

EASTERN STANDARD CRIME PRESENTS...

CROOKED



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Crooked is the creation of Geoff Eighinger. Contributions should be 2,000 words or more and previously unpublished. All stories must have a hardboiled or noir kick to them.

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BLACK AND PINK AND BLOND ALL OVER

A Bo Fexler Story

By Clair Dickson

Deputy Michael Ruggins slid into the booth opposite me, asking, "Do you know either of these men?" He laid a photo on the table. A grainy security-camera photo from a bar. There were no other patrons visible in the photo, just two men fighting, one with a knife, the other laying on the pool table.

"Well. I am . . . familiar with the knife-wielding man in the tee shirt. But I don't actually KNOW him," I said.

"Bo Fexler, right?" Michael's very new partner and trainee, Adam Tass, asked suddenly.

"How'd you know?" I questioned. My normally blonde hair had been dyed hot pink, my face was heavily made-up with purple-glitter eye shadow and deep purple lipstick. It was a far cry from how Tass had seen me before.

"You have a pretty distinctive voice," Tass answered honestly. It's a problem he has.

Looking back at Michael, I raised my eyebrows.

"Don't give me that look," he chastised.

"I'll give you any fucking look I damn well please," I said.

"Besides, I already said you were right about it."

I shrugged. After all, I've known for many years that the speech impairment I was born with makes everything I say kind of warped—kind of like someone using a bad fake southern accent who breathes too much when they talk. I just try not to think about. "Where was this taken?"

"Metropolitan Bar and Grill. Sunday night."

"I figured that from the time and date stamp, darling. The suit. He still around?"

"We're not sure. We've heard reports that he's not. It certainly looks like they're in a death struggle here. You said you know the dark-haired one."

"I was much more careful with my words. I know *of* him."

"The more careful you are with your words, the more I know you're hiding something."

"I don't give a shit what you think you figured out about me." I folded my arms across my chest.

"Look, Bo, we both know that, in your profession, you come across people. You hear things."

"Indeed. And I get paid to hear those things."

"What, no working for free? For the good of all?"

"I wrote that in a letter to the electric company once. Told them that since I had worked for a charitable cause without compensation, I should receive credit on my electricity bill."

"You're kidding. You—you really did that?"

I nodded. "I got a 2% late fee for not paying the minimum amount by the date due."

Michael laughed.

"So— why do the police care about this? Seems like a lot of effort for, what, an assault charge?"

"No. There's something more here. I can't really say much on it. But there's something bigger here."

"Maybe murder?"

"I don't know. I have a feeling we're going to find a mass of nasty stuff when we break this open."

"And there's a reward in it?"

"I'll talk to Oraski. I'm sure we can work something out. If it's any good."

"Oh, darling, you know I'm good," I breathed.

Michael cleared his throat and glanced around. His dark skin hides any blushing. Takes some of the fun out of it.

I laughed. "You do know, Michael, that fucking with you is one of the things I enjoy most. I know this man by the name Jude." I tapped one band-aid wrapped pointer finger on the photo. "He's one of Livingston County's less-savory fellows. Not sure exactly what he does. I never asked." I gave him a long look.

He understood. "Anything else?"

"Sometimes he can be found at Sparky's Auto Shop, between Brighton and Howell."

"Sparky's," Michael echoed.

I nodded. "Yeah. That one. Any patrons from the Metropolitan come forward about this?"

"No. Bartender said he thought Ted Neely was around that night, stirring things up. We tried talking to Neely, but didn't get anywhere."

"Oh?"

"He's pretty much not home. The one time an officer found him at home, Neely refused to talk. Said he was tired. We don't have much we can push with."

"Neely..."

"What?" Michael prompted.

I breathed out slowly. "You know the Carraway case I've been working?"

"Missing boy. You've been on that one for a while."

Tass smirked.

"I think that's where I've come across the name Neely. Not Ted, though, but his mother. Sara."

"That's really helpful." Tass rolled his eyes.

"I also know how you can save a lot of money on your car insurance." I leaned back and crossed my arms over my chest. Then, I looked back at Michael. "Sara Neely is... an involved parent."

He nodded. "You think she'd know if her son was in trouble?"

"Sure. She covered for him when he was charged with domestic assault two years ago. Beat up his girlfriend, left her passed out on the floor. Mom said that Ted was with her that evening. Defense attorney never thought to check her alibi. She had a damned speeding ticket that same night. She wasn't home with Ted."

"How do you know all that?"

"Read about it in the police records. Better than daytime soaps."

"Seriously."

"When am I not serious?"

"You're never serious." Michael chuckled.

"Sara Neely is one of Matthew Orton's girls."

"Girls... you mean like girlfriends."

"Just because he's 57 doesn't mean he still can't score. And with a hot younger woman."

"Thing is, Sara clams up real tight whenever her son comes up. And clams other people up. Which is odd because I was there to talk with Matthew about Nick Carraway. Never gotten far with her, but maybe I'll give it another try. It seems like a stretch though, that the missing Carraway boy would have anything to do with Jude or even with Ted Neely. You don't have anything on Ted?"

"Nothing. Rumors. Accusations from people who don't like him. Can't even make a connection between him and any of the other... how did you put it-- less savory folks in the area. So you're going to look into this?"

"Only if I get paid. I can't get buy on just my looks, you know. Oh, well, actually, yeah, I can. Still."

He hesitated, half-shrugged. "Yeah. You know the deal. So long as it leads to an arrest and prosecution."

"I'll be in touch. Can I keep the photo?"

"Yeah. Bo--"

I lifted my chin.

"Be careful. These are shady people. Try not to get yourself in trouble."

"Uh huh." I wasn't thinking about trouble-- I was thinking about how I could cash in twice on this investigation.

I watched Michael's patrol car pull into traffic, then I paid my tab. On my way out I dialed up my client. "This is a long shot, but does the name Neely ring bell? Maybe Ted Neely?"

"Um..." There was the sound of breathing on the other end, so I knew I hadn't dropped the call. "Well, not that I can recall."

"Did Nick ever go to the Metropolitan Bar and Grill?"

"Uh, yeah. I think so. I think he liked to play pool there. He used to go with a friend of his. What was his name? Chris? It wasn't a guy he hung out with much. Only to the Metropolitan. They'd go on, like, Thursday nights. So it wasn't crowded."

"Chris? You know anything else about him?"

"Went to Howell High School. Graduated same year as Nick."

"Thanks."

A couple phone calls later, I had a full name and a place of employment for the friend Nick Carraway used to go to the Metropolitan Bar and Grill with on Thursday nights. I met up with Chris at the warehouse where he worked and he punched out for break to talk with me. Stepping outside, he pushed his hands in his pocket and started right in with, "Yeah, we went there quite a bit for a while. I heard Nick's been missing for a couple months now."

"Yeah. I'm surprised your name didn't come up sooner."

"Most of Nick's other friends didn't like me. They were a little wilder, I guess. Maybe it was a just a little more immature. I was already working full time and saving up money, you know. I started working when I was fourteen to help my family. I started paying for everything I had, so my folks wouldn't have to."

"Do you remember meeting a guy named Ted Neely at the bar?" He shook his head and I took a photo of Neely that I'd gotten from the mug shot book at the PD.

Chris took a long look at the photo, then tapped against his hand. His mouth twisted into a grimace. "I don't know. I don't think so, but it's been a while and I don't really remember. Maybe Nick met him there-- we stopped playing pool together a couple months before he left."

"Why'd you stop playing pool?"

"Allison."

"Who?"

"Allison. This girl that Nick started to see. He brought her along sometimes, but I didn't much like her. She didn't like me, I guess. It's not like she was stuck up, I just don't think she liked me. Maybe 'cause I look Mexican."

"You know her last name, perchance?"

"Uh. Shoot. She went to school with me. Can't think of it."

"I don't suppose you could help me out with that? Maybe look it up and get back with me?"

"Sure."

"I'll pay you for it." I took a twenty from my wallet to show him.

He waved it away. "Nah— I won't take it. What's your number?" I gave him a card. He shook my hand before he turned to go back to work. He seemed more suited to a guest spot on "The Brady Bunch" than in the middle of any of my cases.

None my trips to Sara Neely's house had been successful. And that was when I was just trying to talk to Sara's boyfriend, Matthew. I debated trying another trip, maybe being more direct and aggressive. But then another idea came to mind.

Odd voice or not, I still had a damn fine body. Maybe Ted Neely would like to see it. And maybe he'd be willing to part with some information to for the privilege.

I drove down the thinly-populated, narrow dirt road behind a battered dark pickup truck. There was so much dirt on it, that I couldn't tell if it was dark blue or deep green or just black. I stopped a house away when I saw the truck pulling into the driveway of Ted Neely's house. I recognized the man who got out, and grabbed my camera. He was dark haired with broad shoulders and well-toned muscles that were visible under his tee shirt. The man from Michael's photo: Jude.

I zoomed in with the camera, getting a good shot of the man and his host—homeowner, Ted Neely. The two men didn't disappear inside, though; Ted stepped out onto the front stoop with his guest. The two men looked in my direction, suddenly making me antsy.

I flipped through some papers, making them visible over the top of the steering wheel. Ted closed his front door, and then he and Jude got into the latter's truck. They cast several more looks in my direction, and I took that as a cue to exit, stage left. It could have been a bout of paranoia or an inflated sense of importance, but I wasn't risking my bones.

I started down the street, casually, and checked the rearview mirror to make sure they were still there. Turning right on the nearest crossroad, and left on the next, I kept glancing in the rearview mirror. The black truck was still there. I turned left again, sped up, and rolled through the next stop sign as the black truck rounded the last corner. It sped up, too.

Even in its prime, the Cavalier would never have done well as a get-away car. Nevertheless, I stepped on the gas, and roared around the next corner. It was several long miles back into town with the truck gaining on me. Only by weaving through the back roads at reckless speeds, I stayed a safe distance from the truck.

But then the road straightened. A long empty stretch with nothing but trees. The truck caught up. The space between us narrowed to mere inches. I took my foot off the gas, held the steering wheel tight, and waited as the truck came ever closer.

Bumpers kissed. My car jostled and slid to the edge of the road spraying loose dirt and gravel. Something smacked against my mirror. On the other side, the truck grazed the rear corner of my car.

I moved further off the road and slammed on the brakes, hoping the truck would just pass. As he drove past, he turned the truck into my car. The car went off the road and down into the ditch.

Then the truck drove off into the twilight. I pushed my car door open and climbed up out of the car and the ditch, using weeds for handles. Standing on the edge of the road, I swore—in as many combinations as I could come up with. I looked at my car, wedged in the ditch, and dialed the sheriff's department.

Headlights lit up the road with a ghastly grey light. I stepped back to the edge of the ditch. The tow truck came to a stop and a man stepped out of the cab. "Looks like I came by at the right time," he called. "Need a hand?"

"No, thanks." Whenever fate twists, it always twists badly for me.

"It's not a problem at all!" He swung back into the cab, and swung the truck in a wide arc. I had to scurry out of the way as he swung the tow truck into place.

"Wait—hold on one fucking minute!" I ran over as the driver jumped out of the truck again. He bent under my car and swung the chains in place.

I yanked him by his shirt. He pushed me away and clipped the hooks to the chain links. I grabbed him again as he stood.

He punched me in the stomach. The pain bent me in a two and scared my breath away. Coughing, I tried to grab at his sleeve. He shoved me away, rounded the front of the truck, and climbed in. I smacked the passenger side door. With a rev of the engine, the truck jerked my car from the ditch. I wedged a fingernail under the edge of the odd square on the truck door, then jumped back as the truck roared away. Taking my car with it.

Shit. But I had the square I'd pulled from the truck. It was a magnet—dark green but without any writing.

Eventually, the police car I'd summoned arrived. The officer took my report and agreed to give me a ride back into town. Back at home, I washed up and tied my still-pink hair into a quartet of braids. I dressed for bed in gray jogging pants and tank top. Just as I pulled the covers up, I recalled that there was only one company in the area that drove plain dark green tow trucks.

Sparky's Auto Repair. If had been a reputable place, I might have just waited until morning. Instead, I traded jogging pants for carpenter jeans and grabbed my keys for the Camaro. As a PI, I know that a conspicuous car is questionable at best, but I really liked the dozen-year old slightly battered blue sports car.

Sparky's was quiet and dark when I pulled into the parking lot of the neighboring party store. I tucked my keys into my pocket and grabbed my cheap digital camera from the passenger seat.

My Cavalier, I found, was behind a tall, slatted chain link fence. It appeared to be still in one piece. I tossed my ankle-length sweater back into the car since it would impede my climb. Then I went over the top of the fence. There were a half-dozen cars and a small garage. I went to the garage and tried the door. It was locked. But, as I jiggled the handle, I noticed a fair amount of play in the knob. I turned, jiggled, and pushed. The bolt scraped past the strike plate and the door swung in.

I grinned. That shouldn't have worked.

Inside, I found a mountain range of boxes. Several of them had slightly used auto parts inside. I turned the box for a rusty brake rotor and but found no shipping address. I fumbled for a light switch. Blinking against the sudden brightness, I barely waited for my eyes to adjust before taking a dozen photos.

Then, I shut off the light again, put the bottom of my shirt over my hand and grabbed the door knob. I rubbed the knob on both sides before jerking the door shut. Like no one had ever been there.

I scaled the fence again, but when I started down, I slipped. My hand shot out and grabbed at the fence, but the weight of my falling body ripped my fingers loose. I left some flesh on the fence and some blood on the rocks at the bottom. Picking my bruised body off the ground, I headed to the main shop.

I tried the doors, but they were locked up tight. I peered in the windows, but couldn't see a damn thing. So, as the sun was just tinting the skyline, I returned home. I sat at the dining room table to eat some cereal before I crawled into bed for some sleep. After a couple of hours, I was up and rolling again.

I drove back to Sparky's Auto Repair. I wore a small, tight tee shirt that, because of my height, didn't hardly reach my navel; nonetheless, I tugged my jeans a little lower on my hips. Then, I walked into the auto repair shop, looking for a man.

The man at the counter wore a blue patch on his dirty grey-ish shirt that claimed he was Scott. He looked shortly out of high school, with a scar on his chin and a few pimples across his forehead.

He could have been wearing a target.

"Hi," I breathed. "I don't suppose you can help me?" I spoke even slower than normal.

He offered a flickering smile. "Maybe. What do you need?"

"Two things. I think you might have my car. It was picked up the other day by a dark green tow truck. You have dark green trucks, right?" I drawled the last word with a lopsided smile, covering my inability to say R's.

"We do," Scott answered. "What kind of car do you have?"

"Cavalier." I leaned on the counter. In that position, I had to tip my head back to look up at his face. It hid my height advantage and put me in a mildly submissive position. "Grey."

He smiled again. "Let me check." He went to the antique computer and poked function keys. "Nope. No grey Cavalier."

"It's in the back. I saw it."

He shook his head. "I don't have anything."

"Look, it's got my registration in it."

"Look— you'd have to wait for my boss. I can't do that—"

"Whatever-- never mind, Scott." I shook my head then, let a slow smile play across my lips.

"Huh. . . oh. The name tag."

"Anyone ever tell you how . . . cute you are?"

Scott blushed. "Sometimes," he stammered.

"You seeing anyone?" I tucked a lock of hair behind my ear.

"Me? No—not right now," he added.

"No?"

He shook his head.

"Funny. Neither am I. How does that happen? People like us— without dates."

Scott shrugged. Stringing him along was easier than pulling wooden ducks on a rope.

"Would you . . . well," I paused and looked down. "Would you be interested in me? I mean, in dating me?"

"Oh, sure! Yeah. We could go to the movies or something."

"Or something. You live around here?"

"Howell."

"Seems pretty quiet around here."

"Yeah."

"Want some company?"

Scott grinned toothily. "What kind of company?"

"Mine." I rounded the counter. "But, don't let me stop you from your work. I'll just sit with you while you take care of things. That way, if your boss comes by, it doesn't look so bad."

"Good plan. I got some paper work to take care of. In back." He wiggled his eyebrows.

We went to a small office just steps from the counter. It was cluttered, paneled in fake wood, and carpeted in matted green shag carpet. Scott gestured to a chair facing the desk, but once he sat in the desk chair, I seated myself on his lap. He laughed—giggled really. I gave him a peck on the cheek.

"Don't you have work to do?" I breathed in his ear.

"Yeah..." He thought he was getting something.

I pawed through the papers. "Is this what you have to do?"

"No." He slid his hand up my shirt, but stopped short of my bra.

I could feel his hard on beneath me. I leaned in and pressed my lips against him, a closed mouth kiss. He gripped my sides, moved his hands up to the bottom band of my bra.

I leaned away from him and held his hands in place. "You can't disobey the boss and let my car out, but you can get busy in the shop's office?"

"Well, that's different."

"Not to me. But, tell you what, if I got my car back, I'd be... really grateful." I lowered my eye lids and lifted one side of my smile higher than the other. He damn near melted off the chair.

"Yeah?"

I scooted back into him, against his erect dick. He sucked in a breath. "Yeah."

"Okay. I'll get you your car."

"Can you pull it into the front lot?"

"In a minute."

I touched my fingertip to his lip. "Call it foreplay. Go get my car. When you come back, I'll have a surprise for you."

He couldn't get up fast enough. He did cop a feel as he lifted me off his lap, though. I watched from the office door as he pulled my car into one of the parking spots in front of

the building. He came back in, twirling the keys around his fingers as if he'd already scored.

I sat back in the chair as he came back into the shop. Crossing one leg over the other, and my arms across my chest, I gazed levelly at him. "Who's Theissel?" I asked, referring to a name in a little book that had been crossed out.

"Huh?"

I motioned him over with a finger. He perched on the edge of the desk. I slid my hand up his pants, stopped with just a graze to his balls. His breathing quickened. "Who's Theissel?"

"He's a supplier. I guess." He let out a little moan as my hand moved just a little higher.

"Go on."

"Uh. That's kind of hard. Why—"

"Don't ask why. Just tell me what you know about him."

"He's a supplier. But not one of our regular suppliers. My boss is the only one who contacts him."

