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Gin and Juice

A homoerotic short by

JT WHITEHALL

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He heard a faint buzzing, and caught the flash of something black in his peripheral vision, bold and swirling the air into a cooling sensation that compounded Julian MacArthur's sense of impending doom. That smell, too...what acrid aroma had pervaded his personal space? He reached for the remote and turned up the volume of the Florida/Georgia game, determined to shake off the creeps.

A second, then third fistful of corn chips did nothing to sway his discomfort, and Julian leaned back against the headrest of his recliner. There, again! He swiveled his head around to scan his small apartment and saw nothing that resembled the flowing black curtain that teased his paranoia. Yet, the smell remained, like he'd forgotten to turn off the stove top after heating his nacho cheese dip.

His heart turned suddenly heavy and sank deep into his stomach. What was it his late grandmother had once said to him, about what to expect...no, ridiculous. Julian shook his head—he was a young man, not yet thirty, and aside from an occasional football snack like this he observed a very healthy diet. He worked his job, yet didn't live it, and found plenty of time for relaxation and swimming at the gym. No way could these odd signs and sights now plaguing him indicate a visit from the...

“Hello, Juice.”

Julian startled and jerked his head to the right. There stood the flash of black, now personified in the ubiquitous robes of the Grim Reaper—and a damn gorgeous one at that. Grimmy's soft green eyes and brown hair looked nothing like Julian had expected in the myths he'd learned. The wives' tales of the hereafter regaled upon him by his now-dead Slavic grandmother had painted different images in his head, those of a more austere Angel of Death with

less skin, and a scythe that could cut an entire field of wheat in one swipe.

This Death, and it had to be him since Julian kept his apartment sealed tight, held no such instrument, but somehow he had gotten the remote control. He turned off the TV and tossed it aside on the couch. “Did I get that right?” he asked. “They call you Juice, right?”

Julian nodded involuntarily, then silently cursed himself. *Damn it.* Had he bluffed, he might have bought himself some time and made Death think he’d come for the wrong Julian McArthur. Certainly another one had to exist somewhere. “Are you sure you’re at the right place?” he asked, his voice cracking. “You know, there’s another Juice who’s probably more likely to be called at this point, given his alleged, current stress levels.”

“No, you’re the one.” Death shrugged up one drooping sleeve and produced a BlackBerry. He punched a few buttons and checked the screen, then, “Yep, says to look for a white guy who *didn’t* win the Heisman. Sorry, bud.”

Julian scowled. Criminy Moses, but how he hated that nickname, branded on him since the sixth grade after a younger cousin just learning the talk mangled his name.

He threw up his hands. Fritos turned airborne. “How is this possible, with all that oatmeal I eat for breakfast? I just had a checkup, and my heart is fine.”

“It’s not your heart.” Grim smiled.

“Then what?” Julian looked around him. “Is it because I’ve been sitting in this chair without my feet elevated? I die of deep vein thrombosis?” Immediately he reached for the lever on the right side of his La-Z-Boy and cranked up the footrest.

“Try again,” Grim sang, shaking his head.

“Is it the beer?” Julian picked up the longneck brown bottle by the lip. “I have to admit it did taste a bit funny, but it’s been in the fridge since New Year’s and I thought beer kept.” Damn, why now? Julian never thought to stop

for Death, and now, echoing Emily's mournful song, he had to stop right when the Bulldogs managed a first down in the fourth quarter with only three points to claim for a tie game.

"Actually," Grim said, walking slowly so that he literally passed through the footrest and Julian's raised legs, "it's the Fritos."

"Hmph." In defiance Julian fisted several curled shards and crammed them in his mouth.

"You choke on them," Grim said.

Julian coughed.

* * * *

There had to be a way out of this, Julian decided. Why would Death make his presence known *before* he actually committed the deed that called him home? If he remembered his grandmother's lore correctly, the Grim Reaper didn't always observe the rules of mortality by the book. Legend spoke of the occasional man who managed to weasel out an early appointment after besting Death in a game of wits or some skill. Surely some persuasive maneuvers might grant him a stay of execution...say, for about fifty or sixty years.

"It doesn't seem fair," Julian said, standing and brushing away chip crumbs from his sweat pants. "There's a dozen terrorists who still haven't been caught, people who cut off their employees' benefits and insurance, and your time is spent collecting decent people who swallow too quickly."

"Well, according to my records, it says here you never had a problem with swallowing before." Grim leered at Julian, holding up his smart phone. "If you're interested in demonstrating..."

Aha. Perhaps Grim was a misnomer for this lascivious dark angel. Julian licked his lips. "I don't do that anymore,

but would it buy me a reprieve if I did right now?" he asked, panning his gaze down Death's thick robes and wondering what to expect underneath.

