

DAMN NEAR DEAD

AN ANTHOLOGY OF GEEZER NOIR

Edited by Duane Swierczynski

Busted Flush Press
Houston 2006

Damn Near Dead

Published by Busted Flush Press

Compilation copyright © 2006 by Duane Swierczynski

Guest Introduction copyright © 2006 by James Crumley

Editor's Introduction copyright © 2006 by Duane Swierczynski

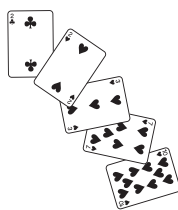
First Printing June 2006

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

ISBN: 0-9767157-5-9

Design & Illustrations: Greg Fleming

Layout & Production Services: Jeff Smith



BUSTED FLUSH
PRESS

P.O. Box 540594

Houston, TX 77254-0594

www.bustedflushpress.com

“My Father’s Gun” by Dave White. Copyright © 2006 by Dave White.

“Twilight on Second Avenue” by Sarah Weinman. Copyright © 2006 by Sarah Weinman.

“The Ballad of Davey Robson” by Ray Banks. Copyright © 2006 by Ray Banks.

“Say Goodnight to the Bad Guy” by Duane Swierczynski. Copyright © 2006 by Duane Swierczynski.

“Policy” by Megan Abbott. Copyright © 2006 by Megan Abbott.

“3-A” by Jenny Siler. Copyright © 2006 by Jenny Siler.

“The Necklace” by Sean Doolittle. Copyright © 2006 by Sean Doolittle.

“Fathers and Sons” by Charles Ardai. Copyright © 2006 by Charles Ardai.

“Duffers of the Apocalypse” by Victor Gischler. Copyright © 2006 by Victor Gischler.

“Daphne McAndrews and the Smack-Head Junkies” by Stuart MacBride. Copyright © 2006 by Stuart MacBride.

“The Last Bachelor of North Miami” by Jason Starr. Copyright © 2006 by Jason Starr.

“Last Right” by Zoë Sharp. Copyright © 2006 by Zoë Sharp.

“Funeral for a Friend” by Simon Kernick. Copyright © 2006 by Simon Kernick.

“The Killer Beside Me” by Allan Guthrie. Copyright © 2006 by Allan Guthrie.

“Tender Mercies” by Jeff Abbott. Copyright © 2006 by Jeff Abbott.

“Pros and Cons” by Donna Moore. Copyright © 2006 by Donna Moore.

“Stepping Up” by Mark Billingham. Copyright © 2006 by Mark Billingham.

“Femme Fatale” by Laura Lippman. Copyright © 2006 by Laura Lippman.

“Payoff” by Steve Brewer. Copyright © 2006 by Steve Brewer.

“Geezer Tricks” by Charlie Stella. Copyright © 2006 by Charlie Stella.

“Requiem for Moe” by Reed Farrel Coleman. Copyright © 2006 by Reed Farrel Coleman.

“Has Anyone Seen Mrs. Lightswitch?” by Colin Cotterill. Copyright © 2006 by Colin Cotterill.

“Old Gun” by Ken Bruen. Copyright © 2006 by Ken Bruen.

“Encore” by Milton T. Burton. Copyright © 2006 by Milton T. Burton.

“Cranked” by Bill Crider. Copyright © 2006 by Bill Crider.

“The Deadsters” by Robert Ward. Copyright © 2006 by Robert Ward.

“Just Friends” by John Harvey. Copyright © 2006 by John Harvey.

CONTENTS

Guest Introduction by James Crumley (b. 1939)

Editor's Introduction by Duane Swierczynski (b. 1972)

PART ONE: TWILIGHTS AND GOODNIGHTS

"My Father's Gun" by Dave White (b. 1979)

"Twilight on Second Avenue" by Sarah Weinman (b. 1979)

"The Ballad of Davey Robson" by Ray Banks (b. 1977)

"Say Goodnight to the Bad Guy" by Duane Swierczynski

"Policy" by Megan Abbott (b. 1971)

"3-A" by Jenny Siler (b. 1971)

"The Necklace" by Sean Doolittle (b. 1970)

PART TWO: DUFFERS AND BACHELORS

"Fathers and Sons" by Charles Ardai (b. 1969)