I slowly undid his zipper. He was fully erect and sweat had appeared on his forehead. "And."

"And he has a plain white truck that he uses to make deliveries. We're not supposed to check the deliveries, just take the paperwork and let Theissel into the back. The employees don't have anything to do with him— oohh."

I had unfastened his button and stroked him through the fabric of his blue briefs. "Anything else?"

"Haven't— haven't seen him... in a while. Oh god." He grabbed my head.

"How long of a while?"

"Couple weeks. Oh yeah— that's fucking great—!"

"One last question, honest. You know a Carraway?"

"No."

"No? You sure you don't know Nick Carraway?"

"Oh—" He sighed in a breath. "I think Theissel has a guy named Holloway, but that's all I know." His eyes were closed, his head tilted back, his whole body tense.

I smiled up at him. With the hand that wasn't massaging answers from him, I took hold of the hand that he had holding my head. I pulled it away. Then, very quickly, I stood up, scooping my keys off the desk. Without even a glance at the young man I'd been toying with, I strode out of the shop.

"Wait— hold up— what the fuck?" he shouted after me. He came to the front door, pants still unzipped.

I slid into my car, pulled into traffic, and drove away.

My phone started to chirp when I was only a few blocks from home. It was Chris Davis, Nick's friend. He had the girl's name: Allison G. Stimen.

So I made a call to the Stimen house. I didn't think she'd still be living there as most high school students in this area are in a hurry to move away, somewhere. Anywhere.

"This is her mother."

"I'm a friend of hers and I kind of lost track of her. Wanted to look her up again now that my life's settled down."

"What's your name?"

"Bonnie Fexler."

"Don't remember a Bonnie Fexler."

"Well, we weren't real close friends. I met her through Nick."

"Nick. Good for nothing. Are you as worthless as he was?"

"I don't think so. Maybe you could give me Allison's phone number so I could call her up?"

I heard ice cubes clinking in a glass. "Yeah. Though she doesn't live around here anymore. She moved away with her boyfriend."

"Nick?"

"No. Some guy name David. David Halloway. I guess she married him. Which is good because he went and got her pregnant."

"Their number?"

"I think it's still good." She drew a deep breath and sighed out the numbers to me. "Anything else?"

"No. Thanks!" She hung up without another word.

I thought for a moment, came up with a plan, then dialed the number I'd just gotten.

"Hello?"

"Hi. I'm doing a survey and I would like to ask you a few questions! Would that be okay?"

"I guess."

"Your name?"

"Allison Halloway."

"Your street address?"

"7145 West Branch."

"How many adults live with you?"

"Just one."

"Relationship to you?"

"Husband."

"His name?"

"David Halloway."

"Where did you go to high school?"

"Howell."

"And your husband?"

"Brighton."

"Are you currently employed?"

"Me or him?"

"Both."

"I'm not. He is."

"The name of his employer?"

"Um. I'm not sure. Theissel? The guy he works for his Theissel."

I was taken aback. The name in Sparky's book of suppliers that was now crossed out. I stalled with, "How long has he worked for this company?"

"About a year or so, now."

"Do you know anyone by the name of Neely?"

"No. What kind of survey is this?"

"Not a very good one." And with that collection of errors, I just hung up. I had some exceptionally valuable information. I had been planning to just give the name Theissel to Michael and see what he came up with, but now I had a good reason to investigate myself.

I stopped at home long enough to grab a cold Diet Pepsi and to look up Theissel on my laptop's phone disc. I jotted his address down, found the location on my map program, and then drove to the southwest corner of the county. The wealthiest corner. He had a large home nestled on the hillside amongst tall trees. I didn't like the idea of pulling in the driveway as it would take me far from the road and potentially have me boxed in by another car. Debating with the aide of a cigarette, I finally decided to park on the shoulder and walk up. I shrugged into a knee-length grey sweater before starting my hike.

While the last cigarette alone was not the cause of my difficulty making the steep, long, physical climb, it was the one I cursed under my breath as I struggled with the exertion. It was the grade more than anything, a steep angle that had to be a winter-time nightmare with even the slightest collection of snowflakes. Finally, I reached the top and paused at the corner of the house to catch my breath. For a moment, I let myself think that there might not be anyone home but stopped that thought before it lead to uncontrolled cursing.

I knocked on the door. A young woman answered. Younger than I expected. She was probably about my age, but looked younger. She wore the new boot-cut jeans and a cute polo that had to come from the junior's department, same as the ones I used when I was trying to pass myself off as younger. Her hair was slightly curled, an effect heightened by some styling product that stiffened the strands. Her hair looked like it would be crunchy to the touch.

"Yes?"

"Maybe I have the wrong address. Are you . . . Mrs. Theissel?"

"I am. Why?"

"I need to know if this man here is your husband, Greg," I said, extending the photo for her to see. She plucked it from my fingers, which irritated me.

"Why do you want to know?"

"It's part of my investigation, ma'am."

"What investigation?"

"I'm not permitted to say."

"I have a right to know."

I drew in a short breath between clenched teeth. "Look. This isn't a difficult question. Is that your husband or not?"

"Get off my property." She shifted from guarded to outwardly hostile. And she was hiding something. It was as obvious as if she'd flipped on a set of neon lights to announce it. Just without the arrow pointing to what or where exactly.

"Where is Greg anyway?" I pressed.

"That's none of your business."

"Oh, but it is. Don't worry. I have a pretty good idea anyway."

"Get off my property before I call the cops!"

"If you give me my photo back." I reached for it. She slammed the door, banging it solidly into my outstretched hand.

I clutched my hand to myself and beat a hasty retreat in case she decided to release the hounds. Or actually call the cops. Back in my car, at the bottom of the hill, I inspected my wound. The knuckles on my ring and middle fingers had taken the brunt on the impact and were stiff from the swelling. They hurt when I flexed them. But they still worked. Which met my low standards. My pop bottle was still cool to the touch so I carefully wrapped my injured fingers around it, hoping to reduce some of the swelling.

A dark SUV rolled down the Theissel's driveway as I sat two mailboxes away, nursing wound and pride. The SUV barely paused at the bottom of the driveway before turning onto the road, heading away from me. I jammed the car into gear and spun up some road-edge gravel as I zipped after the SUV driven by an unhappy woman with dark, crunchy-looking hair.

Being familiar with the roads, I knew I could safely stay several yards behind the prey I was stalking. The hills and broad shoulder made any change in direction visible from even that distance. The SUV took US-23 north then exited just north of the little hamlet of Hartland. Clyde Road is a quiet two-lane road and as we headed west, I began to worry about being noticed. At least I'm too cheap to "restore" my Camaro, making it look like anyone's old sports car. Or so I tell myself.

The road turned to dirt. Then, finally, Mrs. Theissel turned onto a small side street. I stopped at the end to watch as she turned into one of the driveways. Then, I drove past the end of the road, turned around, and parked in the shallow drainage ditch at the edge of the road to wait. If I'd had a 'for sale' sign, it would have made good camouflage for the car. I made a mental note to pick one up and keep it in the car for later stake-outs.

The green SUV left a couple of hours later. I passed the time reading a clichéd mystery novel, with the exception of my short jaunt to do some plant-watering. I'm good with nature's needs.

Michael was on duty still, but I decided to call him anyway. Or rather, call the station to have them relay a message to him. The dispatcher agreed to do so, but something made me think she would take care of it when she was done filing her nails or flipping through her how-to-feel-bad-about-yourself-in-ten-easy-steps magazine.

Luckily, forethought came first, and rather than going to the house, I drove back out to the nearest store. I couldn't very well show up with bright pink hair. And I didn't have time or water for a boxed dye. I snaked around a few aisles until I stood in front of the small spray paint selection. I grabbed two large cans of black spray paint.

Standing by my car, I proceeded to spray-paint my pink hair. I responded in a non-verbal, one-fingered way to the trio of men who stopped to chuckle. They moved on, and I finished the color change of my hair. It was sticky and crispy and the chemicals were probably on par with the ones I inhaled voluntarily from Phillip-Morris. But, surveying the results in the mirror, I decided that it looked okay. At least it wasn't pink. I found a different tee shirt in the trunk of my car, gave it a sniff and decided it was clean enough. Then, I went back to the house.

It was closer to the road than its neighbors, but boasted a huge backyard. There was also a large pole barn back against the woods. Several half-dismantled cars were parked against the garage. A plan percolated in my brain, reaching full potency as I crossed the front yard. I dug my hand into my pocket for my pop receipt and jotted the address—or at least a few sloppy scrawls—on it as I walked to the front door. Then, I rang the doorbell.

The man who answered the door was tall and lanky with light brown hair. The expression on his thin face was one of even thinner patience. He looked me over, stopping on the spray-painted hair. I smiled.

"Hi. Greg Theissel, right?"

He shook his head. Big surprise. Like Sunday coming after Saturday. "No."

"No? But—" I looked at my prop paper. "Isn't this 520 Mack? Did I take a wrong turn?" I bubbled, a thing as foreign to me as Greek.

"Yeah. You got the right address. Wrong name."

"Oh? You're pulling my leg. What's your name then?"

"Ted. Ted Heely."

"Neely?" I asked, not sure I'd heard right.

"No. Though I get confused with him sometimes. Don't know who he is."

"Do you know Greg Theissel?" I asked.

There was movement of someone else in the house. I craned my neck, but the man at the door calling himself Ted leaned over. He made a better door than a window.

I smiled again. "Well. Thanks! Sorry!" I batted my eyes and gave a little wave as part of the ditz routine I'd practiced. Whatever it takes.

The door was closed, but my interest in the house was still wide open. And inviting. I rounded the house, noting the windows. I watched for movement inside even as I stealthily crept on bent knees along the wall and under the windows. At the back corner of the house, I gauged the distance to the pole barn. I should have brought my camera.

I peered around the corner of the house to see if I could make the dash. A hand grabbed me by the arm and hauled me around the corner where another hand was waiting to grab me. It was the real Ted Neely. Between my surprise and my clumsy fumbling, I didn't offer any concerted resistance to being hauled inside.

He shoved me into the house, with the last push toppling me like a toddler-menaced block tower. I drew my knees up under me, sliding my hand up my own smooth calf.

"Hands on your head." The phrase was accompanied by the requisite hand gun. I complied, my gun still in my ankle holster. "Stand up." The other man— Greg— was the one with the gun and the power. "Ted— get whatever she was getting from her ankle."

Ted reached down and I envisioned myself kicking him in the face. But with the barrel of a gun less than six inches from my nose, I was on my best behavior. The only time that ever happens. Ted pulled the leg of my jeans up to my knee, removed the gun from the holster. "Cute little thing. The gun, too," he added as if he was funny. He gave my leg a little caress.

"Thanks."

"What's a pretty thing like you doing carrying a cute little gun like this?" Ted asking, still thinking he was funny.

"The better to shoot people with," I replied.

From my periphery, I saw Ted nod his head. Greg asked, "You've been snooping around other places, haven't you?"

I opened my mouth, then shut it, struck with a sudden realization. My voice. My fucking distinctive voice. Warped by that dammed speech impairment. It was like being back in the fifth grade when two little boys were taunting me, trying to get the freak to say something they could laugh at. Only, Mrs. Pendleton wasn't around to stop it.

I blinked. Ted grabbed me by the scruff of the neck, making a face when he touched my painted hair. "Who the hell are you and what the hell are you doing here?" he demanded, leaning in. I was not intimidated like I was supposed to be. I was watching the gun, figuring that Greg's arm would get tired eventually.

Ted tightened his grip on my neck, restricting my breathing. Greg's gun wavered. He lowered it when he sighed in frustration. "We should just shoot her," he said weakly.

Ted shook his head, a movement I probably wasn't supposed to see given how he was standing partly behind me. Then, he turned his ear towards the front of the house. "Someone's here."

"You check. I'll watch her." Greg grabbed me by the arm and sat me at the kitchen table. He pressed the gun barrel against my head. But stood very near. My eyes were drawn to his zipper for reasons that had nothing to do with lust. When sitting me in the chair, Greg had let me put my hands in my lap.

I balled one of those hands into a fist and struck. He doubled over with a little cry and dropped the gun so he could cup his wounded groin. And I bolted.

I went into the living room, then realized that was stupider than trying to sneak to the pole barn. I wondered what stupid thing I would do to top that as I grabbed the banister and vaulted myself up the stairs. Ted gave a startled 'hey' as I went past. I took my cell phone from my pocket and dialed 911 as I ran.

I spotted the master bedroom, recalling a second floor balcony. But heavy footsteps were already closing in behind me. I closed the master bedroom door, twisting the lock a fraction of a second before the men reached it. Then, I headed for the balcony, yanking the sliding door open and walking right into the screen door.

"Fuck." Then I noticed a female voice speaking muffled and remembered my phone.

"—is there an emergency?" the woman on the other end asked.

"Yes. 520 Mack. Hartland? I don't know. It's off Clyde Road." Wood splintered, I yelped. The cell phone clattered to the ground, teetered a moment on the edge of the balcony before falling to the cement below. I had considered jumping until I saw the phone break in a spray of plastic.

Behind me was the roof gable, with ends low enough that I could grab them if I stood on the balcony rail. It was a stretch, but I was adrenaline-powered. I grabbed the edge of the shingles and jumped. The death-grip I had on the edge countered gravity, though it tore up my hand. At least now I was evenly crippled.

I crawled up the slope towards the top, then headed to where the house made an L. I crossed over the ridgeline to the front slope of the roof, out of sight from the master bedroom balcony. I scooted down the roof, peered over the edge from a safe four feet away.

A scuttling noise behind came moments before the arms wrapped around my upper body. I kicked my legs out as I fell, pushing myself into a sideways roll. We were dangerously close to the edge; my foot hung out over nothingness as I gripped the arms of the man gripping me. His own lack of self-preservation concerned me. He rolled over the top of me, placing himself further up the roof. I finally got to see that it was Jude. Nice to know, just of no fucking use to me.

"This is all just—a misunderstanding," I squeaked out as he put a heel against me and shoved. My hands scratched down the shingles. I slid perilously close to the edge.

Jude gave me another push. I rolled with it, figuring if I was going over, I'd have a better chance if I landed on my front. I only managed to get to my side before the fall, and landed on a bent knee. The impact left me stunned for a moment atop the damp mulch, hip

jarred. I used my good leg to lever myself to a standing position.

"She's over here!" Jude shouted.

Ted came around the corner of the house, arms stretched in front of him as if to grab me. Funny what adrenaline does for pain. Better than morphine. I pivoted and tore off in the other direction.

"She's going the other way!"

Gee. My very own play by play.

I ran close to the edge of the house, hoping it would keep Jude from tracking my movements. I heard scuffling on shingles. Reaching the corner of the house, I made the decision to bolt for the barn without any conscious thought. My hair streamed out behind me, my lungs ached with each tortured breath, and my leg spasmed, threatening to give out with the next step. Or maybe the one after it. I grabbed the door to the pole barn. It was locked.

The bottom track on the door was damaged, and I was able to pull the door away from the building. I heard footsteps behind me as I stuck my head through the hole. Shoulders, hips, and right leg followed

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A hand grabbed my left ankle, twisting it painfully. I yanked it, using the door as leverage and he pulled back. I jerked again and his hands slid down, catching my shoe. I gripped the edge of the door, readied myself even as he was trying to drag me out. Then, on the silt-coated floor, my right foot slipped backward. My body hit the door frame, but the sudden movement startled my attacker. My foot was loose. I brought it inside with the rest of me and took a few fast steps away from the door. Minus a shoe. I kicked the other one off.

Hands slammed against the locked door. I heard shouting- someone asking for a key, no doubt.

I coughed and retched from the exertion and the smoking. They don't show this part in the movies. I put my hands on bent knees and straightened to see what I was dealing with. The place was dimly lit with diffuse sunlight that came through a few high windows. Another coughing fit doubled me and damn near had me swearing off cigarettes.

Then, I found the light switch. It was a warehouse. Tall metal racks held more boxes than books I've read. Well, maybe not quite that many, but close.

I hurried down the center aisle, then turned down a side aisle and scaled the rack. From the top, I could see the whole barn, including the front door. I tore open one of the boxes to confirm that it was a slightly used auto part.

The front door of the pole barn opened. Behind me, I heard something else. The guys didn't see me. I shifted and peered towards the back. There was the third man, coming in the back. Figures they would have thought this through.

I picked him for my target. I was in a good position on the top of the racks. I could

move about and felt reasonably protected from gunshots.

I heard them moving about below me—below! I had the high ground. And a lot of weighty car parts that would make pretty good weapons.

I handled a few boxes, picking one that seemed like a good weight. Then I moved to the edge of my perch, peering into the chasm. I was about two or three feet above their heads as they moved down the row. But I was spotted and shot at. As soon as I had seen the gun lift, I was back in the relative safety of the racks, dropping the box so I could move easier. The bullet tore through the corrugated roof, letting in a small round hole of light. I moved to the edge and made a daring leap across the four foot gap to the next rack. It clanged with my landing. I heard chatter below.

I hurried and leapt the next rack. As I moved to the far side of that one, I spotted the man I was looking for. The one who had come in the back door by himself. Jude. I dropped my box between the racks, then leapt to the next rack. More chatter from below.

There was a scuffle of movement. I walked on boxes to the edge of the rack and hefted a box I could barely lift. Jude was just a few feet away. I heaved the box and hurled it at him. I had already stopped to grab a second box, figuring the first would miss. It didn't.

Jude was knocked forward with the impact. There was commotion below, and shouts. Something that I could only conclude was directed at me since it started with "Hey Bitch!" I didn't hear the rest, since I was concentrating on hefting the second box. My arms trembled with exertion, but I heaved it at Jude. I watched this one land. Right on the back of his head.

The part of me that likes to avoid legal entanglements hoped that he'd live. Even though it was clearly a case of self-defense. A couple shots were fired. I laid flat on the boxes. Then, like an inch worm, I scooted away from the edge. There had to be a quieter way to get around.

I leaned over the edge and extended my foot to the next rack. My legs are long, but not freakishly so. I stepped onto the rack below and reached across, stretching farther than my legs are used to. I could get my toes to the other side. Good enough. I shifted my weight and grabbed for the other rack. Quietly.