"Just until I came," Death said, "and I have to warn you that when I'm excited—"

Julian, however, saw the score. "I'll get my coat," he said with a resigned sigh, then stopped in mid-pivot toward his closet. "Unless," he added, "I should dress for warmer weather?" Already he broke out in a sweat just thinking about it.

"That's not for me to decide, Juice. I just make the deliveries. However," He consulted his BlackBerry again, "I've seen your file, and I gotta tell you...I've seen similar profiles that didn't result well."

"What?" Granted, he was no Mother Teresa, but Julian had pretty much spent his seemingly short life steering clear of the law and not purposely rear-ending slow drivers in the passing lane despite the strong temptations. "What could I have possibly done to earn eternal damnation?" he demanded.

"It's not what you've done, Juice—"

"Could you at least not call me that?" Had he just previewed Hell, an eternity of taunts and dry mouth from endless supplies of salted snacks? "My name is Julian, and I'd appreciate your using it for the duration of this...transport, transition, whatever the hell you call your collecting of souls."

Death, giving a heavy sigh, let back his hood and sat on the couch as though anticipating a long haul ahead. Julian noticed how his hair shone lighter under the brightness of the ceiling fan, and that the Reaper had nice cheekbones and full, kissable lips.

"It's what you *haven't* done," Death finished, and reached out his arm toward the remote. Quickly it rose unaided and flew into his hand, and Death aimed it at the television. "Watch."

The screen illuminated with a montage of Julian's childhood—the birthday parties and holidays, elementary school, Cub Scouts. His history played out like a grainy home movie, highlighting various points of Julian's life, yet as he watched he noticed the underlying theme that became all the more obvious as his history progressed.

Death pointed it out to him, as though to rub salt in the wound. "Look at yourself. Surrounded by people who love you and want to include you in their lives, and you're nothing but a sealed envelope."

"That's not entirely true," Julian grumbled, and slouched down on the couch, arms folded. As the denial came out, however, he realized any defense he presented wouldn't hold water. The evidence flickered on his television—he was the sullen kid sitting in the corner while the family gathered around the piano to sing carols, and he sat alone in the cafeteria with his nose in a book while everybody laughed and planned to meet for pizza after the football game.

Soon the film segued into the adult years...rather, the adult *film* years, Julian decided. The next scene showed him lying back in bed, elbows propped to support his torso while a hot, nubile young man with freckled shoulders and red hair bounced on his cock.

"Look at that!" He gestured to the set; Death did just yet, with great interest. "Does that look like a sealed envelope to you?"

Death, however, only smirked. "Wait for it," he said, and the two watched intently as the onscreen Julian shouted his climax and collapsed backward. Seconds later, he snored as the redhead continued to writhe and coax his erection back to life.

"Classy," Death snarked as he switched off the set. "Just like a man. You come and you go."

"What? I play rough. Sex wears me out."

“You could at least have mustered the strength to help your partner reach his own release,” Death said, tsking.

Julian snorted. “I fail to see how this incident counts against me. People get tired during wild sex. Besides, I’m sure Brad understood.”

“His name was Burt.”

Julian sat forward and steepled his fingers. “Get out of my apartment and don’t come back until we’ve annexed Cuba.”

Death held up his hands. “Hey, you know I can’t do that. I got quotas to meet, you know, and to be honest I was hoping to make this an easy pickup. It’s my night to sit vigil at Jerry Lewis’ house.”

Julian sighed. “But you’re Death—time shouldn’t have meaning for you.”

“True,” Death conceded, “but I hadn’t intended to waste what I do have arguing with you. Now,” he stood, “you gonna come peacefully or not?”

Julian’s heart quickened. “Speaking of coming...”

“Sorry, sweetheart.” The Reaper shook his head, smiling sadly. “I was only joking before. I don’t trade sex for delays in final exits.”

“Ah, but legend has it the Grim Reaper has accepted challenges of other sorts. A game of chess to win back the soul?”

Death raised an eyebrow. “You want to play chess against me?” he asked, incredulous. “When I went to get Bobby Fischer, even *he* wouldn’t play me for an extension.”

Julian, though, had already leaped from the couch and now rummaged through the utility drawer in his kitchen. Producing a deck of cards, he turned to the robed man with a wicked grin.

“I have a better idea,” he said.

* * * *

Three hours later, Death fanned his winning hand on the dining table. "Gin," he declared.

"Crap!" Julian slammed down his own useless set of cards and rattled the empty beer cans crowding his arms.

"Give up yet?" Death sank in his chair, rolling his eyes. "I really don't want to put in overtime this week."