"Duffers of the Apocalypse" by Victor Gischler (b. 1969)

"Daphne McAndrews and the Smack-Head Junkies"

by Stuart MacBride (b. 1969)

"The Last Bachelor of North Miami" by Jason Starr (b. 1966)

"Last Right" by Zoë Sharp (b. 1966)

"Funeral for a Friend" by Simon Kernick (b. 1966)

PART THREE: KILLERS AND CONS

"The Killer Beside Me" by Allan Guthrie (b. 1965)

"Tender Mercies" by Jeff Abbott (b. 1963)

"Pros and Cons" by Donna Moore (b. 1962)

"Stepping Up" by Mark Billingham (b. 1961)

"Femme Fatale" by Laura Lippman (b. 1959)

PART FOUR: GUNS AND GEEZERS

"Payoff" by Steve Brewer (b. 1957)

"Geezer Tricks" by Charlie Stella (b. 1956)

"Requiem for Moe" by Reed Farrel Coleman (b. 1956)

"Has Anyone Seen Mrs. Lightswitch?" by Colin Cotterill (b. 1952)

"The Old Gun" by Ken Bruen (b. 1951)

PART FIVE: FELONS AND FRIENDS

"Encore" by Milton T. Burton (b. 1947)

"Cranked" by Bill Crider (b. 1941)

"The Deadsters" by Robert Ward (b. 1945)

"Just Friends" by John Harvey (b. 1938)

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Respect Your Elders. Or They'll Kick Your Ass

By Duane Swierczynski

I was just sitting downstairs in my living room, idly watching CNN with my wife, wondering how the hell I was going to introduce the collection you hold in your hands.

Then Paula Zahn introduced her big story:

Two elderly women in Los Angeles. In their 70s. Grandmother types, if a little glammed up. (This was L.A.) Charged with mail fraud.

But they were also, according to an LAPD spokesman, prime suspects in two hit-and-run murders.

Seems these little old ladies had cooked up a murder-and-insurance-scam plot—taking out meaty policies on a pair of homeless guys, then (allegedly... maybe...) running them down in the back alleys of L.A.

Those ladies are the kind of geezers you'll find in this collection.

My kind of geezers.

When people think “senior citizens” and “mystery fiction,” certain images come to mind: the kindly old amateur sleuth with a ball of yarn in her lap, cat on the sofa and a dead body in the foyer. A cup of tea, a plate of finger sandwiches, a severed head in a pink gift box. Jessica Fletcher, Miss Marple. Fixodent and forget it. Genteel stuff like that.

That's—pardon my language—a bunch of horse pucky.

Truth is, getting old is the most hardboiled thing you can do. Make it past 65 and your hair starts to go. Your body fails you at inopportune times. You begin to suspect you're surrounded by idiots. You have values and morals the rest of the world seems to have forgotten. Kids won't stay off your lawn. You're the ultimate outsider. Cast aside. Ignored. Expected to die peacefully, in your sleep.

Not the seniors in this collection. You're about to enter a twilight world where turning 65 can mean you're the last woman standing. Or the guy too stubborn to die. It's the boulevard of broken hips. The land of the old, the bold, the uncontrolled.

I'm talking about old people... who kick ass.

The idea for this anthology came right from the twisted mind of Busted Flush Press owner David Thompson, who clearly has grandparent issues. I thought it was brilliant, but at first, was a little puzzled at why he thought I was the guy to edit this anthology. Sure, I'm getting up there in years (as of this writing, I'm 34). And yes, I do have kids, which means I've passed along my DNA, which means I'm biologically useless to the world and have begun my slow, desperate march to the grave. (Happy Father's Day!) But it's not like I'm ready for the glue factory. Maybe David assumed I was an old soul.

Anyway, I was a little worried about approaching writers for this anthology. I felt compelled to issue a disclaimer in my e-mail pitch to each one: "I assure you, this is no comment whatsoever on your age, but..."

Then I had the bright idea of running the stories in age order, from Whippersnapper to Grand Master. Most writers took it in stride, and happily coughed up their birth years. Laura Lippman should have slapped me, but didn't. Dave White was in a panic for weeks about being the youngest contributor in the anthology, and I tortured him with tales of a wildly talented pre-teen noir author I'd discovered. Al Guthrie was vaguely surprised that, when he looked up the year on his birth certificate, he was younger than he'd thought.