"You'll pay for that Bitch!"

I wasn't stupid enough to answer. I moved to the next rack. Only five more racks until I was at the back of the pole barn.

"We're gonna find you. And then you're going to pay for it!"

He may have liked the sound of his own voice, but I wasn't enjoying it. Like the grind of a dying hard drive. Except it wasn't just precious data facing impending doom. I moved to the next rack.

My finger caught in the grate for a moment, but my momentum yanked it free. Another bruise. At least it went with the collection.

I went over the top of the boxes and stretched to the next rack. I didn't have my camera, but no matter what happened, I could testify. Thinking that, I paused and checked a few more boxes to make sure the one I'd opened hadn't been the only used piece in the joint. Wouldn't want my testimony dropped on technicality.

Of course, that precluded me getting out alive. On that thought, I moved to the next rack. I heard something close to me. I lay on the rack, holding my breath to try to hear better. A head appeared over the side. Instinctively, I kicked at it.

He jerked back with the impact. Then, his hand shot out. It found only boxes, which tumbled when he pulled on them. He fell, bringing half a dozen boxes with him in a clatter. I thought I heard him grunt when he hit the floor. Something metal clanged and reverberated. I lay there, muscles tensed so tight they hurt. I kept expecting to see another face over the side. Finally, I moved, listening as I did.

I thought I heard sirens. I wasn't going to wait there to find out. I moved to the next rack. There was only one man left. I'd bet twenty bucks that he was armed. And I don't make bets I can't win.

I made it to the last rack. I heard movement. Something thudded. Sounded like a box hitting the floor. Maybe the guy who fell was getting up. Maybe his pal was helping him. Unless his pal was more interested in me.

I paused, then leaned over the edge. I dove back, as if I could move faster than the bullet. His aim was off, otherwise, I'd have a bullet-trail parting my hair. Perfect. I moved back on the rack and shoved a whole line of boxes off the edge of the rack. They tumbled to the floor. I heard a yell. I didn't hear anything that made me think the boxes had actually hit him. I moved back a rack and tried to peer between the shelves. I glimpsed him. He looked like he was still standing.

I tossed a box over the edge. He moved into the main aisle. I could see his shadow from the light coming in the back door, but not him. Good enough. He was lined up with the rack I was on, with his shadow stretching past it.

I grabbed a few boxes and tossed them ahead of him, then monkeyed down the side of the rack. I didn't even look as I darted for the door. A gunshot rang out. I didn't feel the stab of a bullet—an experience that, unfortunately, I have had before. I grabbed the door, used it to lever myself out, then reached in to close it behind me. A bullet shattered the door's window. I swung it shut anyway. The knob turned easily in my hand. Of course it was unlocked. Jude had come in that way.

I glanced around and spotted a long slightly bent metal pipe. I grabbed it and moved back to the door. I could have waited for him to open the door and hope that I could surprise him. But that's what everyone does. I prefer turning the tables. I grabbed the door handle, turned it and let the door pop open. There was no movement inside that I could hear. A car rolled down the dirt road in front of the property.

Squaring my shoulders, I held the pipe ready. He was about my height, maybe a little higher. I adjusted my hold on the pipe. A blow to the head would stop him better than a blow to the middle. In the middle, I might just catch his arms. I drew a breath, then kicked the door wide open. In that motion, I stepped forward, spun to my right and swung.

He let out a short yell before the pipe smashed his nose. Blood gushed. He dropped the gun. I kicked it, then stepped past him to grab it.

"Nobody move! Police!"

I glanced at Ted's bloody face. He had his hands up with a scowl twisting his lip beneath the bent, likely broken, nose. "You first." I gestured with the gun.

He walked past me and down the center aisle. Three or four police officers were at the end, guns trained down the aisle way. I tucked the gun into the top of my jeans and put my hands up. When I stepped over Jude's body, he grabbed at my pant leg. I stumbled, which got a shout out of the officers. Jumpy shits.

Someone radioed for an ambulance. And some back up.

We were all separated to talk with the troopers. One trooper took down my answers while another helped bandage my wounded and still bleeding hand. I hadn't even realized that I'd left a trail on everything I did.

Not that I was planning on leaving this out. After I finished the summary of my adventure, the questioning officer mentioned, "We should get an official statement from you. Would your mind coming to the Brighton State Police Post?"

"Uh, well, I guess not. Thing is, when I hand over cases all gift-wrapped like this to the Livingston County Sheriff's department, I always get a stipend," I said. Always in the two times so far, but selective omission paid off again.

"I'm sure we can work something out."

Sergeant Orlaski, of the Livingston County Sheriff's Department said the same thing when I handed him the fat envelope of pictures and reports the next morning. Michael heard about my visit to the LCSD and was waiting for me when I exited Orlaski's office.

"Nice job, Bo."

"Thanks. Find anything on the scuffle in the pic?"

"Yeah. You're pal, Jude—Jude Landry— spilled that there was a dispute because Theissel reneged on parts he promised. He denied any knowledge that they were stolen parts. So did Theissel. Now, maybe you could believe that Landry didn't know. But Greg Willimings had to. It was his house. And he was more than happy to roll on Theissel. Couldn't do it fast enough. Now, Neely talked Landry out of stabbing Theissel. And Theissel agreed to deliver the parts. Neely owns a junk yard. Same one that kid, Carraway—Halloway?—works at. We got them on the auto parts, but are you going to press charges on the assault? It would help with Landry, since he's not directly connected with anything."

I made a disgusted face. "If I must. I have better things to do with my time."

"Like wash that . . . gunk out of your hair?" Michael gingerly touched one of the discolored, solid locks of hair that stuck out from under my bandana. The lock scrunched quite solidly and a few black specks flaked off it.

"Believe me, I'm trying. I've also gotta drive up to Saginaw and verify that David Hallway is really Nick Carraway. Which will finish that case."

Michael chuckled softly as we reached the front door.

"What?"

"Funny how you can pull together a case like this, but—"

"Go fuck yourself, Michael," I snapped before he could say it.

"Wait—no, I was going to comment on how you can't figure out how to get spray paint out of your hair," he said quickly. He touched my shoulder. "I heard about what those guys were saying about your speech."

I pressed my lips together, embarrassed about my error. "Yeah. Look. I got paperwork to do. Papers don't care how I talk."

"Only papers don't get to see just how sharp you are. Both mind, and tongue." He was smiling when I glanced at him. "You know I like both."

"For whatever fucking good that does me."

"You got the stipend, didn't you?"

Yeah. But I also got one at the State Police, without your help."

"Wait a minute—you're double dipping?"

"And my client is paying for the Carraway investigation."

"Damn, Bo!"

I grinned. "Clever, cunning and shrewd are all synonyms."

"How do you sleep at night?"

"Quite well, thank you."



BIO: Nearly 50 Bo Fexler stories have appeared in places like [Out of the Gutter](#), [Yellow Mama](#), [Mysterical-E](#), [Powder Burn Flash](#), and the now-defunct Muzzle Flash. Her first novel is seductively dressed and looking for representation. When I'm not writing, I teach alternative high school.

13 Questions

With SEAN CHERCOVER

Author of [Big City, Bad Blood](#) and [Trigger City](#)

The following Q & A was conducted via e-mail by Geoff Eighinger in January...

1. Will the Ray Dudgeon, P.I. character be the focus of all future novels?

Actually, I'm working on a standalone right now. So, no. But I do hope to return to Ray for many years to come. We'll see.

2. Were you surprised at the success of your debut novel, *Big City, Bad Blood*?

How could I not be? So many factors have to come together for a book to get noticed. I'm acutely aware of how lucky I am, and I'm grateful to everyone who helped spread the word.

3. What authors do you read when time permits?

I read constantly, not just when time permits. In no particular order, looking at the bookshelf of recently-read favorites: Ken Bruen, Lawrence Block, Richard Price, Laura Lippman, Jonathan Santlofer, Dennis Lehane, Cormac McCarthy, Megan Abbott, Walter Mosley, Bill Cameron, Lee Child, John McNally, Mark Billingham, Loren Estleman, SJ Rozan. That's just a sample, but it'll give you a taste of my recent reading. I also read a lot of dead people.

4. Is being a writer better than selling encyclopedias?

It probably won't surprise you to hear me say that writing is significantly better than selling encyclopedias. But selling encyclopedias was a fascinating experience, and I'm glad I did it.

5. Do you feel the Internet is good or bad for the book industry?

I haven't a clue. It is very bad for maintaining the status quo of the book industry. But in the long run? I dunno. The status quo has to change anyway, but the Internet is giving it a mighty shove, forcing it to change faster than people in the industry would like. So, whether good or bad, it is painful for many.

6. How easy of a transition was it from being a private detective to writing about one?

Fairly easy. The biggest potential pitfall is the temptation to strive for too much realism and include a lot of authentic detail that weakens the narrative and slows the pace. The needs of the narrative must come first. People say they want PI novels to be authentic, but I think what they really mean is that they want them to be plausible. A truly authentic PI novel might include a few very exciting chapters, but most of it would be boring as hell. So I try to include authentic details here and there, especially stuff that most PI novels get wrong, but I'm careful not to go overboard.

7. Is Chicago your kind of town or do you prefer the great north?

Chicago is definitely my kind of town. Toronto is my hometown, and has much to recommend it. But Chicago stole my heart.

8. What actor do you feel would best portray Ray Dudgeon on the big screen?

The book is in development at Fox, so I must respectfully plead the fifth.

9. What writers (if any) have influenced you the most?

God, that's a tough one. The list would be very long. Here are a few: Mark Twain, Mickey Spillane, Lawrence Block, William Faulkner, Raymond Chandler, Hunter S. Thompson, Patricia Highsmith, Ross and John D. McDonald, Derek Raymond, Harper Lee, James Crumley, Kurt Vonnegut, George Orwell, Sara Paretsky, Walker Percy. Hell, I could go on and on.

10. Which alcohol is your drink of choice?

Whaddaya got? I drink pretty much everything, but I'm a big fan of quality rum. Mount Gay Extra Old, Appleton Estate 12-year-old, El Dorado 12- or 15-year-old. Also drink a lot of Irish and Scotch. Bourbon. Red wine. Guinness. And so on. Maybe I have a problem.

11. What inspired the Gravedigger Peace character?

Gravedigger was inspired by a few people I've known. A childhood friend, a couple of friends who served in Vietnam, and a former mercenary. He's a composite character,

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shaped by imagination into one person. Ray has his share of psychological problems, and he has a mentally healthy friend named Terry, but I also wanted him to have a friend who is even more troubled than himself. And I wanted to turn the "psycho sidekick" trope on its ear. I love the psycho sidekick, but I didn't want to shift the moral burden off of Ray. So Gravedigger doesn't step in and do the violent things that need doing. I leave that to Ray.

Anyway, I love Gravedigger, and he has a story of his own, called "A Sleep Not Unlike Death" which you can find in the Hardcore Hardboiled anthology, edited by Todd Robinson of [Thuglit](#).

12. So, how about that Rod Blagojevich?

Yeah, he's a piece of work. Glad they caught him. I'm sure he'll look fetching in an orange jumpsuit.

13. What do you have lined up next in the way of crime fiction work?

24 Up next is a short story called "A Calculated Risk" in the upcoming THRILLER 2 anthology.



WRITING CONTEST! WRITING CONTEST!

The short story blog [A Twist Of Noir](#) is currently in the midst of its first short story contest. They are offering a cash prize of \$25 for 1st place, \$10 for 2nd place and \$5 for 3rd place.

THEME: Alienation
WORD LIMIT: 5,000

Limit one entry per writer. Visit the link below for more information on how to submit...

[CLICK HERE FOR FULL DETAILS](#)

PARTNERS

by Eric Beetner

"Who in the name of Jesus, Mary and Joseph is responsible for this?"

Lou Mapes surveyed the scene in the back room of Masto's barber shop. Rocco lay there in a pool of blood. Hank and Philly Joe stood side by side, each waiting for the other to answer Lou. When neither did they both started makes excuses at the same time.

"I don't really know. There was a lot of bullets flying."

"Could have been me, could have been him. Who's to say really?"

"I told you to talk to him," growled Mapes.

"In truth Lou," Hank cleared his throat before continuing, "You said 'take care' of him."

"You misheard."

"Entirely possible. I suppose so but...I don't really think..."

Mapes cut him off with a look. The black and white checked tile floor was nearly covered by Rocco's deep Italian blood. Before Mapes had showed up Philly Joe had joked that it was probably fifty percent blood and fifty percent wine and marinara sauce. The joking had stopped when they saw how upset Mapes was.

"What's done is done and there is no undoing of this fucking mess. You got to take care of this."

"See, there you said it again. I think it's just something that you say a lot, Lou."

Hank's attempts at rationale were of no concern to Mapes.

"Fix it. Clean it up. Take him away. It never happened."

"Right Lou. Which one of us?"

"Both of youse!"

Hank and Philly Joe looked at each other as if they had just been set up on a date. Philly Joe let Mapes know his dislike for the idea.

"Lou, we don't work together. We took on this one as a one-off. I barely know the guy..."

"Yeah, and I don't really do disposal." Hank was really starting to grate on Mapes' nerves.

"You fix it or I fix you." Mapes turned and walked out into the barber shop proper. His foot slipped a little and his round stumpy body shifted and caromed off the door jamb. "Jesus Christ on a crutch is that blood? Did I just step in blood?" He held up his shoe for his silent crony to look at. Mapes had not been limber enough to see the bottom of his own feet for thirty years. The silent crony nodded.

"Aw shit. And on my jacket! Mother fuck where didn't youse guy get blood in here? You can split the dry cleaning bill!"

He rolled his beach ball of a gut on out the door leaving Hank and Philly Joe alone in the room with what was left of Rocco. There they stood, two strangers united by murder. The room was unfamiliar to them. The dead man on the floor was a stranger to both. The man standing opposite and waiting for the other to take the lead was an entirely new

acquaintance as well but there they were standing on the shrinking real estate of black and white tiles.

Philly Joe decided that he should be the one to take charge since he was obviously older. Well, not obviously but the graying around his temples at least showed more of the stresses of a life lived in the murder business than Hank's relatively unworn face did.

"Okay, so, we should get him out of here."

"Yeah, suppose so."

"You get his head and I'll get his feet."

"Why do I get the head?"

"Because you're right there. Just grab his head and I'll grab his feet which are right here and we'll carry him out and put him in the trunk of your car and get this over with."

"Hold the phone there, pallie. My car? Why my car? I don't want blood soaking into the carpet of my car."

"He's barely got any blood left after your itchy trigger finger."

"You shot just as many rounds as I did!"

"Yeah, yeah. Sure, sure. Let's just get him out and we'll see who's got a bigger trunk and we'll put him in that one."

"Because you're concerned that he have a luxury ride for his final outing?"

"Because he's a fat sonofabitch and I don't think he'll fit in my trunk without a hacksaw, capisce?"

"What kinda car do you got?"

"It's a GM or some shit, I dunno. Whattya you got?"

"Cadillac. So naturally I don't want to fuck up the interior."

"The trunk ain't the interior."

"The hell it ain't."

"The interior is like the backseat and shit."

"Look, if it ain't the outside, it's the inside. That's what interior means in case you didn't graduate no school anywheres."

"It's not like you use the trunk for anything else."

"All I use my trunk for is hauling dead bodies? What the fuck is wrong with you? I don't gotta get groceries and shit?"

"Let's just get him outta here and we'll go from there."

Philly Joe leaned down and grabbed Rocco under his arm pits. The white barber's shirt, which barely had any white left on it due to the blood, stuck to the floor and peeled up slowly, the cotton heavy with thickening plasma. Hank reached down for the legs and grabbed him just above his florsheims. Both men grunted at the effort to raise the body and they started a comical shuffling across the floor headed out into the barber shop. After about two feet Rocco's butt dragged on the floor and the men found that the blood slick was helping them. He slid on a snail trail of red and their feet glided over the linoleum with ease from being greased up on the blood/marinara mix.

In the tiny barber shop, four seats and usually no waiting, the men slid Rocco to the front door and set him down for a breather. Hank grabbed his side to hold off a stitch.

"Where you parked?"

"Around the corner 'bout half way up the block."

"I'm about two blocks away. You go get your car and pull it up out front."

Philly Joe barked. "That don't pay any respect to the conversation we just had about interior space."

"Your car is closer. That trumps all."

"Bull shit it does. If we were going to drag him outside and bring the body to the car, then maybe. But if we bring the car here then the difference is moot."

"The walk is still farther."

"Oh boo hoo hoo, you can't walk two blocks? Do you want us to drag a dead body, a fat fucking dead body, out into the street just so you can prove your point and put him in my car? Maybe we should put on a flashing sign that says 'hey cops, come and get us we just killed this fat guy'"

"All right, y'know what? I'll go get my car. Fine. We'll put him in the back and I'll drive him out a dump him. Then I'm done with you."

"Fine by me. This is why I don't work with partners. Might as well be working with my fucking wife for all the shit."

Hank pulled a white handkerchief from his pocket and mopped his forehead before he opened the barber shop door with a tinkle of the bell and went out to get his car.

Alone in the shop Philly Joe sat in a barber chair. He reached and lifted a white towel to his own sweaty face. He was silhouetted in the darkened shop by the yellow streetlights outside. God, a shave would feel kinda nice right now. Been a while since his last straight razor shave; nothing you do at home is ever as close as that. He loved the warmth of the cream going on. He leaned back in the chair and shut his eyes. Nothing like a barber chair for feeling pampered. It was always one place where you didn't mind it if another man was touching you. Philly Joe's regular guy had died about five years ago. You can't get these newer kids to do it the same. His old guy would trim the hair on his hands and in his nose, even. That was service. A pride in the job brought over from the old country that when a man comes to see you it means he wants to look his best and that was what you agreed to when you let him in your chair. You have to have total trust in your barber. You trust that he will not make you look like a fool. You trust him around your throat with a razor. They never did learn why Rocco had lost the trust of Mapes but, boy, did he ever.

