

# FREEDOM FICTION

An eclectic mix of all flavours of genre fiction

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## Editor's Note

Kowabunga dudes and dolls,

And we plunge into our second year with a wonderful collection of 13 fiction short stories plus a bonus 4000 word detailed exclusive interview with author Mark SaFranko.

I would like to take a moment here and thank our talented returning authors – namely, A D Dawson, Ilan Herman, Martin Murphy and Jeremy Colangelo – for continuing to amaze us with splendid fiction and for their association with Freedom Fiction Journal. A D Dawson enthralls us again with his witty & gritty Sergeant Bert Dalton adventure from the heart of UK. Ilan Herman brings us yet another entertaining & philosophical tale of Koy from planet Zoomar.

Our special thanks and everlasting gratitude to Mr. Mark SaFranko and his publishers at Murder Slim Press (UK) for having spared time and effort in indulging FFJ and its fans with a comprehensive interview. Mark SaFranko's fiction is hardhitting and realistic and though we are providing you with a review of only one of his novels here, you can check out his homepage for more details and follow the words and links at the interview in this issue that presents inspiration for us all and showcases the dedication of the accomplished, experienced writer.

We have a fabulous range of fiction in this issue – starting with pure Pulp Fiction, to SciFi, Crime, Alternate History, to intriguing narrations straight from a stream of consciousness.

It has been a great 2009 for us all. We hope also that our fans support this website and forum by visiting the 'Gift Shop' section of <http://freedomfriends.in/> and considering the 2010 calendars or the prodigious FFJ Annual Anthology vol 01. You can see the 'preview' for these and get customized shipping, all secure transactions on third-party tools.

### **Pulp To Grind Your Senses !!!**

Best Wishes,

*Ujjwal Dey*

Editor for Issue 05, Vol02.

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## **Drive, She Said**

**By Sam S. Kepfield**

**Synopsis:** A femme fatale, the 1960s, fast cars, hard drinks and the average Joe with an exceptional job – an intriguing adventure.

**About the Author:** Sam Kepfield is a writer who is forced to earn a living as a criminal defense attorney in Hutchinson, Kansas. He has a bachelor's degree from Kansas State University (B.A. 1986), a law degree and an M.A. in History from the University of Nebraska ('89, '94), as well as doctoral work at the University of Oklahoma. He has been an avid reader of science fiction since childhood, and several years ago decided he'd try his hand at it. So far, his stories have appeared in *Revolutions SF*, *Jupiter SF*, *Science Fiction Trails*, *The Future Fire*, *Cemetery Moon*, and *Atomjack*, among others. .

**In this pulp tale,** a man will discover that his job of capturing the horrible deaths gets more interesting when he has a close encounter of the female kind.

## Drive, She Said

By Sam S. Kepfield

May was good, second maybe only to Christmas. Some ways, better – lots of formerly handsome crewcut boys in button-downs and chinos, lying on the pavement after flying through a windshield. The girls – the pretty girls in skirts and saddle shoes, perfect toned legs twisted askew, pert bosoms crushed by dashboards, cute-as-a-button faces gone after hitting a metal dashboard. Proms for the high schoolers, end of finals for the college crowd, all involved copious amounts of alcohol and speed.

*Bread and butter*, Dexter Carruthers told himself. It hadn't been so bad when he was a horny teenager, the really hot cars – the Dusenbergs, the Cords, the Bugattis – all cost a king's ransom, no way ordinary kids were laying hands on that much horsepower. But in the Year of Our Lord 1963, when the Hudson Hornet and Chrysler 300 and Impala SS were available to suburbia with High Octane fuel at the local Sunoco on the corner, it was a recipe for *Mayhem on the Freeways*. Or *Blood on the Pavement*. Or *Car-nage*. Or any one of a dozen titles put out by the Midwest Film Institute. Carruthers was President, Crew, and Editor of the shoestring operation that had provided an adequate living for the past six years by distributing safety films to driver's ed classes from Milwaukee to Tulsa to Denver.

Carruthers set a black case holding his Bolex H16 camera on the floorboard of the Kansas Highway Patrol cruiser, a Ford Crown Vic in the navy blue and white livery of the Kansas Highway Patrol. His riding partner for the night, Trooper Geoffrey Denison, was behind the wheel, turning over the motor. Carruthers slid inside, cradling the Bolex between his calves.

Denison was a six-two slab-jawed blond crewcut bit of Aryan perfection in an unwrinkled uniform and boots spit-shined to a mirror finish. It was a marked contrast to Carruthers' own appearance, a tubercular gauntness, pale pallor, watery blue eyes behind thick spectacles, and slovenly dress under a stained Army-issue raincoat. Denison wheeled the cruiser away from the Highway Patrol barracks and headed down 7<sup>th</sup> Street, which would take them onto the Interstate. The American autobahns were built for safety, four lanes divided, banked curves, safety rails, but an idiot-proof system doesn't mean there aren't idiots, and Carruthers' career was proof of that.

"...sent back pictures from space, the first time an American astronaut has done so. Cooper is now in his scheduled rest period, and Faith 7 is expected to splash down tomorrow night. This makes him the first astronaut to spend more than a day in orbit. In other news, authorities are still investigating the sighting of an object near Silver Lake, twenty miles west of Topeka, over the weekend..." Carruthers turned off the radio.

"Sorry," he said. "Got a bit of a headache."

"Got some aspirin in the glove box," Denison said. Carruthers opened the glove box, found a small tin of Bayer under the owner's manual. He took one out, then shook another one, pulled a bottle of Coke from the pocket of his rumpled and stained raincoat, opened it, popped the pills in, and swallowed with a huge swig of sugary carbonation.

It was dark as the cruiser hit the interstate, and Denison turned up the police radio. It was a half-hour later, by his battered Timex, that the call came in over the radio – a wipeout on U.S. 24, north of where they were, maybe ten minutes. Perfect. Fresh enough that the bodies would still be warm, not covered up, maybe one or two still alive, barely, arms weakly moving, their life ebbing away on 8mm film in living color. Denison hit the siren and light, and barreled north on a county road towards Highway 24.

Carruthers listened but pretended not to as Denison got the details. Car full of kids, sounded like college kids, from Washburn here, or maybe from KU over in Lawrence, hit a bad turn, through the guard rail, six total, three known dead, one male two females...Carruthers felt his headache ebb.

They arrived at the scene, found it lit by the lights a pickup truck and a police car. The railing had been cleaved by the impact, and in the thicket of trees beyond shone red taillights and the reflection of headlights from the chrome rear bumper. Carruthers got out, unlocked the camera case, took the Bolex out and began turning the hand crank to wind the film. He set it on the hood while he fished out a pack of Luckies and his Zippo, took a deep drag, hefted the camera onto his shoulder.

A tall, skinny man in a blue uniform slumped against the police car, looked up as they approached. His eyes were haunted. "It's horrible. Never seen anything like it," the man – really a fuzz-nuttred kid with a badge and a holstered .38. Ink on his high school diploma was still wet, likely as not.

But of course Carruthers had seen worse, had been this kid's age when he was shooting 8mm film of dead GIs in Normandy, had film rolling when Charlie Company had stumbled across a fence in Germany that they first thought held animals but instead held people, some living, some dying and some stacked like cordwood by the furnaces abandoned mid-cremation by the guards. Denison was an ex-Marine who'd survived Okinawa, so a few dead teenagers weren't going to rattle him. They glanced at each other, volumes of man's inhumanity to man passing in their eyes.

Denison stood by the local cop, striking a brave I'm-in-charge pose, one he did so well, and Carruthers caught it on film. He depended on the Kansas Highway Patrol for his livelihood, and if that meant giving them a little positive press, well, that was part of the game. He followed Denison as he tromped off towards the railing, making his way through the brush. The pickup lights illuminated the scene. An old-timer in overalls who looked like he'd seen his share at the Marne leaned against the fender and tipped his hat to both of them.

Carruthers switched on the portable light that he'd rigged to attach to the camera, followed Denison towards the crumpled car. He looked at the trunk, saw an Oldsmobile badge between tail fins. It figured – some rich college kid got Daddy's car keys, loaded up the Rocket 88 with buddies and booze and girls and high-octane.

Three bodies in the rear seat, two blondes sandwiching a crewcut boy in a plaid shirt. One of the girls was moaning and trying to move. The other was still, her head at an odd angle. The boy lay unmoving, face like raw hamburger. Carruthers wound the camera, set it on the roof and yanked the door open. He took some long, lingering footage of the three, letting the camera run the full 40 seconds, rewound, shot more.

The windshield was gone, and so were the occupants of the front seat, save the driver, who sat behind the wheel with a stunned expression on his face, blood running down from the corners of his mouth. Carruthers reached out and felt the boy's chest. It was like touching a bag of wet sticks that had been stomped on. The kid rated twenty seconds of footage.

Beyond the thicket lay a wheatfield. The Olds' headlights lit up the green wheat, and Carruthers could see three gaps in the sea of grain. Denison was moving towards the nearest, so Carruthers ran down the film with shots of the trooper plodding manfully yet sadly towards the carnage in his pressed uniform and boots.

The farthest body was that of a girl. She lay on her back, legs splayed and arms thrown out, long red hair in a mussed fan around her head, looking like a rag doll tossed on the floor. He gazed at her chest, saw no motion under the ample breasts concealed behind a half-unbuttoned white blouse. He tossed the butt of his Lucky on the dirt, ground it out with his heel, and wound the camera, pointed it, switched the lens and moved in for a close-up...

Her eyes flew open as he knelt, the head jerked up. Carruthers fell back on his butt, nearly spilling the camera. The girl bolted upright, green eyes wide with terror, titian hair covering her face. She made an odd, strangled noise in her throat, leaped to her feet, and bolted off through the wheatfield at a pace that would have shamed Wilma Rudolph. Carruthers fumbled to retrieve his camera, hands shaking and heart fluttering. The camera had wound down, the crank was unmoving. Carruthers swore under his breath.

"Hey! Hey! Miss!" It was Denison. The big trooper rushed up beside Carruthers, put his hands to his mouth. "It's okay, we're here to help you. There's no danger!" The white blouse and red hair disappeared into a treeline several hundred yards away.

Carruthers fumbled with the crank, found he couldn't get the camera wound, set it down and took out another Lucky. Denison had to work the Zippo for him. "Never seen anything like it," Denison said with amazement. "Go through a windshield and get up and walk away. Saw this Jap over on Saipan once, though, got his head shot half off..."

"Later," Carruthers interrupted and waved his hand. "I gotta get back to the lab, develop this." Denison gave him a puzzled look, but shrugged his shoulders. Another highway patrol cruiser had parked by Denison's, and a third showed up seconds later.

The next day, he developed the film and viewed it on a screen in the grimy storefront that sat behind the warehouses and elevators that lined the Kansas River. He still jumped when the corpse came to life. The camera dropped, then resumed filming with the ground out of kilter, but all he could see was ripe wheat. No redhead streaking away with impossible speed or uncanny grace.

The dead young men turned out to be members of a fraternity at the University of Kansas in Lawrence. Two of the girls were identified as sorority sisters. The identity of the redhead, after a visit with some of the bereaved frat brothers three days later, remained unknown. She had left behind no purse, no identification, had never been seen by the dead girls' sorority sisters. One of the frat boys said he might have heard from his now-decapitated friend that he'd met a knockout redhead at a dance a couple of weeks before, or maybe it was a blonde at the union. Carruthers came away as perplexed as before, but shrugged it all off. The living didn't concern him.



The crash at US 75 was bad. South of Topeka, a brand-new Chevy Impala had drifted over the center line, grazed a tractor trailer, bounced off a guardrail, then banked into a station wagon and then a Volkswagen. The semi was undamaged. The VW was an accorded heap of scrap metal, its sole occupant DOA. The station wagon was staved in on one side, the family of four intact. The Impala, which had come to rest in a ditch, was almost unrecognizable. Two other blue-and-white Fords were there. As they arrived, a pumper truck and red Chevy appeared from the other direction. A small gaggle of ghouls stood at a not-quite respectable distance, and rubberneckers slowed traffic.



As he approached the car with Denison, Carruthers could detect a whiff of antifreeze and gasoline. "No skid marks," Denison said, pointing to the pavement. "Drunk as a skunk, likely." Carruthers wound the Bolex, turned on the light, and began rolling film of Denison cautiously approaching the Chevy. The grass was wet, he had to struggle to keep his balance as he descended the steep ditch. The driver was barely visible, slumped over in the seat. He wore a blue uniform with a silver oak leaf – an Air Force major, probably stationed at Forbes. And sitting next to him was the passenger, face and neck splashed

with crimson – hers or the major's, he couldn't tell – head thrown back, way too far back. She wore a black cocktail dress.

Her hair was red.

Carruthers almost dropped the camera, recovered. Couldn't be, lotta redheads around here.....but he was drawn to the passenger side of the Chevy, rolling film as he did so. He heard a click, meaning he had ten seconds of film left before rewind. He moved in for a good closeup of the redhead, switching to a closeup lens. He was standing by the front windshield post, rewinding the Bolex, when he heard a tinkle of glass and a moan. Carruthers looked up. The redhead wasn't dead. She was moving, putting both hands to her head, bringing it up with a snap and a cracking sound. Her eyes opened slowly, widened in alarm when she saw him. "You," or something like it, gurgled from her throat.

"Hey, don't worry," Carruthers said. "I'm –" But she reared back, threw her weight against the door. The metal protested, then gave on her second push, spilling her onto the grass. Carruthers bent to offer her a hand, but she scrambled to her feet, kicked off the high heels, and sprinted up the ditch. The ghouls began pointing and jabbering, parting as she shoved through them.

Carruthers was so stunned that he forgot to rewind the camera, then began cursing himself for being so negligent.

"Was that – ?" Denison's voice trailed off.

"Yeah," Carruthers replied, distracted. "But it couldn't be."

"Yeah," Denison agreed. "Couldn'ta been. Some dame looks like her. Probably just stunned and disoriented. We'll probably find her wandering around Gage Park tomorrow, no idea how she got there." Like Carruthers, Denison sounded as though he were trying to convince himself.

Carruthers looked back in the car, at the dead Air Force major spread out over the front seat, wound the camera and shot more footage. "*A brave soldier meets his death, but it is a meaningless one, no medals given out here...*" he could hear the narration as he shot. He lowered the camera as the film ran down, then looked on the floorboard for any items the redhead might have left – a purse, a handbag, gloves, anything, and then his eyes lighted on a small square of bright yellow cardboard.

It was a matchbook. Carruthers checked the scene; Denison was conferring with the other troopers, his back turned and no one watching him. He furtively reached in through the open door and snatched the matchbook, slipping it in his coat pocket.

The driver, it turned out, was Major Henry Daniels, and he was indeed assigned to Forbes Air Force Base, which was located on the south end of Topeka, ten miles up the road from the crash. Carruthers did some more digging, falling into the old habits from his days on the *Kansas City Star*, made calls, and found out that the major was married. He was also assigned to the 548<sup>th</sup> Strategic Missile Squadron, which gave Carruthers pause – whatever Major Daniels was doing at Forbes, it had TOP SECRET stamped all over it in big red letters.



The matchbook worked wonders. The bartender at Duffy's, located a mile south of the base on US 75, remembered Daniels, who'd come in that night alone, ordered a scotch. He'd been promptly joined by the redhead, who had been in the bar all of ten minutes. "Classy lookin' gal, too," the bartender, whose name was Mick, told Carruthers over a vodka martini. "Didn't belong in a place like this, but we take her money all the same. Long red hair, really stacked, legs up to her neck."

"Anything odd?"

Duffy scratched his chin. "Well, I dunno it's odd, but she just sat there for a coupla hours, musta had a dozen guys go up to her and start a conversation, just looked at 'em like she didn't speak English, they give up. When the flyboy come in, her face lit up like a Christmas tree, she was all over him. Figured she had a thing for the uniform, 'cause the flyboy weren't nothing ta look at." Carruthers had another drink, thanked Duffy, and left.

The next day, Tuesday, brought a check in the mail, all of five hundred dollars from the Iowa Department of Public Safety, for use of *Slay Ride*. Five hundred would pay the rent for six months on office and apartment, groceries, maybe a fancy dinner out, enough cigarettes and Scotch through the Fourth of July. He walked to the bank with a spring in his step, left the bank feeling a little taller with a fat wallet and coins jingling.

He had called the KHP barracks, and asked for Denison. There was a pause on the other end of the line. "Oh," the female receptionist said. "You haven't heard, have you?"

"Heard? Heard what?" his head began spinning.

"Mi – Trooper Denison was killed this morning. He – he ran into a train this morning, in North Topeka. Around two a.m."

"Car stalled on the tracks?"

"No. His car ran into a train. Like he didn't know it was there. Services are Friday, now if you'll excuse me..." and she hung up.

Carruthers put down the heavy receiver, sat in his chair, moving only to light a cigarette. He dully reflected how odd this was. He dealt with death every day. Ever since he was nineteen, drafted and torn from his journalism studies and sent to Europe, he'd seen just about every way a body could be destroyed. What he put on film for a living was just meat, though, flesh mannequins without a history or a story.

Denison he'd gotten to know well through the five years they'd ridden together. Sure, he was a bit too clean-cut and picture-perfect. And the leftover esprit de corps from the Marines could be tiring. He read the law a little too literally. He did over do the strong, silent Gary Cooper type quite a bit. Not much of a sense of humor. And the fondness for loud Hawaiian shirts while off-duty was inexcusable. But he was solid, handled violent drunk drivers with the same unflappable professional courtesy he would show a leadfooted grandmother or housewife.

Something began tickling the back of Carruther's mind. How in the hell do you *run into a train* – even at two a.m.? It was inconceivable that he'd be involved in a one-car accident unless...

Unless he had help from a passenger.

And this is where Carruthers began to get chills down his neck. Two odd events in the last couple of weeks, the mysterious redhead who'd done a Lazarus and a four-forty dash away from multiple fatality accidents. Denison had been there, had seen it...

Eliminating witnesses?

