I thought..."

"When you told me you wanted to transfer, it was a dream come true for me. But then, with Phil..."

Herb reached out with his good hand, held hers.

"You're a good cop, Herb Benedict. It would be selfish of me to keep you from that."

"That's okay. You're allowed to be selfish."

Bernice's eyes glassed over.

"You know, every day when you go to work, I worry about you. But seeing you in action..."

Herb smiled.

"Was I dashing?"

"You were magnificent. You saved more than me and you. Phil had...problems."

"No kidding."

After his death, a search of Phil Grabowski's apartment uncovered a large cache of weapons and eighteen notebooks full of handwritten, paranoid ranting. Herb was only one name on a long list of targets.

"I can't deprive you of your job, Herb. And I can't deprive Chicago of you. You've got six years left to do good for this city. I want you to use those years well."

Herb pulled Bernice close and held her tight, despite the twenty-odd stitches in his shoulder.

"You know, the doctor says I'll be out of here by next Friday."

Bernice touched his cheek.

"Just in time for pot roast."

"Pot roast is my favorite, you know."

"I think you've mentioned that before."

"But this Friday, why don't we go out to eat instead? Someplace nice, romantic."

Bernice's eyes lit up. She looked like a teenager again.

"I'd like that."

"And then afterwards, maybe some nookie."

"That sounds perfect, but you know what?"

"What?"

Bernice grinned, and it was positively wicked.

"We don't have to wait until Friday for that."

She closed the door to the room and turned out the light.

Last Request

Phin has been in three of the five Jack Daniels books so far, Whiskey Sour, Rusty Nail, and Fuzzy Navel. In those books, Jack tempers some of Phin's darker moments. Not so in this story. This is also my favorite first line of anything I've written.

I picked up a transsexual hooker named Thor, all six feet of her, at the off ramp to Eau Claire, Wisconsin, as I was driving up north to kill a man.

She had on thigh-high black vinyl boots, red fishnet stockings, a pink mini skirt, a neon green spandex tube top, and a huge blonde wig that reminded me of an octopus. I could have spotted her from clear across the county.

“You looking for action?” she said after introducing herself.

“I’m always looking for action.”

“Tonight’s your lucky night, handsome. I’m getting out of this biz. You give me a ride, you can have whatever you want for free.”

I opened the door, rolled up the window, and got back on the road.

Thor spent five miles trying to pay for her ride, but the painkillers had rendered me numb and useless in that area, and eventually she gave up and reclined her seat back, settling instead for conversation.

“So where are you headed?” she asked. She sounded like she’d been sucking helium. Hormone therapy, I guessed. I couldn’t tell if her breasts were real under the tube top, but her pink micro mini revealed legs that were nice no matter which sex she was.

“Rice Lake.”

I yawned, and shifted in my seat. It was past one in the morning, but the oppressive July heat stuck around even when the sun didn’t. I had the air conditioning in the Ford Ranger cranked up, but it didn’t help much.

“Why are you going to Rice Lake?” she asked.

I searched around for the drink holder, picked up the coffee I’d bought back in the Dells, and forced down the remaining cold dregs, sucking every last molecule of caffeine from the grit that caught in my teeth.

“Business.”

She touched my arm, hairless like the rest of me.

“You don’t look like a businessman.”

The road stretched out ahead of us, an endless black snake. Mile after mile of nothing to look at. I should have gotten a vehicle with a manual transmission, given my hand something to do.

“My briefcase and power ties are in the back seat.”

Thor didn’t bother to look. Which was a good thing.

“What sort of business are you in?”

I considered it. “Customer relations.”

“From Chicago,” Thor said.

She noticed the plates before climbing in. Observant girl. I wondered, obliquely, how far she’d take this line of questioning.

“Don’t act much like a businessman, either.”

“How do businessmen act?” I said.

“They’re all after one thing.”

“And what’s that?”

“Me.”

She tried to purr, and wound up sounding like Mickey Mouse. Personally, I didn’t find her attractive. I had no idea if she was pre-op, post-op, or a work in progress, but Thor and I weren’t going to happen, ever.

I didn’t tell her this. I might be a killer, but I’m not mean.

“Where are you headed?” I asked.

She sighed, scratching her neck, posture changing from demure seductress to one of the guys.

“Anywhere. Nowhere. I don’t have a clue. This was a spur of the moment thing. One of my girlfriends just called, said my former pimp was coming after me.”

“How former?”

“I left him yesterday. He was a selfish bastard.”

She was quiet for a while. I fumbled to crank the air higher, forgetting where the knob was. It was already up all the way. I glanced over at Thor, watched her shoulders quiver in time with her sobs.

“You love him,” I said.

She sniffled, lifted up her chin.

“He didn’t care about me. He just cared that I took his shit.”

This got my attention.

“You holding?” I asked. Codeine didn’t do as good a job as coke or heroin.

“No. Never so much as smoked a joint, if you can believe it.”

I would have raised an eyebrow, but they hadn’t grown back yet. Maybe I’d be dead before they did.

“It’s true, handsome. Every perverted little thing I’ve ever done I’ve done stone cold sober. Lots of men think girls like me are all messed up in the head. I’m not. I have zero identity issues, and my self esteem is fine, thank you.”

“I’ve never met a hooker with any self esteem,” I said.

“And I’ve never met a car thief on chemotherapy.”

I glanced at her again. Waited for the explanation.

“You couldn’t find the climate control,” Thor said. “And you’re so stoned on something you never bothered to adjust the seat or the mirrors. Vicodin?”

I nodded, yawned.

“You okay to drive?”

“I managed to pick you up without running you over.”

Thor clicked open a silver-sequined clutch purse and produced a compact. She fussed with her make-up as she spoke, dabbing at her tears with a foundation sponge.

“So why did you pick me up?” she asked. “You’re not the type who’s into transgender.”

“You’re smart. Figure it out.”

She studied me, staring for almost a full minute. I shifted in my seat. Being scrutinized was a lot of work.

“You stole the car in Chicago, so you’ve been on the road for about six hours. You’re zonked out on painkillers, probably sick from chemotherapy, but you’re still driving at two in the morning. I’d say you just robbed a bank, but you don’t seem jumpy or paranoid like you’re running from something. That means you’re running to something. How am I doing so far?”

“If I had any gold stars, you’d get one.”

She stared a bit longer, then asked.

“What’s your name?”

“Phineas Troutt. People call me Phin.”

“Sort of a strange name.”

“This from a girl named Thor.”

“My father loved comic books. Wanted a tough, macho, manly son, thought the name would make me strong.”

I glanced at her. “It did.”

Thor smiled. A real smile, not a hooker smile.

“Are you going to Rice Lake to commit some sort of crime, Phin?”

“That isn’t the question. The question is why I picked you up.”

“Fair enough. If I still believed in knights in shining armor, I’d say you picked me up because you felt bad for me and wanted to help. But I think your reason was purely selfish.”

“And that reason is?”

“You were falling asleep behind the wheel, and needed something to keep you awake.”

I smiled, and it morphed into a yawn.

“That’s a damn good guess.”

“But is it true?”

“I’m definitely enjoying the company.”

She kept watching me, but it was more comfortable this time.

“So who are you going to kill in Rice Lake, Phin?”

I stayed quiet..

“No whore ever gets into a car without checking the back seat,” Thor said. “A forty dollar trick can turn into a gang rape freebie, a girl’s not careful.”

I wondered what she meant, then remembered what was lying on the back seat. What I hadn’t bothered to put away. “You saw the gun.”

“People normally keep those things hidden. You should try to be inconspicuous.”

“I’m not big on inconspicuous.”

“That box of baby wipes. Are you a proud papa, or are they for something else?”

“Sometimes things get messy.” Which was an understatement. “So if you saw the gun, why did you get in?”

Thor laughed, throaty and seductive. She could shrug the whore act on and off like it was a pair of shoes.

“The streets are dangerous, Phin. A working girl has to carry more protection than condoms.”

She reached into the top of her knee high black vinyl boot, showed me the butt of a revolver.

“Mine’s bigger,” I said.

“Mine’s closer.”

I nodded. The road stretched onward, no end in sight.

“So how much do you charge, for your services?” Thor asked.

“Depends.”

“On what?”

“The job. How much I need the money.”

“Does it matter who the person is?”

“No.”

“Don’t you think that’s cold?”

“Everyone has to die sometime,” I said. “Some of us sooner than others.”

Another stretch of silence. Another stretch of road.

“I’ve got eight hundred bucks,” Thor said. “Is that enough?”

“For your pimp. The selfish bastard.”

“He is. I earned this money. Earned every cent. But in this area, every where, from the trailer girls to the high class escorts, has to pay Jordan a cut.”

“And you didn’t pay.”

“He knows how important my transformation is. One more operation, and I’m all woman. Holding out was the only way I could make it.”

“I thought you loved him.”

“Just like he says, love and business are two separate things.”

Her breathing sped up. Over the hum of the engine, I thought I heard her heart beating. Or maybe it was mine.

“Why don’t you kill him yourself, with your little boot revolver.” I said.

“Jordan has the cops in his pocket. They’d catch me.”

“Unless you had an alibi when it happened.”

Thor nodded. “Exactly. You drop me off at a diner. I spend three hours with a cup of coffee. We both get something we need.”

I considered it. Eight hundred was twice as much as I was making on this job. Years ago, if someone told me that one day I’d drive twelve hours both ways to kill a man for a lousy four hundred bucks, I would have laughed it off.

Things change.

The pinch in my side, growing bit by bit as the minutes passed, would eventually blossom into a raw explosion of pain. I was down to my last three Vicodin, and only had twenty-eight cents left to my name. I needed more pills, along with a bottle of tequila and a few grams of coke.

Codeine for the physical. Cocaine and booze for the mental. Dying isn't easy.

"So what do you say?" Thor asked.

"What kind of man is Jordan?"

"You said it doesn't matter. Does it?"

"No."

I waited. The car ate more road. The gas gage hovered over the E.

"He's a jerk. A charming jerk, but one just the same. I thought I loved him, once. Maybe I did. Or maybe I just loved to have a good looking man pay attention to me, make me feel special."

"Murder will pretty much ruin any chance of you two getting back together."

"I'll try to carry on," she said, reapplying her lipstick.

Gas station, next exit. I made up my mind. A starving dog doesn't question why his belly is empty. His only thought is filling it.

"I'll do it," I said.

"Really?"

"Yes."

Thor smiled big, then gave me a hug.

"Thanks, Phin. You're my knight in shining armor after all."

"I'll need the money up front," I said. "You got it on you?"

"Yeah. Take this exit. There's a Denny's. You can drop me off there."

I took the exit.

We pulled into the parking lot. It was close to empty, but I killed the lights and rolled behind the restaurant near the Dumpsters, so no one would see us together. When I hit the breaks, Thor stayed where she was.

"Second thoughts?" I asked.

"How do I know you won't take my money and run?"

"All I have left is my word," I said.

She considered it, then fished a roll of bills from her purse. When she was counting, I put my hand on her leg.

Thor smiled at me.

"I didn't think you were into me," she said. "Finish the job, and then I'll throw in a little bonus for you."

"I just need to finish my other job first," I told her.

"I understand."

My hand moved down her knee, found the revolver, and tugged it out.

With the windows closed I doubt anyone heard the gunshots, even though they were loud enough to make my ears ring.

I took the cash, hit the button to recline Thor's seat until she was out of sight, and rolled down her window. I hated to let the heat in, but the glass was conspicuously spattered with her blood, and I didn't need to make any more mistakes. Then I pulled out of the parking lot and got back on the highway, heading south.

Jordan had told me, over the phone, that I'd find Thor working the Eau Claire off ramp. He said to dump the body somewhere up the road, then meet him in the morning. The few hours wait were so he could establish an alibi.

A few miles up the road I pulled over, yanked Thor out of the car, and got behind the wheel again before another car passed. Then I grabbed the box of baby wipes in the back seat. As I drove I cleaned up my hands, then the passenger side of the vehicle. There wasn't too much of a mess. Small gun, small holes. I was lucky Thor got in the car at all, after spying the gun I'd sloppily left in plain sight. Stupid move on my part.

Hers, too.

When I reached Eau Claire I headed to where I thought Jordan would be. He'd be angry to see me so soon, but that wouldn't last very long. Just until I shot him in the head.

I had nothing against Jordan. I had nothing against Thor, either. But a deal is a deal, and as I told the lady, all I had left was my word.

CRIME STORIES

The first grown-up books I ever read, from the age of nine, were mysteries. This had more to do with them being on my mother's bookshelf than any particular design on my part. But I fell in love with them. Spenser and Travis McGee were my first literary heroes. I loved Ed McBain's 87th Precinct, and the Remo Williams Destroyer series by Richard Sapir and Warren Murphy.

Then I got into hardboiled and noir. Mickey Spillane. Max Allan Collins. Lawrence Sanders. Ross MacDonal. Donald Westlake and Richard Stark. Chandler and Hammet. Andrew Vachss. Reading about cops and PIs was cool, but reading about criminals was cool too.

In my teens, I was floored by *Red Dragon* and *Silence of the Lambs*, and that started me on a serial killer binge. I devoured John Sandford, James Patterson, Robert W. Walker, David Wiltse, and Ridley Pearson.

Which is probably why my novels are such a mishmash of different genre styles.

When I sit down to write a short story, it's for one of two reasons. First, because someone asked me for one. Second, because I have an idea. If I'm writing to fill an anthology slot or crack a market, I usually start with a few lines, which leads me to a premise, which leads to conflict, which leads to action. But if I already have an idea, it usually springs full blown from my head and onto the page as fast as I can type.

Often, I have story ideas that won't fit into the Jack Daniels universe. Sometimes these are horror stories, or straight humor, or sci-fi, or a combination of different styles.

Sometimes they're crime stories.

The Big Guys

This was one of three stories written for Small Bites, an anthology of flash fiction to benefit horror author and editor Charles Grant, who needed assistance paying some hefty medical bills. Flash fiction is a story of 500 words or less. Strange as it sounds, writing shorter is sometimes harder than writing longer, because you have less words to fit all of the story elements in. Small Bites used three of my flash fiction shorts. This piece won a Derringer Award.

"I'm surprised you asked me here, Ralph. I didn't think you liked me."

Ralph grinned over the wheel. "Don't be silly, Jim." He cut the engines and glanced over the starboard bow. There was some chop to the sea, but the yacht had a deep keel and weathered it well.

"Well, we've been neighbors for almost ten years, and we haven't ever done anything together."

Ralph shrugged. "I work crazy hours. Not a lot of free time. But I've always considered you a good friend, Jim. Plus, our wives are close. I thought this would give us a chance to get to know each other. Belinda mentioned you like to fish."

Jim nodded. "Mostly freshwater. I haven't done much deep sea fishing. What are we going for, anyway?"

Ralph adjusted his captain's cap.

"I was originally thinking salmon or sailfish, but it's been a while since I went for the big guys."

"Big guys?"

"Sharks, Jim. You up for it?"

"Sure. Just tell me what I need to do."

"First step is getting into the harness." Ralph picked up a large life vest, crisscrossed with straps and latches. "This clips onto the rod, so

you don't lose it, and this end is attached to the boat, in case you get pulled overboard."

Jim raised an eyebrow. "Has that ever happened?"

"Not yet, but it pays to be careful. These are Great White waters, and some of those bad boys go over two thousand pounds."

Ralph helped Jim into the vest, snugging it into place.

"What next?"

"We have to make a chum slick."

"I've heard of that. Fish blood and guts, right?"

"Yep. It's a shark magnet. You want to get started while I prepare the tackle?"

"Sure."

Ralph went to the cooler and took out the plastic bucket of chum. Even refrigerated, it stank to high heaven. He handed it to Jim, with a ladle.

"Toss that shit out there. Don't be stingy with it."

Jim began to slop chum into the blue waters.

Ralph swiveled his head around, scanning the horizon. No other boats.

"So," Jim asked, "what's the bait?"

Ralph gave Jim a deep poke in the shoulder with a fillet knife, then shoved his neighbor overboard.

Jim surfaced, screaming. Ralph ladled on some guts.

"Not very neighborly of you, Jim. Screwing my wife while I was at work."

"Ralph! Please!"

Jim's hands tried to find purchase on the sides of the yacht, but they were slippery with blood. Ralph dumped more onto his head, making Jim gag.

"Keep struggling." Ralph smiled. "The big guys love a moving target."

"Don't do this, Ralph. Please. I'm begging you."

"You'd better beg fast. I see that we already have some company."

Jim stared across the open water. The dorsal fin approached at a brisk pace.

"Please! Ralph! You said you considered me a good friend!"

"Sorry...wrong choice of words. I actually meant to say I considered you a good chum."

It took a while for Ralph to stop laughing.

The Agreement

I wrote this in college, and never tried to publish it because I considered it too violent. But after selling several stories to Ellery Queen, I still couldn't crack its sister publication, Alfred Hitchcock. After a handful of rejections, I sent them this, and they bought it. I liked the last line so much I've reused it a few times in other stories.

Hutson closed his eyes and swallowed hard, trying to stop sweating. On the table, in the pot, thirty thousand dollars worth of chips formed a haphazard pyramid. Half of those chips were his. The other half belonged to the quirky little mobster in the pink suit that sat across from him.

"I'll see it."

The mobster pushed more chips into the pile. He went by the street nick Little Louie. Hutson didn't know his last name, and had no real desire to learn it. The only thing he cared about was winning this hand. He cared about it a great deal, because Bernard Hutson did not have the money to cover the bet. Seven hours ago he was up eighteen grand, but since then he'd been steadily losing and extending his credit and losing and extending his credit. If he won this pot, he'd break even.

If he didn't, he owed thirty thousand dollars that he didn't have to a man who had zero tolerance for welchers.

Little Louie always brought two large bodyguards with him when he gambled. These bodyguards worked according to a unique payment plan. They would hurt a welcher in relation to what he owed. An unpaid debt of one hundred dollars would break a finger. A thousand would break a leg.

Thirty thousand defied the imagination.

Hutson wiped his forehead on his sleeve and stared at his hand, praying it would be good enough.

Little Louie dealt them each one more card. When the game began, all six chairs had been full. Now, at almost five in the morning, the only two combatants left were Hutson and the mobster. Both stank of sweat and cigarettes. They sat at a greasy wooden card table in somebody's kitchen, cramped and red-eyed and exhausted.

One of Louie's thugs sat on a chair in the corner, snoring with a deep bumble-bee buzz. The other was looking out of the grimy eighth story window, the fire escape blocking his view of the city. Each man had more scars on their knuckles than Hutson had on his entire body.

Scary guys.

Hutson picked up the card and said a silent prayer before looking at it.

A five.

That gave him a full house, fives over threes. A good hand. A very good hand.

"Your bet," Little Louie barked. The man in the pink suit boasted tiny, cherubic features and black rat eyes. He didn't stand over five four, and a pathetic little blonde mustache sat on his upper lip like a bug. Hutson had joined the game on suggestion of his friend Ray. Ray had left hours ago, when Hutson was still ahead. Hutson should have left with him. He hadn't. And now, he found himself throwing his last two hundred dollars worth of chips into the pile, hoping Little Louie wouldn't raise him.

Little Louie raised him.

"I'm out of chips," Hutson said.

"But you're good for it, right? You are good for it?"

The question was moot. The mobster had made crystal clear, when he extended the first loan, that if Hutson couldn't pay it back, he would hurt him.

"I'm very particular when it comes to debts. When the game ends, I want all debts paid within an hour. In cash. If not, my boys will have to damage you according to what you owe. That's the agreement, and you're obliged to follow it, to the letter."

"I'm good for it."

Hutson borrowed another five hundred and asked for the cards to be shown.

Little Louie had four sevens. That beat a full house.

Hutson threw up on the table.

"I take it I won," grinned Little Louie, his cheeks brightening like a maniacal elf.

Hutson wiped his mouth and stared off to the left of the room, avoiding Little Louie's gaze.

"I'll get the money," Hutson mumbled, knowing full well that he couldn't.

"Go ahead and make your call." Little Louie stood up, stretched. "Rocko, bring this man a phone."

Rocko lifted his snoring head in a moment of confusion. "What boss?"

"Bring this guy a phone, so he can get the money he owes me."

Rocko heaved himself out of his chair and went to the kitchen counter, grabbing Little Louie's cellular and bringing it to Hutson.

Hutson looked over at Little Louie, then at Rocko, then at Little Louie again.

"What do you mean?" he finally asked.

"What do you mean?" mimicked Little Louie in a high, whiny voice. Both Rocko and the other thug broke up at this, giggling like school girls. "You don't think I'm going to let you walk out of here, do you?"

"You said..."

"I said you have an hour to get the money. I didn't say you could leave to get it. I'm still following the agreement to the letter. So call somebody up and get them to bring it here."

Hutson felt sick again.

"You don't look so good." Little Louie furrowed his brow in mock-concern. "Want an antacid?"

The thugs giggled again.

"I...I don't have anyone I can call," Hutson stammered.

"Call your buddy, Ray. Or maybe your mommy can bring the money."

"Mommy." Rocko snickered. "You ought to be a comedian, boss. You'd kill 'em."

Little Louie puffed out his fat little chest and belched.

"Better get to it, Mr. Hutson. You only have fifty-five minutes left."

Hutson took the phone in a trembling hand, and called Ray. It rang fifteen times, twenty, twenty-five.

Little Louie walked over, patted Hutson's shoulder. "I don't think they're home. Maybe you should try someone else."

Hutson fought nausea, wiped the sweat off of his neck, and dialed another number. His ex-girlfriend, Dolores. They broke up last month. Badly.

A man answered.

"Can I speak to Dolores?"

"Who the hell is this?"

"It's Hutson."

"What the hell do you want?"

"Please let me speak to Dolores, it's real important."

Little Louie watched, apparently drinking in the scene. Hutson had a feeling the mobster didn't care about the money, that he'd rather watch his men inflict some major pain.

"Dolores, this is Hutson."

"What do you want?"

"I need some money. I owe a gambling debt and..."

She hung up on him before he got any farther.

Hutson squeezed his eyes shut. Thirty thousand dollars worth of pain. What would they start with? His knees? His teeth? Jesus, his eyes?

Hutson tried his parents. They picked up on the sixth ring.

"Mom?" This brought uncontrollable laughter from the trio. "I need some money, fast. A gambling debt. They're going to hurt me."

"How much money?"

"Thirty grand. And it need it in forty-five minutes."

There was a lengthy pause.

"When are you going to grow up, Bernard?"

"Mom..."

"You can't keep expecting me and your father to pick up after you all the time. You're a grown man Bernard."

Hutson mopped his forehead with his sleeve.

"Mom, I'll pay you back, I swear to God. I'll never gamble again."

An eternity of silence passed.

"Maybe you'll learn a lesson from this, son. A lesson your father and I obviously never taught you."

"Mom, for God's sake! They're going to hurt me!"

"I'm sorry. You got yourself into this, you'll have to get yourself out."

“Mom! Please!”

The phone went dead.

“Yeah, parents can be tough.” Little Louie rolled his head around on his chubby neck, making a sound like a crackling cellophane bag. “That’s why I killed mine.”

Hutson cradled his face in his hands and tried to fight back a sob. He lost. He was going to be hurt. He was going to be very badly hurt, over a long period of time. And no one was going to help him.

“Please,” he said, in a voice he didn’t recognize. “Just give me a day or two. I’ll get the money.”

Little Louie shook his head. “That ain’t the deal. You agreed to the terms, and those terms were to the letter. You still have half an hour. See who else you can call.”

Hutson brushed away his tears and stared at the phone, praying for a miracle. Then he had an idea.

He called the police.

He dialed 911, then four more numbers so it looked like it was a normal call. A female officer answered.

“Chicago Police Department.”

“This is Hutson. This is a matter of life and death. Bring 30,000 dollars over to 1357 Ontario, apartment 506.”

“Sir, crank calls on the emergency number is a crime, punishable by a fine of five hundred dollars and up to thirty days in prison.”

“Listen to me. Please. They want to kill me.”

“Who does, sir?”

“These guys. It’s a gambling debt. They’re going to hurt me. Get over here.”

“Sir, having already explained the penalty for crank calls...”

The phone was ripped from Hutson’s hands by Rocko and handed to Little Louie.

“I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.” Little Louie hung up and wagged a finger at Hutson. “I’m very disappointed in you, Mr. Hutson. After all, you had agreed to my terms.”

Hutson began to cry. He cried like a first grader with a skinned knee. He cried for a long time, before finally getting himself under control.

“It’s time.” Little Louie glanced at his watch and smiled. “Start with his fingers.”

“Please don’t hurt me...”

Rocko and the other thug moved in. Hutson dodged them and got on his knees in front of Little Louie.

"I'll do anything," he pleaded. "Anything at all. Name it. Just name it. But please don't hurt me."

"Hold it boys." Little Louie raised his palm. "I have an idea."

A small ray of hope penetrated Hutson.

"Anything. I'll do anything."

Little Louie took out a long, thin cigarillo and nipped off the end, swallowing it.

"There was a guy, about six years ago, who was in the same situation you're in now."

He put the end of the cigar in his mouth and rolled it around on his fat, gray tongue.

"This guy also said he would do anything, just so I didn't hurt him. Remember that fellas?"

Both bodyguards nodded.

"He finally said, what he would do, is put his hand on a stove burner for ten seconds. He said he would hold his own hand on the burner, for ten whole seconds."

Little Louie produced a gold Dunhill and lit the cigar, rolling it between his chubby fingers while drawing hard.

"He only lasted seven, and we had to hurt him anyway." Little Louie sucked on the stogie, and blew out a perfect smoke ring. "But I am curious to see if it could be done. The whole ten seconds."

Little Louie looked at Hutson, who was still kneeling before him.

"If you can hold your right hand on a stove burner for ten seconds, Mr. Hutson, I'll relieve you of your debt and you can leave without anyone hurting you."

Hutson blinked several times. How hot did a stove burner get? How seriously would he be hurt?

Not nearly as much as having thirty thousand dollars worth of damage inflicted upon him.

But a stove burner? Could he force himself to keep his hand on it for that long?

Did he have any other choice?

"I'll do it."

Little Louie smiled held out a hand to help Hutson to his feet.

"Of course, if you don't do it, the boys will still have to work you over. You understand."

Hutson nodded, allowing himself to be led into the kitchen.

The stove was off-white, a greasy Kenmore, with four electric burners. The heating elements were each six inches in diameter, coiled into spirals like a whirlpool swirl. They were black, but Hutson knew when he turned one on it would glow orange.

Little Louie and his bodyguards stepped behind him to get a better look.

"It's electric," noted Rocko.

Little Louie frowned. "The other guy used a gas stove. His sleeve caught on fire. Remember that?"

The thugs giggled. Hutson picked the lower left hand burner and turned it on the lowest setting.

Little Louie wasn't impressed.

"Hey, switch it up higher than that."

"You didn't say how high it had to be when we made the agreement." Hutson spoke fast, relying on the mobster's warped sense of fairness. "Just that I had to keep it on for ten seconds."

"It was inferred it would be on the hottest."

"I can put it on low and still follow the deal to the letter."

Little Louie considered this, then nodded.

"You're right. You're still following it to the letter. Leave it on low then."

It didn't matter, because already the burner was firey orange. Rocko leaned over and spat on it, and the saliva didn't even have a chance to drip through the coils before sizzling away and evaporating.

"It think it's hot," Rocko said.

Hutson stared at the glowing burner. He held his trembling hand two inches above it. The heat was excruciating. Hutson's palm began to sweat and the hair above his knuckles curled and he fought the little voice in his brain that screamed get your hand away!

"Well, go ahead." Little Louie held up a gold pocket watch. "I'll start when you do. Ten whole seconds."

"Sweet Jesus in heaven help me," thought Hutson.

He bit his lip and slapped his hand down on to the burner.

There was an immediate frying sound, like bacon in a pan. The pain was instant and searing. Hutson screamed and screamed, the coils burning away the skin on his palm, burning into the flesh, blistering and bubbling, melting the muscle and fat, Hutson screaming louder now, smoke starting to rise, Little Louie sounding off the seconds, a

smell like pork chops filling Hutson's nostrils, pain beyond intense, screaming so high there wasn't any sound, can't keep it there anymore, Jesus no more no more and...

Hutson yanked his hand from the burner, trembling, feeling faint, clutching his right hand at the wrist and stumbling to the sink, turning on the cold water, putting his charred hand under it, losing consciousness, everything going black.

He woke up lying on the floor, the pain in his hand a living thing, his mouth bleeding from biting his lower lip. His face contorted and he yelled from the anguish.

Little Louie stood over him, holding the pocket watch. "That was only seven seconds."

Hutson's scream could have woken the dead. It was full of heart-wrenching agony and fear and disgust and pity. It was the scream of the man being interrogated by the Gestapo. The scream of the woman having a Caesarean without anesthetic. The scream of a father in a burning, wrecked car turning to see his baby on fire.

The scream of a man without hope.

"Don't get upset." Little Louie offered him a big grin. "I'll let you try it again."

The thugs hauled Hutson to his feet, and he whimpered and passed out. He woke up on the floor again, choking. Water had been thrown in his face.

Little Louie shook his head, sadly. "Come on Mr. Hutson. I haven't got all day. I'm a busy man. If you want to back out, the boys can do their job. I want to warn you though, a thirty grand job means we'll put your face on one of these burners, and that would just be the beginning. Make your decision."

Hutson got to his feet, knees barely able to support him, breath shallow, hand hurting worse than any pain he had ever felt. He didn't want to look at it, found himself doing it anyway, and stared at the black, inflamed flesh in a circular pattern on his palm. Hardly any blood. Just raw, exposed, gooey cooked muscle where the skin had fried away.

Hutson bent over and threw up.

"Come on, Mr. Hutson. You can do it. You came so close, I'd hate to have to cripple you permanently."

Hutson tried to stagger to the door to get away, but was held back before he took two steps.

“The stove is over here, Mr. Hutson.” Little Louie’s black rat eyes sparkled like polished onyx.

Rocko steered Hutson back to the stove. Hutson stared down at the orange glowing burner, blackened in several places where parts of his palm had stuck and cooked to cinder. The pain was pounding. He was dazed and on the verge of passing out again. He lifted his left hand over the burner.

“Nope. Sorry Mr. Hutson. I specifically said it had to be your right hand. You have to use your right hand, please.”

Could he put his right hand on that burner again? Hutson didn’t think he could, in his muddled, agony-spiked brain. He was sweating and cold at the same time, and the air swam around him. His body shook and trembled. If he were familiar with the symptoms, Hutson might have known he was going into shock. But he wasn’t a doctor, and he couldn’t think straight anyway, and the pain, oh jesus, the awful pain, and he remembered being five years old and afraid of dogs, and his grandfather had a dog and made him pet it, and he was scared, so scared that it would bite, and his grandfather grabbed his hand and put it toward the dog’s head...

Hutson put his hand back on the burner.

“One.....two.....”

Hutson screamed again, searing pain bringing him out of shock. His hand reflexively grabbed the burner, pushing down harder, muscles squeezing, the old burns set aflame again, blistering, popping...

“.....three.....”

Take it off! Take it off! Screaming, eyes squeezed tight, shaking his head like a hound with a fox in his teeth, sounds of cracking skin and sizzling meat...

“.....four.....five.....”

Black smoke, rising, a burning smell, that’s me cooking, muscle melting and searing away, nerves exposed, screaming even louder, pull it away!, using the other hand to hold it down...

“.....six.....seven.....”

Agony so exquisite, so absolute, unending, entire arm shaking, falling to knees, keeping hand on burner, opening eyes and seeing it sear at eye level, turning grey like a well-done steak, meat charring...

“Smells pretty good,” says one of the thugs.

“Like a hamburger.”

“A hand-burger.”

Laughter.

“.....eight.....nine.....”

No flesh left, orange burner searing bone, scorching, blood pumping onto heating coils, beading and evaporating like fat on a griddle, veins and arteries searing...

“.....ten!”

Take it off! Take it off!

It's stuck.

“Look boss, he's stuck!”

Air whistled out of Hutson's lungs like a horse whimpering. His hand continued to fry away. He pulled feebly, pain at a peak, all nerves exposed—pull dammit! —blacking out, everything fading...

Hutson awoke on the floor, shaking, with more water in his face.

“Nice job Mr. Hutson.” Little Louie stared down at him. “You followed the agreement. To the letter. You're off the hook.”

Hutson squinted up at the mobster. The little man seemed very far away.

“Since you've been such a sport, I've even called an ambulance for you. They're on their way. Unfortunately, the boys and I won't be here when it arrives.”

Hutson tried to say something. His mouth wouldn't form words.

“I hope we can gamble again soon, Mr. Hutson. Maybe we could play a hand or two. Get it? A hand?”

The thugs tittered. Little Louie bent down, close enough for Hutson to smell his cigar breath.

“Oh, there's one more thing, Mr. Hutson. Looking back on our agreement, I said you had to hold your right hand on the burner for ten seconds. I said you had to follow that request to the letter. But, you know what? I just realized something pretty funny. I never said you had to turn the burner on.”

Little Louie left, followed by his body guards, and Bernard Hutson screamed and screamed and just couldn't stop.

A Fistful of Cozy

Satire, written for the webzine ShotsMag.uk at their request. This pokes gentle fun at the sub-genre of zero-violence cozy mysteries, with their quirky but spunky amateur sleuths.

“This is simply dreadful!”

Mrs. Agnes Victoria Mugilicuddy blanched under a thick layer of rouge. Her oversized beach hat, adorned with plastic grapes and lemons, perched askew atop her pink-hued quaff.

Barlow, her graying manservant, placed a hand on her pointy elbow to steady her.

“Indeed, Madam. I’ll call the police.”

“The police? Why, Barlow, think of the scandal! Imagine what Imogene Rumbottom, that busy-body who writes the Society Column, will say in her muck-raking rag when she discovers the Viscount de Pouissant dead on my foyer floor.”

“I understand, Madam. Will you be solving this murder yourself, then?”

“I have no other choice, Barlow! Though I’m a simple dowager of advancing years and high social standing, my feisty determination and keen eye for detail will no doubt flush out this dastardly murderer. Where is Miss Foo-Foo, the Mystery Cat?”

“She’s in her litter box, burying some evidence.”

“Miss Foo-Foo!” Agnes’s voice had the pitch and timbre of an opera soprano. “Come immediately and help Mumsy solve this heinous crime!”

Miss Foo-Foo trotted into the foyer, her pendulous belly dragging along the oriental rug. Bits of smoked salmon clung to her whiskers.

“Barlow!” Agnes commanded, clapping her liver-spotted hands together.

Barlow bent down and picked up the cat. He was five years Mrs. Agnes's senior, and his back cracked liked kindling with the weight of Miss Foo-Foo.

Agnes patted the cat on the head as Barlow held it. Miss Foo-Foo purred, a sound not unlike a belch.

"We have a mystery to solve, my dearest puss-puss. If we're to catch the scoundrel, we must be quick of mind and fleet of foot. Barlow!"

"Yes, Madam?"

"Fetch the Mystery Kit!"

"Right away, Madam."

Barlow turned on his heels.

"Barlow!"

Barlow turned back.

"Yes, Madam?"

"First release Miss Foo-Foo."

"Of course, Madam."

Barlow bent at the waist, his spine making Rice Krispie sounds. Miss Foo-Foo padded over to Agnes and allowed herself to be patted on the head.

Straightening up was a painful affair, but Barlow managed without a grunt. He nodded at Mrs. Agnes and left the room.

"To think," Agnes mused, "only ten minutes ago the Viscount was sipping tawny port and regaling us with ribald tales of the gooseberry industry. Just a waste, Miss Foo-Foo."

Agnes's eyes remained dry, but she removed a handkerchief from the side pocket on her jacket and dabbed at them nonetheless.

Barlow returned lugging a satchel, its black leather cracked with age. He undid the tarnished clasps and held it open for Mrs. Agnes. She removed a large, Sherlock Holmes-style magnifying glass.

"The first order of business is to establish the cause of death." Mrs. Agnes spoke to the cat, not to Barlow. "It's merely a hunch, but I'm compelled to suggest that perhaps the lovely port the Viscount had been sipping may have been tampered with."

"An interesting hypothesis, Madam, but perhaps instead it has something to do with that letter opener?"

"The letter opener, Barlow?"

"The one sticking in the Viscount's chest, Madam."

Agnes squinted one heavily mascaraed eye and peered through the glass with the other.

“Miss Foo-Foo, your hunch proved incorrect. The poor, dear Viscount appears to be impaled through the heart with some kind of silver object. But what can it be, puss-puss?”

“A letter opener, Madam?”

“Could it be a knife, Miss Foo-Foo? Perchance some rapsallion gained entry to the den though the window, intent on robbing the rich Viscount? Perhaps a fight ensued, resulting in the bloodthirsty criminal tragically ending the Viscount’s life with this vaguely Freudian symbol of male power?”

Barlow peered at the body.

“It appears to be the letter opener you bought me for my anniversary, Madam. The gift you presented to me for fifty years of loyal service.”

“Miss Foo-Foo!” Agnes bent over the fallen Viscount and lightly touched the handle of the protruding object. “Why, this is no knife! It’s Barlow’s letter opener! I can see the engraving.”

“How lucky you must feel to have served me for so many years.” Barlow intoned.

“This changes everything!” Mrs. Agnes placed the magnifying glass back into the satchel, her gnarled fingers latching onto a tin of fingerprint powder. “Some heathen must have stolen Barlow’s lovely gift—”

“Sterling silver plated,” Barlow said.

“—with the intent to frame our loyal manservant! Barlow!”

“Yes, Madam?”

“Open this tin so I may dust the offending weapon!”

“Yes, Madam.”

Mrs. Agnes used the tiny brush to liberally apply a basecoat of powder to the letter opener’s handle.

“Why, look, puss-puss! There’s nary a print to be found! The handle has been wiped clean!”

“Perhaps the murderer wore gloves, Madam?” Barlow reached for the powder tin with a gloved-hand.

“Or perhaps, Miss Foo-Foo, the killer wore gloves! This fiend is no mere street malcontent. This seems premeditated, the result of a careful and calculating plot. But why the Viscount?”

“Perhaps he was a witness, Madam? To another murder?”

Mrs. Agnes squinted at her manservant.

“That’s daft, Barlow. Even for a lowly servant such as yourself. Do you see another victim in this room?”

“Indeed I do, Madam.”

Barlow removed the cheese grater from his vest pocket, a gift from Mrs. Agnes for his forty year anniversary, and spent forty minutes grating off the old dowager’s face.

The old bat still had some life left in her after that, so he worked on her a bit with his thirtieth-year-anniversary nutcracker, his twentieth-year-anniversary potato peeler, and finally the fireplace poker, which wasn’t a gift, but was handy.

When she finally expired, he flipped the gory side face-down and spent a leisurely hour violating her corpse—something he couldn’t have managed if she were alive and yapping. Sated, Barlow stood on creaky knees and picked up the bored Miss Foo-Foo.

“You have a date with the microwave, puss-puss. And then I’m the sole heir to Madam’s fortune.”

Miss Foo-Foo purred, making a sound like a belch.

Three minutes and thirteen seconds later, she made a different kind of sound. More like a *pop*.

Cleansing

The bible is full of crime stories. Here's one that never made the canon.

“There’s a line.”

A long line, too. Thirty people, maybe more.

Aaron cleared his throat and spat the result onto a rock. He could feel the desert heat rising up through the leather of his sandals. An unforgiving sun blew waves of heat into their faces.

“It seems to be moving.”

Aaron squinted at Rebekah, fat and grimy. The wrap around her head was soaked with sweat and clung to her scalp in dark patches. Her eyes were submissive, dim. A bruise yellowed on her left cheek.

Looking at her, Aaron felt the urge to blacken it again.

“I cannot believe I let you drag me here.”

“You promised.”

“A man should not have to keep the promises he makes to his wife. In another nation, you’d be property. Worth about three goats and a swine. Perhaps less, an ugly sow such as you.”

Rebekah turned away.

Aaron set his jaw. A proper wife did not turn her back on her husband. He clutched at Rebekah’s shoulder and spun her around.

“I could have you stoned for insolence, you worthless bitch.”

He raised his hand, saw the fear in her eyes.

Liked it.

But Rebekah did not finch this time, did not cower.

“I will tell my father.”

The words made Aaron’s ears redden. Her father was a land owner, known to the Roman court. A Citizen. On his passing, Aaron would inherit his holdings.

Aaron lowered his fist. He tried to smile, but his face would not comply.

“Tell your father—what? Any husband has the right to discipline his wife.”

“Shall I open my robe to show him the marks from your discipline?”

Aaron bit the inside of his cheek. This sow deserved all that and more.

“Our marriage is our business, no one else need intrude.”

“And that is why we are here, Husband. I will not tell Father because you consented to this. It is the only way.”

Aaron spat again, but his dry mouth yielded little. The line moved slowly, the sun baking their shadows onto the ground behind them.

As they approached the river, Aaron’s throat constricted from thirst.

But this river was not fit to drink. Shallow and murky, the surface a skein of filth.

“Perhaps I should tell your father that his daughter has been seduced by a cult.”

“My father knows. He was cleansed a fortnight past.”

“Your father?” Aaron could not believe it. Her father had clout and status. Why would he jeopardize that by fooling around with fanatics?

Aaron stared at the river, confused. Another person waded into the center. Unclean, smelling of work and sweat, someone’s servant.

The man known as the Baptist laid hands on the zealot’s shoulders and plunged him underneath the scummy waves.

Then the Baptist yelled in a cracked voice, about sin and rebirth and Jehovah. A few seconds later the servant was released, gasping for air.

“He has been saved,” Rebekah said. “John has cleansed his soul.”

Aaron frowned. The man did not look saved. He looked muddy and disoriented.

“You are a fool, Rebekah. This talk of souls and one god is illegal and dangerous.”

“It works, Aaron. I have heard the tales. Healing the lame. The sick. Purging anger and hatred from men’s hearts.”

“I will not let that fool dunk my head in that putrid water.”

“Good day, Father.”

Aaron followed her eye line, turned.

Rebekah's father Mark smiled at Aaron, clapping a hand on his shoulder.

"There is nothing to fear, Aaron. The stories are true. At my baptism, I felt as if released from bondage. I felt my soul shrug off the chains of sin and soar like a bird."

Aaron stared into Mark's twinkling, smiling eyes and calmed a bit.

"I am not afraid, Mark."

"Good. You are next."

Rebekah and her father stepped onto the bank with Aaron. The warm water lapped against his toes.

"Am I to go alone?"

"We are family," Rebekah said. "We shall all go together."

She took his hand, a gesture that she had not made since their wedding day. As a unit, they waded over to the man called John.

"Are you ready to cast aside sin and be reborn in the glorious love of your Father, Jehovah?"

Aaron looked at Rebekah's father. The older man smiled, nodded.

"Yes," Aaron said. A quick dunk and it would be over.

John put his hands upon Aaron's shoulders and shoved him downward.

The water was hot, alive against his skin. Aaron's shoulders were pressed down to the bottom and the muck parted to accept him.

He held his breath, straining to hear the words John would speak.

But John spoke nothing.

Aaron shifted, placing a hand on John's thick wrist. He gave it small squeeze, a signal to begin.

The wrist did not yield.

Aaron felt another hand upon him, and then a weight against his chest.

He grasped at it.

A foot.

Alarm coursed through Aaron. Something was wrong. He opened his eyes, peered up through the murk.

John held him firm, Rebekah hunched beside him. Her eyes were venom, and it was her foot that pinned down Aaron's chest.

Aaron tried to twist and thrash, but he had no leverage. A burst of precious air escaped his lungs, bubbling violently up through his field of vision in an endless stream.

This crazy cult was going to murder him.

He reached out his hand, grasping at Rebekah's father. He could not allow this.

Mark caught his wrist, held it tight...and pushed Aaron deeper into the mud.

Aaron screamed, sucked in a breath. The water tasted sour and burned the inside his lungs as if they'd inhaled fire instead. He pried at John's fingers with his free hand, and a moment of clarity flashed through the chaotic panic in his mind.

This was not John the Baptist. He'd seen this man before. He was a servant of Rebekah's father.

The crowd by the river. They'd all been Mark's servants.

And through the weighty distortion of the water, he could hear them cheering.

Lying Eyes

The following four stories were all written for the magazine Woman's World. Every week it publishes a 1000 word mini mystery, in the tradition of Donald Sobol. The story provides the clues to solve the crime, then the solution is explained. I wrote four of these for Woman's World before finally selling one. This one was a reject, but was later published in the magazine Twisted Tongue. Can you solve the mystery?

It was a textbook kidnapping, or so they thought...

Billionaire David Morgan didn't look anything like he did on television. His distinguished face appeared worn and tired, and his piercing blue eyes were bloodshot from lack of sleep.

"I just want her to be okay," he said, for the hundredth time.

Detective Starker patted his shoulder.

"I know, Mr. Morgan. The kidnapper said he'll call with your wife's location."

Morgan's eyes released another tear.

"Are you sure they have the money?" he asked.

"We're sure."

Starker thought back to the money drop, and his insides burned. One million dollars in unmarked bills, left in a suitcase in a parked car. The kidnapper had warned the police that any attempts to stop him or track him would result in the death of Celia Morgan, David's young wife.

Nonetheless, Starker had made sure there was a tiny transmitter in the suitcase, housed in the lining and impossible to detect.

But at the money drop, Starker had watched the kidnapper transfer the cash into a large plastic bag, leaving the suitcase and the tracking device behind in the parking garage, leaving the authorities with no way to find him.

Now Celia's only hope was that the kidnapper was a man of his word, and would reveal her location.

"What if he doesn't call?" Morgan asked, voice trembling. "When Margaret, my first wife, passed away, I never thought I'd love again. I couldn't bear..."

His words were lost to another crying spell. Starker gave the millionaire another pat on the back.

"Don't worry, Mr. Morgan. We'll get her. Let's go over your list of enemies again."

"Enemies? I told you before. I'm the CEO of one of the largest manufacturing companies on the planet. I've been in this business for forty years. I have more enemies than there are names in the Manhattan phonebook."

"Does anyone stand out? Someone who felt you wronged them? Someone wanting money from you?"

"You saw the list. Everyone on it hates me. I told you before, Detective, that line of investigation is hopeless."

"How about around your home? Fired any of the help lately? Landscapers? Maids? Chauffeurs?"

"Celia handles all of that. Wait—I did have to fire the pool cleaner a month ago. I came home from work early and found him in our living room, watching television. Fired him on the spot."

"What was his name?"

"I don't remember. Celia will know...oh dear..."

The mention of his wife's name brought fresh tears. Starker felt awful for the man.

"Where did you meet Celia, Mr. Morgan?"

"She...she was one of my house cleaners. I pretty much ignored her for the first few weeks she worked for me. But she always had a kind word, a bright thing to say. Soon, I began to linger before going to the office, chatting with her over morning coffee. I know she's barely a third of my age, but she makes me feel young."

The phone rang, startling Starker. He nodded at Morgan to pick it up.

"Hello? Is she okay? Where is she?"

Starker, listening in on an extension, wrote down the address for the storage facility where the kidnapper claimed he'd left Celia Morgan.

"Let's move," Starker told his people.

Super Value Storage was across town, but Starker arrived in record time. He led his team, and the anxious David Morgan, to storage locker 116. It was a large sized unit, used for storing furniture, and the door had a combination lock on it. One of the cops used the bolt cutters, and Starker raised the door, a chemical stinging his eyes and making him squint.

He shone his flashlight inside, revealing a terrified-looking Celia Morgan.

She sat in the dark, tied to an office chair, a gag in her pretty mouth. Behind her were two empty buckets of something called sodium bisulfate, and a large empty cardboard box that had BROMINE written on the side.

David Morgan rushed to his wife, white granules crunching under his feet.

"Mr. Morgan!" Starker shouted. "Don't touch anything until we've collected evidence!"

Starker stepped in, snapping on a pair of latex gloves, removing the gag from Celia's perfectly made-up face. She was a strong one—her mascara hadn't even run. He then used a utility knife to cut the clothesline that securely bound her, careful to leave the knots for the crime lab to analyze.

"Celia, my love!"

David Morgan embraced his wife, and she kissed his cheek.

"I'm okay, David. He didn't hurt me."

Starker motioned for his team to come in, and he reached overhead and fumbled with the bare bulb hanging overhead, burning his fingers before eventually finding the pull cord and bathing the area in light.

"Did you have a chance to see your kidnapper?" Starker asked the woman.

"No. I'm sorry. I never saw his face," she said, her clear blue eyes drilling into him. "I've been sitting here in the dark for hours."

"Hours?" Starker repeated.

"Yes."

Starker gave Morgan a final pat on the back, and then separated the married couple.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Morgan, but I'm going to have to arrest your wife...as an accomplice in her own kidnapping."

How did Starker know?



SOLUTION: Celia's make up was perfect. If she'd been in that room for hours, locked up with chemicals that made Starker's eyes sting, her own eyes would have been red she would have been crying. Plus, when Starker reached up to turn on the light, the bulb was hot, meaning it had recently been on. Thus, Celia had just gotten there, and was lying to them. Since bromine and sodium bisulfate are pool cleaning chemicals, Starker suspected Celia was in on the scheme with the pool cleaner Morgan had fired a month previously.

Perfect Plan

Another Woman's World rejection. Though these are short, fast reads, they took a bit of thought to produce. They were a fun exercise in the mystery tradition of seeding clues.

The heist was flawless, except for one large detail...

Marty had been watching them for over a month. The Richardsons were an attractive young couple, wealthy by chance—they had rich parents on both sides. Five nights a week they prowled the town, dressed in fancy clothes and expensive jewelry. Sometimes to the theater. Sometimes to a five star restaurant. But they enjoyed riverboat gambling the most.

Mrs. Richardson's weakness was hundred dollar slots. She could go through ten thousand dollars an hour. For Mr. Richardson, the allure of blackjack proved irresistible. He was what casino folks called a 'whale,' betting more money on a single hand than Marty earned in the last three years—and Marty held down two jobs and couldn't even afford a car. By day, Marty drove a school bus. At night, he cleaned casino ashtrays and emptied trash cans.

But if Marty's plan worked out, he'd never work another shift at either job.

Marty had seen the Richardsons gamble many times, reckless in the way the very rich tended to be. Mostly, they lost. But sometimes they won, and won big. When they did, they took their spoils in cash. On those big win days, the casino sent an armed escort with the Richardsons, to make sure they arrived home safely.

Marty watched, and waited, polishing slot machines and vacuuming gaudy plush carpeting. He was biding his time until the

Richardsons hit it big, because the next time they did, he would relieve them of their winnings.

Marty had followed them all around town, many times. He'd made frequent, secret visits to their house. In the past four weeks, Marty had learned a great deal about the Richardsons.