The bell tinkled again and Philly Joe opened his eyes to see Hank enter, obviously perturbed.

"Is there anything we can wrap him in or something?"

"They got hand towels. This guy would use about fifty of them. Let's just do the thing."

"I really don't want to fuck up the carpet on my Caddy. I only had in six months."

"Jesus will you stop bitching. You can get it cleaned out. I know a guy."

"They never get it all. It soaks deep down. I'm gonna take this guy way out to dump him. He's got like two hours of bleeding into my carpet. That don't come out."

"Who's ever gonna see it? I bet it's dark too. They always put dark carpet in the trunk because they know you're going to get it stained."

"It's burgundy."

"Well then what the fuck are you getting all twisted up about? You won't even see it!"

"I'll know it's there!"

"Jesus Christ they pair me up with a fucking neat freak."

"Wait, I got an idea."

Hank did a quick inventory of the counter in the barber shop and came up with a straight razor with a green handle and gold speckles. Philly Joe wanted to ask but didn't want the answer. Hank stepped over Rocco and put a foot on his chin, leaning his head back and exposing his neck. Philly Joe had to object.

"What the fuck are you doing now?"

"I'm gonna drain him."

"He ain't got any left!"

"I'm just gonna make sure."

Hank bent down and Philly Joe watched the silhouette of Hank slashing a wide gash in Rocco's neck. Philly Joe rotated his barber chair away from the gore. Blood did not gush out like a guy who was alive, and Philly Joe had certainly seen that before, but there was still more blood in him that moved slowly as it was no longer urged on by a heartbeat.

Staring at the back wall now Philly Joe asked rhetorically, "Are we ever gonna get out of here?"

He did not see Hank lift each of Rocco's arms and hack across his wrists to let out even more of the offending color.

"You can go without me if you want. I'll get him into the car on my own."

"Hey, hey." Philly Joe spun back around in his chair, not flinching at the slight of Rocco with even more holes in him. "I don't know you from a hole in the ground and I don't trust nobody I don't know. I am staying here until I know things are cool and this guy is dumped. I don't let nobody clean up my messes for me. That's how I stay in business."

Hank shrugged and took a seat in chair #2 to watch the blood seep out to an acceptable limit.

Fifteen minutes went by without a word. The only sound in the tiny shop was an occasional snore from Philly Joe. That gave way to a massive snort that woke him up and gave him a few seconds of disorientation while he remembered where he was.

"What time is it?"

"You were only out about fifteen minutes."

"Well then let's get going."

"I guess he's bled out enough."

"I seen guys dead for a week had more blood in him. Let's move it."

Once again the door tinkled the bell as Rocco was carried out of his shop for the last time. Hank pressed a button on his keyless entry and the trunk on the new Cadillac popped open on its own so they could heave the body up and inside in one, less than deft, move. The rear shocks dipped the back end of the Caddy down as Rocco's body, still heavy despite being drained of blood, fit tightly into the deep trunk.

Philly Joe straightened up, twisted his back to reset it a little and started to take off his leather gloves.

"I'll follow you. Just don't speed or nothing. My car ain't as nice so don't rub it in."

"What, do you think I want to get picked up by the cops? I'll take it easy."

"Wait here while I get my car."

"Yeah, yeah, half way up the block."

Hank sucked in air and waited outside in the pre-dawn cool before getting into his new car. He didn't want to get all sweaty and then have the new car smell overpowered by B.O.

On the way to his car Philly Joe reloaded his gun which was down to just one bullet in the clip from the firestorm a few hours ago that brought Rocco down. He slapped in a new clip and tucked it into his belt so it was handy just in case. After all, he didn't know Hank from anything. Who knew how this would go down once they got out to the drop site?

Hank mirrored the reloading once Philly Joe was out of sight. He didn't know this guy and so far the relationship was less than cordial. Anything could happen before the ink was dry on this contract.

Hank led and Philly Joe followed as they drove out of the city, across a long stretch of suburbs and finally into the hills and forests far away from prying eyes. Once they left the glow of street lamps and highway lighting the world became dark and Hank slowed for fear of a deer leaping out of the woods in front of his new Caddy.

Philly Joe cursed him for going so slow and wondered just when the hell they were going to get wherever he was leading them. Over the trees to the East the first glow of dawn was turning the black sky a deep bruise blue.

Finally after a twenty-six mile journey (Philly Joe checked his odometer) Hank pulled off onto a side road and took a rutted and muddy path into the woods. Across a painfully slow half mile there was a slight clearing and Hank stopped the car. Philly Joe breathed a sigh of relief.

"Thank fucking Christ."

Hank got out first and left the engine running to use the headlights to illuminate the clearing in front of them. Philly Joe turned off his car and got out already yelling.

"Are you getting paid by the mile on this job?"

"We needed someplace secluded. This is secluded."

"This is more than secluded, this is another fucking state. Maybe another country for all I know."

"Would you please just quite bitching and grab a shovel."

"Hold on a fucking minute while my ass cramps work themselves out."

He made a show of stretching his legs and walking a broad circle in front of the headlights. With each stretch of his legs he let out a broad moan accompanied by a billow of steam from the morning chill in the air.

"Are you done? You sound like my Grandma."

"Hey, you don't stretch before you dig a grave and you'll get cramps. You'll barely make it through the digging let alone how you'll feel the next day. That's experience talking."

"By tomorrow I'll be long gone from your sight so what do you give a crap if I'm sore?"

"I don't."

"Then dig."

Hank tossed Philly Joe a shovel and they both started digging in the hard ground. Steam was the only thing that came out of their mouths as they worked in silence.

Five minutes of digging passed and they were no more than a few inches down. Hank suddenly seized and grabbed his lower back.

Philly Joe smiled.

"Cramp?"

Hank sucked air between his teeth. "Back spasm," he grunted.

"Told you so."

"Shut the fuck up."

Philly Joe just chuckled.

Hank tried to walk it off but he could barely stand upright so his movements didn't help. He finally just sat down on the ground in front of the Cadillac's headlights on a matted pile of leaves.

The glow of morning was growing above the tree tops but down on the ground it was still night. The overturned soil gave a loamy decaying smell to the air and they hadn't even cracked the trunk yet to see what smells awaited them from Rocco.

Philly Joe leaned on his shovel. "I say it's deep enough."

"What?"

"It's deep enough. Let's plant him and get the fuck out of here."

"You seen that fat fucker? That isn't deep enough to cover his chins."

"Listen, you drove us way the fuck out to bumbleville where no one can find him so why even bury him at all. I could stash the statue of liberty out here and no one would find it. Let's dump him and then you get the fuck out of my sight forever."

"I like the last part but we're going to bury him proper. I don't skimp on a job. That's why I keep working." Hank tried to stand up but now his back was seized up fully and he couldn't manage it.

"Look at you," Philly Joe mocked. "You can't dig. You didn't listen to me and now you pulled your back out and we have no choice."

"You finish it."

"The fuck I will!"

"By the time you're ready to get him out of the trunk I'll be okay to help."

Philly Joe threw down his shovel and started walking towards the back end of the Cadillac. "This is just stupid. I'm arguing with a gimp."

He got to the trunk and looked for a way to open it but saw none. He retraced his steps and stood over Hank on the ground and tried to look him in the eye but he was blinded by the headlights right behind Hank's head.

"Gimme the keys," Philly Joe said behind squinted-shut eyes.

"Finish the hole," replied Hank in his most serious voice.

"Fuck you."

Philly Joe reached down to search through Hank's pockets figuring that Hank couldn't do much to protest since he was down with a bad back but when he opened his eyes he found himself facing the barrel of Hank's gun.

"Finish the fucking hole. We're in enough shit as it is because of the fucking O.K. corral we left back at the barber shop and I don't need any more black marks against me with Lou Mapes."

Philly Joe stayed still. The clouds of steam from his mouth were steady and showed his calm. It wasn't the first time he'd stared down a gun. Not by a long shot.

"You pull a gun on me, pal and you'd better be ready to use it."

"Ready, willing and able." Despite being crippled and on the ground Hank had the upper hand, they both knew it.

Philly Joe stood, slowly and with no sudden moves without being told to. He backed away, hands out in the open so Hank could see them, and returned to his shovel.

"How deep you want it? I ain't going the full six feet."

"Just deep enough that his gut don't stick up through the dirt. Sun's coming up, the ground should soften a bit."

Philly Joe glowered down at Hank with contempt. This partner shit was a bad idea from the get-go. He said it to Mapes but that fat fuck wanted two guys on it for some reason. This is what it got him. Grave digging in the boondocks at gunpoint. Hell no. Philly Joe was nobody's landscaper.

He raised up the shovel and brought it down into the earth. It dug in only a little so he had to step on the blade with his heel to drive it down and get a load worth lifting. He leaned on the handle and the blade cut through and placed a meatloaf-sized clump of dirt on the shovel.

Hank grinned as he watched this asshole work. He saw the deep breath come spilling out in a white cloud and he knew that Philly Joe would be sweaty and exhausted by the time the work was done.

Philly Joe spun and flung the dirt at Hank. The heavy dirt and wet leaves splashed across his face and into his eyes. Hank yelled and tried to wipe away the stinging soil. It was time enough for Philly Joe to rear back and swing the shovel forward catching Hank across the face with the flat part of the blade.

The sound of metal hitting flesh and a subtle crunch of bone echoed off through the woods and came back to them. It had apparently awakened a number of birds who cawed in the morning fog.

Hank slumped to the side and was still. Steam rose from the blood that trailed from his nostrils. His breath was steady but shallow.

Philly Joe kicked the gun aside and reached into Hank's pocket for the car keys. He came out with them and then gave a kick to Hank's unconscious body as he stepped around to the trunk.

It was a considerable effort to lift Rocco on his own. Despite being drained of blood he was still a fat, fat man. The smell didn't even phase Philly Joe. He'd smelled worse than this.

Philly Joe bent over and hooked his hands under Rocco's armpits and heaved. As he straightened up something in his gut gave way. Philly Joe dropped the body and howled in pain, grabbing at his groin. The howl was answered from a far away peak by a coyote.

Philly Joe resisted the urge to flop to the ground as he clutched at his hernia. It had done this about ten years back and he was laid up for a month. Now he had split a seam again and his insides were straining to get out.

He sucked in a deep breath of air and blew out it out with a tremendous "MOTHER FUCKER!!!" into the night.

In his effort he had managed to get Rocco's torso over the edge of the trunk and it wasn't much work to let gravity do the rest. Rocco's neck bobbed open and closed from where it had been slashed with the razor and it gave him an appearance that was less dead than just fake.

Philly Joe gritted his teeth through the pain as he haltingly dragged Rocco by the ankles, cutting a path through the pine needles and fallen leaves, to the token grave. He dropped the corpse beside the hole and paused to bend at the waist and alternately pray for his own early death and that of Hank who got him into this world of shit in the first

place. He stayed bent at an angle until the pain subsided and his breathing became normal again.

The quiet calm of the forest was interrupted by a gunshot and Philly Joe's right kneecap exploded.

He choked on a scream as he fell. Philly Joe went toppling over Rocco's body and into the shallow hole.

Hank dragged himself up to one elbow from where he had crawled to the gun. His back screamed in pain and his face, broken nose and jaw all screamed back.

This was going to take some explaining to Lou Mapes but at least it would all be his side of the story. He certainly had the evidence of a double-cross written all over his face in bruises and broken bones. Fuck burying them. Just get in the car and go.

He squeezed off another round at the dark, writing mass in the hole. The shot echoed between the trees and again the birds called a response. The dull thud of the slug biting deep into flesh didn't echo at all.

Hank forced himself up to a stooped-over standing position and he willed himself back to the trunk. He pulled his keys out of the lock and paused before he shut the trunk. He removed the white handkerchief from his pocket and pressed it to the carpet at the bottom of the trunk floor and it came back wet and red. Blood.

"Mother fuck...."

He was right. Fucker bled out more and now the carpet was ruined. Ruined and drenched in evidence. God damn it.

Hank wasn't sure if that was worse or was it the fact that Philly Joe was right about him stretching before he used the shovel? That cock sucker even had the balls to come out and say I told you so. Don't that beat all? Well, now he can lay out, exposed, and get picked over by the coyotes because he was too damn lazy to dig a proper grave.

Hank slammed the trunk and shuffled off to the drivers side door. As he pulled on the handle a bullet ripped through the glass of the window and went right through his ribs and out the other side.

Hank collapsed, the twin holes on either side of his lungs sucking air where it shouldn't suck.

Philly Joe could barely see over the fat gut of Rocco obscuring his view but he was pretty sure that the shot landed. What he wasn't sure about was if he could stand up. That second shot cut right through his gut and now his legs had gone cold and weren't responding to his commands.

The few inches of excavated dirt was now filling up with blood. It was warm on his cheek so he knew it wasn't Rocco's.

"God damn it," he managed to wheeze out.

This is why I never work with a partner, he thought.

Hank's chest wounds at first were spewing steam like he was some sort of mechanical man but when the air heated up they stopped. Soon after, so did his breathing.

Philly Joe's back started to warm up and he knew that the sun has crested over the trees. He could see the light change from blue-black to warm yellow even though he was face down in the dirt. The smell of his own blood mixed with the fresh dirt and went well together like a good Chianti with a hearty red sauce.

It was forty-five minutes before Philly Joe died and another sixteen hours on idle before the Cadillac ran out of gas and went silent.

Three copses, two cars and one unfinished grave stood silently together in the woods slowly taking on a layer of fallen pine needles.



BIO: I am a film and TV editor, director and writer living in Los Angeles. I have two novels that I am currently shopping, one co-written with crime novelist JB Kohl. I am also a writer for the Noir City Sentinel, the Film Noir Foundation publication. My film making website is ericbeetner.com and my writing site in ericbeetner.blogspot.com.

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THE GIRL FROM YESTERDAY

by Jake Hinkson

She was pregnant but terribly underweight at the same time, with a black eye starting to go purple and hunger chapping her bruised lips. The guy with her didn't look like the type of guy to knock around a pregnant girl, but you can never tell. He was balding and quiet, wearing dirty black slacks with holes in the knees. I was willing to bet they were both dressed entirely in clothing they'd picked up at shelters like ours. The guy looked fifty or even sixty. The girl was about nineteen.

I was hanging up my office phone as they sat down at one of the long tables. I'd been watching them for a while, since they walked in the door. It was noon and the shelter was full of drunks trying to hold off their drinking until after lunch. My wife, Betty, was in the kitchen and I could see her through what had once been the order window when our mission was still a restaurant. Her graying hair was pulled back in a no-nonsense ponytail, and she was barking orders at someone behind her in the kitchen. When she yells, Betty still looks like the twenty year old girl I married.

35 I got up and walked to the door of my office. The pregnant girl and her man sat down at one of the tables by the exit. The volunteers from the African Methodist Episcopal Church, most of them teenagers, were passing out the bowls of stew. A kid named Nate—a nice kid with a big funky afro—was cutting up pans of cornbread into little squares. He was cutting them up too small, probably because Betty had told him the day before that he was cutting them too big. He loaded the slices onto a tray and started passing them out. The pregnant girl ate her little square of cornbread as soon as Nate handed it to her.

I was smoking a cigarette. Betty didn't like me to smoke and especially didn't like me to smoke in the shelter, but I...well, I don't have a good way to finish that sentence. I guess I'm ornery sometimes, but if you're in the sad business of trying to reduce human suffering, much of it self inflicted, you've seen enough hunger and sorrow—and you've taken enough punches in the jaw by quivering junkies—to get a little ornery sometimes.

I mashed out my cigarette and dropped it in a Coke can. The pregnant girl was tearing into her stew, but the old guy with her just stared at the tablecloth.

I walked over to their table.

The girl didn't stop eating, and the old guy didn't stop staring at the tablecloth. He wasn't drunk though. I can spot a drunk from many miles away. His problem was that he wasn't right in the head. I see a lot of guys who aren't right in the head, too.

Lonnie, a regular who is drunk twenty-three out of every twenty-four hours, was sitting next to the girl. He was wearing red sweatpants and a brand new t-shirt with an American flag on the front.

"Howdy, Fred," he said.

"Lonnie," I said. "How goes it?"

"Pretty well. Stew's hot."

"Betty keeps the pots burning," I said.

"She don't like me," Lonnie said.

I shrugged. Betty probably didn't like Lonnie. "She got up this morning and spent the day making you stew, didn't she?" I asked. "What were you doing at nine o'clock this morning?"

Lonnie smiled a gappy grin. "Sleeping down by the river."

"Drunk?"

Lonnie shrugged. "Beats thinking."

The girl and her man had not changed what they were doing this whole time. She finished her stew and reached for his. He didn't flinch as she took it. She patted his shoulder and started into the stew.

I sat down.

"Hello," I said to her. I could tell he wasn't much of a talker.

She nodded and kept eating, getting faster at it like she thought I might take it away.

"Fred Porter," I said. "I run this place with my wife."

The girl nodded.

"What's your name?" I asked. No harm in asking.

"Rita," she lied. She took a long pull off of her glass of water.

I nodded. "Haven't seen you here before."

"Passing through," she said.

"Who's your friend, Rita?"

She put down her spoon and looked at me disappointedly. "Why are you asking me these questions?"

I shrugged.

She looked at the old man. He was a dirty character. Grime filled the grooves of his rough face. Now that I was closer to him, I was pretty sure he was actually younger than I'd first thought.

Without taking his gaze from the tablecloth, he touched his forehead, and I noticed for the first time some bruises at his receding hairline.

"What happened?" I asked him.

He shook his head. One of his eyeballs was bloody.

The girl looked around as if she were starting to get scared.

"Why don't we go sit in my office?" I said.

The girl wasn't happy about it and looked at the old man for a sign of what to do. He touched his forehead again and tears welled up in the girl's blue eyes.

I led them to the office. The old guy shuffled, but the girl had a bizarrely quick step, as if she'd been walking so long she'd forgotten she was pregnant.

I motioned at the two chairs in front of my desk and walked around it, sat down and closed the spread out newspaper. I dropped it beside my swivel chair.

"What happened, Rita?"

"We were attacked a couple of days ago."