But otherwise, as the young kids say, it was all good.

Huge thanks to David for giving me the chance to work with some of my favorite writers, and in many cases, beg them for a story. Thanks to every single contributor, who not only nailed the concept, but surprised me with the depth and range of their stories. The big worry about "high concept" anthologies is that the stories run the risk of following predictable patterns. That is not the case here. There's not a single story like another. (If you find two that are alike, I blame the Alzheimer's.)

Most of all, thanks to you, dear reader, whether you're over 65 and angry at the world, or under 65 and wish you had an excuse to wave your cane in the air and curse a lot.

I hope you enjoy the stories. I sure as hell did.

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Bill Crider (born 1941) is the author of the Sheriff Dan Rhodes series, which began with the Anthony Award-winning Too Late to Die. (The 13th Rhodes novel, A Mammoth Murder, was published in spring 2006.) He also runs the very popular "Bill Crider's Pop Culture Magazine," and has a fabled collection of Gold Medal paperbacks. He's probably even better read than Charles Ardai.



CRANKED

by Bill Crider

After the meth lab exploded, Karla decided she'd walk to the truck stop.

It wasn't her fault that some moron had fired a shotgun and blown the place up. Karla had been lucky, having jumped out a window before the blast, but she'd been cut by flying glass, and the hair on the back of her head was a little bit singed.

She still looked pretty damned good, though, better than any of the skanks at the truck stop, that was for sure. She knew she wouldn't have any trouble getting a ride out of town, and she might be able to get away before anybody found out she was still alive.

She didn't think anybody else who'd been in the meth lab was alive. The place had gone up in flames just seconds after the explosion.

Karla felt a little bad about that, but none of it would've happened in the first place if that drug task-force Nazi hadn't sent her in there with a wire. Whatever had happened, she figured the whole thing was on him.

Not that he'd see it that way, the self-righteous bastard.

Karla didn't like walking in the heat and humidity. The mosquitoes sang around her ears, and her whole face felt greasy. She could still smell the cat piss odor of the meth lab, and she supposed the stink was in her clothes and hair. She didn't feel a personal feminine freshness, either.

But she had to stay off the road, so it would take her a while to get to the highway. She'd still look better than those truck-stop ho's, anyway.

She heard sirens in the distance and walked back farther into the trees. First came a sheriff's car, and before long a couple of fire trucks came tearing along the county road, dragging rooster-tails of dust along behind them. Karla didn't think the fire trucks would do much good, not the way the house had been burning. As if she cared.



Lloyd hadn't taken his meds for two days, and he was feeling damned sharp, considering. He was fully dressed under the covers, except for his shoes, which were stuck under the side of the bed. He

thought he was looking good, and he'd look even better when he put his teeth in.

Lloyd knew that in his case *better* was a relative term, but at least with his teeth in he'd look a little less like Gabby Hayes.

His daughter, Lou, came into the room like she did every day when she got off work. She looked a little disappointed, as usual, that Lloyd hadn't kicked off yet.

She was a skinny blonde, but the color was out of some bottle. She'd had brown hair as a kid, but it had gone gray early, not like Lloyd's, which still had a lot of black in it even though he was seventy-six. Lou had her mother's disposition. That wasn't a recommendation.

"How're you today, Daddy?" she said, the same as every day.

Usually Lloyd could hardly answer because his mind was so fuzzed with the drugs. They gave them to everybody in The Home because they liked to have the inmates nice and quiet all the time. In a lucid moment Lloyd had just pretended to take the shit and spit it out later. After two days he was almost back to normal.

But in Lloyd's case, *normal*, like *good*, was a relative term. Lloyd had never liked to play by the rules, which was how he'd wound up in The Home. He'd stayed drunk for a week and a half after the doctor had told him what was wrong, and Lou had gotten him committed. He'd been a handful at home, he knew that, so he didn't blame her much. By the time he was halfway sobered up, they'd got him full of the meds and he was trapped.

He knew he hadn't led a godly life, and maybe this was his punishment for all the things he'd done before he got sent to the pen that time. He'd put that behind him after his release, but things had a way of catching up with a man.