He knew they had an electric fence, but he had a plan to deal with the electric fence. He knew they had a dog, but he had a plan to deal with the dog. He knew they had a burglar alarm, but he had a plan to deal with the burglar alarm. He knew they had a safe, but he had a plan to deal with the safe. He even had a way to deal with the Richardsons themselves, if they woke up during the robbery. Marty had a gun, and would use it if he had to.

Marty had planned every tiny detail.

All Marty needed was for the Richardsons to win big, and that night, it happened. Mrs. Richardson hit the Double Diamond Jackpot—a cool half a million dollars.

The Richardsons celebrated, cheering and laughing. The casino manager came by to congratulate them both. The couple left with two satchels full of cash, accompanied by two armed guards.

Marty followed.

The Richardsons lived exactly 6.3 miles away from the riverboat. They always took the same route, but just to be sure they didn't deviate from their routine, Marty kept them in sight. He tailed them up to their estate and parked across the street. Once the Richardsons were through their electric fence, the armed guards waved farewell and drove away.

Which left Marty alone to do his work.

He kept his tools in a large satchel under his seat. After setting the parking brake, he grabbed the bag and exited his vehicle through the rear door.

The electrified gate crackled in the night air. From the bag, Marty removed some heavy rubber gloves and galoshes. Rubber didn't conduct electricity, and Marty climbed over the fence safely.

The mansion stood three stories high, boasting dozens of rooms. Marty located the five bullhorns attached to the outside of the building. Any unauthorized person trying to get in through a door or window would trigger these sirens. He filled each bullhorn with a can of aerosol insulating foam—the kind homeowners use in their attics to reduce drafts. The foam filled every crack and crevice, quickly

hardening into a solid material. The sirens would still go off, but they wouldn't be any louder than a whisper.

With the alarm system beaten, Marty located the living room window and pushed a plumber's plunger onto the surface. Using a diamond edged tool, he cut around the plunger until he could remove the glass.

When he had a hole in the window, he took a thermos from his bag and shook out a ball of raw hamburger.

Scruffy, the Richardson's harmless but noisy pug, came running into the room. Before the dog could begin barking, Marty stuck his hand through the hole in the window, holding the hamburger. Mixed in with the meat were sleeping pills.

The dog gobbled up the treat, then stared at Marty, waiting for more. Marty gave the dog a rawhide bone. Scruffy chewed for five full minutes, then closed his eyes and began to snore harmlessly.

Marty felt for the latch and opened the window. He listened closely for the Richardsons, hearing a TV in another part of the house.

The safe, Marty knew from his many reconnaissance visits, was behind a large painted portrait of Mrs. Richardson. Marty crept up to it in the darkness, removing a cordless drill and a feather pillow from his bag. Unzipping the pillow, he placed the drill inside until just the large bit protruded, and then began drilling the safe, the sound muffled by the feathers.

He'd barely begun when the lights suddenly switched on. Marty spun around, reaching for his pistol, but decided against it when he saw the room was filled with cops.

Marty dropped the drill and raised his hands.

"How did you get here so fast?" Marty asked. "My plan was perfect!"

The lead detective answered. "The casino helped the Richardsons set up the phoney slot machine payoff tonight, to lure you here. We've been waiting for you for over an hour. You made one very big mistake."

What was Marty's mistake?



SOLUTION: Marty didn't own a car, so every time he followed the Richardsons and parked near their house, it was using his work vehicle...a school bus. The Richardsons spotted it easily, and knew something was going on because there are no school buses that run at night.

Piece Of Cake

This is the Mini Mystery that Woman's World finally bought. I still have no idea why they preferred this one over the other three. It's actually my least favorite.

Some folks will do anything to win...

The Bitsy Farmer Rocky Mountain Cake Bake-Off had played host to many wonderful desserts over the past ten years, but this was the first time it played host to a criminal.

Bitsy stared at the five finalists and frowned. When she began the contest a decade ago, it was to help new chefs. But things had gotten ugly. Really ugly.

Bitsy's skills in the kitchen had given rise to a multi-million dollar cake-mix company. Always the innovator, Bitsy used the Rocky Mountain Cake Bake-Off to encourage amateur cooks. The winner received ten thousand dollars, plus her recipe would be sold through Bitsy's company. But never before had Bitsy been faced with this dilemma.

An anonymous phone caller had informed Bitsy that one of the remaining contestants was planning to sabotage her competitors. Not only was that unfair, but the scandal could hurt the integrity of the event—an integrity Bitsy had spent years building.

Bitsy knew she had to figure out who the villain was, before the competition was ruined.

She walked over to Contestant #1, Suzi Snow. The elderly Ms. Snow reminded Bitsy of her grandmother; hair up in a gray bun and always smiling.

"Hello, Ms. Snow. What are you baking for us today?"

Ms. Snow grinned, showing off super-white dentures.

“My famous angel food cake, with a fresh raspberry glaze. I have a secret ingredient, passed down through six generations.”

“What is it?” Bitsy asked, curious.

Ms. Snow winked. “I’ll only share it if I win.”

Bitsy wished her luck, and walked through the kitchen studio over to Contestant #2, Maureen Hamilton. Maureen was Bitsy’s age, but shorter and perpetually scowling. She looked to be in a mood when Bitsy approached.

“The altitude is murderous,” Maureen moaned. “It will be a miracle if this chocolate cake turns out. Plus I don’t think this oven is calibrated correctly. I don’t want to lose because of faulty equipment.”

“I’ll send a technician over to check it out,” Bitsy said. She spoke into her walkie-talkie and asked someone to come by.

Maureen frowned and kept mixing.

Contestant #3 was Maria Espinoza. She’d brought her teenaged daughter with to assist, which the rules allowed. Both wore white latex gloves, which was definitely sanitary, but somewhat unusual.

“This will be the best angel food cake you’ve ever eaten,” Maria beamed.

Bitsy noticed that Maria’s daughter was opening a package of raspberries.

“Are you making a raspberry glaze?” she asked.

“Yes. I know that other lady is making a similar cake, but mine will be better. You’ll see.”

Bitsy bid her good baking and moved on the Contestant #4, Holly Doolittle. Holly was opening up packages of cream cheese, and Bitsy noted that her counter top was covered with graham cracker crumbs.

“Bitsy! I’m so excited to meet you! You’re my idol!”

“Thank you,” Bitsy said, a little embarrassed.

“I only hope my cake is half as good as one yours. You’ve got to be the best baker in all of Colorado. Boy, I just love you!”

Bitsy endured a hug, then moved along to the final contestant, Georgia Peters.

“Ms. Peters, I...”

“Shhh!” Georgia put a finger in front of her lips. “The first layer of my quadruple golden layer cake is in the oven. With this elevation, I can’t take any chances.”

“Sorry,” Bitsy whispered, somewhat mollified. “Good luck.”

"I don't need luck," Georgia whispered back. "This cake will win for sure."

Bitsy's walkie-talkie squawked. Georgia shot Bitsy an evil look at the intrusive sound, and Bitsy hurried away.

"What is it?" she asked into the radio.

"We found something." It was Niki James, Bitsy's assistant. "You'd better come and look."

"Where are you?"

"In the hospitality suite."

Bitsy flew through the kitchen, down the hallway, and to the suite. When she arrived, Niki was as pale as cake flour.

"It was under the sofa, in a plain paper bag."

She pointed to the table, and Bitsy gasped when she saw a gun laying next to a bowl of chips.

"When I became your assistant, I never knew I'd have to deal with anything more dangerous than a spatula," Niki said. "Who would bring a gun to a bake-off?"

"Did you touch it?" Bitsy asked.

Niki nodded. "I didn't know what was inside, so I reached in."

"No name on the bag?"

"It's just a regular paper lunch sack," Niki said.

"How about on the gun?"

"I didn't look close enough."

Bitsy thought out loud. "How long has the hospitality suite been open?"

"It's been open all night. I know for a fact that every contestant has been in here, some several times."

Bitsy rubbed her temples. She couldn't believe that one of the women she'd just met would commit murder just to win.

"Should we call the police?" Niki asked.

"Yes. We'll have to cancel the bake-off."

"The negative publicity will be devastating."

"I know. But there's nothing—"

Bitsy's voice trailed off when her eyes locked on the gun. There was something unusual about it. She crept closer to get a better look.

"This isn't a regular gun," she said. "Look at the writing on the side."

Niki came over and read the word engraved into the stock.

"Starter pistol? What's that?"

“It’s used for races. It doesn’t fire real bullets. Only makes a loud noise.”

As the words left Bitsy’s mouth, she smiled.

“Call security. I know who the saboteur is.”

Who is the saboteur, and how did Bitsy know?

□ □ □

SOLUTION: Bitsy believed Holly Doolittle had brought the starter gun. A loud noise, especially at the high altitude in the Colorado Rockies, would cause flour-based cakes to collapse. Holly was making a cheesecake, which would be unharmed by the loud bang, ensuring a win. Holly had bragged about her plan to her next door neighbor, who placed the anonymous call to Bitsy.

Animal Attraction

After I sold Piece of Cake, I figured I had a new market that would take everything I wrote. I was wrong. After buying my previous story, Woman's World gonged this one. My hat's off to Encyclopedia Brown, because this isn't as easy as it looks.

Only obscure knowledge will lead to a killer...

The First Annual Spokane Zoologist Convention ended on a very sour note...a murder.

To make matters even worse, no one knew who the dead man was.

"I'm sure he's a registered zoologist," said the convention organizer, Dr. Myrna Simmons, who claimed she recognized the deceased from the day before. "I checked him in at the reception table. I remember searching for his name tag. But for the life of me, I can't recall his name. The poor man."

The victim was a handsome forty-something male, wearing a blue suit and a red tie. His wallet was missing. A cheese knife pierced his back—it had apparently been taken from the hors d'oeuvres table. A napkin was wrapped around its handle, preventing the killer from leaving fingerprints.

The body had been found lying face-first on the coatroom floor. One of the convention attendees had gone to hang up her jacket, and almost tripped over him. Immediately afterward, the police had been called, and the banquet hall sealed. No one was allowed to leave without permission from the authorities.

Detective Robbie Walker personally checked the alibi of every person in attendance, and was left with four remaining suspects. During the course of his investigation, Walker cross-referenced the guest list and discovered that there was one person too many in the banquet hall. Walker deduced that this convention crasher was the

murderer, and he'd taken the dead man's name tag in an attempt to blend into the crowd and escape.

None of the four suspects had any form of picture ID on them, and each was unable to confirm his identity.

Walked needed to figure out who the imposter was.

He approached the first man, an elderly fellow with a bushy white beard who claimed to be Dr. Jordan McDermott.

"Dr. McDermott, what types of animals do you specialize in?"

"I study the duck-billed platypus," McDermott said, a bit too cheerfully considering the morbid circumstances. "Its fur is among the softest in the world. It lays eggs, and after they hatch it nurses its young. The male platypus is also poisonous. Quite an amazing animal."

Walker was skeptical. "Is all of that true?" he asked the others.

They each shrugged.

"Zoology has so many specialties," said Dr. Apu Patel, a tall, thin man with penetrating brown eyes. "It's impossible to know everything about everything."

"What do you specialize in, Dr. Patel?"

"Elephants. They can smell water from three miles away. And an elephant is the only animal that cannot jump."

"Really?"

"It's true. Did you know that African elephants only have four teeth?"

"I did not know that," Walker admitted. It sounded very suspicious.

"That's nothing," said Dr. Harry Reinsdorff, a fat man with thick, round glasses. "I'm a marine biologist, and I'm studying why sharks don't get cancer. Did you know that sharks can smell a drop of blood in the water from five miles away? And besides the five senses humans have, they also have an extra sense called the Line of Lorenzo, which lets them detect electrical fields in the water."

Walker felt a headache coming on. He didn't know if any of these outrageous facts were true or false.

"How about you?" he asked Dr. Mark Kessler. "What do you specialize in?"

"I unashamedly admit that I study cockroaches," Kessler said. His bulging eyes and brown suit made him look sort of like a cockroach himself. "They're really fascinating creatures. Their blood is white, not

red. They can hold their breath underwater for more than ten minutes. And did you know a cockroach can live up to two weeks with its head removed?"

"Yuck," Walker said. The other suspects echoed the sentiment.

"Let's go over your stories again. Dr. McDermott," Walker said, turning to the platypus specialist, "Where were you when the body was discovered?"

"In the bathroom," McDermott said. "I wasn't feeling very well. Too many libations last night. I tried a drink called a rusty nail. Vile stuff."

"How about you, Dr. Patel?" Walker asked the pachyderm professor.

"I was on my cell phone, checking my voice mail. I'd gotten a message from the San Diego Zoo. Apparently one of their elephants has elephant pox."

"And you, Dr. Reinsdorff?"

"I was also on the phone, confirming my reservation tonight at an expensive Japanese sushi restaurant that serves sea cucumbers. They can be poisonous, unless you remove the brain at the center."

Walker said, "Yuck," again, and then asked, "How about you, Dr. Kessler?"

"I'm afraid I was just staring out the window, doing nothing at all. I'm not a very sociable person."

Walker had no idea what to ask next, but fortunately Dr. Myrna Simmons, the convention organizer, came hurrying over.

"Detective Walker! I've got that book you wanted."

She handed him a copy of *The Complete Encyclopedia of Animals*. Walker thanked her, excused himself, and went into the other room for some fact-checking.

He returned ten minutes later, a broad grin on his face. With dramatic flourish, he pointed at one of the suspects.

"I've discovered that you are lying. I'm afraid you'll have to come downtown with me to answer some more questions."

Which of the suspects was lying?



SOLUTION: The so-called shark expert. Walker discovered that sharks do in fact get cancer, that they can only smell blood in the water from a quarter mile away (not five miles), and that the sense that detects electricity is called the ampullae of Lorenzini, not the Line of Lorenzo. He also discovered that sea cucumbers don't have brains, therefore their brains could not be poisonous, and the man must have been lying about his sushi restaurant reservations. Incredibly, all of the other facts strange animal facts were true. The imposter soon confessed that he had snuck into the convention and murdered Dr. Reinsdorff for having an affair with his wife.

Basket Case

Written for an anthology that was supposed to have stories based on Warren Zevon songs. The antho never sold, but the British zine The Horror Express bought this. It's about the things we do for love...

Rust from the crowbar flaked off, coating my palm with orange dust. I tapped the iron against my pants leg, then checked my watch again.

11:42.

Three more minutes.

I wanted to put an ear to the door, but that would only piss me off. I'd lose control, hearing another man grunting inside Leena. Then I might use the crowbar for real, rather than as a prop. The goal was to rob the guy, not kill him.

At least Leena had her limits.

I knew Leena was crazy the first time I saw her, playing pool in a yuppie bar on Rush & Division. She wore a halter top, no bra, her great ass wrapped in a tight leather mini that barely covered her white panties. The guy she was with had his hands all over her, and she seemed to be enjoying it. The slap and tickle went on so long I would have put down money that he was going to nail her right there on the pool table, but it didn't go that way. Instead of getting laid, the guy got a beer mug shattered on his dome when he whispered something to Leena that she obviously didn't appreciate. He hit the floor, covered in blood and Heineken, and Leena kicked him in the stones two or three times until his buddies pulled her off.

After spitting on him, Leena walked up to the bar. Everyone gave her space.

Everyone except for me. I moved in.

“You’ve been watching me for the last hour,” were her first words to me.

“You’re something to watch.”

She must have liked my response, because she leaned in closer.

“You know what that jackass said to me?”

“He insult your mother?”

“Worse. He asked me how much for the night. Take a look at me.”

Leena stepped back, twirled. Her thighs were firm and her hair was blonde and she could have had any man in that bar and she knew it.

“Do I look like a whore?”

“Never saw a whore with a body that nice.”

“Damn right. I don’t sell it.” Then she grinned at me and licked her lips, all red lipstick and pink tongue. “I give it away.”

I bought her a few beers, and we soon got into the hot and heavy the same way she had with bleeding boy, except I didn’t say anything stupid and managed to seal the deal back at my place a few hours later.

Leena wasn’t just hot. She was fire.

I do okay in the chick department. I’m average looking, but have a lot of muscles. Working construction nine months out of the year gives me a deep tan. I go out four nights a week, and I go home with someone about half the time.

But I’d never met a woman like Leena before. It wasn’t simply sex. It was *SEX*. When she was finished with me, I felt melted, like a plastic bottle that had been nuked in the microwave. She did things to me—amazing things, things that blew my mind. And when morning came, and she gathered up her shit to do the walk of shame back home, I knew that I couldn’t just let her leave my life forever. I had to see her again.

“You still got some left?” she’d asked.

I nodded.

“Call me.”

I called her. We saw each other the next night.

And let me tell you, the sex was aitch-oh-tee *HOT*.

I felt like one of those hermits who go up on a mountain and find god, except my god wasn’t peace and love and being one with the universe; it was hot, sweaty fucking that was so intense I had to pull the sheets out of my ass when we finished.

I wasn't looking for emotional attachment. Neither was Leena. She wasn't the type. I knew she was using me, and that when she got bored she'd move on.

But before I understood what was happening, I was whipped. I would have done anything for her. So when she told me she needed some help, I fell all over myself volunteering.

Leena, I found out, didn't have a regular job. She got her money from men. Not like a prostitute; Leena never directly took money for sex. But there were certain men she dated, 'whales' she called them, who took her nice places and bought her nice things in exchange for being with her a few nights a month.

Tonight, one of these fat-cats was calling their relationship quits. He was wracked with guilt over his wife, or some crap like that. Since this particular whale was also paying for Leena's apartment, she was understandably miffed.

"No one leaves me. You have to help me, John."

"Help you do what?"

The plan was, after she boffed the whale goodbye, I was supposed to burst into the room pretending to be Leena's husband. I'd swing the crowbar around, threatening the guy, acting crazy. Leena assured me he'd be reaching for his checkbook to smooth things over.

"We'll get twenty grand at least," Leena said.

11:44.

One more minute.

A groan—a male groan—came from behind the door. Then a thumping sound.

I squeezed my eyes shut, wiped the sweat off the back of my neck. I'd never had a jealous minute in my whole life, but right then, right there, I wanted to bash this guy's head into the mattress. I wouldn't have to fake being angry, no sir. When I got done with him, he'd be offering a lot more than twenty large.

A giggle. High and feminine.

I ground my teeth.

11:45.

I burst in, crowbar raised.

The puke cleared my teeth before I even got the door closed behind me.

The whale was tied to bed. There was a big bloody hole where his stomach should have been, loops of shiny intestines pulled out and

draped across all four bedposts like Christmas lights. All kinds of slimy glop soaked the sheets and pooled on the floor. The smell of blood and shit was so strong, I hurled again.

Leena—sexy, crazy Leena—was naked and squatting on his face, riding hard, her hands clenched on the headboard, making her cum sounds.

I dropped the crowbar.

Leena's back arched, and she shuddered and turned. Her perfect tits were coated with blood and dark bits of stuff. Her eyes were wide, manic, and the grin that creased her face scared the absolute fuck out of me.

She crawled, like a predatory cat, over the corpse and to the foot of the bed.

"Hi, John."

"Leena...jesus..."

She squatted, thighs spread, one hand rubbing gore between her legs.

"Come over here, John."

I took a step back, feeling the door knob hit me in the ass.

"Don't be scared. I'm harmless."

"Harmless?" I pointed at the mess behind her. "That's not harmless."

"He didn't complain. He died happy. See?"

She reached back and grabbed the guy by the joint, and damned if it wasn't stiffer than one of the bedposts. Leena began to stroke it, up and down.

"It's okay, John. He had it coming. I made it good for him."

As horrible, as revolting, as the whole scene was, I felt myself begin to respond.

"Come over here, Johnny. Come to Leena."

She licked something black and gooey off of her upper lip. Her hips humped the air. I had an urge to run away, to leave the apartment and run to the nearest bar and drink the last five minutes out of my memory.

But instead I took off my pants.

I fucked Leena, right there, on top of the dead guy.

And let me tell you, the sex was aitch-oh-tee *HOT*.

Urgent Reply Needed

Another Amazon.com short, this one in response to the email spam we all get, seemingly all the time. I've remained undecided if the last page hurts the story or helps it, and I've cut the ending many times. Here it is uncut.

When Conroy saw the message in his INBOX, he smiled.

URGENT REPLY NEEDED!!!

Allow me sir to introduce myself. My name is Dr. William Reingold, executor to the estate of Phillip Percy Jefferson III, former CEO of...

According to the email, Dr. Reingold had 17 million dollars that he was required to distribute to Jefferson's heirs, and a detailed genealogy search had turned up Conroy.

Conroy considered his luck. Just last week, a diplomat from Nigeria had emailed him requesting assistance to help distribute 42 million dollars in charity funds, and a month prior he was contacted by an auditor general from Venezuela with 24 million in a secret arms account and a lawyer from India trying to locate the relatives of a billionaire who died in a tragic plane crash. He'd also recently become a finalist in the Acculotto International lottery in Madrid, which wanted to give him a share of a 30 million euro prize.

Conroy hadn't even bought a lottery ticket.

"Wonderful thing, the Internet," he mused.

"Playing computer solitaire again?" Ryan, from the cubicle to his right, spoke over the flimsy partition.

"Email. If I just give this fellow my bank account number, he'll wire 9 million dollars into my account."

Ryan laughed. "Spam. I got that one too."

Conroy darkened. “Did you reply?”

“Of course not. Who would reply to those things?”

“Who indeed?” Conroy thought. Then he hunched over his keyboard.

Dear Dr. Reingold, I'm very interested in discussing this with you further...



The warehouse where Dr. Reingold had scheduled their meeting was located in Elk Grove Village, a forty minute drive from Conroy's home in Elgin. The late hour troubled Conroy. Midnight. If Conroy hadn't needed the money so badly, he never would have agreed to it. Insurance barely covered half of his mother's nursing home costs, and since his layoff he'd only been able to find temp data entry work at nine dollars an hour—not even enough for one person to live on.

Conroy pulled his BMW into the warehouse driveway, his stomach fluttering. This was an industrial section of town, the area deserted after hours. Conroy wondered how often the police patrolled the area.

He switched on his interior light and reread the email he'd printed out.

Park in front and enter the red door on the side of the building.

Conroy stuffed the note into his jacket and peered at the warehouse. His headlights illuminated a sidewalk, which led to the building's west side. A few seconds of fumbling through his jacket pocket produced a roll of antacids. He chewed four, the chalky taste clinging to the inside of his dry throat.

“I don't like this at all,” he whispered to himself.

Then he killed the engine and got out of the car.

The sidewalk was invisible in the dark, but Conroy moved slowly toward the warehouse until he felt it underfoot. He followed the perimeter of the building around the side, and saw a dim light above a red doorway, a hundred feet ahead.

The walk seemed to take an eternity. When he finally put his hand on the cold knob, his knees were shaking.

The door opened with a creak.

“Hello?”

Conroy peeked his head inside, almost crying out when he felt the steel barrel touch his temple.

“Hello, Mr. Conroy.”

He dared not turn his head, instead peering sideways to see the thin, rat-faced man with the .38. His light complexion was pocked with acne scars, and he wore too much aftershave. Standing behind him was another, larger man, holding a baseball bat.

Conroy couldn’t keep the tremor out of his voice when he said, “Where’s Dr. Reingold?”

The man snickered, his laugh high-pitched and effeminate.

“Idiot. I’m Dr. Reingold.”

He didn’t look very much like a doctor at all.

“You bring your bank account number?”

“No, I—”

Dr. Reingold grabbed Conroy by the ear and tugged him into the room, a small office lit with a single bare bulb hanging from the ceiling.

“I told you to bring that number! Can’t you follow instructions?”

Conroy didn’t see the blow coming. One moment he was on two feet, the next he was flat on his back, his head vibrating with pain, his world completely dark.

“I can’t find his wallet.”

A different voice. Probably the big guy.

“No wallet. No check book. What a loser.”

A jingle of keys.

“A Beemer. That’s worth a few grand. Wasn’t a total waste of time.”

“In his email, he said he was rich.”

“Could have been lying.” There was a cold laugh. “Internet is filled with liars.”

A gun cocking, close to Conroy’s head.

“So let’s waste him and—”

“I have money,” Conroy croaked.

He managed to open his eyes, unable to focus but sensing the two men staring down at him.

Dr. Reingold nudged him with his foot. “What did you say, buddy?”

“I have a coin collection. Worth over fifty thousand dollars.”

“Where is it?”

“At my house.”

“Where’s your house?”

“Please don’t kill me.”

Dr. Reingold leaned down, scowling at Conroy. “I’ll do worse than kill you if you don’t tell me where your house is.”

Conroy cursed his own stupidity. He doubted he’d live through this.

“In Elgin. It’s in a safe.”

“Marty, find a pencil on that desk.”

Conroy tried to touch his throbbing head, but Dr. Reingold kicked his hand away.

“The safe combination is tricky. Even if I gave it to you, you probably couldn’t open in.”

Dr. Reingold tapped the gun against his own cheek, apparently thinking.

“You live alone?”

“Yes.”

“Any dogs? Guns? Nasty surprises?”

Conroy’s eyes teared up. “No.”

Dr. Reingold grinned. “Well then, Mr. Conroy, let’s go see this coin collection of yours.”

□ □ □

Conroy sat wedged between the two thugs. The big one, Marty, drove. Dr. Reingold kept the .38 pressed into Conroy’s ribs, hard enough to bruise.

This wasn’t supposed to happen, Conroy thought. This should have ended in a bank account deposit, not in my death.

He pictured his poor mother, who would be sent to a State nursing home if the checks stopped coming. Filthy living conditions. Nurses who stole jewelry and medication. Sexual abuse.

Conroy pushed the images out of his mind, focusing on the problem at hand.

“This it?” Marty asked.

Dr. Reingold gave Conroy’s sore ribs a jab.

“Next house, on the end.”

“Nice neighborhood. Real quiet. Bet you can put the TV volume all the way up, neighbors don’t complain.”

Conroy didn’t answer.

Marty pulled the BMW into the driveway, parking next to the garage. Dr. Reingold tugged Conroy out of the car and shoved him up to the front door.

“Move it. We gotta another sucker to meet later tonight.”

Conroy’s hands were shaking so badly he could barely get his key into the lock. He took a deep breath before he turned the knob.

“I’d better go in first,” he said, quickly pulling the door open. His house was dark, quiet.

“Easy there, speedy.” Dr. Reingold had Conroy’s ear again. “You’re a little too eager to get inside. I think I’d better...”

The bear trap closed around Dr. Reingold’s leg with a sound that was part clang, part squish. He screamed falsetto, dropping the gun and prying at the trap with both hands.

Conroy reached for the pistol, swinging it around at Marty, who watched the whole scene slack-jawed. He shot the large man four times in the chest, then raised the gun and cracked it alongside Dr. Reingold’s head, silencing the screams.



Conroy was shoveling the last bit of dirt atop the grave when Dr. Reingold woke up.

“Good morning,” Conroy said, wiping a sleeve across his sweaty brow.

Dr. Reingold’s eyes were wide with terror, and he struggled against the chair he’d been bound to.

“You can’t get away, Dr. Reingold. The knots are too tight.”

“What the hell is going on?”

“You don’t remember? You and your associate lured me to a warehouse in Elk Grove, using a fake email story. Right now you’re in my basement.”

“Where’s Marty?” Dr. Reingold said, his voice creaking.

“He’s right here.” Conroy patted the fresh mound. “Next to him is Mr. Bekhi Kogan, a highly dubious Nigerian diplomat. One mound over is Sr. Domingo, who spoke no Spanish, though he was supposedly a Venezuelan auditor general. The third grave is Zakir Mehmood, who had a distinct Chicago accent, even though he claimed to be from Pakistan. Behind him is a lottery commissioner from Madrid, I forget his name. Began with an L, I think.”

Conroy set the shovel on the table, next to the pliers and the filet knife.

“Spammers. All of them. They all promised me riches. Just like you did, Dr. Reingold. All they wanted in return was my bank account number. Speaking of which...”

Conroy picked up the filet knife, and held it against the bound man’s ear.

“...why don’t you tell me your account number, Dr. Reingold?”

Dr. Reingold began to sob.

“Who...who are you?”

“I’m your most dreaded enemy, Dr. Reingold.” Conroy grinned, his eyes sparkling. “I’m a spam killer.”

Conroy pushed the knife forward and Dr. Reingold began to scream.



All in all, a pretty decent take. Dr. Reingold’s bank account contained over seventeen thousand dollars. He’d had a little trouble remembering his routing number, but Conroy was good at helping people remember things.

Next time, he’d do things differently. He hadn’t expected an Internet swindler to have a partner. Or a weapon. The ones he’d dealt with previously had been con artists, not hardened criminals.

Well, live and learn. In the future, he’d be more prepared.

After a quick shower, Conroy visited his favorite all night diner for some meatloaf and a slice of cherry pie. Late night grave digging made a man hungry.

“How are you, Mr. Conroy?”

The regular waitress, Dora, was in mid coffee pour when she sneezed, spilling some onto the table.

“Sorry about that.”

Conroy grimaced.

“Sounds like you have a cold.”

Dora sniffled. “Yeah. Bad one too.”

“Shouldn’t you be home, resting?”

“Can’t. Need the money.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

Dora sneezed again, not even bothering to cover her mouth. “You want the usual?”

Conroy thought it over, then made his decision.

“Not today. I just remembered something I have to do.”

Conroy left the restaurant. Instead of climbing into his car, he walked around back and waited in the alley for Dora's shift to end. His hunger had been replaced by a hunger of a different kind.

He fingered the .38 in his pocket, pleased with his newfound sense of purpose.

I'm giving myself an upgrade, he mused.

From now on, he would be Conroy Version 2.0—Spam Killer *and* Virus Eliminator.

Blaine's Deal

Before I owned a computer, I had WebTV, which was an Internet browser that hooked up to the television. I found some online writing groups, and would regularly type stories to post for critiques. This was the first story I ever put on the world wide web.

They shoot cheaters at The Nile.

Blaine lost his mentor that way, a counter named Roarke. Didn't even have a chance to get ahead before the eye in the sky locked on, videotaping skills that took years to master. Then it was burly men and a room without windows. One between the eyes, tossed out with the trash.

Poor bastard deserved better.

Blaine pushed back the worry. He was dressed like a tourist, from his sandals to his Nile Casino T-shirt. Made sure to spill some beer from the paper cup down his chin when he took a sip. Sat by a loud slot machine called Pyramids and plunked in quarters, trying to look angry when he lost. Ugly American. Probably had a job in the auto industry.

When the coins ran out, he frowned, scratched himself, and made a show of looking around. He'd had an eye on a particular Blackjack dealer for the last two hours. Surfer guy, looked like a tan version of the Hulk, too young to have been in the business long.

Blaine wandered over to the table, pretended to think it over, then sat down and fished some cash out of his shorts. Three hundred to start.

He took it slow. Six deck shoe, sixteen tens per deck. Too many to keep track of mentally. But no need to. Every counter had his tally method.

Roarke had been one of the best. Subtle. See a ten, adjust the elbow. Ace, move the foot. Depending on his body position, Roarke knew if the shoe was heavy or light with face cards.

But the silver globes in the ceiling caught him just an hour into his game. Roarke was found a few days later in an alley, the offending foot and elbow smashed. Back of his head was missing, and no one bothered to look for it.

Blaine was a counter as well, but his tally couldn't be seen by the cameras. No tapping feet or odd posture. Pit boss could be taking a dump on his shoulder, wouldn't notice a thing.

He bet small, safe. Won a few, lost a few. Turned more cash into chips and bided time until he got a nice, fat shoe. Then it was payday.

Thirty minutes. Twelve thousand dollars.

He lost a grand, on purpose, before tipping the Hulk a hundred bucks and calling it quits for the night.

Blaine walked out of the casino happy, not needing to fake that particular emotion. He'd be off this tropic isle tomorrow. Back to his wife, laden with money. A memorable and profitable trip.

The goons grabbed him in the parking lot. Nile Security. Guys with scars who were paid to give them.

"What the hell's going on?"

No answer. They dragged Blaine back inside. Past the crowd. Down a hall. To a room without windows.

Panic stitched through his veins. He fought to stay in character. Hackles and indignation.

"I'm calling the police! I'm an American!"

The door slammed. A bare bulb hung from the ceiling, casting harsh shadows. The pit boss forced Blaine to his knees. Big guy, a walrus in Armani, breath like rotten meat.

"We shoot card counters here."

"What are you talking about? I won the money fair!"

The blow knocked Blaine off his feet. Concrete was sticky under his palms. Old stains.

"Camera caught it. Under the table."

The blood in Blaine's mouth contrasted sharply with his blanched face. The pit boss reached down, pulled at Blaine's shorts, his underwear.

Blaine stared down between his naked legs. The abacus was along his thigh, taped to the right of his testicles.

The pit boss ripped it off, a thousand curly hairs screaming.

“This belong in your shorts?”

“How did that get there?” Blaine tried for confused. “I swear, I borrowed this underwear. I have no idea how that got on me.”

His explanation was met with a kick in the head. Blaine kissed the mottled floor, his vision a carousel. He flashed back to Roarke’s funeral, closed casket, the promise he made. “I’ll beat the Nile for you, old buddy.”

Should have stuck with Vegas.

The pit boss dug a hand inside his sport coat. “Never saw a guy count cards with his dick before. Man with your talent, should have gone into porno.”

The gun was cool against Blaine’s temple.

“No one cheats the Nile.”

Blaine’s wife cried for seven weeks straight when she learned of his death.

The Confession

Beware. This is a rough one. I wrote this story as a dual experiment. First, to do a serious story using only dialog. No action. No exposition. No speaker attribution. Just talking. And second, I always wondered if I could make readers squirm without relying on description. It was written for a horror issue of the webzine Hardluck Stories, at the request of Harry Shannon, and it's as nasty a story as I've ever done.

“From the beginning? The very beginning?”

“Wherever you want to start, Jane.”

“Wherever I want to start. Well. I guess you could say it all started when I was thirteen years old, when my father started coming into my bedroom.”

“Your father molested you?”

“Molested? That sounds like he stuck his hand under my bra. My father fucked me. Made me suck him off. Called me Daddy’s Little Whore. Used to write it on my forehead, in marker. I’d have to scrub it off before going to school. Wretched bastard. Went on until I ran away, at sixteen.”

“And that’s when you met Maurice?”

“That pimp fucker thought he was so smooth, busting out a white girl. Had no idea my old man busted me out years earlier.”

“Was Maurice the one in the pit?”

“No. Maurice was the belt sander.”

“Who was in the pit?”

“You want me to tell it, or answer questions?”

“Whatever you’re more comfortable with.”

“Okay. I’ll tell it. Maurice found me at the shelter. Slimy pricks like him can probably sniff out teenage pussy. He talked sweet, hooked me on crack, and the next thing you know I’m blowing guys in their

cars for twenty bucks a pop. Wasn't that bad, actually. I know I'm nothing to look at. Even before all the scars, I was fat and dumpy. Plain Fucking Jane, my mom called me. You got a cigarette?"

"Menthol."

"Beats sucking air. Thanks. Anyway, Maurice set me up with this freak. Guy took me back to his place, had a whole torture dungeon in his bedroom. That's how my face got all fucked up. Cigarette burns. Looks like acne scars, doesn't it? Kept me there for four days, then dumped me in a trash can."

"Did you know his name?"

"We'll get to that. You wanted this from the beginning, remember?"

"Take your time."

"Shit. I'm sorry, I can't smoke menthols. Do you have anything else?"

"No."

"Do I have to smoke?"

"No."

"I want to do this right for you."

"It's okay."

"Thanks...Mr. Police-man. Where was I? Oh yeah, after my face got burned, Maurice couldn't give me away. I wound up ass fucking winos in alleys for three bucks a pop. You ever have gonorrhea in your ass? Hurts like a bitch. And fucking Maurice wouldn't give me money for the clinic. Whatcha got there? A picture?"

"Is this Maurice?"

"Jesus! That's disgusting! Is that real?"

"Is this Maurice?"

"Yeah. That's him. Doesn't look too good there, does he? Heard he might live."

"We don't know yet."

"Ha! Be damn tough for him to testify. But I'm getting ahead of myself. After a while, the VD got so bad I couldn't walk. Maurice beat the shit out of me, left me for dead. That's when Gordon found me."

"Reverend Gordon Winchell?"

"He's no reverend. No church would have him. He was just another preacher, screaming scripture at drunks in soup kitchens. Saved my life, probably. Got me to the hospital. Actually came to visit

me during my recovery. Seemed like an actual decent guy from a while. Until I learned his kink.”

“What did he do to you?”

“On the day of my release, the good Reverend took me to his apartment, tied me to the bed, and began biting me.”

“Biting you?”

“Look at this—”

“You don’t need to—”

“Don’t get all prude on me. See? Nothing there. Bit my nipples right off. If I wasn’t in handcuffs I’d show you what he did to my twat.”

“Jesus.”

“You okay, Mr. Police-man? You don’t look so good. You want to take a break?”

“How did you get away?”

“He had it all worked out in his head that he’d kill me. But he couldn’t. Didn’t have the balls. So he dumped me in front of the same hospital he brought me home from.”

“Did you call the police?”

“Are you fucking kidding me? I called fucking everybody. When my dad was raping me, I called DCFS, and he paid the assholes off. When that freak burned my face, I filed a complaint, and you guys didn’t do shit. Gordon eats my private parts, one of your finest told me to have my pimp take care of it. Is this turning you on?”

“Stick to the story.”

“This is some pretty sick shit.”

“Stick to the story!”

“Okay. Sorry. Where was I? I lost my place.”

“The cops didn’t help you.”

“Right. Okay, here it is. That was it for me. I had enough of playing the victim.”

“Is that when you started...?”

“Is that when I started grabbing these sons of bitches? Yeah. When I got out of the hospital the second time, I tracked down the freak, watched his house until he was asleep, and then broke in. Used his own handcuffs on him. And his own blowtorch. It was hard to restrain myself, lemme tell you. But even holding back, his balls turned black and fell off after only three days.”

“This was John McSweeny?”

“Yeah. He sure was a screamer. Screamed so much, his throat actually started to bleed. Know what the weird part is? He smelled great! Like honey baked ham. When I burned off his face I was actually drooling. Is that funny or what?”

“You stabbed Mr. McSweeny.”

“The hell I did. I never killed no one. After a week or so, I uncuffed one of his hands, and gave him a steak knife. Fucker cut his own throat, and that’s God’s truth.”

“After McSweeny came Maurice.”

“Nope. Next came my father. I invited him over, got all weepy on the phone saying I forgave him. Hit him with a tire iron when he walked in the door. The freak, McSweeny, had all of these ropes and pulleys and shit, so I stripped Dad naked and hung him up. Then I lowered him down on that hat rack. Right up his ass. Funniest damn thing you ever saw. The more he moved, the lower he sunk, the higher the pole went up his poop chute. He lasted almost a month. I’d bring him food and water. That pole got about two feet up him before he finally died.”

“That’s murder, Jane.”

“That’s gravity, cop. If he stayed perfectly still, he would have lived. Blame Isaac Newton.”

“Then Maurice?”

“Then Maurice. When I was honey baking McSweeny, he was anxious to make the pain stop. Gave me all sorts of things. His bank account. His stocks. His car. I went to the dealer who used to sell me crack, bought a needle of H, snuck up on Maurice.”

“You mentioned you used a belt sander.”

“It takes all the skin off, but then gets real slippery. I kept buying belt after belt, until I figured out I could improve the traction if I threw salt on him.”

“How long did you torture Maurice?”

“A few weeks. He’d scab over, then I’d start on him again.”

“So...the guy in the pit?”

“That was the good Reverend Gordon. He got a heroin poke too, and when he woke up, he was chained up in the hole.”

“What did you do to him?”

“Poetic justice. Fucker liked to bite, so I gave him a taste of his own medicine. I went to the pet store, bought a big box of rats. Put them in the pit with him. They were tame at first, but when they got

hungry they began to nibble nibble. They started on the soft parts—look, do I have to read anymore?”

“Stick to the script.”

“But you’ve still got your clothes on. You don’t seem into this at all.”

“I pay the money. I make the rules. I want you to finish reading.”

“Look, sugar, I’m the best. Why do you want me to sit here and read when I can make you feel good?”

“Please don’t...”

“Are you crying? Don’t cry, baby. It’s okay. Don’t be afraid. Let me just get these pants off.”

“I don’t want to...”

“I like shy boys. Are you a shy boy? Let’s see how shy you are—Jesus!”

“You...you were supposed to stick with the script.”

“Where’s your cock? You don’t have a fucking cock!”

“You read the story.”

“The story?”

“Reverend...Reverend Gordon.”

“But that was all bullshit, right? Some freaky shit you made up?”

“He...liked to bite...”

“You’re bullshitting me.”

“I’m...a whore...”

“I’m leaving. Open this door.”

“Daddy’s Little Whore...”

“Open this fucking door or I’ll start to scream!”

“McSweeny’s house. Soundproof.”

“You psychotic fucking freak! Let me out!”

“I won’t hurt you. I want you to understand.”

“Get the fuck away from me!”

“You’re a prostitute. You’re a victim too.”

“Let me go!”

“Someone hurt you, right?”

“I want to leave. Please let me leave.”

“You didn’t choose this. You didn’t choose to fuck men for money.”

“I...want to leave.”

“Who hurt you? Your father? Your pimp? You can tell me.”

“I...don’t...”

“I won’t judge you. It’s okay.”

“No...”

“Who was it?”

“Don’t...”

“Who was the monster that made you this way?”

“My...uncle.”

“Your uncle?”

“He’d babysit me. Make me do things.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I...didn’t mean to call you a freak.”

“I know. It’s okay.”

“Jesus, I thought my life was shit. But all you went through...”

“It’s okay. From now on, we’re both okay. Come on, I want to show you something.”

“I...I don’t wanna go down there.”

“Trust me. I would never hurt you.”

“What’s that smell?”

“I told you. Smells like ham.”

“That was all true?”

“Most of it. Except they’re all still alive. Meet Mr. John McSweeny.”

“Oh my god...”

“Looks tasty, doesn’t he? I use that wire brush on his burns. Still can coax a few screams out of him. Watch your step, there’s the pit.”

“Oh Jesus...”

“I see the rats finished off most of your face, Gordon. And congratulations! Looks like they also had a litter of hungry babies! You’re a papa!”

“What...what is that?”

“That’s Maurice. Can’t even tell he’s a black guy anymore, can you? That belt sander is quite a tool. Want me to pour some vinegar on him, wake him up?”

“This is all...I can’t believe...”

“I know. It’s a lot to take in. But here’s who I really wanted you to meet. Say hello to my father. The person who turned me into the man I am today. Go on, say hello.”

“Um...hello.”

“He can’t talk, because of the gag. But if you want him to answer, just give the pole a little shake. Like this. Hear that? I think he likes you.”

“He’s...crying.”

“Of course he is. He’s got two feet of hat rack up his ass. Probably punctured all sorts of vital stuff. You want to give the pole a little shake?”

“No...”

“Go ahead. Not too much, though. Just a little tap like this. See? You can hear him screaming in his throat.

“I don’t want to.”

“Yes you do. You’re a victim, just like me. The only way to stop being a victim is to fight back. Go on.”

“I really don’t...”

“Stop playing the victim.”

“But...”

“Fight back. It’s the only way you’ll be able to live with yourself. Put your hand on the pole.”

“This isn’t right.”

“Raping children isn’t right. Pretend it’s your uncle hanging there. Remember all the things he did to you.”

“My uncle. That fucking son of a bitch.”

“Whoa! Hold on! You’re going to kill him, shaking it that hard. Ease back.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to...”

“Yes you did. Felt good didn’t it?”

“I...I thought of killing him so many times.”

“Death is too good for men like that. He doesn’t need killing. He needs to be shown the error of his ways. Oh...don’t cry. It’s okay. No one is ever going to hurt you, ever again. I promise. There there.”

“Can we...can we...”

“Can we find your uncle and bring him here?”

“Yeah.”

“Of course we can, dear. Of course we can.”

HORROR STORIES

I'm a huge horror movie fan, dating back to the creature features and *Twilight Zone* reruns on UHF Channel 32 in the mid-seventies. If you ever visit a Jaycee's haunted house on Halloween, or ride a roller coaster, you'll hear both screams and laughter. The two emotions are closely tied.

Since writing is about provoking emotion in the reader, I try to use as much fear and as much humor as I can in my stories. Fear is universal. It connects us as human beings. And being scared is a blast.

My bookcase is filled with thousands of horror novels and anthologies, from the traditional standbys of King and Koontz, to the splatterpunk gorefeasts of Jack Ketchum and Ed Lee, to the British shocks of Graham Masterton and James Herbert.

I tend to jump around sub genres when writing horror. I don't mind going for the gross out, but I also like to poke fun and make jokes. Even my darkest horror stories could be classified as black comedy if you look close enough. Though I write some scary and disturbing stuff, it's always done with a wink.

I've written a few horror novels, but they remain unpublished. Perhaps they'll see print some day. In the meantime, here's a big dose of primal fear, aimed right at your jugular. Make sure your doors are locked...

Finicky Eater

This is my very first published story, which was published right after I sold Whiskey Sour. Its centers on a theme I've gone back to often in my fiction. This appeared in the magazine Horror Garage, which featured a girl on the cover with her face soaked in blood. My mom didn't pass out copies at her job.

"Eat it."

Billy pushed his plate away.

"I'm not hungry anymore."

A pout appeared on his shiny little face. A miniature version of Josh's. Marge could remember when it used to be cute.

"You haven't even tried it. I made it different today. Just take a bite."

"No."

Marge could feel the tension build in her neck, like cables beneath the skin.

"Billy, honey, you need to eat. Look how skinny you're getting."

"I want an apple."

"We've been over this Billy. There are no apples. There won't be any apples ever again."

He crossed his arms. So thin. His elbows and wrists looked huge.

"I want a Twinkie."

Marge's mouth quivered, got wet.

"Billy, please don't..."

"I want McDonald's french fries, and a Coke."

A deep breath.

"Billy, we don't have any of those things anymore. Since they dropped all those bombs, we have to make do with what's available. Now please, you need to eat."

She pushed the plate back towards her son. His portion of meat was small, scarcely the size of a cracker. Pale and greasy. Marge eyed it and felt her stomach rumble.

It's for Billy, she chastened herself.

But if he didn't want it...

Marge killed the thought and looked away for some distraction.

She failed.

After three months in the shelter, there was nothing left to distract herself with.

She knew every inch of the tiny room like she knew her own body. The shelves, once stocked with canned goods, were empty. The TV and radio didn't work. The three dirty cots smelled like body odor, and the sump hole in the corner had long overflowed with urine and feces. No view, no entertainment, no escape.

Josh had built the shelter because he wanted his family to live. But was this living?

Marge turned to her son, the tears coming. "We're going to make it, Billy. I promise. But you need to eat. Please."

"No." Billy's own eyes began to glaze. "I want Daddy."

"I know you do. But Daddy left, Billy. He knew we didn't have enough food. So he made a sacrifice for you and me."

"I wish Daddy was here."

Tears burned her cheeks.

"He's here, Billy." She patted her chest. "He's here, inside of us, and he always will be."

Billy narrowed his eyes. "You hit Daddy on the head."

Marge recoiled as if slapped.

"No, Billy. Your father made a sacrifice."

"He did not. You hit him on the head while he was asleep."

Billy picked up the small piece of meat and threw it at his mother.

"I don't want to eat Daddy any more!"

Marge scooped up the meat, sobbing. It tasted salty. She didn't want to take food from her son, but she needed the strength for what came next.

She silently cursed her husband. Why didn't he properly stock this place? Getting nuked would have been better than this.

Her hand closed around the fire axe.

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The scream woke her up.

Marge's face burned with fever. Infection, she knew. In a way, a blessing. Consciousness was far too horrible.

"Billy?"

Whimpering. Marge squinted in the darkness.

"Mommy?"

She shifted, the pain in her legs causing her to cry out. She unconsciously reached down to touch them, but felt nothing.

They'd eaten her legs last week.

"What's the matter, Billy? Are you hungry, honey?"

"I made a sacrifice, Mommy."

He crawled out of the shadows, handing Marge his tiny, dirty foot. The drool that leaked from her mouth had a mind of its own.

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"You...you have to do it, Billy."

Billy was crying.

"You have to do it for Mommy. Mommy can't cut off her second arm. I can't hold the axe."

"I wish Daddy were here."

"Daddy!" Marge's face raged with anger, madness. "Your father did this to us! He got off lucky!"

She stared at her baby boy, legless, pulling himself along on his hands. Damn the world, and damn God, and damn Josh for letting this...

There was a noise coming from the door.

It was a knock! Someone was knocking!

"Billy! Do you hear it! We're going to be..."

Billy swung the axe.

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"This one's still alive!"

Officer Carlton leaned over the small boy, checking his pulse. He was awful to look at, legless and caked with blood. His mouth was a ruin of ragged flesh.

No—not a ruin. The flesh wasn't his.

"Jesus."

His partner, Jones, made a face.

"Looks like the kid ate his mom. There's another body over here. My guess it's the homeowner. Why'd they come down here?"

Carlton shrugged. "The father had a history of paranoid behavior. Maybe he convinced them it was a nuclear war."

He squinted at the father's corpse. The bones had been broken to get at the marrow inside. Carlton shivered.

"There's a hidden room back here. Look, the shelf swings away."

The hinged shelf moved inward, revealing a large pantry, stocked with canned goods. Enough for years.

"Now, Billy!"

Carlton caught the movement and spun around, in time to see the little creature with the axe bring it down on his partner's head.

Carlton's jaw dropped. The woman—the gory, limbless torso that they thought was dead—was undulating across the floor towards him like a gigantic worm.

He drew his gun. The axe hit him in the belly.

"We're saved!" the mother-thing cried.

Her voice was wet with something. Blood?

When she bit into his leg, he realized it was drool.

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Marge slithered away from the light. It was too bright outside. There was probably radiation coming in, but she didn't pay it any mind.

Her only motivation was hunger. And the food was in the hidden room.

Part of her brain recognized the can goods around her, recognized that they contained edible things. But her attention was focused on the police officer, cowering in the corner, holding the pumping wound in his gut.

Her mouth got wet.

She crawled, inch-worm style, up to him.

"Get away, lady!"

Billy crawled past her, faster because he still had arms. The cop screamed, and Billy hacked at his flailing legs like kindling.

A sound mixed in with the screams, and Marge realized it was laughter.

Her son was laughing.

"Billy! Don't play with your food!"

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"You killed Daddy."

Billy had his mouth full of something purple, and his eyes were far away.

“Yes I did, Billy. I killed him so you could have food. But we have enough food now for weeks. And these men have families, who will come looking for them. We’ll never be hungry again.”

Billy chewed and spit out something hard.

“Daddy is inside me.”

“That’s right.”

“You’re a little inside me, too. Your legs and arms.”

Marge almost smiled at the child’s analogy.

“That’s right. Mommy is a little inside you.”

Billy narrowed his eyes.

“I want all of you inside me.”

Marge watched her son drag himself over to the axe.