"Attacked where?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. Downtown. We were coming up here from Texas and our car broke down."

"Where were you going?"

"North."

"I assumed you were heading north if you came up from Texas," I said "but where up north?"

She looked at the old man as if she expected him to answer. She tapped her stubby, dirty fingernails on the seat, and he didn't move. "He hasn't been right for a couple days," she said.

"So what happened a couple of days ago?" I asked.

"Our car broke down. He couldn't fix it because he didn't have the right part. The Lord led us down to the river."

I nodded. Between the two of us, Betty is the religious one. Before we got married she made something exceedingly clear. "I'm going to serve the Lord until the day I die," she said. Betty believes in God. I believe in Betty.

I asked Rita, "What happened at the river?"

"We slept there a couple of days."

I nodded at the old man. "What's his name?"

She looked at him. He was staring at my desk like it was whispering something to him he couldn't quite hear.

Rita said, "He is the one the Lord calls The Revelator." When she said it, she sounded like a automated phone operator.

"I see," I said. "So you and the, uh, Revelator here were down at the river and then what?"

"A man came," she said.

"Who was this man?"

She shook her head. "I'm not sure. The Revelator was suspicious of him from the beginning."

"Was he a homeless man?"

"No."

"How do you know?"

"We had seen him a few days before," she said, letting out a sigh that was all exhaustion and no attitude. Then, "We were getting food out of a dumpster behind a restaurant, a Mexican food place. This man came out of the back door and told us to go

away. The Revelator told him that as God had fed Elijah in the wilderness, causing the ravens to bring him meat and bread, that" she tumbled over the words "that he, that God would provide for the Revelator and his bride."

"You're married?" I said.

She nodded.

"You don't have a ring," I said.

"We were married by God, not by Man," she said.

"Oh. And then what happened?"

"We left and went back to the river. The next day, or maybe two days, I don't know, the man came down to the river."

"Why?"

She shook her head. "He wanted to take me away from the Revelator."

"He wanted to take you where?"

She shook her head and looked at the Revelator. The Revelator was asleep.

"Where did he want to take you?" I asked.

"To hell. He wanted to stop the Revelator from finishing his work. The Lord hath decreed that the Revelator should take his bride and hasten the second coming."

I nodded. "And what would happen if you were taken away?"

She sat up very straight in the chair. She paid so little mind to her swollen stomach it was as if she wasn't aware of it. "The Revelator and his bride are one body. No one shall separate the body without destroying it. The Lord hath decreed the bride of the Revelator should burn in the lake of fire with the Deceiver if she be taken away from him. The bride's family should die the deaths of the heathen and darkness should fall on the face of the earth."

I looked at the Revelator. A line of spit was running down his chin. There looked to be a little blood in it.

She said, "The evil man wanted to take me away, to men with guns. The Revelator struggled with him, but the Deceiver was strong with the man and he" her voice cracked "he hit the Revelator with a pipe."

"What did you do, Rita?"

She shook her head.

"Please tell me," I said. "What did you do? The man hit the Revelator with this pipe, hit him on the head it looks like."

"Yes," she said, wiping her tears. "Several times. Hit him." She shook her head and put her knuckle to her mouth. "I didn't know what to do. My mother..."

"You were afraid the man with the pipe was going to take you away from the Revelator."

"Yes. And the Lord hath decreed that the bride's family should die the deaths of heathens if she be taken away." She sighed exhaustedly again. "Or run away."

"So you protected the Revelator?"

"Yes. We had a knife in our bag. It was long and thin. I drew it across the evil man's neck as the Revelator had taught me."

"You'd done this before?"

"No," she shook her head. "But the Revelator showed me how."

"I see. Then what?"

"I put the man in the river. But..." she choked up again and touched the Revelator lightly, almost maternally, on the arm "...but he wasn't...right. He'd always said we should avoid the heathen and their places but, but I was so hungry. I was so hungry, and the ravens never came to us."

I nodded. I picked up the paper and opened it and slid it across the table.

It was yesterday's paper. Under a picture of Rita, taken some years earlier when she was clean and young and smiling at the camera like she was thinking of what she was going to wear to prom, a caption read, "Karen Nelson, Missing for Three Years From a Church Youth Trip, Was Seen in Texarkana Two Days Ago. Police Say This Is 'The Best Lead in Years.'" Next to the text of the article was a picture of Rita and the Revelator standing at the counter of a gas station in Texarkana.

Rita looked at it. Behind her I saw four uniformed officers walk in. I was impressed with how quickly they'd responded to my phone call. One walked over to the kitchen window. The drunks and homeless souls sitting at the tables all stiffened up. Betty, her eyes wide with alarm, pointed the cop to my office. Her blue eyes met mine, and I tried to smile reassuringly.

"There are people here," I said. "They want to talk to you, Rita. They're going to take you and the Revelator to the hospital. He needs his head looked at where the man hit him with that pipe. And you need your baby looked at."

She regarded her stomach for the first time. "I don't want them to take my baby away from me."

"They won't," I said. I stood up. The cops were at the door. One, a handsome, silver haired guy, came in slowly.

Rita turned and when she saw them she screamed. The cops poured into the room and tackled the Revelator. They threw him to the ground, and he kicked a little. He wasn't really even awake, but they held him down despite his lack of struggle. One of the cops was a stocky, pretty blonde with a hard mouth. While the guys subdued the unconscious man on the floor, she put some handcuffs on Rita before I could see her do it.

"She doesn't need those," I barked.

"Back up sir," the cop barked back.

The cop with the silver hair jumped up and put his thick hand on my chest. "You need to calm down, sir," he said.

Betty was in the doorway. Her hair was pulled back in a scarf and sweat beaded her face.

I took a deep breath. Rita had crumbled to the floor. Quietly I said, "I am calm sir. I think the girl is already very agitated, and she doesn't require handcuffs."

The cops were pulling the Revelator to his feet. Rita was turning red. "Don't hurt him," she said.

I knelt down next to her and put my arms around her. She sunk into me. "He'll be okay, Rita," I said.

The silver-haired cop knelt down. His voice was soft, and he seemed to be following my lead now. "Ma'am," he said.

"Don't hurt him," she said.

"We won't hurt him," the cop said. The others had pulled the Revelator up and put him back in the chair. "I need to ask you some questions."

The girl wouldn't look at him. Her face was buried in my chest.

"Are you Karen Marie Nelson?"

She shook her head.

"Tell him the truth, Rita," I said.

The cop said, "Are you Karen Nelson of Arlington, Texas?"

Rita drew her head up and looked at me. "That was the name Man gave me," she said. "God hath given me another name in heaven."

"Good Lord," Betty said.

The cop frowned and looked at me. Then he pointed at the Revelator and asked Rita, "Who is this man?"

She stared at the drooling old man and touched her stomach. "The flesh of my flesh," she said.



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A KID LIKE BILLY

By Patricia Abbott

Everyone knows a kid like Billy. You've seen him at the grocery store bagging food or stocking shelves, or in a pet store feeding the dogs and cleaning cages, or maybe at a nursery dragging a Christmas tree to someone's car. That's the sort of place you'd regularly find a boy like mine.

His mother was killed by a careening car when Billy was three. Eventually, when I surfaced from that bottomless well of grief, I counted myself lucky that Billy was off in preschool that morning and not in Ellie's arms. Billy wasn't like other kids even then but he was all I had and that was enough to keep me going.

The years passed slowly for us though. Billy repeated fourth grade and then ninth. On the night that I watched him walk across the squeaking stage to take his diploma, I knew in my heart he still didn't know what a fraction was or where to find Michigan on a map. People tell you to get boys like Billy into plumbing or carpentry, jobs where they can use their hands more than their heads, but Billy wasn't much of a craftsman either. He preferred television to anything an employer could offer.

"What're you doing home?" I said, finding him in front of the TV one day when I came back to the house to retrieve a police file I'd taken home the night before. He should've been down at the worksite on State Street sweeping up nails, or whatever it was they had him doing that day.

"I wanted a tuna sandwich." He was watching *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, his shoes kicked off and the half-eaten sandwich drying up on a plate. His feet smelled bad and I wondered when he'd last changed his socks.

"I packed you tuna. Did you even unwrap it to look?"

"That's pretty funny, Dad. You usually pack ham on Wednesdays."

"Today's Tuesday," I said, grabbing the dirty plate.

Al Ferguson gave him a job at the IGA next. All Billy had to do was stock shelves, sweep the sidewalk, and help women tote grocery bags to the car. Billy got fancy and began organizing the cans by colors or sizes—markers he could relate to more than words. He could read only with effort.

"Bill," I said, in the store one day to pick up some Hamburger Helper, "just do what Mr. Ferguson tells you. Bear down." But he couldn't keep that job once the summer rush began either.

There was no meanness in my boy, no cunning or ill-will. But neither was there any logic or common sense. I lay awake nights wondering what would happen to him, wondering if a town like West Lebanon was the best place for a boy like mine.

West Lebanon's in the northern part of the Lower Peninsula in Michigan. In summer the population swells to 5000, but for nine months a police force of six men keeps order among 1200 people. In my years as Chief of Police, we've never had a murder or even a suspicious death. Drug problems, the occasional DWI, a few marital disputes, one or two suspicious fires, some B & E's, especially in the summer, a bully or two raising hell over at the high school, lots of traffic accidents. But spread over 365 days, it's a peaceful spot.

In the tenth year of my tenure as Chief, I hired Billy to work on the force. I took some heat for it—both with my own men and with two members of the City Council. Patty Harmon, the President that year, put it bluntly, "I guess you're the one who'll take the heat if he screws up. Right?"

There was some low-level grousing at first, but gradually my men came around. Billy turned out to be a pretty good crossing guard at the elementary school. He also saw that the squad cars were washed and serviced, answered the phone, and ran errands. These were the chores my men disliked and after a few months, nobody was complaining. I never sent Billy out on a dangerous or complex job. He didn't carry a gun or a nightstick. He didn't go out on patrols. If he answered a phone call asking for serious help, he passed it on to whoever else was with him.

"A good kid," Sam Hunter, my second in command, told me more than once. "Brains aren't everything, Chief."

The majority of calls came from people telling us their dog was lost or that they were locked out of their car or house. The winters were filled with slow days when a crossword puzzle or crime novel often occupied us. Rummy was popular. So were *The Price is Right* and *All My Children*.

Until February. It was a lousy February like most of 'em up here, one of those months where it never seemed to be fully light. Cold, snowy. In the second week, four of us came down with a terrible stomach virus. The headache that came with it was crippling. Billy didn't catch it. He'd never been sick a day in his life.

So it was just Billy and Ed Stuyvesant at the station. Around noon, the bug hit Ed like a bullet to the gut. He high-tailed it into the bathroom. "All right out there, Son?" he called to Billy between bouts. Ed wasn't really worried. Half the town was down with the bug so things were even more quiet than usual.

The call was clocked at 12:45 and came from a house out on Badger Creek Road. Helen Clayton's. She told me later she'd expected Billy to pass the phone on to someone senior, but after hearing her first sentence or two, Billy told her he'd see to it and hung up. Ed said he'd heard Billy say something through the door, but since he hadn't heard the phone ring, thought it was one of those trivial things Billy was prone to say. So Ed mumbled something

back and returned to the business at hand, never dreaming Billy had taken off to answer a call for help.

Billy drove out to Badger Creek Road on his motor scooter at 12:50. The roads had been recently cleared from a storm the day before. Mrs. Clayton reported the disturbance as coming from the Ryans' summer home. We'd checked the house for a disturbance the week before. Nothing. But Helen was no hysteric and breaking into summer homes is an ongoing problem in towns where houses are deserted for months. Teenagers looking for a place to have sex and drink, break in.

The Ryans' house was further back from the highway than Helen's. As a year-round resident, Helen didn't want a long driveway to plow. Helen couldn't see much, if anything, from her place. She described the noise later as a radio playing at full volume, laughter, swearing, shouting, cars pulling in and out too noisily. She thought it was teenagers—out of school for President's Day. Skiers perhaps?

The racket finally died down, and she assumed one of us had come out to quiet things. She went back to whatever she was doing (dying her hair, she confessed) and it wasn't till an hour or two later that someone stumbled into the station saying he'd seen a body jamming the door open at the Ryans.'

"No, I didn't go any closer," the fellow told Ed. "Didn't know what I might be walking in on." Embarrassed, he added, "Looked like he was past any help from what I could see."

Ed'd been wondering what'd happened to Billy by then. But since wandering was one of Billy's most aggravating traits, he hadn't been worried. He took the guy's statement, asking him how he happened to be tramping around out near Ryan's. The guy whisked his hunting license out, told Ed where he was staying, and left, pretty shaken up. Of course, the hunting season for anything other than crow, squirrel and rabbit had been over for months, but Ed had other things on his mind.

After checking the phone log and talking to Helen, Ed called me, trepidation in his voice. We showed up at Ryans,' recognizing Billy's figure from the driveway. It was almost certain someone had hit my boy with the iron shovel lying next to his body. There was blood everywhere: blood and parts of Billy's skull and brains. My stomach, which had been churning all day from the damned virus, went suddenly calm. Ed's reaction was different: he ran right inside, making it to the john but defiling the crime scene.

Within fifteen minutes, the area swarmed with my little army and men from the neighboring town. I also put in a call to Traverse City, the nearest big city, and they sent over their forensics team and detectives more experienced in handling crime scenes and murders. "Do you realize these bloody footprints probably belong to your own man?" the Traverse City detective asked me.

I nodded. "We've never investigated a murder."

The detective shook his head. "You get the same training we do."

"It's his kid, you know," Ed told him, going quickly from ashamed to angry.

“Sorry for your loss,” the detective said quietly. Those were the words we’d been taught to say, and for the first time, I realized how hollow they sounded. How perfunctory.

I hung back from the start, letting others take the lead. I allowed other police officers to turn my son over, let other men carry him away. I never set foot in the house. It wasn’t up to me to find my son’s killer. Anything I did was likely to screw up any eventual trial because of my inexperience in solving serious crimes and because of my relationship to the victim.

At least a dozen times in the weeks ahead, Billy’s actions were questioned, and I repeatedly admitted Billy shouldn’t have been there, shouldn’t have been employed by a police department, shouldn’t have been allowed to think himself capable of answering such a call.

If I’d grieved over Ellie’s death twenty years earlier, Billy’s death damn near sent me round the bend. Why had Billy answered that call? Probably because the rest of us were down sick. Bad luck. I hadn’t given enough thought to a situation like this one arising and Billy paid the price. The only thing that kept me sane was the idea that the murderer would be brought to justice—that I would see him put behind bars for the rest of his days.

44 But it didn’t look like there was going to be a trial anytime soon because the one and only piece of potential evidence was a Spiderman watch, the kind you can buy in any department store. It wasn’t even certain that the watch, found about ten yards from the door, hadn’t been lost by some summer guest months earlier or a more recent passerby. It’d only been spotted because the glint of the glass caught someone’s eye when the sun made a brief showing.

“What do you think, Chief,” Ed asked. “Has this thing been lying out here since last summer?” We both looked at the watch, which had been placed in an evidence bin. It was in pretty good shape for a watch lost six months earlier. The band was surprisingly long for something you’d expect a kid to wear. “Do adults wear these things?” Ed asked.

“Maybe an adult like Billy...was. Or a girl might even. Think it’s cute or something.” Ed turned his back on me and wiped away a tear. I looked at it again. “It may not belong to whoever was in that house, but it hasn’t been here for long. It would’ve been a foot deeper in the snow and a lot dirtier looking. Nobody would’ve found it and I don’t think it’d be running.” We both consulted our own watches and found Spidey kept pretty good time. We looked at each other. “Plus,” I added suddenly, “if it’d been here since last summer, the time would be an hour off.” Ed looked impressed that I’d thought of that; this was the depth of investigation our force could undertake: remembering daylight savings time.

There were a few signs that people had been there: cigarette butts, beer cans, a few empty bags for snack foods. All these items were eventually run for fingerprints but none matched any prints on file.

I buried my boy five days later, putting him next to Ellie, the spot where I was meant to be. There was nothing to hold up a funeral when a shovel to the head was all there was.

“One quick jab,” the coroner decided. “Must have been an ox.” The whole town turned out, and most of the neighboring ones. That’s the way people are up here. But I’d be damned if it were going to end like this. The investigation continued, but finally the new leads, the people to question, the timetables to work out—trickled out of it.

I am a patient man. Billy taught me that. I knew that whoever was killed my son had found another crib—if that’s the current term—but they hadn’t disappeared entirely. Small-time drug dealers, and that’s who I thought it was, don’t disappear. They’re peasants—like me—and peasants don’t travel well. They like their own john if nothing else. They’d never return to the Ryans’ house, but the area had hundreds of similar setups. I just had to wait it out. And I waited through spring and summer with nary a report of noise or unusual traffic.

It wasn’t until the next fall that some unusual activity drew my attention. Summer fills the houses in northern Michigan with law-abiding people, but by October, the houses are being boarded up for winter. It was then that reports of unusual activity began to resurface, lighting up our phone lines or coming across the Internet. Local kids partying a bit too hardy, movement at night, a few DUIs that didn’t seem like the usual beer-induced euphoria. I spent most nights driving or walking the streets of our town and the ones nearby.

“You’re not sleeping much lately are you?” Ed Stuyvesant asked as we stood in front of the coffee machine in November. “I saw your car out on Huron Street last night, Chief.” He lowered his voice even though we were alone. “It was nearly midnight.”

“Just making sure our taxpayers were safe.” We watched silently as the machine dripped its God-awful coffee into the scarred pot. “And what were you doing out there, Ed? A little far from your regular beat, too.”

“Marge’s sister, Brenda, lives out that way. Her dog had some pups in the middle of the night. Ever since the time I delivered that girl’s baby in the squad car, those women think I’m an ob-gyn.” He held his hands up. “Do these look like the mitts of a skilled vet?”

I smiled. “She hear anything out that way? Brenda, I mean. Seen anything going on?”

“Sometimes, Chet, if you’re looking too hard...” Ed said, calling me by name for once. He sampled the brew and made the requisite face. “But if you come across anything, give me a call no matter what time of night. Don’t take it on alone. I never did care about eight hours a night.” He set his half-empty cup down. “You don’t want to get yourself into trouble. Take on more than you can handle alone.”