He'd been a healthy, strong guy for most of his life, and once in the pen he'd jerked an ax handle away from a building tender who'd knocked his teeth out with it. Lloyd had cold-cocked the building tender with the ax handle and spent two weeks in the cooler, but it had been worth it. His false teeth always reminded him of that building tender, the bastard.

"Daddy?" Lou said.

Lloyd came back from wherever he'd been and looked at his daughter with what he figured was the right amount of confusion and distrust.

"Sure could use a Co' Cola," he said.

Lou looked at him sternly, the bitch. She hadn't sprung for so much as a single Co' Cola since he'd been in The Home, nor even a candy bar. Made him spend his own money, of which there was damn little left.

"Some change in the drawer," he said.

Lou sighed. She walked over to the cheap nightstand by the bed and pulled open the drawer. Three quarters lay in bottom. She glanced down at them and then at Lloyd, who gave her a pathetic, pleading look.

"Oh, all right," she said.

She took the quarters from the drawer and left the room to go to the soft drink machine, which was in the big rec room, quite a distance from Lloyd's own room.

As soon as she cleared the door, Lloyd sat up, turned around, and put on the old black walking shoes he'd bought at Wal-Mart. He liked them because of the Velcro straps.

He stood up and looked over at the other bed where a dried-up fella named Jones lay on his back with his eyes and mouth wide open. He was just about mummified. In the month and a half he'd been in The Home, Lloyd had never heard Jones say a word.

"I'm bustin' outta this joint," Lloyd told Jones.

Jones didn't respond. Maybe he really was a mummy. Lloyd didn't waste any more time on him. As he'd hoped, Lou had left her purse on the room's only chair.

Lloyd took her billfold out and helped himself to the money inside, only twenty-one dollars. It would have to do, and he figured she owed it to him.

He also helped himself to her car keys. Then he put the purse back down and went out into the hallway. He looked both ways. Nobody in sight. There was an exit door at the end of the hall to his left, and he didn't think it was alarmed. What with the drugs, nobody ever tried to leave, so there was no need to go to the trouble and expense of wiring the doors.

Lloyd walked down the hall, his rubber soles squeaking on the linoleum floor. He hesitated for a second when he came to the door, then took hold of the bar and pushed. The door opened, and no alarm sounded, so Lloyd slipped out and let the door close silently behind him. He looked around the parking lot until he saw Lou's old Chevy Mailbu. A piece of crap, but it was all he had.

He took his teeth out of his pocket and stuck them in his mouth, moving them around until they felt right. When they did, he gave a porcelain grin. It felt good.

Whistling "San Antonio Rose," Lloyd headed for the Malibu, grinning again as he thought of the look on Lou's face when she got back to the room and found him gone.

The grin faded when he saw that the needle on the Chevy's gas gauge was sitting on the red E. Shit. He'd have to buy gas, and he didn't have but twenty-one dollars. He could remember when you could fill

the tank for a hell of a lot less than five bucks, but not anymore. Well, he'd worry about that later. He wheeled out of the parking lot and headed for the truck stop.



Royce Evans and Burl Isom were tooling along in Royce's rattletrap Dodge Ram pickup. They looked a lot like the two dumbasses in the Dodge ads on TV, but they didn't know it. They thought they looked like George Clooney and Brad Pitt in *Ocean's Twelve*, only taller.

It was the crystal that gave them that illusion, which is one reason they liked to amp up. They had plenty of other reasons, too, but that one was good enough.

Trouble was, staying amped cost money, and Royce and Burl didn't have any.

"Shit," Royce said as he drove the Dodge into and out of a chug hole, causing him and Burl to bounce their heads off the roof. Both of them laughed like monkeys.

"Where we gonna get us some money?" Burl said when the pickup had stopped rocking. It could have used new shocks, but fat chance that Royce would spend any money on something like that.

"Shit if I know," Royce said. "Can't get it from Karla. She's in jail."

Karla worked for a housecleaning service called the Kweens of Kleen. She'd let Royce into a couple of houses, and he'd pilfered a thing or two. Karla had taken the fall for him, which was how she'd wound up as an informant for the county's one-man drug task force.