Billy opened his eyes. The sheets were soaked with sweat. Her turned in bed and shook his wife, who was snoring softly.

“Jill! Wake up!”

Her eyelids fluttered. “What’s wrong, Billy?”

“Get the baby!” Billy rolled over and strapped on his prosthetic legs, snugging the belts tight. “It’s happening!”

Jill sat up. The air raid siren cut through their bedroom like scream.

“The bombs are dropping, Jill! We have to get down to the shelter! Hurry!”

He hobbled out of the room, Jill joining him on the stairs with their six month old son. The siren was louder in the night air. On the horizon was a horribly bright light, and a pluming cloud in the shape of a mushroom.

He opened the door to the underground shelter, ushering his wife and son down the stairs, frightened and anxious and...*salivating*.

The Screaming

This is from the first anthology I ever appeared in, The Many Faces of Van Helsing, which had nothing to do with the Hugh Jackman film but was released at the same time to capitalize on it. I don't do many period pieces, and don't do many stories set in foreign countries. I also don't do many vampire stories, even though I love to read them. This is set in England in the 1960s, and I paid a lot of attention to vernacular, trying to get it to sound right.

“Three stinking quid?”

Colin wanted to reach over the counter and throttle the old bugger. The radio he brought in was brand new and worth at least twenty pounds.

Of course, it was also hot. Delaney's was the last pawnbroker in Liverpool that didn't ask questions. Colin dealt with them frequently because of this. But each and every time, he left the shop feeling ripped off.

“Look, this is state of the art. The latest model. You could at least go six.”

As expected, the old wank didn't budge. Colin took the three coins and left, muttering curses under his breath.

Where the hell was he going to get more money?

Colin rubbed his hand, fingers trailing over dirty scabs. His eyes itched. His throat felt like he'd been swallowing gravel. His stomach was a tight fist that he couldn't unclench.

If he didn't score soon, the shakes would start.

Colin tried to work up enough saliva to spit, and only half-managed. The radio had been an easy snatch; stupid bird left it on the window ledge of her flat, plugged in and wailing a new Beatles tune. Gifts like that don't come around that often.

He used to do okay robbing houses, but the last job he pulled left him with three broken ribs and a mashed nose when the owner came

home early. And Colin'd been in pretty good shape back then. Now-frail and wasted and brittle as he was-a good beating would kill him.

Not that Colin was afraid to die. He just wanted to score first. And three pounds wouldn't even buy him a taste.

Colin hunkered down on the walk, pulled up the collar on his wool coat. The coat had been nice once, bought when Colin was a straighty, making good wage. He'd almost sold it many times, but always held out. English winters bit at a man's bones. There was already a winter-warning chill in the air, even though autumn had barely started.

Still, if he could have gotten five pounds for it, he'd have shucked it in an instant. But with the rips, the stains, the piss smell, he'd be lucky to get fifty p.

"Ello, Colin."

Colin didn't bother looking up. He recognized the sound of Butts's raspy drone, and couldn't bear to tolerate him right now.

"I said, ello, Colin."

"I heard you, Butts."

"No need to be rude, then."

Butts plopped next to him without an invite, smelling like a loo set ablaze. His small eyes darted this way and that along the sidewalk, searching for half spent fags. That's how he'd earned his nickname.

"Oh, lucky day!"

Butts grinned and reached into the street, plucking up something with filthy fingers. There was a lipstick stain on the filter, and it had been stamped flat.

"Good for a puff or two, eh?"

"I'm in no mood today, Butts."

"Strung out again, are we?"

Butts lit the butt with some pub matches, drew hard.

"I need a few more quid for a nickel bag."

"You could pull a job."

"Look at me, Butts. I weigh ten stone, and half that is the coat. A small child could beat my arse."

"Just make sure there's no one home, mate."

"Easier said," Colin thought.

"You know"—Butts closed his eyes, smoke curling from his nostrils—"I'm short on scratch myself right now. Maybe we could

team up for something. You go in, I could be lookout, we split the take.”

Colin almost laughed. He didn’t trust Butts as far as he could chuck him.

“How about I be the lookout?”

“Sorry, mate. You’ll run at the first sign of trouble.”

“And you wouldn’t?”

Butts shrugged. His fag went out. He made two more attempts at lighting it, and then flicked it back into the street.

“Sod it, then. Let’s do a job where we don’t need no lookout.”

“Such as?”

Butts scratched his beard, removed a twig.

“There’s this house, see? In Heysham, near where I grew up. Been abandoned for a long time. Loaded with bounty, I bet. That antiequey stuff fetches quite a lot in the district.”

“It’s probably all been jacked a long time ago.”

“I don’t think so. When I was a pup, the road leading up to it was practically invisible. All growed over by woods, you see. Only the kids knew about it. And we all stayed far away.”

“Why?”

“Stories. Supposed to have goblins. Bollocks like that. I went up to it once, on a dare. Got within ten yards. Then I heard the screaming.”

Colin rolled his eyes. He needed to quit wasting time with Butts and think of some way to get money. It would be dark soon.

“You think I’m joshing? I swear on the head of my lovely, sainted mother. I got within a stone’s throw, and a god-fearful scream comes out of the house. Sounded like the devil his self was torturing some poor soul. Wet my kecks, I did.”

“It was probably one of your stupid mates, Butts. Having a giggle at your expense.”

“Wasn’t a mate, Colin. I’m telling you, no kid in town went near that house. Nobody did. And I’ve been thinking about it a lot, lately. I bet there’s some fine stuff to nick in there.”

“Why haven’t you gone back then, eh? If this place is full of stealables, why haven’t you made a run?”

Butts’s roving eyes locked onto another prize. He lit up, inhaled.

“It’s about fifteen miles from here. Every so often I save up the rail money, but I always seem to spend the dough on something else.

Hey, you said you have a few quid, right? Maybe we can take the train and—”

“No way, Butts.”

Colin got up, his thin bones creaking. He could feel the onset of tremors in his hands, and jammed them into his pockets.

“Heysham Port is only a two hour ride. Then only a wee walk to the house.”

“I don’t want to spend my loot on train tics, and I don’t want to spend the night in bloody Heysham. Pissant little town.”

Colin looked left, then right, realizing it didn’t matter what direction he went. He began walking, Butts nipping at his heels.

“I got old buds in Heysham. They’ll put us up. Plus I got a contact there. He could set us up with some smack, right off. Wouldn’t even need quid; we can barter with the pretties we nick.”

“No.”

Butts put his dirty hand on Colin’s shoulder, squeezed. His fingernails resembled a coal miner’s.

“Come on, mate. We could be hooked up in three hours. Maybe less. You got something better to do? Find a hole somewhere, curl up until the puking stops? You recall how long it takes to stop, Colin?”

Colin paused. He hadn’t eaten in a few days, so there was nothing to throw up but his own stomach lining. He’d done that, once. Hurt something terrible, all bloody and foul.

But Heysham? Colin didn’t believe there was anything valuable in that armpit of a town. Let alone some treasure-filled house Butts’d seen thirty years back.

Colin rubbed his temple. It throbbed, in a familiar way. As the night dragged on, the throbbing would get worse.

He could take his quid, buy a tin of aspirin and some seltzer, and hope the withdrawal wouldn’t be too bad this time.

But he knew the truth.

As far as bad decisions went, Colin was king. One more wouldn’t make a dif.

“Fine, Butts. We’ll go to Heysham. But if there’s nothing there, you owe me. Big.”

Butts smiled. The three teeth he had left were as brown as his shoes.

“You got it, mate! And you’ll see! Old Butts has got a feeling about this one. We’re going to score, and score big. You’ll see.”



By the time the rail spit them out at Heysham Port, Colin was well into the vomiting.

He'd spent most of the ride in the loo, retching his guts out. With each purge, he forced himself to drink water, so as not to do any permanent damage to his gullet.

It didn't help. When the water came back up, it was tinged pink.

"Hang in there, Colin. It isn't far."

Bollocks it wasn't far. They walked for over three hours. The night air was a meat locker, and the ground was all slope and hill. Wooded country, overgrown with trees and high grass, dotted with freezing bogs. Colin noticed the full moon, through a sliver in the canopy, then the forest swallowed it up.

They walked by torchlight; Butts had swaddled an old undershirt around a stick. Colin stopped vomiting, but the shivering got so bad he fell several times. It didn't help that Butts kept getting his reference points mixed up and changed directions constantly.

"Don't got much left, Butts."

"Stay strong, mate. Almost there. See? We're on the road."

Colin looked down, saw only weeds and rocks.

"Road?"

"Cobblestone. You can still see bits of curbing."

Colin's hopes fell. If the road was in such disrepair, the house was probably worse off.

Stinking Heysham. Stinking Butts.

"There it is, mate! What did I tell you?"

Colin stared ahead and viewed nothing but trees. Slowly, gradually, he saw the house shape. The place was entirely obscured, the land so overgrown it appeared to be swallowing the frame.

"Seems like the house is part of the trees," Colin said.

"Was like that years ago, too. Worse now, of course. And lookit that. Windows still intact. No one's been inside here in fifty years, I bet."

Colin straightened up. Butts was right. As rundown as it was, the house looked untouched by humans since the turn of the century.

"We don't have to take everything at once. Just find something small and pricey to nick now, and then we can come back and—"

The scream paralyzed Colin. It was a force, high pitched thunder, ripping through him like needles. Unmistakably human, yet unlike any human voice Colin had ever heard.

And it was coming from the house.

Butts gripped him with both hands, the color fleeing his ruddy face.

“Jesus Christ! Did you hear that? Just like when I was a kid! What do we do, Colin?”

A spasm shook Colin’s guts, and he dry-heaved onto some scrub brush. He wiped his mouth on his coat sleeve.

“We go in.”

“Go in? I just pissed myself.”

“What are you afraid of, Butts? Dying? Look at yourself. Death would be a blessing.”

“My life isn’t a good one, Colin, but it’s the only one I’ve got.”

Colin pushed past. The scream was chilling, yes. But there was nothing in that house worse than what Colin had seen on the street. Plus, he needed to get fixed up, bad. He’d crawl inside the devil’s arse to get some cash.

“Hold up for me!”

Butts attached himself to Colin’s arm. They crept towards the front door.

Another scream rattled the night, even louder than the first. It vibrated through Colin’s body, making every nerve jangle.

“I just pissed myself again!”

“Quiet, Butts! Did you catch that?”

“Catch what?”

“It wasn’t just a scream. I think it was a word.”

Colin held his breath, waiting for the horrible sound to come again. The woods stayed silent around them, the wind and animals still.

The scream cut him to the marrow.

“There! Sounded like hell.”

Butts’s eyes widened, the yellows showing.

“Let’s leave, Colin. My trousers can’t hold anymore.”

Colin shook off Butts and continued creeping towards the house.



Though naive about architecture, Colin had grown up viewing enough castles and manors to recognize this building was very old.

The masonry was concealed by climbing vines, but the wrought iron adorning the windows was magnificent. Even decades of rust couldn't obscure the intricate, flowing curves and swirls.

As they neared, the house seemed to become larger, jutting dormers threatening to drop down on their heads, heavy walls stretching off and blending into the trees. Colin stopped at the door, nearly nine feet high, hinges big as a man's arm.

"Butts! The torch!"

Butts slunk over, waving the flame at the door.

The knob was antique, solid brass, and glinted in the torchlight. At chest level hung a grimy knocker. Colin licked his thumb and rubbed away the patina.

"Silver."

"Silver? That's great, Colin! Let's yank it and get out of here."

But Colin wouldn't budge. If just the door knocker was worth this much, what treasures lay inside?

He put his hand on the cold knob. Turned.

It opened.

As a youth, Colin often spent time with his grandparents, who owned a dairy farm in Shincliffe. That's how the inside of this house smelled; like the musk and manure of wild beats. A feral smell, his grandmum had often called it.

Taking the torch from Butts, he stepped into the foyer, eyes scanning for booty. Decades of dust had settled on the furnishings, motes swirling into a thick fog wherever the duo stepped. Beneath the grime, Colin could recognize the quality of the furniture, the value of the wall hangings.

They'd hit it big.

It was way beyond a simple, quick score. If they did this right, went through the proper channels, he and Butts could get rich off of this.

Another scream shook the house.

Butts jumped back, his sudden movement sending clouds of dust into the air. Colin coughed, trying to wave the filth out of his face.

"It came from down there!" Butts pointed at the floor, his quivering hand casting erratic shadows in the torchlight. "It's a ghost, I tell you! Come to take us to hell!"

Colin's heart was a hummingbird in his chest, trying to find a way out. He was scared, but even more than that, he was concerned.

“Not hell, Butts. It sounded more like help.”

Colin stepped back, out of the dust cloud. He thrust the torch at the floor, looking for a way down.

“Ello! Anyone down there?”

He tapped at the wood slats with the torch, listening for a hollow sound.

“Ello!”

The voice exploded up through the floorboards, cracking like thunder.

“PRAISE GOD, HELP ME!”

Butts grabbed Colin’s shoulders, his foul breath assaulting his ear.

“Christ, Colin! There’s a wraith down there!”

“Don’t be stupid, Butts. It’s a man. Would a ghost be praising God?”

Colin bent down, peered at the floor.

“What’s a man doing under the house, Colin?”

“Bugger if I know. But we have to find him.”

Butts nodded, eager.

“Right! If we rescue the poor sap, maybe we’ll get a reward, eh?”

Colin grabbed Butts by the collar, pulled him close.

“This place is a gold mine. We can’t let anyone else know it exists.”

Butts gazed at him stupidly.

“We have to snuff him,” Colin said.

“Snuff him? Colin, I don’t think—”

Colin clamped his hand over Butts’s mouth.

“I’ll do it, when the time comes. Just shut up and follow my lead, got it?”

Butts nodded. Colin released him and went back to searching the floor. “Ello! How’d you get down there!”

“There is a trap door, in the kitchen!”

Colin located the kitchen off to the right. An ancient, wood burning stove stood vigil in one corner, and there was an icebox by the window. On the kitchen table, slathered with dust, lay a table setting for one. Colin wondered, fleetingly, what price the antique china and crystal would fetch, and then turned his attention to the floor.

“Where!”

“The corner! Next to the stove!”

Colin looked around for something to sweep away the dust. He reached for the curtains, figured they might be worth something, and then found a closet on the other side of the room. There was a broom inside.

He gave Butts the torch and swept slowly, trying not to stir up the motes. After a minute, he could make out a seam in the floorboards. The seam extended into a man-sized square, complete with a recessed iron latch.

When Colin pulled up on the handle, he was bathed in a foul odor a hundred times worse than anything on his grandparent's farm. The source of the feral smell.

And it was horrible.

Mixed in with the scent of beasts was decay; rotting, stinking, flesh. Colin knelt down, gagging. It took several minutes for the contractions to stop.

"There's a ladder." Butts thrust the torch into the hole. His free hand covered his nose and mouth.

"How far down?" Colin managed.

"Not very. I can make out the bottom."

"Hey! You still down there!"

"Yes. But before you come down, you must prepare yourselves, gentlemen."

"Prepare ourselves? What for?"

"I am afraid my appearance may pose a bit of a shock. However, you must not be afraid. I promise I shall not hurt you."

Butts eyed Colin, intense. "I'm getting seriously freaked out. Let's just nick the silver knocker and—"

"Give me the torch."

Butts handed it over. Colin dropped the burning stick into the passage, illuminating the floor.

A moan, sharp and strong, welled up from the hole.

"You okay down there, mate?"

"The light is painful. I have not born witness to light for a considerable amount of time."

Butts dug a finger into his ear, scratching. "Bloke sure talks fancy."

"He won't for long." Colin sat on the floor, found the rungs with his feet, and began to descend.

The smell doubled with every step down; a viscous odor that had heat and weight and sat on Colin's tongue like a dead cat. In the flickering flame, Colin could make out the shape of the room. It was a root cellar, cold and foul. The dirt walls were rounded, and when Colin touched ground he sent plumes of dust into the air. He picked up the torch to locate the source of the voice. In the corner, standing next to the wall, was...

"Sweet Lord Jesus Christ!"

"I must not be much to look at."

That was the understatement of the century. The man, if he could be called that, was excruciatingly thin. His bare chest resembled a skeleton with a thin sheet of white skin wrapped tight around, and his waist was so reduced it had the breadth of Colin's thigh.

A pair of tattered trousers hung loosely on the unfortunate man's pelvis, and remnants of shoes clung to his feet, several filthy toes protruding through the leather.

And the face, the face! A hideous skull topped with limp, white hair, thin features stretched across cheekbones, eyes sunken deep into bulging sockets.

"Please, do not flee."

The old man held up a bony arm, the elbow knobby and ball-shaped. Around his wrist coiled a heavy, rusted chain, leading to a massive steel ball on the ground.

Colin squinted, then gasped. The chain wasn't going around this unfortunate's wrist; it went through the wrist, a thick link penetrating the flesh between the radius and ulna.

"Colin! You okay?"

Butts's voice made Colin jump.

"Come on down, Butts! I think I need you!"

"There is no need to be afraid. I will not bite. Even if I desired to do so."

The old man stretched his mouth open, exposing sticky, gray gums. Both the upper and lower teeth were gone.

"I knocked them out quite some time ago. I could not bear to be a threat to anyone. May I ask to whom I am addressing?"

"Eh?"

"What is your name, dear sir?"

Colin started to lie, then realized there was no point. He was going to snuff this poor sod, anyway.

“Colin. Colin Willoughby.”

“The pleasure is mine, Mr. Willoughby. Allow me. My name is Dr. Abraham Van Helsing, professor emeritus at Oxford University. Will you allow me one more question?”

Colin nodded. It was eerie, watching this man talk. His body was ravaged to the point of disbelief, but his manner was polite and even affable.

“What year of our Lord is this, Mr. Willoughby?”

“The year? It’s nineteen sixty-five.”

Van Helsing’s lips quivered. His sad, sunken eyes went glassy.

“I have been down here longer than I have imagined. Tell me, pray do, the nosferatu; were they wiped out in the war?”

“What war? And what is a nosfer-whatever you said?”

“The war must have been many years ago. There were horrible, deafening explosions that shook the ground. I believe it went on for many months. I assumed it was a battle with the undead.”

Was this crackpot talking about the bombing from WWII? He couldn’t have been down here for that long. There was no food, no water...

“Mary, Mother of God!”

Butts stepped off the ladder and crouched behind Colin. He held another torch, this one made from the broom they’d used to sweep the kitchen floor.

“Whom am I addressing now, good sir?”

“He’s asking your name, Butts.”

“Oh. It’s Butts.”

“Good evening to you, Mr. Butts. Now if I may get an answer to my previous inquiry, Mr. Willoughby?”

“If you mean World War Two, the war was with Germany.”

“I take it, because you both are speaking in our mother tongue, that Germany was defeated?”

“We kicked the krauts’ arses,” Butts said from behind Colin’s shoulder.

“Very good, then. You also related that you do not recognize the term nosferatu?”

“Never heard of it.”

“How about the term vampire?”

Butts nodded, nudging Colin in the ribs with his elbow. "Yeah, we know about vampires, don't we Colin? They been in some great flickers."

"Flickers?"

"You know. Movie shows."

Van Helsing knitted his brow. His skin was so tight, it made the corners of his mouth draw upwards.

"So the nosferatu attend these movie shows?"

"Attend? Blimey, no. They're in the movies. Vampires are fake, old man. Everyone knows that. Dracula don't really exist."

"Dracula!" Van Helsing took a step forward, the chain tugging cruelly against his arm. "You know the name of the monster!"

"Everyone knows Dracula. Been in a million books and movies."

Van Helsing seemed lost for a moment, confused. Then a light flashed behind his black eyes.

"My memorandum," he whispered. "Someone must have published it."

"Eh?"

"These vampires... you say they do not exist?"

"They're imaginary, old man. Like faeries and dragons."

Van Helsing slumped against the wall. His arm jutted out to the side, chain stretched and jangling in protest. He gummed his lower lip, staring into the dirt floor.

"Then I must be the last one."



Colin was getting anxious. He needed some smack, and this old relic was wasting precious time. In Colin's pocket rested a boning knife he kept for protection. Colin'd never killed anybody before, but he figured he could manage. A quick poke-poke, and then they'd be on their way.

"I thought vampires had fangs." Butts approached Van Helsing, his head cocked to the side like a curious dog.

"I threw them in the dirt, about where you are presently standing. Knocked them out by ramming my mouth rather forcefully into this iron weight I am chained to."

"So you're really a vampire?"

Colin almost told Butts to shut the hell up, but decided it was smarter to keep the old man talking. He fingered the knife handle and took a casual step forward.

“Unfortunately, I am. After Seward and Morris destroyed the Monster, we thought there were no more. Foolish.”

Van Helsing’s eyes looked beyond Colin and Butts.

“Morris passed on. Jonathan and Mina named their son after him. Quincey. He was destined to be a great man of science; that was the sort of mind the boy had. Logical and quick to question. But on his sixth birthday, they came.”

“Who came?” Butts asked.

“Keep him talking,” Colin thought. He took another step forward, the knife clutched tight.

“The vampiri. Unholy children of the fiend, Dracula. They found us. My wife, Dr. Seward, Jonathan, Mina... all slaughtered. But poor, dear Quincey, his fate proved even worse. They turned him.”

“You mean, they bit him on the neck and made him a vampire?”

“Indeed they did, Mr. Butts. I should have ended his torment, but he was so small. An innocent lamb. I decided that perhaps, with a combination of religion and science, I might be able to cure him.”

Butts squatted on his haunches, less than a yard from the old man. “I’ll wager he’s the one that got you, isn’t he?”

Van Helsing nodded, glumly.

“I kept him down here. Performed my experiments during the day, while he slept. But one afternoon, distracted by a chemistry problem, I stayed too late, and he awoke from his undead slumber and administered the venom into my hand.”

“Keep talking, old man,” Colin whispered under his breath. He pulled the knife from his pocket and held it at his side, hidden up the sleeve of his coat.

“I developed the sickness. While drifting in and out of consciousness, I realized I was being tended to. Quincey, dear, innocent Quincey, had brought others of his kind back to my house.”

“They the ones that chained you to the wall?”

“Indeed they did, Mr. Butts. This is the ultimate punishment for one of their kind. Existing with this terrible, gnawing hunger, with no way to relieve the ache. The pain has been quite excruciating, throughout the years. Starvation combined with a sickening craving. Like narcotic withdrawal.”

“We know what that’s like,” Butts offered.

“I tried drinking my own blood, but it is sour and offers no relief. Occasionally, a small insect or rodent wanders into the cellar, and

much as I try to resist it, the hunger forces me to commit horrible acts.” Van Helsing shook his head. “Renfield would have been amused.”

“So you been living on bugs and vermin all this time? You can’t survive on that.”

“That is my problem, Mr. Butts. I do survive. As I am already dead, I shall exist forever unless extraordinary means are applied.”

Butts laughed, giving his knees a smack. “It’s a bloody wicked tale, old man. But we both know there ain’t no such things as vampires.”

“Do either of you have a mirror? Or a crucifix, perhaps? I believe there is one in the jewelry box, on the night stand in the upstairs bedroom. I suggest you bring it here.”

Now they were getting somewhere. Jewelry was easy to carry, and easier to pawn. Colin’s veins twitched in anticipation.

“Go get it, Butts. Bring the whole box down.”

Butts nodded, quickly disappearing up the ladder.

Colin studied Van Helsing, puzzling about the best way to end him. The old man was so frail, one quick jab in the chest and he should be done with it.

“That small knife you clutch in your hand, that may not be enough, Mr. Willoughby.”

Colin was surprised that Van Helsing had noticed, but it didn’t matter at this point. He held the boning knife out before him.

“I think it’ll do just fine.”

“I have tried to end my own life many times. On many nights, I would pound my head against this steel block until bones cracked. When I still had teeth, I tried gnawing off my own arm to escape into the sunlight. Yet every time the sun set again, I awoke fully healed.”

Colin hesitated. The knife handle was sweaty, uncomfortable. He wondered where Butts was.

“My death must come from a wooden stake through my heart, or, in lieu of that, you must sever my head and separate it from my shoulders.” Van Helsing wiped away a long line of drool that leaked down his chin. “Do not be afraid. I am hungry, yes, but I am still strong enough to fight the urge. I will not resist.”

The old man knelt, lifting his chin. Colin brought the blade to his throat. Van Helsing’s neck was thin, dry, like rice paper. One good slice would do it.

“I want to die, Mr. Willoughby. Please.”

Hand trembling, Colin set his jaw and sucked in air through his teeth.

But he couldn't do it.

“Sorry, mate. I—”

“Then I shall!”

Van Helsing sprung to his feet, tearing the knife away from Colin. With animal ferocity he began to hack at his own neck, slashing through tissue and artery, blood pumping down his translucent chest in pulsing waterfalls.

Colin took a step back, the gorge rising.

Van Helsing screamed, an inhuman cry that made Colin go rigid with fear. The old man's head cocked at a funny angle, tilting to the side. His eyes rolled up in their sockets, exposing the whites. But still he continued, slashing away at the neck vertebrae, buried deep within his bleeding flesh like a white peach pit.

Colin vomited, unable to pull his eyes away.

“He's going to make it,” Colin thought, incredulous. “He's going to cut off his own head.”

But it wasn't to be. Just as the knife plunged into the bone of his spine, Van Helsing went limp, sprawling face first onto the dirt.

Colin stared, amazed. The horror, the violence of what he just witnessed, pressed down upon him like a great weight. After a few minutes, his breathing slowed to normal, and he found his mind again.

Colin reached tentatively for the knife, still clutched in Van Helsing's hand. The gore gave him pause.

“Go ahead and keep it,” Colin decided. “I'll buy another one when—”

Alarm jolted through Colin. He realized, all at once, that Butts hadn't returned. Had the bugger run off with the jewelry box?

Colin sped up the ladder, panicked.

“Butts!”

No answer.

Using the torch, he followed Butts's tracks in the dust, into the bedroom, and then back out the front door. Colin swung it open.

“Butts! Butts, you son of a whore!”

No reply.

Colin sprinted into the night. He ran fast as he could, hoping that his direction was true, screaming and cursing Butts between labored breaths.

His foot caught on a protruding root and Colin went sprawling forward, skidding on his chin, his torch flying off into the woods and sizzling out in a bog.

Blackness.

The dark was complete, penetrating. Not even the moon and stars were visible.

It felt like being in the grave.

Colin, wracked by claustrophobia, once again called out for Butts.

The forest swallowed up his voice.

Fear set in. Without a torch, Colin would never find his way back to Heysham. Wandering around the woods without fire or shelter, he could easily die of exposure.

Colin got back on his feet, but walking was impossible. On the rough terrain, without being able to see, he had no sense of direction. He tried to head back to the house, but couldn't manage a straight line.

After falling twice more, Colin gave up. Exhausted, frightened, and wracked with the pain of withdrawal, he curled up at the base of large tree and let sleep overtake him.

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"This better be it, Butts."

"We're almost there. I swear on it."

Colin opened his crusty eyes, attempted to find his bearings.

He was surrounded by high grass, next to a giant elm. The sun peeked through the canopy at an angle; it was either early morning or late afternoon.

"You've been saying that for three hours, you little wank. You need a little more encouragement to find this place?"

"I'm not holding out on you, Willie. Don't hit me again."

Colin squinted in the direction of the voices. Butts and two others. They weren't street people, either. Both wore clean clothes, good shoes. The smaller one, Willie, had a bowler hat and a matching black vest. The larger sported a beard, along with a chest big as a whiskey barrel.

Butts had taken on some partners.

Colin tried to stand, but felt weak and dizzy. He knelt for a moment, trying to clear his head. When the cobwebs dissipated, he began to trail the trio.

“Tell us again, Butts, how much loot there is in this place.”

“It’s crammed full, Jake. All that old, antiquey stuff. I’m telling you, that jewelry box was just a taste.”

“Better be, Butts, or you’ll be wearing your yarbles around your filthy neck.”

“I swear, Willie. You’ll see. We’re almost there.”

Colin stayed ten yards back, keeping low, moving quiet. Several times he lost sight of them, but they were a loud bunch and easy to track. His rage grew with each step.

This house was his big break, his shot at a better life. He didn’t want to share it with anybody. He may have choked when trying to off Van Helsing, but when they arrived at the house, Colin vowed to kill them all.

“Hey, Willie. Some bloke is following us.”

“Eh?”

“In the woods. There.”

Colin froze. The man named Jake stared, pointing through the brush.

“Who’s there, then? Don’t make me run you down.”

“That’s Colin. He came here with me.”

Damned Butts.

“He knows about this place? Jake, go get the little bleeder!”

Colin ran, but Jake was fast. Within moments the bigger man caught Colin’s arm and threw him to the ground.

“Trying to run from me, eh?”

A swift kick caught Colin in the ribs, searing pain stealing his breath.

“I hate running. Hate it.”

Another kick. Colin groaned. Bright spots swirled in his vision.

“Get up, wanker. Let’s go talk to Willie.”

Jake grabbed Colin by the ear and tugged him along, dumping him at Willie’s feet.

“Why didn’t you tell us about your mate, Butts?”

“I thought he’d gone. I swear it.”

Jake let loose with another kick. Colin curled up fetal, began to cry.

“Should we kill him, Willie?”

“Not yet. We might need an extra body, help take back some of the loot. You hear me, you drug-addled bastard? We’re going to keep you around for awhile, as long as you’re helpful.”

Butts knelt next to Colin and smiled, brown teeth flashing. “Get up, Colin. They’re not going to kill you.” He helped Colin gain his footing, keeping a steady arm around his shoulders until they arrived at the house.

In the daylight, the house’s aristocratic appearance was overtaken by the many apparent flaws; peeling paint, cracked foundation, sunken roof. Even the stately iron work covering the windows looked drab and shabby.

“This place is a dump.” Willie placed a finger on one nostril and blew the contents of his nose onto a patch of clover.

“It’s better on the inside,” encouraged Butts. “You’ll see.”

Unfortunately, the inside was even less impressive. The dust-covered furniture Colin had pegged as antique was damaged and rotting.

“You call this treasure?” Willie punched Butts square in the nose.

Butts dropped to the floor, bleeding and hysterical.

“This is good stuff, Willie! It’ll clean up nice! Worth a couple thousand quid, I swear!”

Willie and Jake walked away from Butts, and he crawled behind them, babbling.

A moment later, Colin was alone.

The pain in his ribs sharpened with every intake of breath.

If he made a run for it, they’d catch him easily. But if he did nothing, he was a dead man.

He needed a weapon.

Colin crept into the kitchen, mindful of the creaking floorboards. Perhaps the drawers contained a weapon or some kind.

“What you doing in here, eh? Nicking silver?” Jake slapped him across the face.

Colin staggered back, his feet becoming rubber. Then the floor simply ceased to be there. He dropped, straight down, landing on his arse at the bottom of the root cellar.

Everything went fuzzy, and then black.

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Colin awoke in darkness.

He felt around, noticed his leg bent at a funny angle.

The touch made him cry out.

Broken. Badly, from the size of the swelling.

Colin peeled his eyes wide, tried to see. There was no light at all. The trap door, leading to the kitchen, was closed. Not that it mattered; he couldn't have climbed up the ladder anyway.

He sat up, tears erupting onto his cheeks. There was a creaking sound above him, and then a sudden burst of light.

"I see you're still alive, eh?"

Colin squinted through the glare, made out the bowler hat.

"No worries, mate. We won't let you starve to death down there. We're not barbarians. Willie will be down shortly to finish you off. Promise it'll be quick. Right Willie?"

Willie's laugh was an evil thing.

"See you in a bit."

The trap door closed.

Fear rippled through Colin, but it was overwhelmed by something greater.

Anger.

Colin had ever been the victim. From his boyhood days, being beaten by his alcoholic father, up to his nagging ex-wife, suing him into the recesses of poverty.

Well, if his miserable life was going to end here, in a foul smelling dirt cellar, then so be it.

But he wasn't going without a fight.

Colin pulled himself along the cold ground, dragging his wounded leg. He wanted the boning knife, the one he'd left curled in Van Helsing's hand.

When Jake came down to finish him off, the fat bastard was going to get a nice surprise.

Colin's hand touched moisture, blood or some other type of grue, so he knew he was close. He reached into the inky blackness, finding Van Helsing's body, trailing down over his shoulder...

"What in the hell?"

Colin brought his other hand over, groped around.

It made no sense.

Van Helsing's head, which had been practically severed from his shoulders, had reattached itself. The neck was completely intact. No gaping wound, no deep cut.

“Can’t be him.”

Perhaps another body had been dumped down there, possibly Butts. Colin touched the face.

No beard.

Grazing the mouth with his fingers, Colin winced and stuck a digit past the clammy lips.

It was cold and slimy inside the mouth. Revolting. But Colin probed around for almost an entire minute, searching for teeth that weren’t there.

This was Van Helsing. And he had completely healed.

Which was impossible. Unless—

“Jesus Christ.” Colin recoiled, scooting away from the body.

He was trapped in the dark with a vampire.

When would Van Helsing awake? Damn good thing the bloke was chained down. Who knows what horrors he could commit if he were free?

Colin repeated that thought, and grinned.

Perhaps if he helped the poor sod escape, Van Helsing would be so grateful he’d take care of the goons upstairs.

The idea vanished when Colin remembered Van Helsing’s words. All the poor sod wanted was to die. He didn’t want to kill anyone.

“Bloody hell. If I were a vampire, I’d do things—”

Colin halted mid-sentence. His works were in a sardine can, inside his breast pocket. He reached for them, took out the hypo.

It just might work.

Crawling back to Van Helsing, Colin probed until he found the bony neck. He pushed the needle in, then eased back the plunger, drawing out blood.

Vampire blood.

Tying off his own arm and finding his vein in the dark wasn’t a problem; he’d done it many times before.

Teeth clenched, eyes shut, he gave himself the shot.

But there was no rush.

Only pain.

The pain seared up his arm, as if someone was yanking out his veins with pliers.

Colin cried out. When the tainted blood reached his heart, the muscle stopped cold, killing him instantly.

Colin opened his eyes.

He was still in the cellar, but he could see perfectly fine. We wondered where the light could be coming from, but a quick look around found no source.

Colin stood, realizing with a start that the pain in his leg had vanished.

So, in fact, had all of his other pain. He lifted his shirt, expecting to see bruised ribs, but there wasn't a mark on them.

Even the withdrawal symptoms had vanished.

The hypodermic was still in his hand. Colin stared at it, remembering.

"It worked. It bloody well worked."

Van Helsing still lay sprawled out on the floor, face down.

Colin looked at him, and he began to drool. Hunger surged through him, an urge so completely overwhelming it dwarfed his addiction to heroin.

Without resisting the impulse, he fell to the ground and bit into the old man's neck. His new teeth tore through the skin easily, but when his tongue touched blood, Colin jerked away.

Rancid. Like spoiled milk.

A sound, from above. Colin listened, amused at how acute his hearing had become.

"All right, then. Jake, you go downstairs and mercy kill the junkie, and then we'll be off."

Mercy kill, indeed.

Colin forced himself to be patient, standing stock-still, as the trap door opened and a figure descended.

"Well well well, look who's up and about. Be brave, I'll try to make it painless."

Jake moved forward. Colin almost grinned. Big, sweating, dirty Jake smelled delicious.

"You got some fight left in you, eh?"

Colin lunged.

His speed was unnatural; he was on Jake in an instant. Even more astounding was his strength. Using almost no effort at all, he pulled the larger man to the ground and pinned down his arms.

"What the hell?"

"I'll try to make it painless," Colin said.

But from the sound of Jake's screams, it wasn't painless at all.

This blood wasn't rancid. This blood was ecstasy.

Every cell in Colin's body shuddered with pleasure; an overwhelming rush that dwarfed the feeling of heroin, a full body orgasm so intense he couldn't control the moan escaping his throat.

He sucked until Jake stopped moving. Until his stomach distended, the warm liquid sloshing around inside him like a full term embryo.

But he remained hungry.

He raced up the ladder, practically floating on his newfound power. Butts stood at the table, piling dishes into a wooden crate.

"Colin?"

Butts proved delicious, too. In a slightly different way. Not as sweet, sort of a Bordeaux to Jake's Cabernet. Colin's tongue was a wild thing. He lapped up the blood like a mad dog at a water dish, ravenous.

"What the hell are you doing?"

Colin let Butts drop, whirling to face Willie.

"Good God!"

Willie reached into his vest, removed a small Derringer. He fired twice, both shots tearing into Colin's chest.

There was pain.

But more than pain, there was hunger.

Willie turned to run, but Colin caught him easily.

"I wonder what you'll taste like," he whispered in the screaming man's ear.

Honeysuckle mead. The best of the three.

Colin suckled, gulping down the nectar as it pulsed from Willie's carotid. He gorged himself until one more swallow would have caused him to burst.

Then, in an orgiastic stupor, he stumbled from the house and into the glorious night.

No longer dark and silent and scary, the air now hummed with a bright glow, and animal sounds from miles away were clear and lovely.

Bats, chasing insects. A wolf, baying the moon. A tree toad, calling out to its mate.

Such sweet, wonderful music.

The feeling overwhelmed Colin, and he shuddered and wept. This is what he'd been searching for his entire life. This was euphoria. This was power. This was a fresh start.

"I see you have been busy."

Colin spun around.

Van Helsing stood at the entrance to the house. His right hand still gripped Colin's bone knife. His left hand was gone, severed above the wrist where the chain had bound him. The stump dripped gore, jagged white bone poking out.

Colin studied Van Helsing's face. Still sunken, still anguished. But there was something new in the eyes. A spark.

"Happy, old man? You finally have your freedom."

"Freedom is not what I seek. I desire only the redemption that comes with death."

Colin grinned, baring the sharp tips of his new fangs.

"I'll be happy to kill you, if you want."

Van Helsing frowned.

"The lineage of nosferatu ends now, Mr. Willoughby. No more may be allowed to live. I have severed the heads of the ones inside the house. Only you and I remain."

Colin laughed, blood dripping from his lips.

"You mean to kill me? With that tiny knife? Don't you sense my power, old man? Don't you see what I have become?" Colin spread out his arms, reaching up into the night. "I have been reborn!"

Colin opened wide, fangs bared to tear flesh. But something in Van Helsing's face, some awful fusion of hate and determination, made Colin hesitate.

Van Helsing closed the distance between them with supernatural speed, plunging the knife deep into Colin's heart.

Colin fell, gasping. The agony was exquisite. He tried to speak, and blood—his own rancid blood—bubbled up sour in his throat.

"Not...not...wood."

"No, Mr. Willoughby, this is not a wooden stake. It will not kill you. But the damage should be substantial enough to keep you here for an hour or so."

Van Helsing drove the knife further, puncturing the back of Colin's rib cage, pinning him to the ground.

“I have been waiting sixty years to end this nightmare, and I am tired. So very tired. With our destruction, my wait shall finally be over. May God have mercy on our souls.”

Colin tried to rise, but the pain brought tears.

Van Helsing rolled off, and sat, cross-legged, on the old cobblestone road. He closed his eyes, his thin, colorless lips forming a serene smile.

“I have not seen a sunrise in sixty years, Mr. Willoughby. I remember them to be very beautiful. This should be the most magnificent of them all.”

Colin began to scream.

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When sunrise came, it cleansed like fire.

Mr. Pull-Ups

Prior to being published, I'd often go to open mike night and read stories at a venue called Twilight Tales in Chicago. They sporadically publish short story collections, and for their latest anthology, Tales From The Red Lion, asked me for one. This is what I gave them.

Horace checked the address he'd written down, then walked left on Fullerton. Chicago was dark, but far from quiet. Summer meant people stayed out late. Though it neared 10pm, the sidewalks remained packed with college kids, bar hoppers, tourists, and the occasional homeless man holding out his filthy Styrofoam change cup.

Straight ahead he saw the sign; The Red Lion. Horace contemplated walking away, realized he didn't have any choices left, and entered through the narrow door.

The bar resembled a traditional English pub, or what Horace assumed one would look like. Dark, smoky, with stools older than he was and a large selection of scotch bottles lining the wall. He scanned the room, saw one man sitting alone, and approached him cautiously, the stained hardwood floor creaking beneath his feet.

"Are you Dr. Ricardo?"

The man—old, grizzled, red-eyed—glanced up at Horace over a half-empty rocks glass. He drained the remainder and stared, not saying anything.

"My name is Horace Gelt. You're a plastic surgeon, right?"

Ricardo sniffed the empty glass, looking mournful.

"I don't like talking about the past." The doctor's voice was rough, as if he didn't use often.

Horace looked around, saw that none of the bar's four customers were paying attention to him, and sat at the table across from the doctor. He leaned forward on his elbows, getting a closer look. The results didn't impress him. Sallow pallor. Sunken eyes. A fat tongue

that protruded between thin lips. The doctor looked like he'd died a month ago but no one had bothered to tell him.

Again, Horace considered walking away. Then he thought about the record book, about his life's dream, and forced himself to continue.

"I was told you might be able to help me."

Ricardo's red eyes squinted. "Help you how?"

This wasn't illegal. At least, not on Horace's end. But he still felt as if he were making a drug deal, or soliciting a prostitute.

"I need...surgery."

"I need whiskey."

Horace caught the attention of the bartender and pointed at Ricardo. A moment later, the doctor had a fresh glass in front of him.

"How about you?" Ricardo asked. "Don't drink?"

"I'm training."

Ricardo's shoulders flinched in what might have been a shrug, or a snort. He sipped his new drink and leaned forward. The smell of booze coming off this guy made Horace want to recoil, but he didn't move.

"What are you? Tranny? Want me to lop off the goods, shave the Adam's apple, give you boobies?"

Horace made a face. "No."

"I'm good at it. Making little boys into little girls. Had talent. A kind of sixth sense. They shouldn't have revoked my license. I helped a lot of people."

Horace had done his research, and didn't mention the patient that had sued Ricardo out of a license. The guy had gone into surgery expecting a nose job, and had walked out with a vagina. Rhinoplasty on the wrong protrusion.

"I don't want to be a woman." Horace pulled the book page from his pocket, unfolded it carefully. Brett Gantner's smiling face stared up at him, mocking. Horace showed the doctor.

"What is that? I don't have my glasses on."

"Page 43 from the Shawley Book of World Records. Brett Gantner is the record holder for pull-ups. Seven-hundred and forty in an hour."

"I'm sure it makes his mother proud." Ricardo leaned back and sipped more booze. The bartender returned with a basket of food—fish and chips—and set it before the doctor. Without bothering to look at it Ricardo stuck his hand in and began to munch.

“I’m second place. See?” Horace pointed at the printing. “Horace Kellerman. Seven-hundred twenty-five.”

“Only missed by a few,” Ricardo said, his open mouth displaying half-chewed fish. “Damn shame. Maybe you should work out.”

Horace bit back his reply. He worked out all the time, eight, sometimes ten hours a day. He ate all the right foods, supplemented with the right products, treated his body like a shrine. But no matter how hard he worked, how much effort he gave, he couldn’t do more than seven-hundred and twenty-five pull ups. It didn’t seem humanly possible.

The quest to be number one had become such an obsession with Horace that he actually flew to Phoenix to meet Brett Gantner, to see what he had that Horace didn’t.

As it turned out, it was what Brett didn’t have that made him the World Record holder. Brett was missing his left leg, above the knee.

“Car accident,” Gantner had told him over wheat germ smoothies. “I get around okay with the prosthesis. It hasn’t slowed me down any. Don’t you agree, Mr. Second Place?”

Horace felt his bile rise at the memory. Gantner had beaten him not because he was the superior athlete, but because he weighed less. About fifteen pounds less. The weight of one leg.

After that meeting, Horace had gone on a crash diet. But his body fat percentage was already dangerously low, and the diet caused him to lose muscle: he couldn’t even break six hundred. That led to steroid injections, which led to heart palpitations and perpetual shortness of breath, which made him give out at just over five hundred. He finally went back to his old regimen of diet and supplements, and again regularly hit the seven hundred mark, but he couldn’t reach seven-forty. The last time he tried he’d hung on the bar, tears streaming down his face, putting so much effort into his last few pull ups that he shit himself. But seven twenty-five was as high as he could go.

But then inspiration struck. Epiphany. All Horace needed was a doctor who would be willing to perform the surgery. He’d been searching for two months straight, and so far had gotten nowhere. Doctor after doctor turned down his request. One had even told him his problem wouldn’t be solved by plastic surgery, but by psychiatry. Asshole.

An internet forum on body modification and voluntary amputation eventually led him to Dr. Ricardo and this dinky little bar.

Horace wasn't sure if the whack-jobs on the website were telling the truth. One guy bragged he had his hands removed. If he did, how could he be using a computer keyboard? Was he typing with his face? But if the forum people were right, Dr. Ricardo might be able to help him.

"I want you to cut off my legs," Horace told the doctor.

Ricardo didn't miss a beat. He drained his whiskey and then used a fork to roughly bisect a golden fried fillet of perch. He only answered after his mouth was full of fish.

"Ten thousand. Cash. Up front."

Horace was overcome by a surge of joy, but mingled in were feelings of wariness, and oddly, remorse.

"Five beforehand, five after the operation."

Ricardo dunked a greasy bit of fish into some mayo and popped it into his mouth.

"That's fine. But why stop at your legs? Human's have lots of unnecessary body parts weighing them down. A kidney is a few ounces. You don't need all of your liver. Appendix, tonsils, gall bladder, half your stomach and a few yards of intestines—that's several pounds of material."

Horace's face fell, and he realized that the man sitting in front of him wasn't simply an incompetent drunk—he was insane. Much as he longed for the surgery, he wasn't about to subject himself to...

Ricardo's body shook, and it took Horace a moment to realize the doctor was laughing.

"Just kidding, Mr. Kellerman. Let's talk dates. The sooner you lose those legs, the sooner you can break your record. When are you free?"



Horace stared up at the operating room lights. Actually, this was a bedroom, and the lights were the kind do-it-yourselfers used when repairing drywall. He turned his gaze to Dr. Ricardo, who was fussing with a tank of anesthetic, turning the dials this way and that.

Upon arriving at the building—a crumbling brick duplex with empty beer bottles and used syringes decorating the front porch—Horace almost decided to forget the whole thing. But the inside seemed much cleaner than the exterior, and the ersatz surgery theater was extremely white and bright and smelled like lemons; courtesy of the can of disinfectant on the counter. The doctor had walked Horace

through the whole procedure, and he seemed to know what he was doing. Tourniquets would restrict massive blood loss, veins and arteries would be tied off one at a time, and an extra flap of skin would be left on each leg to cover the bone and form an attractive stump, just below the buttocks.

Dr. Ricardo poured a fresh bottle of rubbing alcohol over a hacksaw blade, and Horace looked down the table at his legs, one last time.

They were good legs, as legs went. Perhaps a bit thin, but they'd treated him well for twenty-six years. Horace felt no remorse in losing them. His goal to become the world record pull-up holder was more important than petty things, like walking. And his job had amazing disability insurance. Horace would make do in a wheelchair just fine.

"Are you ready?"

Dr. Ricardo had on his surgical mask, and to Horace's eye seemed sober as a judge. Horace nodded, and Ricardo fit the gas mask over his face.

"Take a deep breath, and count backwards from one hundred..."

Horace began to count, but not from one hundred. He began at seven hundred and forty.

By the time he reached seven hundred and twenty, he was asleep.

□ □ □

Recovery was harder than Horace might have guessed. The pain was minimal when he was lying down, but moving, sitting, taking a shit—these all brought agony.

Ricardo had given him drugs, both oral meds and morphine to inject into his stumps. He only used them once, and as a result slept all day. That was unacceptable. Horace couldn't afford to miss a work out.

While in bed, he stuck with barbells, but after a week he was ready to hit the pull-up bar again.

The results were impressive. On his first attempt, he hit six-hundred and fifty. Not bad after major surgery and seven days on his back. His balance was a little off, but he was thrilled by the results. Ricardo had warned him against resuming activity so soon, and Horace did manage to rip a few of his stitches, but he knew—knew—that the world record would soon be his.

A month after his double amputation, Horace felt great. His stamina was back, and constantly moving around on his hands had

made his arms stronger than ever. He set up his video camera, used a step ladder to reach the pull-up bar, and prepared to break the record.

The first two hundred pull-ups were candy. They came smooth, easy. Horace didn't even break a sweat.

The next two hundred were harder, but he still felt good. No leg pain, good breathing, good stamina, and a full half an hour left on the clock.

Horace paced himself for the next two hundred. Fatigue kicked in, and the familiar muscle pain. He also felt a bit of dizziness. But he still considered himself better off than he did while still having legs, and knew he'd make it no matter what.

When he reached seven hundred, he wasn't so sure anymore. He became extremely dizzy, and nauseous. While his grip was strong, the up and down movement had begun to make his stomach lurch. Perhaps it was still too soon. Perhaps he needed more recovery time, more workouts.

At seven hundred and ten Horace threw up, lost his grip, and fell hard onto his stumps, sending lightning bolts of pain up his spine that made him throw up again.

He waited a week before giving it another shot. Made it to seven hundred and thirty, then hung there for ten minutes until the time ran out, unable to do any more.

The week after that he could only manage seven hundred and twenty-five. A few days later he ran out of time at seven hundred and thirty-two. In the following month he posted numbers of 722, 734, 718, 736, 728, 731, 734, 729, and a tantalizingly frustrating 737. But he couldn't reach seven hundred and forty. No matter how hard he tried.

Depression set in. Then anger. Then a plan. Dr. Ricardo had mentioned all of the extra organs in a human being, extras that amounted to several pounds.

If Horace were five pounds less, he could easily get over 740.



When Horace rolled up to Dr. Ricardo at his usual table in the Red Lion, the good doctor was tilted back in his chair and snoring. Horace shook him, hard.

"I need help. I still weigh too much."

Ricardo took a few seconds to focus. When he spoke, the booze on his breath burned Horace's eyes.

“I remember you. Howard something, right? You needed your legs amputated for some reason. What was it again? Some sort of fetish?”

Horace roughly grabbed Ricardo by the shirt.

“You mentioned that people have extra organs. Kidney, liver, appendix, stuff like that. I want them taken out.”

Ricardo blinked, and his eyes began to glaze. Horace gave him a shake.

“Remove it, Doctor. All of it.”

“Remove what?”

“Everything. Take away everything I don’t need. All of the extra stuff.”

“You’re crazy.”

Horace struck the doctor, a slap than sounded like a thunder crack. The Red Lion’s three patrons all turned their way. Horace ignored them, focusing on Ricardo.

“I got a disability settlement. Half a million dollars. I’ll give you ten thousand dollars for each pound of me you can remove.”

Ricardo nodded. “I remember now. You want to weigh less. Some sort of world record. Sure, I can help. A few yards of intestines. Half the stomach. The arms.”

“No! The arms and the muscles stay. Everything else that isn’t essential to life can be removed.”

“When?” Dr. Ricardo asked.

Horace smiled. “Doing anything tonight?”