This was a lot of talk from a quiet man. “I’ll give you a call, Ed. I’m not aiming to screw it up now.”

“Still hoping to convict someone?”

I nodded. “I’m gonna see someone brought to justice. If I don’t, I’ll never get beyond it.”

“Odds are against it by now. Those cowboys are probably long gone.”

“And where would they go? Detroit? Chicago? They can’t even read a map.”

* * *

It wasn't until the week after New Year's that I picked up two reports of possible criminal activity in Duck Hollow. Duck Hollow's about fifteen miles down the road. It's less of a town than West Lebanon, mostly attracting folks who just want to fish or hunt. Loners. There's a general store with a gas pump outside it and not much else.

The summer houses sit deep in the woods. They're really just barebones cabins—not meant for families. Duck Hollow uses the schools, police, and services of the neighboring towns to get by. The off-season population is 166 and better than 75 of that number are men over fifty, holed up in tiny cabins they knocked together with a few drunken buddies over a couple of weekends thirty years earlier. Nobody tells them how to live their lives in Duck Hollow; taxes are among the lowest in Michigan.

The first suspicious report came from one of the few married couples. They reported that New Year's Eve had been celebrated for eight hours straight at a cabin nearby. The man said it sounded like a machine gun was being fired. It may have been a pump BB gun, but the officer who took the information thought it was probably a semi-automatic shotgun.

46 The next day, someone turning into a lane leading up to a boarded-up house in Duck Hollow, cut off a driver coming from the opposite direction. When the irate driver beeped, the car stopped midway down the lane, the passenger's window came down, and a bald man drew a knife across his throat and smiled. Or leered, the other driver actually reported. A cop checked this one out too, but the house looked untouched. Everyone in Duck Hollow has a knife and a rifle or two.

When I looked at a map, the locations called in were in a straight line if you traveled through the woods. It seemed likely someone was holing up on or near that line. Maybe someone without a car, who was tramping through the woods from house to house. Ed and I went up there a few nights later, scouting every cabin we could find and succeeding only in drawing attention from two men with shotguns. "Police," Ed yelled—both times, the gun was silently withdrawn through a crack in the door. No idle chatter in Duck Hollow.

But the third time, we found their lair. We'd mapped the houses legitimately occupied by then and this one was not on the list, and although the boards facing the dirt road were still up when we cautiously circled the house, the ones over the back door and window had been pulled aside just enough to allow entry. Smoke curled out of the chimney and two pairs of dripping boots sat at the back door. Nice that they'd removed their boots before entering the cabin. Someone had taught these guys manners. "Think we need to call for more help," Ed whispered as we eased closer to the house.

"Looks like it's just two of them," I whispered, gesturing toward the boots. Then I looked at my own bootless feet and wondered. With no wife to tell me how to dress, I routinely ruined shoes. Perhaps a guy inside did too. I shrugged. Calling for help would delay the inevitable.

A minute later, Ed kicked in the flimsy door with one good thrust and then stepped to the side. I peered in cautiously. Inside was a large but barely furnished room with a kitchen area at our end. Two guys were sitting at one of those fifties kitchen tables watching a tiny television set. It must have run on batteries since the electricity was turned off. They both looked up, blinking at the sudden light and at the poised Glock in our hands. Before they could move, I yelled, "Freeze," which they immediately did.

The older one, a beefy, red-faced guy, was around forty-five; the other was a kid who was even larger—maybe eighteen or twenty. "Put your hands where I can see them," I added. I'd hate to tell you how rarely I've said words like that. To myself, I seemed inauthentic but they took me as the genuine thing and the kid's enormous arms shot right up—probably something he'd seen in movies too.

"Like this?" he called out in a surprisingly pipsqueaky voice. I could see his wrists clearly and it nearly took my breath away. He was wearing a Spiderman watch. Red band this time. Before it'd been blue.

"Where did you get that watch?" I asked, stepping up and grabbing his wrist. Big as he was, the kid screamed and nearly fell off his chair. I yanked him back onto it with little thought for the pain. He sat there, his mouth hanging open, not saying a word. I started to repeat the question. "Where did you..."

"Look, he ain't right," the beefy guy broke in. "And all you're doing is scaring him half to death." His voice softened considerably. "His Dad bought that watch for him when he lost his old one. Right, Johnny." The kid nodded. The older man looked at me. "What's with the watch?"

My brain began to click about then and I didn't say anything for half a minute. Ed was waiting, poised, ready to follow my lead. "Could you be the guys killed a boy out in West Lebanon last year?" I asked. "Left him in a doorway."

The beefy guy shook his head. "No, sir. I was down in Jackson 'bout then. Didn't get out till June." He looked at me and answered my next question. "I stole a car."

I nodded. "What about him? He do it?"

"He ain't right," the beefy guy repeated. "His Dad just lets him hang around." He looked around as if John's father might be listening, then added, "He don't know what else to do since his Mom took off. He's got some place gonna take him after the holidays now that the school gave up on him. Up near Marquette."

"You ever hit a guy with a shovel? A guy wearing a shirt like mine?" I asked Johnny, knowing I shouldn't ask questions like that. Knowing I should call the cops in Traverse City and let them handle it. Knowing I was screwing things up. But I had to know.

The kid shrugged. Nobody said anything for ten seconds.

"He probably don't even remember," the beefy guy finally said. "And if he did do it, which I ain't saying he did, it didn't mean nothin'. A kid like Johnny, well you know how it is. Everyone knows a kid like John. Right?"

"Either of you have guns?" I asked, ignoring his last comment. I nodded to Ed and he started to search them.

"Nah, I'm just a minder, you might say," the guy told me. "Since that time in West Lebanon, John here gets minded. I'd just as soon stay out of Jackson so it's okay with me, Money's less but it's something." He looked at Ed as he began to scour the room. "Not that I'm saying anything happened over there, mind you. Who knows how scared a kid like John might be to see a uniform come through a door. Who knows what he's liable to do."

"You're not saying that, huh?"

"Right. Look," he said, staring at Ed and his Glock. "I'll save you some time. We don't have nothing here but the TV and some food." I nodded and Ed shrugged, giving up the search. "It's just daycare," the guy continued in case we still didn't get it.

I looked at the table where the boy sat, head down. A tear slid down his cheek, his hands still up in the air. "Why don't the two of you just get out of here?" I said, avoiding Ed's shocked face.

"What about the other stuff going on?" he asked me. "The break-ins. You know."

"These fellows won't give us any more trouble. Right?"

"Right. Right! You mean we can go?" The guy was rising already, looking for his coat.

"Get your coat on, John."

Johnny lowered his arms slowly. "I don't need a coat, Shep." He looked longingly at the TV where Oprah Winfrey was interviewing a female guest. One of those skinny blondes you saw everywhere. "You ain't gonna leave the TV behind, are you?"

Shep shook his head and picked it up without turning it off. "You do too need a coat, Johnny. It's twenty degrees out there." Shep put the set down again and helped the boy into his coat, grabbed the TV again, and started for the door.

"Get out of the county now," I said from the doorstep. "Get as far away as possible. Cause next time it'll be different." I stood at the doorway, watching them turn toward the forest. "My memory's fading. Next time I may not remember what it was like for a kid like him." I was shouting the last words, shouting and crying both.



BIO: Patricia Abbott has published stories in literary and crime publications such as [Plots with Guns](#), [The Thrilling Detective](#), [Beat to a Pulp](#), [Pulp Pusher](#), [Murdaland](#), [Thuglit](#), [Spinetingler](#), etc. She lives and works in Detroit, Michigan.

WHAT WE PRAY FOR

By Keith Rawson

And here's the money shot! Tits and ass; genital-to-genital contact, and luckily, his target wasn't all that hard on the eyes. Not exactly porn star quality stiff silicon double-D tits and air brushed perfection, but defiantly a higher quality than the usual fatty sagginess you typically expect from middle-age targets. This was what Devin Holman and his colleagues lived for. There wasn't any of that Sam Spade shit involved in P.I. work. Yeah, that's what you got into the business for at first; most of the jackasses—Holman included—who became private investigators got into it because they read too many crime novels growing up, thinking that they'd be chasing down murderers, international jewel thieves, foreign secrets agents—all that Dashiell Hammett bullshit. Reality check; Cops chase real crooks; CIA chases spies; and international jewel thieves, well those bastards don't even fucking exist.

No, P.I.'s chased down pussy hounds and bored house wives; they ran background checks for ruthless multi-national corporations on new potatoes to plant in cube farms. He remembered those days, his first year at Tillman & Associates; he rode Formica shifting through credit reports, drug test results, and minor criminal records. He'd watch his colleagues coming in from all nighters trailing the negligent spouses; the horny housewives and husbands and wished it was him out on the street; surely being on an observation was more exciting than getting tension headaches from reading blinking computer print 8 hours a day. Wrong, very wrong.

How long ago was it when old man Tillman sent him out on his first observation? Eight years ago? Nine years ago? Shit, Holman couldn't even remember the case? He was sure that it was just some traveling salesman getting his dick wet when he was out of town; maybe the wife grew suspicious of his business trips and hired the firm when she came down with a dose of the Clap or a bush full of crabs. Whatever. All the cases, all the observations, they all blended into one big flabby fuck session after so many years on the job, and all you truly cared about was the money shot; the moment when the clothes came off and hopefully the drapes were left open wide enough so that you could snap off a couple of tightly focused shots and you could go home and go to bed at a reasonable hour.

Which was what was so great about this particular observation, it was only 9 o'clock and here was Mrs. Sam Miller stripping down to her God given glory and getting ready to spread it to a man that wasn't her husband. Mrs. Miller was the soon to be former trophy wife of a retired dot.com hot shot who was actually smart enough to get out and walk away with close to a billion stuffed in his bulging pockets before his intellectual property took a shit like all the rest. But like most multi-millionaire computer geeks, Miller was true to the stereotype and he married the first piece of trim that spent more than five minutes paying attention to him. The problem with Mrs. Miller is that she came to the marriage

with a whole shit load of baggage. First off, when Mr. Miller met her she was a stripper dancing at a club that Mr. Miller used to frequent with out of town clients and investors. Mrs. Miller was Mr. Miller's favorite pole climber and he shoveled thousands of dollars into her g-string before he built up the courage to buy a 3-carat ring. Mr. Miller wasn't a stupid man, though, before the "I Dos," Mr. Miller had the future Mrs. Miller sign a pre-nup. Mrs. Miller had no problem with it; it was a fair agreement that treated her right in case the two of them divorced, that is unless she fucked around on Mr. Miller, which, of course, she would never do?

Ten years into the marriage, apparently Mrs. Miller had never stepped out on her geek in shining armor, but suddenly Mr. Miller started noticing Mrs. Miller's behavior changing ever so slightly. Nothing that you would call out of the ordinary, just little things: Hushed cell phone conversations, mysterious errands and shopping trips where she wouldn't come back with anything from the mall, and of course the disturbing lack of sex in their marriage. From a physical stand point, their marriage had always been a primal, animal thing. But for over six months, the sex had dwindled to a few awkward encounters; and 2 weeks ago, Mrs. Miller straight up refused his advances, that's when he decided to sick Tillman and associates on Mrs. Miller.

Mr. Miller, the pathetic fuck, at this point in his story broke down in big snotty tears. Holman hated this part of the job. He wasn't a priest for Christ sakes, he wasn't there to comfort the client and sooth their little emotional aches and pains, he was there to track the target and catch them doing what they weren't suppose to be, so the client could avoid handing a huge divorce settlement. But as his years on the job had taught him, it was better to attempt to give some form of sympathy; the referrals Mr. Miller might bring in if Holman did his job right could possibly keep him in fat city for years to come. So he offered the snotty blubber pot a tissue and did hid best to assure Mr. Miller that Mrs. Miller probably wasn't stepping out on him.

Yeah, right.

Holman expected the Miller observation to go on for weeks. Women are, by nature, a very secretive bunch, and when they don't want the men in their lives to know something, they can keep it buried deep for years, sometimes decades, and when it came to having an affair, women were meticulous in their behaviors. Unlike men, women were extremely discrete. They shifted patterns, never meeting at the same restaurant, bar, or hotel room twice. They'd park their cars in mall parking garages under the guise of spending yet another day shopping and cab it out to their true destination. One of Holman's first street observations lasted nearly a month because the wife he was trailing seemed to have cars stashed all over the city, and the only way he managed to finally catch her on film was that she made the mistake of having her boyfriend pick her up at the primary residence.

But Mrs. Miller completely surprised him on the first day of ops. She left the family home mid-day, dressed down in workout clothes and carrying a gym bag. Her first stop

was an upscale Gym complete with gates and security guards semi-lethally armed with Tasers. No access, so Holman parked a block away from the entrance gate sipping coffee and listening to the police band on his scanner. Fortunately the club had one way in and one way out, so there was no way he'd lose sight of Mrs. Miller's Silver Beemer. He spotted her again three hours after she entered, no work out gear this time from his vantage point. They rolled along in 5 o'clock traffic. Holman sticking three or four car lanes behind at all times; they were headed in the opposite direction of the Miller's mini-mansion. She finally pulled into the parking lot of a chain sports bar called the Spot. She stepped out of the car in full 'come fuck me' gear; lose fitting, low-slung skin-beige dress that was a near perfect match for her own bronze skin tone; her long blonde hair was loose and feathered like some 70's poster girl sex goddess; she finished off the outfit with black Armani shades that seemed to cover half her face and pale brown suede calf-length boots. Holden nearly came in his pants as he watched her near perfect ass roll gracefully with a well practiced bump and grind with each step she took towards the suburban bar.

The bar was apparently a brief pit stop and she strolled out with a man of undetermined stature 15 minutes later. He kept his appearance well concealed behind his own enormous pair of wraparound shades, an LA Dodgers hat pulled low over his forehead, and his body wrapped in what appeared to be a floor-length suede overcoat. Holden smelled golf hustler, a wealthy woman's man whore. The fugitive couple piled into Mrs. Miller's vehicle and drove a couple of miles down the road to a Denny's with an hourly rate motel next door. Holden couldn't remember the last time he'd broken an observation down in less than 24 hours! Jesus either Mrs. Miller didn't have clue her husband was having her followed or she just didn't care and was thinking her sport fucking as a possible exit strategy from her marriage. After a quick snack of deep fried garbage, the couple headed to the motel's front office, rented a ground floor room and headed inside politely groping each other. They left the dusty vertical blinds open for the entire world to see, and most importantly, for his camera to catch live and uncensored in life like digital glory.

Holman zoomed the lens a full 10 to catch a righteous shot of Mrs. Miller, hands flat on the window ledge, bent over, back arched, slightly sagging, but still close to perfect tits bounce back and forth threatening to smack her right on the chin as the golf hustler banged away from behind still sporting shades, hat, and trench coat, his hands roughly gripping her tanned shoulders for extra thrust. Holden's heart felt like a cement mixer on over drive. This shit was hot and it reminded him how long it had been since he'd last been laid, fucking ages. The couple switched up positions, Mrs. Miller's ass now planted on the window ledge, her firm calves parked on the mystery man's shoulders; the hustler had Mrs. Miller's back pinned against the window, his hands moving between rubbing her tits, to running his fingers through her thick hair.

Holden had more than enough shots to send Mrs. Miller back to the day shift at some greasy strip bar, but he couldn't take his eyes off the show and was entertaining idea of unzipping and rubbing a quick one out. The masked man leaned in close, his hands sliding around Mrs. Miller's neck, kissing her like he was trying to swallow her whole, and suddenly he slammed her head into the motel window hard enough to cause the glass to spider web. The motherfucker's hands were around her throat; he was choking her down, and not in your typical erotic affixation style, he was straight up trying to kill her.

Mrs. Miller's fingers went straight to the hustler's face and she started trying to claw at his eyes, Holden was convinced that he was witnessing a possible Murder. Tillman & Associates policy when witnessing a possible act of violence was to call the proper authorities, wait for 5-0 to roll in and assist in the investigation as a material witness. But if he followed protocol, chances were the cops would show up way to late to stop the current situation. His only chance was to step in and stop the attack. Holden bolted from his ride. The room was a good hundred yards away, and he moved as fast as his 250 lbs. of deep fried bulk would allow him. Jesus, he felt like he was going to drop of a coronary before he even hit the door, he'd count himself lucky to have enough energy to stop trench coat guy from choking the rest of Mrs. Miller's life out of her body. Fucking A! This shit was awesome; this was straight up fucking Sam Spade/Mickey Spillane shit!

Holman hit the door with every ounce of his weight and momentum. He was almost surprised how easily the lock popped opened. As soon as Holden was inside the room he turned on Mrs. Miller's attacker, his eyes huge and hot breath ripping in and out of his lungs.

What the shit?

For the first time since the beginning of the observation, Holden got a good look at Mrs. Miller's fuck buddy. The guy was an absolute fat ass, a blimp, and he kind of looked a little like Mr. Miller. Hell, just not a little, a lot. Holman turned his attention to Mrs. Miller. He'd expected her to be unconscious, at death's door. She wasn't, she was laughing like a little girl, her hands covering her mouth, her pale beautiful blue eyes shining with something not quite like happiness. Holden didn't have time to react as the fat bastard smashed something hard and flat against the right side of his face. He crumbled flat on his back, the fat asshole standing over him gripping a thick crystal ashtray in both hands.

Holman's eyes were heavy and he felt like every bone in his face was shattered and moving around with a life of their own. He couldn't believe what was happening.

The fucking creep standing over him and getting ready to cave in his skull was Mr. Miller, and the weeping tub of guts he half-heartedly attempted to comfort a few brief days ago had the biggest cock he'd ever seen.

Holy Christ, that thing had to be at least a foot and a half long?

Sadly, these were Holman's final thoughts.

Tammy Miller laid flat on her back, sweat drenched and smoking, an annoyed squint creasing her brow.

"You know, honey," Tammy's Husband Sam called from the bathroom. "We really should send Zach Tillman a nice 'Thank You' basket?"