"We ought do what Clooney would do, him and Brad Pitt," Royce said. "Knock over a casino or something."

"Closest one's Coughatta," Burl said. "We could be there in an hour, but them damn innians would tomahawk us if we tried it."

"Fuck the innians. We could take 'em. But we ain't got an hour to spare. Let's knock over the truck stop."

"How we gonna do that?"

"Check this out," Royce said.

He leaned over and opened the glove compartment. A Glock niner slid out and bounced off the floor of the truck.

"Holy shit," Burl said, picking it up. He looked it over and put it back in the glove compartment. "Where'd you get that thing at?"

"Stole it off a dead innian," Royce said, and he and Burl went off on another laughing jag.

After he managed to get control of himself, Burl said, "Goddamn, Royce, you kill me. You are one funny sonuvabitch."

He reached out and slugged Royce in the right arm, and Royce

lost his grip on the steering wheel. The truck slewed from one side of the road to another, the headlight beams shining into the ditches and fields.

Royce fought the wheel, but he couldn't keep the truck out of the ditch. It went down the steep side, ripping through the tall weeds, tilting dangerously. Just before it hit the bottom, Royce clamped both hands on the wheel and wrenched hard to the left. For several seconds the truck cruised along the side of the ditch. Burl stuck his head out the window and howled like a ruptured wolf until Royce man-handled the truck back up on the road.

Royce looked over at Burl and said, "Wanna do it again?"

Burl laughed even harder than before. Finally he wiped the tears from his eyes and said again, "Goddamn, Royce, you kill me. You are one funny sonuvabitch."



By the time she finally got to the Trucker's Heaven, Karla was frazzled, but that didn't keep her from being impressed, as she always was with the way the place looked. It was the liveliest place in the county, acres of concrete for the big trucks to park, lit up like Las Vegas. Twenty-four gas pumps for the four-wheelers in front, diesel in the back. Everything you could want in the big rambling building: restaurant where you could get a chicken-fried steak big as a pizza; a store that sold DVDs, CDs, candy, beer, jerky, you name it; showers; bedrooms where you could pick up a phone and order a massage of just about any body part; fast food burgers and rotisserie chicken; a sound system that pumped country music into the air twenty-four hours a day.

Karla thought the real heaven, in which she believed powerfully as only someone who never attends church can, must be a lot like that, but heaven probably didn't have quite as many truckers. That would be okay with Karla. Most of the ones she'd met in the past had been nice enough, but not all of them. You could never be sure. However, Karla had held onto her .22 pistol when the meth lab blew up, so she figured she'd be fine. She threaded her way through the cars and gas pumps and walked up to the big glass doors.



Lloyd hated Trucker's Heaven. He hated the lights and noise, which reminded him of some cheap carnival midway. It made him long for the days when he'd pull up to one of the two pumps at the

Sinclair station and Harry and Larry, the Derryberry twins, would come striding out in their uniforms and gray caps with a green dinosaur on them and fill up his car; check the oil and water; air up the tires, and sweep out his old Ford with a whisk broom while Lloyd sat there in the front seat in comfort.

Now he'd have to get in line to buy gas that cost him as much as three or four good meals would have back in the day, and he'd have to pump it himself. If the tires needed air, he'd better have some quarters because the compressor wouldn't work without payment. And nobody was going to look under his hood, either.

It was okay, though. All he wanted to do was gas up and get out of there.

First, however, he'd have to pay. Nobody gassed up at Trucker's Heaven without sticking a credit card in the pump or paying inside first. Lloyd parked at the pump, got out, and went to pay. He figured he'd get twenty dollars' worth of gas and use the dollar that was left over for a candy bar. What he'd do for money after that, he didn't know. It might not even matter.



Royce made a hard right turn off the feeder road onto the concrete lot at Trucker's Heaven with tires squealing. He sailed into a parking spot between a Hummer and an Escalade and threw on the brakes just in time to keep from running up over the curb and into the ice machine that sat on the walk.

Neither Royce nor Burl was wearing a seatbelt. Burl slammed into the dash, which he thought was funnier than anything else that had happened so far. Royce had been braced for the stop, so he didn't quite bang his head on the steering wheel.

"Hand me that pistol," he said.