"Best of five?" Julian pressed, hopeful.

"We've played four games and I've won each one. Give. Up!" Death outstretched one arm toward the last unopened beer on the counter. It skidded across and flew into his grasp. "Either you come with me now or I turn this into a hacksaw and chop you into little bits and pack you in a bento box."

"I thought the Reaper carried a scythe. Where's yours."

"Hanging on the wall of a Cracker Barrel in Knoxville. Let's go already."

Panic seized Julian with the finality of the moment. He had truly died, and could do nothing to reverse this decision. To think he hadn't eaten Fritos in more than a year until tonight, choosing them for his football game snack only because he craved something savory. He still felt the heavy shards of corn chips scratching at his throat, and when his gaze panned his apartment toward the living area he saw his lifeless body on his recliner, mouth agape and the crumpled bag in the delta of his lap.

"Can we at least..." he gestured toward his dead self, "spruce me up a bit? I look like a total loser sitting there." Indeed, the slovenly sweats and mussed hair did nothing to assert his reputation as a successful businessman, and champion gin player. At least, until tonight.

Death sauntered over to the body and leaned close, then glanced over at a stack of papers on the adjacent end table. He tapped a BMW brochure. "Yeah, I saw the ads for the new series, too," he said. "Looked pretty sweet."

"I'll never know," Julian grumbled, his heart heavy. On impulse, he pressed his hand against his chest to see if he could still feel a beat. Nothing. He sighed. "I was going over to the lot tomorrow to pick mine up."

"Were you getting the convertible?" Death looked up, his eyes sparkling with deep emerald joy. When Julian nodded, he whistled. "Damn, you could have been one lucky bastard."

"Look, forget about making me look presentable," Julian said. "Can we just get the fuck out of here before I get even more depressed?" He glanced about his apartment for one final imprint on his memory. Everything he'd worked for and earned on his own merit and dime would eventually become somebody's yard sale treasure, and he didn't want to think about which of his relatives would contest his estate for the car, given that he never bothered to draft a will. His sister, whom he loved, should get everything, but no paperwork would leave her battling and bickering.

"Tell you what, since you seem like an okay guy, when you're not looking out for your best interests," Death began, straightening and stretching his back. "I'm not one to deny a man one last spin in a new car, unless of course Fate has ordained he have an accident on the way home from the dealership." He smirked.

"So," Julian shook his head in puzzlement, "you want me to wrap my new BMW around a flagpole or something?" A part of him rather relished the thought, to his surprise. If only he had permission to view his own funeral and see the sadness touch the faces of his ingrate brothers, genuinely upset to have lost the chance at a car they could never afford themselves.

"Let's just call this a stay of execution. It's not unprecedented, though—your time is nigh, buddy."

Death snapped his fingers, and instantly Julian found himself back in his recliner, reaching for another handful of

corn chips. His body functioned normally again, beating heart and all. Remembering the consequences, he released the Fritos back into the bag, which he set on the end table.

“One more day, one last ride,” the Reaper said, firm. “After that, you come back here and I take you with me.”

Julian offered a mock salute. “*Jawohl*.”

“Don’t get cute,” Death warned, “or try any funny business. You definitely don’t want to get on Death’s bad side, especially after he’s been so generous.”

With that, the Reaper faded from sight, sucking all humor from the situation away with him. Julian stared down at himself in the recliner, feeling suddenly cold and no longer relieved for even the short reprieve from an unknown eternity.

Did Death expect something in return for his benevolence? The mind reeled with the possibilities, keeping Julian from what would have been a fitful sleep.

* * * *

Might as well go out in style, Julian thought as he greeted dawn’s early light with a nauseous regret. He dressed in a white Polo shirt and a crisp pair of black slacks, then sat down with his laptop and wrote up a brief yet succinct letter of intent.

Everything he owned, he bequeathed to his younger sister. He sent the document in an e-mail to his lawyer, then printed a copy along with a list of his computer passwords and account numbers. He sealed the papers in an envelope left on the counter for his sister to find.

Next, he got on the phone and tracked down his favorite gal at the men’s spa he frequented for one final massage and old fashioned shave. Making the early appointment left little time for a good breakfast, so he settled on a Danish and coffee to go from his regular diner.

He smiled as Patty, who had worked the counter since he literally learned to walk, watched in amazement when he tossed a fifty for her on the table.

“Well, damn, sugar,” she chided. “Looks like Christmas came a bit early.”

You have no idea, Julian wanted to say, but instead offered the silver-haired woman a peck on the cheek before leaving.