He hesitated before he closed up for the day and drove his battered Ford to the KHP barracks. He was greeted by Capt. George Lansdale, who ran the barracks. They exchanged greetings, and condolences about Denison. Lansdale told Carruthers he could ride with Carl Blount, who'd been on the force a couple of years. Blount was a short man with a whipcord body, more talkative than Denison and with a better sense of humor, revealed in tales about his peacetime service in the Air Force in Germany.

At half past midnight, they stood by a reefer truck, rear-ended by a Studebaker on US 24, just west of Manhattan. A sheriff's deputy was there, setting out flares. The truck driver was sitting in the front of the sheriff's car, shaken. A prewar Chevy was parked off the road ahead of the truck, but he could see no other bystanders.

The roof of the Studebaker was peeled back like a sardine can lid. The driver and passenger didn't have time to duck – no skid marks, again, didn't even see what was coming. The bodies were still in the front seat. From the shoulders up – that might take some doing. Blount began searching the ditch on the westbound lane. Carruthers wound the Bolex, began shooting. He got some long, good shots of the two headless bodies, a man and a woman, ages indeterminate, seated on the green vinyl. He moved to the driver's side, then to the passenger side, and switched lenses for a close-up of the passenger, noting the pale skin of ample bosom concealed by a strapless silk dress. He flicked on the portable light, and froze. The blood was---

The blood was green. It took a moment for that to register. The inner tissues were a sickly gray-green, like they'd been pulled from a lake after two weeks under, but the wound was fresh.

*But I'll bet the hair on her head, wherever it is, is red.*

The night air was still, no breeze rustled the leaves of the cottonwoods and elms by the road. Otherwise, Carruthers might not have heard the faint moan from the meadow by the road. He lifted up the light – no cattle, but a weathered shed standing off along a weedy drive leading from the road into the meadow, by a grove of cottonwoods. He looked over his shoulder, saw Blount by the cruiser talking into the police radio. Carruthers shut off the light, tiptoed up the drive, the long grass brushing his chinos. Another moan as he came near to the shed, gray weathered wood leaning at a precipitous angle. He poked his head through the empty doorframe, switched on the light.

A fount of red hair framing a pale face lay in the middle of the dirt floor. The eyes were wide open and quite dead. The neck had been severed roughly, a puddle of green fluid underneath.

A small figure huddled in the corner, legs drawn up and arms clasped around knees. Slowly, the head rose, showing an elfin face and pixie haircut. The Audrey Hepburn look was spoiled by the eyes, which slowly focused on him with malevolence. He began

backing away, and the girl leaped to her feet, grabbed his arm and hauled him into the shed. His foot hit the head, sending it rolling towards the far corner.

"You again," she hissed.

"How – she – her body –" he jerked his head towards the head, which had come to rest, face-down, against the wall.

"A malfunction in the unit. The damage was far too severe to repair. This unit was available." *The Chevy – an unlucky secretary or housewife happening by, thinking to stop and help...*

"The life energy was fading," she explained. "There was only one chance. Initiate a mindscan, then transfer consciousness. It's not often done, and rarely succeeds." She cocked her head. "It is strange, the thoughts and patterns inside. It will take some adjustment."

"What are you?" he asked. "Where are you from?"

Her laughter was mocking, but damned sexy. "Let's just say I'm not from around here, and leave it at that, shall we?" Slowly, the implication sank into Carruther's brain. The flying saucer sightings weren't swamp gas after all.

"So you're part of an invasion force? How many are you?"

She laughed again. "That's classified. I'm not the main force. I'm – you'd call me a recon force. I glean information, from military secrets to routine psychological information, from scanning the minds of your kind. Unfortunately," she said, "it's quite dangerous while vehicles are in motion."

"So I've noticed," Carruthers said dryly.

"Let's look at that film," she said, taking the camera. "It should come in quite useful."

"But – but, that's an instructional film," he sputtered, seeing rent money and bill payments go up in smoke. She raised an eyebrow, inviting an explanation. "I sell it to police departments, public safety offices. They're used in driver's education courses, to teach kids to drive safely."

"You're trying to *prevent* what you film, is that it?" she smiled mischievously.

"Yeah. And it's a good living, too."

"Hmm. Well, I could use it, but not for quite the same purpose."

"How do you mean?"

"It would be a wonderful how-to film, in the absence of live experiments," she said, tucking the reel into her purse. "As for you. You obviously know too much, Mr. Carruthers. I can't very well have you walking around telling your friends about me, what I'm doing on this planet."

“Tell ‘em you’re a space alien here to take over the planet? They’d haul me out to Menninger’s in a flash.”

“True, your seedy demeanor and questionable personal habits – not to mention your profession – might make any talk of my presence appear to be mental illness. But I can’t take that chance.” She reached into her purse, and Carruthers felt his face grow hot, his heart flutter and sweat trickle down his armpits. She’s going for a ray gun –

She extracted something shiny and small from her purse, tossed it to him. He caught it in a jangling catch. Car keys.

“Drive,” she said.

**\*\*\*\* THE END \*\*\*\***

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## Playing God

By Ilan Herman

**Synopsis:** Would life be any easier if we had Divine powers? Or would that be a huge burden of humanity upon you? Koy returns with a new surprise.

**About the Author:** Ilan is 41 year old musical producer with a passion for writing good fiction. His works are online at:

[www.emily-music.com](http://www.emily-music.com) (musical webpage)

[www.scribd.com/ilan-herman](http://www.scribd.com/ilan-herman) (literary webpage)

**In this SciFi,** a man will get a chance to be more than a mere mortal.

## **Playing God**

**By Ilan Herman**

After Jack was abducted by the alien spaceship, and after the round vessel had vanished into the Milky Way, he found himself walking down a tubular corridor with white vibrating walls, escorted by a sinuous blonde who smiled graciously and said her name was Minna. She was tall and well endowed, with sparkling blue eyes, but Jack knew she was a hologram. He knew that he was supposed to be utterly freaked out by the abduction, but he wasn't, and attributed his calm to a narcotic administered by the aliens. Jack felt like his normal self. Then Minna stopped walking and touched the vibrating walls. The walls parted to show a oval room glowing in soft purple. A dark-brown armchair centered the room. The walls were embedded with dozens of TV screens showing people in distress.

Jack stood in the doorway. "What's this? I don't like it."

Minna smiled widely. "Please sit in the chair."

Jack took a step back. "No way."

Minna held his hand softly. "No harm will come to you."

She walked toward the chair, Jack in tow, fingers sliding in and out of her warm palm. The walls stopped showing the TV screens and pulsed sensually in purple and pink.

Minna smiled and gestured to the armchair, as if she was a car model at a convention. "Please sit. I promise the chair will not bite you."

Jack sat in the chair. The soft fabric, like watery silk, curved to embrace his body. He placed his arms on the wide armrests; they nestled his arms in warm yet firm liquid, as if he was floating in a heavily salted sea. The air smelled of roses. Ocean waves rumbled from afar; parrots chirped in a rainforest. His back and shoulders relaxed like after a thorough deep tissue massage. The chair hummed with vibrations that soothed his neck and buttocks.

"Feels nice," Jack said.

Minna laughed. "You like the chair?"

"I do."

"Good," chirped the Nordic queen. "Now you can be God."

"What?"

The multitude of TV screens showing people in distress returned to broadcast on the walls. Minna smiled and pointed to the screens. "You can help them. You can be their God."

Jack nervously tried to sit up in the armchair when he was coddled by soft yet powerful and invisible tentacles that embraced him like a yearning lover. He sank back into the chair and sighed, "I don't know what you're talking about."



“Help them,” Minna said and pointed to the screens. Her bright smile had faded, cheekbones subdued but still sharp.

Jack looked up at one of the screens. Bearded men wearing white gowns were throwing stones at a young woman no older than sixteen.

“What are they doing?” he yelled.

“They are trying to kill her,” Minna said. “She gave her virginity to the wrong man.”

Jack frowned. “How do they know what she wants?”

Minna shrugged, blue eyes filled with sadness. “They do not. Do you want to stop them from hurting the woman?”

“Yes,” he hissed and narrowed his eyes.

Minna pointed to the screen. “Tell them to stop.”

Jack yelled, “Stop!”

One man about to cast a stone froze in his tracks. Then he started shouting and waving his arms, and then lunged at another man who’d thrown a rock at the weeping woman who cowered on the ground, blood trickling from her brow, her face shielded by her arms. Several men then attacked the man who attacked the man who threw the rock. A brawl ensued, with members of rival families trying to kill each other with knives and heavy clubs. While mayhem rumbled, the woman scurried off and found shelter in a brick hut on the village outskirts. The men continued fighting until an elder with a long white beard and a wide gown rushed over and waved his arms and roared, “Cease your fighting.” By then four men lay dead and several others, bleeding and unconscious, were dragged into brick huts by their family members.

Minna smiled and clapped. “You stopped them from killing the woman.”

“Why are you happy?” Jack cried. “Four men died.”

“But the woman lived.”

“But at what cost?”

Minna smiled nervously. “I do not know. You are their God.”

Jack wrestled the chair and tried to free his arms from the liquid armrests. “Screw this God crap. I don’t want to do this.” He struggled mightily but the warm and soothing tentacles held him firmly in the chair.

“Get me out of here,” he shouted.

Minna flashed her sunny smile. “I do not know how to do that.”

"What do you mean? You promised the chair won't bite. I got news for you, lady, it bites. Now get me out of here."

"You are their God," Minna said, voice fading while her image vanished slowly and was replaced by a chubby bald man with a well-groomed silver beard and thick spectacles.

"What is your problem?" the man asked sternly in a clipped German accent.

"Who are you?" Jack asked.

"I am Siegfried, your psychoanalyst. Why are you afraid of being God?"

"Why?" Jack cried and pointed to the screen that showed the dead men who were no older than eighteen. "Look what I did? I can't be God."

Siegfried's hand swerved like a gentle wave. "Even God makes mistakes. You will need practice. Go back to your childhood. Did your mother breastfeed you?"

"This is bullshit," Jack yelled and struggled with the invisible tentacles that continued to shackle him to the armchair. "I'm not talking to anymore holograms. Get me a real person to talk to, or I'm staying in this chair and starving myself to death."

The screens showing humans in distress vanished from the walls. Siegfried paced the room, hands clasped on the small of his back, and shook his head. "Denying yourself sustenance is clear proof that you want to punish your father for sleeping with your mother." He stopped pacing and frowned at Jack. "Why do you hate your father?"

"I don't hate my father," Jack yelled, a shudder of panic in his voice.

"Then you must eat," said the therapist and snapped his fingers.

A red tray with Jack's favorite meal—a rack of ribs smothered with barbeque sauce, and mashed potatoes and coleslaw—appeared from thin air and floated toward him. The tray settled softly in his lap. Steam rose from the food and tingled his nose with a fresh meaty aroma that had him salivating. Confused and angry, Jack nonetheless took a bite. The invisible tentacles stretched just enough for him to do so. The delicious meat melted in his mouth. The mashed potatoes were cooked with perfect portions of butter and garlic; the coleslaw was thick and juicy. The human ignored the hologram of the German therapist and devoured the food. When he was finished, the tray floated away. The screens returned to cover the walls. Siegfried gestured toward them with his chin and said, "It is easier to be God on a satiated stomach."

Jack looked up at the screens. In one of them he saw a black man sitting in a dark alley, slumped against a dumpster. Wearing a torn pair of jeans and a stained white T shirt, his braided hair was thick with dusty smog. The man, hands shaking, pulled out a syringe, a spoon, and a bag of white rocks from his underpants. He placed a rock in the spoon, struck a lighter and let the flame heat the bottom of the spoon. The rock melted in a bubbly hiss. The man sucked the liquid into the syringe. He flicked a finger against his arm and found a vein. Hands shaking, he aimed the syringe and was about to puncture his skin, when Jack whispered, "Stop."

The disheveled man looked up and around, searching for the voice. He placed the syringe on the ground. Hands no longer shaking, the ambivalence in his dark eyes was replaced by sadness. Tears streamed down the man's wrinkled cheeks. He placed his face in his palms and wept for a long time. Then he stood up. He left the syringe and drugs lying on the ground next to the dumpster and staggered out of the alley.

Siegfried clapped his chubby hands and exclaimed, "He will never do heroin again. He has heard the word of God."

"He wasn't doing heroin, he was doing crack, and stop being so happy. The man has no money or job, probably sleeps on the streets," Jack said with a frown, though he was also satisfied that he was able to stir the junky toward sobriety, however tentative. Then he shook his head with dismay: the aliens were trying to suck him into their sordid plan, plying him with an attractive woman, a magical armchair, and delicious food. He was a dog in training, doing tricks for treats. Why were they doing that to him?

Jack narrowed his eyes at the analyst hologram. "I see what you're trying to do. Forget about it. I don't want to play God." He tried to defiantly cross his arms over his chest but the soft tentacles kept his arms anchored to the chair.

Siegfried pursed his lips. "You will play God and you will like it."

"Screw you," Jack said. "I wanna go home. Now beat it and send someone real I can talk to." He shut his eyes in defiance.

When he opened his eyes, Siegfried was gone, replaced by a tiny flame much like the one burning the wick of a candle. The flame, about six feet away, circled him slowly and silently.

"Who are you?" Jack asked.

"I am Koy, from planet Zoomar," the flame said in a high-pitched voice. "This is how I look. I am not a hologram."

"Cool," said Jack. "I believe you. You sound like a nice alien, but do something about your voice. It's squeaky. And then get me out of this chair."

"I will release you," the alien said in a soft baritone, "but I would like to convince you to use the chair and help us."

The tentacles let go of Jack's arms. He stood up and paced the room. "One minute I'm watching Seinfeld in my living room, the next I'm in a spaceship. I don't have a problem with that, but," he stopped pacing and frowned at the flame, "some would call what you did 'kidnapping.'"

"I apologize," Koy said, voice ringing with sincerity, "but we really need your help."

Jack started pacing again. "How can I, a puny human, help you, a clearly superior extraterrestrial?"

The flame shimmered for a moment and then said, "We, the scientists of Zoomar, do not know how to fix mankind."

"Why do you care about mankind? We're pretty hopeless."

"We created you," Koy said slowly, deep sadness in his voice.

Jack stopped pacing. "Say what?"

Koy explained that planet earth was used as a Petri dish to sprout the seeds of life planted by Zoomarian scientists, a genetically engineered experiment that had gone terribly wrong. "Man has become a vicious creature who kills and consumes without care. We need humans to change, to evolve, or we will have no choice but to exterminate the human race. We dread this outcome with every fiber of our enlightenment, but we have lost control. Nothing we do changes human nature." Koy's voice shook with frustration.

"Easy does it, buddy," Jack said. "There's no crying in genetic engineering."



The flame expanded. "What you just said is a perfect example of my inability to understand humans. What you just said makes no sense at all."

"Sure it does," the human said. "It's a take on Tom Hanks saying, 'There's no crying in baseball.' That's from the movie A League of Their Own."

If the flame had fists it could clench and raise to the heavens, it would surely do so while cussing loudly. Instead, Koy's voice cracked with tears. "That is why we need you and others like you, smart human beings who understand the subtlety and nuance of culture and language...."

"You have other people you talk to?" Jack interrupted. He pointed to the armchair. "Others you have sit in chairs and watch videos?"

"Yes. Fifteen other people like yourself."

"How come no one knows about you? How do you keep it a secret?"

"The ones who help us would never divulge our existence."

"And you ask those people to play God?"

"Yes, and some of them are very insightful and helpful." The flame shimmered. "They understand what to do, how to curb the violence."

"And if I say no, will you let me go?"

"Of course," Koy said. "What good would it serve us to keep you against your will? Naturally, your memory of the visit here would be erased."

Jack pointed to the armchair. "If I sit in the chair now, can I get up anytime I want?"

"Yes," the flame whispered, exasperated.

Jack sat in the brown armchair and was surrounded by warm comfort. Then he stood up. The tentacles didn't stop him. Deep in thought, he paced the room while the flame silently looked on.

"Why didn't you show up first, instead of Minna or that silly therapist?" Jack asked.

"You are a man, so we wanted to entice you with an attractive woman, and when that failed, we opted for an authoritative figure."

Jack chuckled. "Minna was hot, but I like real women. And that Freud impersonator was whacky, not convincing at all."

A sigh fluttered the flame. "I trust that you now see that we have lost our capacity to understand what human beings like and want, why they behave the way they do."

Jack shrugged. "Welcome to parenthood. You raise a kid, think you know them, then they turn thirteen and it's like you have no idea who they are. Sad but true."

Silent camaraderie ensued for a moment, and then Koy said, "Would you like to meet Matilda?"

"Who's she?"

A proud parent crept into Koy's voice. "She is one of our best emotional translators."

Jack laughed. "Emotional translator? A cumbersome title, but I like it. Sure, I'll be happy to meet Matilda."

Flame and man left the oval room and proceeded down the white corridor with the liquid walls, until the flame stopped. The walls parted to show a room much like the one they'd left, except the walls were light-green. The room was centered by a black armchair. A

diminutive woman sat in the chair. About seventy years old, her white hair was well groomed and puffed up with hairspray. She had a wide forehead plowed with wrinkles, a slight hooknose, thin lips dabbed with red lipstick, and blue eyes that twinkled with a child's curiosity. Her bony left forefinger, manicured and stained with pink nail polish, pointed rapidly from one screen to the next, while she said, "No, you cannot do this," to one screen, and then "Yes. Do it," to the next. She spoke with a British accent, which viewers find dignified and colorful when watching PBS Mystery Theatre. Because she worked swiftly, the people in distress showing on the screens were quickly replaced by more people in distress. She ignored Jack and Koy who stood in the doorway. They watched in silence while the old woman worked and seldom took more than a few seconds to make a decision.

Matilda then waved her arm. The screens vanished into the walls. She reached into her purse, which was propped against the armchair, and took out a pack of cigarettes. She lit one and then smiled at the guests. "Hello Koy. And who might be the dashing young man you've brought to meet me?"

"Jack Straw," said Jack and saluted casually.

Matilda smiled. "How old are you and what do you do for a living?"

"Forty two, Madam, and I'm a software engineer."

Her eyes widened as she formed her lips in a circle. "Quite the title. Are you married and do you have children?"

"No on both accounts. I guess I have intimacy issues."