Burl couldn't stop laughing, but he managed to open the glove compartment. The pistol slid out and fell to the floor.

"Shit," Royce said. "You can't do anything right."

He leaned over and picked up the Glock.

"Lemme use it," Burl said between giggles.

"You don't have enough sense," Royce said. "Let's go."

"What about masks? We can't let 'em see our faces."

"We'll pull up our t-shirts. Like this." Royce reached a hand into his outer shirt, a green, yellow, and red aloha job that he probably thought was invisible, and pulled his t-shirt up over his nose. "See?"

Burl got the giggles so bad that he slipped off the seat into the floor and doubled up under the dash.

"You're an asshole," Royce said. "Just for that, you can stay in the truck."

Burl nearly strangled himself as he tried to stop giggling and got back up on the seat. He pulled his t-shirt up over his nose, narrowed his eyes, looked from left to right, and said, "Let's go."

"Not while you look like that. We gotta be inconspicuous."

They unmasked, got out of the truck, and stepped up on the walk. Burl looked toward the door.

"Hey, Royce, that's Karla. I thought she was supposed to be in jail."

"Damn," Royce said. "And who's that old fart with her?"

Burl shrugged. "Never saw him before."

"Maybe he's her grandpa. Well, they just better not get in our way. Come on."

"Can I put my mask on?"

"Go ahead."

Burl pulled up his t-shirt and giggled all the way to the door.



Lloyd thought the girl in front of him sure did have a nice shape, and she even said "thank you" when he opened the door for her. Showed she had a good upbringing.

He looked around before he went in and saw a couple of redneck idiots headed his way. One of them had his t-shirt pulled up over the lower half of his face, and the other one had something in the hand he was hiding behind his back. It sounded like one of them was giggling, but Lloyd couldn't be sure, what with the Cornell Hurd Band blasting over the speakers. Anyway, his hearing wasn't what it used to be.

Whoever they were, Lloyd wasn't going to hold the door for a couple of assholes like that. He started inside, but Royce sped up and jerked the door out of his hand.

"Get out of the way, you old fart," he said.

Lloyd didn't take that kind of shit from anybody. "Look here," he said.

"Shut the fuck up," Royce said, pulling his t-shirt up over his nose and sticking the gun in Lloyd's skinny belly. "And get the hell outta my way."

Lloyd doubled over, not because of the pistol barrel in the belly but because of what was already in there that the doctors said was going to kill him.

"Yeah," Burl said, shoving Lloyd on into the store and into a cardboard bin of bargain CDs. "Get the hell outta my way."

The bin collapsed, and Lloyd went to the floor amid a pile of plastic.

Karla looked around at the noise. "Royce? Is that you?"

"Hell, no."

Royce pointed the Glock at the man behind the high counter. "Gimme all your money."

Burl stood by, giggling.

"Burl?" Karla said. "What the hell do you two think you're doing?"

"Robbing the joint," Burl said between giggles. "How'd you know us with our masks on?"

A woman in the candy aisle overheard him and looked around. She started to scream when she saw Royce's pistol.

Royce turned and fired off a shot that went over the woman's head to shatter the glass door of one of the big refrigerators holding soft drinks, fruit juice, and water.

The man behind the counter grabbed the mic that he used to talk to the people pumping gas.

"We have a robbery in progress," he said. "Call 911. Call 911."

People all over the parking lot pulled out cell phones and started punching in the number.

"Shit-shit-shit," Royce said.

Karla thought he was wasting his breath, and so were those people making calls. All the cops in the county would still be out at the meth lab, sifting through the ashes. It would take them a while to get organized and get to the truck stop.

Three burly truckers intent on foiling the robbery started toward the front from the Hickory Holler restaurant in the back, one of them carrying a chair like it was a kid's toy.

Royce shot him. He fell against a popcorn machine, dropping the chair. The other two men ducked into the chips and peanuts aisle.

"Goddamn," Burl said.

"Royce," Karla said, "you're cranked out of your mind. Put down that gun."

Royce wasn't listening. He turned back to the cashier and put a bullet into a carton of Marlboros on the shelf behind him.

"Gimme the money. C'mon, c'mon."