□ □ □

Horace awoke in a drug-induced haze. Thoughts flitted across his drowsy mind, including his last instructions to the doctor.

“Leave the arms, leave the eyes. Everything else goes.”

Like a fire sale on body parts.

He squinted at the table next to him, saw the mason jars lined up with bits and pieces that used to be his. Pounds and pounds of flesh and organs.

Several large loops of intestines, floating in formaldehyde.

A kidney.

A chunk of liver.

So far, so good.

An appendix and a gall bladder, though Horace didn’t know which was which.

A jar of fat, suctioned from his buttocks.

Part of his stomach.

His penis and testicles.

When Horace saw that, he gasped. No sound came out—in the next jar were his tongue, his tonsils, his vocal chords, and a bloody half moon that he realized was his lower jaw.

Doctor Ricardo had gone too far. The drunken bastard had turned Horace into a monster, a hideous freak.

But...Horace still had his arms. And even as maimed and mutilated as he'd become, he could still do pull-ups, still break the...

Horace's eyes focused on the last mason jar. Horace filled his remaining lung with air and screamed, and he was absolutely sure he made some noise, even though he had no ears to hear it.

The last jar contained ten fingers.

The Shed

Just about every horror mag in the world rejected this story. I'm not sure why. Sure, it's a standard EC Comics supernatural comeuppance, but I think it's fun. It eventually sold to Surreal Magazine.

“That’s gotta be where the money is.”

Rory took one last hit off the Kool and flicked the butt into a copse of barren trees. The orange firefly trail arced, then died.

Phil shook his head. “Why the hell would he keep his money locked up in a backyard shed?”

“Because he’s a crazy old shit. Hasn’t left the house in thirty years.”

The night was cold and smelled like rotting leaves. They stood at the southern side of Old Man Loki’s property, just beyond a tall hedge with thorns like spikes. The estate butted up against the forest preserve on the east and Lake Fenris on the west. Due north was Fenris Road, a winding, private driveway that eventually connected with Interstate 10 about six miles up.

Phil peered through the bramble at the mansion. It rested, dark and quiet, a mountain of jutting dormers and odd angles. To Phil it looked like something that had been asleep for a long time.

“Even crazy people know about banks.”

Rory clamped a hand behind Phil’s head and tugged the smaller teen closer. “If it’s not money, then why the hell does he got that big lock and chain on it? To protect his lawnmower?”

Phil pulled away and glanced at the shed. It stood only a few dozen yards away, the size of a small garage. The roof was tar shingles, rain-worn to gray, and dead vines partially obscured the oversized padlock and chain hanging on the door.

“Doesn’t look like it’s been opened in a while.”

Rory grinned, his teeth blue in the moonlight. “All the more reason to open it now.”

It felt all wrong, but Phil followed Rory onto the estate grounds. A breeze cooled the sweat that had broken out on his neck. Rory pulled the crowbar from his belt and swung it at a particularly tall prickweed.

“Yard looks like shit. Can’t he pay someone to cut his goddamned grass?”

“Maybe he’s dead.” Phil chanced another look at the mansion. “No lights on.”

“We woulda heard about it.”

“Could be recent. Could be he just died, and no one found the body yet.”

Phil’s words bounced small and tinny in the open air. He felt a rush of exposure, as if Old Man Loki was sitting at one of the dark windows of his house and watching their every move.

“You turning chicken shit on me? Baby need his wittle bottle?”

“Shut up, Rory. What if he is dead?”

“Then he won’t mind us stealing his shit. Damn—will you check out the size of that lock!”

The padlock was almost as big as Phil’s head. An old-fashioned type with a key-shaped opening on its face, securing three lengths of thick, rusty chain which wrapped around the entire shed like packing tape.

“You gonna try to bust that with just a crowbar?”

“Won’t know until we try.” Rory raised the iron over his head, and Phil set his jaw and cringed at the oncoming sound.

The clang reverberated over the grounds like a ghost looking for someone to haunt.

“Sonuvabitch! First try!”

The lock hung open on a rusty hinge. Rory pulled it off and the chains fell to the ground in a tangle. Phil eyed the door. It was some kind of heavy wood, black as death. Next to the doorknob was a grimy brass plaque.

“Welcome,” Phil read.

“How about that shit? We’re invited.”

Rory laughed, but Phil felt a chill stronger than the night air. He’d heard stories about Old Man Loki. Stories of how he used to live in

Europe, and how he hung around with that creepy Mr. Crowley guy Ozzy sang about.

Reflexively, Phil looked over his shoulder to see if anyone was watching.

There was a light on in the house.

“Shit! Rory, there’s...”

The light winked twice, then went off.

“There’s what, Phil?”

“A light. On the second floor.”

Rory pulled a face and made a show of squinting at the mansion. His mouth stretched open in horror, lips snicking back over years of dental neglect.

“Run, Phil! Jesus Christ! Run!”

Phil took off in a dead sprint, fighting to keep his bladder closed. He was forty yards away when he noticed Rory wasn’t next to him.

That’s when he heard his friend’s laughter.

Phil looked back over his shoulder and saw Rory holding his stomach, guffawing so loud that it sounded like a barking dog.

Phil felt his ears burn. He took his time walking back to the shed.

“You should have seen your face!” Rory had tears in his eyes.

“Shut up, Rory. That wasn’t funny.”

“I swear, you ran like that during football tryouts you woulda made the team.”

Phil turned away, shoving his hands in his pockets. “I wasn’t scared. You told me to run, so I did.”

“Okay, tough guy—prove you aren’t scared.” Rory pointed at the black door. “You go in first.”

Phil chewed his lower lip. If he didn’t go in, Rory would never let him forget it. The teasing would last for eternity.

Why the hell did he hang out with Rory anyway?

“I knew you were chicken.”

“Kiss my ass, Rory.”

Phil grasped the knob and pulled.

The massive door opened with a whisper, moving smoothly despite its weight. Warm, stale air enveloped Phil, and the sound of his own breathing echoed back at him.

So quiet.

Rory switched on the flashlight. The small beam played over four bare walls.

“It’s empty.”

“Shine the light on the floor.”

The cone of light jerked to the center of the room, bending over the edge of a large, round pit and disappearing into the darkness.

“What the hell is that?”

Rory crept up to the edge, holding his flashlight out in front of him like a sword. He peered down into the pit.

“Do you smell that?”

“Yeah. Rotten eggs. I think it’s coming from the hole.”

Phil glanced over his shoulder again, taking a quick peek at the house.

The light was back on.

“Rory—”

“There’s a rusty ladder going down.”

“The light is—”

“Shh! Do you hear that?”

Both boys held their breath. There was a quick, rhythmic thumping, coming from deep within the pit.

Bump...bump...bump...bump...bump...

“What is that? Footsteps?”

...bump...bump...bump...bump...

“It’s getting louder.”

The sound quickened, like a Harley accelerating.

“I think something’s coming up the ladder.”

Phil decided he’d had enough. This was the part in the movie where the stupid kids got their guts ripped out, and he didn’t want to stick around for it. He spun on his heels and hauled ass for the entrance, just in time to see a very old man with a pulpy, misshapen face slam the door closed.

Phil grabbed for the knob and pushed, but the door held firm.

“He locked us in! Old Man Loki locked us in!”

Rory kept his focus on the pit. “I think I can see some...”

A black hairy thing sprang out of the hole and yanked Rory downward. The flashlight spun in the empty air for the briefest of seconds, and then fell into the pit after Rory, the light dimming until the room was drenched in pitch black.

Phil stood stock-still in the darkness.

A minute passed.

Five.

He heard whimpering, and realized it was his own.

This can't be happening, he thought. Why was this happening?

Bump.

A sound. Coming from the pit.

The thing was climbing the ladder.

Phil forced himself to back up until he was pressed against the door.

"Hailmaryfulofgracethelordiswithyou—"

...bump...bump...bump...bump...bump...

"—blessedartthouamong—"

The noise crescendoed, then stopped.

The silence was horrible.

Phil couldn't see anything, but he could feel the presence of something large and warm coming towards him. Something that smelled like rotten eggs and wet dog.

He screamed, and kept screaming when it wrapped its prickly tentacles around his face, a thousand hooks digging in and pulling. Phil's hands shot up to push the pain away, and similar barbs shot into his palms.

His screaming stopped when the barbs filled his open mouth.

Then, with a quick tug, Phil was dragged down into the pit.

There was a sensation of falling, skin burning and tearing away, consciousness blurring into a darkness as complete as the one that surrounded him.

And suddenly, Phil was watching a movie in his head. A shaky, black and white film of him and Rory breaking into Old Man Loki's mansion. Rory had the crowbar, and they used it on Loki, breaking his bones, bashing his face, demanding his money. Old Man Loki moaning the whole time, "*The shed! The shed!*" Repeating it over and over, even when Rory jammed the crowbar down the old man's throat.

The movie abruptly cut to Phil as a much older man, clad in an orange prison uniform. He was strapped to a chair, a guard swabbing electrolyte on his temples and his left leg. The switch was thrown and Phil's blood began to boil within his veins, every nerve locked in agony.

Phil watched the prison doctor pronounce him dead, watched as his own soul left his body, transporting him to Loki's estate.

A terrifying déjà vu ensued as he viewed himself acting out the same scenario he'd experienced only moments ago. Breaking into the shed—the thing grabbing Rory—getting dragged into the pit—

When Phil finally caught up with himself, he discovered he was in a small, stone dungeon.

Next to him, a forty-year-old version of Rory was chained to a medieval torture rack, naked and stretched out until his shoulders had separated. His body was a haven of slithering, spiny worms, which burrowed underneath his skin.

“Hi, buddy.” Rory offered a bloody smile, his teeth filed down to exposed nerves. “Be nice to have some company.”

Phil remembered that Rory had been executed eight years prior.

“What’s going on? What happened to the shed?”

Rory whimpered, a worm tunneling into his ear. “Old Man Loki didn’t have no shed. That’s why we beat him to death. Kept saying it over and over, when we asked him where his money was.”

“But we just broke into the shed.”

The worm stitched out of Rory’s nose, trailing crimson mucus. “The shed is the doorway to this place. I remember breaking in, too. Right after I died.”

Phil squeezed his eyes shut. His temples still burned where the electrodes had been attached. But the memory of his own death dwarfed the fear he felt right now.

He opened his eyes and tried to bolt, panic surging through him. But, like Rory, he found himself tied to a rack. His eyes fell upon a fire pit, where a dozen branding irons glowed white.

A squat, hairy man entered the room. He had sharp horns sticking out of his head where ears would normally be, and his skin was a dull shade of crimson.

He picked up a hot iron and gave Phil a fanged grin.

“Welcome to eternity, Phil. Let’s get started.”

Them's Good Eats

I had this terrible little story idea stuck in my head for almost twenty years, and finally put it down on paper for the collection Gratia Placente published by Apex Digest. One of my rare jumps into science-fiction, though this is more horrific black humor than sci-fi.

“Damn, Jimmy Bob, these are damn good cracklins.”

Earl’s face—wrinkled and sporting three days’ worth of gray whiskers—glistened with a fine sheen of lard. A hot Georgia breeze blew smells of tilled earth and manure, but the overpowering scent was pig skins, fresh from the deep fryer. Earl eagerly reached for the plate Jimmy Bob held out, a pile of pork rinds stacked onto a grease-soaked paper towel.

“Thanks, Earl,” Jimmy Bob said. “Got me a new way of preparation.”

“Tell me.” Earl scooped two more into his mouth and chewed so fast he risked a tongue severing. “I been eating cracklins since I was weened off the tit, ain’t never had any this good before.”

“It’s a secret.”

“Chicken shit. Tell me or I’ll beat it out of you.”

Jimmy Bob snorted, a sound not unlike a fat bullfrog croaking. He slapped Earl on the back, hard enough to make the old man’s dentures slup off his gums and out of his mouth. The teeth bounced onto the dirty wooden porch.

Jimmy Bob stared down at Earl, a man half his weight and forty years his senior, and smiled big.

“Well, I wouldn’t want to take a beating, Earl. The secret, my good buddy, is skinning the piggies while they still alive and kicking.”

“Doe thip?” Earl said. He’d been going for “no shit” but hadn’t stuck his teeth back in yet.

Jimmy Bob held up his hand, preacherman-style. "That's the God's truth, Earl. Something about them porkers struggling and squealing before they die, tenderizes their skins and imparts that extra tangy sensation. Longer they struggle, tastier they get."

Earl wiped his falsies on his bib overalls and slurped them into his eating hole.

"You're putting me on," Earl said.

"You got a dead spider in your bridgework, Earl."

Earl picked out a dry Daddy Longlegs and flicked it over his shoulder, then repeated his prior statement.

"I'm honest as the day is scorchin', Earl. Ain't just the cracklings, neither. Bacon comes out so juicy it melts in your mouth, and you can cut the pork chop with a spoon they're so tender."

"Now I know you're funning me, Jim Bob. Ain't no way you can carve up a hog while it's still kicking. It would run like the dickens, and the blood would make it all slippery."

"I built me a hog rack, out of wood. Keeps it locked in place while I do the carving. Put on the salt and vinegar while they're still wiggling, so it soaks in. Louder then hell, but you're tasting the results. Want another one?"

"Hell yeah."

Earl was reaching for more when the big silver saucer flew out from behind a fluffy white cloud, situated itself over Jimmy Bob's porch, and hit the two men with a beam of light.

There was a moment of searing hot pain, then darkness.



Jimmy Bob awoke on his back. His head hurt. His last memory was of Earl, who had come over with a mason jar full of his rotgut corn shine, and he figured he had himself a granddaddy hangover. But Jimmy Bob couldn't remember drinking any of the shine. All he could recall was eating cracklins.

He stared up at the ceiling, and realized it wasn't his ceiling. It was silver, and curvy.

Then he noticed he was naked. Even worse, Earl was on the floor next to him, similarly declodded.

"Oh sweet Jesus, how drunk did we get?"

Jimmy Bob reached for his nether regions, but nothing down there seemed to ache from use. Thank the lord for that.

He sat up, the metal floor smooth and cool under his buttocks, and looked around. The room they were in was all silver. No furniture. No carpet. No doors or windows. No lights, even though he could see just fine. It was like being inside a giant metal can.

Then Jimmy Bob jerked, remembering the spaceship in the sky, the blinding bright light.

An unidentified flying saucer. A UFO.

Lordy, him and Earl had been abducted.

He nudged his old buddy.

“Earl! Get your ass up. We’re in some shit.”

Earl didn’t move.

“Goddammit, Earl!”

He shoved Earl again. Earl remained still. Jimmy Bob noticed his friend wasn’t breathing, and had taken on an unhealthy bluish tint.

Jimmy Bob knew about CPR from watching TV, and much as he didn’t want to touch lips with the older man, especially since they both were nekkid, he forced Earl’s mouth open and blew hard down the old geezer’s throat.

His breath didn’t go nowhere, no matter how hard he gusted, and Jimmy Bob squinted down and saw the big bulge in Earl’s neck.

Earl has swallowed his falsies.

Jimmy Bob stuck his finger into Earl’s mouth, tried to fish the teeth out, but they were down too far and Earl’s throat was cold and slimy and disgusting and after ten or so seconds Jimmy Bob realized he didn’t like Earl that much to begin with so he took his hand back and wiped the spit off on Earl’s thick tangle of gray chest hairs.

Jimmy Bob wondered if he should say some words, but he didn’t know no prayers and then he got really scared because he was alone—all alone—in an alien spaceship, so he tried to give Earl CPR again.

It didn’t work no better the second time, and then Jimmy Bob got up and started pacing back and forth, terrible thoughts bouncing around in his bean.

He’d seen all the movies. Starship Troopers. Independence Day. War of the Worlds. Alien. Predator. Alien vs. Predator. No good ever came out of being abducted. The aliens were always bad guys who wanted to take over the world or eat people’s guts or hunt humans for sport or get folks pregnant in their bellies or give painful probes up the brown place.

Jimmy Bob didn't want none of that to happen to him. He wondered why those guys that made movies never made one about an alien who came to earth and gave a lucky farmer a brand new plow. He'd watch that on the cable, for sure. But instead it was always death rays and cut-off heads.

Jimmy Bob yelled for help, loud as he could, so loud his ears hurt. No one answered.

He ran to the nearest wall, pushed against it. The surface was slippery, almost like it was covered with a fine layer of grease. He grunted with effort, but the metal was solid, immobile. Jimmy Bob walked around the room, trying to find some sort of seam, some sort of crease. Everything he touched was rock solid and perfectly smooth.

Jimmy Bob sat in the center of the room and hugged his knees to his chest. He wondered if they was still flying over earth, or if they was already in another universe, about to land on some weird planet with rivers made of acid and trees that looked like rib bones. He wondered what the aliens looked like. Tall and gray with big glowin eyes? Green and scaly with sharp fangs? Or did they have fish heads, like that commander guy in Star Wars? And what did they want from him?

Was it the butt probes?

He looked at Earl. Earl got off easy, the lucky bastard. Maybe Jimmy Bob could fish out those false teeth and choke on them himself. Not a bad idea, considering. He began to crawl towards his dead friend when he heard a buzzing sound.

It sounded like a pissed off hornet, and seemed to come from everywhere at once. Jimmy Bob looked around, tried to find the source, and noticed a pinpoint of white light on the wall. First it was a real tiny, and then it grew into a larger and larger circle until it was the size of a manhole cover.

Death ray.

Jimmy Bob crabbed backwards, trying to get away for the death ray, but there was no place to go. He retreated until he was up against the opposite wall, fists and teeth clenched, waiting for the final *ZAP* that would make his skeleton light up then turn him into cigarette ashes.

The *ZAP* didn't come. In fact, the more he looked at the light, the more Jimmy Bob began to think it looked more like a door than a death ray.

Was this some kind of alien trick? If he went through the door, would he be hunted down like a deer, aliens in big orange coats chasing him through the woods? Would he have to fight in some alien gladiator battle? Would he be forced to squat on a probe the size of a fire plug?

Maybe none of those things. Maybe this was a chance to escape.

Jimmy Bob took a quick look at lumpy-throat Earl, then sprang to his feet and ran for the circle of light. He was almost upon it when something flew out the doorway at him.

It was large, and red, and hit him in the chest with the force of a football tackle. Jimmy Bob tumbled backwards, the weight of the thing pinning him down, blanketing him in a warm, wet goo.

Jimmy Bob screamed.

The thing on top of him also screamed, and Jimmy Bob bucked and pushed and got it off and scurried away, his eyes focusing on a creepy crimson alien, completely hairless, dripping head to toe with some kind of blood-like fluid.

No, it wasn't blood-like. It was actual blood.

And the creature wasn't an alien.

"No more," it whimpered. Its voice was thick and wet.

Like Jimmy Bob, it was naked. A man. A human man. Or what was left of one. Every square inch of his body was bleeding, thick and viscous like he'd been dunked in raspberry preserves. The man lay on his back, trembling, red smudges coating the floor where he had rolled.

"Hey buddy, you okay?" Jimmy Bob asked, knowing how ridiculous it must have sounded.

"No more...please...no more..."

Jimmy Bob chewed his lower lip and looked the man over. There didn't seem to be any main wound. Instead, his whole body was a wound. He hadn't been skinned—Jimmy Bob didn't see any exposed muscle or fat on the man. No, this man looked more like he'd been worked over with a cheese grater. Every square inch was raw and bloody. Even his eyelids looked scraped.

"What happened to you?" Jimmy Bob asked.

The man's chest rose and fell. "Kill me," he said.

"Who are you?"

"Please...kill me. I tried to...kill myself...by breaking open my head...but I always knock myself out first."

The bleeding man lifted his head then rammed it viciously into the floor, making a hollow pinging sound.

“Are we on an alien ship?” Jimmy Bob asked.

The man’s eyes opened, startlingly white compared to the redness of his body. His eyes locked on Jimmy Bob.

“I’m begging you...kill me...”

Jimmy Bob crawled over to the man.

“Answer my questions.”

“I want to die.”

Jimmy Bob slapped him. The man howled like a dog with a toothache.

“Keep it together. I need to know what’s going on.”

Rather than reply, the man began to sob. Jimmy Bob slapped him once more. And a few times after that. It was like hitting a wet fish.

“Damn it, tell me what’s going on! Answer me!”

“I’ll...I’ll tell you...if you promise to kill me after.”

Jimmy Bob considered it. He’d never killed a man before, but if anyone needed killing, this poor bastard did. He figured he could snap his neck, if’n he got a good hold of it. Couldn’t be any harder than breaking hog necks, which he did with tasty regularity.

“Deal. Now tell me what’s happening.”

“Appealing. It’s appealing.”

The man began to sob again, and Jimmy Bob smacked him on the chest to get his attention.

“What’s appealing?”

“They...pulled them all off.”

“You’re not making sense. Start at the beginning.”

“They...caught me when I was in the woods...hunting coon. Ship. A big white light. At first I didn’t know where I was...didn’t know what had happened. They left me in this room. I don’t know...for how long. But then...they came.”

“Who?”

“Aliens. Short...like midgets. Big heads and tiny mouths. Scales instead of skin. They took me...took me to the room and...”

The man began to cry again. Jimmy Bob dug his fingernails into the man’s shoulder to help him focus.

“And what?”

“And they put me...in the machine. It...it scraped my skin off.”

“But why? Why torture you? Did they ask you questions?”

“No.”

“Were you,” Jimmy Bob winced, “probed?”

“They...they kept me in there...just long enough.”

“Long enough for what?”

“For me to bleed. Then they took me here. I thought it was over. But they came back. They always come back.”

“For what? What do they want?”

The buzzing sound began again, and the pinpoint light on the wall began to grow.

“Kill me! You promised!”

Jimmy Bob backed up to the other side of the room, fear oozing out of every pore. Two figures stepped through the light. They were short, green, with heads like watermelons and tiny little black eyes. True to form, they wore little silver suits, and held little silver ray guns.

“Get away from me, you stinking space iguanas!” yelled Jimmy Bob.

They shot their little guns, and Jimmy Bob was paralyzed where he stood, his muscles locked by an unpleasant tingle of electricity. Space tasers. He strained to move but couldn’t.

The aliens approached, walking in a strange, waddling gait, as if their oversized heads were threatening to tip them over. Jimmy Bob noticed childlike, almost delicate, noses and mouths on their broad faces, and their black rat eyes had a glint of red to them. He watched as they went to Earl, poked him with their clawed fingers, and then spoke rapidly to each other in some foreign space language that sounded a lot like that singing chipmunk cartoon. They didn’t look happy.

Jimmy Bob tried to speak, but his jaw felt like it had been wired shut and he could only manage a few grunts. If only he could talk, maybe he could get out of this. Reason with them. Or bribe them. Maybe they’d like Jimmy Bob’s complete collection of state quarters, each coin in mint condition and sealed in a protective plastic case. Or maybe they’d want his grandma’s antique sterling silver serving set, complete except for a single salad fork that he broke adjusting the carb on his Chevy.

Jimmy Bob tried to say, “Silverware,” but only a grunt came out. They didn’t seem impressed. Their little iguana claws latched onto his wrists and pulled him forward with amazing ease. Jimmy Bob noticed for the first time that he was floating a few inches about the floor, and

they tugged him along as if he were a balloon. The aliens maneuvered him through the opening, and he caught a last glimpse of his bleeding cellmate, who had resumed bashing his own head into the floor.

Jimmy Bob was pulled through a large metal tube, first right, then left, then down a gradual incline sort of like those tube slides at Chuck E. Cheese. The aliens kept chittering to each other, and one of them patted Jimmy Bob on the thigh and smiled.

Maybe this will be okay, Jimmy Bob thought. Maybe they won't hurt me.

A few seconds later, Jimmy Bob was placed into a large upright box, which closed around him like a coffin and dipped him into complete darkness.

Then, agony.

At first, it felt like being burned alive. But there wasn't any heat. The pain was the same, though, every nerve in his body firing at once. It was as if someone was using a power sander on his body, scraping every inch from head to toe. There was even a probe, but it felt more like a giant drill bit, coring out his unhappy place. Jimmy Bob screamed in his throat, screamed until he was sure it bled like the rest of him.

After an unknown amount of time, Jimmy Bob passed out.

He came to while being pulled back through the hallway, and then shot, like a rocket, back through the doorway and back into the original room. He hit the floor with a wet splat, and rolled onto his belly, the pain driving him mad, eating him alive. He was no longer frozen by the ray gun taser, but he dared not twitch because even the slightest movement was torture.

"Kill me," someone said.

He glanced right, his eyes already crusting with dried blood, and saw his cellmate.

Jimmy Bob asked, "Why are they doing this?" but it came out garbled—even his tongue had been scraped raw.

"Been here...weeks...maybe months. They use...an IV...so we don't die..."

"Why?" Jimmy Bob asked again.

"Snacks."

Jimmy Bob wasn't sure he heard right.

"What?"

"We're snacks."

“How? They suck our blood?”

His cellmate sobbed.

“Scabs. They wait until we heal, then peel off the scabs and eat them. Like beef jerky.”

Jimmy Bob moaned. Those little iguana bastards were going to wait until his scoured body began to scab over, and then tear off the scabs? He couldn't bear it.

“A dozen of them come in with pliers,” the man said, even though Jimmy Bob didn't want to hear no more, “They peel off every last piece. They're slow eaters, too.”

“Jesus, no.”

“And...” the man became full blown hysterical, “they dip us in salt and vinegar so we taste better!”

Jimmy Bob squeezed his eyes shut. He could already feel the sores on his body begin to heal, begin to clot. The light on the wall appeared, and began to get bigger.

“You promised to kill me!” the man shrieked at Jimmy Bob.

A bunch of space iguanas filed in, chirping at each other like Alvin and the band, snapping gleaming metal pincers. One of them held up a bottle of hot sauce.

“NOOOOOO!” Jimmy Bob began to scream before the space taser froze his vocal parts.

Then the snacking began.

Jimmy Bob hadn't thought his pain could get any worse.

But it did.

First Time

I wrote this when I turned thirty. I never was able to sell it, perhaps because it's a bit too obvious. This is also one of the few shorts I've ever written with an omniscient narrator, popping into the heads of more than one person in the same scene.

“Were you nervous your first time?”

Robby didn't break stride. He could clearly remember that smelly hotel room, Father paying the money, the girl naked and waiting.

“A little,” he answered his brother. “Everyone's nervous the first time.”

“I guess I am too. A little.”

Pete looked it. Thirteen and small for his age, lost in one of Robby's old T-shirts. But that's how Robby was at thirteen, walking into that room. And ten minutes later, he walked out a man, ready to take on the whole damn world. Robby wished their father was there, then cursed himself for the thought. He was the man of the family now, since Father had gone away. It was his job to initiate Pete.

“How long do I have?” Pete asked.

“Long as it takes. Once you pay, you're there 'till it's done.”

“Is it a lot different from animals?” They lived on a farm, so both boys had a lot of experience with animals.

“A lot different. Think about it. A real woman, like in one of those magazines. Naked and all yours. Maybe I'll even do one too.”

“Really?” Robby knew he wouldn't. They didn't have enough money for two. Besides, Robby did it enough at home. He was eighteen, and picked up women whenever he liked. His boyish good looks, just this side of full-blown manhood, attracted girls like flies to compost. Robby was a real lady killer.

“Are we almost there Robby?”

“Almost.”

The neighborhood was seedy, all cracked sidewalks and graffiti and urine soaked winos. It hadn't changed at all since Father brought him here, those years ago. He could still picture the face of his first girl—oval, with high cheek bones and bright red lipstick that made her mouth look like a wound. Her eyes were vacant, wasted on some drug, but not so wasted that she didn't moan when he stuck it in.

You never forget your first.

The boys cut through an alley, rats scurrying out of their path. Pete moved a little closer to his brother. He was nervous, but didn't want to show it. Robby was his hero. He wanted to make him proud. He relished every story Robby told him about his times with women, forever caught between awe and envy. Now it was his turn.

"Did Father watch you?" Robby asked.

"Yeah. He watched. Afterward he said he was real proud of how I gave it to her."

Pete's face bunched up.

"I don't remember Father so good. Before they took him away."

"Father's a great man. We'll see him again some day. Don't worry."

Pete looked up at his older brother. "Will you watch me, Robby?"

"If you want me too."

"I want you too."

"I will then. Here we are."

The alley door was brown and rotten. Robby kicked it twice.

"I got money!" That was what Father had said five years ago, and Robby's chest swelled saying the same words. After a moment the door inched open. A red eye peered through the crack.

"You the ones called earlier?"

The boys nodded.

"You cops?" Pete giggled.

"Hell no, we ain't cops!"

The door opened, revealing a short, thick man with hairy arms.

"Thirty bucks."

Robby took six fives from his pocket and laid them out one at a time. They quickly disappeared into the man's dirty jeans.

"You or the kid?"

"It will be Pete tonight," Robby said.

They followed the man through a hall lit with single bare bulb, down some stairs, and into a basement thick with mold. Against the

wall, naked and waiting, was the girl. She was fatter than Robby's first one, with dirty knees and smeared lipstick and so much blue eye shadow she looked like a peacock. But there was some life in her eyes, a tiny spark that hadn't been totally dulled by the drugs.

"Hey, hey guys," she said, her voice slurring. "Untie me and we can party, okay?"

"You bring your own?" the man asked Pete.

Pete nodded, patting his pocket. The man spit on the floor, and then left the basement.

"What's your name, beautiful?" Robby asked. He put a hand on her cheek and she nuzzled against his touch.

"Candy. Can you untie my hands? I'm better when I can use my hands."

"Hi Candy, this is Pete. You're gonna be his first."

"Hey, Petey," she flashed him a whore's smile, a curved mouth without any trace of warmth. "Come get some Candy, baby."

Pete licked his lips and gave his brother a glance. Robby nodded his approval, and backed away.

"She's all yours, Pete. Do her good."

Pete looked at her, hanging there by her wrists, and couldn't believe this was really happening. It was almost as if he wasn't there, but rather above himself someplace, watching everything going on.

She protested when she saw the knife. The protest was soon replaced by crying. Pete made some tentative cuts at first. Her screams were so loud that it freaked him out.

"No one can hear," Robby assured him. "Just mind the blood."

Getting brave, Pete jabbed deeper and harder. It was just like Robby had told him. She cried. She begged. And every sound made Pete hate her even more. The excitement built and built, and he cut faster and harder, and finally he lost control and stuck the knife in her neck and there was a gurgling choking sound and then she wasn't moving.

Pete took a step back, his heart hammering, the thick smell of blood filling his nostrils. He was excited, but disappointed that it ended so fast. Robby patted his shoulder.

"Nice job. I'm proud of you. Father would be proud too."

"It wasn't...too quick?" Robby laughed.

"The first one is always quick. You'll be able to last longer the more you do it."

The door opened behind them. It was the short man, with a mop and bucket. Pete looked at the dead girl, wishing he could take her home as a trophy. He settled on the left breast, putting it in a plastic bag we brought with for the purpose.

"A breast man," Robby laughed. "Just like Father."

"When can I do it again, Robby?"

"Whenever you want. I'll teach you how to get women, just like Father taught me. It gets more and more fun each time. Remember to wipe off your knife. We'll ditch it down a sewer grate on the way home."

Robby made a show of eyeing the body.

"Good work. You really wrangled some screams out of her. Didn't I tell you it was more fun than slaughtering a pig?"

"A lot more fun. I'm gonna write Father in prison, tell him I finally did it."

"Good idea. He'd like that. Now I think you deserve—some ice cream!"

Pete grabbed his older brother and hugged him.

"Thanks, Robby."

Robby took a deep breath, filling his lungs with pride. He thought about Tommy and Ed and Jasper, all younger than Pete, all anxious for their first times.

"After the ice cream, let's tell our brothers. Tommy's turn is coming up in October."

"He's gonna love it," Pete said, and the two of them walked out of the basement, through the building, and down the alley, searching the seedy neighborhood for a place that sold soft serve.

Forgiveness

The toughest horror magazine to get into is Cemetery Dance, and I sent them a few things before they finally published this one. Odd thing though, they never gave me a formal acceptance, or a contract, or a check. I only knew it saw print because some guy at a writing convention brought a copy up to me to sign.

The woman putting the tube into my penis has cold hands.

She's younger than I am—everyone is younger than I am—but she betters me in the wrinkle department; scowl lines, frown lines, deep-set creases between the eyebrows. The first woman to touch my peter in fifty years, and she has to be a gargoyle.

I close my eyes, wince as the catheter inches inward, my nostrils dilating with ammonia and pine-lemon disinfectant and something else that I knew so well.

Death.

Death has many smells. Sometimes it smells like licking copper pennies out of used public washrooms. Other times it smells like cold cuts pickled in vinegar, left in the sun to rot.

On me it smells sour. Gassy and bloated and ripe.

"There you go, Mr. Parson." She pulls down my gown and covers me with the thin blanket. Her voice is perfunctory, emotionless.

She knows who I am, what I've done.

"I'd like to talk to someone."

"Who?"

"A priest."

She purses her lips, lines deepening around her mouth in cat whisker patterns.

"I'll see what I can do."

The nurse leaves.

I stare at the white cinder block walls over the hump of my distended stomach. Edema. My body can no longer purge itself of fluid, and I look ten months pregnant. The morphine drip controls the worst of the pain, the sharp stuff. But the dull, cold ache of my insides rotting away can't be dampened by any drug.

The room is cool, dry, quiet. No clock in here. No TV. No window. The door doesn't have bars, but it is reinforced with steel and only opens with a key.

As if escape is still an option.

Time passes, and I go into my mind and tried to figure out what I want to say, how to say it. So many things to straighten out.

The next thing I know the priest is sitting beside the bed, nudging me awake.

"You wanted to see me, Mr. Parson?"

Young, blond, good-looking, his Roman collar starched and bright. Youthful idealism sparkles in his eyes.

Life hasn't knocked the hope out of him yet.

"Do you know who I am, Father?"

He smiles. Even white teeth. Little points on the canines.

"I've been informed."

I watch his face. "Then you know what I've done?"

"Yes."

I see patience, serenity. Old crimes don't shock people— they have the emotional impact of lackluster history books.

But the crimes are still fresh in my mind. They're always fresh. The images. The sounds.

The tastes.

"I've killed people, Father. Innocent people."

"God forgives those who seek forgiveness."

My tongue feels big in my mouth. I speak through trembling lips. "I've been locked up in here since your parents were babies."

He rests his elbows on his knees, leaning in closer. His hair smells like soap, and he's recently had a breath mint.

"You've spent most of your life in this place, paying your debt to society. Isn't it time to pay your debt to the Lord?"

And what of the Lord's debt to me?

I cough up something wet and bloody. The priest gives me a tissue from the bedside table. I ball it up in my fist, squeeze it tight.

"What's your name, Father?"

“Bob.”

“Father Bob—I’ve got cancer turning my insides into mush. The pain, sometimes, is unbearable. But I deserve that and more for what I’ve done.”

I pause, meet his eyes.

“You know I was once a priest.”

He pats my hand, his fingers brushing my IV.

“I know, Mr. Parson.”

Smug. Was I that smug, when I was young?

“I’m in here for killing twelve people.”

Another pat on the hand.

“But there were more than twelve, Father.”

Many more. So many more.

His complacent smile slips a notch.

“How many were there, Mr. Parson?”

The number is intimate to me, something I haven’t ever shared before.

“One hundred and sixty-seven.”

The smile vanishes, and he blinks several times.

“One hundred and—”

I interrupt. “They were children, mostly. War orphans. No one ever missed them. I’d pick them up at night, offer them money or food. There was a place, out by the docks, where no one could hear the screams. Do you know how I killed them?”

A head shake, barely perceptible.

“My teeth, Father. I tied them up—tied them up naked and filthy and screaming—and I kept biting them until they died.”

The priest turns away, his face the color of the walls.

“Mr. Parson, I...”

The memories fill my head; the dirty, bloody flesh, the piercing cries for help, the wharf rats scurrying over my feet and fighting for scraps...

“It isn’t easy, Father, to break the skin. Human teeth aren’t made for tearing. You have to nip with the front incisors until you make a small hole, then clench down hard and tug back, putting your neck and shoulders into it. It took a long time. Sometimes hours for them to die.”

I sigh through my teeth.

“I’d make them eat bits of themselves...”

The priest stands, but I grab his wrist with the little strength I had left. He can't leave, not yet.

"Please, Father. I need Penance."

He takes a breath, stares at me. Watching him regain composure is like watching a drunk wake up in a strange bed. He manages it, finally, but some of that youthful idealism is gone.

"Are you sorry for what you've done?"

"I'm sorry, Father." The tears come, a rusty faucet that has gone unused for years. "I'm sorry and I beg for God's forgiveness. I'm...so...alone. I've been so alone."

He touches my face as if petting a crocodile, but I'm grateful for the touch.

The tears don't last long. I swat them away with tissue.

Together we say the Act of Contrition.

The words are familiar on my tongue, but my conscience isn't eased.

There's more.

"Rest now, Mr. Parson." He makes the sign of the cross on my forehead with his thumb, but his eyes keep flitting to the door, the way out.

"Father..."

"Yes?"

I have to proceed carefully here. "How strong is your faith?"

"Unshakable."

"What if...what if you no longer needed faith?"

"I will always need faith, Mr. Parson."

For the first time since his arrival, I allow myself a small smile. "Not if you have proof."

"What do you mean?"

"If there is proof that God exists, you'd no longer need faith. You would have knowledge—tangible knowledge."

He narrows his eyes. "You have this proof? A lapsed priest?"

"Defrocked, Father. My title was stripped."

"Of course it was. You killed..."

I sigh, wet and heavy. "You misunderstand, Father Bob. They didn't defrock me because of the murders. My vocation was taken away from me because I knew too much."

I lower my voice so he must lean closer to hear me.

"I KNOW God exists, Father."

The priest frowns, folds his arms.

“The great mystery of Faith is that we accept God without knowing. If God wanted us to truly know, he would appear on earth and touch us.”

I raise my hand, point at him.

“You’re wrong there, Father. He has come down and touched us. Touched me.” This is the tricky part. “Would you like to see the proof?”

I almost shout with glee when he nods his head.

“Sit, Father Bob. This story takes a while.”

He sits beside me, his face a mixture of interest and wariness.

My mouth is dry. I take a sip from a cup of tepid water, soak my tongue.

“Fresh from the Seminary, I was sent to Western Samoa, a group of islands in the South Pacific. It’s tropical paradise, the population predominantly Christian. A garden of Eden, one of the most beautiful places on earth. Except for the hurricanes. I arrived after a particularly devastating storm wiped out most of Apia, the capitol.”

It comes back in fragments, a series of faded snapshots. After a twenty hour plane ride, I landed in little more than a field. The island air and deep blue beaches were a stark contrast to the wholesale destruction throughout the land. I saw livestock rotting in trees. Overturned cars with little brown arms jutting out crookedly beneath them. Roofs in the middle of streets, and jagged pipes planted in piles of rubble where schools once stood.

Worst of all was the constant, keening sob that hung over the city like a cloud.

So many ruined lives.

“It looked like God had smashed His mighty fist down on that country. How could He have allowed this? I had to assist in the amputation of a man’s legs, without anesthetic because there was none left. I had to help mothers bury their babies using gnarled traffic signs to dig graves. I gave so much blood I almost died myself.”

“Natural disasters are a test of one’s faith.”

I shake my head.

“It didn’t test mine. I was sure in my faith, like you are. But it made me question God’s intent.”

“We cannot question God, Mr. Parson.”

“But we do anyway, don’t we?”

I sip more water before I continue.

“In Western Samoa, I did God’s work. I helped to heal. To rebuild. I restarted the parish. I preached to these poor, proud people about God’s grace, and they believed me. Things slowly got back to normal. And then the murders began.”

I close my eyes and see the first body, as if it is in the room with me now. The eyes jut out of the bloody, ruined face like two golf balls pushed into the meat of a watermelon. The flesh is peeled away, in some places exposing pink bone. A rat pokes its greasy head out of a lacerated abdomen and squeals in gluttonous delight.

“Every seven days, another mutilated body was discovered. The police didn’t seem to care. Neither did my congregation. They accepted it like they accepted the hurricane; sad but unavoidable.”

Father Bob folds his arms, eyebrows furrowing.

“Were you killing those people, Mr. Parson?”

“No...it turned out to be one of my parishioners. A fisherman with a wife and three kids. He came to me just after he butchered one—came into my Confessional drenched in blood, bits of tissue sticking to his nails and teeth. Begged me for forgiveness.”

The man had been short, painfully thin for a Samoan. His eyes were the eyes of the damned, flickering like windblown candles, both insane and afraid.

“He claimed he was a victim of a curse. A curse that had been plaguing his island for millennia.”

“Did you dismiss his superstitions?”

“At first. While Christians, the islanders had a distant connection to paganism, sometimes fell back to it. I tried to convince him the curse wasn’t real, to turn himself in. I begged him that God didn’t want any more killing.”

I was so earnest, so full of the Word. Convinced I was doing God’s work.

“He laughed at me. He said that killing is exactly what God wanted.”

The priest shakes his head. He speaks with the sing-song voice of a kindergarten teacher. “God is all-loving. Killing is a result of free-will. We had the paradise of Eden, and chose knowledge instead of bliss.”

I scowl at him.

“God created mankind *knowing* that we’d fall from grace. It’s like having a child, knowing a child will be hungry, and then punishing the child for that hunger.”

Father Bob leans in, apparently flustered. “God’s grace...”

“God has no grace,” I spit. “He’s a vengeful, vindictive God. A sadist, who plays with mankind like a child pulling the wings off of flies. Samoa was Eden, Father. The real Eden, straight out of the Bible. The murderer, he showed me a mark on his scalp.”

I lift up my bangs, reveal the Mark at my hairline.

“Witness, Father Bob! Proof that God truly exists!”

The priest opens his mouth. It takes a moment before words came out.

“Is that...?”

I nod. I feel inner strength, the strength that had forsaken me so long ago.

“It’s the Mark of Cain, given to the son of Adam when he slew Abel. But the Bible was inaccurate on that point—Cain didn’t wander the earth forever, but his curse did, passed on from man to man for thousands of years. Passed on to me from the murderer in Samoa.”

The Mark grows warm on my head, begins to burn.

“This is your proof of God, Father.”

He stands abruptly, his chair tumbling backwards. I grin at him.

“How does it feel to no longer need faith?”

Father Bob falls to his knees, weeping.

“My God...my sweet God...”

Abruptly, blessedly, the burning sensation disappears. I laugh, laugh for the first time in decades, laugh with a sense of perfect relief.

Father Bob presses his hands to his forehead. He screams, just once, a soul shattering epiphany that I understand so well.

“The Lord be with you, Father Bob.”

And then he falls upon me, mouth open.

I try to push him away, but am no match.

His first few bites are awkward, but he quickly learns my technique.

Nip.

Clench.

Pull.

The pain is exquisite. So much worse than cancer.

So much better...

Redux

Another story for a Twilight Tales anthology. This was the first story of mine they ever accepted, for the collection Spooks. I'm mixing genres again, this time PI noir and ghost stories.

“Let me get this straight—you want me to murder you tonight?”

She nodded. “At midnight. As violently as possible.”

I leaned back, my office chair creaking in distress. The woman sitting across from me was mid-thirties, thin, well groomed. Her blonde hair, pulled back in a tight bun, held a platinum luster, and the slash of red lipstick she wore made her lips look like a wound. There was something familiar about her, or maybe it was my whiskey goggles.

I blinked at my watch. 11:00am. I'd been soused since breakfast.

“And this decision is because of your dead husband?”

“Yes.”

“You want to be—” I paused. “—reunited with him?”

A tricky word to pronounce, reunited, even when sober. But being a semi-professional drunk with some serious pro potential, it came out fine.

“I need to die, Mr. Arkin.”

“Call me Bert. And you haven't offered your name yet, Miss...”

“Ahh...Springfield. Doris Springfield.”

“Are you trying to atone for some sin, Ms. Springfield?”

Another tough sentence, but it slid out like butter.

“No. The death has to be violent, because a person needs to die violently in order to become a ghost.”

I blinked. Then I blinked again. Before my face gave anything away, I broke her stare and went looking through my desk drawer for the Emergency bottle. I took two strong pulls.

A frank look of pity, perhaps disgust, flit past her eyes.

I shrugged it off. Who was she to judge me? She was the one who came in here wanting a violent death.

The bottle went back into the drawer, and I wiped my mouth on the back of my jacket sleeve.

"It's medicinal." I didn't care if she believed it or not. "So...you want to die to become a ghost?"

"Yes. He haunts me, my husband does. Not in any of the clichéd methods you've heard about; I mean, he doesn't break dishes or rattle chains. Instead, every night, he comes to me and holds me when I'm in bed."

Her eyes went glassy, and I frowned. Tears made me uncomfortable.

"We're both so very alone, Mr. Arkin. I want to...I must...be with him."

"Ms. Springfield, I'm sorry for your loss. But murder is—"

"I have thirty-six thousand dollars."

The number gave my weak resistance pause. I could put money like that to good use.

Since I'd gotten kicked off the force, a grievous wrong since half the guys in the CPD are alkie, employment opportunities nowadays were slim. I work as a night watchman four times a week at a warehouse, and do the private investigator thing in my free time, mostly lapping up scraps that my friend Barney throws me. Barney is still on the Job, and whenever something minor comes along that the cops don't have time for, he funnels it my way. Mostly cheating spouses and runaway kids.

But Barney never sent me anyone who wanted to die.

"Just how did you find me, Ms. Springfield?"

"I...I heard about your problem."

"Which problem is that?"

Her eyes, tinged with red, locked onto me like laser sights.

"You're being haunted, too."

This time there was no hiding my reaction, and I recoiled as if slapped. My shaky hands fumbled with the desk drawer, unable to open it fast enough.

The whiskey burned going down, but I fought the pain and sucked until my eyes watered.

Rather than face her, I got up and walked over to the window. My third floor view of the alley didn't change much from winter to summer, but it did offer me a brief moment to collect my thoughts.

"Who told you?" I managed to say.

"I'd...I'd rather not say. I'm asking you to do something illegal, and if something should happen...well, I wouldn't want it getting back to him."

I searched my mental Rolodex for people I'd blabbed to about my problem. Hell, it could have been any bar jockey in any of three dozen gin joints going back two years.

When I drink, I talk.

So I wind up talking a lot.

"Does this person—the one who sent you here—know that you want to die?"

"No. I simply asked around for someone who believes in ghosts, and your name came up. Who haunts you, Mr. Arkin?"

I shut my eyes on the view.

"My mother," I lied.

"She died violently?"

"You could say that."

The booze made my tongue feel big in my mouth, and I began to forget where I was. Usually a good thing, but now...

"I can't do this, Ms. Springfield."

"There's no way to link it to you. You can use my gun."

"That's not the problem. I just don't want this kind of thing on my conscience."

"Is thirty-six thousand enough?"

"Yes. No. I don't know."

"I also have these."

I turned to look at her. She opened her purse and took out a small, white envelope.

"Diamonds, Mr. Arkin. About six carats worth. My husband was a jeweler, and he assured me they're worth over twenty thousand dollars. I was going to leave them to charity, but..."

"Look, Ms. Springfield—"

"I'll leave you the papers on these. That's almost sixty-thousand dollars, Mr. Arkin."

Sixty grand for my conscience?

Who was I kidding? My conscience wasn't worth sixty cents.

“Congratulations, Ms. Springfield. You’ve hired yourself a killer.

□ □ □

I stumbled out of Harvey’s Liquor on Diversey and took a nip right there in the middle of the street.

Chicago winter wind bit at my cheeks and face, making all the broken capillaries even redder. I stuck the bottle in my jacket and climbed into my car.

Driving was a blurry, dreamlike thing, but I managed to make it home. Truth be told, I’d driven a lot worse. At least I could still see the traffic signals.

My apartment, a little shoe box in Hyde Park, had the smell to go along with the ambience. Checking the fridge revealed just a dirty pat of butter and some old pizza crusts.

So I had a liquid lunch instead.

Part of me wanted to sober up so I wouldn’t make any mistakes tonight.

The other part wanted me to get drunk enough so I wouldn’t remember the details later.

I took a spotty glass from the sink and poured myself three fingers and sat down at my cheap dinette set and drank.

I had to admire the lady. She had guts, and her plan looked like it would work.

At 11:45pm I arrive at her house on Christiana off of Addison. Park in the K-Mart lot across the street. Access her place from the alley; she’ll leave her gate and her back door unlocked. The house will look like it had been robbed—drawers pulled out and pictures yanked off the walls. She’ll be in the bedroom, hand me the gun. A quick *blam-blam* in the brain pan, and I can leave with the diamonds and the cash. No witnesses, no muss, no fuss.

I got to pouring another drink when the screech of tires raped my ears and made me drop the bottle.

There was a room-shaking, sickening crunch of motor vehicle meeting flesh, followed by the thump-thump of a skull cracking under the front and rear tires.

“Leave me alone, you little bitch!”

She came out of the wall and hovered before me. Her glow was soft and yellow, a flashlight bulb going dead.

I avoided looking at her face, even as she moved closer.

“You’re a bad man, Mr. Arkin.”

I bit the inside of my cheek, refusing to be baited.

"A very baaaaaaad man."

She touched my arm, and I jerked back, slopping my drink all over the table. Being touched by a ghost was like getting snow rubbed into your bare skin—so cold it was hot.

"Go away!"

I turned to get up, but she already stood in front of me. No more than five feet tall, her head a crushed pumpkin leaking brains instead of stringy seeds. One eye was popped out and dangling around her misshapen ear by the optic nerve. The other one stared, accusing.

"You can still turn yourself in."

I stumbled away, heading for the bedroom, bottle in hand.

"Call the police, Mr. Arkin. Confess...confess..."

I pulled the door open and screamed. My bedroom had become a winding stretch of suburban highway. Speeding at me at fifty MPH, a swerving, drunken maniac unscrewed his bottle cap rather than paid attention to the road.

Me. It was me driving.

The car hit like a slap from God, knocking me backwards, smearing my face and body against the phantom asphalt in a fifteen foot streak.

I lay there, in agony, as I watched myself get out of the car, look in my direction and vomit, and then get right back into the car and drive off.

The image faded, and I found myself lying on my stained carpet.

"Confess, Mr. Arkin."

I sought my dropped bottle, the worst of the nightly terror over for the time being.

"Confess?" I spat. "Why should I? Haven't you tortured me enough for the last two years? I ran you over once. You've done this to me how many times? Two hundred? Three?"

She stood next to me now, the loops of intestines hanging out of her belly giving me cold, wet slaps in the face.

"Go to the police and confess."

"Go to hell, or heaven, or wherever you're supposed to go."

I rolled away and struggled to my feet.

"I can't go away until my business here is done."

I drank straight from the bottle now, trying to tune her out. Confess? My ass. Going to the cops meant going to prison. And that just can't happen. I couldn't survive in prison.

They don't let you drink.

"You can't die without resolution, Mr. Arkin. If you do..."