Matilda had a deep laugh riddled with decades of smoking. "Some solitary people are more loving than ones with mates and children. Not all is what it seems."

"You should know," Jack said and pointed to the walls. "How long you been doing this?"

"Five years."

Jack whistled. "How do you last? So much misery and craziness."

"Quite simple," said the crusty dame. "I have three daughters and one son, and eleven grandchildren and four great grandchildren. I'm trying to save them."

Then Matilda looked at Koy's flame and asked, "Why did you choose him?"

The flame shimmered. "He thinks very quickly."

"Maybe he does, but is he compassionate?"

"When he finds spiders in his apartment he traps them in a cup and releases them in his backyard. He takes care to step over a column of ants. Even though he doesn't have children, he donates money to foundations that help orphans in Africa."

"How do you know all that?" Jack cried. "How long have you been spying on me?"



"We are always in search of emotional translators," Koy said. "We mean no disrespect to your privacy. We make sure to never watch when you are taking a shower or using the bathroom, and we empathically cease our surveillance when you entertain female company."

Jack frowned. "Thanks a lot. You guys are a pushy bunch of aliens."

The flame contracted. "We offer our sincere apology. We mean no harm."

"The road to hell is paved with good intentions," said Jack. "I think your failed experiment proves that."

Matilda put out her cigarette and chuckled. "The experiment isn't a failure yet, though it is teetering over the abyss. Koy and his fellow scientists can be as ambivalent and insensitive as humans, but they have no malice. Have you considered why you want to play God?"

"I'm not sure that I do," Jack said. "I saved a woman from being stoned, but then four men got killed. I don't think I'm good at playing God. Besides, I don't have the temperament. I'll probably start hating people real quick."

Matilda nodded. "Legitimate concerns no one but you can consider. Perhaps a few days as a trial period will help you decide."

"Maybe," Jack said and shrugged. "At least the food here is good."

Matilda laughed. "That it is." Then she narrowed her blue eyes. "You should try out. After all, what could be nobler than saving the human race?"

"But what if I keep making mistakes?"

Matilda smiled. "Playing God is like riding a bike. You'll fall and scrape your knee, but then you'll get up, dust yourself off, and get back on the bike. You get better at it. Now, if you'll excuse me, I must get back to work. Come visit with me tomorrow if you decide to stay. I like you."

Matilda waved her right arm. The screens came alive on the walls.

Jack and Koy left the light-green room that was swallowed by the white walls. They proceeded down the hallway when Koy said, "If you wish, you can try working an hour or two a day, so not to be overwhelmed. That way you can maintain your life on earth. The daily molecular transport is easy and harmless."

"I like that option," Jack said, perhaps somewhat empowered to try to save humanity.

They arrived at the room with the brown armchair. Jack sat in the chair, stretched his legs and said, "Comfy." Then he looked at Koy's flame. "How about one screen at a time, instead of a whole bunch?"

"Of course," said the alien scientist, voice filled with gratitude.

Jack shook his head. "You guys are clueless about humans. You got in way over your head."

"Zoomarians do not have heads," Koy said.

Jack rolled his eyes. "It's a figure of speech," and then waved his arm. "Never mind. Come back in an hour."

The walls parted to allow the flame to leave the room. Jack rubbed his palms, his heart beating quickly with nerves. Then he took a deep breath and looked up at the screen.

Raising clouds of dust, a jeep rumbles across the Kenyan savannah. The driver is a young black man. Two white men dressed in khaki and wielding hunting rifles sit in the back.

"Over there," one of them shouts and points to the herd of elephants. He has a thin moustache and icy-blue eyes.

The jeep veers toward the large beasts. The elephants see the jeep and start to run, but are too slow. The jeep gains on the herd. The man with the thin moustache places the rifle against his shoulder and shouts, "I'm gettin' the big one on the left."

The herd's rumble grows louder. Warning cries trumpet from their trunks. The jeep is upon the large elephant leading the herd, his tusks long and sharp. The man shuts his left eye and aims. His finger caresses the trigger. He's about to pull the trigger when his arms start to shake. The bewildered look in his blue eyes overtakes the steely confidence.

"Shoot the bloody thing," the other man yells. "What are you waiting for?"

The hunter slowly shakes his head. "I can't."

"What do you mean you can't, you bastard. We paid fifty grand to shoot an elephant."

The hunter with the thin moustache raises his rifle to the sky and lets go with a round that sails over the herd. The second hunter aims his rifle at the large elephant, but then points his rifle at the ground and unloads his bullets. The herd moves on. The hunters remain seated in the back of the jeep, arms dangling to their sides.

"What happened?" the blue-eyed one finally mutters.

"Hell if I know," the other hunter says, "but suddenly I don't wanna kill an elephant."

The man with the thin mustache nods. "Neither do I. Let's go back to camp and get drunk. Why did we want to kill an elephant anyway?"

"I have no idea, but I'll drink to that."

Sitting in his brown armchair in the oval room pulsating in soft purple, Jack raised his arms in triumph and cried, "I saved an elephant."

\*\*\*\* THE END \*\*\*\*

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## The Ultimate Ride

By A D Dawson

**Synopsis:** Sergeant Bert Dalton is back and he fights a tougher case against worse crimes and gets you a chuckle or two in between his detective work.

**About the Author:** 'The Ultimate Ride' is the fourth Bert Dalton story to date. The big Sergeant has also featured in the April edition of FFJ and in the printed annual anthology. Two more of his tales, 'Bert Takes A Bite' and 'The Old Mother,' have appeared in The Death Head Grin and The Demonic Tome webzines respectively. Presently Dawson is writing the fifth story, 'Bert Reaches the Heights'. His webpage is at [www.myspace.com/theenglishdevil](http://www.myspace.com/theenglishdevil). Follow Sergeant Bert Dalton at [http://www.myspace.com/sergeant Bert Dalton](http://www.myspace.com/sergeant_Bert_Dalton)

**In this dramatic crime fiction,** Sergeant Bert Dalton keeps his chin up and keeps walking to beat big crime in small towns.

## The Ultimate Ride

By A D Dawson



It had been a long night on patrol. Boy-racers had been making the most of the May bank holiday; causing chaos around Market Town's busy ring road. Sergeant Bert Dalton was well ready for his full English when his shift came to an end early on the Tuesday morning. He pulled into the Lemon café car park and scrambled stiffly out of the patrol car. His partner, Alec Ballack, was slumped asleep in the passenger seat – it was only his seat restraint that stopped him from falling forward and smashing his fat and ruddy face onto the

dash. Dalton didn't disturb the snoozing police officer as he quietly shut the door of his vehicle. He soon disappeared into his favourite greasy spoon café.

"A full English please, Esther," he said to the grey-haired proprietor as she busied herself behind the counter with a grubby tea towel.

She smiled warmly. "Take a seat, love, I'll soon have it with you."

He was going to sit in his usual seat at the back of the café, when he noticed that it had already been taken by a tall young man in his early twenties – he was wearing an ill-fitting suit and, bizarrely, for it was a grim morning, large wraparound shades. The lad looked away from the gaze of the big officer and he dropped his head to look down at his greasy plate – thereafter he pushed his food around with a knife, which looked like a scalpel in the hand of an indifferent surgeon.

"Good morning," said Dalton as he sat at the table across from his usual place.

The lad looked up nervously and nodded in response to the cheery greeting – slightly more than he ought to have. No sooner had he sat down, Dalton was served with a steaming brew. He thanked the waitress and picked up a newspaper that someone had left behind.

"It's yesterdays," said Dave, a smiley taxi driver and the only other patron in the establishment at this early hour.

"You're early this morning, Dave," said Dalton as he threw the paper noisily down onto the tabletop

"I've got a run to the airport in 20 minutes; thought I'd just have a bite before I left."

The lad on the next table suddenly stood up. Such was his haste, he knocked his chair over; he clumsily righted it and hastened to the counter. He threw some money down onto the counter and without waiting for his change, he left. Dalton watched him as he climbed into a black car that was parked next to the patrol car – he made a mental note of the

registration plate. The car shot off at speed spraying gravel up from the rear wheels as they skidded to grip.

“He seemed to be in a bit of a hurry,” commented Dave with a mouthful of bacon.

“Do you know him, Dave?” asked the officer.

Dave shook his head. “Do you?”

“Never seen him before in my life.”

“I’ve seen him around lately,” said the waitress as she lowered an Olympian-sized breakfast down in front of Dalton, “I’ve seen him driving around Wellock a few times of late – he drives like a bloody maniac.”

Dalton sighed his displeasure as he went about releasing his cutlery from the confines of the tightly wound serviette. He felt that there was something not quite right about the lad – but he couldn’t think what it was.

The door to the café opened and in walked, Arthur, a thickset lorry driver wearing a lumberjack shirt with a white t-shirt underneath – both garments struggled to arrest his oversized paunch.

“Morning, Arthur,” said Esther.

Arthur smiled weakly and mumbled his order.

“Are you feeling all right, love?” said Esther with earnest concern – Arthur was usually loud and flirtatious.

“I’m just a bit tired, that’s all,” he replied without animation. He sat down at the table near the door to wait his order.

“Aren’t you speaking, Arthur?” called out Dave cheerily as he passed him for the door.

Arthur forced a smile.

“Hey where are you going, you bugger?” called out Esther, “you haven’t paid yet.”

Dave apologised and returned to settle.

“I thought that I was going to have to place you under arrest then, Dave,” said Dalton in mock seriousness.

Dave let out a guffaw as Esther playfully flicked her tea towel towards him – Arthur sat, ashen faced, and without a reaction at the mirth. Dave left.

“He’s a funny sod that one,” said Esther as she disappeared into the kitchen.

The sergeant ate his breakfast in silence, not venturing to engage the sullen lorry driver.

Ballack was still fast asleep when Dalton returned to the car – he had dribbled down his chin, such was his stupor. He jumped up with a start when Dalton deliberately slammed the car door shut.

“St... ste... steady on,” Ballack managed as he rubbed at his swollen eyes.

“Wakey, wakey.”

“I’m bloody starving,” Ballack moaned as he released his seatbelt to get out of the vehicle.

“Too late, I’ve already eaten,” Dalton replied with glee as he started up the motor.

“You haven’t have you? Why didn’t you wake me up?”

“What do you know about Arthur?” the Sergeant suddenly asked, his mood turning sombre.

“Lorry driver Arthur?”

Dalton nodded.

“Not a lot; lives with his wife in Wellock on the council estate– she’s a bit of all right; younger than him. Why did you ask?”

“He didn’t seem himself this morning that’s all... and he had the beginnings of a bruise under his left eye I noticed.”

Ballack shrugged with indifference.

&&&

Wellock, a small quintessential English village, is pleasantly placed on the rural outskirts of Market Town. The better part of the population live around the lush village green and duck pond in their picturesque cottages overlooking the gaily-painted Maypole; a pointed spire to their rear ever watches their progress from above. To the far south of the Maypole, and hidden by a thick copse of trees, is a small grey-walled council estate that provides the labourers for the nearby farms. Nothing extraordinary ever happens in the sleepy village – except for an outbreak of foot and mouth ten years ago.

Curtains twitched one evening when Sergeant Dalton pulled his patrol car up outside number 29 - The Old Rectory.

Police officer Ballack got out of the vehicle and stretched. It was a pleasant early autumn evening and he had discarded his navy tunic in favour of a short-sleeved shirt.

“Good evening, officer,” said the Vicar, who appeared to materialise from nowhere. “I trust there is not a problem?”

“A Mr. Wilson; do you know him, Vicar?” asked Ballack without further ado as he pushed his cap to the back of his head before scratching his brow with a well-chewed pencil.



"I most certainly do," replied the weak-chinned fellow, "he is a stalwart of the church choir – a fine baritone."

"Have you seen him today?" continued the officer whilst indicating towards the drawn curtains and uncollected milk bottle with his pencil – sent to sour cream by the day's sun.

"My goodness," ejaculated the Vicar in shock, "I do hope he is all right in there... it's nothing to do with the travellers who have camped up near the brook is it? A rotten lot they are. I spotted them this morning when I took Old Brock for his walk – he's my dog."

"I wouldn't have thought so, Vicar," retorted Ballack in bemusement at the Vicar's senseless rant. He referred to his notebook. "We had a call from a neighbour... a Mrs. Smith, the Post Mistress this morning. She was worried that Mr Wilson had not opened his curtains."

"This morning? This morning?" raged the Vicar, his face turning beetroot, "It's evening now and you've only just got here – what's that all about?"

Ballack shrugged. "If you'll excuse me, Vicar."

Mrs. Smith, a plump lady in her early sixties, came hurrying across the road towards the patrol car; she was breathless by the time she got there. She dabbed at her wrinkled brow with a lacy handkerchief. Gasping out her words, she introduced herself to Ballack. She told him how she had banged on Wilson's door and windows to no response. She followed Ballack up towards the front door. Ballack knocked loudly on the door to no response either. He lifted up the letterbox and called out his name – still no response.

"I'm going around the back, Bert," he shouted to his sergeant, who sat waiting in the vehicle.

He bade Mrs Smith to stay where she was as he walked around the side of the building. The back garden was a sight to behold – God working alongside man to create a beautiful garden to rival Eden. A lush green lawn was bordered at all sides by a perfusion of colourful spring flowers. A small orchard stood at the bottom next to a vegetable plot. He tried the door but it was locked. The curtains were pulled closed, therefore he couldn't see inside. He called Dalton on the radio and awaited his arrival.

"Can you see him?" Dalton asked as he joined his colleague.

Ballack shook his head. Dalton sighed and pulled out his truncheon. He extended it to its full length and sent it against a small pane of glass, which made up the door. He carefully pushed his hand through the gap and unlocked the door.

"Come on then, let's have a look-see," he said to Ballack as he stepped sprightly inside.

They found themselves in a neat kitchen with a small scrubbed pine dining table pushed one side up to the wall. A small stale batch loaf lay on top with a bread knife next to it. A teapot, which stood there also, was cold to the touch - an empty china teacup alongside waited its fill. Finding nothing suspicious, they left the kitchen and stepped into the lounge. Ballack took a sharp intake of breath – an old man of about mid-70s sat on a high-backed armchair with his head back and his mouth wide open. Dalton felt for a pulse on his turkey neck.

"He's dead as the proverbial," he said as he looked down at a scattering of photographs that had obviously fallen from the deceased fellows grip when he expired.

Ballack picked up one of the photographs as Dalton surveyed the room – he couldn't see anything out of the ordinary. "What's that?" he asked, indicating to the photograph.

"It's *Kingda Ka*. It's one of the world's fastest and highest roller coasters – it goes up to 128 MPH."

"How do you know that you fat freak?"

"I've seen it on the internet; I'm into roller coasters," he replied as he scooped up the other photographs. He sorted through the other photographs. "Here's *The Steel Dragon* from Japan – it has the largest track in the world of just over 8000 feet." He carried on in a tedious tone. "*Nemesis* from Alton Towers – I've been on that one, *Goliath* from California, *Dodonpa*, Japan... & C&C."

YAWN.

"He seems to have had quite an interest in riding on roller coasters; he's had his photograph taken on all of them with the same grinning loon sitting beside him," remarked Dalton as he peered over his colleague's shoulder at the snaps. "What's that one?" he asked as he pointed to a small unremarkable track with a single loop.

"Be buggered if I know," returned Ballack. "It doesn't look up to much at all; it can't be more than a 30 foot drop from its highest point. The cars look a bit antiquated too, it must have been one of his *first* rides - he's not had his photo taken on it though."

Dalton smirked. "Seems a pity his *last* ride was taken in a high-backed chair then." He nipped his nose between his thumb and forefinger. "He seems to have left a small deposit too."

Ballack walked over to the fireplace to admire a carriage clock that sat centre. He noticed a lottery ticket under one of the legs. He pulled it out and looked at it. "Looks like he'll be missing the lottery draw on Saturday," he said as he waved the ticket.

"Put it back where you found it," said the sergeant sternly.

"You didn't think that I was going to keep it did you?"

Dalton ignored the question. "Get on to the doctor and get him over here. I'll find out if he has any relatives to contact," he said indifferently as he made for the front door to speak to Mrs. Smith.

Ballack saluted sarcastically as his senior stepped out of the front door. He heard him speak to Mrs. Smith in hushed tones – she burst into tears.

&&&

"Why are we driving up here, Bert?" Ballack asked as his sergeant pulled the car off the main road to enter a narrow country lane.

"The Vicar mentioned about some travellers up at the brook; I thought we'd go and have a gander just to see if everything is okay."

As they drove, Dalton noticed that the hedges and verges to the sides of the lane had been disturbed where the lane narrowed. It was obvious that a much bigger vehicle – probably a lorry – had recently driven this way. He didn't bother mentioning this to Ballack, who was disgustingly munching on a packet of pickled onion *Monster Munch*. Dalton made way as far as the lane went before getting out of the car and leaning up against a wide gate that gave vehicular access to a pasture – a small herd of cows gave him no notice and carried on munching nonchalantly at the lush grass beyond. The brook ran behind a line of trees that stood at the far side of the 5-acre field. Flattened grass across the field told the sergeant that the same vehicle that had been driven up the lane had crossed the field – a broken chain and padlock lay on the ground where it had been rudely smashed from the five-barred gate. He pushed open the gate and walked across the field towards the line of trees – Ballack bumbled after him shouting for the sergeant to wait so he could keep up. When he got through the line of trees, Dalton came to a small clearing – the brook babbled pleasantly to the far side. It soon became obvious that trauma had occurred to the vegetation in the clearing. Large areas of meadow grass had been flattened and puddles of what looked like engine oil polluted the grass near to where his size 10s were placed.

"Looks like they've moved on," said Ballack breathlessly.

"Mmmm," returned his senior thoughtfully as he scanned the area with his keen eyes.

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Nottingham Goose Fair is one of Europe's biggest travelling fairs. It opens in early October and runs for 4 days. After the 4 days the attractions split up and settle in nearby towns for a few days more.