The cashier said, "We put it all in the vault slots. All's I got is about fifteen bucks."

"C'mon, c'mon."

Lloyd finally got untangled from the CD bin and knocked the CDs off him. Trucker music. Red Sovine, Dave Dudley, C. W. McCall. Lloyd figured truckers were the only ones using CB radios anymore. He stood up and said, "Hey, asshole."

Burl looked at him over the rim of his t-shirt. "Which one of us

you mean?"

"You'll do," Lloyd said and kicked him in the balls.

Burl's t-shirt slipped down to reveal his whole face, but that was the least of his concerns. He grabbed his crotch and fell to his knees, trying to get his breath, tears running down his face.

Royce grabbed the money the cashier put on the counter and turned to Burl.

"Get up, dumbass. We gotta get outta here."

"No, you don't," Lloyd said. "Lemme have that gun."

"Screw you," Royce said and pulled the trigger.

The bullet missed Lloyd and blew the cotton brains out of a teddy bear in a bin of stuffed animals

"Now look what you did," Lloyd said.

"You old bastard."

Royce was ready to pull the trigger again, but Karla said, "Don't you pull that trigger, Royce. I have a gun, and I'll shoot you in the knee if you do."

Lloyd had known the girl had a good upbringing. She was sticking up for her elders.

Royce looked at her and slammed the Glock into her wrist. She dropped the .22 and Burl picked it up as he struggled to his feet, his left hand still holding his crotch, tears running down his face.

"Shoot the old fart," Royce said, "and let's go."

He grabbed Karla's good arm and dragged her through the door.

Lloyd walked up to Burl, who was bent halfway over and trying to get his finger through the trigger guard of the .22. Lloyd took hold of the pistol and twisted it up and back. He heard Burl's finger snap. Burl fell to the floor, assumed the fetal position, and whimpered like a baby, his hands clutched together at his groin.

When Lloyd started past him, however, Burl stuck out a foot and tripped him. Lloyd staggered into the thick glass door and hit his forehead on it. He turned around and shot Burl in the ass cheek. Burl screamed like a panther.

"Jesus," the cashier said. "You're one mean old dude."

Lloyd gave him a blindingly white grin. "You ain't seen nothing yet, sonny."



Royce shoved Karla into the floorboard on the passenger side of the truck and started to back out of the parking space, but he couldn't see too well because of the Escalade on one side and the Hummer on the other.

Which is why he didn't notice the Camaro.

The driver of the Camaro didn't notice Royce, either, because he had his windows up, was talking on his cell phone, and listening to Gwen Stefani with his speakers cranked up loud enough to drown out the Cornell Hurd Band from Trucker's Heaven's speakers.

The rear of the truck hit the front of the Camaro, turning it halfway around. The driver, who had no idea what had happened, jammed his foot at the brake, missed, and hit the accelerator pedal. The Camaro shot forward and crashed into the grille of a Trans Am that its driver was filling with regular unleaded.

The Trans Am was shoved backward about ten feet, not a bad thing in itself. The bad thing was that the hose was still jammed in the filler hole and was torn from the pump. Regular unleaded sprayed all around.

An alarm sounded, Gwen Stefani said, "This is my shit," and the clerk inside Trucker's Heaven hit the automatic shut-off button, but it was already too late because the right front hubcap popped off the Camaro, spun a foot or two, and struck the concrete, sending up a couple of sparks.

And that was all it took to turn Trucker's Heaven into Trucker's Hell. Fire was all over the Camaro and the Trans Am. The guy who'd been at the pump had run out of the way, and the Camaro's driver jumped out and ran, too, as did everyone else who was at the pumps.

Karla tried to get out of the floor of the truck to see what was happening, but Royce hit her in the forehead with his fist and knocked her under the dash.

The pickup had stalled when it hit the Camaro. Royce ground on the starter but couldn't get it to catch.

"Fuck this," he said, when he looked back and saw the parking lot aflame.

He jumped out the door of the truck and ran around the Hummer, where Lloyd was waiting for him.

"Where's that lady you had with you," Lloyd said. He had to yell it to be heard over the screams, the country music, and Gwen Stefani.

The Trans Am blew up about then, so if Royce answered, Lloyd didn't hear him. Lloyd hadn't expected an answer, however. He had a feeling that Royce hadn't had a very good upbringing and didn't respect his elders.