"I know! You've said it a thousand times!"

"Your soul will be mine if you don't atone."

She cracked a bloody smile, all missing teeth and swollen tongue.

"I don't think you'll like eternity with me in charge."

I spun on her, jabbing a finger into her spongy head.

"I'll have money soon! Lots of money! I'll hire someone to exorcize your preachy little ass!"

She laughed, a full, rich, deep sound that made the hair on my arms vibrate.

"I'll be seeing you, Mr. Arkin. Soon."

And then she faded away, like a puff of cigar smoke.

I drank until I started to puke blood.

Then I drank some more.



My hands perspired in the latex gloves Ms. Springfield had provided. The alley behind her house was deserted, except for a rat scurrying into an old Pepsi box.

I walked up to her gate—it was the only one that was unlocked—and let myself into her modest backyard.

Dark, silent, porch light off. Her back door opened with a whisper.

"Ms. Springfield?"

The door led into her kitchen. Drawers had been pulled out and silverware scattered along the floor. I avoided stepping on anything sharp, and made my way through the kitchen and into a hallway.

"Ms. Springfield? It's me."

Silence.

I took a pull from my flask, to calm my nerves. Then another, for luck.

"Ms. Springfield?"

She said to meet her in the bedroom. There were stairs to the right.

I ascended slowly, cautiously. The higher I climbed, the more this seemed like a very bad idea. Even if I could bring myself to murder her—and get away with it—who was to say she wouldn't haunt me too? One ghost was bad enough. Having two...

“Mr. Arkin?”

Her voice came as such a shock that I almost lost my balance on the steps.

“Ms. Springfield?”

“Second door on the right.”

Her voice was terribly relaxed.

I took a deep breath, blew it out. Reflexively, my hand went to my hip holster, and I haven’t worn a hip holster in years.

“I’ll be right there,” I said, more for myself than for her.

She was sitting on her bed, dressed in a white night gown. Her blonde hair hung over her shoulders. In her hand was a .38 police special.

I had a momentary flash of panic, but she turned the revolver around and handed it to me, butt first.

“I was worried you wouldn’t come.”

“Money makes a man do strange things.”

I looked on the nightstand, next to the bed. Stacked in a neat pile, so many twenties I’d need a bag to carry them out.

So much money.

“It’s almost midnight.” Ms. Springfield’s voice had a pleasant, almost cheerful lilt. “I want you to shoot me in the heart.”

I shuffled from one foot to the other, uncomfortable.

“The head would be better.”

“I don’t intend joining my husband without a head to kiss him with.”

Good point.

“The heart it is.”

I moved closer, my gaze flickering between her and the money. Part of me wanted to just take the cash and run. I could make it to Mexico before the cops got on me.

“It’s almost midnight, Mr. Arkin.”

Her face—calm, so sure.

“This is what you really want, isn’t it?”

For the first time since I’d met her, she smiled. “This is all I want.”

She tilted her chin upward, thrust out her chest.

I extended the gun.

“This might hurt.”

“Just keep firing until it’s done. I want messy, remember?”

I chewed my lower lip. The gun shook in my grasp.

A drink. I needed a drink.

My free hand reached back for my flask, and Ms. Springfield's features erupted in pure anger.

"Shoot me, you worthless drunk!"

I fired.

The bullet took her in the center of the left breast, her white nightgown exploding in red fireworks. She pitched to the side, gasping like a landed fish.

I shot her in the back.

Twice.

Three times.

Still twitching. And a high-pitched, whistling wheeze from the sucking wounds in her chest.

"Aw, screw it."

I put the last two slugs in the back of her head.

She stopped moving.

Shoving the gun deep in my jacket, I went for the money. I took a bloody pillow case and began stuffing it full of stacks. The diamonds lay there too, and the papers. I grabbed them and turned to get the hell out of there, but the bedroom suddenly transformed into a highway, and for the second time today I ran myself over.

I tried to brace for the impact, but you can never brace for that kind of thing.

Even knowing it wasn't real, I screamed at the very real feeling of the impact sluicing through every nerve and fiber of my being. Spectral or not, it hurt like hell.

When I was able to move again, the pumpkin head ghost floated above my head, staring down with her one good eye.

But this time she had company.

"I believe you've met my daughter," said the ghost of Ms. Springfield. Her nightgown glowed white, peppered with ugly red starbursts. Bits of brain and bone floated above her hair like a halo.

She held a glowing .38.

The ghostly gun fired, and I felt the bullets rip into my body, gasping in pain and shock.

"It's not real," I told myself.

I lay there, listening to the slurping, keening sound of my lungs leaking air through the holes in my chest. Even though I wanted to move, I couldn't.

Even when I heard the approaching sirens.

□ □ □

Killing me? It would have been too easy.

Ms. Springfield knew I was the one who ran down her daughter. Her daughter told her.

The only thing stronger than the woman's grief had been her lust for revenge.

She truly did want to die, so she could join her child on the other side.

So they could be together.

So they could haunt me together.

I sat on the cold floor of my cell, hugging my knees.

I've been dry for over a month now, and it's been as bad as I thought. Shaking, vomiting, delirium tremens, pure hell.

But none of it's as bad as the ghosts.

Every day I am treated to an agonizing smearing across the highway, or having large holes blown out of my chest and head.

On some days, I get both.

And without the booze to deaden the pain...

In hindsight, I should have turned myself in after I hit that little girl.

I try to explain that to them. Try to get them to understand that I was just a scared drunk.

They show no mercy.

"And this is just a taste," Ms. Springfield repeatedly tells me. "When you die, your soul belongs to us. We have plans for you, Mr. Arkin."

They have shown me their plans.

Sometimes I cry so hard the prison doctor has to medicate me.

Life now centers on diet and exercise. I watch what I eat. I work out three times a day.

I'm in the best shape of my life.

Which is a good thing.

Because as horrifying as my life is, I want to live as long as I can.

The ghosts can run me over and gun me down a thousand times a day, and that is nothing compared to what they have in store for me after I die.

I don't want to die.

Please, God, don't let me ever die.

Bag

I wrote this for the zombie anthology Cold Flesh. It began as a writing exercise, where someone hands your protagonist a paper bag and says don't open it until midnight. I tried to think of the absolute worst thing a paper bag could contain...

"No thanks."

The bum thrust the bag at me again. Brown paper, bearing the name of a local grocery store, crumpled and filthy and dripping something brown.

"Take it."

I tried to shove him away using my elbows; he was even dirtier than the bag. Strange how these people are invisible until one is in your face, reeking of garbage and body odor and piss. This is what I get for forgoing a cab and deciding to get a little exercise on the way home from work.

"Take the bag, Jimmy."

I'd pushed him an arm's-length away, but his use of my first name was like a slap.

"How did you...?"

"The answer is in the bag. Take it."

I grinned. Someone I knew must have put this poor sap up to this. Maybe Marky, from Accounting, or my cousin Ernie, who was the only forty-year-old in all of Chicago who still thought joy buzzers were funny.

"Fine. You win. Give me the bag."

The street person smiled, giving me a blast of brown teeth and fortified wine. I took the brown bag, which had surprising heft to it, and reached into my pocket for some change.

"Don't open it until the sun goes down."

"Excuse me?"

He walked away, blending into the rush hour sidewalk crowd, before I could give him his dollar.

My first impulse was to open it right then and there. But there were people all over, and if this was from Cousin Ernie, it was probably offensive or even illegal. Good old Ernie once sent a sixty-eight-year-old stripper to my office, one whose pasties hung at belly button level and whose grand finale included popping out her dentures. If this drippy, heavy thing in the bag was from Ernie, it would be best to open it when I got home.

Home was on the Lake Shore, a high rise condo with a killer view and a 24-hour doorman and mirrors in the elevator. Not too shabby for a South Side kid who used to pitch pennies in back alleys for lunch money. Money had always been the primary motivator of my life, and the stock market was a natural evolution from teenage poker games and fantasy football pools.

I did okay. Better than okay. Enough to keep me in Armani and Cristal. I was on the short list for five star restaurants, and got to bed women of fine social standing, and twice a year I'd fly my mom to Tuscany so she could visit relatives who all worshipped me as a god.

Life was fine.

My condo was cold and smelled like vanilla, some kind of stuff the maid sprayed around after her afternoon visit. I plopped the bag up on the breakfast bar and went to the bedroom to strip, shower, and change into evening wear. Tonight was Molly Wainwright, of the Barrington Wainwrights, and she was ten years younger than me and a foxy little tramp who oozed sex like her daddy oozed real estate.

If all went well, Molly would be notch number ninety-seven on the Jimmy belt. That's ninety-seven runs batted in, out of a possible two hundred-twenty. I did the math in my head.

"Score tonight, I'll be batting .440."

Damn impressive for a South Side kid. And as far as fielding went, I only had one error in my entire career. It was an experience I didn't care to repeat.

I shaved, took the dry-cleaner's plastic from my gray suit, and decided to go with the diamond stud cufflinks. By the time I was dressed and ready to roll I'd completely forgotten about the leaky paper bag on my breakfast bar.

But when I went to the fridge for Evian, there it was, perched on the counter like an old alley cat.

I checked my Bvlgari—a quarter to six. The bum warned me not to open it until the sun went down, but that sounded like stupid Ernie theatrics and I didn't have time to play around. Slowly, gently, I unrolled the top of the bag and peeled it open.

The stench hit me like a sucker punch. Rotting meat masked with something antiseptic. I got an accidental snootful, gagged, and staggered back.

The bag wiggled.

I squinted, held my breath. Whatever was in the bag was definitely dead; the smell was proof. It had to be an air current, or the contents settling, or —

It moved again.

My heart did the pitter-patter thing, like the couple times I'd been caught cheating at five card stud and a beating was about to ensue. The bag jerked to the left, then to the right, then toppled over onto its side.

A tiny red fist appeared from the top, opening and wiggling five miniature fingers.

I knew what this was. I knew, in the depths of my soul.

My fielding error.

The thing cried out, soft and wet. A bulbous, bald head emerged, large fetal eyes locking onto me.

"Daddy."

"Oh, Jesus."

It pulled itself from the bag, dragging along two undersized first-trimester legs and a slimy blue umbilical cord. Though covered in mucus, I could make out the large scars running zigzag over most of its body. Scars that had been sewn up in an ugly Frankenstein stitch.

In its tiny hand was a curved needle, trailing thread.

"Oh, sweet Jesus."

"Not until dark, Daddy. I haven't finished yet." The needle dug into its shoulder, repairing a laceration caused by the abortionist's knife. *"I wanted to look pretty for you."*

"It wasn't my fault," I managed. *"The rubber broke."*

My head swam with images of Margo Williams. Young. Sweet. Timid in bed, but I liked them that way. When she called me with news of her pregnancy, I'd had three women since her.

I mailed her a check to get rid of it, and hadn't heard anything of the matter until months later, when I found out she died from complications during the procedure.

"Not my fault," I said again.

The thing on the counter sat up and slumped forward, unable to support its oversized head.

"Mommy says hello. She sent me here so you could take care of me."

The emotions piled one top of another in my chest, fighting for dominance. Guilt. Revulsion. Amazement. Fear. Anger.

Anger won.

"Go back where you came from!"

"Don't you want me, Daddy?"

For an absurd moment, I pictured the bloody, scarred thing sitting on my lap at a baseball game, a tiny cap on its misshapen fetal skull.

"I don't want you! I paid them to take care of you!"

Its tiny face crinkled, tears clearing trails in the mucus.

My decision made, I wondered how to get rid of it. Wrap it in newspaper and drop it down the garbage chute? Flush it down the toilet? It was small enough to fit. But if it was discovered in either case, it might lead back to me. I watched TV. I knew about DNA tests.

I glanced around the kitchen, eyes flicking over possibilities. Microwave. Stove. Compactor. Freezer.

Disposal.

The thing sat right next to the sink, a sink I paid almost two grand for. The garbage disposal could grind up a turkey leg, and this thing wasn't that much bigger. One quick push and—

"Don't grind me up in the garbage disposal, Daddy."

I clenched my teeth. How could it read my thoughts?

"I'm a part of you, Daddy."

It smiled, or tried to smile, with that big scar bisecting its head.

I forced myself to act.

In one quick motion, I scooped it up and shoved it down the sink drain, hard. The bulbous head was too big to fit through the opening, so I smacked it with the edge of my fist, over and over, forcing it down.

"Daddy, don't! I'm your own flesh and blood!"

I pulled my hand free and hit the garbage disposal switch.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then everything happened at once.

The whirl of the disposal was surpassed by horrible screaming. My screaming.

It was like being attacked by hundreds of men with hatchets. My ears were the first to be stripped away, then my nose and cheeks. Clothing was flayed off my body in bloody strips, followed by the meat underneath. Fingers, knees, cock and balls, ground up in a bladed tornado. And a booming voice tore through my head, louder than my own cries.

"I'M PART OF YOU, DADDY!"

How I managed to hit the off switch, I have no idea. My eyes had been cored from my skull. Even more unbelievable, I somehow dialed 911 using only the meaty stump of my hand.

The pain was unimaginable.

It still is.

These days, my son visits me in the hospital. I can't see him, but I can feel him. He's very good at sewing. He practices on me, when the nurses sedate me at night.

I've named him Jimmy Jr.

Looks just like me, I bet.

Careful, He Bites

Another flash fiction piece for the Small Bites anthology. The guidelines were to write a were-creature tale in 500 words or less.

“Careful. He bites.”

Malcolm snorted, offering Selma a glimpse of gray teeth. His pants hung around his ankles, the condom dangling like an elephant booger.

“Bites? Damn thing don’t even got no feet or wings.”

Malcolm banged his palm against the canary cage, knocking the bird across the newspaper-lined bottom.

“I wouldn’t do that,” Selma said.

Malcolm squinted at her, ugly. “What you gonna do about it, whore?”

Selma shrugged. She swung her legs over the side of the bed and reached for the pack of smokes. Malcolm leaned over and gave her a harsh shove.

“I said, what are you gonna do about it?”

“Nothing. The bird can take care of himself.”

Malcolm snorted again, the condom jiggling.

“It can, huh? Let’s see what Mr. Birdy can do.”

Selma stared blankly as Malcolm opened the cage and stuck in a sweaty fist. The bird tried to wiggle away, but Malcolm managed to get a hold of it quickly.

“Looks like Mr. Birdy is...DAMN!”

Malcolm dropped the bird and withdrew his hand, staring dumbly at the small spot of blood on his palm.

“Damn thing bit me!”

Selma lit a smoke.

“Told you.”

Malcolm slapped her across the mouth, smearing bright red lipstick. Then he turned his attention back to the bird.

"I'm gonna..."

"You're not gonna do nothing." Selma's lower lip began to swell, but she seemed calm. "It's a full moon."

"Full moon? What the hell are you talking about?"

"Were-canary," Selma said.

Malcolm frowned, raising his hand to strike her again.

The little feathers growing out of his fingers caused him quite a shock.

Malcolm screamed, bones and tendons snapping and shrinking as the ancient curse of the were-canary mutated his adult human form into that of a tiny, yellow songbird. He perched on the nest of his tangled pants, the condom wrapped around his pointy feet.

"Tweet," Malcolm said.

Selma snatched him up and promptly broke one of his wings. Malcolm sang in agony, flopping around on the bedroom floor in tight circles.

Disoriented and wracked by pain, he didn't notice the cat under the bed until the feline had already pounced.

"He bites too," Selma said.

The next morning, Selma awoke to whimpering.

"...*please...kill me...*"

She stared at the man, naked and cramped in the birdcage. Roscoe, her former pimp. His legs and arms were missing; it was the only way he'd fit into the cage.

"Morning, Roscoe."

"...*please...*"

She gave him some fresh water and birdseed, then padded off to the bathroom.

The cat's litter box contained several bowling ball-sized deposits. They didn't come out that big, but once the moon went down, things went back to normal.

That was the price she paid for having pets.

"Hey, Roscoe! How about a little song while I shower?"

"...*please...Selma...*"

"Do you want me to get the cheese grater?"

Roscoe began "Blue Moon."

Selma smiled. After all, who else had a bird that sang baritone?

Symbios

The closest I've ever come to hard science fiction. I wrote this back in college, and then polished it up a decade later when it was published by Apex Digest. It was originally called Star Vation, but I wisely changed the title.

Voice Module 195567

Record Mode:

Is this thing working?

Play Mode:

Is this thing working?

Record Mode:

This is Lieutenant Jehrico Stiles of the mining ship Darion. I've crash-landed on an unknown planet somewhere in the Eighty-Sixth Sector. Captain Millhouse Braun is dead.

I suppose I'm Captain now.

Captain Braun's last VM concerned the delays we'd been having due to a micro meteor shower while mining Asteroid 336-09 in orbit around Flaxion.

A lot has happened since then. The Brain caught the Madness.

I told Mill a thousand times we shouldn't have used an Organic, but he was willing to take the risks, as long as he had extra cargo space to carry more ore. You know the sales pitch. Why have an interstellar processor that weighs twenty six metric tons and takes up gads of space when an Organic Brain with nutrient pumps can navigate the ship while weighing only three kilograms?

Well, we did fit more ore on the ship. And now Mill and the rest of the crew are dead. When the Brain went bad it thrust the ship into Wormhole GG54 and I got spewed out here.

Mill and Johnson and the rest of the crew were fried when the Brain misfired the photon props. One moment I was watching them on

the console viewer, drilling into the asteroid's cortex, and the next moment they were vaporized and the ship was being hurtled toward the wormhole.

The trailer detached before I went through, sending millions of credits worth of iron on some unknown trajectory.

I survived re-entry because the ionic suppressors run automatically and not on Brain power.

The Brain wasn't so lucky. It's dead now, the nutrient containers smashed when we hit the planet's surface. But the Brain had enough juice left in it to seal every hatch and cargo hold before its functioning ceased.

Nothing on the ship works. The com-link is dead. The homing beacon is dead. I can't even open the steel doors to the pantry, and my unrefrigerated food supply is rotting away without me being able to get to it.

The oxygen systems have malfunctioned, but the planet I'm on has an atmosphere I can breathe. The nitrogen level is high, and I'm light-headed a lot, but so far I'm still alive.

The temperature is also hospitable to human life. A bit chilly, but mostly pleasant. Days last about forty hours, and nights about twenty.

I'm surprised this Voice Module still works. It's got a crack in the case, but the batteries haven't leaked. I figure without a recharge, I've got maybe two hours of recording time left.

I'll have to use it sparingly. I've salvaged all I can from this damn ship, and I can't find a lousy pen.

Voice Module 195568

Record Mode:

This is my fourth day on the planet, and I made an impressive discovery. The terrain here tests high for ferrite, making this planet worth a fortune. If no one has staked a claim, I could get funding and mine this place until it's just as gutted as earth is. The planet is large enough that it might even end the Ore Crisis, perhaps for a few years.

The only problem is that I'm starving.

There's a water stream nearby, brackish but drinkable. I waded in deep and searched for hours, but couldn't find animal life in the water, or the surrounding area.

Plant life abounds. At least I think they're plants. Maybe they're fungi. They're reddish in color, lacking chlorophyll, and they have

appendages that resemble leaves. The landscape is littered with hundreds of different species, some as high as buildings, some the size of grass.

None have been edible. Everything I've plucked so far contains an acidic enzyme—concentrated highly enough to burn my fingers and my tongue. Swallowing any of it would tear a hole through my stomach.

But at least I have water.

I haven't scouted very far yet, only a few kilometers. Maybe I'll be lucky and there will something to eat on the other side of that big hill that splits my horizon.

Hunger is starting to weaken me. I can't stay awake for more than seven or eight hours. Tried several times to pry open the steel pantry doors, but can't budge them a crack. I think I broke my big toe kicking the panel in frustration.

I hope for rescue, but know the odds against it. If this is truly an undiscovered planet, then no one knows it exists, and no one knows that I'm here.

And I have no way to tell them.

Voice Module 195569

Record Mode:

My hiking boots were a gift from my mother, and came with genuine antique pig-leather laces.

I boiled and ate the laces this morning. My boots won't stay on now, and I've got—I know this sounds funny—a terrible knot in my stomach. But there's nothing else to eat. The only other organic thing on the ship is the Brain, and I'm not touching that. I'd rather starve to death. I'd rather die.

Morals are what make us human.

Voice Module 195570

Record Mode:

I met my new neighbors today.

They are only knee-high, and somewhat resemble the extinct species called dogs. They're covered with a short, rough fur, have pointy ears and yellow eyes, and walk around on underdeveloped hind legs.

I was sleeping in what used to be the control bay, dreaming about food, when I felt something poke me in the ribs.

I opened my eyes, startled, and found six of them in a circle around me. They spoke to one another with high pitched yaps.

None wore clothing or carried weapons. And even when I stood, towering over them by some five feet, none seemed afraid.

One of them yipped at me in what might have been a question. I said hello, and it cocked its head, confused by my voice. I can't recall reading about any life form like these back in school. For all I know they are an undiscovered species.

They half-coaxed, half-pushed me out of my ship and led me further than I'd previously scouted, over the hill.

They took me to their home. There were no structures, just a collection of holes in the dirt. When we arrived, dozens of little brown heads popped up out of the holes to stare at me.

A short time later, I was surrounded.

A kind of collective humming sound rose up within the group, and they all came to me, holding out tiny paws to touch my legs. They took turns, their eyes locked on mine.

For a moment, I felt like a god.

When I reached out to touch them they weren't afraid. And when I did pat a head their dog lips turned into grins and they wiggled their tails.

It was like being around dozens of well-behaved children. For a while I completely forgot how hungry I was.

Voice Module 199571

Record Mode:

They eat the plants. Somehow they're immune to the acid content. They eat many different varieties, raw. Then, out of their droppings, new plants grow.

Nature's perfect symbiotic planet. Ironical that I'd wind up here, considering how my own species has trashed the earth, and the planets of the surrounding star systems.

Perhaps this is a penance of sorts.

I stayed for most of the day in the village, watching the puppies play, patting small heads. I've counted eighty-two dog people in this settlement. Maybe there are other settlements, elsewhere. Staring

across the huge landscape with nothing to see but kilometers of horizon, I have to wonder.

Later I left them and tried once again to pry open the metal door that locks away all of the food in the ship's pantry. Once again I was unsuccessful.

Voice Module 199572

Record Mode:

I'm dying. My clothes hang on my body like sheets, and I know I've lost at least fifteen kilograms.

The dogs seem to understand that I'm deteriorating in some way. They try to do funny things to make me laugh, like cartwheels or jumping on me, but I can't laugh.

In fact, when I look at the dogs for too long, I start to salivate.

I wonder what they taste like.

Like that synthetic meat, locked away in the ship's pantry?

I've never had real meat. Could never afford it. My father had a cat steak once, and said it was delicious. My grandfather remembers when he was young and there were still a few cows left, and he used to get meat on holidays.

What do these little dog people taste like?

If I wanted to I could wipe out the entire village in just a few minutes. They have no weapons. They don't move very fast. Their teeth are rounded. I could kill their entire population and not even get scratched.

But I don't. I can't. I won't.

Voice Module 199573

Record Mode:

I ate the Brain today.

I thought it would be rotten, but there was no decay at all. I have a hypothesis why. Decay is caused by bacteria, and perhaps this world has none.

I boiled the Brain, picked out the glass shards, and ate with my eyes closed, trying not to think about what it was.

But I did think about it.

It shouldn't matter. After all, the Brain had ceased operation. Tissue is tissue.

Even if the tissue is human.

Besides, the volunteers who sign up for the Organic Processor Program are elderly, near the ends of their lives. Running a starship gave a brain donor dozens of extra years of sentience, of life.

And, important point, this one did go mad and kill my crew and destroy my ship.

It owed me.

There wasn't any taste to it. Not really. But when I was finished eating, I cried like a child.

Not because of what I had done.

But because I wanted more.

Voice Module 199574

Record Mode:

I can't eat an intelligent life form. Not that the dog people are particularly intelligent. No tools, no clothing, not artificial shelter, though they do have a rudimentary form of communication. I even understand some of their words now.

I can't eat things that speak.

But all I've consumed in the past fifteen days were two shoe laces and a soggy, very small Brain.

I have a few solar matches left. I could spit-roast one of these doggies using a piece of pipe.

What did my grandfather call it? A barbeque.

The village has named me. When I come by, they yip out something that sounds like "Griimmm!"

So to the dog people I am Grim.

They sleep next to me and hug my legs and smile like babies.

Please let a rescue ship find me tonight, so I don't have to do what I'm planning to do.

Voice Module 199575

Record Mode:

I ate one.

When I awoke this morning I had such a single-mindedness, such a raw craving to eat, that I didn't even try to fight it.

I went to the dog people's village, picked up the nearest one, and as it yipped "Griimmm!" with a smile on its face, I broke its neck.

I didn't wait around to see what the others did. I just ran back to ship, drooling like a baby.

Then I skinned the little dog person with a paring knife.

It was delicious.

Roasted over an open fire. Cooked to perfection. I only left the bones.

When I was done, the feeling was euphoric. I was sated. I was satisfied.

I smacked my lips and patted my stomach and knew how grandfather must have felt. Real meat was amazing. It made the synthetic stuff seem like garbage.

Then I noticed all of dog people around me.

They stared, their eyes accusatory and sad. And they began to cry. Howling cries, with tears.

When I realized what I had done, I cried too.

Voice Module 195576

Record Mode:

Two months on this damn planet, and that's according to these sixty hour days, so it's more like half a year. I haven't recorded anything in a while, because I haven't wanted to think about what I've been doing.

I've eaten fifty-four dog people so far.

I've stopped losing weight, but I can count my ribs through my shirt. One a day isn't enough nourishment for a man my size.

I try to make it enough. I have to ration. And not because of any moral reason.

The population is dwindling.

I don't know why they haven't run away. Packed up and left.

But they haven't.

They don't fear me. Maybe they don't understand fear.

The young puppies still hug my legs when I visit the village.

Everyone else stays inside their holes.

I try not to take the young ones. Instead I dig with my hands and pluck the adults from the ground. They don't fight. In fact, they try to hug me.

I think I'm a little insane at this point.

When I grab them, and they look at me with those sad eyes and say my name...

Sometimes I wish they would run away, leaving me to starve. So I couldn't kill any more of them.

It's like eating my children.

Voice Module 199577

Record Mode:

There are just three left.

They don't even go underground anymore. It's almost as if they've accepted their own deaths.

I wonder sometimes if I deserve to live when so many have died.

But the hunger. The terrible hunger.

I know when my food supply here runs out, I'll have to search for more.

More children to eat.

How can something that sickens make my stomach rumble?

Voice Module 199577

Record Mode:

A ship!

I saw a ship orbiting.

It was night. I was staring at the constellations, trying to remember my astronomy so I could pinpoint where I was in the galaxy.

One of the stars moved.

It circled the planet twice in three hours. I hope against hope it's a manned ship, not a damned probe. Please let there be people on board. I can't last too much longer.

There is nothing left to eat. I've consumed the entire dog village, boiled their bones and eaten the hides, hair and all.

I'm so thin I look like a skeleton with my face.

Voice Module 195578

Record Mode:

The ship landed several kilometers away. I ran most of the way to it, my euphoria bordering on hysterics.

It turned to hysteria when I saw the ship.

Nothing human made it.

It was spherical and grey, like a giant pearl. At first I thought it was some type of meteorite. There were no portals or exhausts, just smooth grey curves, reflecting the world around it.

I hadn't gotten within a few steps when it opened. A hole just sort of appeared in its side. Small and blurry at first, but soon several meters wide. I hid behind an outcropping of rocks.

Then something came out of the hole.

It was twice my size. Vaguely humanoid, but lacking a head. Six yellow eyes stared out from behind the clear visor encircling its chest. The eyes moved in different directions, scanning the terrain. No arms, but under the trunk of the body were four legs, thick and each ending in three long toes.

Its skin appeared reptilian; black scales that shone as if wet.

On the lower half of its body, it wore a bizarre version of pants. Above the eyes was a large and impressive mouth. I instantly thought of old holograms I'd seen depicting sharks. The rows of triangular jagged teeth encircled the top of the creature like a bastardized crown.

As odd as its appearance was, it seemed to exude a kind of peace. I felt as if I were looking at a fellow intelligent being rather than an enemy from space.

I took a step toward it, and it reared up on its two back legs and waved its front legs at me, making a snorting sound. I suppose my appearance unnerved it. My features probably were just as strange and grotesque to it as it was to me.

"I won't harm you," I told it.

"I won't harm you," it repeated, imitating my voice perfectly. It lowered its front legs and took a cautious step forward. I also took a step.

"Zeerhweetick," it said.

I tried to imitate the sound as best I could. It relaxed its legs and squatted when we were within a meter of each other. I also sat down.

"I won't harm you," it said again.

I recalled my astronaut training. *Intelligent Lifeforms 101* was an entirely hypothetical class about the possibility of communication with an intelligent alien life form. It was in the curriculum because the World Assembly demanded that all space travelers have that training. They believed if we ever did encounter a new race, the first meeting between species would set the tone for all future relations. Making first impressions and all that crap.

Everyone considered it a joke class—we'd visited hundreds of planets, and never encountered any life form smarter than a cockroach.

Now I felt like that was the most important class I ever took.

I began by using words and miming motions. Pointing to myself I said, man. Pointing at its ship I said, ship. And so on.

It watched, and repeated, and within an hour it had picked up several verbs and began asking questions.

“Man here long?” it said in my voice. Then it pointed to the ground.

“Fifty cycles,” I said. I flashed fifty fingers, then pointed at the sun, slowly moving across the horizon.

“More men?”

“No.”

“Ship?”

“Broken.” I pulled up a nearby weed and cracked it in half, illustrating my point.

It gestured at its own ship with a three fingered leg and also yanked a plant from the ground.

“Ship broken.” It ripped the weed in two.

“Man,” I said again, pointing to myself. Then I pointed at it.

“Zabzug,” it said, pointing at itself.

“Hello, Zabzug.”

“Hello, Man.”

And so began mankind’s historic first communication with an intelligent alien species.

I was so excited I wasn’t even thinking about the other intelligent alien species I had just finished devouring.

Voice Module 195579

Record Mode:

After communicating for several hours, Zabzug and I went back to my ship. He moved slower than I did, sometimes tripping over foliage. One time I helped him up, getting my first close look at those teeth on his scalp. How he could imitate me so perfectly with a mouthful of fangs like that was anyone’s guess.

“Thank you, Man,” Zabzug said after getting back to his feet.

I smiled at him. His teeth twitched, which I took to be a smile too.

He was very excited at the sight of my ship, and began speaking rapidly in a series of grunts and snorts. I sat and watched him explore it top to bottom. He stopped in front of the pantry and stayed there a long time, snuffling, trying to open the metal door. Liquid poured down from his head and over his eye plate like tears.

“Hungry,” Zabzug said. “No eat long time.”

“Man hungry too,” I told him.

He beckoned me over and we struggled with the pantry for a while, not budging the door a centimeter. Zabzug’s drool smelled like a sour musk, and being right next to him made me realize how big he really was. Three times my mass, easy.

And those appendages of his had incredible strength behind them, putting huge dents in the thick steel door.

But it was all for nothing. The pantry stayed closed.

Voice Module 195580

Record Mode:

Zabzug explained to me how he crashed by drawing a very detailed schematic in the dirt. His ship runs on a bastardized form of fission, using a refined chemical to help control the reaction. I guess the chemical could best be described as a form of lubricant, as oil was used in combustion engines back on ancient earth.

So basically he’s stranded here because he ran out of oil, stalled, and got sucked into the same wormhole as me.

We made some limited talk about putting my power supply into his ship, but the parts were so fundamentally incompatible that it proved impossible.

Zabzug tried eating some plants, doing me one better and actually swallowing a few. He became violently ill. I must admit to some perverse amusement at watching black foam erupt out of the top of his head like a volcano, but that only served to remind me how hungry I was.

Two intelligent species, meeting for the first time in history, each with the capability of interstellar travel, and both starving to death.

It might be funny if it were happening to someone else.

Voice Module 195581

Record Mode:

After a week together, I consider Zabzug a friend. He’s told me much about his planet, which seems to be located in the Hermida Galaxy. Like humans, his species have used up their natural resources, and have begun scouring the universe for food, fuel, and building material.

He's much better at learning English than I am at learning his language. He's gained such a mastery of it that he made his first joke.

We were resting near his ship, talking as usual about how hungry we were, and Zabzug told me, "If you weren't so ugly, I'd consider eating you."

Funny guy, that Zabzug.

Voice Module 195582

Record Mode:

Zabzug is starving too. His skin has lost its luster, and his eyes are glazed.

We still have animated talks, but the silence often lasts as long as the chatting.

I'm hesitant to tell him about the dog people, about what I consider my genocidal crime.

But they're all I can think about.

I finally spill the story. Hopeful he won't judge. Hopeful that he might know where to search for more.

To my surprise, Zabzug seems to know what I'm speaking about, and he's able to draw an exact picture of their species.

"Hrucka," he told me. He awkwardly explained that the hrucka were like pets to his species.

It made sense. Evolution doesn't create just one species of animal in an ecosystem. The hrucka must have been put here.

Or stranded here.

Which might mean that somewhere, on the planet, there's another ship like Zabzug's.

He's very excited by this prospect, and we decide to conduct a search first thing tomorrow.

Voice Module 195583

Record Mode:

We searched for three days.

We didn't find anything.

Voice Module 195584

Record Mode:

Zabzug came into my ship at night as I slept. The viscous drool from his mouth dripped onto my face and woke me up. In one of his

appendages he held a sharp piece of pipe, the one I had been using to roast dog people. Upon my awakening, he yelped and dropped the pipe, hurrying from my ship.

I suppose he's having the same problem that I had with the dog people. Respect for an intelligent life form versus the overwhelming need to survive.

But he's in for a surprise.

I'm going to eat him first.

I stayed awake the rest of the night, standing guard with the pointed pipe. He had the strength advantage. I had the speed advantage. We both seemed to be of similar intelligence, and both had the ability to use tools.

His eyes might be a weak point, but they were always covered by that face plate—Zabzug even wore it to sleep. His skin was covered with scales, and though they looked moist, they were hard, almost metallic, to the touch.

The vulnerable point was his mouth. It was crammed full of sharp teeth, but maybe I could jam something down his throat and into all the soft parts inside.

At the first peek of sunlight I'll go to Zabzug's ship with my spear.

What does alien lizard taste like?

Voice Module 195585

Record Mode:

He didn't come out all day, and I couldn't find a way in. There isn't a seam on the entire ship. No cracks or ridges or anything to pry or beat open. After several hours of trying, I decided to just wait. He'd have to come out eventually.

He wanted the same thing I wanted.

Voice Module 195586

Record Mode:

The bastard ate my hand.

Chomped it off at the wrist. I fell asleep, waiting for him to come out.

But I got him...haha...I got him...jammed the pipe down his throat, into the soft stuff.

Dead. He's dead.

Zabzug, my friend, is dead.

I used my belt as a tourniquet for my hand, but it didn't stop the bleeding.

I had to use the solar matches to close the wound.

The pain...so much pain in my wrist.

But the hunger...the need...is even stronger.

I'm going to cut him open now.

Voice Module 195587

Record Mode:

I'm full! What a wonderful feeling! For the first time since I landed on this planet, I've eaten until I'm ready to burst.

I'm so happy I don't even notice the pain.

Voice Module 195588

Record Mode:

Zabzug lasted for a whole month.

Some parts were delicious.

Some parts, not so delicious.

I ate everything. The inedible parts were boiled into soup until every calorie and nutrient was leeched out.

I even gained a few kilos.

And now, with the last of the soup gone, with the hunger pangs returning, I am afraid.

Voice Module 195589

Record Mode:

Four days since I've eaten anything. Zabzug had stretched out my belly, and I drink a lot to keep it full, to try and fool it into feeling sated.

My belly isn't fooled.

I've managed to get into Zabzug's ship, using a key. It's a tiny sphere he'd been keeping in a pocket. When it touches the ship, the portal opens.

I've fully explored the interior, trying to gain an understanding of how it works. The vessel is a marvel of engineering, with a navigation system light-years ahead of ours. The technology is even more valuable than the iron-rich planet I'm stranded on.

If I can get off this rock, I'll be the wealthiest man in the universe.

The first thing I'll do is get a limb graft...no, the first thing I'll do is have a banquet. A feast that will last a month. I'll gorge myself like the ancient Romans, purging between courses so I can cram in more food.

Such a beautiful picture.

Voice Module 195590

Record Mode:

My wrist isn't healing right. It doesn't seem to be infected, but the wound keeps opening.

I think it's a symptom of starvation. My body is conserving its energy, and deems healing unnecessary.

I'm so weak it's an effort to even stand up.

I have to do something. If I stay here, I'll die. Perhaps there's food somewhere else. I've scouted at least fifty kilometers in all directions, but I need to pick one and keep moving.

I decide to follow the sunset. I'll leave tomorrow.

I have no other choice.

Voice Module 195591

Record Mode:

I don't know how far I've traveled. Perhaps a hundred or a hundred and fifty kilometers. I'm in a desert now, and ran out of water a few hours ago.

My tongue is so thick it's hard to speak.

I fear sleep, because I don't think I'll wake up.

Voice Module 195592

Record Mode:

I can't move another step. Thirst is worse than hunger. I'm hallucinating. Hearing things. Seeing things. I even had a fever-dream, imagining a space ship crashing in the distance...

Voice Module 195593

Record Mode:

A week has passed.

Obviously, I didn't die in the desert. I was rescued. Well, sort of.

That ship I'd imagined I saw—it really did exist. A salvage ship, which had made a run at retrieving the trailer full of ore we'd lost.

They also got sucked into the wormhole, and were spit out here.
 Their ship is damaged beyond repair. They'd been here for only a few days, and saw my Voice Module unit glinting in the sun.
 They listened to it, unfortunately.
 Marta, the woman, said she didn't judge me. She understood.
 The man, Ellis, didn't say a word to me.
 I received fresh water, medicine for my wrist, and synth rations.
 "We have enough synth rations for a month," Marta told me. "And we're hoping for a rescue."
 But all three of us knew that a wormhole rescue has ever been attempted. It's suicide to go near those things.
 I eat, and drink, and try to regain my strength.
 I'll need it.

Voice Module 195594

Record Mode:

I got them while they slept.
 Ellis, with a large rock to the head.
 The rock made a mess. I smothered Marta. Not bloody, but it took a while.
 One month rations for three people equals three months rations for one person.
 I'm sorry I had to kill them. I truly am.
 I'm not a monster.

Voice Module 195595

Record Mode:

Is this thing still working?

Play Mode:

Is this thing still working?

Record Mode:

It's been...how long has it been since I used this? Many months. Perhaps years.
 I stopped shaving, and my beard reaches my chest.
 Where did I leave off? I think it was with Marta and that guy, I forget his name. The one I killed with the rock.
 It was for their synth rations. I paced myself, ate small portions, but still finished them too quickly.
 I knew what was next. I knew it from the beginning.

When the rations were finally gone, I ate the people I'd murdered.

Humans, it turns out, are the best meat. Better than dog people. Better than alien lizards.

They sustained me for a while, but then they were gone too.

I began to starve again.

Days, maybe weeks, passed, and I began to wither away. Though I knew hunger well, it didn't make the pain any easier.

At night, I watched the skies. Watched them with a yearning. Hoping for another ship to crash on this planet.

And one did.

Astronomical luck?

Hardly.

Only one survivor this time. Angela something. She explained.

The ore-filled trailer from my ship, the Darion, didn't become lost in space. It's in orbit around Wormhole GG54, daring salvage ships to try and take it.

Many ships have tried. None have succeeded. They get pulled into the wormhole and pushed out here.

It's a giant, baited trap.

According to Angela, five ships have already been lost.

There's a good chance they're somewhere on this planet.

I asked Angela how large her crew was.

She told me there were seven. All dead.

When I killed her, that made eight.

Eight.

Mmmmm.

But that's not enough. It's never enough. I always run out.

I need to find those other ships. And I think I can. The Organic Brain on Angela's ship is still functioning, and it created a partial topographical map of the planet.

The map pinpoints the other crash sites. Some, only a few kilometers away.

I need to move fast. There may be survivors.

The longer I wait, the thinner they get.

A Matter of Taste

Another flash fiction piece for Small Bites. I'm a huge fan of zombie movies, especially the Italian gut munchers. It's pretty obvious with this piece.

“Finish your brains, Phillip.”

Phillip pushed the jellied hunk away, using his stump.

“I don’t want any more.”

Mom squinted in his general direction; her eyes had long since dried up and fallen out.

“Don’t you like brains? All little zombie boys need to eat brains. You want to become rotten and putrefied like Dad, right?”

“Arrgghhhhh,” said Dad. He didn’t have a bottom jaw, so pronunciation wasn’t one of his strengths.

“You know I do, Mom. It’s just...”

“Just what?”

Phillip folded his arms and picked his nose with the ulna protruding from his stump.

“Phillip!” Mom chided. “Manners!”

“Arrgghhhh,” his father concurred.

Phillip stopped picking.

“I hate brains.”

Mom took a deep breath, and blew it out of the bullet holes in her lungs.

“Fine. Finish your small intestines and you can be excused.”

Phillip made a face.

“I don’t want to.”

“But Phillip, you love intestines. Don’t you remember when you rose from the grave? You’d stuff yourself with guts until they were slithering out of your little undead bottom.”

Phillip stuck out his lower lip.

“I don’t want to eat this stuff anymore, Mom.”

“Arrghhhh,” said Dad.

“See, Phillip? You’re upsetting your father. Do you know how hard he works, hunting the living all day and night, to bring back fresh meat so you can eat? It isn’t easy work—he can’t move much faster than a limp, and most of the humans left are heavily armed and know to aim for the head.”

Phillip stood up. “I don’t like it! I don’t like the taste! I don’t like the smell! And most of all, I don’t like eating people I used to go to school with! Last week we ate my best friend, Todd!”

“We’re the living dead! It’s what we do!”

Phillip’s father shrugged, reaching for the child’s plate. He dumped the contents onto the edge of the table, and then lowered his face to the organs and bumped at them with his teeth—the only way he could chew.

“I don’t want to be a zombie anymore, Mom!”

“We don’t have a choice, Phillip.”

“Well, from now on, I’m eating something else.” Phillip reached under the table and held up a plastic bag.

“What is that?” Mom demanded. “I hear roughage.”

“It’s a Waldorf Salad.”

“Phillip!”

“I’m sorry, Mom. But this is what I’m going to eat from now on. It has apples, and walnuts, and a honey-lemon mayonnaise.”

“I forbid it!”

“Arrghhhhh,” Dad agreed.

“I don’t care!” Phillip cried. “I’m a vegan, Mom! A vegan! And there’s nothing you can do about it!”

He threw the salad onto the table and shuffled off, crying.

Dad shoved a piece of duodenum down his throat, then patted his wife on the bottom.

“Arrghhhh.”

“I know, dear. But what can we do? Blow off his head and eat him for lunch tomorrow?”

“Arrghhhh?”

“Good idea. I’ll fetch the shotgun.”

Mom limped in the general direction of the gun closet.

“Waldorf Salad? Not in *my* house.”

Embrace

Written back in college when I thought good writing had to sound flowery and imagery was more important than story. I was wrong on both counts. I can't help noticing, looking over this collection, how many stories of mine have some sort of religious foundation or overtones. That's what happens when you're raised Catholic.

She comes at night.

I push the rocking chair to the balcony so I may watch her, antique cherry that squeaks and protests much like my old bones. This affords me a towering view of my back yard; the hedges trimmed to lollipops, the fountain cherub eternally spitting water, the ocean in the distance.

The sun takes a lazy bow and exits, raking orange and purple fingers across my acres of thick lawn. Years ago, it was champagne cocktails and croquet. Now, I can't even recall the last time I walked the grounds. An acquaintance, deceased like most, once described men as fine single malt—fiery and immature when young, mellowing with age.

I am finally palatable.

The portrait of my younger self hangs above the fireplace, stern face and eyebrows tempered with resolve. Eyebrows that have grown gray and bushy and without direction.

Once, I would settle for nothing less than crushing all opposition.

Now, I'll settle for some honey in my tea.

I watch as the mist arrives, a soft, ethereal blanket, glowing in my yard lights.

She always comes with the mist, and I feel my pulse quicken, warming me. I drop the blanket from my lap—I don't need it anymore.

The first sight of her is magic. Awe and wonder, feelings known only to the young and to me. Worth more than I have ever earned. She is clothed in translucent blue, the color of the moon, a robe that moves like silk. Her face is always peaceful, her movements sure, and I am

both enthralled and pacified. Her dance is nature and life, ebb and flow. Slow, languid turns and comfortable poses, arms always beckoning, the tune known only to her.

Beneath my balcony she stops and smiles, as she has for many years.

“Dance with me.”

Tonight I shall.

I grip the armrests of my rocker with gnarled hands and tremble to my feet. The thousand pains that plague my days, the gagging pills that keep me beating, the nights of disquiet—all nullified by my resolve. I finally have the strength to know I have none left. The hand has been played, and folded.

Legs shaky, a yearling, knock-kneed and wide-eyed, I lean over the railing. Into her arms I fall, and break...

And then I am free. I bow to my Lady, and take her hand. “May I have this dance?”

The music is crisp in my ears, light and airy. I embrace her, and we waltz on the mist, above my lawn, away from my empty prison. Through the cherub and the hedges, across the beach, over the sea to chase the sun.

Her mouth flutters closer to mine, soft lips parting.

Black teeth. Sharp.

I cry out, my voice muffled by her hungry kiss, ripping at my face, peeling, pulling.

I gaze up at her through lidless eyes, milky with red.

Her maw finds my soft belly, bites, probes deep.

I am tugged into the ground by looping coils of innards.

Down.

Down.

Down to heat so strong the very air sears, baking raw flesh without ever killing nerves.

We dance again on rusty nails, on white coals and fish hooks, my bowels roping us together for eternity.

For another dance.

And another dance.

Trailer Sucks

I almost didn't write this story, because the subject matter is downright disturbing. But I couldn't get the idea out of my head, so I made this humorous rather than straight horror. After writing it I put it away, convinced it would never see print. Unfortunately, my friend Jeff Strand was publishing a collection of humorous over-the-top horror stories called Until Someone Loses An Eye, and asked if I had anything suitably offensive. Along with The Confession, this is something I sometimes wish I never wrote. You've been warned.

The night began like any other night at the Galaxy Trailer Park, everyone on lawn chairs in front of Freddie's big double-wide, sharing a bottle of Evan Williams whiskey and setting fire to any squirrel stupid enough to wander into Billy's box trap.

They'd caught three so far, at the cost of one peanut per squirrel. Zeke would yank them out of the box with a leather work glove, sprinkle some of Erma Mae's fancy smelling nail polish remover on its fluffy tail, and then touch a Marlboro to the critter. Damn things ran so fast, they looked like bottle rockets shooting across the lawn, squealing all the way. One even made it all the way up a tree and into its nest, setting that ablaze, little flaming baby squirrels leaping to their deaths and bouncing when they hit the sod.

Good clean American fun.

Jim Bob walked over, a spit covered stogie dead in his lips, smiling like the way he did when he got his weekly check from the gubment, or like that one time when he shit in a box and mailed it to the local porker department because they gave him a ticket for having that rusty Ford up on blocks on his front lawn for over six years.

"Guess what I got me, fellas?"

"A small pecker?" Freddie cackled. Billy thought this was so funny he squirted Evan Williams out of his nose.

Idiots, Jim Bob thought.

“No, you jackasses. I got me a vampire.”

More giggling. The giggling turned to guffaws when Zeke, in a show of wit usually reserved for men with more teeth, said, “Well, now...that really sucks.”

Jim Bob waited for the laughter to die, showing extraordinary patience, especially considering he broke his ex’s nose for sassing back with less conviction. He looked at each of them men in turn, giving them his quit fucking around stare. It only took a few seconds for respectful silence to ensue.

“Here’s the deal,” Jim Bob said. “You all know ‘bout them killings, right?”

The group nodded as one. Some nutbag had been cutting off noggins—one a week—of neighborhood church-going folk. The heads hadn’t been found. Last week it was dear old Mrs. Parsons who got herself killed. She had been one of the few women in the community Jim Bob respected, and he often played Mr. Fix-it in her townhouse for eight dollars an hour and homemade apple pie.

“Well, I caught me the killer,” Jim Bob said. “Out in the woods, south of Rooney Lake, by that overgrown cemetery. I was hunting coon, discovered this old shack. Outside, in a rain barrel, were all eight heads from the eight people been killed.”

Jim Bob paused. Every eye was locked on him, respectful.

“So I go into the shack, and it’s got one of them, whatchamacallits, caskets inside. I opened it up, and sleeping in the casket was an honest-to-Christ vampire. Fangs and all. She’d been cutting off the heads, see, to hide the bite marks on the neck. Pretty slick, I gotta admit.”

“What’d you do?” Zeke asked.

“You gotta put a stake through the heart,” Billy said. “I saw this movie...”

“I’m telling this story,” Jim Bob snapped.

“Sorry, Jim Bob. I’ll shut up.”

“You do that. Anyway, I was thinking the same thing. Put a stake in this bitch.”

“Bitch? It was a lady vampire?”

“Hell yeah. And a pretty piece of tail too. Big old titties, and legs that looked like they could wrap around you and ride you until your balls fell off.”

“So, what’d you do?”

"I'm getting to that. I was thinking about staking her, but she seemed too damn pretty to kill. Plus, since the Missus left, I haven't tagged a piece of ass."

"You cornholed the vampire?" Freddie asked.

"Can you guys shut up and let me finish the damn story? Jumpin' Jesus on a pogo stick! Do I have to staple your flappers shut?"

"Sorry, Jim Bob."

"Sheesh. Anyway, I'd been riding my 4 by 4, so I hitched a chain up to the casket and dragged it back to my trailer. It was getting dark, and I had to hurry in case the little vixen woke up."

"Did you make it?" Zeke asked.

"No, you idiot. She woke up and killed me."

Silence from the group.

"Hell yeah I made it, you jackass. And I brought her inside and tied her, nekkid, to my bed. Then I gave it to her."

"The stake?"

"The dick."

Billy cocked a head at Jim Bob. "You raped a vampire?"

"It wasn't rape. A vampire ain't alive, dummy. Ain't no laws against humping the living dead."

Zeke winked and gave Jim Bob a nudge. "So how was the little whore?"

"Like fucking an ant hill. That bitch was drier than a box of Grape Nuts. Plus, she woke up in the middle of it, started hissing and snapping those fangs. Could hardly get my nut off."

"Did you stake her?"

"Goddamn, Billy, can you shut up about the goddamn stake for five goddamn minutes?"

Billy nodded, pretending to zip his mouth closed.

Jim Bob chomped on his cigar, swallowed a little piece. "Okay, so I got to thinking. She might be all dried up down there, but her mouth looked all warm and wet and inviting. 'Cept for those long teeth, of course. So I got my five pound rubber mallet and my chisel and I got rid of those nasty teeth. Wasn't easy, neither, bitch spitting and snapping at me the whole time."