Bert Dalton managed to park up his car in a quiet side near to the fairground. He and Tizzy, along with Alec Ballack and his wife, got out the car and made their way gleefully across the busy road and towards the throbbing fair. Smells of mushy peas and hotdogs with onions filled their nostrils as the cooking from the food stalls wafted by on the light wind. Alec liked the white-knuckle rides; his wife preferred the *waltzers* and *carousels*. Tizzy would hasten towards the famous ferrous wheels that looked out over the City whilst Bert dragged everyone along to the terrifying *Wall of Death* and the *Hook-a-Duck*. Just before they were engulfed by the crushing throng and entered the site, Bert's sharp eye noticed a familiar black car parked on double yellow lines – as yet a traffic warden had not placed a ticket under its windscreen wiper. It was the car from the other morning outside the Lemon Café; a modified *Vauxhall Corsa* - a boy racer's dream motor. He soon forgot about the car as the dazzling array of sights and sounds coming from the fair lured him and his party into its midst grinning like loons but watching out for their personal belongings as they pushed through the crowd towards their favourite attractions. Alec steered them towards the roller coaster that stood higher than most here tonight but a shade smaller than the big ferrous wheels. Riders whooped with excitement and fear as they dared to hold their hands aloft as the shining cars looped-the-loop and defied the ground. A queue of people more than a 100 metres long waited their turn as the cars sped around the track above their heads. Alec said something that no one heard; such was the noise of the fair to their ears. As they took their place in the queue, Bert suddenly noticed

someone through the crowd – the driver of the *Corsa* was hanging around near the exit gate from the ride. He twitched furtively in his suit, which looked like it belonged to a lad a full four inches shorter than his six-foot. He pushed his hand through his gelled hair and resettled his shades on his aquiline nose. A group of boisterous teenagers pushed noisily through the exit gate at the end of their ride; their cheap bling glistened expensively in the bright lighting. The driver of the black car stopped the last of their number as he lingered to rearrange his baseball cap; his friends disappeared into the crowd before he could have followed. The driver seemed to be shouting something into the chubby teenager's ear. He handed the teenager an envelope that he opened up and looked inside – a huge grin spread across his spotty face. The teenager nodded and began to follow the driver who pushed rudely through the crowd – turning his head after every third step to see if he was still being followed. Bert shouted something indistinguishable to his wife and set off hurriedly through the crowd without further ado. Before Tizzy could alert Alec, he was gone. It was no good calling him on his mobile because he wouldn't hear what she was saying – she would text him later if he didn't return soon; maybe he was just off to the hot dog stall to buy them some hot dogs. However, that notion would have been all too simple for her husband to follow; she feared an incident of some sort was about to occur – there usually was when Bert Dalton was about!

Breathlessly, Bert climbed into his car and started his engine. He just managed to pull out through the dense traffic and onto the main road as the black car set off; he could see two figures sitting in the car – it was the driver and the youth from the fair.

&&&

Because of the busy roads and traffic restrictions, Dalton was easily able to keep up with the *Corsa* and he was still on its tail when it left the city behind and headed north towards Sherwood Forest. The traffic thinned out as the road wound through the grassy farmlands and the black car increased its speed. Not wanting to be left behind, Dalton put his foot down onto the accelerator and his *Renault Espace* responded well. He kept slightly back as the *Corsa* sped past the Lemon Café and then by the wrought iron gateway of Rufford Park – Dalton feared that a patrol car would soon be in attendance for when he looked down at his speedometer it nudged 80 MPH. However, they were left unchallenged and they were soon up to the round-a-bout that fed the traffic onto the Great North Road. The black car took a left at the round-a-bout and then a sharp left, which took it into the Sherwood Heath visitor centre car park. Dalton followed but drove by the entrance; he pulled his motor into a nearby lay-by that stood 40 metres up the road. He switched off his engine and got out of his vehicle; his senses tingled into full alert.

It was pitch black in the heath car park and Dalton made his way stealthily towards the black car, which was parked in a dark corner next to a minibus. The interior light was on inside the *Corsa* and he could see the driver talking to the young lad. Dalton feared the worst; this was a popular spot for doggers and the youth was probably underage, he was definitely vulnerable. Just before he got up to the car the doors swung open and the twain inside jumped out. Dalton just managed to jump behind a waste bin lest he was to be discovered.

"This way, Darren," said the driver in a slightly East European accent as he turned on a small torch to indicate the way with its beam. They set off past the picnic tables and towards the gloomy heath – Dalton followed at a distance using the shadows to prevent his discovery. Several times he had to crouch low or move swiftly behind a bush as the driver turned his torch back up the overgrown path towards him. He could hear his pulse

throbbing in his ears as he followed; his avid step coiled and ready for avoidance. Dalton became so concerned with keeping out of sight, he didn't realise that he too was being followed. A stocky figure with short-cropped hair followed quietly at no less than 20 yards behind him.

Suddenly Darren turned to run; the driver grabbed him by the collar and slapped him hard across his face; his baseball cap came flying off his head such was the force.

"You've been paid well for this," said the driver calmly, "and I will return you back to town once it is over... I promise."

The youth wiped at his eyes with his grubby hand. "I'm scared."

"You will be fine; no harm will come to you and you are £100 up for your troubles – what more could a lad such as you want?"

Dalton swallowed hard. Part of him wanted to intervene now to save the lad from any further trauma; but the other part of him wanted to wait and discover the full extent of the occurrence and what it could lead to; the latter part of him prevailed – after all he could intervene at any time if it got too hairy.

The driver led the lad from the path and towards the woods. Dalton followed. "What the fuck?" he let out in astonishment at what he saw. He dived down to the ground for cover. He found himself to be lying next to a large untidy bundle of camouflage webbing – he pulled himself closer to it for a better concealment. His mobile phone sounded out...

THUMP

An unseen baseball bat came crashing down onto the back of his head knocking him flat to the ground. Before he could react and defend himself another savage blow was delivered. Blood came pouring out of a gaping wound but he couldn't even put his hand to it, he was so helpless. He slipped into painful unconsciousness as the violent beating continued. Such was the ferocity of the brutal attack that his body was flung about like a rag doll as he was turned roughly over by many hands to receive further punishment from the bat. He opened his eyes momentarily to see a circle of dark legs standing around him as he lay unable to respond – he heard a woman laugh cruelly from their midst. The last thing he saw before a heavy boot separated him from what could have been his last breath was a shapely ankle with a small rose tattooed onto it...

&&&

Tizzy sat tearfully next to his bed as he lay, thankfully, unconscious – he had been left for dead in the dense undergrowth only yards from the lay-by where his vehicle had been parked up. A lady walking her dog in the early morning found him lying with barely a breath to his swollen lips. The paramedics rushed to the scene and were able to sustain him until the ambulance arrived to whisk him off to intensive care at the Kings hospital. He had been in a coma for nearly a week.

"Why haven't they found out who did this yet, Alec?" Tizzy said angrily, her eyes red and swollen through lack of sleep.

Alec wiped back a tear and shrugged his heavy shoulders. He composed himself. "Everyone is doing their utmost, Tiz, you know that."

Tizzy smiled kindly and put her hand softly on the police officer's sleeve. She knew Alec was right. She had overheard him talking to the Superintendent in the corridor that morning; the Super had disclosed that forensics had found traces of blood on Bert's clothing that wasn't his – it was probably his assailant's. Presently they were desperately trying to find a match for it.

His breathing was laboured but regular and his pulse beat strongly from his chest. The bruising and swelling to his face was still hideous and plastic tubes came out of him like tentacles. However, despite his dire condition, Tizzy knew that he would eventually cough himself back to life. "How long have I been like this?" he would bellow, fearing that his police work would be suffering. He would find out who did this to him if it took him a thousand years – by God he would surely track them down and make them face the consequences of what they had done.

COUGH  
COUGH  
COUGH

"What the... how long have I been like this?"

You must take it easy Mr. Dalton," said the kindly nurse.

"Take it easy... take it easy? I'm battered and bruised... OUCH... who did this to me?"

"We don't know," said Alec reluctantly for he knew the response, "maybe you should lie still."

"You don't know, you fat bastard; you'd better get off your arse and find out, for I'll be buggered if I know what's happened to me," he bellowed from cracked lips.

"Your memory will soon return, Mr Dalton... you've suffered a lot of trauma."

"It had bloody better... COUGH... because what use is a copper without a memory?"

"At least you've remembered you're a copper... that' good isn't it?" said Alec with an inane look spread across his flabby chops.

"When I get out of here, I'm going to twat you one..."

"Glad to have you back, Bert."

"It's good to be *back*, mate... hey Tiz how are you in all of this?"

Tizzy fell across his chest and cried. "I'm a lot better now you bloody numbskull."

&&&

After his release from hospital 3 weeks later, Bert Dalton began to put his life back in order again as he recovered from his injuries. Physically he was soon fine and he had lost none



of his long-term memory. Unfortunately, he could only faintly remember going to the Goose Fair that fateful October night, but not a jot of what had happened afterwards when he left.

To confound matters, the blood found on Dalton's clothing belonged to a 15-year-old boy, Darren Dare, who had gone missing whilst at the Goose Fair the same night Dalton had been there. According to his friends, who were the last to see him, he had gone missing after they had all been on the roller coaster ride together. They had returned to the ride soon afterwards when they realised he wasn't with them, but they couldn't find him anywhere – they assumed that he had gone back home to Radcliff where he had lived.

Despite tireless police work around the local communities, they could not find any leads regarding the lad's disappearance. The only connection they had was between Dalton and the boy. Dalton was interrogated several times but each time he left his colleagues, and himself, with a blank. As yet he wasn't a suspect. However, he soon would be if nothing turned up. Although fit for desk duties, it was preferred that he stayed at home on the sick. Despite the terrible beating he took, the press were sending waves and as far as they were concerned, Dalton had strayed from his surfboard.

&&&

"Where do you want to go?" asked Ballack as he drove away from his friend's house in his new *Audi A4*.

"Wherever, Alec," returned Dalton indifferently as he admired the soft leather upholstery.

"How about *The Maypole Inn* at Wellock?"

"Whatever," came the curt retort.

"The Maypole it is then."

"How did you afford to buy a car like this?" Dalton asked abruptly.

"I... er... we've just had an insurance policy mature," stammered Ballack in reply.

"Must have been a good 'un," said Dalton morosely as he looked out of the window.

The Maypole Inn, a quiet pub in Wellock; a roaring fire took the chill from the cold autumn evening. Dalton stooped as he entered – *duck or grouse* – to avoid hitting his head on the low beams. He sat down at a table away from the fire and Ballack went to the bar to get the drinks. It was early evening and the regulars had not arrived as yet, except for a couple of strong-shouldered young farmers who sat next to the bar on high stools as they enjoyed their beverages. Ballack didn't really want to be there. He knew what a misery Dalton was when things were not going his way. As far as Bert Dalton was concerned, he should be back at the station helping to solve the mystery that was surrounding him presently and not on the sick. Ballack ordered the drinks and placed the foaming ales down onto the tabletop next to Bert.

"I hope you are just having the one drink, Alec," said Dalton sternly as he took a sip from his pint pot, "you don't want to be crashing your new expensive car do you?"



Ballack was beginning to regret doing as Tizzy had asked – *get the arsehole out from under my feet for an evening will you, Alec*, she had begged. He had reluctantly agreed.

He tried to change the subject. “You know Arthur?”

“Arthur?”

“Lorry driver Arthur... you know who I mean.”

“Yeah; what about him?”

“He made an emergency call the other night; his wife was giving him a right beating.”

“Jesus, is he all right?”

Ballack sighed. “Not really; he was battered, bloodied and bruised when our lads got to him, she was hitting him with a baseball bat – he refused to press charges though.”

“What made her go off like that?”

“He accused her of seeing another fellow – she’s out all of the time and she doesn’t tell him where she is going.”

“He seemed a bit off the last time I saw him, do you remember I told you he had a bruise under his eye... we were at the Lemon Café.”

Ballack nodded, although he didn’t recall.

The door suddenly opened and in walked the Vicar. He always called for a half pint of an evening before returning to the vicarage after services. He recognised Ballack and raised his hand to greet him; Ballack grimaced. The Vicar let out a comic guffaw through his horse teeth and joined the off-duty police officers at their table. He became serious as he asked Dalton about his recovery.

“I’m fine, Vicar,” he replied amicably to Ballack’s surprise.

The Vicar continued in the same earnest tone. “It’s not been a very good time of late. Since the harvest festival I’ve lost two of my congregation.”

Dalton was aware of the demise of Mr Wilson who they had called upon after he died of a heart attack.

“Is that so, Vicar?” said Dalton.

“I’m afraid so, Sergeant; George Mullens, Michael Wilson’s, very best friend has not been seen for weeks – he is feared lost.”

“Did you know about this, Alec?”

“Yeah we were informed just after you were admitted to hospital.”

"I'm very sorry to hear that, Vicar; I'm sure we are doing our best." And they continued the chitchat till Dalton lost his thirst for the ale.

Outside the pub, the sergeant wondered aloud, "Seems a bit of a coincidence," as he put on his seatbelt.

"What does?" replied Ballack as he slipped the car smoothly into gear.

"George Mullins and Michael Wilson."

"Shit happens," replied Ballack nonchalantly as he sped off into the night. "I'll take us up the side road to give her a try out," he added with a smirk whilst referring to the new *Audi*.

The deluxe motor powered easily around the winding road, sticking to the road like its tyres were coated in glue.

"Me and Tizzy are on about going away for a few days to the seaside," said Dalton. "Thought it might help with my amnesia," he added woefully.

"We're going away too," replied Ballack smugly.

"Where you going?"

"Florida."

"A new car and a holiday in Florida; that must have been a bloody good... watch out!"

A car came flying recklessly around a tight bend nearly colliding with the oncoming Audi. Ballack's advanced driving skills were just enough to avoid a head on collision. He braked smoothly and steered to the side as the other car carried on up the narrow country road. Ballack turned the car on a sixpence and sped after the other car.

"What a twat," he screamed out almost hysterically as he ran through the gears. The more powerful car soon caught up to the other just as it neared the village.

"Overtake him before he hits the village, Alec; he'll fucking kill somebody if he carries on like that."

"Okay."

Suddenly Dalton felt nauseous. The black car in front was recognisable to him – but where had he seen it? The registration plate was familiar too. As Ballack tried to overtake, the black car swung to the side; Ballack braked fiercely to avoid crashing into the back of it. He nearly lost control of his car, narrowly avoiding the ditch as he wrestled the car to a standstill.

"He's getting away," shouted Dalton.

Ballack put his foot down and the motor wheel-spun back into contention. However, he could not prevent the black car from entering the village. The car turned right at a junction and powered towards the green. It suddenly swerved to miss the startled Vicar as he crossed the road towards the rectory. Unfortunately the black car had obscured Ballack's

view and he didn't see the Vicar until the last moment. He braked so hard that he lost control of the motor and it flew up the banking towards the maypole.

SMASH

The vehicle smashed straight into the metal maypole – which was not for bending. The front of the car crumbled as if it was made of plastic. The airbags engaged to arrest the officers. The black car stopped and the driver got out.

"You don't fuck with me you bastards," he taunted in broken English.

Ballack was traumatised into a statue but Bert Dalton jumped out of the car as if he was a young constable on his first raid. However, in his haste he hit his head on the buckled doorframe – he went down like a bag of shit to the hilarity of the youth. His hilarity was short lived, however, as the maypole suddenly lurched forward. It may not have been for bending but it was for uprooting. As if a lumberjack had been in attention, the maypole fell away from the *Audi*.

SMASH

Unbelievably it landed straight across the roof of the black car smashing it asunder. The youth stood open mouthed as the sound of tortured metal and breaking glass filled the still night air. Ballack had recovered from his trauma and had reacted. He launched himself at the youth just before he could flee. He pinned the youth to the floor and sent a couple of kidney punches into his back to pacify him. The Vicar stood stammering over Dalton as he came around.

"You are rather accident prone, Sergeant," he said as he helped the tottering officer to his feet.

"Bloody hell," said Dalton as confusing flashbacks made his head spin around.

&&&

Dalton, still in civvies, looked on as his colleagues searched through the heath. They stood in a straight line and walked slowly forward across the flattened grass looking towards their toes.

"They brought the vehicle up through the old pit yard and onto the heath through the broken down fence over there," said Detective Ed Clarke.

"Sir, sir..." he was interrupted by one of the forensic team, a thin guy wearing a paper suit. "We've found some blood and body tissue well away from where Bert was clobbered."

"Get it matched with Darren Dare's immediately," he ordered.

"Sir."

"I don't get it," Clarke continued as he pushed his hand through his hair in bewilderment, "why a roller coaster in the middle of nowhere?"

Dalton shrugged. "I was as surprised as you Ed when I saw it." He pointed to his right. "There were about a dozen people standing over there queuing up for the ride to start."

Clarke's mobile phone interrupted them. "Clarke... yes... okay... we're at the heath now." He replaced his handset. "That was Alec; he's just got the photograph of the old roller coaster off Michael Wilson's daughter for you to look at again."

"I'm more than sure the ride I saw over there the other night was the same as the one on Wilson's photograph," said Dalton confidently as he indicated to the clearing. "I don't even have to look at it again."

"Pity Wilson isn't about to tell us more about it," muttered Clarke, who trusted the sergeant's judgement as much as his own.

"Or his mate, George Mullins," added the sergeant. "I'm sure his disappearance is linked to all of this."

Clarke nodded in agreement. "We've got a lot of work to do on this one, Bert. Are you back in tomorrow?"

Dalton grinned. "I surely will be, Ed."

"We'll talk to the Pole together shall we? He's not said anything yet."

Later that day, reports from forensics revealed the blood found on the heath belonged to the missing teenager, Darren Dare.

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The next morning, Clarke and Dalton stayed behind in the station to interview the owner of the black car, a 23-year-old Polish immigrant named, Joseph Kalin. Everyone else, who was not on specific duties, had gone, *en bloc*, to examine the site near the brook at Wellock – the area discovered by Sergeant Dalton the day he was attacked in October.

Kalin sat on a hard backed chair with his long legs pushed under a bare wooden table. Interview room 3 was used for all of the important cases – the Super watched proceedings from behind a two-way mirror. Dalton stood silently with his broad shoulders pressed up against the only door in the spartan room. He suddenly opened the door and in strode Clarke. He sat straight down opposite Kalin without looking at him.