The ladies at ManQ Salon reacted similarly to Julian’s generous gratuities. Though they tried to gift him with free shampoos and cologne he turned everything away. Where he’d end up, he realized, it probably didn’t matter how good he smelled.

He doubted Old Spice could mask the stench of sulfur and brimstone. Julian shuddered at the image as he called for his cab, focused on the passing scenery as he slouched in the backseat. When the BMW dealership crossed his line vision he felt his heart constrict. This truly would be his last stop before home. He mentally calculated alternate routes home, finding it ironic how he’d want to rev up the engine of his new convertible, yet felt in no hurry to go anywhere.

After a heavy tip to the driver, Julian lumbered up the walk and through the glass doors to the showroom. He inhaled deeply, heady now with the aroma of fresh leather and crisp success. Many times in the past when he entered this wide building with the latest model sedans and two-seaters on display, a giddiness overcame him—he found those instances when the theme from “It’s a Small World” played in his head quite comical, as though he’d discovered an amusement park tailored just for him. Now, as he waited with the receptionist to meet the man bringing out his car, no merry music sounded to enhance this moment, only silence and a somber sadness veiling his heart and dulling the dealership’s white motif.

“Mr. MacArthur? I’m Todd, nice to meet you.”

Julian turned, eyeing the approaching man whose hand reached forward to grasp his. For the love of... of course BMW would have to send over the most incredible looking mechanic this side of *Playgirl's* Men of NASCAR issue on the day he could do little, if anything, about it. Todd, despite the random grease stain on his blue coveralls, shone with an ethereal beauty. His mussed, blond hair nicely complemented his strong jaw, brown eyes, and friendly smile. When they shook hands, Julian grounded himself lest the warmth of the other man's touch send a fiery lust jolting through him and hardening his cock.

Fuck you, Death. Anger quickly boiled his blood. *Meet the man of my dreams on the day I die... I'll bet this was planned all along just to fuck with me. You knew he was coming out to greet me.*

Todd hooked the thumb of his free hand over his shoulder, and Julian realized they continued to shake unconsciously. "I understand the paperwork's all taken care, and we got your keys in the ignition. So you're ready to go," Todd said.

"Uh, sure." What a time to lose the ability to speak coherently. Julian cringed. If only he could prolong this moment, and drink in enough of Todd's sexy smile to last him in the hereafter. He hoped they allowed masturbation wherever he ended up.

"This way." Todd started toward a side door. "We saw you coming and drove it up for you. Ready to roll."

"Thanks." Julian's heart pounded with each step, and once he spotted that familiar flash of silver and the smooth curves of his new ride, he decided the anticipation of finally taking possession of his car attributed to how he felt now. He flexed his fingers, itching to plunge right in and wrap his hands around the leather encased steering wheel, then drop the gas pedal until it fused with the floor.

Outside, the man just stood and stared for a bit, admiring the paint and sleek majesty. They had the top

down for him already, and Julian moved closer for a better look at the shined leather seats and dashboard.

"She's a beaut, Mr. MacArthur," Todd was saying as Julian overcame his timidity and dashed around the grill to the driver's side door. "I gotta tell you, some of the guys aren't too happy to see this one leave. Not every day we get a special order for a tricked out new mod—"

"Julian."

Todd leaned closer. The radiating heat singed the edges of Julian's heart. "Come again?"

Don't tempt me. "Call me Julian. Mr. MacArthur is...I don't know, a bit too formal for such an event."

Todd frowned a bit, then that beautiful wide smile returned with greater wattage. "You got a point there, Julian. This is definitely one of your happier days."

Julian sighed.

Todd reached into the back pocket of his coverall outfit for a white rag spotted with black oil marks. He wiped his hands, as though it were a nervous tic. "What I wouldn't give for a ride."

"You haven't driven one of these yet?" That surprised Julian, who figured all the mechanics in a dealership got to sample the merchandise to improve their work mindset.

"No, yours is the first of the new convertibles to come in, and when that unloaded it wasn't driven far, just through the garage and now here." Todd shook his head. "We'll have to keep an eye out for when the rest of the inventory comes in."

"Or," Julian said, coming back around to face Todd, "you could ride with me for a bit, see how it runs."

"You serious?"

"Come on, why not?" Julian beckoned with a crook of his neck and opened the side door. *Not every day I get to tool around town with a sexy companion*, he wanted to say, but held back. Julian usually figured himself adept at gauging a person's sexuality, but reading Todd proved a

challenge. Adding equally hot man bait like a BMW convertible into the mix skewed Todd's interest, it appeared.

Did the man smile for him or the car?

"What the hell? I'm due for a break."

As they strapped in and pulled out of the lot, Julian decided not to let that worry him. With only a few hours left, he wanted to live the hell out of his life.