"Fuck Zach Tillman. He should screen these guys a little more carefully before he sends them out."

"You know, honey," Sam said as he stepped out of the bathroom, gently patting his thinning mousy brown hair dry with a cheap motel room towel.

Sam truly wasn't much to look at. He was at least 100 lbs. overweight, practically blind and had some of the worst back acne Tammy had ever seen. But he was a wonderful husband who indulged his wife's every whim, including occasionally letting her screw recently deceased Private Investigators. Plus his cock could easily be classified as one of the eight wonders of the natural world: that helped out a lot.

"Zach can't exactly ask for guy's penis size on a resume. Besides, the last two were far from disappointing. And at least this guy stayed hard until you were finished."

"I know, Sweetie," she said as she stood up from the bed she'd been laying and grinding out her cigarette into what was left of Devin Holden's skull in one smooth motion before wrapping her arms around her husband's neck. "But, Jesus, look at him. He can't be more than five inches, six inches tops, and my fingers did most of the work."

"I know, honey. But you still had fun, didn't you?"

"Of course."

"And you know, I was thinking about what you said the other night. Maybe it is time we throw a woman into the mix?"

"Oh, you'll love it, baby!"

"I'm sure. But I'm thinking lubrication's going to be kind of a problem. I don't think I can get some woman as worked up as you do with these guys."

"Yeah, but maybe Zach has a lesbian on the pay roll that he wouldn't mind getting rid of?"

"Yeah, maybe? It doesn't hurt to ask?"



BIO: Keith Rawson lives in the Phoenix, AZ suburb of Gilbert with his wife and daughter. He has been writing for the past fifteen years but has just recently started sending his material out for publication over the past year. He has been fortunate enough to have found homes for fifteen of his stories in such venues as DZ Allen's Muzzle Flash, [Powder Burn Flash](#), [Flashshots](#), [Darkest Before The Dawn](#), [Yellow Mama](#), [A Twist Of Noir](#), and [Bad Things](#). He has also recently completed the first draft of a hard-boiled crime novel tentatively titled, *Retirement*.



STONE REHAB

By Michael S. Chong

Illustration by Michael Archibald

I first met Ron Stone when we were both kids. He was a few years older than me and had the reputation of being a tough guy. You know the one that everyone in the neighbourhood was scared of and told different stories about how he took on a whole gang of guys at one time beating them all up. One of my favourite tales happened at the local fair where Ron unknowingly went against a Golden Gloves who knocked out all his teeth but Ron never went down.

The first time we ever had any real conversation was off to the side at a party, both of us full of beer, hard liquor and soft drugs. He cornered me, too drunk to be intimidated, and read me some poetry he wrote out of a banged-up notebook. The poems were for an upper-class girl he had the hots for and weren't too bad, somewhere between soft metal ballad lyrics and Bukowski. He told me later he had his way with her and once that was done, lost interest.

Over years of sharing mutual friends, Ron and I became pretty close, going on fishing trips and attending the booze cans he ran, which always had long lines for the washroom, those waiting impatiently to get in and those leaving hyperactive and wired.

While I became a bureaucrat, Ron went through a number of professions from heisting computers to running ladies, less a pimp than a driver.

Even when he went inside for a stint, which seemed more often than not, he kept in touch with infrequent calls and then the week-long party once he got free.

For a time, Ron became affiliated with some bikers. He never got too deep since by then, his bad habits had taken away his subtlety. There were rumours that he had made some guys disappear. There was that one time he and an associate held a guy in a bar, the reason being the guy owed money, which made the news.

After a while, Ron seemed to just sink into the blow. Ever see one of those guys who have had so much go up their nose that the nostrils collapse? Ron had one of those noses.

After a while, I think Ron lost control of everything. He grew anxious and incoherent. He found a Dr. Feelgood and started doing hillbilly heroin, making him a walking coma victim.

A few of us amongst his friends tried to talk him into rehab and he'd agree then, say that he was in it getting clean but each time we saw him again, he would still be a mess, moving and talking like he was stuck in mud.

The last time I saw him over at a friend's place, he was totally out of it, talking to the wall, blabbering incoherently, and trying to exit the room through a closet.

After that, no one heard from him at all for a year or so. I tried to contact him on his birthday and his father told me that he was up north and hung up.

Then a couple of weeks ago, out of the blue, Ron called me.

"Hey Ricky, how's it going?" Ron sounded sober.

"Ron, where the hell have you been?"

"I'm doing a piece."

"What the hell happened?"

"I was framed. I'll tell you all about it later."

"So how long?"

"A couple of months. I can do it standing on my head."

"As long as you're not bent over."

"Fuck you, I told you that shit doesn't happen up here."

"Just watch your hemorrhoids."

"In your dreams, Ricky boy. How are the boys?"

"Same old shit. Baron's working on his bikes and Mel's engaged to Lara again."

"Again? When will that boy learn? He never has any luck with the ladies. Anyway, that's why I'm calling you. You remember Anna?"

Anna was a woman that Ron had shacked up with a few years ago. She had been in a nasty car accident and was supposed to have been waiting on a big insurance settlement. When she was struck by the other driver, too drunk to walk let alone get behind a wheel, it had crushed her legs and she had to relearn to walk.

There was talk of marriage when they were together, but when Ron was alone he would say he wanted a chunk of the money coming to her although I was always thought he had a soft spot for her.

I told him I thought Anna was long gone and Ron said that he had hooked up with her again a few months ago and yes, she got her settlement. It was mid six figures and he wasn't going to let anything get in between him and the money.

"The last time I spoke to her, she sounded a little antsy," Ron said. "Would you keep six on her for me? I mean like watch her place one night and see what's going on?"

"Ron, that chick loved you. I was always surprised you let her go."

"I was in a bad place. You know. Look, do me this one fucking favour. You owe me."

"Owe you?" I laughed. "Most of the shit I've ever had with the law was due to you." On more than one occasion, hanging with Ron was what they call a "heat score." There was that time Ron reached behind the counter at a 7-11, grabbing a carton of cigarettes with no attempt at discretion, then hopped into my car with me having no knowledge of the crime until the cops woke me up at 4 am later that night.

"C'mon, one night," he said. "All you have to do is sit outside her place one night and see if she comes home with somebody or leaves with somebody. That's all."

"One night? Fuck man, I can do one night. I won't case her place for a week. One night. Where's she staying?"

So that Friday, I parked across the street and one house away from a duplex in the east-end of town. The hand-tooled wooden chairs on some of the porches beside the pile of rusting bicycle frames and weathered couches on others suggested the gentrification of this area was still in progress.

I smoked a joint, fiddled with the radio for a while then fell asleep. Knocking on the window woke me up. Looking at the dash clock bleary eyed, I saw that I'd been out for at least 3 hours. Through the driver's side window, I saw a clearly wasted Anna, weaving on her feet, bent over smiling at me, doing the roll-down motion with her hand.

"Ricky," she slurred. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Anna used to be a stripper or what Ron liked to call a 'peeler.' I had first met her when Ron was driving 'peelers' around, either from the club to home or to pre-arranged meetings with clients for private dances.

We were at club having drinks and he got me a lap dance. After G n'R's "September Rain" with the dancer grinding her butt into my groin, she sat down beside us and Ron introduced me to Anna. Although I would never get a lap dance for myself, finding the commercial aspect of the transaction a little bit of a turn-off, Anna had a firm but voluptuous body and earthy scent just short of B.O. which got me hard despite myself.

Now years later, outside her place and before I could say anything Anna said "Are you spying on me? That jealous bastard. Well, I'm glad I came home alone tonight. You're coming in for a drink, Ricky, so we can catch up."

With my cover blown and the joint still keeping me a little buzzed, I thought what the hell. I followed her black patent leather stiletto boots toward her messy bungalow. She bent over and exclaimed that she had found a baggy of blow.

"Wow, that's incredible," I said and pretended to look around on the ground myself. Looking back, I wonder why she went through the bother. She probably told Ron that she was going to stay clean.

I could tell you that I was thinking about my friendship with Ron when Anna started blowing me like a porn star but I would be lying if I told you I was after she swallowed.

The next day I waited for the call from Ron. Right away, Ron said he called a neighbour of Anna's this morning he knew from booze can days that morning and heard that the guy's wife saw a man leaving Anna's that morning when she was getting the newspaper. I told him I saw Anna come home with his old biker buddy Bull, the first name that came to my head. Bull had been a mentor of sorts for Ron during his time with the bikers. God knows where he got the nickname since he was thin and wiry, with shoulder-length hair receding at the front.

"That fucker," Ron said. "It figures. It fucking figures. Come and see me, we need to talk in person."

I had never wanted to visit Ron when he was inside. It would make me a Known Associate and who needs that? The next day I drove the 3 hour drive north to the joint they had Ron locked up in.

He looked like he hadn't slept when he walked up to the bolted down metal table I sat at waiting for him. He clasped hands as he sat down without looking me in the eyes.

"Thanks for coming," Ron said. "So did they fucking see you?"

I told him they didn't. He said the reason he was inside was because of Bull but wouldn't go into any more detail. He asked if he was there all night and I told him I had left after I saw Anna and Bull enter together.

Ron told me Anna hadn't come to visit him once. "She won't even return my calls," Ron said. "Fuck, I have a kilo stashed for that fucker."

He was quiet for couple of minutes, just looking into his palms on the tabletop, then looked at me with bloodshot eyes. "Here's what I want you to do."

Ron wanted me to call the cops, then plant the kilo at Bull's place. The reason for calling before the fact being that it would give Bull very little time to accidentally find the kilo and blow the plan. "You have to do this for me."

I asked him "Why me?" and he said he didn't trust anyone else. That sort of got to me.

"It'll be easy," Ron said. "Bull hides the key to his side door in his mail box. On Sunday nights he's always at "church," their weekly meeting, so you can do it then. Put it under the couch then call the cops. 5-0 are probably itching to get him for anything. It'll be a piece of cake."

So that Saturday I went to Ron's parents' place, telling them that Ron wanted me to grab some stuff for him. His dad let me in and I found the kilo hidden in a vent. The next day after dark I called in to the cops, telling the dispatcher that "there were smells of marijuana and people coming and going at all times of the day and night and would you please look into it because I do have children," then headed over to Bull's duplex near the docklands.

I knocked on the door like a good thief and no one answered. Finding the key where Ron said it was, I scoped the neighbourhood which was quiet with the glow of televisions. I went in through the side door and stepped into the blackness. Having only been here once before, going on a run with Ron to pick up his supplies, I remembered that the place was cluttered with empty takeout containers and beer bottles. Slowly feeling my way around, everything feeling sticky to the touch, I found the light switch to the light and flicked it on. I was in the kitchen with a sink full of dirty dishes and a table with scratched lottery tickets and an open pizza box with chewed crusts.

I went through the doorway to the living room and the light from the kitchen barely illuminated the couch against the far wall. As I walked toward the couch and pulled out the kilo secreted inside my jacket, Bull turned on the light and walked into the room holding a gun pointed right at my chest.

"What the fuck are you doing here?"

Bull was wearing a thread-bare robe, his nose red like he had a cold. A look of recognition came to his eyes and he chin pointed at me. "You're Ricky, Ronnie's old buddy. The fuck is that?" He motioned to the kilo I was trying to put back into my jacket.

I thought fast. "Bull, yeah it's me Ricky. Ron wanted me to return this kilo to you because he was worried that his folks might find it."

"Bullshit," Bull said, never taking the gun off of me. "Sit the fuck down." I sat down on the couch, placing the kilo on the coffee table covered in empties and a heaping ashtray. "So Ron knows you're here?"

"This is your kilo, isn't it?"

"Could be." Bull picked up the kilo and looked down at it for a second. "But I still don't understand why you brought it here and snuck in."

"I knocked, but no one answered and Ron told me where the side door key was. I let myself in because I have no place to keep something like this and it is yours."

"Ron could've let me know. This sounds like bullshit. Is Ron trying to fuck me up? He knows I don't keep any shit here outside of personal." He stepped towards and hit me on top of the head with the butt of the gun. It felt like I blinked out for a second.

"Listen, just contact Ron and he'll let you know," I said.

"Ron knows I'm not usually home on Sunday nights," Bull said. "I'll fucking contact Ronnie and get to the bottom of this. You just sit there and think about telling the full fucking story."

On a cell phone, Bull called a screw at the joint where Ron was being kept. First they talked about some business in coded words. From what I could make out, it had something to do with replenishing the screw's supplies. Bull asked to speak to Ron then said to me "Now let's see if your story holds."

"Ronnie," Bull said. "How goes it? Yeah, yeah, I'll see that comes your way. So I'm home from church tonight and guess who just walks into my place? Your buddy Ricky."

I could barely make out Ron's voice through the cell.

"Right," Bull said doing little circles around my face with the barrel of the gun. "So why didn't you get word to me? Right. Well, the fucker let himself in with my hidden key... No, of course, you don't know nothing about that. Well, how did he know where the key was?"

"I've been here before," I said. "I've seen you take it."

"He says he's been here before and he seen me take it. Right. Well, okay. You just sit still and I'll get back to you."

Bull put his cell down on the coffee table and sat down on an ottoman across from me. He smiled, never once taking the gun from me.

"So Ron told you? I came here to return it."

"Both of you fuckers are lying and you're going to tell me the truth. Get the fuck up."

"I told you the truth."

"Get the fuck up. Go to the kitchen."

I made no move and he stood up and clubbed me on the head with the gun. "Get the fuck up."

I did and walked to the kitchen. He made me sit in a chair then proceeded to bind my ankles to the chair legs with some duct tape. My wrists were wrapped together in my lap.

He came up around me and pushed the barrel of the gun into my nose.

"So what the fuck is really going on?" Ron asked. "The way I figure it is that Ron is pissed about being inside on account of me and wanted to plant that shit in here to get me busted. So we can either make this easy and you can just walk away or..." He slammed the gun across my face and I tasted blood.

"Look this is my fault," I said. "I shouldn't've just come in. I'm sorry."

"Ronnie was obviously lying to me. That guy could never lie."

The doorbell rang. "You wait here," Bull said, leaving the room and heading to the door. With only my pants tied to the chair, I pushed out of my shoes, undid my pants then slipped them off. I could hear Bull talking to someone at the front door down the hallway. I pulled my pants free from the chair, put them back on, found a knife, wedged it in a drawer and rubbed my bound wrists against the serrated edge until I was free. I tiptoed to the living room, grabbed the kilo and then walked out the side door. There was a cop car there. I had no idea they would respond so quickly. It was probably due to the fact that Bull was known to all the boys in the precinct.

As I walked out to the sidewalk, I looked back and saw Bull at the door talking to a pair of cops. He saw me and I waved. I knew know if Bull was unsure before about the frame, he was damn sure now.

With nowhere to go, I hopped in my car and drove home. When I got in, there was a message from Ron. "How the fuck could you screw up so badly?" Ron said in his message. "This is not fucking good. Take care of yourself. I'll do my best in here." With that he hung up and I could tell he was worried.

I was pretty sure Bull had no idea where I lived but I knew he would eventually find out. All I had now was the kilo. It would have to be my ticket out. With a street value of over a hundred grand, it could buy a lot of tickets. Still, I had no way to move it, my best connection being inside with his own life endangered because of my poor criminal skills.

I sat down at my kitchen table, cut open the kilo wrapped in plastic, and did a couple of lines. When chopping it up with my driver's license, the granules looked denser and more crystalline than any I had done before, which made me think that the coke was hardly stepped on. After I did the first line, I was sure of it with the whole side of my face freezing. It hit me like a jolt and I felt like I could take on Bull barehanded even if he had the gun. I would kick the fucking pistol out of his hand then beat the fucker up. Yeah! Ten minutes later, I wasn't so sure anymore so did another line, then another. An hour passed by and probably 10 lines, I had lost count. Fuck, what if he had always known where I lived and was heading over right now?

Perhaps I was thinking a little with my dick, but Anna seemed like my best and only option. If she knew Ron, then she would know Ron's connections. At the very least, she would be able to point me in the right direction. I did another hour of lines and was so nervous when I left, I was peeking through the curtains at my car to make sure I wasn't

being surrounded. A neighbourhood teenage kid stopped to light a smoke and I could've sworn to God he was looking right at me. I had seen him in the area before unless he was watching me those times too but I hadn't done anything back then but I had spent a lot of time with Ron in the past and they might've put a tail on me. You never know.

The whole drive to Anna's I felt like I was being followed, so I started circling blocks on the way. After one turn, I saw another car also turn. This made me duck down an alley, then when I came back out the other side, the car was right there waiting for me. I backed up down the alley and spun around in an empty lot, then raced back out the way I originally came. Pulling out of the alley I saw that the first car I saw was parked in front of a house just down the street. The second car I saw was just the same make. I needed another line and did it right off the dash.

When I got to Anna's it was around midnight. I circled the block a couple of times to make sure no one was tailing me and no one was, unless they were passing off between cars which I had seen them do on TV. After the third time, I parked way down the street from Anna's and walked to her door.

When she answered she didn't seem happy to see me. "Hey Ricky, you back for more?"

"I need your help. Can I come in?"

"Sure come on in." She stepped aside to let me in and as soon as I was by her she closed the door and I pulled out the kilo.

"Well, well," Anna said. "What have we got here." She took the kilo from my hand. "Jesus, you're a dumb fuck."

"Yeah, I was hoping you could help me move it. I need to get out of town."

As we walked to her living room, she started giggling.

"What's so funny?" I asked.

As we entered the living room, I knew what was so funny. Bull was sitting there nursing a beer. I turned to run and Anna got me in a bear hug which gave Bull enough time to jump up and hit me across the head with the gun he pulled from his coat. I went down to the ground. Someone kicked me but with my head down I wasn't sure if it was Bull or Anna. I looked up and saw Bull screwing a silencer onto his gun. "Sorry Anna, I'll clean up the mess." Bull said, then shot me in the head.



BIO: Michael was born a Scorpio in the Year of the Dog. He has been with people that have found drugs just lying on the ground. He worked as a reporter while living in the Netherlands while also writing for such publications as [Rice Paper](#) and, online, [Allan Guthrie's Noir Originals](#).