"Right you piece of shit, don't fuck me about today because I've just had some very bad news." He looked at Dalton. "They think they may have found the body of George Mullens near the brook in a shallow grave. His skull is caved in and he has multiple injuries." He turned from Dalton and looked straight into the prisoner's eyes. He switched on the tape and made all of the legal declarations without breaking eye contact.

Kalin smiled radiantly before coughing behind his hand.; then shrugged, "Should that be of any importance to me?"

Clarke did not reply.

Pause...

Clarke continued. "Were you at the Nottingham Goose fair on the evening of October 4, 2008?"

"No," came the curt retort.

"Then how do you explain the fact that one of our officers saw you there? And, further to this, your car was parked on the Boulevard right next to the fair site. We have a picture of your vehicle from the C.C.T.V cameras."

"Did you say the 3<sup>rd</sup>?"

"No I said the 4<sup>th</sup>. The 4<sup>th</sup> of October 2009."

"Ah... I was confused... I was there at the 4<sup>th</sup> and had a fun time... it is no crime, no?"

"You left with a teenager named, Darren Dare... he's missing."

"I left al..."

"THE CAMERAS DON'T LIE!"

"I say no more until I get solicitor."

Clarke switched off the tape and winked at the sergeant. "A solicitor isn't going to help this chump very much."

It was a long day that followed at the station. The body found at the brook was later identified as definitely of George Mullens. Bert Dalton was not in the best of moods when he walked out to his car to, at last, go home; he'd been at the station for nearly 12 hours.

"Sergeant, sergeant," shouted a young WPC as she followed Dalton out into the car park.

"What is it, Belinda?" he returned impatiently.

She waved a piece of paper. "Alec thought you might like to deal with this one."

He snatched the paper out of her hand and read it. "He's right for once, I'll take it. Have you just come on shift?"

"Yes Sergeant."

"Book us a car out we're going to Wellock."

"Serg."



&&&

Not much traffic was about as they drove the dark country roads into Wellock. They drove by the fallen maypole and headed up towards the council estate. Belinda indicated to a house. All the lights were on and the front door was open.

"I hate domestics," she sighed.

Dalton didn't respond and he steered the vehicle towards the kerb. They could hear angry shouting as they walked up the garden path – curtains twitched from the windows of neighbouring houses. Belinda knocked on the open door.

"Mrs. Brookes... Mrs Brookes... it's the police, can you come to the door, please?"

SLAP

"You fucking bitch, that's the last time you ever lay your hand on me," bellowed a man's voice.

"Let go of me you bastard... bastard."

Dalton and Belinda stormed into the house and up the stairs towards the fracas. Two small children were cowering in their room. Belinda went to the children on Dalton's command and he ran into the other bedroom.

"Arthur, let her go," he demanded upon entry. Arthur was holding his wife down on the bed and she was desperately trying to punch him. His wife's short skirt was up around her waist to reveal a small black thong and her voluptuous breasts were falling out of her tight vest top in her struggle to free herself. Her long yearling legs kicked high into the air... a shiver sent itself down Dalton's spine. He felt faint and he held his hand over his eyes. He took a deep breath and struggled to compose himself, for on the woman's left ankle was a familiar tattoo... a small rose. Dalton's mind wandered back to the dark heath and the pain returned momentarily back to his body. "Arthur, let her go," he mechanically reiterated. Arthur did as the big Sergeant asked. His wife ran towards Dalton and hid behind him.

"Don't let him hurt me officer... he's a brute."

Dalton sighed. Arthur had scratch marks all over his face and arms and an angry red weal was etched under his eye. Belinda had settled the children and came into the room. She took Arthur's wife's arm and led her out of the room and downstairs.

"You know that I hardly touched her... I was defending myself... she attacked me," Arthur gasped.

"I only know what I saw Arthur... why should she attack you?"

Arthur plonked himself down onto the bed. "She's been seeing somebody else... has been for months."

Dalton inhaled deeply.

Arthur woefully continued. "The whole village is laughing behind my bloody back and I challenged her about it... that's why she attacked me... it's not the first time either. She's going out tonight again and won't tell me where she is going... it's not right."

Belinda entered the room. "Mary's mother is coming to take the kids to her house... what are we doing about him?" she asked vehemently.

"Is Mary pressing charges?"

Belinda shook her head.

"We aren't either... he's free to go."

"Serg?"

"Is there anywhere you can go for the night, Arthur?"

"I've a brother in Market Town I could go to."

"We'll give you a lift on the way back to the station."

"Thank you."

Dalton spoke into his radio. "Is Detective Clarke still at the station... yes... tell him to get himself up to Wellock pronto... to the council estate... unmarked car and bring Kelvin... yes Karate Kelvin."

&&&

Dalton watched as Belinda drove away; Arthur sat dejectedly in the back seat with his head bowed low. With them gone, Dalton skulked into the shadows of a shrubbery that stood to the side of the estate – his keen eyes peeled on Arthur's house frontage. He could see Mary looking out of a downstairs window – obviously looking for someone to arrive. Dalton looked at his wristwatch; it was nearly 7pm. A blue *BMW* pulled up and out stepped someone he knew. It was the traveller, Bill Bryce's son, Alvin – a muscular and uncouth youth in his early twenties. Dalton thought he had gone up in the world judging by the pristine motor he was driving. Unashamedly Mary came running out of the house and flung her arms around the young man; she kissed him passionately before they both got into the vehicle. Just as they pulled away Clarke's car came thankfully around the corner; Kelvin sat next to him staring blankly out of the window. Dalton stepped out into the road and waved Clarke to stop.

"Follow that BMW that you've just passed," shouted Dalton as he climbed into the back seat of the car.

Detective Clarke did as he was asked without question.

&&&

They followed the car away from Wellock and towards Market Town. Instead of going straight on at the crossroads near the college and into town, the BMW turned off right down the road that led to the Coldwall Dam. The quiet road was a dead end and was covered on both sides by thick pine tree plantations. Clarke pulled over at the mouth of the road.



"We'd be better off walking from here, they can't go far because the road ends after 400 yards," he said.

Leaving the car behind, they set off walking down the road, keeping to the shadows as they went. Soon they came across the BMW but the occupants were not inside; a familiar minibus stood empty next to it.

Kelvin suddenly ejaculated. "What's that over there in the trees?"

The others could not see anything until Kelvin had stepped off the road and into the beginnings of the woods. He pulled a covering of camouflage netting away to reveal a hidden lorry.

Dalton coughed nervously. "We'll go that way," he said as he noticed long grasses flattened by heavy footfall near the lorry. "Be on your guard lads, we're probably being watched," he warned.

Keeping to the dark tree line they disappeared into the woods. After a few hundred yards, Kelvin suddenly grabbed his sergeant's sleeve. "There's something going on over there, I can hear talking."

"I can too," added Clarke.

"Right, you stay here Kelvin and watch our backs," said Dalton assertively – despite butterflies flying around his queasy stomach.

Dalton and Clarke carried on stealthy forward until they came across a clearing. They both dropped to their knees behind some rhododendron. Before them they could see the roller coaster – the same one as seen on Wilson's photograph.

"Fuck me," whispered Clarke as he scanned the scene. Two men were on ladders high up working on the single loop as the empty cars awaited their passengers. A group of people stood in a huddle nearby talking in hushed tones. Clarke noticed Bryce and another man; they were arguing in front of Mary. A small torch lit up the cabin where the operator sat. A gangly man wearing a dark coloured jumper sat reading a newspaper. Suddenly Bryce grabbed Mary's arm and pushed her towards the man who grabbed her roughly by the wrist. She protested but was forced to go along with him. He led her to the side of the cars. He held her tight as the group moved towards him.

Suddenly a noise came to their backs. Clarke and Dalton turned to see a stocky fellow fall under a rabbit punch by Kelvin. Kelvin grinned as he cuffed the unconscious figure again for luck. "He nearly had you," he mocked.

"Fuck off, Kelvin," said Clarke as he turned back towards the ride.

Dalton sent his boot into the man's shaven head. "Bastard."

The group handed cards to the man as they were beckoned to approach. He looked at them before allotting them their seats.

"What the Dickens is going on?" said Dalton.

"Isn't that Albert Maile, the MP?" said Clarke hoarsely after recognising the portly man who had been allotted the front car.

"I think you're right," agreed Dalton shaking his head in disbelief.

The man holding Mary pushed her into the empty seat next to Maile. He said something to her before pushing the restraint down over her shoulders. She put her hands over her face. The other two men had since removed the ladders and were checking the restraints of the other passengers. The taller of the two gave the thumbs up to Bryce who, in turn, sent up his thumb for the controller who threw his newspaper to the floor. The cars slowly began to move forwards. A chain clattered as they were pulled up the steep slope where they would be released to the grace of gravity. Upon reaching the summit the cars stopped momentarily – Mary screamed.

WHOOSH

Off they went hurtling down the drop in an ever-increasing speed. The passengers whooped with excitement as they neared the loop. As they hit the loop, the cars were going at a fair pace. The cars began their loop and just as they turned upside down at the top underside of the loop, there was a loud crack.

AAAAAAAAGGH

A screaming figure fell from one of the cars and dashed itself down onto the unforgiving track below to be cut in two by the pursuing cars as they completed their loop.

"Jesus Christ," exclaimed Dalton in horror.

Dalton, Clarke and Kelvin moved swiftly forward towards the ride loudly shouting their police presence as they went. Dalton dropped the surprised Bryce with a kick to his genitals whilst Kelvin made short work of the two riggers. Clarke followed the fleeing operator into the woods as he flew from his cabin; closely followed by the other man. Dalton shouted at the passengers to stay where they were as the ride came to an end; he called for back up on his mobile as he hastened towards the fallen figure – it was Mary. Maile sat weeping in his car and the others remained silent with their heads bowed not daring to move. Clarke returned shaking his head – the twain had disappeared into the darkness. Kelvin cuffed Bryce and stood smug guard over his disabled charges.

&&&

"He's fucking what?" raged Dalton as he kicked his waste bin to the other side of his office.

Clarke sighed heavily. "We couldn't pin anything to him... his fancy Dan lawyer saw to that."

"So as it stands, Maile walks free?" stated the Sergeant incredulously.

Clarke shrugged. "Fraid so, Bert. But at least we've got the main culprits, Bryce and his cronies, banged to rights."

"The crown prosecution want a rocket up their arses," continued the irked police sergeant. "MPs; if they're not on the take they're... fuck it."

"Bryce should get life," interjected Clarke brightly.

"He deserves it too, fucking moron... it ought to have been Maile that was flung out of that bloody car and dashed on the track below."

Clarke righted the waste bin. "I can't believe that people would pay... intelligent people to boot... to gamble their lives on a roller coaster... the *Ultimate Ride* they called it. 12 passengers to get on at the beginning of the ride, but only 11 to get off at the end of it."

"It wouldn't have been so bad if it had been only them that had died... it was the fact that innocent people were killed too... people, like Darren Dare who was forced to ride... and even Arthur's wife."

"Seems that Bryce thought it through pretty well. Keep the big payers alive for as long as realistically possible to keep the money rolling in and sacrifice the others for a few hundred quid."

Have *any* of the riders been charged?" asked Dalton.

Clarke shook his head sadly. "Money people... bankers, businessmen... they can afford the best lawyers."

"Make's you wonder why we bother."

"We do bother, Bert; because we care."

Just then the door opened and in walked Ballack; he was grinning like a Cheshire cat. "Thought I'd call to say too-da-loo. I'm off on my holidays tomorrow... Florida here I come."

"We know where you are going knob cheese... enjoy the roller coaters won't you?"

Ballack turned green. "I shan't be going on any of them that's for sure."

Dalton sat down behind his desk. "We've got a lot to talk about on your return," he said sternly.

"Have we?" returned Ballack nervously.

"Yeah we have," continued the big sergeant, "we need to talk about lottery tickets and the such."

"I... I... I'll be seeing you," Ballack stammered as he staggered towards the door. He left.

Clarke stifled his laughter. "You can't prove anything about that lottery ticket, Bert."

"I know that, but at least I've ruined his holiday."

"He might not come back," chortled Clarke.

“Suits me.”

With that the twain collapsed into hysterical laughter.

**\*\*\*\* The End \*\*\*\***

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## **The Boomerang Boys**

**By Kyle Hemmings**

**Synopsis:** A narrative that captures the mood, the moment and the spirited heart.

**About the Author:** Kyle Hemmings lives and works in New Jersey, where he skateboards near Branch Brook Park, attempts backflips, and sometimes misses. He really digs R. Crumb's artwork.

**In this fiction,** we witness the adventure some call life.

# **The Boomerang Boys**

## **By Kyle Hemmings**

### **1. Pink And Cinderella**

We find Pink Floyd in the sand, completely naked and nuku under the sun. He looks like somebody's version of Ted Nugent when he was young enough to be Neanderthal. Me and Elephant Boy, an Indian kid, who has - what else - tattoos of tusks on both arms, kick sand in Pink's face. If Elephant weighed any less, he'd be lighter than his skateboard.

"Yo, dude, like you know what time it is?" I say, throwing him a pair of jeans and a T-shirt that says 'Are You Alright?'

Pink wipes the crust from his orbs and says "Fuck you, bitch. I was dreaming I did it with Cinderella, and Charming was drooling with castrated hopes." He swivels his head of moppy chestnut hair around. The California surf this morning is calm as the insides of my ratty Reeboks.

"Who you calling a bitch? Do I have titties? You know we got a tournament tomorrow in Grass Valley?"

"Duh, gee, Wally ... No, Sheep Slut. I didn't forget. I was just getting some Zen."

Later, Elephant Boy tells me he's got a sudden urge to call his mom in Pasadena. After one week on the road, the Elephant Boy wants to suck on his mother's tit. His brother, by the way, smokes some of the best ganja this side of the Ganges. I mean, you don't feel human after inhaling that shit.

### **2. The Interview**

Interviewer: Describe yourself.

Sheep Slut: Basically, I'm a stretched wire that's not electrically grounded. I'll also shock anyone within reach of his own tongue.

Interviewer: Explain.

Sheep Slut: Two in the morning in a Topeka hotel is not exactly the time and place to initiate a water balloon war. But the dudes were okay with it. Later, I was explaining our situation to a dog-faced deputy, promising that I'd keep the outcasts in check. He was cool with that. Later, Elephant did a kick-flip front-side five-O on this rigged bump to electrical box.

Interviewer: Any advice for street skaters?

Sheep Slut: Destroy everything in your path and remember nothing.

Interviewer: What's your big dream?

Sheep Slut: Moonwalking on the Eiffel Tower.

Interviewer: What's the biggest problem facing today's generation?

Sheep Slut: Consuming vast amounts of fast food and spending endless hours in Burger King stalls waiting for enlightenment.

Interviewer: Your solution?

Sheep Slut: Consuming vast amounts of fast food and forsaking the enlightenment crap.

### 3. The Skate Video



I've been on all kinds of cross-country trips but never like this one. The video tour is pretty stag for most companies 'cuz they own your time, plan demos and shop signings to promote their skateboards. We eliminated two problems: driving cramped as suction cups and staying in hotels as expensive as Donald Trumps' threads by traveling in The Rocket - a 38-foot long RV. Pink Floyd and Elephant Boy shed schedules, showing up at Dunkin' Donuts unannounced - no bitching or bickering, no demos, no team managers, no distributors. The crew just chilled considering we all lived and logged some 5000 miles in a cruising box. The result was a videotaped hold-on-to-your-pants roller coaster ride that included everything from broken ankles, Elephant jumping off a 50-foot water tower and a twenty-foot slam to the dome, rehab visits to ex-

rippers, Michigan border troubles, me, frenching up a storm with someone's mom, and a chick so stoked for Pink, she ditched her boyfriend while Pink did a backflip off a Chicago vert-ramp.

I mean, come on, how can you go wrong with two cool dudes like Pink and Elephant and a crew that parties like a bunch of Goths who detest false metal. They're inspiration for the dead and the goofy-footed, man. Even your own mother who can't be tied down.

### 4. After Elephant's Carlsbad Accident

Back in the hotel room, I take Elephant's skateboard and start trashing the room: smashing mirrors, windows, the chintzy furniture that holds photos of the three of us holding our boards over our heads. I'm spinning around and around and whacking everything so hard I think the axle shields and inverted kingpins are coming apart.

Pink Floyd barges in, followed by a crew member, and both grab hold of my arms, and I'm telling them the docs lied. The fuckers lied.



The camera guy enters and Pink puts a hand over the lens. Get the fuck out, he's tellin' him. He's handling this.

"Tune it down, man," says Pink Floyd, hard-starin' me.

"He's just veggin' in a wheelchair."

"I know. I know what you're going through. But for a slinky kid, he had my father's balls. He'll go down bigger than Danny Way."

I drop the skateboard. The crew member, the size of a gorilla and then some, backs away.

"Look," says Pink, "here's what we'll do. We'll win the Philly tournament and give half our winnings to Elephant's family. I think it's the only thing to do."

"It sucks," I say.

"Yeah, it sucks," says Pink. "Life sucks. But zero or die, Elephant will be remembered."

We face each other and Pink places a fist over his heart. "You copy?"

"I copy."

"What's the matter?"

"Think I broke my hand."

"Fuck."

I want to kick somebody's ass so bad and discard him as roadkill.

## **5. Drivin' Along Ventura**

We're drivin' up Ventura Highway. It's a nice day, turned down and all, and we're passing some hot chicks in halters and cut-offs. Pink honks and one waves. I'm in love for a whole five minutes. But Pink pulls over towards a Tex-Mex and says, "Yo, like I'm hungry for a couple of cheeseburgers."

And I'm thinking of climbing to the roof of Pink's van, all jacked-up on my board and doing a 360 flip or a front-side ollie all the way around the world, maybe over its edges, flying over every flat-footed pedestrian, glued to the ground. I'll land at the exact spot on Pink's hood like some human boomerang, step down and spit on the ground, thinking of the way Elephant Boy never dragged his feet.