"Hang on," he called over the smooth purr of the engine. "Let's see how much trouble we can get into."

Todd chuckled. "Nice day, sweet ride...I have a good idea."

Julian turned sharply onto the main road at first opportunity, pondering a few ideas of his own.

* * * *

Buildings and familiar landmarks shrank in the rear view mirror and disappeared altogether once he hit the interstate. After a brisk burst of speed down a relatively quiet stretch of asphalt, Julian pulled off onto a state highway known for its winding curves and hairpin turns. As long as he could remember, he'd loved riding this long way from his childhood home to visit family and other favorite places.

As the wind whipped through his short hair, missing his bangs only slightly, he wondered about the physical transition from this world to the next. He'd heard people who'd gone through near death experiences describe the feeling of speeding through a tunnel toward light, not unlike this trip. How many twists could he expect when Death came back to claim him?

"So, what do you think?" Todd hollered over the roar of the wind. The blond man had his hand clamped over the rim of the door while his foot tapped to the beat of Metallica blaring through the stereo.

“Awesome, I’m loving it! Don’t want it to end!” He meant that.

“Hey, you don’t mind making a stop, do you?” Todd asked. “There’s a winery down in the valley. Would like to pick something up while we’re here.”

Julian had already turned in that direction as Todd asked. “Sure. I know the place, and I don’t get down as often as I should.” *Looks like I won’t again.*

As they neared Black Sheep Vineyards, Julian smiled, grateful for the opportunity to say goodbye to some friends in person. He’d known the owner since high school, and though he’d turned down the initial chance to invest in the winery he was pleased for his friend’s success.

He spotted the sheep-shaped sign guarding the long entryway, and they drove past rows of twisted vines toward the main house. Risking a glance at his handsome companion, a peaceful joy settled Julian’s nerves. Any other day, in a different situation, this could have been a romantic afternoon tryst. Perhaps if he approached the rest of the day with that attitude, it might make the end easier on him.

It would certainly speed up his last day on Earth, too. Sadness panged at that realization.

Luckily they had come during a lull period—no tour buses and masses of casual tasters to dodge on the way to the bar. Julian spotted his friend Rick carting a case from the back to the register.

“Hey, Juice!” called the bearded man, who waved them over with an effusive grin. “Long time, bud. Where you been?”

Julian deflected the bemusement on Todd’s face as Rick addressed him by his nickname. To hear it now, though, didn’t bother him so much. Who would act so familiar in the afterlife?

The two friends shook hands and exchanged niceties, then Julian mentioned the new car. “We were testing her

wings and you were on the way,” he said. “Todd wanted to pick up some wine.”

Todd had drifted away a bit, engrossed in the large winery’s rustic decor. Hands in pockets, he stepped toward the fireplace. “Yeah, you got a case of Merlot?”

“Sure thing. Anything you want to try while you’re here?”

Julian reached for his wallet, and asked for a bottle of Rick’s most exclusive reserve vintage and two glasses. “And, here you go,” he said, handing over a hundred dollar bill. “His case is on me.”

Rick raised his eyebrows but said nothing. His friend knew of his sexual preferences, and no doubt figured the gesture for a romantic overture. “Wait here,” Rick told him, “and I’ll get that bottle first. There’s a nice spot down by the lake, we set up some chairs. Very quiet.”

Geez. “It’s not like that, Rick. I just met the guy, we’re test driving my car.”

“Like that’s stopped you before.” Smirking, Rick dipped behind the tasting counter and produced a dark bottle. After sliding over two glasses, he uncorked the Chardonnay Reserve and set it in a chilled bucket. “If I’m not here, ask Debbie for your wine. Enjoy.”

Julian nodded, suddenly apprehensive. He wanted to say something to Rick to let him know this would be the last time they spoke, but their earlier banter implied to Julian that his friend might not believe him. Instead he watched Rick slip back into his office and bade him a silent farewell before heading over to where Todd stood, by the fireplace.

The blond mechanic flipped through a magazine, peering up at Julian with a wicked gleam in his eye. “Juice?” he asked.

The wine bucket became leaden. The glass stems tucked between his fingers cut into his skin, and he felt relieved when Todd helped with the load. He laughed off

his new friend's amusement. "Just a childhood nickname," he said. "I never played football."

"So you're Juice MacArthur then? I didn't make the connection earlier." Todd licked his lips. "I'm sure as hell glad I did now. I heard about you."

"Have you now?" As Julian saw no reason why the group of Red Hat ladies tottering into the building needed clarification of his reputation, he beckoned Todd out the side door and down the deck stairs toward the lake.