"Did it work?" Zeke asked.

Jim Bob broke into a big grin. "Worked like an unwed mother with ten kids. That girl could suck the feathers off a jaybird."

Laughter and spontaneous back-slapping ensued.

“Can we see her?” Zeke asked.

“See her? You can take her for a test drive,” Jim Bob said, to cheers. Then he added, “For five bucks.”

“Five bucks?” Freddie frowned. “I thought we was buddies, Jim Bob.”

“We is buddies, Freddie. But the care and feeding of a vampire costs money. I had to make a deal with Jesse Miller, the janitor over at Covington Hospital. He charges ten bucks for a pack of blood. So unless one of you guys wants to hook up a straw to your wrist, it’s five bucks a bang.”

Freddie had to go inside to get some cash. Billy gave Jim Bob a check. Zeke didn’t have no money, but had two and a half packs of Marlboros, which Jim Bob admitted was just as good.

They all went over to Jim Bob’s trailer, which stank of stale beer and rotten food because Jim Bob hadn’t done much cleaning since his wife left.

“She’s in my room,” Jim Bob said. “It’s still daytime, so she’s sleeping the sleep of the undead. But the sun is gonna set soon, and then she’ll be wild and buckin’.”

The quartet crept, quiet as church mice, into the bedroom.

As promised, there was a naked woman tied to the bed, with big old melon titties and fat, red dick-sucking lips, which recessed a bit into her mouth seeing as she had no teeth no more.

“Goddamn!” Zeke removed his John Deere cap and smacked himself on the thigh with it. “Ain’t this something!”

“I’m first.” Freddie had already undid his overalls. “It’s been almost three weeks for me.”

“I thought Fat Sue Ellen gave you a handjob behind the church last Sunday.”

“Handjobs don’t count.”

“Wait a second,” Billy stepped in front of Freddie. “How do we know this is really a vampire or not?”

Freddie got mean eyes. “Frankly, Billy, I don’t give a shit if it’s a vampire, my sister, or Mother goddamn Theresa. I’m fucking it.”

“You want to go to jail, Freddie? We could all go to jail for this. Is a piece of ass worth prison?”

“Hell yeah.”

“Hold up, Freddie.” Jim Bob smiled, put a hand on his shoulder. “Billy’s right. I don’t want to see my good buddies go down on no

felony charges. Lemme prove to you this bitch is what I say she is. First of all, any of you see her breathing?"

The three squinted, looking for the telltale rise and fall of the nekkid girl's chest. It didn't move an inch.

"See? No breathing. Now Billy, you want to check to see if you can find a pulse?"

Billy reached out a hand, then hesitated.

"I don't want to."

"Well, shit. You want to stick your peter in her, but you're afraid to touch her wrist?"

Billy swallowed and put two fingers on her wrist, right below where the baling wire bound her to the bedpost.

"Nothing," Billy said. "And she's real cold."

"You sure this ain't just a dead body?" Zeke said. "Because I didn't just pay two packs of smokes to bugger no dead bitch."

"Does a dead body do this?"

Jim Bob reached into his jeans and took out a small silver rosary. He touched the cross to the girl's thigh.

The reaction was instant. The skin blistered and smoked, burning a cross shape into her flesh.

"Goddamn!"

Freddie sniffed the air. "Smells like bacon."

Billy grabbed Jim Bob's wrist, pulled it away from the vampire.

"Jesus, Jim Bob! You made your point. Quit marking her all up."

Jim Bob laughed. "Don't matter none. Bitch heals up the next day. You can get real rough with this little lady, and she's like that fucking battery bunny on TV. Keeps on a'going."

To prove his point, Jim Bob made a fist and punched at her ribs until the left side of her chest caved in.

"Lemme have a go," said Zeke. He picked up the rubber mallet resting on the dresser and brought it down hard on the girl's knee. There was a snapping sound, and the knee bent inwards.

"Son of a bitch! Ain't that somethin'..."

All four men jumped back as the vampire lurched in the bed, her toothless mouth stretched open, crying out like a colicky child.

But no sound came out.

"Shut the fuck up, whore," Jim Bob said, slapping the vampire across the face. She narrowed her yellow eyes at him and hissed, her fat lips flapping.

“Damn,” Billy said. “That’s some scary shit.”

“You kidding? This is the perfect woman. Beat her ass and she can’t complain.”

Freddie’s bibs were already around his ankles.

“I’m first. What do I do? Just stick it in her suck hole?”

Jim Bob slapped her again, then swallowed another piece of cigar.

“You could, but it ain’t no good. She tries to spit it out.”

“Then what do I do?”

Jim Bob put the rosary back in his pants, and his hand came out with a pocket knife.

“Give yourself a little nick on the pecker with this.”

Freddie hooded his eyes. “Slice open my pecker? Fuck you.”

“Trust me, Freddie. This bitch drinks blood. She goes crazy for just a little taste. Just make a tiny little cut, and she’ll suck your balls right out your dick hole.”

“No way.”

“Don’t be a pussy,” Zeke said. “Ain’t nothing but a little prick on a little prick.”

“Then you go first.”

“No problem.” Zeke shoved Freddie aside and dropped trou.

“Gimme the damn knife.”

Jim Bob handed Zeke the pocket knife and watched his friend made a tiny slit along the top of his dirty, wrinkled foreskin.

“Now what?” Zeke asked.

“Climb on and give her a taste...and get ready for the ride of your life.”

Zeke got onto the bed, causing the vampire to scream again when he kneed her broken ribs. But when his bloody dick got near her lips, she stopped screaming and opened her mouth wide, straining to reach it, tongue licking the air.

“Well, lookee here. Bitch really wants it.”

“Shove it in, Zeke. Let her have it.”

Zeke did, and the room filled with slurping and sucking sounds. Zeke’s eyes rolled up into his head and he moaned.

“Is it good, Zeke?”

“Unngh unghh unghh unghh...”

“Is that yeah?”

“Oh...fuck yeah...”

Zeke's hips were like a piston, gaining speed. Within a minute, his hairy butt clenched, his thighs spasmed, and he was crying out for his mama.

Zeke fell back with a look on his face that was positively fucking angelic.

"I've been boning since I was eleven years old, and that was the best fuck I've had in my whole entire goddamn life."

"I'm next," Freddie said.

Jim Bob handed him the knife, and Freddie gave his pecker two pokes, one on either side of the head, before jamming it in.

Freddie was even quicker than Zeke, finishing up faster than it took most guys to piss.

"That made my nose hair curl," Freddie said, laughing. "Damn, Jim Bob, I think I shot about a gallon into that bitch."

"Goddamn sloppy thirds," Billy swore. But that didn't stop him from stripping off his shit stained underwear, giving his pecker a little cut, and ramming it in those drippy fat lips.

Jim Bob had gotten it four times the night prior, but watching his buddies go at it made his cock so hard he could jack up a car with it. When Billy finished, Jim Bob gave himself a poke-poke with the knife, squeezed to get the bleeding started, and shoved it down her throat.

The sensation was no less incredible than it had been the first four times. This bitch used it all; her lips, her tongue, her cheeks, her throat. She bobbed her head so fast it was a fucking blur. Goddamn, it was good. For five dollars, this was the deal of the century. He should charge at least seven-fifty. Hell, when word got around, there'd be guys lined up out the door for a taste of this. At seventy-fifty a head, twenty people per day...

"Ouch!"

Jim Bob pulled out. While he was mouth fucking her, he felt something pinch.

Sure enough, looking down at his dick, there was more blood than there should have been.

"What the fuck?"

He tried to wipe away the blood, and then noticed the small hole near the base of his pecker.

"What happened, Jim Bob?"

Jim Bob clenched his teeth.

“Fucking bitch bit me.”

“I thought you knocked out her teeth.”

“I did.”

Jim Bob reached over to the dresser, picked up his chisel. He shoved it in the vampire’s mouth and pried her jaws open.

There it was, on her upper gums; a new goddamn tooth growing in.

“Son of a bitch!”

Jim Bob flew into a rage. He hit her in the face with the chisel, over and over, cheekbones snapping and jaw cracking. The vampire shook like unholy hell, but that just fueled his fury.

Goddamn women. Can’t trust any of them. Even the undead ones.

“Jim Bob...”

Jim Bob didn’t pay the boys no mind. He switched his grip on the chisel and began to stab the vampire with it, putting out one of the bitch’s eyes with a slurpy pop, then the other.

“Jesus, Jim Bob!”

Someone, maybe it was Zeke, tried to pull him off. But Jim Bob wouldn’t budge. After he’d turned the vampire’s face into Spaghetti-O’s, he began to stab at her chest, puncturing the chisel through her rib cage, driving it into her heart all the way up to the wood handle.

“Holy shit,” Billy said.

The vampire began to smoke, her skin cracking and splitting open, exposing red, raw muscle and rotting organs. There was sizzling and snapping and a terrible odor like wet, burning dog.

“Stop it, Jim Bob!”

And then something hit Jim Bob in the back of the head and he was out.

□ □ □

“Look. He’s waking up.”

Jim Bob sensed people in the room with him. Without opening his eyes, he knew it was Freddie, Zeke, and Billy.

He could smell them.

His memory was hazy, but Jim Bob knew one thing for certain; I’ve never felt so good.

His shoulder, which had bothered him every single day since he dislocated it ten years ago hauling bags of cement, didn’t hurt at all. He wiggled his big toe, which had an ingrown nail so full of puss it was nearly double the size, but there was no pain.

He felt fan-fucking-tastic.

There was only one problem; he couldn't seem to move his arms.

"Jim Bob? You awake?"

Jim Bob opened his eyes and stared his friends standing around his bed. It seemed to be very bright in his room, even though the only light was the forty watt lamp on the dresser.

"Do you understand me, Jim Bob?"

Jim Bob tried to say Of course I understand you, you idiot, but nothing came out of his mouth.

"Goddamn," Zeke said. "He doesn't understand a damn word."

Billy leaned in close. "Do you remember what happened, Jim Bob? You were killing that vampire bitch, and the Freddie hit you on the head with that mallet..."

"Sorry, man." Freddie shrugged his shoulders. "But you were destroying the best piece of ass I ever had."

Billy shook his head sadly. "Problem was, he hit you too hard."

"My bad," said Freddie.

Jim Bob tried to ask a question, but his lips moved in silence.

"You died, Jim Bob. But since that vampire girl bit you on the pecker, we figured we should keep an eye on you, case you came back. And you did."

Zeke smiled. "You should see yourself, Jim Bob. You got teeth longer than my German Shepherd, Harley. I'd hold up a mirror to show you, but it probably wouldn't do nuthin'."

A vampire? Jim Bob thought. This is crazy.

But then he touched his tongue to his teeth and felt the sharp points.

Holy shit! I'm a vampire. That must be the reason I can't talk—I'm dead, and there's no goddamn air in my lungs.

"Sorry we had to tie you up," Billy said. "But we didn't know what else to do. You...uh...want some of this blood?"

Billy held up a plump unit of plasma, one of the packs Jim Bob had bought from Jesse Miller at the hospital.

Jim Bob's mouth instantly filled with drool. He craned his neck toward the blood, licking his lips, trying to reach it. Never before had he been so hungry. He had to have that blood. Hadtohadtohadtohadto...

"Damn!" Zeke said. "Will you lookit that! I think he wants it!"

"Give it to him, Billy." Freddie nudged him.

Zeke held up a hand. "Hold on, wait a second."

“Give it to him. He’s our friend.”

“He ain’t our friend no more. He’s a goddamn monster. Look at him, snapping and slobbering.”

Gimmeegimmeegimmeegimmee! I need that blood!

“So what should we do?” Billy asked. “Kill him?”

Zeke grinned, rubbing his goatee. “I got me a better idea. Jim Bob may not have big old titties, but I bet he’ll be pretty good just the same.”

Zeke picked up the mallet and chisel. Billy smiled, unzipping his pants.

“I got first this time!”

Jim Bob opened his mouth to scream, but nothing came out.

Markey

Flash fiction, a little slice-of-life tale that I posted on my website as a freebie.

Something is in my ear.
It crawled in when I was sleeping. Really deep. I can feel it tickle
against the side of my brain.
I tried to kill it with a sharp pencil.
There was a lot of blood. But it didn't come out.
I stuck some pliers in my ear, to pull it out.
But it went in deeper.
Then it started to talk to me.
It didn't sound like words, not at first. More like chirping.
Kind of like a cricket.
But if I concentrated real hard, I could understand.
He says his name is Markey.
Markey talks to me all the time. He tells me he understands me.
He knows that I'm different.
Markey says we're going to be famous one day.
He wants me to kill a little girl.
I don't want to. Killing is bad. I tried to get Markey out of my ear
by banging my head into the wall, over and over.
Markey didn't like that. He made me hold my hand over the stove
burner as punishment.
It hurt a lot, and I had to go to the hospital for a while. The doctors
were very nice. They asked me what happened.
I told them it was an accident.
I didn't tell them about Markey.
When my hand got better, Markey was nicer to me.
For a while.
Then he started talking about killing again.

He said I should bring a little girl back to my basement and do mean things to her with a hammer.

Markey said it won't be much different than all the cats he's made me kill. Except this will be even more fun.

Markey has made me kill a lot of cats.

I have a table in my basement with straps on it. The straps are strong, so the little girl won't get away when I'm putting the nails in her head.

I drive a school bus.

It would be easy to grab a little girl.

Better than cats, Markey said.

I was so alone before Markey crawled into my ear.

He's my best friend.

I'll grab the little bitch tomorrow.

Punishment

Another EC Comics inspired tale that I wrote in my younger days. I polished it a decade later for an anthology that never came out, so instead I printed up copies as chapbooks and gave them away for free at horror conventions.

Dominick Pataglia tried to block out the screaming coming from the Punishment Room, but the ceiling mounted speakers were at maximum volume.

The screams came at regular intervals—animal cries, sharp and shrill, only identifiable as human because they were punctuated with pleas for mercy.

Mercy was not known here.

Dominick clamped his fists over his ears, but the terrible sound penetrated the flesh and bone of his hands. From the creaking noise that underscored the screaming, Dominick guessed they were using the screws; wooden clamps, tightened on joints until the bones almost cracked.

Sometimes bones did crack, causing political bedlam in the form of inquiries and written protestations from sympathy groups.

This usually resulted in a sharp fine.

The Law plainly stated that the punishment couldn't inflict permanent damage. The Government was a stickler on that. It interfered with the education process.

Another scream, like a pig being butchered. Dominick squeezed his eyes shut. He had felt the screws before, and other things that were even more horrible.

Dominick had been a guest of the Punishment Room three times since he came here. Each time it had gotten worse.

His first visit had been just after he arrived. Two men in hoods and uniforms grabbed him before he'd even gotten off the bus. They

dragged him to the Waiting Room and locked him in, confused and afraid.

There were no windows in the Waiting Room, no furniture, and the floor was cold, gray concrete. It had a sharp, acrid odor, beneath the scent of antiseptic. Dominick would later identify it as the smell of fear.

On the walls of the Waiting Room, tacked up in ranks and files and covering every inch of space, were photographs.

Pictures of people being tortured.

Thousands of photos, thousands of faces, each depicting a moment of grotesque agony.

Dominick opened his eyes and they locked onto a picture of himself. He looked so young in the picture, even in the grip of agony. It was taken only a few months ago.

They had used the rack the first time.

He hadn't done anything to warrant it. It was just to get him acquainted with the way things were done here.

He had screamed until his voice gave out.

That was what seemed to be happening to his comrade in the Punishment Room. The screams were becoming hoarser. Not because the pain was lessening, but because he had been in there for over an hour. Poor bastard.

Dominick let his eyes wander around the room until he saw he photo of the second time he'd visited the Punishment Room. For talking to an instructor out of turn. Dominick couldn't even remember what he had said to him.

Dominick's face in the picture was tear-stained and manic.

They had used the screws on him. On his thumbs, his knees, his testicles.

It had taken him ten days in the infirmary to recover.

His third visit to the Punishment Room was the worst, and warranted three Polaroids, all of which hung on the wall. During a two hour period he was strung up by his feet and beaten with a rubber whip over every inch of his naked body.

Then he was beaten again.

And again.

And again.

The pain reached such an intense level he kept blacking out, and a doctor had to be called in to give him amphetamine shots to keep him awake.

That's what the Torture Man thrived on. There was a rumor one poor girl had been in the Punishment Room for fourteen hours, simply because she kept passing out from the pain.

The Torture Man loved that.

What he loved even more was breaking someone tough.

The Torture Man glowed when someone showed anger or hatred; anything other than total submission. Because then the Torture Man got to break the spirit along with the body.

Where they found people like the Torture Man, God only knew.

Another hoarse cry. It would be ending soon, and then it would be Dominick's turn.

This was his fourth visit. That meant the electricity. From what others had told him, electricity made everything else look mild.

He would have current driven into his teeth, and his ears, and up his anus. The Government had not banned this torture, even though it resulted in burns on the contact points. Burns weren't considered permanent damage.

The screaming stopped. The silence that filled the Waiting Room made Dominick dizzy.

It would be only moments now.

He hugged his knees to his chest and touched the bottom of his left heel for the hundredth time. Rules required he strip before he came in, but Dominick had managed to tape a stubby pencil to the bottom of his bare foot.

He tapped the sharpened point, but it offered him no courage. Even if Dominick somehow found the guts to use it as a weapon, he didn't think it would get him very far. The Torture Man would probably be amused.

And after the amusement would come anger.

Thinking about it made Dominick nauseous. But he thought about it anyway.

Maybe it would work, if he was quick. Maybe it would work, if he stabbed the Torture Man somewhere vital, like the face. Maybe...

The door opened.

The Torture Man filled the doorway, steeped in the stench of body odor and fear. He stood almost twenty inches taller than Dominick, a monster of a man, with a barrel chest and strong, thick fingers.

“Nice to see you again, Mr. Pataglia.” His voice was like raking leaves. The black cowl left his mouth uncovered, and his crooked brown teeth smiled with power and certainty. There were stains on his gray shirt from his armpits to his flanks, and a large wet spot soaked the front of his black pants.

Though sexual abuse and rape weren’t allowed by the law, the government allowed him to masturbate while torturing.

Dominick palmed the pencil and fought to keep his sphincter closed. He could hardly breathe. The Torture Man produced a clip board and glared at it with little rat eyes.

“Attacked a hall monitor, eh Dominick? Haven’t you got the balls? We’ll have to hook them up to the generator, see if we can light them up.”

The Torture Man giggled like a young girl.

Dominick stood on rubbery legs and backed into the corner of the room. Dread soaked him to the core. The Torture Man closed in, huge and looming. He grabbed Dominick by the wrist.

“Please,” Dominick pleaded. The pencil felt like a strand of spaghetti in his hand, slick and useless.

The Torture Man brought his face close, so close Dominick could smell his rancid breath.

“You’re my last assignment of the day, so we’ll have plenty of time together.”

Dominick looked away, catching a glimpse of his photo on the wall.

“No we won’t.”

Dominick’s voice surprised him. It was low and hard, steely with resolve.

The Torture Man was surprised as well. He went smiley and wide-eyed.

“Why, Mr. Pataglia, did you just contradict—”

Dominick’s hand shot out and plunged the pencil into the center of the Torture Man’s right eye.

It went in hard, like stabbing a tire, and there was a sucking-slurping sound.

The Torture Man screamed. He released his grip and stumbled backwards, his meaty hands fluttering around his face like birds afraid to land. Blood and black fluid seeped down his face in gooey trails.

Dominick took three quick steps after him and swung his fist at the pencil, managing to knock it deeper into the socket.

The Torture Man made a keening sound, and then crumpled into a large, fat pile on the concrete. His mouth hung open like an empty sack, and his good eye rolled up into the socket, baring the bloodshot white.

Dominick stood over him for a moment, shocked. Had he done it? Had he killed him?

Run! demanded the voice in his head.

But Dominick remained rooted to the floor.

He had to make sure. He had to make sure the bastard was dead.

The adrenalin was wearing off, leaving Dominick sick and shaky. He forced himself to kneel, and then tentatively stretched out a hand to check the Torture Man's pulse.

It was like willfully putting his hand in a fire.

After an eternity of inching closer and closer, Dominick touched the Torture Man's wet, clammy neck. He probed beneath the fat and the stubble, seeking out the carotid.

There was a pulse.

Dominick yanked his hand back as if shocked.

Run, you idiot! If he wakes up...

But Dominick couldn't run. He embraced a chilling certainty; even if he didn't escape, he couldn't allow this evil man to live. Not just for himself, but for all the others.

He chewed his lower lip and reached for the pencil.

The Torture Man groaned.

Dominick sprang to his feet. He needed a weapon of some kind. Side-stepping the Torture Man, Dominick raced out the door and into the hallway. To the left, the door to the courtyard. To the right, the Punishment Room.

Dominick's reaction was visceral—he didn't want to go in the Punishment Room ever again. But there were weapons...

He went right.

The Punishment Room was straight out of his nightmares. Dark and filthy, illuminated by two bare bulbs hanging from the ceiling by greasy cords. The walls were black, and an underlying stink of urine

and excrement fouled the moist air. Chains and shackles were bolted to the floor and walls, a rack sat in one corner, and a cabinet full of the Torture Man's hideous instruments yawned open, revealing his tools of pain.

Dominick heard a noise like wind whistling through the trees. He looked back and saw the Torture Man standing in the doorway, wheezing. The pencil was still poking from his eye, and gooey red tears streaked down his face. He pointed a huge finger at Dominick, and took another labored step forward.

Dominick reached into the Torture Man's cabinet and removed a can of lighter fluid. He popped the top and squirted it at the Torture Man's face.

The Torture Man screamed when the alcohol hit his punctured eye. He stumbled backwards and tripped over the generator.

"You little bastard! When I get you..."

Dominick grabbed the nearest object—a digital camera sitting on the cart—and fell upon the Torture Man. He brought the weapon down on his tormentor's face, again and again, the plastic case cracking and splintering as he used it to knock out teeth and break bone.

The Torture Man lashed out, connecting with the side of Dominick's head. Dominick fell onto his back, landing hard. His vision blurred, and something was poking him behind his left shoulder.

Next to him, the Torture Man sat up. He grabbed the pencil and pulled. His eye slurped out of the socket, looking like a tiny red jellyfish trailing its tentacles. The Torture Man howled, dropping the pencil. The eye swung freely down at cheek level, hanging by a coil of optic nerves.

Dominick reached behind his back, seeking the source of his discomfort. He pulled it into view.

It was a steel clamp, almost the size of his hand. He squeezed the ends and it opened its jaws, baring tiny teeth. A cord was attached to the bottom, and Dominick followed it along the floor to where it plugged into the electric generator.

He glanced at the Torture Man, who had managed to find his rubber whip. He smacked it against Dominick's face, the pain instant and staggering.

Dominick rolled onto his side, still gripping the clamp. The whip lashed across his naked back, and he cried out.

“You think you know pain?!” the Torture Man bellowed. “I’ll show you pain!”

Dominick spun around onto his bottom, taking another whip stroke in the face. He thrust the clamp at the Torture Man, securing it to his ankle.

Then he stretched out his hand and hit the switch on the generator.

The reaction was instant.

The Torture Man doubled in half like a book slamming shut, and pitched head-first to the floor. A strong whiff of ozone plumed around him as his grotesque body shook in racking spasms. Blood sprayed from his mouth and a piece of tongue escaped his clenched teeth and tumbled down his chin.

Dominick crab walked backwards, putting distance between them. He watched, wide-eyed, as the clamp on the Torture Man’s leg began to smoke, and then ignited the soaked-in lighter fluid.

The Torture Man burned like kindling.

Dominick pulled his gaze away and found the drawer next to the cabinet that held his clothes. He tried to ignore the popping sound of blistering flesh and the Torture Man’s gurgling moans. By the time he’d tied his shoes the moans had died along with the monster.

The can of lighter fluid was on the cart, next to a pair of tin snips. Dominick shoved the snips in his back pocket and squirted fluid onto the rack. Then he did the same to the Torture Man’s dreaded cabinet and the instruments it contained.

They burned well.

Finally, he went back into the Waiting Room and doused the walls, staring one last time at the picture of himself on the rack, watching it burn.

They would be coming. Soon. He had to get away.

The door to the courtyard was open, and amazingly, no one was around. It made sense—the Hall Monitors hadn’t expected to escort him out of there for another few hours.

Dominick stepped out into the fresh air. The sun winked through the trees like an old friend. A light breeze cleared the stench of urine from his nostrils.

The fence was just beyond the basketball courts, locked and topped with razor wire. Impossible to climb over.

But he wasn’t climbing.

Two minutes with the tin snips, and he was through the fence.

Freedom enveloped him like a mother's love.

He ran off into the woods, giddy, yet knowing that someday he would return.

But not as a victim.

Dominick had read the forbidden history books. He knew that a hundred years ago there was no torture in America's Public Schools. There was once a time when eleven-year-olds like himself went to school to learn. When education wasn't Government indoctrination. When children were free.

The Torture Man, evil as he was, was just a symptom of the disease. Both a part of the system, and a product of it.

But Dominick knew there were others like himself. Fighters, who sought change.

He would meet up with these people. Grow strong. And in time, when he returned to this place, it wouldn't be as a victim.

It would be as a liberator.

Dominic Patalgia ran through the woods, not looking back at the Elementary Camp. His footfalls were sure and strong, and as he ran he could swear that he heard the sound of a thousand boys and girls behind him, cheering.

FUNNY STUFF

If I could turn an unbiased critical eye toward my own work, I'd say the thing that makes it unique is the humor.

My standard author bio says I used to do improv comedy. In college, I wrote and starred in a comedy play called *The Caravan O' Laughs*, which was a collection of insane skits that had a few shows in Chicago and southern Illinois. I've always been comfortable in front of an audience, and from early on I had the kind of mind that always finds the joke in any situation.

Comedy has its roots in the same part of our brain that responds to fear. We laugh at things that scare us, confuse us, and surprise us. We're wired to recognize and process millions of pieces of incoming information, and when something defies our expectations, laughter is the result. An evolutionary tension breaker to help us deal with being confused.

Most of my writing contains varying degrees of humor. I can't help it. When I'm editing, the thing I spend the most amount of time doing is cutting jokes for the sake of the story. I hate cutting jokes, and if I snip one I'll usually use it later in another tale. My work desk is scattered with little pieces of paper, each containing a joke, many of them awful.

It's a sickness, really.

The following shorts use various forms of humor to varying degrees of success. There's satire, and parody, and black humor, and puns, and inappropriate humor, and one-liners, and slapstick, and a lot of irony. Out of everything I've written, these stories have the most of me in them.

Light Drizzle

The title, and much of the plot, is a nod to my friend Barry Eisler and his John Rain series. But this is also a satire of the entire hitman sub-genre, where tough guy assassins with exotic pasts follow strict codes and kill in bizarre ways with common, everyday objects to get the job done.

The mark knelt next to a garbage can, two hands unsuccessfully trying to plug nine holes in his face, neck, and upper body. A gambler, late in his payments, with one second-chance too many. I didn't have all of the details.

Rule #1: Don't make it personal.

Knowing too much made it personal.

He dropped onto his face and spent a minute imitating a lawn sprinkler—a lawn sprinkler that sprayed blood and cried for his mama. I kept my distance.

Rule #8: Don't get all icky with the victim's fluids.

When all movement ceased, I moved in and planted the killing corkscrew in his left hand. In his right, I placed a bottle of 1997 Claude Chonion Merlot. His death would look like an unfortunate uncorking accident.

Rule #2: Make it look natural.

I ditched the latex gloves in the Dumpster and spun on my heels, practically bumping into the bum entering the mouth of the alley. Ragged clothes. A strong smell of urine. Wide eyes.

I reached into the inner pocket of his trench coat, tugged out another pair of latex gloves.

Rule #3: No witnesses.

"Who're you?" the bum asked.

"I'm John," I lied.

Rule #19: Never give your real name.

My real name was Bob. Bob Drizzle. I'm half Japanese. The other half is also Japanese. I also have a bit of Irish in me, which accounts for my red hair. Plus some Serbo-Croatian, a touch of Samoan, a dab of Nordic, a sprinkling of Cheyenne, and some Masi from my mother's side.

But I blend invisibly into all cultures, where I ply my unique trade. I'm a paid assassin. A paid assassin who kills people for money.

I gave the bum a sad frown and said, "Sorry, buddy."

The gloves didn't go on easy—the previous pair had left my hands sweaty, and my palms fought with the rubber. The bum watched the struggle, his stance unsteady. I considered going back to the dead gambler and retrieving the corkscrew, to make the scene look like a fight for Merlot gone deadly.

Instead, I pulled out a pocketful of skinny balloons.

"I'm unemployed," the bum said.

I shoved the multicolored mélange of latex into his filthy mouth, and while he sputtered and choked I blew up a pink one and expertly twisted it into a horsey. I dropped it by his twitching corpse. Street person dies making balloon animals. We've all seen it on the news many times.

I tugged off the gloves, balled them up inside out, and shot the three pointer at the open can.

Missed.

"What's going on?"

A man. Joe Busybody, sticking his nose in other people's business, watching from the sidewalk. Linebacker body, gone soft with age.

I reached for another pair of gloves. "Sir, this is police business. Would you like to give a statement?"

The guy backpedaled.

"You're no cop."

I didn't bother with the second glove. I removed the aluminum mallet from my holster. That, along with a little seasoning salt and the pork chop I kept in my shoe, would make his death mimic a meat tenderizing gone wrong.

But before I had a chance to tartare his ass, he took off.

I keep in shape.

Rule #13: Stay fit.

Any self-respecting hitman worth his contract fee has to workout these days. Marks were becoming more and more health conscious. Sometimes they ran. Sometimes they refused to die. Sometimes they even had the gall to fight back.

I do Pilates, and have one of those abdominal exercisers they sell on late night television. I bought it at a thrift store, with cash.

Rule #22: Don't leave a paper trail.

The witness had a head start, but I quickly closed the distance. When the guy glanced, wide-eyed, over his shoulder, I was able to smash the mallet on his forehead.

See ya. Wouldn't wanna be ya.

The mark stumbled, and I had to leap over the falling body. I skidded to a stop on thick rubber soles.

Rule #26: Shoes should be silent and have good traction, and good arch support.

I took a moment to scan the street. No one seemed to be watching.

I played Emeril on the mark's face, then put the mallet in his right hand and the pork chop in his left.

I was sprinkling on the Mrs. Dash when I heard something behind me.

My head snapped up at the sound, and I peered over my shoulder. The number 332 commuter bus had stopped at my curb. Right next to the big sign that said BUS STOP.

I cursed under my breath for breaking *Rule #86: Don't kill anyone where people are likely to congregate, like bus stops.*

I stared. A handful of riders, noses pressed to window glass, stared back.

The bus driver, a heavy-set woman wearing a White Sox hat, scrambled to close the bus door.

But I was fast. In three steps I'd mounted the stairs and withdrawn a can of oven cleaner from my holster. Nasty stuff, oven cleaner. The label is crammed full of warnings. The bus driver stared at the can and got wide-eyed.

"Drive," I told her.

She drove.

I faced the terrified group of riders. Two were children. Three were elderly. One was a nun with an eye patch.

Rule #7: No sympathy.

I snapped on another latex glove.

After counting them twice, I came up with nine people total. Just enough for a soccer team.

Perfect.

I removed the uninflated ball and the bicycle pump from my holster. Soccer games got rowdy. Casualties were common.

After screwing some cleats into the bottoms of my thick, rubber soled shoes, I spent a good ten minutes stomping on the group. The nun was especially tough. But I had training. I was a fuscia belt in Jin Dog Doo, the ancient Japanese art of killing a man using only your hands and feet and edged weapons and blunt weapons and common household appliances and guns.

Eventually, even the nun succumbed. Some torn goal netting and a discarded ref's whistle completed the illusion. Only one last thing left to do.

"Stop the bus!" I yelled at the driver.

The driver didn't stop. She accelerated.

Rule #89: Don't attract attention.

This bus was attracting more than its share. Besides speeding, the driver had just run a red light, prompting honks and screeching brakes from cross-town traffic.

This simple hit had become a bit more complicated than I'd anticipated.

"Slow down!" I ordered the driver.

My command went unheeded. I took a Chilean Sea Bass out of my holster. It used to be called the Pantagonian Toothfish, but some savvy marketers changed its name and it's currently the hottest fish on the five star menus of the world. So hot, that overfishing has brought the Chilean Sea Bass/Pantagonian Toothfish to the brink of extinction.

Beating the driver to death with the fish would look somewhat...well...fishy. At first. But when I planted a deboning knife and a few slices of lemon in her pockets, the cops would get the picture. Just another endangered species taking revenge.

I walked up to the front of the bus and tried to recall if "*The Complete Amateur's Guide to Contract Killing*" had a rule about whacking a driver while you were a passenger. Nothing sprang to mind.

Still, it didn't seem like a wise idea. I tried another tactic.

"Stop the bus, and I'll let you go."

That was Rule #17: Lie to the mark to put her at ease.

Or was that Rule #18?

I reached for the cheat card that came with the book, folded up in my pants pocket.

Rule #18: Lie to the mark. Rule #17: Get in and out as quickly as possible.

I'd sure blown that rule to hell.

I shook the thought out of my head, recalling *Rule #25: Stay focused.*

I put the crib sheet back in my pocket and poked the driver in the hat with the bass.

"Stop the bus, and you'll live. I give you my word."

I grinned.

Rule #241: Disarm them with a smile.

The driver hit the brakes, catapulting me forward. I bounced off the front window and onto his back. The Sea Bass—my weapon—went flying, which broke *Rule #98* and *Rule #104* and possibly *Rule #206*.

Dazed, I sat up, watching as the driver shoved open the door and ran off, screaming.

I did a quick search for the Toothfish, but couldn't find it amid the soccer massacre. I'd have to leave it behind, a blatant disregard for *Rule #47*. Luckily, the fish had been wiped clean of prints (*Rule #11*) and was unregistered (*Rule #12*) so it wouldn't lead back to me.

Now for the driver.

I sprang from the bus and saw her beelining for Comiskey Park, where the White Sox played baseball. There was the usual activity around the stadium; fans, hotdog vendors, people selling programs, and no one seemed to pay any attention me or the screaming fat lady.

The South Side of Chicago; where screaming fat ladies are commonplace.

Doubling my efforts, I managed to catch up with her just as she reached the ticket counter. I took a 1/10,000th scale replica of the Washington Monument out of my holster and pressed the pointy end to her back. She was about to become another sightseeing souvenir victim. But before I got ram the monolith home, the ticket attendant caught my eye from behind the thick bullet proof glass.

I had a hunch the glass was also souvenir proof, and I couldn't kill the bus driver with someone staring straight into my eyes, practically salivating to be a witness for the prosecution.

So I did the only thing I could in that situation. I whispered to the woman to keep quiet, and then smiled at the attendant.

“Two for the cheap seats,” I said.

I paid, then walked arm in arm with the driver through the bustling crowd. The picture presented to me was disheartening. People were everywhere.

There was no private corner to drag the woman into. No secluded nooks. The bathrooms had lines out the door. Every square foot of space was crammed to capacity.

How do you kill a person in a crowded space without anyone seeing you?

I closed my eyes, trying to remember if this situation ever came up in the book. *Rule #90*? No, that had to do with airplanes. *Rule #312*? No, that was for killing a mark in a rain forest.

At times like this, I really wished he'd kept my job at the grocery store. Or bought that other book, *“The Complete Amateur's Guide to Kidnapping and Extortion.”*

“Let me go or I'll scream,” the bus driver said over the pipe organ music.

“If you scream, I'll kill you,” I answered.

A classic stalemate. It happened to me once before, in the Har Dong peninsula, on the isle of Meenee Peepee, in the city of Tini Dik. I was at a hotel (I recall it being the Itsee Wang), and came upon a gorgeous Mossad agent named Desdemona, who I managed to manipulate by engaging in massive quantities of athletic sex with her. Later, when I sobered up, I realized I'd been duped. Rather than a beautiful double agent from Israel, Desdemona had actually been just a large pile of dirty towels.

I had no idea what that had to do with anything, or how it could help me now.

No other options open, the bus driver and I made our way to the seats. They were in Section 542, way up in the nosebleed part of the stadium.

Even that section was full, fans packed shoulder to shoulder. We stepped on several toes and spilled a few beers wading through the crowd.

“These seats suck,” said the bus driver.

I told her to shut up.

To keep her quiet, I decided to appeal to her inner overeater, and bought two red hots from a hawking vendor.

She took both of them.

Then we settled in to watch the game.

It was the bottom of the fifth, Sox down two runs.

I chose to make my move at the seventh inning stretch. By then, all of the drunken fans around us would get up to relieve their bladders, and I'd be able to off the bus driver and slip into the stream of moving bodies. Then I could...

The next thing I knew, the bus driver was shoving a hot dog with the works into my face, trying to blind me.

"Help!" she screamed, at the same time trying to get her big ass out of the stadium seat.

First one cheek popped free, then the other, and then her big butt was out and shaking in my face.

I wiped ketchup out of his eyes and looked around.

No one paid any attention to the bus driver. Someone behind us even yelled "Down in front!"

I stood and wrapped an arm around her fat shoulders, under the pretense of helping her back to her seat.

Then I jammed the souvenir monument into her throat. Hard. Six or seven times.

An eerie silence settled over the crowd. Then the stadium exploded in screams.

I looked onto the field, wondering if there had just been a spectacular play.

The game had stopped. Instead of baseball players, I saw myself on the Jumbotron monitor, forty feet high, the bloody Washington Monument in my hand.

Oops.

I did a quick scan of the ball park. Thirty, maybe thirty-five thousand people.

This was going to be tough.

I reached into my holster for the roll of fabric softener and the Perry Como LP, and got started.

Mr. Spaceman

Science fiction, with a humorous bent. I can't remember why I wrote this, but it was fun to write. I have it as a freebie on my website.

“I have traveled many billions of light years to mate with an earth woman.”

Debbi eyed the john and licked her bright red lips. Freak, she thought.

He was dressed up like some kind of gooey alien, and she had to admit the make-up was pretty good. His face had scales on it, like a fish, and his mouth had little dangly things that moved when he spoke. The spacesuit, made of some kind of metallic silvery fabric, was Hollywood-quality—not surprising, considering they were on the Sunset Strip. It was probably an old movie prop.

The only fake thing about the costume was the eyes; big yellow orbs that were attached to his head on stalks. They looked like tennis balls.

The freak leaned closer to Debbi. “Will you mate with me?”

Any other night, she would have told him to take a hike. Weirdos were best avoided. But rent was due tomorrow, and business had been slow. Besides, her horoscope said today was a day for taking chances, and Debbi always put her faith in the stars. She launched into her pitch.

“Straight is twenty-five, half and half is fifty. And for seventy-five I’ll take you around the world, sugar.”

“I have already been in orbit around your world eight hundred and forty-two times.”

“Couldn’t find a parking space, huh?” Debbi smacked her gum. “How much money you got, Mr. Spaceman?”

Mr. Spaceman stuck one of his lobster claws into his tunic and pulled out a roll of cash that would choke a horse.

“Don’t flash money like that around here!” Debbi looked up and down the street, scanning for predators. “This isn’t a nice neighborhood.”

“I thought this was the city of angels.”

“The angels carry knives and guns.”

She took the john by the claw and led him down the block to the flop house. The desk clerk, a fat, greasy guy named Larry, raised an eyebrow.

“Does Mars need women?”

“Screw you, Larry. Gimme 214 for the rest of the night.”

Larry handed her the key and winked.

The room was dark, dingy, the bed still rumped from the previous rental. Debbi took off her halter top and hot pants, nudifying herself.

“See anything you like, ET?”

The john nodded several times. “I am aroused at the sight of your mammalian infant feeding vessels.”

“You should be. They cost six grand.”

She sidled up to him, her hand seeking the front of his shiny outfit. The things I do for a buck...

“So, can Mr. Spock come out and play?”

“Who is this Mr. Spock? My name is Gnerlok. I am from the planet Norbulon in the second quadrant of the Xaldorgia Galaxy.”

“A tourist, huh? I had a feeling. Isn’t Norbulon somewhere east?”

To a Californian, everyplace was east.

Gnerlok narrowed his bulbous eyes. “Yes. It is east. Near the state called Florida.”

“I can spot an out-of-towner a mile away. How about slipping out of those tin foil pants?”

With the deft move of a pro, Debbi southicated Gnerlok’s zipper. His outfit fell with a clanging sound.

“Oh my.” Debbi bit her lower lip to keep from laughing, Fire Engine Red #03 rubbing off on her teeth. “I’ve never seen one that small before.”

Gnerlok frowned.

“I assure you, that this is an average size for a male from Norbulon. I’m actually a bit larger than most.”

“Go ahead and think that, sugar. You want to take a shower, get all that make-up off?”

“I am fine.”

You're about as far from fine as you can get, Debbi thought.

"Okay, Mr. Spaceman. What would you like to do first?"

"Please give my full access to your uterine cavity."

Debbi laid back on the bed. "Like this?"

"That is perfect."

Gnerlok climbed on, then immediately climbed off.

Debbi frowned at him. "What's the matter, sugar?"

"Nothing is the matter. The coupling was most enjoyable."

"You're done?"

"Yes I am. Was our mating pleasurable to you?"

Debbi sighed. She sat up, giving him a pat on the claw. "You're a machine, honey. I'll never have better."

Gnerlok pulled up his pants and dug out his wad O'bills.

"Here is three hundred earth dollars. Thank you for procreating with me."

Debbi reached for the cash. "Anytime, sug—"

Her words were cut off by a rumbling sound. It came from her abdomen, loud enough for them both to hear.

"Excuse me. I had a couple chili dogs for dinner, and it sounds like those dogs are barking."

"That is not the sound of your digestive system."

The sound repeated, louder this time. Debbi looked down, unable to comprehend what she saw.

Her belly was expanding.

"What the hell is going on?"

"We have successfully mated. My brood incubates inside of you."

Her stomach was now the size of a basket ball, and the growth showed no signs of stopping.

Even worse, Debbi felt something deep within.

Something moving.

"You freak!" Debbie screamed. "Take off that stupid mask and tell me what you've done to me!"

She bolted to her feet and reached for Gnerlok's face, her fist closing around one of his eye stalks.

"Please do not tug at my face, earth-woman."

Debbi recoiled. That's not a mask.

"My God! What part of Florida are you from?"

“I am not from Florida. I have used deception to gain admission to your birthing portal. Now my progeny shall be born, and we shall enslave the world and—”

“I’m not ready to be a mother!” Debbi cried. “I haven’t finished Junior College yet!”

“Nor shall you ever, earth-woman. My species shall destroy—”

Debbi slapped Gnerlok across the face.

“Our agreement was for sex, not motherhood! You owe me a lot more money!”

Gnerlok held his cheek, his bulbous eyes widening.

“But money will not be necessary when we take over—”

There was a popping sound, and a flood of green cascaded down Debbi’s legs.

She stared, horrified, as her uterus contracted and a tiny yellow crustacean, the size of a golf ball, shot out of her and plopped onto the floor.

“Waaa,” it cried.

Debbi’s eyes got moist. She swallowed back the lump forming in her throat. “My baby.”

She bent down to pick it up, and the motion caused more creatures to shoot rapid-fire from her womanhood.

“Don’t just stand there like an idiot!” she hissed at Gnerlok. “Pick my children up!”

Gnerlok didn’t move until Debbi slapped him again. Then he moved as fast as he could.

It was hard to keep up. Debbie’s body spit them out like watermelon seeds.

For five minutes, the room was a combat zone. Multi-colored alien crayfish flew through the air—*BING! BING! BING!*—Gnerlok scurrying after them, mindful where he stepped.

Debbi finally expelled the last child and let out a huge sigh of relief. She felt like an empty corn popper.

“How many is that?” she asked.

Gnerlok placed the final three on the bed and tugged at his dangly mouth thingies.

“One hundred and seventeen.”

“Did you get the one that flew behind the TV?”

“Yes I did.”

“Check to make sure.”

“I am sure.”

Debbi clenched her teeth. “Are you sasssing back?”

Gnerlok checked behind the TV again.

“None of my progeny reside behind the TV,” he said.

“Your progeny? Don’t you mean *our* progeny? I’m the one that did all the work.”

Debbi approached the bed and picked up one of the kids. Her kids. It looked like a crawfish, complete with lobster claws and a tail. But its tiny face was almost human.

“They’re kind of cute. What do they eat?”

“They will feast on your rotting corpse until they are large enough to dominate—”

Debbi grabbed Gnerlok by the eye stalk once again, squeezing out a stream of tears.

“Let’s get one thing straight, Mr. Spaceman. All this talk of taking over the world, it ends right now. Got it?”

“But I’ve traveled for billions—”

Debbie yanked. Gnerlok screamed.

“Enough! You’re a father now. You have responsibilities. I hope you have a damn good job, because diapers alone are going to cost a fortune.”

“My job is to dominate—” Gnerlok cast his free eye, fearfully, at Debbi. “I mean—I have no job.”

“But you’re rich, right? Where did you get that big roll of money?”

Gnerlok mumbled something.

“Speak up, Mr. Spaceman, or I’ll tie these eye things into a big bow on your ugly head.”

“A scratch-and-win lottery ticket.”

Debbi scowled. “So that’s how it is. You come up to me all slick, flashing your cash like you’re a real player. Then you knock me up, and you don’t even have a job. Do you at least have a place to live?”

“I arrived on this planet only two earth hours ago, and have not had a chance to establish a permanent residence.”

Debbi sighed. Ugly, hung like a Chihuahua, and a homeless deadbeat.

“How about a car? No! Wait! A space ship! You’ve got a space ship, right?”

Gnerlok glanced, one-eyed, at the floor.

“When I landed, a group of three disaffected youths assaulted me and absconded with my interstellar vessel.”

Welcome to LA.

Debbi needed to think, and she mentioned as much.

“While you are thinking, could you please release my—”

“I got it! My brother-in-law works for a furniture place. I bet he can get you a job in upholstery. But first, we have to go to City Hall and get married.”

“Married? But I am not ready for marriage. I still require a few more years to play the field.”

“Should have thought of that before you started mating with earth women. This is your responsibility, Yoda. And you’re not weaseling out of it.”

Debbi released Gnerlok’s eye and turned her attention to the kids on the bed. A feeling of pure joy welled up in her chest, a place she hadn’t had much feeling since getting the implants.

“Hello, my darlings. I’m Mama.”

“Mama!” several of them cried.

“Yes. Mama. And this is your homeless deadbeat father. He’s going to do good by you, or else your Uncle Joey will break his knees. Say hello to your children, Hubby.”

“Hello, children.” Gnerlok frowned and gave them a half-hearted wave.

“Tracy! Jerry! Don’t eat your brother! Daddy will get you some food.” Debbi jabbed a finger at Gnerlok’s chest. “There’s a pizza place down the street. Get an extra large with anchovies. I bet they’ll like anchovies.”

“Anchovies,” Gnerlok repeated.

“And I’m starving too. Get me a meatball sandwich. And move your alien butt, or I’m picking up the phone and calling the CIA. I’m sure they’d love to hear about your plans to dominate the world.”

“Yes, earth-woman.”

Gnerlok slunk out the door.

Debbi sat on the bed and tickled little Alphonse under the chin. He giggled.

So did Debbi.

She’d always put her faith in the stars. And for good reason, it turned out.

“You know what, kids?” Debbi’s eyes became moist. “I think we can make this work. We can be a big, happy family.”

And if it gets too weird, Debbi decided, I can always make a big pot of gumbo and eat the little buggers.

“Come to Mama, my delicious little babies. When your father gets home we’re going house hunting. We’re going to get a nice, big place in Beverly Hills.”

With an extra large stove, Debbi decided.

Just in case.

Don't Press That Button!

A Practical Buyer's Guide to James Bond's Gadgets

Written for the essay collection James Bond in the 21st Century. I had a lot of fun with this, being a Bond fan for practically my whole life. Plus, it gave me the opportunity to simply string jokes together, rather than deal with a plot or characters.

If your first exposure to James Bond happened before the age of nine, you probably fell in love with the series for one reason: The Gadgets.

The women were hot, but you wouldn't care about that for a few more years. James Bond was tough and could fight, but so could those short guys on UHF's *Samurai Saturday*, and they had the added appeal of speaking without their lips matching their words. Global politics, espionage, and undercover infiltrations still aren't interesting, years later.

No, the thing that made your pre-pubescent brain scream with unrestrained joy was all the cool stuff Bond picked up in Q Section. You wanted the grappling hook pistol, and the pen filled with acid, and the laser watch, and the hand-held suction cups for climbing walls, and the wrist dart gun, and the rappelling cummerbund—even though you had no idea what a cummerbund was.

But now that you're all grown up, do the gadgets still have the same appeal? Do you still wish you could run to the nearest Wal-Mart and buy an electric razor that can deliver a close shave plus sweep your room for electronic listening devices?

This practical guide will look at some of best of Bond's gadgets, and offer valuable buying advice to those interested in plunking down their hard earned dollars for spy gear.



GADGET - False bottom briefcase which holds a magnetic mine, used by Bond in *Octopussy*.

USES - Protecting and transporting papers, blowing things up.

COOLNESS - Hidden compartments are always cool. So are mines.

REALITY - These already exist, in a wide variety of colors and payloads.

DO YOU WANT IT? - Yes you do. Think about how memorable your next corporate meeting will be if you're carrying one of these.

SAFETY TIP - Don't try to bring it through airport security.



GADGET - Snorkel that looks like a seagull, used by Bond in *Goldfinger*.

PRACTICAL USES - Fool your friends at the pool, see other seagulls up close, collect change from the bottom of public fountains.

COOLNESS - Uncool. The crocodile submarine in *Octopussy* has many more applications. In fact, so does simple SCUBA gear. Q Section was apparently hitting the NyQuil when they thought this up.

REALITY - Possible to manufacture, but tough to market, depending on where you put your lips.

DO YOU WANT IT? - Not really, except to amuse yourself while drinking too much.

HYGIENE TIP - Boil the bird after every use.



GADGET - Ski pole that fires a rocket, used in *Octopussy*.

USES - Improve your slalom time, blow up your friends, roast a chicken really fast.

COOLNESS - Very cool.

REALITY - Single use wouldn't be practical, it would be too heavy, and it might go off too soon (many men have this problem, and it's nothing to be embarrassed about.)

DO YOU WANT IT? - Yes, but you should be careful—tucking high explosives under your arm while speeding 70mph downhill isn't for anyone under the age of 14.

SAFETY TIP - Practice on the bunny slope before you take it down that black diamond run.



GADGET - Aston Martin DB5 sports car, used by Bond in *Goldfinger* and *Thunderball*.

USES - The ultimate road rage machine/babe magnet. Oil slick sprayer, smoke screens, tire slashing blades, machine guns, and an ejector seat for when your blind date turns out to be a bore.