**\*\*\*\* THE END \*\*\*\***

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## **Blood Sport**

**By Gil A. Waters**

**Synopsis:** Another true pulp fiction to hit you hard and feel pleasure in the pain of these special beings.

**About the Author:** Gil A. Waters lives in the vicinity of Washington, DC, and likes to write. So far, he also has managed to get published in *The Battered Suitcase* (March 2009), *Clockwise Cat* (July & November 2009), *Spooky Action at a Distance* (August 2009), and *The Legendary* (October 2009). You can read and meet him at <http://gilwaters.com/>.

**In this gritty fiction,** our protagonists drive, drink, damage and ask for more.

## **Blood Sport**

**By Gil A. Waters**

It didn't look like the kind of place that might hold the key to salvation.

In fact, it was little more than an unsightly growth along an otherwise unblemished stretch of highway. Four small buildings of sand-blasted brick and sun-blistered wood, each marked by a single generic sign that announced its purpose: "Gas" and "Diner" on one side, "Motel" and "Bar" on the other. Between each pair of buildings lay a gravel lot large enough to accommodate the tractor-trailers that accounted for much of the traffic in this unrequited corner of the world. Two were parked next to the diner, while a decrepit brown station wagon and a couple of dusty motorcycles languished next to the bar on the other side.

Rik slowed his car and pulled into the gas station alongside the lone gas pump. An unkempt little man, wearing oil-stained overalls and no shirt, emerged from the shadow of the open garage bay and approached, as Rik stepped out of the car and surveyed the desolate landscape. Nothing but scrub and sand in all directions, occasionally interrupted by a tiny silver trailer baking in the sun — a nighttime home for one of the few mummified souls who actually lived here.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" said the man, noticing the grimace of displeasure on Rik's face.

"Lovely," Rik replied, exhaling the word as if he were expelling smoke from his lungs.

He didn't bother to look at the man, but continued to gaze at the horizon, perhaps waiting for the heavens to open and the gods of irony to give him a sign.

"Yeah," the man continued, "what we have here is what you might call your archetypal southwestern shithole."

Rik's frown transformed into a smile as he turned to face the man. He hadn't expected such a philosophical flourish from someone who looked as if he could barely scratch his own name in the dirt with a stick.

"I don't believe I've ever considered what an archetypal shithole might look like."

"Take my word for it, this is it. This is the kind of place that exists only because it's halfway between someplace and someplace else."

"Well, I suppose that means I'm getting somewhere," Rik said.

The man smiled and nodded in return.

"Shall I fill 'er up?" he asked.

"Why, yes, thank you."

The man unscrewed the gas cap and began to fill the tank of Rik's car: a 1970 Hemi Cuda with heavily tinted windows and several coats of dull black primer; the perfect muscle car for the man with few muscles.

"What did you do before?" asked Rik.

The man winced at the question and stared down at the ground for a few seconds, then raised his head.

"I find that it's best not to dwell on the past," he replied.

"I didn't mean to pry," said Rik. "It's just that you don't speak as if you've spent your whole life pumping gas."

The man raised his eyebrows in mock surprise.

"I'm what you might call a 'closet intellectual,'" he said.



"Really? This doesn't seem like a very intellectual kind of place," Rik said.

"To the contrary! There's only two things to do out here: read and fuck. Seeing as how I'm not the kind of man who attracts a lot of women, the choice seemed obvious."

"That's probably a wiser choice anyway," Rik said, trying to be kind.

"Maybe. But it takes a whole lot of books to keep you warm on a cold night."

Rik looked up at the mid-day summer sun and wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his arm.

"Not much chance of it getting cooler any time soon," he said.

"Exactly," the man replied. "And that's why I'm here."

Rik laughed and handed the man a generous portion of the stolen cash in his pocket.

"You're not wearing gloves," Rik observed. "You don't even have a gun."

"I suppose I like to live dangerously — just like you."

Rik looked down at his own bare hands, through which infection conceivably could pass into his body from any tainted person he might be unlucky enough to touch. Then he wrapped his right hand around the grip of the 9mm Glock holstered under his left arm.

"You're not afraid of getting shot?" Rik asked.

"With my bad aim, a gun wouldn't help me avoid that fate anyway," he said, turning back toward the garage.

"Thank you kindly," he said as he walked away, holding up the money Rik had given him.

Rik got back in the car and drove the three-hundred or so yards to the diner across the lot, coming to a stop in the shade of its low, over-hanging roof. He grabbed his duffel bag from the passenger seat and headed inside.

The drivers of the two trucks parked nearby were perched next to the entrance on a couple of the tiny stools that lined the counter. Looking like grotesquely distorted versions of Tweedledum and Tweedledee, each had managed to elevate morbid obesity to a patriotic art form, cramming oversized heads and bodies into tiny caps and shirts proudly emblazoned with images of the flag. As soon as Rik walked in the door, they looked him up and down as if he were naked, sizing up his gun in comparison to their own absurdly large .44 Magnums.

"Howdy, gentlemen," said Rik as he walked to the booth at the rear of the diner.

Each trucker responded with a barely perceptible nod of the head.

Rik sat down with his back to the wall and tossed his duffel bag over the table into the seat on the other side.

An ancient, skeletal waitress with bleached, bee-hive hair and what looked like an elephant gun strapped to her side emerged from the kitchen. Hands clad in stained surgical gloves, she thrust a scrap of paper in a dirty plastic folder in front of him. There were only five items on it, each of which seemed more nauseating than the next.

"You know what you want, or you need more time to look it over?" she asked.

"Well, it's a tough choice," Rik replied, "but I think I'll have the Coyote Platter."

The waitress yelled over her shoulder in the general direction of the kitchen, "Juan! Gimme one *caca coyote*."

"*Caca coyote*?" said Rik.

"It's a private joke," she said in a voice so devoid of humor it would have made a clown cry.

“Anything to drink with that?” she asked.

“A cup of your finest coffee. Or, should I say, one *caca café*.”

She fixed him with a stony gaze. “You’re a funny guy,” she said as she walked away from the table.

The waitress disappeared into the kitchen and returned almost immediately with a plate and a cup, which Rik took to be a bad omen. What she set before him looked as if it might once have been a steak, alongside a pile of what might have been mashed potatoes, all covered in something resembling gravy.

Rik let out a sigh and started to eat, willing his taste buds into submission.

He was only into his third bite when he sensed it. Even before he could hear the roar of the engine, he felt the tingling along his spine that meant another like him was drawing closer. He looked out the window and across the gravel lot as a 1978 Harley Low Rider pulled into the gas station. The rider was a woman, tall, with straight black hair that flowed to the middle of her back. She jumped off the bike and started to put gas in the tank, waving off the little man as he reemerged from the garage to offer his assistance. Then she brusquely handed him some cash, got back on, and sped towards the diner in a cloud of dust. The truckers were already staring and drooling as she brought the machine to a stop beside Rik’s car, grabbed the saddlebag hanging on the back, and came inside.

“My, my, my,” said one while the other laughed. “What do we have here?”

She ignored him and turned toward the row of booths.

“That is *fine*!” he persisted, stretching out one bloated arm and gently patting her on the ass with a glove-clad hand.

That was a mistake.

She spun around, hair twirling like a Spanish dancer, and in one fluid motion took the .357 Desert Eagle from the holster at her side, pulled back the hammer, and pressed the muzzle into the soft flesh between his bewildered eyes.

Rik couldn’t suppress the wide smile that spread across his face. There were few aphrodisiacs more powerful than the sight of a beautiful woman with violent tendencies.

She stood silently for a moment and pressed the gun a little harder against the man’s forehead. Then, in a voice colder than death, she said, “If I ever see either of you again, anywhere, I will kill you.”

The trucker under the gun began to stutter, “I, I, I’m sorry . . .”

But she raised her free hand, put her forefinger to her lips, and whispered, “Shhhhh.” Then she took a few steps backwards, continuing to point the gun at him, and sat down at the booth closest to the entrance. She laid the gun on the table in front of her and said simply, “You’re both leaving now.”

The truckers pulled out their wallets with hands that trembled like those of a drunk in need of a drink, threw some cash on the counter, and ran out so fast they almost tripped over each other. The waitress stepped from behind the counter, where she had stood quietly watching the drama unfold.

“What can I get for you, killer?” she asked, holding a menu in front of the beautiful gunslinger’s face.

“Coffee. And water,” the woman replied, pushing the menu aside.

The waitress returned with a glass and a mug just as the truckers gunned their engines and pulled out of the lot. Rik picked up his plate and his coffee cup and sauntered over to her table.

“Hi!” he said in a loud voice as irritatingly perky as possible as he sat down across from her.

She froze, mouth half open, arm in mid-air, cup of coffee in hand.

“I recommend the Coyote Platter,” he continued with the unnerving familiarity of a stranger who somehow knows your darkest and deepest secret.

She slammed her cup on the table, spilling about a third of its contents in the process, as her brow furrowed above her sunglasses in a look of annoyed disbelief.

“Are you out of your fucking mind?” she asked rhetorically, gesturing toward the gun that still lay before her.

“Why, yes, I am out of my fucking mind, as a matter of fact.”

The waitress returned to the table, probably trying to head off the unspeakable carnage she was sure was about to ensue.

“Something to eat?” she asked, once again holding out the menu.

Now it was Rik who pushed it aside.

“Like I said, get the Coyote Platter. It’s a culinary experience you won’t soon forget.”

The woman stared at him for several more seconds, her brow becoming ever more furrowed as she tried to make sense of the lunatic seated before her.

“Okay. Fine. I’ll have the god-damned Coyote Platter.”

“Juan! Another *caca coyote*,” yelled the waitress as she walked away.

Now the gunslinger looked doubly perplexed.

“Did she just say — ?”

“It’s a private joke,” Rik answered with authority. “Something to do with local legend concerning the curative powers of dog shit, I believe.”



The woman put her head in her hands and began massaging the back of her skull with the tips of her fingers.

"You okay?" asked Rik.

"You're giving me a headache."

"Sorry to hear that. If you want some painkillers that'll knock an elephant on its ass, let me know. I get headaches that would rip your brain to shreds."

Her head shot back up and she studied his face for some clue. Her mouth opened slightly, forming around an unasked question that she swallowed back into silence.

The waitress returned with a plate and set it in front of her.

The gunslinger glanced down at it and, in a barely audible whisper, muttered, "Oh my god."

"See, what did I tell you," Rik said. "Unforgettable, isn't it?"

He sawed off another piece of meat on his own plate and put it in his mouth.

"Seriously, though, it's not as bad as it looks," he added as he chewed.

She said nothing, but started to eat, quickly devouring everything on the plate. It seemed as though she hadn't eaten in a while.

"You've got quite an appetite," said Rik as he continued to pick at the remnants of his own meal. "I guess that means you're a healthy girl."

She pushed the empty plate away and stared out the window at nothing in particular, slowly sipping what remained of her coffee.

"What do you want?" she asked in a voice that now sounded more tired than annoyed.

"Nothing, really. I've just got some time to kill in this hellhole. Besides, you look lonely."

She let out a bitter laugh.

"Really? So you thought you'd do me a favor and keep me company? You want to be my friend?"

Rik paused before answering, waiting until she had once again raised her coffee cup to her lovely lips.

"Well, not exactly," he replied. "I wouldn't mind fucking you, though."

Rik watched with amusement as she choked on the coffee and two small streams of liquid flowed from her nostrils. He grabbed the cup from her hands before she spilled the rest of it on herself and set it back on the table.

Once she'd stopped coughing into her napkin, she stared at Rik with a kind of hopeful curiosity.

Rik continued, "You see, I had a conversation with the local philosopher at the gas station. I believe you've already met him. He's a remarkably well-spoken gentleman who hasn't bathed in about a year."

She nodded her head.

"He wasn't very talkative with me," she noted absent-mindedly.

"Ah, well, you probably scared the shit out of him. Besides, he and I had the benefit of male bonding. Regardless, he informed me that there are only two things to do around here: read and fuck. I don't have a book on me at the moment, and the only other woman I've seen so far is as old as my great-grandmother, so that leaves you."

He took off his sunglasses and looked at her with a desperate weariness as deep as her own.

"So, you want to fuck?" he asked.

She paused for only a second before responding.

"Sure, what the hell."

They each laid some cash on the table and got up, not bothering to wait for the waitress to present them with a bill. They grabbed their respective bags, stepped back into the blinding sunlight, and walked together across the empty highway to the motel; five tiny rooms attached to an even smaller office. Inside was a gray-haired old man seated behind an empty wooden desk who barely acknowledged their presence by momentarily glancing up from the newspaper he was reading.

"Me and the missus need a room," said Rik.

The man silently pointed to a sign on the wall indicating the cost per night — or day, as the case might be.

"I'll get this, honey," he said to her as he handed the man a few bills and accepted a room key in exchange.

"Are you always such a jackass?" she asked once they'd stepped back outside.

"Most of the time," Rik replied. "I once had a therapist who told me that it's a defense mechanism to mask my deep-seated insecurities."

They walked to the room farthest from the office and Rik unlocked the door. They stepped inside, threw their bags on the floor, tossed their guns and sunglasses on the nightstand, and stood facing each other by the side of the bed.

With the fingertips of his right hand, Rik brushed her left cheek and then made his way down the side of her neck and across the sweat-soaked t-shirt clinging to her breasts. A smile began to break across the stony veneer of her face as she felt the nearly electric

charge of his touch. She grabbed both sides of his head and pulled him towards her, pressing her lips against his and hungrily intertwining her tongue with his own. They fell onto the bed as they pulled off each other's clothes. Once they were naked, she stretched out on her back and spread her legs, inviting him in.

Rising to his knees, Rik paused as he looked down upon her. Like him, she was thirty-something, with a face hardened and worn beyond her years. But she also had a lean, muscular physique that put his own body to shame. He slid on top of her and then slid inside, losing himself in the currents of pleasure that rippled through their skin at every point where their bodies came into contact, culminating in luscious orgasms that nearly rendered them both unconscious.

Afterward, they lay side by side, spent and dripping, and stared up through the ceiling into their own silent fears.

"I'm Rik, by the way."

"Dez."

"Nice to meet you."

"Likewise."

A minute passed before he asked the obligatory question. "How long have you had it?"

"About a year and a half," she replied without emotion. "And you?"

"Three years."

"Damn. From the beginning. There aren't many of you old-timers left."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"And I'm guessing you can sense," she observed.

"Yeah. That started happening about a year ago."

"That makes you a valuable commodity in some circles — and dangerous."

"My momma always told me I was special."

He rolled on his side to face her.

"What did you do before?" he asked.

She stared at him, eyes full of lonely suspicion, and said nothing.

"Hey, I'm just trying to make conversation," he said. "But if you want to keep this a straight fuck, that's fine with me."

He got up and went to the window, opening the blinds just enough to unveil a tiny sliver of the world. A couple of dusty drunks were stumbling out of the bar, barely distinguishable from the tumbleweed that rolled past them.

At first he didn't notice the blood beginning to drip from his eyes like tears of crucifixion.

"You'd better not do that by the window," Dez said, sounding a little more relaxed at the sight of his disintegration.

He snapped the blinds shut.

"Shit!" he muttered as he headed for the bathroom. "I can usually feel when it's about to start."

Now the blood was beginning to flow from his nose and ears as well, and the pain was building deep within his head like a knife trying to push its way through his skull. He turned on the shower and crouched beneath the stream of hot water, holding his head in his hands and rocking back and forth like an autistic child. He was only vaguely aware of Dez getting into the shower and sitting down across from him, leaning against the cracked ceramic wall that long ago had been white. The blood flowed for ten minutes or so before coming to a stop as abruptly as it had started. Rik raised his head, nearly blinded by the pain that had not yet begun to ebb.

"I haven't had it this bad in a while," he said in a whisper.

"You want me to get you something?" Dez asked.

"In my duffel bag. There's a black case."

She got up and disappeared into the bedroom, then returned with the case. She sat on the toilet and opened it.

"Morphine," she said jealously. "I've been eating oxycodone for weeks."

Rik smiled.

"I've gotten pretty good at ripping off hospitals."

She took out the syringe and the morphine bottle.

"How much?" she asked.

"A hundred milligrams should do it."

Dez pulled back the plunger until a hundred milligrams worth of air filled the syringe before pushing the needle through the rubber stopper of the bottle. Then she injected the air into the bottle, turned it upside down, drew the proper dose into the syringe, and withdrew the needle.

She handed the syringe to Rik, who proceeded to add one more wound to the track marks that perforated the veins of his feet and ankles. His eyes grew heavy and his head fell forward to his chest as the morphine saturated his body. But, unlike an ordinary junky, he

regained a semblance of normalcy in a matter of seconds. He got up, returned the syringe and morphine bottle to their resting place, then went back to the bed, propping himself up against the headboard with a pillow as Dez lay down beside him. Rik grabbed the remote from the nightstand and turned on the tiny television that sat on the dresser at the foot of the bed.

As the television came to life, a car commercial was just ending and a scantily clad young woman was leaning over the hood proclaiming her love for the automobile's big, powerful engine. Then a little girl appeared on the screen, as white as the dress she wore, sitting on an impossibly green lawn playing with a blond-haired doll.

"Oh, good! This one's my favorite," said Rik, settling into his pillow.

The camera slowly panned back to reveal a clichéd suburban paradise: a white picket fence encasing the child in a metaphor of safety, a housewife with garden shears and a broad-brimmed pink hat trimming hedges, a mailman whistling as he made his rounds, an overweight man in baggy white shorts and black socks trailing after his lawnmower. Suddenly, a darkly clad figure of some indeterminately dark ethnicity appears, skulking along the sidewalk. The camera zooms in on his grim, razor-stubbed face as a single drop of blood trickles down his cheek from his left eye. The camera pulls back again and the suburban warriors have sprung into action, closing in on the intruder from all sides, guns drawn, ordering him to lie face down on the ground. The scene then dissolves into darkness, and the symbol and acronym of the Department of Terrorism Eradication materializes on the screen: an all-seeing eye perched atop two swords crossed like the bones on a pirate's flag, superimposed on bold red letters proclaiming the ubiquitous presence of "TeRad." A somber voice intones, "Remember. National defense is everyone's responsibility. Be prepared."

"Does that capture the spirit of this country or what?" Rik asked rhetorically. "Paranoid, racist, self-righteous, and totally fucking obsessed with guns."

He reached over to the nightstand and lovingly caressed his own weapon.