Rick had been right about privacy. The brush had grown around the water, and when the two neared the edge of the lake Julian spotted the Adirondack chairs just hidden from view of the winery. One could truly enjoy an afternoon of rest with a bottle of white or red here.

The way Todd now leered him, Julian knew the man wanted to have some fun.

Todd undid the buttons on his coveralls, revealing a tight black t-shirt and a flash of denim at the waist. "Got hot all of a sudden," he murmured. "Weird for October."

Julian snorted. "That the best you can do for a come-on?" he chided. "I *did* spring for the high-end Chard, you know."

"Big spender." Todd whistled. "Nothing wrong with that, though. You can't take it with you when you're done."

"No, you certainly can't." Julian set the wine on the table between the chairs and sat, stretching his legs and crossing them at the ankles. "I hope," he said as Todd shrugged out his coveralls, "whatever you heard was positive."

"Most of it." Todd joined him at the other chair and filled both glasses. Julian waited for Todd to volunteer more, and his frustration made the silence unbearable.

Todd then handed over a glass, smiling coyly. "What?"

"You're playing the tease now?" Julian accused.

"Only because you don't."

“That is the big complaint about me?” Julian asked, incredulous. “That I don’t tease? Damn, to think I believed guys just wanted a hard pounding.” He laughed, and Todd responded in kind.

“Never said I didn’t want that,” Todd said, then paused a moment to sniff and savor the wine. “I understand you’re quite good at showing a guy a good time.”

“I’m grateful for the good press. I guess the checks have all cleared.”

Todd laughed. “I’m told, though, you don’t do....everything.”

“Good reason for that. I don’t like everything.” Julian knew where the conversation headed—down a road more twisted than the highway leading them to the Black Sheep. It brought to mind what Death had shown him last night—he loved to fuck, not suck. He even admitted it. For all the men with whom he’d shared pleasures, oral sex on his part never entered into it. It wasn’t that he did not enjoy the taste of man, or the sensation of velvet skin sheathed over a hard cock in his mouth—he’d always viewed the act as submissive, and he preferred to drive.

Looking back at Todd, recalling the yearning on his face that told Julian how badly he wanted behind the wheel of the BMW, he saw the point Death tried to make. His selfishness effected people, and thanks to a gluttonous move with a bag of Fritos he stood to sadden friends and family who still cared for him.

He’d chosen his last day on Earth to satisfy his own desires. He could have called his sister, spent more time chatting with Rick, but he went to get a new car and flirt with a hot piece of ass. Damn if he didn’t leave his phone at home, too.

Well, he thought as he licked his lips, maybe now he could try to make it up to past lovers who wanted more from him.

Todd stretched out in his chair, and Julian rolled out of his and knelt between the other's man's legs. "Would you do me a favor?" he asked, daring to stroke Todd's groin. He delighted in how quickly the denim shifted under his palm as Todd hardened.

"I'll be happy to repay the one you're doing for me." Todd grinned.

"Actually, I wanted to ask you—even though we haven't known each other long—if you wouldn't mind keeping a secret for me."

"Go on." Clearly intrigued, Todd raised an eyebrow. When Julian reached up to undo his belt and zipper, the man sighed with relief.

Julian undid the fly and pulled back the band of Todd's underwear enough to free his cock. Tucking the elastic snugly under Todd's sac, Julian gripped the base of the blond's thick shaft and gently massaged the skin.

"My secret is," he said, "I'm damn good at this." With that he pointed the tip of Todd's reddening cock to his lips and sucked in the head. Todd possessed a salty tang that mixed nicely with the oaky quality of the wine. The instant they made contact, Todd's gasp filled his ear and a heady pleasure clouded Julian's mind.

Taking Todd in this manner reminded Julian just how much he missed such an intimacy. He'd convinced himself years ago that a true top just didn't perform oral, and that the point of sex for the aggressive partner was to receive gratification by taking. True, by topping other men he technically "gave," but he "took" men roughly and savored the resulting orgasms. Now, as he licked and sucked Todd to complete hardness, he rediscovered his passion for giving without being asked, and slowly found satisfaction in this act.

A bit too late, of course. Julian massaged Todd's balls and shifted for comfort as his knees bore into the grass. Todd, resting back with his eyes closed, must have sensed

his movements for he widened his legs a bit to accommodate him. Hands tangled in Julian's hair and guided him to a preferred angle of attack. Julian allowed the manipulation for about a minute before releasing Todd's cock to pay more attention to his sac.

"Damn, you *are* good," Todd said on a sigh, and thrust his hips up to meet Julian. "I could let you do this all day."