COOLNESS - This is one pimped out ride.

REALITY - You could probably pay to have this car custom made, but it would cost a lot of money, and you wouldn't be allowed to drive it anywhere, except maybe in Texas.

DO YOU WANT IT? - Hell, yeah. Rush hour would never be the same.

BUYING TIP - At the dealer, don't be afraid to haggle. And don't get suckered into buying the undercarriage rust protection.



GADGET - Stick-on third nipple, used by Bond in *The Man With The Golden Gun*.

USES - For those many times in life when you just need a third nipple.

COOLNESS - At first glance, not very cool. But once you consider the possibilities, the coolness factor rises, much more so than the fake fingerprints Bond used in *Diamonds Are Forever*.

REALITY - Hollywood SPFX guys make these all the time, and you can too with some plaster for an impression cast, and some foam latex.

HINT: Shave your chest first.

DO YOU WANT IT? - Yes. Put them on sofas, on jewelry, on windows, on fruit, and all over yourself before that visit to the public pool.

SAFETY TIP - Don't use super glue.



GADGET - Little Nellie portable gyrocopter with rocket launchers, machine guns, flamethrower, and heat seeking-missiles. Used by Bond in *You Only Live Twice*.

USES - Fly around, impress the ladies, drop stuff on people.

COOLNESS - Uber-cool. Smaller than a helicopter. Not nearly as expensive to use as the Bell-Trextan rocket pack Bond used in *Thunderball*, but with a lot more firepower.

REALITY - Available on Ebay for under 20k, but without the weaponry. (Weaponry is available separately on Ebay.)

DO YOU WANT IT? - Of course you want it. Just think about all the stuff you could drop on people.

TIP - From three hundred feet, a small honeydew melon can cripple a man.



GADGET - Wrist watch with plastic explosive and detonator, used by Bond in *Moonraker*.

USES - Blow stuff up, threaten to blow stuff up.

COOLNESS - Cool. Blowing stuff up never gets old.

REALITY - Possible, and cheap to make. But you'd have to buy refills all the time. They always get you on the refills.

DO YOU WANT IT? - Yes. Excuse me, what time is it? It's time to blow stuff up! Let's start with that stupid seagull snorkel.

SAFETY TIP - Don't play with all the dials until you've read the instructions.



GADGET - Keys that open 90% of the world's locks, used by Bond in *The Living Daylights*.

USES - Unlimited. Steal cars. Rob banks. Take the change from parking meters. Shop after hours. And never pay for a vending machine again.

COOLNESS - Opening stuff up: Cool. Walking around like a janitor with a big key ring: Uncool.

REALITY - Master keys exist, and can be found on the Internet. So can lock picks. So can lawyers, which you'll need after you get caught opening up other people's locks.

DO YOU WANT IT? - No. You'd probably just lose them.

SAFETY TIP - Don't keep these in your back pocket while ice skating. Or your front pocket.



GADGET - Surfboard with concealed explosives, combat knife, and mini computer, used by Bond in *Die Another Day*.

USES - Hang ten, then kill seven.

COOLNESS - Super cool. You can shred that gnarly barrel, and at the same time Google what the hell that means.

REALITY - It's possible to produce, but be careful you don't wax your mini-computer.

DO YOU WANT IT? - Of course. But instead of weapons and electronics, you can fill your board with soda and snacks (that you got for free at the vending machine.)

SAFETY TIP - Make sure the combat knife is properly secured before you hit the waves, or you'll be hanging nine.



GADGET - X-Ray eyeglasses, used by Bond in *The World Is Not Enough*.

USES - Seeing through things like playing cards, safes, walls, doors, and clothing (to look for concealed weapons and stick-on third nipples.)

COOLNESS - Perhaps Bond's coolest gadget. It would sure make everyday life a lot more interesting.

REALITY - If you ever sent away for a pair of these in the back of a comic book, you know they don't work, but what did you expect for \$2.95? Your mother told you they wouldn't work, didn't she? Real versions may exist, but they probably cost big bucks. And cause cancer.

DO YOU WANT IT? - Sure you do. Just don't take them to family reunions. Or retirement homes.

COMFORT TIP - Wear baggy pants.



GADGET - Underwater manta ray cloak, used by Bond in *License To Kill*.

USES - Pretend you're a manta ray, get close to other manta rays, get sexually assaulted by a manta ray.

COOLNESS - Not cool, unless you have a secret thing for manta rays.

REALITY - Can be made in real life, but for God's sake why?

DO YOU WANT IT? - Only if you're really lonely. You might also consider getting the seagull snorkel as well, and you can pretend you're a ray chasing a seagull. You can play that one for hours and hours.

BUYING TIP - If you spend more than \$30 for this, you're a real moron.



GADGET - Lotus Esprit sports car that turns into a submarine, complete with mines, missiles, underwater ink jets, and self-destruct mechanism, that Bond used in *The Spy Who Loved Me* and *Moonraker*.

USES - Never take the ferry again, drive into swimming pool to fetch the quarters Grandpa throws in there.

COOLNESS - A hot car, and a hot submersible, all in one. Plus rockets.

REALITY - Boat cars do exist in real life, but they're actually dorky looking, and driven by people who can't get dates.

DO YOU WANT IT? - You know you do. But when purchasing options, go for an Alpine stereo and Bose speakers instead of a self-destruct button—it's more practical.

UNDERWATER TIP - If you drive over a starfish and cut it in half, it will grow into two new starfishes, both of them very pissed off at you.



GADGET - Dinner jacket which turns into a black sniper's outfit, used by Bond in *The Living Daylights*.

USES - When black tie events become boring.

COOLNESS - Cooler than the light blue tux with the ruffle shirt which turns into an adult diaper, but not by much.

REALITY - They already have these for rent at Gingiss. You'll need two forms of ID, and there's a mandatory 14 day waiting period.

DO YOU WANT IT? - You don't want to admit it, but yes you do. But then, you never had much taste in clothing.

FASHION TIP - Belts are okay, but the trendy sniper prefers suspenders.



GADGET - Cigarette lighter grenade, used by Bond in *Tomorrow Never Dies*.

USES - No smoking means no smoking.

COOLNESS - Anything that blows up is cool (see plastic explosive watch.)

REALITY - You can put explosives into anything; lighters, bottles, cans, small animals, etc.

DO YOU WANT IT? - Absolutely. Think about taking it to a heavy metal concert when the power ballad is playing.

SAFETY TIP - Don't get it confused with your real lighter because you might accidentally throw your real lighter at the bad guys and they'll say, "Why'd you throw a lighter at us, stupid? Are we supposed to be scared?" Also, you might blow your face off.



GADGET - Piton gun with retractable wire, used by Bond in *Diamonds Are Forever* and *Goldeneye*.

USES - Climb up buildings and rock faces, retrieve the remote control without getting up from the couch.

COOLNESS - Climbing, swinging, and shooting things are all cool.

REALITY - Wouldn't actually be strong enough to hold a man's weight, but you could have fun letting your buddies try it out.

DO YOU WANT IT? - Yes. It's like being Spiderman, but without the webby discharge.

SAFETY TIP - Don't point it at your own face, or at family members, unless you're trying to climb them.



GADGET - Exploding talcum power tear gas, used by Bond in *From Russia With Love*.

USES - Personal hygiene, making enemies cry.

COOLNESS - Talc isn't very cool. Neither is tear gas. But it does explode, which counts for something.

REALITY - It might already exist. It might not. Who cares?

DO YOU WANT IT? - No. You make your significant other cry all the time without gas, and no one uses talc anymore.

SAFETY TIP - Wear a gas mask before applying to your underarms.



GADGET - Magnetic watch with circular saw, used by Bond in *Live And Let Die*.

USES - Cutting through rope tied around your wrists, finding screws you dropped on the carpeting.

COOLNESS - Having your watch face spin around really fast is cool. Cutting off your own hand at the wrist is uncool.

REALITY - Buy a chainsaw that tells time instead. It's cheaper and more effective.

DO YOU WANT IT? - No. If you want a cool Bond timepiece, get the plastic explosive watch. Or the laser bean watch from *Tomorrow Never Dies*. Or the grappling hook watch from *The World Is Not Enough*. Or the ticker tape message watch from *The Spy Who Loved Me*. Or the digital radio watch from *For Your Eyes Only*. Or even the Geiger counter watch from *Thunderball*—you can't have too many Geiger counters around the house.

SAFETY TIP - Careful you don't lose any fingers when you reset for different time zones.



Remember: You're never too old to play with toys. Especially explosive, potentially deadly, extremely expensive toys. Just think about how envious your friends and family will be when they see you driving around in your sporty new BMW 750 iL with the electrified door handles, bulletproof glass, re-inflating tires, and rear nail ejectors.

Go ahead. Think about it. Because that's as close as you'll ever get to owning one, spy-boy.

Now go boil your seagull snorkel—that thing is riddled with germs.

Piranha Pool

A story about being a writer. It's humorous, but there is a lot of truth behind the jokes.

“What do you think?”

I was a cup, waiting to be filled with praise. Instead I got silence. She sat there, my pages in her hands, staring at a point over my shoulder.

“How about that ending?” I prodded. “Weren’t you surprised?”

Miranda clucked her tongue. “I guessed the ending.”

“You did?”

“Yeah. And I really don’t think you need the first few paragraphs.”

“Hold on a sec.” I motioned time-out with my hands. “The first paragraphs set the scene.”

“Sorry—I didn’t think you needed them.”

I looked away, then back at her. My friend, wife, companion for eight years.

“Did you like anything?”

“Joe, you’re a wonderful writer. But this story—I think you were just trying too hard.” She brightened. “I thought the middle part was funny.”

My eyes narrowed. “When the character died?”

“Yeah. It was cute how you did that.”

“That wasn’t supposed to be funny.”

“Oh.”

There was a ticking sound. The hands of my watch. Miranda tried on a smile.

“I like the title.”

Great. I remembered how much I loved her, and somehow found the strength to thank her for her opinion. Just because we were man and wife didn’t mean we had to agree on everything.

This particular piece didn't speak to her, but that was probably a matter of taste. I was certain that others would view it differently.

□ □ □

"It stinks."

"Excuse me?"

Gerald pinched his nostrils closed. "The story stinks, Joe. Sorry, but it isn't your best."

"What about the surprise ending?"

"Saw it coming."

"You did?"

"It was obvious."

I took the story from my brother's hands and paid too much attention to lining up the sheets of paper.

"You probably guessed it because you know me too well."

"I guessed it because it was cliché. The middle part was kind of funny, though. What did Miranda think of it?"

"She loved it."

"Well, there you go. My opinion probably means nothing, then. I liked that other story you did. The one about the otters."

"I wrote that in second grade."

"Yeah, that was a good one."

I looked at my bare wrist. "Damn, I gotta run, Gerald. Thanks for the input."

"It's a good title, Joe. Maybe you can write a different story using the same title."

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"Wow. Great story."

"You liked it?"

"Loved it."

The relief was better than a foot massage.

"How about the ending?"

"Terrific."

"What was your favorite part?"

My mother's smile faltered for a split second. "Oh—there were so many."

Mr. Dubious took over my body. "Mom...?"

"The middle part. I have to say that was my favorite. Very funny."

So much for my relief.

"You thought the death scene was funny?"

Caught in the lie, her demeanor cracked.

“No, not that. But there were some other funny parts.”

“What parts were funny, Mom?”

“Well...you had some pretty funny typos.”

I rubbed my eyes. “Did you like anything?”

“Joe, I’m your mother. Everything you do is precious to me.”

“How about the title?”

Mom shook her head sadly.

“Not even the title?”

“Joe, I’m not a good judge of fiction. You should ask your wife or your brother. I’m sure they’ll love it.

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“Poopy.”

I stared at my four-year-old, a child who is captivated by his own toes.

“Why is it poopy?”

“You should have Spider Man in it.”

“I don’t want Spider Man in it.”

My son looked at me, serious. “Spider Man can climb walls.”

“I know he can. But let’s talk about Daddy’s story. Did you think it was sad when the character died?”

“Does Spider Man tie people up and suck their blood?”

“What?”

“Spiders tie up bugs and suck their blood.”

I sighed and looked at Fluffy, the family cat.

Why the hell not?

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“Fluffy, dammit, get back in this house!”

But the feline had beat a retreat only two pages into the narrative. Gone to tree, sitting ten feet out of reach in the crook of an elm branch.

“I’m serious, Fluffy.”

He stared back down at me with indifferent eyes and then began to groom.

“Fine. Count the days until you get tuna again, cat.”

I smoothed out the wrinkled edges of the manuscript and went back to my desk.

A few clicks of the mouse later and I was online. Surely Usenet had fiction forums. Without too much difficulty, I located an amateur

fiction newsgroup and posted my tome proudly. Let the compliments commence...

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“Joe? What is that sticking out of out computer monitor? Is that a hammer?”

“It slipped.”

“You attacked the computer with a hammer? What were you thinking?”

I gave Miranda malice wrapped in a fake grin. “I don’t want to talk about it, honey. It’s still under warranty.”

“I don’t think a hammer in the screen is covered by the warranty.”

“Miranda...”

“What’s wrong with you? Does this have anything to do with that stupid story?”

I stood up, deaf. The story was clenched in my left hand. “I’m going out. I’ll be back later.”

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“So, what did you think?”

The wino held out a filthy hand. “Do I get my five dollars now?”

“First you have to tell me if you liked it.”

He brought the paper bag to his lips, took a pull off the unseen bottle.

“It was...”

“Yes?”

“It was wonderful.”

His eyes went dreamy, beatific.

I beamed. “Wonderful?”

He hic-cupped. “The loveliest thing I ever heard.”

Who would have thought it? I didn’t normally endow people who smelled like urine with good taste, but here was an obvious exception.

“What was your favorite part?”

“The chicken.”

I stared at my pages, confused.

“Chicken? There’s no chicken in this story.”

“I ate chicken in Cleveland. Cooked so tender, it fell off the bone. You gonna give me my five bucks?”

Great—he was a lunatic. You can’t get an honest opinion from a lunatic. I turned to walk away.

He grabbed my arm. “Man, you owe me five bucks! I stood here listening to that garbage, I want my money!”

I decided, right then, that I’d rather be disemboweled than give this guy five bucks.

I pulled free and hit the street in a sprint. Shouldn’t take long to lose him. He was drunk and disheveled and—

“Gimme my damn money!”

—right behind me. For a guy wearing at least four layers of clothing, he could run like the wind. I cut through an alley and hurdled a cluster of garbage cans.

“I listened to that whole crappy story!”

The bum was closing in. I could hear his mismatched shoes slapping the pavement only a few steps back. Just my luck—I’d given a reading to an Olympic sprinter fallen on hard times.

Another turn, between two apartments, into the back parking lot. Dead end.

“Gotcha.” The bum grinned, gray teeth winking through a scraggly beard. He gestured with his hand—give it to me.

I sucked in air and nodded submission, my hand producing my wallet.

He shook his head. “All of it.”

“You said five bucks.”

“I’m gonna need a month’s worth of booze, to get that lousy story out of my head.”

I left the parking lot forty bucks lighter.

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I stared at the page. My story. My child. Why couldn’t anyone else see the symbolism? The imagery? This story was perfect! From first word to last, a marvel of narrative genius! What the hell was wrong with the world, was it—

Hmm. Actually, I could probably change this part, here, to make it stronger. And this sentence could be tightened. And perhaps that paragraph is a bit wordy. Where’s my pencil?

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“Wow, Joe. It doesn’t even seem like the same story.”

I grinned at my wife. “I took everyone’s suggestions into account, and did a little self-editing.”

“A little? You practically changed every line. Even the characters are different.”

"I kept the title, though."

Miranda nodded, handing back the papers. I could see her searching her thoughts for the right compliment.

I gave her some help. "So it's tighter?"

"Oh, yes. Much tighter."

"Is the death still funny?"

"Not funny at all. Very somber."

I sighed, letting out the tension. "So it's a lot better."

Miranda winced. "Actually, I thought the other version was better."

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"See that?" I held my painting in front of my son, keeping it out of reach because the acrylic hadn't dried it. "Daddy made a picture of Spider Man."

My son squinted at my artwork. "It's pooppy."

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"Joe, you've been staring inside the fridge for ten minutes."

"I want to make a sandwich," I told my wife.

"What are you waiting for?"

"I doubt my ability."

"Joe—it's a slice of ham and two pieces of bread."

I frowned. "I'm having some competency issues."

"Didn't Darren like your cow painting?"

"That wasn't a cow. It was Spider Man."

Miranda rubbed my back. "Go sit down, honey. I'll make you a sandwich."

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"Miranda! Come here! What is this?"

She stared at the kitchen table.

"It looks like you've made a big letter A out of pretzel sticks."

"Damn right!"

"Joe—are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Want to see me make a B?"

"I'm calling Dr. Hubbard."

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"Many people have feelings of inadequacy. It's natural."

The shrink was old, bespeckled. His gray goatee pointed at me when he talked.

"This is more than inadequacy, Doc. I'm questioning every move I make. I feel totally incompetent."

"All because of one little story?"

"That's how it started."

"May I see it?"

Without getting up off the couch I pulled the crumpled story out of my pants pocket and handed it over. As he read, I could feel body go numb. Ice cold, unfeeling. One more heartless comment couldn't hurt me. I was immune to criticism.

"This is pretty good."

I sat up and spun towards him. "Excuse me?"

He held up a finger, still reading. When he finished the last page, he handed back the story and smiled.

"I liked it."

"Really?"

"Yes. Really."

"You aren't just saying that because I'm paying you three hundred dollars an hour?"

"Really, Joe. I thought it was a nice, touching story. Good structure. Well-defined characters. Interesting subtext. I'd actually like to have a copy to pass around the office."

I sprang to my feet, my blood replaced by helium. "Well, sure, no problem, you can have this copy, absolutely, it's all yours."

"Would you sign it for me?"

Were there clouds above nine?

"Of course. Here, I'll borrow your pen."

"You know," Doc Hubbard said as I scrawled my name on the top margin, "I'm a bit of a writer myself."

"Really?" I added 'To Doc' above my name, and then underlined it.

"Perhaps you'd like to ready one of my stories?"

"Sure," I told him, drawing a large circle around my signature. "Be happy to help you with it."

Doc grinned, then opened up his desk drawer. He held out some paper. "Go ahead. Off the clock."

I smiled and accepted his story, pleased to be valued for my opinion.

It was bad. Real bad.

"So? What did you think?"

“Well, Doc, it’s interesting.”

“Yes. Yes. Go on.”

“Um, very few typos.”

His grin lost some wattage.

“How about the ending?”

“Actually, I, uh, saw it coming.”

The grin was gone now.

“Should have figured,” he mumbled.

“What was that?”

“How can you recognize talent, when you have none yourself?”

“But you said...”

“I lied. I said it for three hundos and hour. I’ve read aspirin bottles with more entertainment value than your stupid story.”

“How can you...”

“I’m sorry,” Doc Hubbard offered a placid smile. “Our time is up.”

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“Joe?”

“Hmm?”

“Were you ever planning on going back to work?”

I glanced at Miranda and scratched at my stubble. “I haven’t given it much thought.”

“You’ve been lying in bed for three weeks.”

“Hmm.”

“Work called. I told them you were still sick. They want a doctor’s note, or you’re going to be fired.”

“Bummer.”

Miranda’s eyes went teary, and she walked off.

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“We’re leaving.”

I stared at my wife and son over the pile of cellophane wrappers cluttering my bed.

“Leaving where?”

“Leaving you, Joe. You’re not the man I married. I’ve been talking to a lawyer.”

She handed me a sheaf of papers. The word DIVORCE was on the header. I gave them a token look-through.

“This is terrible,” I concluded. “Poor sentence structure, too much legalese, look at this typo...”

But they were already gone.

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My story was in front of me, on the table, next to a picture of my family.

I was done dwelling. I'd had enough.

The gun went into my mouth and I pulled the trigger, my last sensation a tremendous BOOM coupled with a sense of perfect relief.

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The pitchfork jabbed me in the ass.

"Hey!"

"Keep moving."

I stared out across the inferno, Satan's minions tormenting the damned as they slaved away.

"This room is for rapists. Any rapists in the group?"

Two guys in line with me raised their hands. The devil opened the door or them, and they were seized by a huge goat-like creature and thrust into a cauldron of boiling oil.

"Next room, adulterers."

Four more of my group went in. I winced when the whips began to swing.

"Bad writers. This room here, bad writers."

No one moved.

"That's you, Joe."

I was prodded in, my bowels jelly. But rather than hideous tortures, I found myself in a large classroom, stretching back as far as I could see. People of all races, creeds, and dress sat at undersized desks, rows and rows going off into infinity.

"Hello, Joe." The teacher had a pig snout and tusks, her hair done up in a bun and her pointy tail raised behind her like a question mark.

"What is all this?"

"This is eternity, Joe. Who would like to critique Joe's story first?"

Three million hands went up.

"Who are these people?" I asked.

"Murderers. As punishment for their sins, they were forced to listen to your story. Several times, in fact."

"My story is their torture?"

“Well, I *have* read it aloud several times. There used to be twice as many people in the room, but a few million elected to go to the boiling oil chamber rather than hear it again.”

I shut my eyes. When I opened them, I was still there.

“And I have to listen to their opinions for eternity?”

“Every thirty years you get a one week vacation in the piranha pool.”

The teacher made me stand in front of the classroom, and the critiques began.

I counted the days until the piranha pool.

Well Balanced Meal

This is something I wrote back in college. It's the first time I ever did a story using only dialog. I read this at the infamous Gross Out Contest at the World Horror Con, but was pulled off the stage for not being gross enough. The next year I came back with a truly disgusting story and won the contest, becoming the Gross Out Champion of 2004. The story that won the contest will never see print. If you're curious, the ending involved relations with a colostomy bag. This piece is much less extreme.

"Hi, welcome to Ranaldi's. You folks ready to order?"

"Not quite yet."

"How about we start you off with some drinks?"

"Sounds good. I'll have a rum and toothpaste."

"Flavor?"

"Pepsident."

"I'm sorry. We only have Aim, Close-Up, Gleem, and Tarter Control Crest."

"Give me the Crest, then."

"And you sir?"

"I'll take a Kahlua and baby oil."

"Miss?"

"Vodka and mayonnaise."

"How about you, Miss?"

"Just hot buttered coffee for me."

"I think I'm ready to order."

"What can I get you sir?"

"A pimpleburger."

"How would you like that cooked?"

"Until it turns brown and starts to bubble."

"You have a choice of soup or salad with that."

"What's the soup?"

"Cream of Menstruation. It's our special—we only get it once a

month.”

“That sounds good.”

“How about you sir, ready to order?”

“Yeah. I'll take boils and eggs.”

“Good choice. The chef has several big ones just waiting to be lanced.”

“Is the ham fresh?”

“No ma'am.”

“Okay, I'll take the ham. Can you cover it with vomit?”

“Of course. What kind?”

“How about from someone who has just eaten chicken?”

“I'll have the cook eat some chicken right now so he can puke it up for you.”

“I'd like it to be partially digested, if possible.”

“There will be a forty minute wait for that.”

“No problem.”

“And you miss? Have you decided?”

“Yeah. I think I'll just take a bowl of hot grease with a hair in it.”

“Pubic or armpit?”

“Can I get one of each?”

“I think I can arrange that.”

“Could we also get an appetizer?”

“Of course sir.”

“Fresh rat entrails.”

“How many orders?”

“How big are the rats?”

“They're a pretty good size.”

“Okay, two. Do we get to dig them out ourselves?”

“Yep. We serve out rat entrails live and squirming.”

“Make it three then.”

“Can we get a cup of placenta for dipping?”

“Yes you can.”

“Is it okay to order dessert now?”

“Of course miss.”

“I'd like the sugar fried snot.”

“Good choice. One of the busboys has a terrible cold.”

“I think I'll have a slice of lung cake.”

“Would you like spit sauce on that?”

“On the side.”

“Sir, would you like to order your dessert now?”

“A blood sundae.”

“What kind?”

“What kind do you have?”

“Types A, B, and O.”

“No AB?”

“I'm sorry. We're out.”

“Could you mix A and B together?”

“It will clot.”

“That's okay.”

“And you, Miss? Dessert?”

“I think I'll skip dessert and eat my own stool when I get home.”

“That's a good idea, honey. Cancel the lung cake, I think I'll just eat my wife's shit too.”

“We do serve feces here. Regular and chunky style. We're also running a special on diarrhea. Two cups for the price of one.”

“No thanks. Why buy something you can get for free at home?”

“Thrifty thinking, sir. Can I get you folks anything else?”

“Yeah. This fork has got water spots on it. Can I get a new one?”

“Absolutely sir. I'll be right back.”

A Newbie's Guide to Thrillerfest

Written for a special edition of the magazine Crimespree, which was given away for free at the first Thrillerfest convention. A variation on this essay also appeared in a special Love Is Murder issue for that conference, using different names and tweaking some of the jokes.

Every year there are dozens of writing conferences. If you're a fan of mysteries and thrillers, 2006 brings you Love is Murder in Chicago, Sleuthfest in Ft. Lauderdale, Bouchercon in Madison, Left Coast Crime in Bristol, Men of Mystery in Los Angeles, Magna Cum Murder in Muncie, and a slew of others, many of which suck.

The best conference of them all is undoubtedly Thrillerfest, presented by the International Thriller Writers. In one short year, the upstart ITW has grown to become the writing organization with the longest website URL: www.internationalthrillerwriters.org.

What can you expect when you attend Thrillerfest? How can you make sure you get your money's worth? Will you have a chance to corner ITW Co-President David Morrell and ask him to blurb your new manuscript, *The Speech Impediment Murderererer*? (Answer: Yes. Uncle Davy loves this. The best time to approach him is while he's eating, or in the bathroom.)

Reading and memorizing this carefully compiled article will fully prepare you for anything this conference has to offer. It might even save your life.

REGISTRATION - If possible, buy your conference pass in advance. Bring proof of your registration to the event (a Paypal receipt, a copy of the letter saying you've been confirmed, your hard drive) because there's a 90% chance your registration was lost, and the people running

the conference will have no idea who you are. A much easier, and cheaper, tactic is to simply buy a nametag and a black marker. Stick it on your chest when no one is looking, and you're in.

THE HOTEL - If possible, stay at the hotel. After the days' events are through, there are always exclusive parties where you can get free food and drink and meet cool people. You won't get invited to these parties, but you can hang out in the hallway with your ear to the door, and listen to JA Konrath make a fool of himself. Actually, you probably won't need to put your ear to the door to hear that. JA's pretty loud.

WHAT TO WEAR - The fashionable conference-goer wears business casual. Comfortable shoes are a must, because you'll be walking a lot. A book bag is a great accessory. Not only can it hold books, but also an emergency fifth of vodka (do you really want to pay \$9 for a martini at the hotel bar?)

AUTHOR SIGHTING - Imagine it: You're in the lobby, putting the cap back on your vodka, and suddenly James Rollins appears out of nowhere. Do you just run up to him, squealing like a schoolgirl, and beg him to sign your paperback copy of *Map of Bones* that you've read 36 times, the last time aloud to your pet parakeet that you named Sigma?

The answer: NO! Jim is a bigshot author, and they all hate signing paperbacks. Go to the bookroom and buy a hardcover first edition. When you approach him, make sure it's on your hands and knees, because you are not worthy. Address him as "Mr. Rollins" or "Sir" or "Your Highness." And NEVER make direct eye contact. He's far too important to look at you.

In contrast, if you spot James O. Born, feel free to bring him your paperback ex-library copy of *Shock Wave*. Born will be thrilled to sign that. He'll also sign other authors' books, cocktail napkins, food products, and basically anything but the check.

PANELS - If you're an author, you need to speak on a panel. But it's too late to sign up for one now, bonehead. They've already printed the programs. If you are on a panel, there's only one important rule to

follow: Make sure you're on a panel with Barry Eisler. Barry is the one with the gaggle of drooling women following him around, hoping he'll suddenly keel over so they'll get to administer CPR. Don't expect anyone to remember a single thing you've said when you're on a panel with Barry, but at least you'll be speaking to a packed room.

FOOD - Conference food is usually barely edible, but it's expensive to compensate. That's why all of the popular authors usually go out to eat at the trendiest restaurant in the area. It's very easy to get invited to one of these exciting outings, where industry gossips flows fast and loose, and Barry often takes his shirt off and dances the lambada—the dance of love. If you want to go along, all you have to do is write a NYT Bestseller. If you haven't done that, then you're stuck with the hotel food. Be sure to try the potato salad. *Is that potato salad?* It might be rice pudding. Or lamb. Or a big dish of pus.

ITINERARY - There are many things to see at a conference, and often you'll be tortured by the dilemma of two good panels happening at the same time, with no clue which to attend. The answer is easy. Attend both of them. Authors love seeing scores of people leave the room while they are talking—they believe they're being so effective, the crowd is rushing out to buy their book. Try to do this five or six times per hour, and make sure you open and close the doors loudly. Also, take that extra time between panels to talk on your cell phone. If your conversation carries on into the panel room—it's okay. His Majesty Rollins will forgive you.

WHERE ARE THE AUTHORS? - You've been trying desperately to get F. Paul Wilson's autograph, but he's been missing in action for two days. Where is he? He's in the hotel bar. In fact, all of the authors are in the hotel bar. If you want to chat in depth with your favorite thriller writer, arrive early while they're still coherent. In Paul's case, I challenge you to figure out when that it.

THE BOOKROOM - This is the most important room in the whole conference. Here, you'll find all of the books by all of the authors in attendance, expect for the one book you truly want to buy. They'll be out of that one. But don't worry, there will be plenty of pristine, unsold, unread copies of *Bloody Mary* by JA Konrath. Plenty of them.

BARGAIN HUNTER TIP - All the paperbacks in the bookroom are free if you simply rip off the cover beforehand! Don't be bashful—the booksellers love it!

ETIQUETTE - It's during one of the delicious buffet-style meals. You've got your plate piled high with something that might be meat in gravy, or it might be a cobbler, and you're searching for a place to eat. While walking around the room, you see an empty chair between Tess Gerritsen and ITW Co-President Gayle Lynds. Do you dare ask to sit there? In a word, NO! They are huge mega bestsellers and that seat belongs to someone a lot more important than you are. Go sit by Jon and Ruth Jordan, who publish this magazine. Always plenty of chairs around them. The surrounding tables are usually free too.

PAID ADVERTISEMENT – Buy the anthology *Thriller – Stories To Keep You Up All Night*, an ITW collection featuring stories by superstar mega-bestselling authors such as JA Konrath, and others.

ATTENDEES - Conferences are a great place to meet new people who share common interests. They're also a great place to get abducted by some weirdo and killed with a blowtorch. Wise convention goers avoid talking to anyone else, at all times. Try to keep some kind of weapon on you. They sell \$59 letter openers in the hotel gift shop, right next to the \$42 tee shirts and the \$12 bottled water. If you're an author, save the receipt—it's deductible.

Or try carrying around a plate piled high with that stuff they served at lunch—the stuff in the gravy. That way, if someone tries to assault you, you can say, “Stop it! I'm eating!”

AWARDS - At most conferences, the writers like to congratulate themselves by giving each other awards. They usually do this over a nine course meal that takes eleven hours, and a cash bar that charges so much for a Budweiser you'll need to put it on lay-away. In an effort to distinguish itself from the many other conventions and organizations that do this sort of thing, the ITW decided to do this as well.

The star-studded gala begins at 7pm on Saturday, and ends sometime on Thursday morning. When the event has concluded, be sure to congratulate the lucky winners. It's also a lot of fun to go up to the losers and congratulate them for winning, and then pretend to be confused when they tell you they've actually lost. Do this two or three times to the same loser. They'll start to find it funny, eventually.

SIGNINGS – There will be many scheduled signing times, where dozens of authors all sit in the same room and greet the hundreds of fans waiting in line for Lee Child. If you're in Lee's very long line, remember that to keep things moving quickly you aren't allowed to say more than two words to him, and he'll only have time to sign an "L." A lower case "L." Lee's a very busy man.

Lee Goldberg, on the other hand, will have plenty of time to sign his full name. Plenty of time. If you so desire, he'll even sign it using the time-intensive, hand-lettered art of calligraphy. Don't be afraid to ask. He has plenty of time.

SUNDAY – This is the day where everyone sleeps in and/or catches their flight home, and panel attendance is traditionally low. By some dramatic conference oversight, 9am on Sunday is when JA Konrath has his scheduled panel. He's not sure how this happened. Perhaps he pissed someone off somehow, unlikely as that may sound. But he urges you to attend this panel, on the super-exciting topic of writing for female characters. Never saw that hot-button topic at a convention before, have you? There will be some other high caliber authors on this panel, probably, and JA is bringing some butterscotch schnapps to put in the audience's coffee. Get your lazy butt out of bed and be there. He'll be entertaining. Promise.

CONCLUSION - Remember, if you want to have a memorable conference, responsibility rests squarely on one person's shoulders—the person running the conference. Be sure to complain about every little thing, at any given time, even if it's something they can't fix such as, "The carpet is too soft" or "F. Paul Wilson touched me inappropriately" or "I hear voices in my head." Demand a refund. Threaten to contact an attorney. And above all, remember to have fun.

Inspector Oxnard

A humorous take on the many detectives in crime fiction who are able to glance at a crime scene and brilliantly deduce everything that happened. I wrote this for an anthology, but they rejected it. Too Monty Python-ish, they said.

Special Investigations Inspector J. Gerald Oxnard arrives on the scene moments after the crime has been committed. The usual entourage of detectives from the SI Division of New Bastwick's Police Department accompanies him.

I'm the newly appointed member of this crack investigating team, a reward for my exemplary grades at the Police Academy. It's just my luck that my first case is a murder.

The portly Inspector kneels beside the cooling body of a man in his late twenties. After several minutes of intense scrutiny, he nods and clears his throat, prompting one of the nearby detectives to help him to his feet.

"He was killed by a lion," Inspector Oxnard says. "I'm thoroughly convinced."

The room absorbs the declaration, mulling and silent.

"But...Inspector," I say, "How did a lion get up to Room 715 of the Vandenburg Hotel without anyone seeing it?"

Inspector Oxnard puts a thin and elegantly manicured hand up to his mustache and rolls the waxy end.

"A disguise," he says.

"A disguise?" I ask.

"Of course. Perhaps a long overcoat and some dark glasses. Haven't you ever seen a lion walk on his hind legs at the circus?"

Several of the detectives standing around sound their approval. One writes it down in his note pad.

"But what about the knife?" I ask.

“The knife?” Inspector Oxnard shoots back, eyes sharp and accusing.

“In the deceased’s back.” I say.

There’s a moment of chin-scratching silence.

“Don’t lions have an opposable thumb?” Detective Jenkins asks.

“No, you’re thinking of monkeys,” Detective Coursey says.

“But isn’t a lion kind of like a big orange monkey with sharp teeth?” Detective Rumstead asks.

There are several nods of agreement. Inspector Oxnard runs a hand through his gray hair, which is slicked back with mint-smelling gel, and wipes his palm on Detective Coursey’s blazer.

“It had to be a lion with a knife,” the Inspector says, “wearing an overcoat and dark glasses. Put out an All Points Bulletin, and check to see if a circus is in town.”

“But Inspector,” I say, “there’s no sign of forced entry. How did the lion get into the room?”

“Simple. He had a key.”

“Why would he have a key?” I ask.

The silence that follows is steeped in apprehension. After a full minute, Inspector Oxnard makes a self-satisfied yelping sound and thrusts his finger skyward in apparent revelation, poking Detective Graves in the eye.

“The deceased was having an affair with the lion! Thus, the lion had a duplicate key!”

Excited applause sweeps through the group. Inspector Oxnard draws on his pipe, but it does little good because the bowl is upside down, the tobacco speckling his shoes.

“Did the lion prefer the company of men?” Detective Struber says.

“Perhaps,” Inspector Oxnard says. “Or perhaps it was...a lioness!”

Several ‘ahs’ are heard. Someone pipes in, “Of course! The lioness is the one that does the hunting!”

“But what about motive?” I ask, my Police Academy training coming out. “What was the motive?”

“Hunger,” the Inspector says. He nods smartly to himself.

“But the body is intact.”

“Excuse me?”

“None of it has been eaten!” I say.

“That makes no difference. Maybe the lioness was scared away before she could finish, or perhaps she simply lost her appetite.”

“I sometimes have terrible gas, and can’t eat at all,” Detective Gilbert says.

Nods of acquiescence all around, and several discussions of gas pains ensue.

“But where are the paw prints?” someone shrieks. “Where is the fur? Where is the spoor? Where is the damn reason that this was done by a lion and not a human being?”

Everyone stares at me, and I realize I’ve been the one shrieking.

Inspector Oxnard frowns and gives me a patronizing pat on the head.

“I know you’re only a novice, so I can understand why you cannot grasp all of the subtle intricacies of a murder investigation. But in time, Detective Cornhead, you’ll begin to catch on.”

“My name is Richards, Inspector. Detective Richards.”

“Nothing to be ashamed of.” Inspector Oxnard slaps my shoulder. “We were all young once.”

Detective Oldendorff runs through the door and trips over the body. He picks himself up, urgency overriding embarrassment.

“There’s been another robbery!” he says. “The First New Bastwick Bank!”

Inspector Oxnard thrusts out his lower lip and nods.

“It sounds like that blind panda has struck again. Come, gentlemen!”

Inspector Oxnard gracefully exits the room, his entourage filing behind him like ducklings. I stare at the body for a moment, and then follow.

This police work is a lot harder than I thought.

Appalachian Lullaby

My friend John Weagley asked me if I had any radioactive monkey stories for his collection Requiem For A Radioactive Monkey. Naturally, I did.

At first, they were all kind of excited when JoJo got into the Uranium.

“He’s gonna mutate, I bet,” said Gramps. “Maybe grow another monkey head. Or teats.”

“Could easily quadruple in size,” said Pops. “Go on a rampage, killin’ folks and rapin’ women.”

Uncle Clem disagreed. “I’m bettin’ invisibility. A seeable monkey causes enough trouble, running around, bitin’ and chitterin’, throwin’ feces. An invisible monkey would be a hunnerd times worse.”

“Would the feces be invisible?” Aunt Lula asked.

“Likely so. Wouldn’t know it was there ‘till you sat in it.”

Gramps packed his lower lip with a wad of Skoal and spat brown juice into Aunt Lula’s coffee mug.

“Shoulda kept that uranium locked up. Leavin’ it on the counter like that, monkey was gonna mess with it sooner or later.”

Uncle Clem disagreed. “JoJo ain’t never fooled with it before.”

“Them glowin’ isotopes, they’re like a magnet to the lower primates. Shoulda kept it locked up.”

Pops scratched his head. “Where’d we get the uranium anyway?”

They all sat around and had a think about that. No one said nothin’ for a while, the only sound being the slurp-slurp of Aunt Lula and her coffee.

“Well,” Gramps finally said, “whatever strange mutation happens to JoJo, I’m guessin’ we all agree it’ll be speck-tack-ler.”

Somethin’ did happen to JoJo, and it happened fast. An hour after messin’ with the Uranium, JoJo’s hair all fell out, and then he died.

“Didn’t see that comin’,” Uncle Clem said.

Pops scratched his head. “Where’d we get a monkey anyway?”

No one could answer that. Only one who could have was JoJo, and he didn’t say much on account of his deceasedness. Plus, JoJo was a monkey, and monkeys don’t talk.

The next day, Gramps lost all of his hair, even the hair growin’ from his ears, and got sick something fierce.

“Gramps?” Pops asked him, side-steppin’ the chunk-streams gushing from Gramps’s dip-hole. “You been messin’ with that Uranium?”

Gramps answered between expulsions. “Wanted...another...head.”

Later that night, after Gramps hemorrhaged, they buried him in the garden, next to JoJo. The family grieved and grieved, and Aunt Lula made some Uranium cookies to cheer everyone up, but Uncle Clem hoarded them all for himself.

“Thad a dab thine thookie,” Uncle Clem said, not speakin’ clearly because most of his teeth had worked themselves free of his bleedin’ gums.

When Uncle Clem coughed up his pancreas, they buried him in the garden, next to Gramps and JoJo.

Not long after, Aunt Lula’s hands turned black and plum fell off, on account she didn’t wear no lead gloves when she made the uranium cookies. “Because lead is poisonous,” she had said, smartly.

When Aunt Lula died, Pops buried her in another part of the garden, not too close to Uncle Clem and Gramps and JoJo, because that part was all took up.

When he was done, Pops scratched his head. “Where’d we get a garden anyway?”

Convinced the *Curse of the Radioactive Uranium* would claim him next, which would have been a very bad thing because there was nobody left to bury him in the garden, Pops played it smart.

He buried himself in the garden with the uranium.

When the milkman came by later that week, with the milk and eight ounces of farmer’s cheese, he noticed the five new mounds in the garden. Being a curious milkman, he dug them all up.

“Well, will you lookit that,” said the mailman. “Where’d they get that uranium?”

He found some tin foil in the kitchen, and wrapped up the Uranium and took it home, for his pet monkey to play with.

ONE NigHT ONLY

A farce, very much in James Thurber territory. I've always want to write a straight humor novel, but there isn't any market for it.

Frank stood beneath the mismatched letters on the marquee and frowned.

ONE NigHT ONLY, it proclaimed.

That was still one night too many.

Ahead of him in line, another poor dope with an equally unhappy face was being tugged towards the ticket booth by his significant other.

"He's supposed to be brilliant. Like Marcel Marceau, only he talks," the wife/girlfriend was saying.

The man was having none of it, and neither was Frank. He stared at his own pack leader, his wife Wendy, mushing him forward on the Forced Culture Iditarod. She noted his frown and hugged his arm.

"Stop moping. It'll be fun."

"It's the playoffs."

"It's our anniversary."

"We have another one next year."

Wendy gave him The Look, and he backed down. He glanced at his Seiko, wishing he had a watch like Elroy on *The Jetsons*, with a mini TV screen. It was ten after nine. Halftime would be almost over, and it was the pivotal fifth game in the Eastern Conference Finals, the score tied 48-48.

Frank had managed to catch the other four pivotal games, but this one was really pivotal. If the Bulls won, it meant there would only be seven more pivotal games left in the playoffs.

They reached the ticket counter, and Frank noted several divots in the thick glass. Probably made by some other poor bastard forced here by his wife. Tried to shoot his way out, Frank guessed.

He could relate.

His mind wrapped around the fantasy of pulling out an M-16 and taking hostages to avoid seeing the show, but he lost the image when he noted how many twenty dollar bills his wife was setting in the money tray.

“This costs how much?!?”

“It’s an exclusive engagement,” the cashier said. “Alexandro Mulchahey is only in town for one night.”

“And what does he do for this kind of money? Take the whole audience out for dinner in his Rolls Royce?”

Wendy gave him The Elbow. But Frank wasn’t finished yet.

“Maybe you folks will finally be able to afford some more capital letters for the marquee.”

Now Frank received The Love Handle Pinch; Wendy’s fingernails dug into his flab and twisted. He yelped and his wife tugged him aside.

“You’re embarrassing me,” she said through a forced smile.

“I’m having chest pains. Do you know how many Bulls tickets we could have bought with all that money?”

“If you don’t start pretending to have a good time, I’m going to invite GrandMama over for the weekend.”

He clammed up. Wendy’s grandmother was 160 years old and mean as spit. Her mind had made its grand exit sometime during the Reagan years, and she labored under the delusion that Frank was Rudolph Hess. The last time she visited, GrandMama called the police seven times and demanded they arrest Frank for crimes against humanity.

Plus, she smelled like pee.

Wendy led him into the lobby, and began to point out architecture.

“Ooo, look at the columns.”

“Ooo, look at the vaulted ceiling.”

“Ooo, look at the mosaic tile. Have you ever seen anything so intricate?”

“Yeah, yeah. Beautiful.”

The theater was nice, but it was no *Circus Circus*. While his wife gaped at the carved railing on the grand staircase, Frank’s attention was captivated by a little boy sitting alone near the coat check.

The boy had a Sony Watchman.

“Did you want a drink, dear?”

Wendy smiled at him. “A glass of wine would be wonderful.”

Frank got in line—a line that would take him right past the little boy and his portable TV. He made sure Wendy was preoccupied staring at a poster before he made his move.

“Hey, kid! Nice TV. Can you turn on the Bulls Game real fast? Channel 9.”

The kid looked up at him, squinting through thick glasses.

“I don’t like the Bulls.”

“Come on, I just want to check the score.” Frank winked, then fished five bucks out of his pocket. “I’ll give you five bucks.”

“Mom!” The child’s voice cut through the lobby like a siren. “An old fat man wants to steal my TV!”

Frank turned away, shielding his face. The bartender gave him the evil eye.

“Merlot,” Frank said, throwing down the five.

The bartender raised an eyebrow and told him the price of the wine.

“It’s how much?!?”

“Frank, dear...” Wendy was tugging at him as he pulled out more money.

“Hold on, hon. I think I just bought you the last Merlot on earth.” Frank watched the bartender pour. “And it’s in a plastic cup.”

“I want to get a program.”

Frank’s wife led him past the little boy, who held up his Watchman and stuck out his tongue. The little snot was watching the Bulls. Frank squinted but couldn’t make out the score.

They got in line for the programs and Frank momentarily forgot about basketball when he saw the prices.

“*For a program?!?* Don’t they come free with the show?”

“That’s a Playbill, Frank.”

“What’s the difference?”

The difference, apparently, was forty bucks.

“Do they have a layaway?”

“They have sweatshirts, too, Frank. Would you like one?”

“I don’t want to have to get a second job.”

“Your birthday is coming up.”

Wendy grinned at him. Frank couldn’t tell if she was joking or not. He forked over the money for a program, and then they walked to the mezzanine and an usher took their tickets.

“Row A, seats 14 and 15.”

“Front row center,” his wife beamed. “Happy Anniversary, Frank.”

She kissed his cheek. Then she began pointing out more architecture.

“Look at the balconies.”

“Look at the stage.”

“Look at the plasterwork. Have you ever seen anything so beautiful?”

“Yeah, yeah. Beautiful.”

The usher showed them their seats and Frank frowned.

“I thought we were front row.”

“This is the front row, sir.”

“How about all those guys in front of us?”

“That’s the orchestra pit, sir.”

They took their seats, which were actually pretty nice. Plush red velvet, roomy and comfortable. Too bad they didn’t have seats like this at the United Center, where the Bulls played.

Wendy handed him a Playbill, and Frank squinted at the cover. A man in period clothing stared back at him.

“Who is this guy, anyway? Alexandro Mulchahey?”

“He’s the famous Irish soliloquist.”

“One of those guys who talks with a dummy on his lap?”

“He’s a dramatic actor, Frank. He does Shakespearean sonnets.”

Frank slumped in his chair. This was worse than he’d thought. When Wendy nagged him about this night, during a pivotal regular season game a few months back, he hadn’t heard her mention Shakespeare.

“And this guy’s famous?”

“He’s the hottest thing in Europe right now. He’s in all the papers.”

Frank folded his arms. “If he was in all the papers, I would have heard about him.”

“He wasn’t in the sports section.”

Frank frowned. The most pivotal basketball game of the century was playing right now, and Frank was stuck here watching some fruit in tights talk fancy for three hours.

Maybe he could fake a heart attack. Those ambulance guys have radios. They could tune into the game...

Some people needed to get to their seats, and Frank and Wendy had to stand up to let them by.

It was the kid with the Watchman! He stuck his tongue out at Frank as he passed, and then sat three seats away from them, his TV still tuned to the Bulls game.

Frank glanced at Wendy. She was absorbed in her program, gaping at big, color photos of Alexandro, who appeared to be in the throes of agony or ecstasy or a massive bowel movement.

“Look at how passionate he is,” Wendy beamed.

“Or constipated,” Frank muttered. He turned to look at the kid. The little boy held up the Watchman so Frank could see the game. The screen was tiny, but there was a score in the corner that Frank could almost make out. He leaned closer, straining his eyes.

The little snot switched the channel to *Tom and Jerry*.

“Goddamn little...”

There was a moaning sound in front of them.

“Orchestra is warming up.” Wendy bounced in her seat like an anxious schoolgirl. “It’s going to start soon.”

The little boy whispered something to his father, and they both got up. Once again Frank and Wendy had to stand. Frank fought the urge to strangle the little monkey as he sashayed past.

The father took the kid by the hand up the aisle.

“Wendy, I have to go to the bathroom.”

“The show’s about to start.”

“It’s an emergency.” Frank made his Emergency face.

“Hurry back.”

Frank stood up and followed the boy into the lobby. As he guessed, his father led him into the bathroom.

The kid’s father was standing by the sink, checking out his hair from three different angles.

“I just joined Hair Club for Men,” he told Frank.

“Looks good,” Frank told him. It looked like a beaver had died on the man’s head.

“Can you see the weave?”

“Hmm? No. Seamless.”

Frank eyed the stalls. Only one door was closed. Had to be the kid.

He walked into the nearby stall and closed the door. Removing twenty dollars from his wallet, he slipped the bill under the partition

“Psst. Kid. Twenty bucks if you can give it to me for an hour.”

There was no answer. Frank added another bill to the offer.

“How about forty?”

The voice that came from the stall was far too low to belong to a child.

“I normally don’t swing that way, man. But for sixty, I’ll rock your world.”

Frank hurried out of the bathroom and into the lobby. The kid and his dad were going back into the theater.

“Hey! Buddy!”

Several people in the crowd turned to stare at him. He pushed through and caught up with Hair Weave and his kid.

“You think I could check out the game on your son’s TV?”

“The game?” Hair Weave scratched his roots.

“Bulls game. Playoffs.”

“Clarence, let this man see your TV for a second.”

“Batteries are dead.”

Clarence switched on the Watchman and nothing happened. He smiled. Malicious little bastard.

“Did you see the score?”

“Yeah—fifty-four to sixty-eight.”

“Who was winning?”

“Sixty-eight.”

“Come on Clarence, Mommy’s waiting.”

Clarence stuck out his tongue and followed his father down the aisle.

Frank felt as if his head were about to blow apart. He almost began crying.

“Are you okay, sir?”

An usher, red vest and bow tie, no more than eighteen. Frank grabbed his arms.

“Is there a TV anywhere in this place?”

The boy scrunched his eyebrows. “TV? No. I don’t think so.”

“How about a radio? It’s the Eastern Conference Finals. I have to know the score.”

“Sorry. There’s a TV in the dressing room, but...”

Frank lit up. “There’s one in Evander Mulrooney’s room?”

“You mean Alexandro Mulchahey?”

“I went to school with Evander, in Italy.”

“Mr. Mulchahey is Irish.”

Frank clapped the usher on the shoulder, grinning broadly.

"I should stop in, say hello to the old hound dog. Where's his dressing room?"

"I don't think..."

Frank held the forty dollars under the kid's nose.

"Just tell me where it is."