"Turn that crap off before I shoot you," said Dez in a voice that was only half serious.

Rik turned the television off and put the remote back on the nightstand.

"Just trying to pass the time," he said.

He closed his eyes and placed one hand on Dez's thigh.

After a few minutes of silence, she answered his question.

"I was a TeRad officer," she said.

For a moment Rik forgot how jaded he'd become.

"No shit?!" he replied, sitting up and turning to face her. This conversation was starting to sound like something more than just the pillow talk of the damned. "You mean I just fucked one of the motherfuckers who are trying to kill me?!"

"Doesn't that make you feel special?" she asked.

"I suppose."

"I guess you could call it 'poetic justice,'" she continued in the bitter voice of someone who, in one horrendous moment, had been knocked from a perch of moral superiority and reduced to nothingness.

"You could say that," Rik replied. "It must have been quite the career stopper in your line of work."

"I was out with my squad one day, hunting Biological Terrorism Agents like you, when blood started dripping from my eyes."

"Charming. I'm guessing your fellow TeRads were more than a little surprised to discover that you too were a BioTag."

"I killed all three of them on the spot. And then I ran."

"I'd imagine."

"So maybe you want to kill me now," she said, almost sounding hopeful that Rik would grab his gun off the nightstand and put her out of her misery.

Instead, he leaned over and kissed her lips.

"No. I'm a fucker, not a fighter," he said. "Besides, I think fate has leveled the circumstances between us."

"What did you do before the Outbreak?" she asked.

"I was a high-school English teacher, believe it or not."

Rik laid back and again closed his eyes for a few minutes before looking at his watch.

"If you're here for the same reason as me, it's nearly that time," he said.

Dez sighed.

"I hope this doesn't end up being another dead end," she said.

Rik tried to be nonchalant.

"Well, it's not like we have anything better to do with our lives anymore."

They got up and dressed in silence. By the time they stepped back outside and headed toward the bar, Dez's emotional armor was back in place and she wore the same impervious expression she'd had when he first saw her.

The bar was a typical southwestern dive, stale and black. A few lonely silhouettes briefly turned to face them as they entered, then melted back into the shadows. A generic country song played on an old jukebox lit by dull, flickering lights, while a bartender with a

big, bushy beard and an even bigger belly cleaned glasses with a dirty rag. Dez and Rik walked to an empty table in one of the corners furthest from the door.

“What you having?” asked the bartender from behind the counter.

“A bottle of vodka and two glasses,” Dez called out, not bothering to consult with Rik.

As they waited for their 80-proof nectar to arrive, they surveyed the clientele. Four barflies sat at the counter; three greasy men revolving around one plump woman squeezed into a neon-red dress as tight as a sausage skin. A couple of bikers were seated at a table in the opposite corner. And a TeRad poster adorned an otherwise empty wall, as required by law in this and every other commercial establishment in the nation. Rik’s eyes lingered on the poster as he contemplated its juxtaposition with the newfound sexual companion seated at his side.

“Almost as good as having a TV, ain’t it?” asked the woman in red, her erstwhile companions looking on jealously as she turned her glassy-eyed gaze in Rik’s direction.

“Almost,” Rik replied.

“Hey, Mel, when you gonna get a TV in this shithole,” she asked the bartender with feigned anger as he set the bottle and shot glasses before Rik and Dez.

“As soon as we get a TV station out here,” he replied.

“Ain’t you never heard of satellite TV — like Bud’s got in every room at the motel?” she asked.

“Sure, I heard of it. You gonna pay for it?”

“Hell, no, I ain’t gonna pay for it. That’s your responsibility as the proprietor of this establishment. You gotta give customers like this gentleman and his lady friend here something to look at besides that piece of shit.”

“What’s wrong with you. Ain’t you patriotic?”

“Yeah, I’m patriotic.” She paused for dramatic effect. “I’ve got a red, white, and blue ass from sitting on this stool all day.” She let out a long, phlegmy laugh until she was literally choking on her own sense of humor.

“Hell, Sally,” said the bartender. “We don’t need no TV. We got you for live entertainment.”

“You go to hell!” she said between coughs.

As soon as she’d recovered, she took a cigarette from the pack in front of her and lit it with a long, theatrical drag. “One good thing about all this,” she said, pointing to the poster. “Ain’t no one afraid of dying from smoking no more.”

“That’s looking on the bright side,” said Rik.



"I mean, why worry about cancer when any one of us could be a BioTag? Hell, even one of these sorry bastards right here could be a walking biological weapon," she said, waving a dismissive hand at her brooding companions.

"Hey, baby, I got your biological weapon right here," said one, grabbing his crotch.

"I seen you naked, Sid. You ain't even got a biological water gun," she screeched, forgetting about Rik and resuming deliberations with her groupies.

Dez and Rik had finished about a quarter of the bottle when Rik sensed the impending arrival of their first unwilling comrade.

"Heads up," he said to Dez.

A couple of minutes later, in walked a grizzled old man with wild white hair that fell to his shoulders and about a week's worth of stubble on his face. He wore baggy brown trousers and a long-sleeve flannel shirt that looked nauseatingly hot in the summer heat. The man paused for only a moment to survey the bar's denizens before his eyes fell upon Dez and Rik. He walked over to their table and, in a low voice, asked, "Is this a private party or is anyone invited?"

"Anyone who has been marked for death is free to join," Rik replied.

The man nodded and pulled a chair up to the table, letting out a heavy sigh as he sat down. He glanced over his shoulder in the direction of the bartender.

"When you getta chance, I'd be much obliged if you'd bring me your tallest, coldest beer," he said.

Rik studied the man's absurdly hot flannel shirt. "I take it you shoot up in your arms," he observed.

"Yeah," the man replied, "though my veins are pretty much gone by now."

The bartender set a mug of beer on the table and the old man drained nearly half its contents in one long gulp.

"My name's Moss," he said as he set the glass back on the table.

Rik and Dez replied with their own names.

"Any sign of the mystery man?" he asked.

"Not yet," said Rik.

"Where'd you meet him, anyway?"

"In New York, about four months ago. I was stealing a car when he tapped me on the shoulder. I nearly blew his head off. I didn't even sense him coming up behind me."

"You can sense!" Moss said in surprise.

Rik nodded in reply.

Moss looked over at Dez, posing the same questions to her with raised eyebrows.

She hesitated for a moment before providing her own succinct responses. "L.A. Two months ago. And I can't sense."

Moss stared at her for a few seconds with a puzzled expression. "Well," he said, "I was in Santa Fe a few months back. I'd just spent five minutes bleedin' out in a gas station toilet. When I finally got cleaned up and pulled myself together, I opened the door and there he was, standin' right in front of me with that stupid smile on his face."

Moss paused to finish his beer in another long gulp, raised the empty glass above his head, and called out, "Another, please, if you'd be so kind."

"You know anything about him?" Moss asked.

"Just the card," said Rik. The card. A thick, cream-colored business card with the words "NeuroVont, Inc." printed in the middle in Gothic script. Nothing else.

Rik looked up at the door.

"We've got more company," he said.

Soon afterward, in walked a waif of a woman no more than twenty years old. She had long blond hair, scared blue eyes, and was wearing a tattered summer dress. By lascivious reflex, Rik smiled widely in her direction.

"Down boy," said Dez.

The other male eyes in the bar drifted in her direction and lingered for more than a moment.

The waif quickly made her way to the table and haltingly began to ask, "Is this, uh — I mean, are you — ?"

"Have a seat, my dear," Rik offered.

"I'm Lia," she whispered after taking a seat next to Dez. Rik and Moss offered their own names in return, but Dez declined.

"How long you had it, girl?" asked Moss, incredulous at her excessive youth.

"Three months. I was living at home. My parents would have turned me in if I hadn't run — ." Suddenly, she started to cry, drawing unwelcome attention to the group.

"Pull yourself together," Moss growled.

Added Dez, "If you don't stop that right now, I'll take you out back and blow your fucking brains out."

Lia's tears were quickly dried by the fear that Dez so skillfully inspired in others.

"I'm sorry. It's just that I've never been away from home before. And sometimes I don't have enough money to eat because it's so hard to keep a job when — when it can happen any minute."

"Why would you try to get a job?" asked Moss, unaccustomed to such naiveté in the company he kept.

"How do *you* survive?" she asked.

"I deal drugs, mostly," he replied.

"I've gotten pretty good at car theft, breaking and entering. You know, that kind of thing," Rik offered.

"I don't know how to do any of that," Lia said glumly.

Rik reached across the table and patted her hand. "I'd be happy to teach you some tricks of the trade."

A deep frown etched itself into Dez's forehead. Lia had enough common sense to doubt the sincerity of Rik's offer and withdraw her hand despite the pleasurable sensation of his touch.

Before the exchange could continue, the door opened and their unnamed host stepped inside. Aside from the cryptic and unnerving smile plastered on his face, he was so average looking as to be nearly invisible. Neither old nor young, not short or tall, neither fat nor skinny; just somewhere in-between. He walked to their table, pulled up a chair, and studied each of their faces one by one.

"I see you've all gotten acquainted," he said, "although not necessarily on the best of terms." He paused for a moment before continuing.

"But that's alright. We don't have to like each other. What bonds us is something much stronger than personality. We share something in common that is, shall we say, rather unique."

"Yeah," Moss chuckled. "We're all diseased and dying."

"All living things are at some stage in the process of dying," the man replied. "And I'm sure you've realized by now that what we're dealing with here is not your typical disease. In fact, how do we even know that it is a disease?"

Everyone else seated at the table stared at the self-styled guru as if he were stoned.

"It sure as hell feels like a disease," said Moss. "And bleedin' from your eyes and ears don't strike me as particularly healthy."

"Just because something is painful doesn't mean that it's injurious," the man responded.

"I've always assumed it was some sort of fucked up military experiment that escaped from its test tube before it was finished," Rik said. "Maybe some specially engineered gene-

therapy kind of deal where you try to create a super soldier by enhancing human sensory abilities, which is why some of us can sense — although that doesn't explain why I can't sense *you* coming."

The man's expression betrayed a hint of pride.

"That's certainly possible," he said. "It's definitely an affliction with a purpose, wouldn't you say? But after three-and-a-half years living under a dictatorship of fear and silence, it doesn't seem as if an answer is forthcoming from the government any time soon."

"Does that mean you actually have an answer or not?" Dez asked.

"The powerful fear what they can't control, and try to control what they fear," the man continued. "But that doesn't make them immune to whatever it is that's happening to us. There are very powerful individuals who have been personally affected by the Outbreak, including some at the highest levels of government. Individuals not content to await an official 'cure' for their loved ones to be handed down from on high. Individuals with the resources to create their own research facilities, like NeuroVont, that are sanctuaries of a sort for people such as us."

"It sounds like you're looking for lab rats," said Dez. "And asking us to trust people who aren't exactly our friends."

"The line between friends and enemies isn't always clear," said the man. "The truth is, a place like NeuroVont couldn't remain secret for long without the covert assistance of at least a few people in positions of authority. But others are involved as well. Wealthy families whose members have been afflicted. Scientists not willing to be muzzled in their search for answers. As for being 'lab rats,' unless we study ourselves, we're not going to learn why we're — changing."

"So are you trying to convince us to join a cult, check into prison, or start a revolution?" asked Rik.

"What I'm doing is offering you an invitation," the man replied. "An invitation to come with me to a place where we can search openly for answers without fear of TeRads or police or soldiers."

"How do we know the feds aren't just outsourcing to places like NeuroVont to round us up and keep us out of sight?" asked Rik.

"You don't," the man said. "At least not until you see for yourself. But what's the alternative? Running year after year with no end in sight?"

Everyone at the table grew silent. Moss was the first to speak. "Well, hell. It's not like we've got much to lose. Sure, I'll go."

"I'll go," said Lia, fighting back a resurgence of weepiness. "I don't want to run anymore."

"You're right," said Rik. "It's better than nothing."

Dez nodded her assent at well.

The man's perpetual smile grew even wider. "Then let's be on our way. We can be there in about...."

The shooter must have had a silencer attached to his weapon, because the bullet that blew out the back of the man's head made scarcely a sound.

Rik, Dez, and Moss instinctively dove for cover under neighboring tables, hitting the floor at the same time as the man's lifeless corpse. Lia took the time to scream in surprise, making her the next target of the unseen assassin. As her body fell to the floor beside Dez, everyone in the bar, from the bartender to the woman in red, pulled their guns and unleashed a barrage of firepower into the shadow-strewn corridor at the back of the bar from which the shots had originated. If the shooter hadn't retreated quickly, he — or she — was no doubt reduced to a piece of bloodied Swiss cheese.

Dez rose to her knees and flipped over a couple of nearby tables for cover. Rik took her lead and did the same; then they pulled the tables together to form a shield against any more gunfire from either the corridor or the front entrance. Moss was about to join them behind the makeshift barricade when an explosion ripped through the front of the bar, sending bricks and pieces of wood slamming into the metal tabletops that sheltered them. Before the dust from the explosion had even begun to clear, a fusillade of automatic-weapons fire erupted, followed by the dying moans of those who had survived the explosion only to be finished off by bullets. Dez and Rik huddled behind the tables, firing their guns blindly over the barrier in the general direction of their invisible assailants.

Rik ran out of bullets first. He rolled onto his back and scrambled to load a fresh clip into his gun. As he let the spent clip fall, he saw a shadow out of the corner of his eye; someone approaching along the wall to his side. There was no way he'd be ready to fire again in the split-second before the assassin was upon them, and Dez still had her head down, shooting over the tables.

For a moment, Rik felt the peculiar combination of fear and relief that comes with the realization that death is about to end your suffering. Then another feeling came over him; a sensation of power, of understanding; as if he'd suddenly discovered a muscle that he had never used before, but that was so simple to control once he realized it was there.

"Lower your gun," he said just as the shooter came into view and was about to unleash a volley from the 9mm machine pistol in his hand.

The man — a TeRad, judging from his black paramilitary garb — stopped and let his arm fall to his side.

Dez, now aware of the impossible scene unfolding before her, had stopped shooting and was staring in disbelief, her mouth hanging open.

"How many are with you?" Rik asked the agent, who had a look of absolute terror in his eyes as he realized he'd lost control of his own body.

"Three."

"Kill them; then kill yourself."

Without the slightest hesitation, the agent turned around and fired his weapon in one long, continuous burst. He stopped only long enough to put the muzzle to his temple and pull the trigger one last time.

Rik and Dez stood up and surveyed the destruction before them, silently contemplating the enormity of what had just transpired. The wall that once had framed the entrance to the bar was almost completely blown away; bloodied bodies were strewn everywhere in the rubble amid splintered tables and chairs: Moss, Lia, their nameless host, the two bikers, the bartender, the lady in red and her companions — and the three TeRads shot by the fourth, whom Rik had somehow persuaded to commit a murder-suicide.

Dez looked at Rik with an expression that betrayed more than a little apprehension.

“I guess I’d better stay on your good side,” she said.

For once in his life, Rik was at a loss for words.

“I wouldn’t hurt — I mean, I wouldn’t make you — do things.”

Dez nodded her head and looked away.

“I suppose we should try to find NeuroVont,” said Rik.

“I guess so,” Dez agreed.

He reached over and took her hand in his own.

“We should probably get out of here now,” he said.

“Yeah,” she replied. “That’s probably a good idea.”

Rik and Dez retrieved their bags from the motel room and headed across the street to Rik’s car. A few suspicious faces gazed out at them from inside the diner, while the little man at the gas station stood calmly by the gas pump and waved goodbye. Rik waved in return. Then he and Dez drove away into an arid wasteland of death within an endless expanse of possibility.

\*\*\*\* THE END \*\*\*\*

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## **Midnight Screams In The Workhouse**

**By Martin Murphy**

**Synopsis:** Crime, criminals and the perverted law enforcers – here is a front row seat to a madhouse at work.

**About the Author:** Martin Murphy is 36 and living in Cork City in the south of Ireland. He has been writing seriously since the autumn of 2008 and has nearly thirty short pieces done to date including sci-fi, fantasy, humour, science, philosophy and some current affairs/ journalism. He is also completing a fantasy novel and has another started.

**In this intriguing tale,** an experiment draws horrible results.



## Midnight Screams In The Workhouse

By Martin Murphy

In the hot summer of 1957, the Brownhills Workhouse was officially opened. It was situated on an acre of land about three miles outside the city. The building had been recently renovated and had been used previously as a home for destitute children. That had been from the turn of the century up until 1948 when it was closed under controversial circumstances. It was hoped by those who would run the new establishment that the past would be forgotten and a new start made. But memories linger and a decade isn't a long time.

The children that once lived there were orphans and so called illegitimate children, that is, they were mostly unwanted and the adults in their lives just wanted to be rid of them. A former resident, John Smith, who had lived as a child there for six years in the twenties, spoke out as a man in the mid forties. He denounced it as a 'Dickensian hellhole' and totally unsuitable for children. When a child died in the home inexplicably in 1947 there was a follow up investigation which revealed grave and widespread neglect in the home. It was closed the next year and had remained closed for nearly a decade.

Now it was opening again and was intended to be a workhouse and reformatory for prisoners. Under new rules, prisoners would spend the last year of their sentence here so that they could 're-engage with society' as they were all told at their induction. The new governor said in his speech at the opening that 'Here men will find meaningful work and a way to contribute to society and give something back'. All the men who worked at Brownhills said the work was pure drudgery and there was nothing meaningful about it. In fact it was worse than this when you considered that they were also practically starved and beaten by the guards for even minor infringements of the rules. The governor ran Brownhills with a heavy hand.



The workhouse produced fabric for uniforms mostly, so the work environment was one of loud, thudding looms going for most of the day. The men worked twelve hour shifts, five days a week for which they only received a small allowance which was a serious injustice but that was not their only trouble. Each day started at 6am so they had to be up at 5:30. They worked until 6pm with an hour break at 12pm for lunch and two short twenty minute breaks at 9:30 and 3:30. The food was awful. They got porridge day in, day out and never got a change. Their main meal at 12pm consisted of poor quality, fatty meat, a choice of peas or carrots and boiled potatoes. Gravy was a bonus. For tea they usually got some version of eggs such as

scrambled eggs or an omelette. Like the porridge this became disliked because it never changed. At their small breaks they had warm tea and plain biscuits – always.