Royce grabbed for the Glock he'd stuck in the waistband of his pants, intending to shoot Lloyd. He wasn't likely to miss, since they were standing only about two feet apart.

Lloyd had the .22, and he wouldn't mind depriving the world of one more piece of white trash. He'd have done it, too, if he'd known

how many bullets he had left. He'd already wasted one on that asshole in the store, and he didn't want to waste another.

He was standing by the freezer that held bagged ice, so he reached out his left hand and flipped the door open, swinging it as hard as he could back into Royce, who had the pistol almost out of his waistband.

When the door hit his hand, Royce pulled the trigger. His scream could be heard even above Gwen Stefani, who was declaring yet again that she wasn't no hollaback girl.

Lloyd stepped over Royce, who was now lying on the none-too-clean sidewalk with blood on the front of his pants.

"Maybe you just shot the end of it off," he said.

Lloyd gave him a little kick for good measure and went to the truck. He looked in the driver's side door and saw Karla in the floor. Off to his right another car blew up with a *fwoomp* that shook the parking lot. Lloyd could feel the heat from the fire through his clothes.

"We better get outta here," Lloyd said. "What do you think?"

"Let's go," Karla said, wiggling out from under the dash.

Lloyd pulled himself up into the driver's seat. The engine turned over the first time he tried it, and he drove past the burning cars and pulled onto the service road. Looking in the rearview mirror, he saw his daughter's Chevy consumed by flames. He hoped she had good insurance.

"Whichaway you headed?" Lloyd said.

Karla fluffed her hair. She wished she'd had time to freshen up and use the toilet. Maybe she could do that a little farther on down the road.

"I was thinking of visiting my aunt up in Paragould, Arkansas. She might give me a job in her beauty parlor. Where you going?"

"Never been to Arkansas. What's it like there?"

Karla started to answer, but she closed her mouth when she looked up and saw the sheriff's cars, a couple of fire trucks, and a DPS car headed for them, flashers going, sirens yowling.

"Don't think they'll be interested in us," Lloyd said. "There's this big fire back there behind us, and they'll be going to that."

Karla looked back just as there was another explosion. A fireball rose in the sky, and she thought it was even brighter than when the meth lab went up. She wondered if Arkansas was far enough away, but she guessed it would do.

"Arkansas is all right," she said, turning to give Lloyd a good look. "You want to go? We could have us some fun."

"Damn, girl, I'm old enough to be your granddaddy. Considering the way I spent some of my time when I was younger, I might *be* your granddaddy."

"I don't think so. My mama's not from around here. She had me up in Paragould. You never been there, have you?"

"Nope."

"Okay. So how about it?"

Lloyd stopped at a red light. When it changed to green, he turned left, drove under the highway, and turned left again. When he was headed north on the highway, he said, "You sure you want me to go along?"

"Like I said, we could have us some fun if you did."

Lloyd thought about it. "I got to tell you two things before you decide for sure. For one thing, I ain't led a blameless life."

Karla nodded. "That makes two of us. What's the other thing?"

Lloyd didn't think he'd tell her about the stomach problem. Why worry her? He wondered how much fun a man his age could stand and how long somebody who was damn near dead would last with a woman like this one. By God, maybe he'd just find out.

"Well?" Karla said. "What's the other thing?"

Lloyd gave her a grin.

"These ain't my real teeth," he said.

Afterword

I wrote this story because of another one that I did for a blog project started by Dave White and Bryon Quertermous. That story was called "Raining Willie," and I liked the character of Karla so much that I kept wondering what happened to her after the crack house blew up. I figured the only way I'd ever find out was if I wrote something else about her, and "Cranked" was the result. Now I find that I'm still wondering about her, which means that sooner or later there's probably going to be another story. Since you mentioned it, I wanted to put in a favorite bit of wisdom from one of my grandmothers here. Unfortunately, they weren't much for pithy sayings, so I thought maybe I'd give you one from Pappy Maverick, who was nothing if not a bundle of pithy sayings. Here's one I think Karla would like: "Man is the only animal you can skin more than once." Maybe not words to live by, but they'll have to do. —B.C.