The usher sniffed the money, then nodded. He led Frank through an unmarked door and down a winding hallway that had none of the frill and pizzazz of the lobby. It barely had ample light.

The hall finally ended at a door to the backstage. Frank half expected to see a jungle sandbags and painted backdrops, but instead it was very orderly. There were several people milling about, but none of them paid Frank any attention.

"He's the third room on the right. Don't tell him I let you in. I'll lose my job."

Frank didn't bother thanking him. He ran to the door, flinging it open, seeing Evander Fitzrooney sitting in a make-up chair.

The soliloquist turned to him, venom in his eyes.

"I don't allow visitors before a performance! Get out!"

Frank ignored the actor, scanning the room, searching frantically for the...

"Television!"

Frank ran to it, arms outstretched, and Evander stood up and punched Frank square in the nose.



"How many times can I say I'm sorry?"

Wendy stared at Frank through the bars. She didn't seem sympathetic.

"I've decided to let you spend the night in jail, Frank. Maybe it will help you prioritize your life."

"Wendy...please. I need you to bail me out. The game has to be almost over, and I gave my last forty bucks to that pimply usher."

Wendy darkened, then turned on her heels and walked out.

"Wendy! Will you at least find out the score for me? Please!"

After Wendy left, Frank slumped down on the metal bench, alone. Every second seemed to last an hour. Every minute was an eternity. Are the Bulls winning? Will they move on to the finals? What was the score?

Never a religious man, Frank silently begged the Lord to please send someone to give Frank the score.

When Frank finished the prayer and opened his eyes, he was confronted with a wondrous sight.

The cops were bringing in a man—a large, burly man—wearing a Bulls jersey.

“Is the game over?”

The man squinted at Frank. “Yeah, it’s over. Most amazing ending I’ve ever seen. It’ll be talked about for decades to come.”

“Who won? Who won?”

The door closed, and the cops went away. The burly man looked Frank over, top to bottom.

“You a Bulls fan?”

Frank began to jump up and down.

“Yes, dammit! Who won the game?”

The man smiled. It was an ugly thing.

“How much is it worth to you to know?”

“Name your price. I don’t have any money on me, but I’ll get it to you. My word is good.”

Burly Guy licked his lips. “Don’t want no money.”

“What is it you want, then?”

Fifteen minutes later, Frank learned a valuable lesson: If you dedicate your life to sports, you’ll only get hurt in the end.

Treatment

Written expressly for my website. I like to post free stories because websites should be about what you have to offer, not what you have to sell.

“It all goes back to the time I was bitten by that werewolf.”

Dr. Booster’s pencil paused for a moment on his notepad, having only written a ‘w.’

“A werewolf?”

Tyler nodded. Booster appraised the teenager; pimples, lanky, hair a bit too long for the current style. The product of a well-to-do suburban couple.

“This is the reason your grades have gone down?”

“Yeah. Instead of studying at night, I roam the neighborhood, eating squirrels.”

“I see...and how do squirrels taste, Tyler?”

“They go down dry.”

Booster wrote ‘*active imagination*’ on his pad.

“What makes you say you were bitten by a werewolf?”

“Because I was.”

“When did this happen?”

Tyler scratched at the pubescent hairs on his chin. “Two weeks ago. I was out at night, burying this body...”

“Burying a body?”

The boy nodded.

“Tyler, for therapy to work, we have to be honest with each other.”

“I’m being honest, Dr. Booster.”

Booster made his mouth into a tight line and wrote ‘*uncooperative*’ on his pad.

“Fine, Tyler. Whose body were you burying?”

“It was Crazy Harold. He was a wino that hung out in the alley behind the liquor store on Kedzie.”

“And why were you burying him?”

Tyler furrowed his brow. “I had to get rid of it. I didn’t think digging a grave would be necessary. I thought they disintegrated after getting a stake in the heart.”

Booster frowned. “Crazy Harold was a vampire?”

Tyler shifted on the couch to look at him. “You knew? Shouldn’t they turn into dust when you kill them?”

Booster glanced the diplomas on his wall. Eight years of education, for this.

“So you’re saying you hammered a stake into Crazy Harold—”

“It was actually a broken broom handle.”

“—and then buried him.”

“In the field behind the house. And just when I finished, that’s when the werewolf got me.” Tyler lifted up his right leg and hiked up his pants. Above the sock was a raised pink scar, squiggly like an earthworm.

“That’s the bite mark?”

Tyler nodded.

“It looks old, Tyler.”

“It healed fast.”

“Your mother told me you got that scar when you were nine-years-old. You fell off your bike.”

Tyler blinked, then rolled his pants leg back down.

“Mom’s full of shit.”

Booster wrote *animosity towards mother* in his pad.

“Why do you say that, Tyler? Your mother is the one who recommended therapy, isn’t she? It seems as if she wants to help.”

“She’s not my real mother. Her and Dad were replaced by aliens.”

“Aliens?”

“They killed my parents, replaced them with duplicates. They look and sound the same, but they’re actually from another planet. I caught them, once, in their bedroom.”

Booster raised an eyebrow. “Making love?”

“Contacting the mother ship. They’re planning a full scale invasion of earth. But I thought you wanted to know about the werewolf.”

Booster pursed his lips. *WWSFD*? He appealed to the picture of Sigmund hanging above the fireplace. The picture offered no answers.

"Tyler, with your consent, I'd like to try some hypnotherapy. Have you ever been hypnotized?"

"No."

Booster dimmed the lights and sat alongside the couch. He held his pencil in front of Tyler's face at eye level.

"Take a deep breath, then let it out. Focus on the pencil..."

It took a few minutes to bring Tyler to a state of susceptible relaxation.

"Can you hear me, Tyler?"

"Yes."

The boy's jaw was slack, and a thin line of drool escaped the corner of his mouth. Booster was surprised at the child's halitosis—perhaps he had been eating squirrels after all.

"I'd like you to remember back a few weeks, when you told me about burying Crazy Harold."

"Okay."

"Tell me what you see."

"It's cold. There are a lot of rocks in the dirt, and the shovel won't go in very far."

Booster used his pen light to check Tyler's pupils. Slow response. The child was under.

"What were you digging?"

"Grave. For the vampire."

Booster frowned. He'd studied cases of patients lying under hypnosis, but had never had one on his couch.

"What about the werewolf?"

"Came out of the field. It was big, had red eyes, walked on two legs."

"And it bit you?"

"Yeah. I thought it was going to kill me, but Runs Like Stallion saved me."

"Runs Like Stallion?"

"He's a ghost of a Sioux brave. The field is an old Indian burial ground."

Booster decided he'd had enough. He wrote *'treatment'* in his notebook and went over to his desk, unlocking the top drawer. The plastic case practically leapt up at him. He took it over to Tyler.

“Tyler, your parents are tired of these stories.”

“My parents are dead.”

“No, Tyler. They aren’t dead. They care about you. That’s why they brought you to me.”

Booster opened the case. The gnerlock blinked its three eyes and crawled into Booster’s hand. It would enter Tyler’s mouth and burrow up into his brain, taking over his body.

“Soon, it will all be better. You’ll have no more worries. You’re going to be a host, Tyler, for the new dominant species on this planet. Are you scared?”

“No.”

“Open your mouth, Tyler.”

Tyler stretched his mouth wide.

Wider than humanly possible, crammed with sharp teeth.

The gnerlock nesting in Dr. Booster’s brain crawled out through his neck after the wolf decapitated the host body.

Its eleven legs beelined for the door, antennae waving hysterically, telepathically cursing that quack Freud.

Halfway there, a green ghostly foot came down on its oblong head, smashing it into the carpeting.

The Indian gave the wolf a thumbs up, but Tyler was already leaping out the window, eyes locked on a juicy squirrel in the grass below.

An Archaeologist's Story

Written for a college anthropology course, as a final project. The Woody Allen influence is obvious. I've always liked this story, but no one ever expressed any interest in publishing it, even though it made the rounds.

DAY 1 – 2:47pm

The funding has come through! As I write this, I am in a plane heading to the Bahamas, on a grant from the University of Sheboygan. With me are my colleagues Dr. Myra Bird and Dr. Jerome Sloan.

I'm thrilled, though my excitement was somewhat dampened when I had some trouble getting my excavation tools through airport security. Jerome's sly joke that I wasn't really an archaeologist, but rather a homicidal maniac, prompted them to conduct an embarrassing and somewhat uncomfortable body-cavity search.

I'm grateful the airport security gentlemen had small hands.

As for the site, none of us knows what to expect. Sure, there have been stories of fossilized *Homo erectus* skulls just lying on the beach, waiting to be picked up, but archaeological rumors are plentiful. I still remember traveling to the Antarctic six years ago, because of the discovery of what seemed to be an *Australopithecus boise* tooth, but instead turned out to be just a small white rock. I sorely miss those three toes I lost to frostbite.

But this site seems like the real thing. The authenticated femur of a *Homo habilis* was found by a vacationing family in a small cave. Evidently, the children were acting up, and the father had grabbed something lying next to him to beat them with. It turned out to be the fossil in question. Luckily, it remained intact, even though the father used it.

I also believe the children have gotten out of intensive care.

Myra, Jerome and I have been waiting a week now for the go ahead to investigate. My bag was long ago packed and waiting for the word, leaving me pretty much without anything to wear for the last week.

But now we were finally on our way.

Jerome just tapped me on the shoulder, smiling. He is also obviously thrilled about this trip. No, he just wants my martini. I give it to him. I am so high right now I do not need alcohol. This package of peanuts is fine.

DAY 1 – 9:35pm

What a horrible flight! Jerome threw up on the stewardess, who then refused to acknowledge us for the rest of the trip. We didn't even get served our dinner, which as far as I could make out was some kind of meat in brown sauce. When we got to the airport, Customs confiscated Jerome's suitcase, which was filled with liquor. Both Myra and I are appalled at the lack of professionalism on our colleague's part, and we attempted to confront him and express our disappointment.

Unfortunately, he was unconscious.

We managed to get him to the hotel by strapping him to the hood of our taxi, but they charged us fare for three just the same.

The hotel we are staying at is very cheap, and we all must share a room due to budgetary constraints. Myra and I propped Jerome up on the sink, then discussed where we would sleep, there being only one bed. I was willing to be adult about it and share the bed with her, half and half. She agreed, and now I must sleep on the underside of the mattress.

Myra is very sharp, so sharp in fact that I once cut myself shaking her hand. But she has really sexy bone structure, and her teeth are exquisite. I long to run my hands over her ilium and ischium, but realize such thoughts are dangerous, as I must work closely with her. Nothing must jeopardize our excavation.

I can barely wait to start work tomorrow.

DAY 2 – 5:43am

I am awakened in the morning by Jerome retching. The sound was disturbing enough, but the fact that he was retching on me made it impossible to sleep any longer. After a shower, I dressed and went

down to the lobby and waited for my colleagues to join me. Myra arrived a few minutes later, without Jerome. When I inquired about him, she told me he was sick and going to stay in bed for the day. I wanted to protest, but realized he probably wouldn't be much help to us anyway, and would only throw up on anything we might find.

We called a cab and took it to the sight. My mind was giddy with anticipation. I could tell Myra was nervous too, because she bit off all her nails and spit them in my face (a cute habit she has.)

When we arrived, it was exactly as I had expected; a clearing in the tropical forest of about eighty square yards. On the edge of it was a rock formation that held a small cave. Myra had brought her camera, and she began to take pictures of the area. Then she gave the camera to me, and asked me to take some pictures of her posing on the rocks.

After shooting three rolls of film, we broke out our equipment and began our excavation. Armed with a flashlight, a horse hair brush, and a small pick, we entered the cave. Myra clutched my arm, afraid of being attacked by vampire bats. Every so often I would flash my light at the ceiling and yell "A bat!" just for fun.

I soon quit, as Myra would slap me repeatedly in the face when she discovered there was no real danger.

A quick inspection of the cave showed no real evidence of primitive man. Though we were unduly excited about seeing something on the wall, which just turned out to be a spray painted picture of a man's genitalia, with "*Eat me Jonny*" written beside it. Primitive as it may be, it wasn't what we were looking for.

After examining the cave, we went to inspect the area where the femur was found, twenty feet east of the opening. The ground was hard clay, and we discovered the impression of where the discovered femur bone had been lying. Using our picks, we dug roughly six inches down for a square yard of the area encompassing the impression, but got nothing for our efforts except a large pile of clay.

By then it was late afternoon, and we chose to break for lunch. Unfortunately, neither of us had brought anything to eat. But this was a tropical jungle, and there were many edible roots and tubers growing around us. I also noted that several of the rocks were slate, and if need be we could knock off a Mousterian point using the Levallois technique and go hunting for rodents.

Myra, however, wanted a burger and fries, so we had to go back to the hotel.

DAY 2 – 1:46am

Upon finishing lunch, it was our intention to report our progress to Jerome, then return to the sight. But to our surprise Jerome was not in the room. We begin searching the hotel, and I find him sitting by the pool in a chaise lounge, sipping a Mai-Tai.

I am shocked at his conduct, and threaten to tell our superiors of his insubordination. He flips me the bird.

I find Myra peeking in the Men's room, and tell her of Jerome's attitude. She agrees we should file a report recommending he be dismissed, or at least have his suave safari hat taken away. Then we take a cab back to the sight.

While I continued to excavate the area where the fossil was found, Myra decided to start in another area, closer to the mouth of the cave. It is hard, laborious work, but it is made more bearable by Myra, who sings operettas while she digs.

Four hours into it, I discover something. Rather than get Myra excited over what may be just a rock, I bit off a small portion of my lower lip to keep from yelling with joy. As I dig around it I realize it was smart that I waited, for my discovery was nothing but a long, thin stone. Or perhaps a petrified snake. Either way, it wasn't important.

The sun begins to set, and we know we must go. We aren't discouraged, as neither of us expected to find anything on the first day, but we are a little disappointed. When we get back to the hotel, Jerome is watching "*Emmanuelle in Egypt*" on pay-per-view, eating what appears to be his third room service filet mignon. He apologizes profusely about earlier, and promises to accompany us tomorrow. We reluctantly forgive him, and Myra lets him sleep next to her that night.

I must sleep on a small wooden chair.

It doesn't bother me, for I have slept in far worse places. Like Detroit. Or that time I was in Cairo, and slept on a bed of camel dung. To this day, I still attract more than the average amount of flies.

DAY 3 – 7:30am

I awake to the sound of gagging. I then realize that it was me, as Jerome stuffed a small gourd into my mouth as a joke.

He is really beginning to irritate me.

Jerome and Myra had gotten up earlier, so there is no time to change or take a shower, as they are on their way to the sight. I am already in the cab when I realize I am still wearing my Snoopy pajamas.

Myra reassures me not to worry, as the sight is secluded, and they are pretty nice pajamas. Then she takes several pictures, while she and Jerome laugh hysterically. I haven't been so embarrassed since I interned with Leakey, and mislabeled a gracile Australopithecine skull fragment for robust, completely forgetting to take into account the sagittal crest.

I smile politely, and jokingly tell them both to go to hell. We do not talk until we reach the sight. When we get there, Jerome is impressed with our progress. He agrees we should keep at what we are doing, and he'll start work further in the cave. I like this idea, as it keeps Jerome away from me.

Several hours later, I again come upon what appears to be fossil material. But this time it is more definite. I call Myra over, and we begin to dig it out together. It turns out to be a parietal bone, intact! I am so excited I kiss Myra. She surprises me by passionately responding. She then goes into the cave to give the news to Jerome, whom she finds is sleeping. He becomes very excited, and clutches the bone tightly, yelling, "Mine! All mine!"

In the meantime, I excavate the area further, and soon uncover an occipital bone. It begins to get dark, but the prospect of finding a complete skull prompts me to go on. Then I realize my colleagues have already left, and I must walk the seven miles back to the hotel, as I have no cab fare in my pajamas.

DAY 3 – 11:22pm

I make it to the hotel, my feet raw and bloody, and my occipital bone clutched firmly in hand. To my disgust, Myra and Jerome are in bed. Naked. Also in bed with them are several gourds. This sickens me, and I go to the bathroom to clean my feet. I will never eat gourds again.

DAY 4 – 6:45am

A loud banging on the bathroom door wakes me up. I had fallen asleep on the sink. I open the door and it is Myra, who holds out the parietal bone and demands I examine it. I tell her it is an average

Homo erectus parietal. Then she tells me the curvature is too extreme for erectus, yet too round for habilus. I examine my occipital, and then agree. It is possible we may have found the link between the two! It is possible we have found a new species!

In her excitement, Myra kisses me again. I resist at first, after what she did with Jerome, but soon respond to her advances and begin pressing against her body. She falls over backwards, and pulls me down with her. It is then, when we are on the floor, fornicating like animals, that Jerome walks in with the camera. He takes several pictures before I realize what is happening. All the time Myra is laughing and smiling. I finally pull away and hide in the bathroom, humiliated.

Jerome knocks an undetermined time later, and tells me I must give credit for the find to him, or he is sending the pictures to “National Geographic”. I am shocked, and cannot speak. He rants on and on, about how he’ll call the new species *Homo jerome*, and how it will make him rich and famous beyond his wildest dreams. I begin to cry.

Myra busts in and takes a picture of this.

DAY 4 – 12:54 pm

I am now convinced, after sitting in the bathroom and thinking about it all morning, that Jerome must die. Myra too. I cannot be humiliated in front of the scientific world. Nor can I let the credit for such an important discovery go to someone else. The answer is murder.

I go to Hertz and rent a large SUV. My plan is simple. I will run them over. Then back over them five or six times to make sure they are dead. I park the car behind a palm tree in front of the hotel, then wait for them to come back from the sight. Thoughts of being featured on The Discovery Channel fuel my thirst for vengeance.

The second they step out of the cab, they’re pancakes.

DAY 4 – 8:45pm

Myra and Jerome finally return to the hotel. My fingers sweat as I turn the ignition key, and the engine roars to life like a prehistoric beast—perhaps an *Indricotherium transsouralicum*, or a *Doedicurus* with a slight cold.

Myra wraps her arms around Jerome and kisses him lovingly, as they both stand innocently on the curb, waiting to be flattened.

I put the car into gear, and slam the accelerator to the floor. My mind is racing, but I foresee everything in slow motion: the look of shock on Jerome's face when he sees me coming at him, the scream Myra will barely have a chance to let out, the crushed, bleeding mess of bone and sinew that was once my colleagues.

I drive past them and keep on going. I cannot bring myself to do it.

I am not a killer. I am an archaeologist.

Who cares if I don't get credit for this find? There will be other excavations. I will find other fossils. There is a big wide world out there, covered in dirt. Somewhere there is bound to be other extraordinary discoveries, and I will be there to make them. I and I alone will go down in history as the man who revolutionized archaeology, even if it takes me the rest of my life. I will bounce back!

Nah...too much work.

I turn the car around and level Jerome and Myra in mid-kiss.

Homo jerome my ass.

After they were flattened, I hit Reverse and backed up over their bodies. Twice.

If only Leakey could see me now.

Could Stephanie Plum

Really Get Car Insurance?

I have a dirty little secret. Even though my books are compared to Janet Evanovich's, I'd never read her until after writing book number three. I was invited into an essay collection about Evanovich's character, called Perfectly Plum, so I read all the books back-to-back, then contributed this piece.

By my count, Stephanie Plum has been involved in the loss or destruction of twelve vehicles at the time of this writing, which is 8:55am, Eastern Time. But, in all fairness, I'm not very good at counting. Plus, I listened to two of the books on abridged audio, which is known for cutting incidental bits from novels, such as characterization and plot.

Since I had nothing better to do today, other than to donate my kidney to that sick guy who paid me fifty thousand dollars, I decided to find out if, in the real world, could Ms. Plum get insured?

Let's take a moment to look at the phrase "in the real world."

Have you taken a moment? Good. Let's move on.

Since Stephanie Plum is a fictitious character, who lives in a fictitious place called Trenton, New Jersey, she isn't expected to completely conform to all aspects of reality, such as car insurance, or gravity. Since I knew that this task before me would involve a great deal of painstaking research and determination, I immediately went to work. After work, I went to a movie. Then, a nap.

Discouraged by my lack of progress, I called my neighbor Shelby, who knows a lot of stuff, such as why bottled water costs the same as bottled iced tea, even though it doesn't have all the stuff in it that tea has. Such as tea. Quote Shelby:

"Stephanie who?"

The story would end there, except that I have a lot more to tell.

My next course of action was to take my phone off the hook, because I kept getting obnoxious messages along the lines of, “Where’s that kidney?” and “You have to get to the hospital immediately!” and “He’s dead.”

Then I went to the Pleasant Happy Valley Assisted Living Facility (Now with 14% Less Elderly Abuse) to meet with renowned Stephanie Plum Scholar Murray Christmas. That’s his real name, and though it may seem odd, it isn’t nearly as odd as is sister’s name, Groundhog Day. Murray attempted to be cooperative, but being a hundred and three years old, he’d forgotten much of the minutiae, such as his own name. After much patience, and some help from his nurse to understand his drooling wheezes, I got nowhere. So I have no idea why I’m telling you this.

But when the nurse left, I looked through his personal effects, and got a real nice gold watch.

This opens up a large topic for serious discussion, which I am merely going to skip.

After pawning the watch, I pulled out my trusty phone book and began calling insurance companies. After eight calls that went nowhere, I decided I needed a better plan than giggling and making fart sounds when someone answered. So I decided to try talking.

Here are some of the conversations I had. My name has been changed to protect me.

CALL NUMBER ONE

ME: Do you sell car insurance?

INSURANCE MAN #1: Yes.

ME: My name is Julie Pear, and I’m not a fictitious character. I played a hand in destroying twelve cars in my last thirteen books. Will you insure me?

INSURANCE MAN #1: I need more information.

ME: I like the color red, and dogs.

INSURANCE MAN #1: I meant about your driving background.

ME: I also like Rob Schneider movies.

INSURANCE MAN #1: I’m sorry, we can’t insure you.

CALL NUMBER TWO

ME: Hello?

INSURANCE MAN #2: Can I help you?

ME: My last four cars have exploded, but it wasn't my fault. Can you insure me?

INSURANCE MAN #2: How did these cars explode?

ME: definition of explosion

INSURANCE MAN #2: Well, you're welcome to come in and we can give you a quote.

ME: How about I give you a quote instead? How about, "This was no boating accident!"

INSURANCE MAN #2: Excuse me?

ME: That was from Jaws. I loved that movie. I still get scared taking baths.

INSURANCE MAN #2: You're an idiot.

CALL NUMBER THREE

INSURANCE MAN #3: Making rude noises like that is very immature. (Pause) I know you're still there. I can hear you giggling.

CALL NUMBER FOUR

ME: I want a large thin crust, sausage and extra cheese.

PIZZA GUY: That will be fourteen ninety five.

After all of this hard work, I only knew one thing for certain: if Stephanie Plum were a pound of bacon, she'd sure be a clever one. I'd pay a lot of money to see a talking pound of bacon in high heels. A lot of money.

The next thing on my to do list, after a good scratch, was attend an insurance convention. The convention brought many to tears, due to a chemical leak that gave most attendees second degree burns.

Quote Harold Barnicky, one of the attendees: "Those little crackers they had, the ones with the spinach and cheese—mmmm-mmmmmmmmm!"

Personally, I preferred the three bean casserole, which was inappropriately named because I counted at least a dozen beans, and counting isn't my strong suit.

But none of this effort brought me any closer to the end of this essay.

Undaunted, superfluous, and proselytical, I decided to try a more direct approach, because even though I'm a writer, I've always wanted to direct.

So I wrote an impassioned, persuasive letter to the largest auto insurer next to my house. The letter brilliantly detailed the whole sordid tale, and was perhaps the greatest thing I've ever written on a cocktail napkin. Without permission, here is the company's reply:

We CARE Auto Insurance
WE INSURE EVERYONE!™
8866 Haknort Lane
CHICAGO, IL 60610
(847) 555 - AUTO
To: Margaret Apples
Re: Recent Insurance Inquiry

Ms. Apples—

When my father began We Care Auto Insurance 64 years ago, he had a grand dream: To supply auto insurance to everyone who needed it, regardless of their driving record or accident history. He wanted to be the insurance company for the common man—the senior citizens with senility issues, the veterans missing important limbs, the narcoleptics, the mentally retarded, the unrepentant alcoholics.

Father believed everyone—even those with heroin habits and cataracts the size of dinner plates—deserved to be insured. For more than six decades, We Care Auto Insurance carried on this proud tradition.

We have insured drivers with organic brain damage of such severity they couldn't count past four. We have insured drivers with quadriplegia, who drove using a suck-and-blow straw. We have insured the legally blind, the morbidly obese, the legally dead, and Mr. Chimp the Driving Baboon. We've even insured several Kennedys.

Now, for the first time in our history, We Care Auto Insurance must turn down an application.

Yours.

While the law doesn't require us to provide an explanation for the reason you aren't being allowed into the We Care Auto Insurance family, I've chosen to write this letter to make something perfectly clear: We are not to blame, Ms. Apples. You are.

While reviewing insurance applications, we compile statistics from several sources, which allows us to come up with monthly rates and deductible figures. When feeding your information into our computer database, our network promptly froze.

We haven't been able to reboot it.

According to our information, you've been responsible for destroying more cars than any single driver in North America, and possibly South America as well.

You've destroyed more cars than Carzilla, the giant robotic crane that tours with monster truck shows and eats cars.

In layperson's terms; you've destroyed a huge fucking butt-load of cars.

There have been so many, I'm guessing you've lost track of them all. Allow me to refresh your memory.

After your Miata was repossessed (which seems to be the only nice car you've ever owned) you played a hand in the explosion of a Jeep owned by a Detective Gepetto of the Trenton Police Department. This, unfortunately, was not the last automobile casualty Detective Gepetto suffered at your hands.

Your next vehicle, a Jeep, was stolen. You'll be pleased to know that a VIN search has recently located it, in a scrap yard in Muncie, Indiana. The odometer reading was well over 220,000 miles. Having escaped you, this Jeep led a full and possibly interesting life, without explosions, though your insurance company still had to foot the bill for it nonetheless.

The blue Nissan truck you acquired shortly thereafter soon went to the big parking lot in the sky after being blown up with rocket launcher. I must admit, I had to read the claim report three times before the phrase rocket launcher sunk in. I've insured several CIA operatives, a movie stuntman named Jimmy Rocket who specialized in pyrotechnics, and a scientist who actually worked for a rocket company (I believe they called him a rocket scientist) but none of them ever lost a vehicle to a rocket, missile, or any comparable exploding projectile.

Your replacement car, a Honda CRX, was soaked in gasoline and burned. My record search was unable to turn up the name of the perpetrator, but might I suggest it was one of your previous insurance agents? That wouldn't surprise me.

Your name came up in several claims made by a company cryptically called Sexy Cuban Man. The claims included an exploded Porsche and a stolen BMW. Not content with that, you somehow also managed to burn down a funeral home. Did you get confused in the dark and mistake it for a car somehow?

A Honda Civic, registered to you, was torched, and a Honda CRV registered to you was totaled, and then set ablaze.

Why you bought another Honda is beyond my mental capacity, but you did, and it was promptly burned, along with another Sexy Cuban Man vehicle, by—and this is in your own words—a giant rabbit. Was Jimmy Stewart anywhere in the vicinity, pray tell? Or did this rabbit happen to have a basket of brightly colored eggs?

Your next vehicle, a Ford Escape, didn't escape at all. Again it was burned. Perhaps car insurance isn't what you need. Perhaps you simply need a car made of asbestos. Or a Sherman Tank.

Your next victim, a Saturn, was bombed. So was an SUV belonging to the unfortunate Joe Morelli. You also had a hand in the recent explosion of a Ford Escalade.

Records show you just purchased a Mini Cooper. Such an adorable car. I've included it in my nightly prayers.

While the first few explosions might be written off as coincidence, or even bad luck, somewhere around the tenth destroyed vehicle a little light came on inside my head. I finally understood that no one could be this unlucky. There was only one possible explanation.

You're sick in the head.

The psychiatric community calls your specific mental illness Munchausen's by Proxy. A parent, usually the mother, purposely makes her children sick so she can bask in the attention and sympathy of others.

I've decided that this is what you're doing, only with vehicles. Rather than feeding little Molly peanut butter and bleach sandwiches, you've been deliberately destroying your own cars. All because you crave attention.

But your warped scheme to put the spotlight upon yourself isn't without casualties. I'm not speaking of your helpless automotive victims. I'm speaking of my wonderful company.

Writing this letter fills me with sadness, Ms. Apples, for you have destroyed my father's dream. For the first time in our history, we are rejecting an applicant. This comes at a great moral cost, and a great financial cost as well.

Because of you, we have been forced to change our trademarked slogan, *We Insure Everyone!* Do you have any idea how much letterhead we have with that slogan on it? A warehouse full. And unless we hire someone (perhaps an immigrant, or a homeless person) to cross out the slogan on each individual sheet of paper, it is now land-fill bound.

Ditto our business cards. Our refrigerator magnets. Our full color calendars we give to our loyal customers every holiday season. The large and numerous interstate billboards. And our catchy TV commercials, which feature the jingle written by none other than Mr. Paul Williams, naturally called, *"We Insure Everyone."*

What will our new slogan be? I'm not sure. There are several in the running. They include: *"We Insure Practically Everyone," "We Really Want to Insure Everyone,"* and *"We Insure Everyone But Margaret Apples."* I also like the slogan, *"Why Can't You Be in the Next Car You Blow Up or At the Very Least Get a Job at the Button Factory,"* but that has too many words to fit on a business card.

You have crippled us, Ms. Apples. Crippled us worse than many of the people we insure, including the guy with the prosthetic pelvis and the woman born without arms who must steer with her face.

I hope you're happy.

As a public service to the world, I'm sending copies of this letter to every insurance agent in the United States. Hopefully, this will end your reign of terror.

If it takes every cent of my money, every single one of my vast resources, I'll see to it that you never insure another vehicle again. When I get done with you, you won't be able to put on roller skates without the Feds breathing down your neck.

Whew. There. I feel a lot better now.

And though we aren't able to insure you, Ms. Apples, I do hope you pass our name along to any friends or relatives of yours who are seeking auto insurance.

Sincerely,
Milton McGlade

So there you have it. Based on the minutes of hard work I've devoted to this topic, Stephanie Plum would not be able to get car insurance.

In conclusion, if I had only ten words to end this essay, I'd have a really hard time thinking of them. Now if you'll excuse me, I've got a kidney to sell on eBay.

Cozies or Hardboiled?

How to Tell the Difference

A fluff piece for Crimespree magazine. I got a big kick out of writing this.

Mystery is a broad genre, encompassing thrillers, crime novels, whodunnits, capers, historicals, and police procedurals. Two of its most bi-polar brethren are the tea-cozy, as typified by Agatha Christie, and hardboiled noir, best portrayed by Mickey Spillaine.

But with the constant re-categorizing and re-inventing of sub-genres, how can you, the reader, tell the difference?

Fear no more! Here is a definitive set of criteria to determine if that potential bookstore purchase *The Winnipeg Watersports Caper* is about a gentleman boat thief, or a serial killer with an overactive bladder.

☐ ☐ ☐

If the book has an elderly character that solves crimes in her spare time, it is a cozy.

If the book has an elderly character that gets shot seven times in the face and then raped, it is hardboiled.

☐ ☐ ☐

If the protagonist drinks herbal tea, and eats scones, it is a cozy.

If the protagonist drinks whiskey, and makes other people eat their teeth, it is hardboiled.

☐ ☐ ☐

If a cat, dog, or other cute domestic animal helps solve the crime, it is a cozy.

If a cat, dog, or other cute domestic animal is set on fire, it is hardboiled.

☐ ☐ ☐

If the book has a character named *Agnes*, *Dorothy*, or *Smythe*, it is a cozy.

If the book has a character named *Hammer*, *Crotch*, or *Dickface*, it is hardboiled.

☐ ☐ ☐

If the murder scene involves antiques, it is cozy.

If the murder scene involves entrails, it is hardboiled.

☐ ☐ ☐

If the hero does any sort of knitting, crafting, or pet-sitting, it is a cozy.

If the hero does any sort of maiming, beating, or humping, it is hardboiled.

☐ ☐ ☐

If the sidekick is a good natured curmudgeon who collects stamps, it is a cozy.

If the sidekick is a good natured psychopath who collects ears, it is hardboiled.

☐ ☐ ☐

If the book contains recipes, crossword puzzles, or cross-stitching patterns, it is a cozy.

If the book contains ass-fucking, it is hardboiled.

☐ ☐ ☐

If cookie crumbs on a Persian rug lead to the villain, it is a cozy.

If semen stains on a stab wound lead to the villain, it is hardboiled.

□ □ □

If any characters say, “*Oh my!*” it is a cozy.

If any characters say, “*Jesus Goddamn Fucking Christ!*” it is hardboiled.

□ □ □

If the murder weapon is a fast-acting poison, it is a cozy.

If the murder weapon is a slow-acting blowtorch, it is hardboiled.

□ □ □

If the main character has a colorful hat that is filled with fruit and flowers, it is a cozy.

If the main character has a colorful vocabulary that is filled with racial slurs and invectives, it is hardboiled.

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And finally, if the author picture looks like your grandmother—beware...it could be either.

The Addiction

Another humor story about what it's like to be a writer. Like Piranha Pool, this is semi-autobiographical, and pretty much anyone who has ever tried to write for a living can relate to the narrator.

The first time I ever saw it was at a party.

College. Dorm. Walls constructed of Budweiser cases. Every door open, the hallways and rooms crammed with people, six different rock tunes competing for dominance.

Rituals of the young and innocent—and the not so innocent, I found out that night.

I had to give back the beer I'd rented, popped into the first empty room I could find.

He was sitting in the corner, hunched over, oblivious to me.

Curiosity made me forget about my bladder. What was he doing, huddled in the dim light? What unpleasant drug would keep him here, alone and oblivious, when a floor thumping party was kicking outside his door?

"Hey, man, what's up?"

A quick turn, guilty face, covering something up with his hands.

"Nothing. Go away."

"What are you hiding there?"

His eyes were wide, full of secret shame. The shame of masturbation, of cooking heroin needles, of snatching money from Mom's purse.

Then I saw it all—the computer, the notebook full of scrawls, the outline...

"You're writing fiction!"

The guilt melted off his face, leaving it shopworn and heavy.

"Leave me alone. I have to finish this chapter."

"How can you be writing with a party going on?"

He smiled, so subtle that it might have been my beer goggles.

“Have you ever done it?”

“Me?” I tried to laugh, but it sounded fake. “I mean, when I was a kid, you know, drawing pictures and stuff, I used to make up stories...”

“How about lately?”

“Naw. Nothing stronger than an occasional essay.”

“You want to try it?”

I took a step back. All of the sudden my bladder became an emergency again.

“No, man...”

The guy stood up. His eyes were as bright as his computer screen.

“You should try it. You’ll like it.”

“I’m cool. Really.”

He smiled, for sure this time, all crooked teeth and condescension.

“You’ll be back.”

I hurried out of the room.

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The clock blinked 3:07am. I couldn’t sleep.

To the left of my bed, my computer.

My mind wouldn’t shut off. I kept thinking of the party. Of that guy.

Not me. I wasn’t going to go down that path. Sitting alone in my room when everyone else was partying. I wasn’t like that.

My computer waited. Patient.

Maybe I should turn it on, make sure it was running okay. Test a few applications.

I crept out of bed.

Everything seemed fine. I should check MS Word, though. Sometimes there are problems.

A look to the side. My roommate was asleep.

What’s the big deal, anyway? I could write just one little short short short story. It wouldn’t hurt anyone.

I could write it in the dark.

No one would ever know.

One little story.

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“Party over at Keenan Hall. You coming?”

“Hmm? Uh, no. Busy.”

“Homework?”

“Uh, yeah. Homework.”

“That sucks. I’ll drink a few for you.”

“Sure.”

I got back to plotting.

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I raised a fist to knock, dropped it, raised it again.

What’s the big deal? He probably wasn’t in anyway.

One tiny tap, the middle knuckle, barely even audible.

“It’s open.”

The room was dark, warm. It smelled of old sweat and desperation.

He was at his desk, as I guessed he’d be. Hunched over his computer. The clackety clack of his fingers on the keyboard was comforting.

“I need...I need to borrow a Thesaurus.”

His eyes darted over to me, focusing. Then came the condescending smile.

“I knew you’d be back. What are you working on?”

“It, uh, takes place in the future, after we’ve colonized Jupiter.”

“It’s impossible to colonize Jupiter. The entire planet is made out of gas.”

“In 2572 we discover a solid core beneath the gas...”

I spit out the rest of my concept, so fast my lips kept tripping over one another.

“Sounds interesting. You bring a sample to read?”

How did he know? I dug the disk out of my back pocket.

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I knew it was coming. Short stories weren’t enough anymore. The novella seemed hefty at the time, but now those twenty thousand words are sparse and amateurish.

I was ready. I knew I was. I had a great idea, bursting with conflict, and the two main characters were already living in my head, jawing off at each other with dialog that begged to be on paper.

All I lacked was time.

“Hi, Mom. How’s Dad? I’m dropping out of college.”

I couldn’t make much sense of her reply; it was mostly screaming. When my father came on the phone, he demanded to know the reason. Was I in trouble? Was it a girl? Drugs?

“I need the time off to write my novel.”

I hadn't ever heard my father cry before.

I don't need understanding. Certainly not sympathy. The orgiastic delight that comes from constructing a perfect paragraph makes up for my crummy apartment and low-paying job at the Food Mart. They let me use the register tape for my notes, and I get a twenty percent discount on instant coffee.

Reality is tenuous, but that's a good sign. It means I'm focused on the book. I'm not really talking to myself. I'm talking to my characters. You see the difference?

Sometimes I need to take days off, like for that problem I had with Chapter 26. But I worked through it. The book is more important than food, anyway. Who needs to eat?

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The tears were magic, and the sob was more beautiful than any emotion ever felt by anyone who ever lived.

Helium had replaced the blood in my veins. My hands trembled.

I typed The End and swore I heard the Voice of God.

□ □ □

The alley is cold. I stuff my sweatshirt with newspaper and hunch down by a dumpster, my CD-ROM clutched in a filthy hand that I can barely recognize as my own.

It is my third week on the street. I've made some friends, like Squeaky, who is sitting next to me.

"They locked me out. Sold my stuff to pay the back rent. Even my computer."

Squeaky squeaks. I offer him an empty Dorito bag, and he scurries inside, looking for crumbs. I don't mind him being distracted. He's heard the story before.

"I've still got my novel, though." The CD isn't very shiny anymore, and it has a crack that I pray hasn't hurt the data.

"Best thing I've ever done in my life, Squeaky old pal. Wouldn't change a damn thing about the path I chose."

It starts to rain. I stare at the CD, at my reflection in it. My beard is coming in nicely. It gives me sort of a Hemingway look.

"Did I tell you about the Intervention, Squeaky? Right before I got kicked out. My parents, my brother, the chaplain, and some guy from WA. Tried to get me to quit writing. Follow some stupid 12 step program."

I still feel a twang of guilt, remembering my mother's pleas.

“They wanted me to admit I had a problem. But they don’t understand. Writing isn’t an addiction. It’s a way of life. Like being a rat. Could you stop being a rat, just because your family wanted you to?”

Squeaky didn’t answer. The rain was really coming down now.

“I have to write. I don’t have a choice. It’s who I am.”

The CD in my hand got warm to the touch, glowing with an inner spirit that I knew for sure isn’t just my imagination. It’s worth something. Even if it never sells. Even if I’m the only one who ever reads it.

It validates me.

“I’m no one trick pony, either. I won’t rest on my laurels. I’ve got more books in me.”

I pull out my collection of gum wrappers and sort them out, chapter by chapter.

After reading what I wrote that morning, I take my stubby pencil from my shirt pocket and start where I left off.

After all—writer’s have to write.

It’s what we do.

Weigh to Go

A Personal Essay on Health Clubs

Once upon a time I wanted to write a humor column like Dave Barry. I quickly learned that only Dave Barry was allowed to write humor columns, and newspapers weren't looking for anyone else. This was penned during college, and then tweaked to put on my website.

I was watching “The 20 Minute Workout,” sitting back in my easy chair and eating a box of Twinkies. The blonde aerobics instructor (at least I think she was blonde, for I was having trouble seeing over my stomach) was chirping away about how eating healthy and exercising were the keys to a better you, while doing thigh lifts that made me exhausted just looking at her.

Among other health conscious things, she said that if you are truly satisfied with your body, you should be able to stand naked in front of a mirror and like what you see. I accepted the challenge, and after finishing the Twinkies and two bowls of Frosted Sugar-O's Cereal (now with 30% more corn syrup), I disrobed and went straight to the full length mirror.

Much to my dismay, I looked like a giant sack of potatoes with a penis. This did nothing for my self-esteem, and I dove into a Pigo Size Jay's Potato Chips and didn't stop until I hit cellophane.

It was not until later that I realized most of my problems, such as not understanding my income tax return, were directly linked to my overweightedness. I decided at that moment to start a strict regimen of diet and exercise, but soon just limited it to exercise, not wanting to give up my favorite meal, beer and Snickers Bars.

The thing I had to do, as told to me by countless celebrities on TV who can't get work elsewhere, was join a health club. I went to a popular one nearby, housed in a building the size of Rhode Island.

Inside was like stepping into *The Jetsons*: chrome...mirrors...flashing lights...techno music...a running track lined with spongy foam...rows and rows of exercise machines, as far as the eye could see...Elroy, walking Astro...

I was greeted at the door by a very muscular guy who'd been packed into a Spandex outfit so tightly I could see individual corpuscles pumping through his veins. His name was G.

"How do you spell that?" I asked.

"With a G."

"Do you have a last name?"

"It's just G."

"So on your birth certificate..."

"Enough about me." G grinned big, making his neck muscles ping out. "Let's talk about you."

G herded me through a throng of beautiful people, telling each in turn that he was in a meeting and couldn't be disturbed even if Madonna called with a Pilates emergency. We went into his office, which was decorated with pictures of G with his shirt off and smiling, G with his shirt off and scowling, and G with his shirt off and looking apprehensive, probably wondering where he'd left his shirt.

G handed me a bottled water from his personal mini-refrigerator and sat me at his desk. He remained standing.

"It's a good thing you came today, Mr. Konrath, because you're about five beats away from a major myocardial infarction. If you don't join our club right now, I'll ask you to sign this waiver to absolve us of responsibility when you walk out this door and your ventricles explode."

"I actually just had my heart checked, and..."

"Plus, you're so disgustingly fat, no one will ever love you."

"My wife says..."

"Hey, Joanie and Brenda, come in here and meet my new best friend, Mr. Konrath." G motioned for two attractive young women standing in the hall to come in and smile at me. "Don't you think he'd benefit from our programs?"

"I'd love to get him in one of my Prancercize classes," Brenda said, licking her lips. "I'll help you take off that disgusting, icky fat."

Joanie put her head to my chest. "I hear his pulmonary artery crying out like a sick kitty."

“You truly are a disgusting man, Mr. Konrath,” G said. “I suggest the Super-Duper Extra Special Presidential Package. That will give you access to all of the club’s facilities.”

He handed me a color brochure filled with pictures of smiling, healthy people. The Super-Duper Extra Special Presidential Package monthly dues were slightly more than what I earned in a month, but I would have full access to everything, including unlimited use of their one racquetball court, should I ever decide to take up racquetball.

“Sign it and we’ll be your friends forever,” Joanie said.

“Sign it or you’ll get sick and die alone,” Brenda said.

G put a hand on my shoulder and squeezed. Hard. “I don’t want to sugar coat this—”

“If you did, I’d probably eat it.”

“—but if you don’t sign this contract you’ll be the biggest wuss-boy I’ve ever met.”

I stared at G and had a momentary delusion that I, too, might be able to look like someone stuck a tube up my ass and inflated me. Sure, his shoulders were so broad that he probably needed help wiping his own ass, but he looked damn good without a shirt.

“Sign,” they chanted. “Sign. Sign. Sign...”

I signed, and left the club feeling cheerful about my new commitment to get in shape. The pounds would soon begin to drop off, I was sure. They had to, because I no longer had any money for food.

When I shared the good news with my wife, she was equally excited.

“It cost how much?!?”

“Don’t think of it in terms of costs,” I said, repeating what G had told me, “think of it in terms of benefits.”

“You tell the kids they can’t go to college because their father spent all of our savings.”

“College is overrated. You don’t really learn anything useful. Trade schools—that’s where it’s at these days. You see that one on TV, teaches you how to repair air conditioners?”

My wife shook her head. “You’ve got issues, Joe. In fact, you’ve got a whole damn subscription.”

“Why don’t you come down to the club, check it out? G said there’s a discount for spouses.”

“Are you saying I’m fat?”

“I’m saying that your support hose isn’t hiding your little pouch like it used to when we were dating.”

My wife smiled. She was obviously coming around.

“How long is this stupid contract for?” she asked.

“Three years.”

“That’s how long you’re going without sex. Enjoy the couch.”

The couch was close to the refrigerator, so it wasn’t too bad.

During my fourth week as an Extra Super Special Guy Member, G called me up.

“Mr. Konrath, you joined a month ago. When are you going to come down and start working out?”

“I can’t now, G. I’m waiting for a pizza.”

“Come on, Mr. Konrath. Joining was just the first step. Now you’ve got to start coming in. I’ll blend you a fifteen dollar kelp smoothie, personally train you on the equipment for sixty dollars an hour, and give you a nice thirty dollar rub down afterwards.”

“I thought all of that was included in my Jumbo Deluxo Mega Membership.”

“Did you read the fine print?”

“It was in a different language.”

“Don’t let money keep you from being the best Mr. Konrath that you can be, Mr. Konrath. Come in today and you can take my Jazz Kwon Do class for half price.”

“What do you drive, G?”

“A Mercedes. And my payment is due.”

G was right. I’d made the commitment to get in shape. It was time to put up or shut up. Even my wife, after having our lawyer try unsuccessfully to break the health club contract, had begun encouraging me to go.

“You wasted all that money!” she’d say, encouragingly. “Put down the cheese wheel, get off your lazy ass, and go work out!”

But, truth be told, I was scared. I knew if I went to the club I’d be surrounded by beautiful people, and I would be alienated and my self-esteem would sink even lower.

My plan was to get in shape before I went to the club. It could happen. I lost four pounds just last week, though I found it later, in my upper thighs.

“G, I feel too uncomfortable to come in. Can we do this over the phone?”

“There’s nothing to be ashamed of, Mr. Konrath. There are plenty of fat, ugly people who come here every day. You’ll fit right in.”

“If they come there every day why are they still fat and ugly?”

“You’re disappointing me, Mr. Konrath.”

“Sorry, G. I’ll drop by later today.”

“Great! See you then.”

“Are you mad at me, G?”

“No. Not this time.”

“Thanks. Bye.”

I hung up the phone, happy about recommitting myself to getting into shape. Twenty minutes later I was in the health club parking lot, finishing the last of my pizza. G greeted me warmly, pumping my hand like I was a lat machine. He was bigger than I remembered. I bet he had more definition than Webster’s Unabridged.

Well, come on, all the jokes can’t be good.

“How’s my bestest buddy, Mr. Konrath?”

“Hungry. How about that smoothie?”

“Sure thing. You bring your Visa?”

“My wife took it. But I found some change in the couch.”

G led me to the juice bar, and spent five minutes measuring out assorted powders into a stainless steel blender.

“The base is macrobiotic organic yogurt,” he told me. “Low fat and sugar free.”

“What flavor?”

“Plain.”

“Sounds good. Can you add a few scoops of those chocolate chips?”

After the smoothie, G and I hit the equipment. Almost immediately I knew we were going to have problems. First of all, he wanted me to start a program he called “weight training.” From what I gathered, this involved picking up weights, and lifting them up and down. G gave me a preview, grabbing a barbell the size of a Cadillac (when they still made them big), and curling it up to his chest several times. I very politely told G that he was out of his freaking mind if he thought I was going to do that. You couldn’t pay me to do that. I certainly wasn’t go to pay them to let me.

G let out a friendly laugh and then threw me a weight belt and told me to get started while he went to the juice bar for a creatine shake. “For a boost of energy,” he said.

“Put in some of those mini marshmallows,” I told him. “And some ham.”

While I waited for my energy boost, I sat on an exercise bike, content with watching a girl in a string bikini do leg presses. She had a body that could make a priest give up choir boys. When G came back I was sweating like a pig.

“How are we doing, Mr. Konrath?”

“Great, G. I’m glad I signed up.”

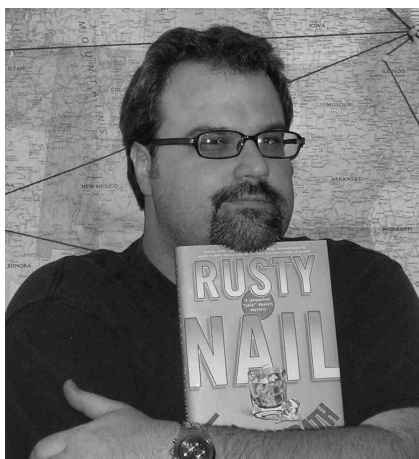
“Let’s not overdo it your first day. Time for your rubdown.”

While G rubbed my achy muscles for three dollars a minute, I had to admit that this health club thing was a good idea after all. Sure, I had to take out a second mortgage to pay for it, but seeing that girl do those leg presses gave my heart a workout it hadn’t had in years.

And later that night, I actually got in a few minutes of strenuous exercise. With my wife, while thinking of the leg-press girl.

I was so quiet I didn’t even wake her up.

About the Author



Joseph Andrew Konrath was born in 1970, in the Chicago suburb of Skokie, IL.

He's written twenty-two books and short story collections, but only a few of these have been published. The published ones include *Whiskey Sour*, *Bloody Mary*, *Rusty Nail*, *Dirty Martini*, and *Fuzzy Navel*. The unpublished ones include *Hardboiled: A Collection of Harry McGlade Stories*, *Private Dick: A Collection of Harry McGlade Stories*, the story collections *Bullshit*, *Miscellany*, *Some Stuff I Wrote*, *J. Andrew Haknort: The World's Worst Poet*, and the novels *Dead On My Feet*, *Three Way*, *Ragged Claws*, *Insidious Intent*, *Everybody Dies*, *A Shot of Tequila*, *Origin*, *The List*, *Disturb*, and *Afraid*.

Most of these unpublished books suck. Don't ask Joe for copies. He won't give them to you. But he holds out hope for the last five novels, and two of them are available on his website.

55 Proof is also, technically, unpublished. Joe printed this book himself for sale exclusively through JAKonrath.com, to appease the three fans of his who have been bugging him for a short story collection.

Joe has been married for eleven years. He has three kids and three dogs. He writes a blog called *A Newbie's Guide to Publishing*, which can be found at jakonrath.blogspot.com.

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"jack" daniels
mystery



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