Julian couldn't argue that. Whatever kept him from the inevitable, he supported. Yet, as Todd's balls tightened under his touch, he knew the release would come soon. Gripping Todd's thighs, he used the bracing position to better bob up and down Todd's cock. He slid over the velvet skin, noting every raised vein and ridge until finally his mouth filled with Todd's warmth. He kept the pressure hard until he gauged Todd was spent completely, then rocked back on his heels and swallowed.

"Fuck." Todd's head lolled on the back edge of the chair, and his body sagged as though Julian had sucked the air out of him as well. "That...was amazing," he said. "You can bet your sweet ass I won't dish about this. Want it all to myself."

"Ask and ye shall receive," Julian murmured, hearing the sadness in his voice. When Todd lunged forward Julian held him close and kissed him hard, prying his mouth open to mate tongues. He then swatted away the hands fumbling with his own pants. "No," he whispered after breaking the kiss. "It's not necessary."

"I want to, though." Todd nipped at his neck.

"What you gave me is more than enough. I have what I need now." If this last act of generosity earned him no brownie points with all things divine, so be it. He forged his own destiny, and now he had to get into his eighty-thousand dollar car and drive home to a lethal bag of corn chips. Hopefully they wouldn't mask Todd's intoxicating flavor.

“Okay,” Todd said, slowly righting himself. Now zipped and buckled, he helped Julian to stand and the two embraced. “It’s fine. You know, in a way I got what I need, too.”

“Oh? Been a while for you, then?”

Todd smiled. “Longer than you know. I also got something I didn’t expect...”

As he spoke, his features changed sharply. Blond hair darkened, eyes glowed, and his face sharpened.

“I have proof now,” the man spoke with the Reaper’s face, “that Julian ‘Juice’ MacArthur’s is a soul worth helping.”

* * * *

Julian took a deep breath to slow his speeding heart. “Son of a bitch,” he muttered. “I should have known something was up, as easy as that went.”

Death chuckled and stepped back toward the wine. He refilled his glass and swirled the contents, holding the golden liquid up to the sunlight. “Don’t sell yourself short, Julian. We have your history on record, and we know you’ve gotten much more ass for less effort.”

“Right.” Julian felt flush and glanced back at the winery to check for unexpected visitors. Luckily the grounds remained devoid of wine tasters and Julian shuffled back to his chair, where he slumped. “You know, I’d have obliged you last night,” he said. “You didn’t have to punk me, or whatever. And I thought you couldn’t have sex on the job.”

“I never said that. I said I didn’t *trade* sex for delays. Now, if I choose to have sex after granting somebody a stay...well, that’s different, isn’t it? I didn’t set out to trick or humiliate you...Juice.” Julian didn’t protest use of the nickname, and Death continued, “I merely wanted the

opportunity to see how you'd handle a reprieve, and to my surprise you did rather well."

Julian huffed. "Yeah, I *lived* up to your expectations. I made a spa appointment for myself and picked up my car. It's all about me."

"You gave Patty a much-needed tip, Julian." Todd refilled Julian's glass and clinked his to it. "Were you aware her grandson needed braces? What you gave her today helped her take care of a good chunk of that bill for her out-of-work daughter."

Julian held his glass close but didn't drink immediately. "No," he shook his head, "Patty never mentioned it." If he'd known, he'd have offered her more, definitely.

"And the ladies at the salon...the extra money you gave them is going toward baby shower gifts for their receptionist. The husband's in Iraq and money's tight—you did good there."

"Good." He didn't mean to sound so wooden, but surely throwing money away at the last minute didn't secure a spot in Heaven. Looking at the man next to him, he knew Death read his thoughts.

"You'll serve your time in Purgatory, but today you may have knocked off a few years," the Reaper told him. "In the meantime, I should tell you there are means of, ah, community service that can help you up that ladder."

"Such as?" Who knew death could be so bureaucratic?

Death stood and crooked his neck, beckoning Julian to follow. He gestured for Julian to stand behind his chair, curl his hands over the back, and bend at the waist. Death then pressed his groin against Julian's backside, grinding his covered cock so that it hardened. The movement set Julian's skin tingling.

"It's not common knowledge among the living," Death said, "well, hell, *nobody* knows about it. But, you can shave

off some of your waiting time through work in the afterlife.”

Julian pivoted his hips in rhythm to Death’s seduction. “You mean, become a Grim Reaper like you?”

Todd encircled Julian’s waist and worked on his belt. “There’s a rather lengthy apprenticeship involved, so you’re aware. Training sessions that require a lot of energy and concentration.”

“I see.” Julian also saw his jeans now pooled at his feet, and his underwear soon followed. He cast a quick glance toward the winery again but Todd’s hand brushed his face and tipped it closer for a kiss.