TIMING IS EVERYTHING

By Barry Baldwin

"Now, Officer, what's your name?"

The chief of homicide's question was a pure formality. Everybody there knew that he knew. But the etiquette of a good reaming-out had to be observed.

"Edwards, sir, Officer Edwards."

"That's a start, anyway. Give you a hundred percent for that."

"Thank you, sir."

"I wouldn't be too quick with the thank yous, Officer Edwards. How long have you been on the force, son?"

The "son" didn't fit the inspector's tone or features. It was his way of playing the hard and soft man at the same time, to keep his victim on the hop. The other one there, his sergeant, knew this technique of old; indeed, he copied it in his own dealings both with the punks in the charge room and the rookie patrolmen, between whom, he thought in his gloomier moments, there was less and less difference with each passing year.

"Roughly six months, sir."

"Roughly? I hope that's not a word that appears very often in your beat reports."

"No, sir. Five months, two weeks, three days, sir."

"I'm surprised you can't get it down to hours and minutes."

The chief seemed suddenly to tire of this cat and mouse game, and went for the kill. His voice could have boiled the fat from a longshoreman's neck, a drill sergeant might have blanched at his language. By the time it was over and he had been allowed to stumble out of the office, the young officer was closer to tears than he ever had been since childhood. Left to themselves, the chief mentally dissected his subordinate who had borne witness to the verbal assassination without a flicker of feature or twitch of a limb. "You think I was too hard on him, don't you?"

"Not for me to say, sir." This untypical formula and formality were designed to convey disapproval. He usually spoke his mind, and they were on first name terms inside the office as they had been in the the police car where they had shared some of their most formative years.

"Yes, you do; and, yes, it is."

After a competitive silence, the sergeant spelled it out. "Like he said, he's hardly been with us for six months. You've got to make some allowance. It was his first body, as well. And what a body to start off with! No wonder there was a pile of upchuck right beside the head. Swears it wasn't his, but he'd no partner with him and it certainly wasn't mine, though I don't mind admitting I came close, you were lucky to be off-duty when the call came in, and it's not likely to have been the perp's. You can hardly blame him for not thinking straight."

"Yes, I can. When you've got a body hacked to pieces all over a New York pavement, and fifty yards away there's a bloodstained machete stuck in the woodwork of Chang's shop door, you don't need to be an Einstein to work out that it's very likely to be the murder weapon. Hell, what are the odds against there being two machetes dripping red around the same place, even in the Bronx? Nor do you have to be Einstein to know that you don't go moving evidence from where you found it and trot back with it like a waitress in a Taco Bell. Anyway, he chose the job. No one forced him to become a cop. Quite the opposite, from what I remember of his file. It's what he draws his pay for. This isn't the Keystone Kops. It's a battlefield out there. Hard on him? What about that girl we've got in the mortuary freezer, all nicely pre-chopped for the slab? Bit harder on her, don't you think?"

The sergeant said nothing. He always felt this was a good policy when there's nothing to say. Well, there was, but he hadn't the words. Although he agreed with every point his superior had just made, he still remained sorry for the young officer.

"Anyway, I agree with you. He's basically a good boy. Come on, Jack. You've been with me long enough to realise that I never mean half of what I come out with in these jawings. As our dear old principal used to tell us when he was taking the cane out of his desk, this hurts me more than it hurts you. My wife often tells me I ought to have been on the stage, She might have a point. Better money, better hours. Still, we can't be gabbing here all day. Philosophy seminar over."

Long years of police work and the weekly poker sessions with his mates had perfected the sergeant's ability to school his features. All this time, he thought as he hurried to keep pace, and I've not really known him at all.

Over the statutory burger and fries in the canteen, young Officer Edwards was regaling his colleagues with the details of his chastisement. He wasn't having much luck attracting any sympathy. Most of the others had had a stripe torn off them by the chief, but they reckoned he was about as fair as any boss could be, and bore no grudge. Anyway, Edwards was a bit too keen for their liking, what with his volunteering for extra shifts and filling out his reports after hours, flashing through them on the new word processor to which they were still struggling to adapt, especially the older ones after all those years of picking them out on the station's venerable Remington.

The others were full of the machete murder, speculating on how long it would take their boss to catch the bastard.

"He'll have him," predicted one. "He'll have him on toast. What was that headline in the Post last time? Mann gets his man..."

"Makes him sound like a fucking Mountie."

"Bit sexist, as well," chimed in a cautiously feminist police woman, whose policy was to wrap up her beliefs in facetiousness, thinking this was the only way to get them across to a bunch of Neanderthals. "Don't they think women are up to big crimes?"

Disappointed, but not disheartened by their lack of support, Officer Edwards drained the dregs from his mug of coffee and stood up. "I'm going to get my own back for what he said to me, treating me like some cadet still wet behind the ears."

"Listen to the veteran of six months. Put some service in first, Eddy. Anyway, you'll have to get your skates on. You know he's retiring in a couple of weeks. You haven't got much time."

"Oh, I know I haven't got much time," said Edwards in a suddenly detached tone, "but I've got long enough."

As it soon turned out, Mann did get his man, and Edwards' mistake hadn't mattered at all. The perp, that term all policemen nowadays apply to unknown committers of serious crimes, at least in TV dramas, had gone to his favourite bar to celebrate the successful killing of his girl friend, which he'd known he had to do the minute she confessed to him that she'd been opening her legs to his best buddie. He might have done it on the spot, but wasn't in the habit of going about with machetes up his sleeve, and anyway it had been right outside her front door and she'd run inside the minute she'd come out with it. So, having left her to stew for a couple of days, he'd rung her up, picking a time when he knew her parents would be out on their regular as clockwork weekly visit to the local Loews, so that nobody would know he had called. It wasn't very hard to persuade her that he understood about these things and still loved her and that they must meet that very evening to talk it out and then set it behind them and get on with things. He said this last bit in such a way as to hint at the possible production of an engagement ring, lack of which had been one of the reasons that had driven her into the arms of his pal. The hardest bit was getting her to agree to turn out on a cold wet night and risk the subway and then a bus to a part of the Bronx that you thought twice about going to even in daytime. But after he'd switched on all his persuasive charm and explained that he had something to do there, which was true enough, and promised faithfully that he'd be waiting at the bus stop he told her to get off at, and added that he knew a decent place there where you could have a quiet drink and a talk, something it wasn't easy to find in New York these days, she'd agreed. When she stepped off the bus into the rain which was now turning into sleet and saw he wasn't there, she panicked, especially as the driver had given her a funny look and said "You want to watch yourself around here, girlie." But then she saw him step forward from a shop doorway. Of course, he'd been sheltering from the rain. Silly her. How was she to know he'd really been hiding there so that no one from the bus would catch a glimpse of him? There was no wasting time on preliminary chit-chat, no last insincere peck on the cheek. She'd hardly had time to wonder what that thing was he was carrying - an All is Forgiven present, maybe? - before it came up with his arm, a just-glinting shadow in the rain, and that was that.

Despite the sergeant's belief, it hadn't been Officer Edwards' pile of vomit by the head. It'd been his, the perp's. He was no loony serial killer. He'd bought the machete from some

Haitian in East Flatbush where many of the city's quarter million immigrants from that cesspool of an island live, saying he collected artifacts from different cultures. It and the Jack the Ripper routine were strictly for the cops' benefit. make them think a maniac was on the loose. If he made the right sort of anonymous phone call, he might be lucky enough to get his best buddie fingered for it. One good reason for not doing him in as well. In any case, better to let him live and share some of the pain over losing their girl. He'd actually killed her with the first slash across the throat, nearly took her head off without the rest of the hacking. If he was unlucky and got caught, all this blood and guts business would impress some idiot social worker and help a good lawyer get him marked down as a crime of passion. He had considered killing a few more, maybe six all told to be one up on the Ripper, but he didn't have the stomach for it, and anyway he realised he didn't want to be in that category if he was caught, since then they'd have him banged up in some asylum for the rest of his days, whereas a crime of passion man with a good background report and some hamming it up in the dock ought to swing a jury and even a crusty old judge into a light sentence. It wasn't that bad in the cooler these days, from what he'd read, good food and colour TV and he'd be a bit of a hero for what he'd done, and he didn't have the kind of looks that would have the fags after him.

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The perp hadn't meant to get drunk and blab. Just a celebratory slug or two, hugging his secret to himself. And in the ordinary course of events, he would probably have got away with it. Most of the drinkers in that bar, not to mention the owner and staff, had plenty to hide from the police, and they, like the Mexicans and Caribs from the local construction site who were the nearest thing to innocents to use the place, all agreed with the philosophical principle that any guy who didn't ice his fluff for doing the dirty didn't deserve to be called a real man. As for the Haitian, East Flatbush was a long way from the Bronx and even if he heard about the killing from the radio or television, the odds were that his drug-addled mind wouldn't put two and two together. Even if he did dope it out, it had been made very clear at the machete confab that he didn't like cops or whites of any kind. The only emotion he'd be likely to feel at the news would be envy of the guy lucky enough to get to do a white woman in. And, reflected the perp, everyone knew the way the cops' minds worked. A white girl ribboned with an Afro-looking weapon and they'd be pulling in every black that breathed, with never a thought for any other colour. Unluckily for the perp, an undercover man was in that night, making contact with a suspected pusher. Being wired up for this, he edged over next to the perp, bought him another slug, had an earful of the carving-up, got the whole thing on tape, made a pretence of going to the head, telephoned, and when it was confirmed that the story included a couple of details which hadn't been released to the press, a squad of blues burst into the bar ten minutes later and hauled the perp off, also the undercover man whom they knew, to give him added street credibility for the future. Of course, the pusher who turned up just in

time to see all this was in luck as a result, but you can't have everything. As the one in charge of the case, the chief scooped full credit, and he was back on page one of the tabloids as the Mann Who Gets His Man.

"Well, Eddy, I reckon that's blown your chances for good," said the police woman in the canteen, not bothering to keep the satisfaction out of her tone, though she switched on a sympathetic smile and even touched his arm with her left hand, since she never let her feminism stand in the way of her desires, and Officer Edwards was definitely bedroom material, though she figured she'd probably have to put landing lights down her mattress to make him get the message, five would get you ten he still had his cherry, the taking of which would make an interesting change from the strictly pay-as-you-enter policy she employed in one way or another with the operators who usually came her way. "Next week, he'll have his gold watch and his three cheers and go down in history as the man who never left a case unsolved. I bet you dollars to doughnuts there'll be a Hollywood version in two years. Move over, Popeye Doyle."

"You might be right," said Officer Edwards, but his voice sounded oddly more chipper than his words.

66 The speeches had been made, the present handed over, the applause unstintingly given by enemies as well as friends. Mann was now in the crowd (more mingled against than mingling, he thought to himself), receiving the standard congratulations, best wishes for a long and happy retirement, and expressions of envy. He knew these last were the least sincere of all. Very few policemen ever really want to pack it all in, whatever they may say. Mann was no exception. He was only doing it for the sake of his wife, Edna. Not that she had put him under any pressure; there'd not been so much as a hint dropped. But he knew what she'd had to sacrifice over the long years, and it was payback time. They had no kids, and what with his pension and her legacy from some old aunt, money was no problem. So, it would be up sticks, farewell to the rotting Big Apple, and off to an all mod-cons - a phrase that tickled his policeman's funny bone - place by the sea for a new life of learning to play golf, deadhead roses, and politely avoid the local sky pilot and retired stockbrokers. Talking of Edna, where the hell was she? Anger was turning into worry behind the relentless smile tacked on his face. She'd missed his Last Hurrah. It was true they'd had a spat a few days earlier, and right up to this morning's breakfast were still being on the cool side to each other. Oddly enough, it had been over his ticking-off of young Edwards. Turned out that she knew his mother through a police charity organisation, and heard the Edwards version, and had decided that he hadn't deserved his rocket. But Edna wasn't the sort of person to stay frozen for too long, and she certainly wasn't a wife who would set out to spoil her husband's big day. Especially since he'd arranged, without telling her who it would be, for Officer Edwards to go and collect her in the best car the station had to bring her to the ceremony. Mann himself had spent the morning clearing out his office before

enjoying a last canteen binge with his sergeant. Sending Edwards was designed to show both him and her that he harboured no hard feelings against either. Surely there hadn't been an accident? Edwards' file had him down as a first-rate driver, whatever his shortcomings with machete-handling. No, they must have run into some almighty traffic problem. But in that case, why hadn't Edwards patched through a message? Maybe the car's radio was on the fritz...

There was a light touch on his shoulder. Despite his turmoil, he managed a joke to himself: am I getting my own collar at last? It was his sergeant. "Can we have a word, sir?" Sir? On today of all days? Mann supposed that he preferred to open up in private rather than among a mob of well-wishers. Well, if that was what he wanted...

"Let's get on with it."

"Perhaps we should step into your office, sir."

Not my office any more, Mann thought, but he allowed himself to be steered out of the crush without demur. The presence of the guest of honour is rarely vital to everyone else's having a good time.

As soon as they were inside the office, now stripped of Mann's photos and other decorative knickknacks, the sergeant closed the door. "Sir, I think you'd better sit down." This was too much. "I may be retired now, but I've still got the use of my legs, thank you very much. Out with it, Jack. What's all this about?"

"I'm afraid it's your wife, sir."

For a second, Mann looked blank, as though the notion of having a wife was alien to him. Then, Oh Christ, there had been an accident after all. That bloody young fool Edwards.

"My wife? Edna? What about her?"

Most policemen learn over the years how to break bad news, but they are no better than anyone else when it comes to getting it.

"There's been a bit of trouble. A very large bit of trouble. I'm very sorry to have to be the one to tell you this, sir, but your wife is dead."

A word never far from a policeman's thoughts. "Dead? She can't be." Mann was aware that he was reacting like a member of the public. "It was Edwards, wasn't it? I'll kill him..."

"No, sir, it's worse than that. She was murdered. Right in your own house."

"Murdered? She can't have been. She was coming to here for me." Mann again realised how typical he was being, and almost found time to despise himself for it. "How?"

"Stabbed in the living room. A break-in. The place was a mess. She must have come downstairs and caught them at it. We got a call from someone who thought they'd heard a racket coming from... Excuse me, sir, did you say Edwards a minute ago?"

"What? Yes. He was picking her up in the car. I arranged it all myself. Where was he? Where is he...?"

"That explains it, then."

"Explains what?"

"How Officer Edwards comes to be in your house, lying next to your wife, stabbed to death as well. He must have arrived right while it was happening and gone in to try and save her."

By pulling every string he had, Mann got his retirement deferred. Officially, he became Special Serious Crimes Coordinator, a title they made up for him. No one was taken in for a moment by this, least of all the press. As time went by, without any progress made, in addition to his wife he also lost his reputation as the Mann who always gets his man. A columnist in the New York Times who never missed a chance to needle the police even dragged in the line that had mocked the death of Christ: He saved others, Himself he could not save.

After a year, Mann was shunted off into retirement, though it was made clear to him behind the scenes that no one was going to object if he kept on it privately, as long as he shared any findings with the official investigation that might now be dormant, but not dead: the book could be closed on the murder of a chief's wife, but never on that of a police officer.

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Mann went on poking around. Apart from his wife, he felt he owed it to young Edwards and his mother, though she'd refused to see him when he turned up with the official sympathy and pre-empted any further attempts by taking an overdose of sleeping pills hours after the funeral. He'd even considered a session with the machete wielder to try and get some insight into why men do what they do to women, only to be told the guy had been stabbed to death with a prison workshop chisel in a fight over what to watch on TV. But as the years went by, the dimming of memories and the ever-increasing caseloads caused people to lose interest, and Mann came to understand that his visits to the station were no longer appreciated. So he went there no more, stayed at home, took to the bottle, died, and was seen off to his solitary - his wife had been cremated and scattered under the terms of her will - grave in a far corner of the local cemetery by only his faithful sergeant, himself now on the verge of retirement, and one or two other old-timers. Quite a contrast with Officer Edwards who, as an officer killed in the line of duty, had been buried with full police honours, his path to eternity adorned by representatives of forces from all over the country, with the President himself there for the purpose of bolstering his latest anti-crime initiative in front of the television cameras. It would have been all so very different, had anyone ever worked out that young Officer Edwards, determined to square his grudge but knowing he'd no chance against the famous detective, and sent over the top by being told to act as chauffeur to the great man's wife, had killed her, then himself. He had smiled at the thought that he would be the new perp down at the station.

After being invited into the living room by Edna Mann to wait for her while she went back upstairs to finish dolling herself, he'd had ample time to slip into the kitchen, help

himself to the biggest and sharpest carving knife in the cutlery drawer, get himself back into the living room, wait for her return, and take her life. A momentary sense of killing his mother was offset by the feeling that she'd understand if not approve of what he'd done. He then potted around the room, methodically creating enough damage and mess to make it seem as though there'd been at least a couple of housebreakers. After that, he did some convincing ripping of her dress, and took a piece of it which he held over his mouth while making the anonymous call to the station. He then wiped off the handle of the knife before wrapping it as loosely as possible with the bit of dress, after which he went back to the body where he stood stock still and stabbed himself accurately through the heart. It was a good bet that the piece of fabric would fall out of his hand with the knife and just be part of the general chaos. And an even better one that nobody would in any case think to test the fingerprints of a police officer who by all appearances had been killed trying to save his own inspector's wife. Not to mention that he'd once read in Dashiell Hammett, who of all people ought to have known, that finger prints are fragile affairs and wrapping something up is more likely to obliterate than to preserve them.

They said at the inquest that, while Edna Mann had been in perfect shape for a woman her age and could have expected to live for a good many more years, in the case of Officer John Edwards it would be of some comfort to his family and colleagues to know that he had an advanced cancer which evidence from his own doctor confirmed he knew about and which would have killed him in a matter of weeks.



BIO: Barry Baldwin has been featured in just about every mystery and crime fiction magazine known to man, including [Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine](#), [Powder Burn Flash](#) and [Mysterical-E](#). For more on Barry, visit his [Wikipedia](#) entry or the LouAnders.com piece entitled [Meet Barry Baldwin](#).