“Relax,” he whispered. “Nobody can see us right now.”

Julian nodded, and did something different for a change—he let his new lover take control. He craned his neck and looked down behind him at Todd’s bare lower half and the thick cock poking his buttocks. Julian didn’t need Death’s retrospective film to recall the last time he took a cock this way, and seeing Death rub the tip against the crack fueled his desire to revisit forgotten pleasures.

He thrust out, moaning as fingers breached his hole. Death touched him the right way, circling the puckered eye before sliding inside and pressing on the magic spot. Julian’s cock, still aching from their earlier encounter, bobbed and leaked precum, yet he refused to relieve himself until Death entered him. Thankfully, he didn’t have to wait long—that thick tip tapped his hole and lubricated the area before easing past the first ring of muscle and allowing Death to hit him balls deep.

“Yes,” Julian hissed through his teeth, and rocked his body as Death rode him hard. He arched his back and nearly hyper-extended his arms trying to maintain balance, yet didn’t stop meeting Death thrust for thrust. Their balls slapped together in a staccato rhythm that filled Julian’s ears and drowned out the distant white noise, while the

sensation of Death's cock sliding in and out of him made him dizzy. He swore he heard bells and whistles signaling his pending climax.

When he did finally come, he waited first for Death to grunt out his release. Julian quickly grasped his cock, and after one tight pump milked the hot semen over his knuckles. Tumbling over that edge, however, took so much out of them that he buckled over the chair, gasping for breath.

"Shit!" he shouted, and let his mind and sanity return to the scene before speaking again. "You better have a good worker's comp plan at this job, is all I'm saying."

Death kissed the back of his neck. "Enjoy it while you can, Juice. There isn't much downtime."

That disappointed Julian. "Surely there are coffee breaks one can stretch into an hour or so."

Death's hand reached under Julian's shirt to pinch a nipple. "We do have a Starbucks on the other side. They're everywhere, you know."

"Hah." All fell quite for a few seconds while Julian and Death caressed each other into afterglow. Then, "Do you hear that?" Julian asked.

"Yep." Death pulled away, much to Julian's chagrin.

"Sirens," Julian said, and bent down to redress. "You don't hear that often this far from the city."

"That's because car crashes are rare."

Julian's heart might have stopped at that, if it still beat normally. He slid his pants over his hips, quiet and listening for his own beat. Nothing.

The answer to his silent question, evident in Death's weak smile, confirmed it.

"No," he whispered.

Death shrugged. "I know I gave you some extra time, but like I told you last night I do have quota and deadlines to meet. I figured this is easier than going all the way back to your apartment."

Julian felt mortified .Yeah, crashing his new convertible offered a more dramatic end to his life than death by Fritos, but... “Rick’s going to think—”

Death cut him off with a raised hand. “No. Your autopsy will show no dangerous blood alcohol level,” he said. “It’s determined you lose control of the car trying to miss a dog wandering out on the road.

“Okay.” Not that he cared what people thought about the circumstances of his death, but Julian figured there were worse ends. Zipped and buckled, he walked back toward the winery and watched the activity unfolding before him. Frantic people congregated in the parking lot, all atwitter about the horrific accident that blocked the road about a mile away. The mention of a mangled BMW sent one girl dashing into the main building, calling for Rick.

Julian walked among the crowd with Death, unnoticed and unacknowledged. When Rick burst from the winery and high-tailed it to his pickup truck Julian called for his friend, not surprised that the bearded man didn’t turn back.

“Goodbye,” he said, quieter, and watched his friend peel out of the gravel lot. A warm hand touched his shoulder, and Julian smiled back at the Reaper.

“I was almost going to throw that gin game,” Death said. “You looked so pitiful.”

“How do I look now?”

Death leered. “Delicious.”

“I feel sad, though. There’s still a lot I didn’t get to do in life. A lot of loose ends left.”

“Come here.” Death wrapped an arm around Julian’s waist and hugged him close. “There are ways of bringing comfort to people you love. I’ll show you the ropes, don’t worry.”

“Ropes, huh?” Julian chuckled. “That’s another thing I didn’t get to try.”

GIN AND JUICE

“Well,” Death said as they walked down the gravel path toward a growing light, “how about we discuss the possibilities over a long coffee break?”

THE END

About the Author

A bartender by night, JT Whitehall spends his waking days perfecting his Guitar Hero game and writing short stories and poetry. A prolific writer of fan fiction, Whitehall succumbed to the encouragement of friends who insisted he try his hand at original work. He draws upon his experiences tending bar and meeting new people as he writes.

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