In the winter it got very cold because the radiators didn't work properly. The men had to put on extra layer just to work inside. In the evenings they could socialise in the common room and play cards but there was no television or radios so they had no news about the outside world and they had no music either. They also missed the company of women whom they never saw for months on end.

Lights out was 10pm and they slept easily for the most part having put down another long, hard day. But recently some didn't sleep. They were disturbed by sounds from somewhere. There were like loud whispers or faint voices from afar. As the weeks went past they became louder and more distinct for those who were still up to hear them. They were the voices of children crying and asking for help. The men who heard them tried to block them out but they became louder and clearer even if most were too deeply asleep to hear them. Eventually more and more prisoners heard them and they were called the 'midnight screams'.

The governor, a cruel man named Hendelman, who believed in rules and austerity for the men, did a secret deal with the prison doctor and a man from the pharmaceutical company. The company wanted to test a new drug but couldn't get clearance for a clinical trial because the side effects were unpredictable and it was possibly dangerous. So they needed a group who were locked up and could be monitored and wouldn't talk. If something went wrong they could easily cover it up.

"No one cares about this lot," said Hendelman to Brook, the man from the drug company. The two men and the doctor were in Hendelman's office.

"Good," said Brook, "If the trial is a success we will all be wealthy men."

"Great," replied Hendelman, "How are we going to do it?"

"I'll let your good doctor Frederick explain that," said Brook.

"It's done in two parts" said Frederick, "First, we put a powerful, psychoactive drug called Kanasil in the water which will stir the prisoners up, make them restless but nothing the guards can't handle, they will just have to work a little harder. We will then leave them like this for awhile, maybe three days and then we introduce the new drug, Somnaflex, into the air supply at night – things could be a bit hairy by then but it will disperse by morning with the fans and it should calm them right down which is what we hope to see. It is designed to be a powerful tranquilliser. On the first drug, Kanasil, the prisoners may have also difficulty sleeping but we are confident the Somnaflex will remedy that too."

"Sounds like a good plan," the governor said, "I will tell my staff later."

Then the three men left the office and went their separate ways. Hendelman met his guards as a group and told them what they were going to do. He said "We're going to do this tomorrow night, men. If we succeed I will give you all a bonus in your next pay check."

One guard, Jack, was very disturbed by this and concerned because he knew a few of the prisoners and got on with them. He didn't want to see them harmed especially not this way. They had already endured enough. The following day came and went and that night as most of the prisoners slept the drug was put into the water supply.

The following day at breakfast Jack went up to two prisoners, Robert and James, that he got on well with, and warned them not to drink tea or coffee or anything that contained water and to spread the word among their friends. He said to get by on milk and orange juice for a few days. When they asked why, he just said to trust him. By the end of that week they saw why and regretted that many prisoners were so quick to dismiss their advice. Most of the prisoners were acting up and behaving strangely. Their moods fluctuated wildly, they were anxious and many couldn't sleep. Some began hallucinating and said they were having 'waking nightmares'. Others became violent and aggressive. More became paranoid and some others just emotionally exhausted. When the unrest reached a certain level, the governor like an evil scientist with human guinea pigs ordered the guards to put the Somnaflex in the vents at night when the staff would be safely locked away elsewhere. The effect was immediate and striking. The next morning when the gas had cleared the prisoners were all much calmer and easier to manage. The three men behind this unofficial drug trial thought they had proved its effectiveness. They were expecting a large amount of money for their efforts.

But, two weeks later things began to change, not dramatically but in a strange subtle way, at least at first. The guards noticed that the prisoners weren't just calm, they were strangely lacking in any emotion – none of the usual laughter or messing among themselves or, when it came to the guards, the hate and resentment. As time went on, it was even more evident that they seemed to feel nothing – no joy or sorrow or fear or anger; they were emotionally barren – human automatons. The guards didn't realise that they had effectively created a group of sociopaths.

The leader of these inmates was a prisoner named Simon and he organised them. He planned an escape and the others waited patiently for their chance at freedom. A day and time was set. At dinner three days later when the bell went for the end of break the prisoners all jumped into action and attacked the guards. One group went after the keys and got them, most just caused general mayhem. Several guards were stabbed and killed with sharp implements but most were locked up in the cells in a strange reversal of fortune. The guard, Jack, was caught too but pleaded strenuously to see Robert or James saying he knew them. Robert came to the cell and got him out and brought him before Simon. Simon had been told by Robert and James what he had done and said, "You have helped us and may have saved some men their sanity. I will spare you, but never go to the authorities about me or the others. Don't talk to cops investigating this case or we will find you and kill you. When we are finished we will let you go and make it look like you got away. For now, you will stay in the kitchen under guard."

"Thank you very much," Jack said sincerely, "I will never talk of this, not to anyone."

"We understand each other then." Simon said. He then went to the cells and addressed the trapped guards in a calm, even voice saying simply; "Ye will burn alive now for your crimes against us and then ye will burn forever in hell. That is your fate. Goodbye!" Fellow prisoners then started dowsing the cells and everything inside with kerosene stored for the heaters from the stockroom.

Simon then went to deal with the governor personally. He dragged him outside and ordered a deep pit dug and then he had the governor injected with a dose of Kanasil and when that was done he ordered that he be put in a large wooden box. He was about to tell his men to put the box in the pit and bury it but then he decided to put a six inch knife in the box with him. He said, "Now, when he is in the box ten feet underground he can slowly suffocate to death or he can end it quickly – his choice." One of the prisoners came up to

Simon and said they were ready to burn down the prison. "Burn it, Tom, burn it all," said Simon emphatically.

After that the prisoners scattered but they were, with a few exceptions, picked up eventually by the police. It was realised later during the inquiry into these events that Somnaflex does permanent damage to certain areas of the brain. The prisoners all spent the rest of their lives in a psychiatric hospital for the criminally insane. They were not insane but they were criminals and this was the only place for them. The governor and his fellow conspirators had robbed these men of their future.

Simon, Robert and James were never found. Robert and James had some contact and they wondered about Simon sometimes but didn't want to meet him. He had taken the water that day but he didn't seem outwardly affected. Was he broken inside though? They wondered if he could still hear the children at night screaming and also if he could feel anything at all now. Or was he still caught in the 'living death' caused by Somnaflex, that devil's concoction. Brownhills was now a burned out shell and no one ever lived there again. The souls of the dead lingered on in that place and their tormented cries could be heard in the dead of night but they will find no eternal rest or peaceful sleep.

**\*\*\*\* THE END \*\*\*\***

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## The Declaration

By Henry Vogel

**Synopsis:** Imagine American occupation of Europe. Now imagine a new freedom struggle.

**About the Author:** Henry Vogel is a former comic book writer and current professional storyteller. He also has a regular job testing computer software. In previous jobs, he has delivered pizzas and newspapers, worked in bookstores and newsstands and even held a government clearance to handle classified data. As part of that list bit, Henry even got to see the inside of a National Security Agency office, which looked nothing like NSA offices look in the movies. Married with two children, Henry lives in Raleigh, NC, USA. "The Declaration" is Henry's first prose publication. If you wish to read more of Henry's work, check out his blog - which is almost entirely dedicated to fiction - at <http://talesandtelling.blogspot.com/> .

**In this alternative history,** you get a new possibility through old facts.

## The Declaration

By Henry Vogel

Charles Gordon had just finished reviewing the document as his limo pulled up in front of the Department of State building. Gathering the document and recent intelligence reports into his briefcase, Gordon strode to the door. His assistant, Tony, was already there. Together they strode toward the car as the driver opened the rear door.

"Is it true, sir?" Tony asked.

"Is what true, Tony?" Gordon replied, though he already knew the answer.

French troops are massing just across the Mississippi, sir," Tony replied. "And that the Spanish navy is staging war games in the Gulf of New Spain."

"Hell, Tony, I thought all you youngsters were, um, what's the word? Inline?"

"Online," Tony corrected.

"Oh, right. Online. Never can manage to remember that one. Don't know why," Gordon muttered as he slid into the back seat of the car. He waited until Tony got in on the other side of the car. "Isn't all of that information available online? That's the hallmark of that new Internet thing, immediate access to news?"

"Well, yes sir, it is," Tony agreed, "but a whole lot of the stuff you find online is just ridiculous. There's no control, so people can post the most outlandish things without any concern whether it's true or not."

"So, this brave new online world is no different than the TV news programs? Ha!" Gordon said.

"I wouldn't go *that* far, sir," Tony said. "None of the TV news programs are claiming our European colonies are going to declare their independence, but it's all over the Drudge Report. I didn't think Drudge was gullible enough to buy that foolishness!"

"Hmph," replied Gordon.

"It *is* foolishness, isn't it?"

Gordon stared out his window, not speaking.

"Sir?" Tony asked, his voice laced with just a touch of unease.

Gordon sighed, "You might as well know, Tony, since it'll be all over the news tomorrow. Yes, our European colonies are attempting to break away, to declare their independence. They see all the trouble we're having over here, what with the Napoleon of New France rattling his saber and trying to claim Quebec from us yet again. They see the President of New Spain backing the Napoleon's power grab and see Spanish troops moving into northern California, probably in the hopes of grabbing Oregon and Washington while we're busy dealing with the French."



"What?" Tony exclaimed. "No one is reporting that bit about California! Not even Drudge!

"Well, good. Apparently the CIA can still keep one or two secrets!" Gordon said. "Anyway, the colonies see this as their big chance. They figure we'll be too busy dealing with the really important issues on the home front to keep them in line."

"Look at what happened the last time we got involved in a war in Europe," Gordon continued. "Ever since we spent the decade of the '40s in the whole German quagmire, the public just isn't willing to put American lives on the line in Europe anymore."

"Maybe it would have been better if the founding fathers had just returned England, France and Spain to their original governments," Tony said.

"Really, Tony, you should know better than to give voice to that revisionist claptrap!" Gordon said. "They do teach American history in the schools these days, don't they?"

"Well," Tony said, "they teach a version of it, I guess."



"Let me guess, the version where the United States should have stayed neutral when France and Spain attacked England in 1779?" Gordon asked. "The version where the United States should have refused King George's offer to grant American independence in return for sending troops to help defend England?"

"That's part of it, sir," Tony answered. "They also say that, having helped defend England, General Washington should not have helped the British conquer France and Spain. And



then, when the British turned on him in the end, how he should have either surrendered or retreated back to America."

"What kind of idiots are in charge of the schools, now?" Gordon demanded. "Any fool would know that Washington couldn't sail back here without abandoning most of his men! Washington was much too honorable a man to ever do that!"

"I know that, sir," Tony began, "but some people claim he was power hungry and-

"What a load of rubbish!" Gordon declared. "Washington did what any real man would do in his situation; he defied the British and fought back! I only wish I could have been around to see King George's face when the American troops marched into London three years later! Wouldn't have minded seeing old George dance on the end of that rope, either, when Washington hanged the old bastard for his treachery! Let me tell you-

"Sorry, sir," Tony interrupted, happy to change the subject, "but we're here."

"What? Oh, yes, so we are," Gordon said as the limo pulled up to the White House.

Minutes later, Gordon was ushered into the Oval Office.

"Mr. President," Gordon said, formally.

"Charles," the President replied, equally formally. "Have you got it?"

"Yes, sir," Gordon replied, pulling the document out of his briefcase. "It's right here."

The President glanced at the document, "They really did it, didn't they?"

"Yes, sir. Cheeky bastards, if you'll pardon me, sir," Gordon growled.

"It'll score points with the public, you know," the President said, rubbing his temples. "And the opposition is going to kill us with it."

"That was the first thing that crossed my mind, sir," Gordon answered.

There was a knock at the door. "Enter," called the President.

A White House staff member entered, holding a newspaper. "You wanted to be notified if a special edition of the Post was released, Mr. President."

"Yes, Bob," the President sighed. "Have they got the story?"

"I think so, Mr. President," Bob answered. "I haven't been privy to-

"Is the text of the European declaration included?" the President asked. Seeing Bob nod, the President added, "What does it say?"

Clearing his throat, Bob read, "When in the course of human events..."

\*\*\*\* THE END \*\*\*\*

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## **First Dream**

**By Bruce Memblatt**

**Synopsis:** A tale of mind seeking redemption for what the body can not resolve.

**About the Author:** Bruce Memblatt has studied Business Administration at Pace University. His interests are varied. He has a great love for the theatre which led him to run a website devoted to composer Stephen Sondheim, which he's lovingly maintained since 1996. He believes it's his love for the theater, and all things theatrical that drew him toward writing. He's 49 years old and he's just begun his journey as a writer. A story he wrote entitled Jingle Jangle will appear in SMN Horror Magazine in December 2009 and in January 2010 another story he penned entitled "The Last Station" will appear in The Horror Zine.

**In this dramatic fiction,** you get to walk through the protagonist's dream and live his horror and see his fate.

## First Dream

By Bruce Memblatt

The evening air feels soggy-humid and heavy. I walk towards a vision, a tree in the distance. There's a band of men traveling closely by. I don't know who they are, or why they're at my side. The night is lit by the shadowy sweep of the moon. Fires are burning around me, blazing wild like torches. The clean crackle of tight twigs snapping as we slowly advance fills the air. The pointy rush of leaves brushing away from my feet jars me and I suddenly realize my feet are bare. My nerves sizzle with fear, but I keep walking steadily as if drawn to that tree. Inherently I know there aren't any options, all choices have vanished. Suddenly the piercing howl of a dog followed by the pained noise of tens of dogs barking and snapping wild and a strange scent in the air, an odd mixture of must and stinging burnt rubber. Then a chill, and then another as the wind whips up in a fury and dies down just as quickly. The tree is still pretty far off in the distance, but we're getting closer with each step. Why do I know we're heading towards that tree? Now the sound of muffled speech, but words are hard to distinguish and then I realize there's a piece of cloth covering my head, a heavy coarse burlapy piece of cloth, but how can I see? I can see everything. Everything I don't want to see. Suddenly my heart begins to gallop like a steed. I breathe in deeply. There it steadies for a moment, but the fear is still beyond anything I can recall. I'm still here, wherever here is, this strange place. The moon grows brighter; we're in a clearing. There's trickle of water seeping under my cold feet and the cakey moist feel of mud around my toes. It must have rained here recently. I try to make out faces on the other side of that beckoning merciless tree. There are people behind that tree, people that seem familiar, almost a crowd. They're standing on the other side of that tree, silent still like they're watching something. Like they're watching an ambulance, or a fire engine racing down a street, but they're not watching an ambulance or a fire truck their eyes are pinned on me. My heart starts to gallop again. The tree is getting nearer and nearer. We're almost there. The face of a preacher smiling sends rapid chills down my spine. Oh my God! I know what's happening! I know what's happening. Suddenly, complete darkness, my eyes are open now. Oh my God, dear Lord it was just a dream, just a sliver of my mind. It felt so real. I've never dreamt a dream that felt as vivid as that torment. There are beads of sweat on my brow. A cold wet sweat. A cigarette? That's what I'll do, I'll turn on the radio and light a cigarette. Forget the cigarette I'll just rest here still for a moment and catch my breath. It was just a dream, just a silly dream nothing to fear. My eyes. I've never felt so tired before. My eyes feel heavy, so laden they can hardly stay open. The rain is gently falling. I'm outside somewhere, I don't know where. There are men at my sides, a group of men. We're walking towards a tree. The glow of fire nearby flickering against the night is met by the sound of dogs screaming like crazed wolves. My heart is racing. Why do I know we're walking towards that tree? The moon is so full tonight, bigger than it's ever been. The moon looks like it could swallow the earth. The night is cold and sharp like thistle. The tree is still pretty far away, but we move closer and closer. The moon is shining even brighter. We're in a clearing, a muddy clearing. The rain is gaining strength, my heart is racing. Have to slow down. If only these nameless faceless men would slow down! There's a crowd in the distance with familiar faces stark and starring bewildered. Further down I see an ambulance. Wait, we're walking past the tree; why are we walking past that tree? The men at my sides speak in mumbled tones. I can make out words.

One mutters, "She's dead. He did it." What could he mean?

Then a harsh rush of wind and the group of faceless men by my side vanishes into the night... My heart is speeding like a train, like a demon train. Deep breaths. I try to close my eyes to forget, but they won't close; I'm in a car driving on a road right near that tree. The rain is falling hard now. The windshield wipers can hardly fight the pounding rain. A shadow darts out of nowhere. Wait it's not a shadow, it's a little girl! I try to swerve. I can't see! Suddenly, a sharp thud. Oh my god! My god, the little girl! I must have hit her. She must be hurt, or dead! Oh my God! An ambulance appears. My heart is going to spin out of control like a crazy scream. Everything appears in staggering flashes now.

A preacher stands still as ice amongst a crowd. The preacher is reciting the girl's last rites. The ambulance speeds off, sirens whirling in anguished screams. The preacher remains. The tree appears again, there's a noose around the tree, a hangman's noose swinging from that tree. My heart is beating like a drill, a steel super-maddened drill. Suddenly, total darkness. My eyes are opening. Oh dear god. It was a dream, another dream. But my heart won't stop pounding; it's racing fast, faster than fast. I can't...

High pitched staccato beeps wailed through the hospital room where Jack Stewart was having a heart attack. Suddenly harsh white light filled the room as nurses and doctors darted in, a sea of white shoes, and pants and shirts dotted with silver tools, stethoscopes and needles dangling and they pounded his chest. Pounded and pounded until Jack would come back. Till his heart ran at a normal pace. The lights on his heart monitor flickered erratically. The top numbers read twenty-five, fifty-nine seventy-nine and then back to twenty-five then sixty, eighty, one hundred and twenty -- he was coming back. A doctor furiously recorded what was happening on a hard silver chart as he stood quietly next to Jack's bed. A nurse was sitting in a small metal chair on the other side of the bed watching her watch and holding Jack's wrist as she checked his pulse, her white shoes tapping against the shiny white floor as she counted beats off in her head.

"How many heart attacks has he had, I mean this week? she asked.

The middle-aged doctor with graying hair around his temples and calm hazel eyes responded 'Three.'

"How is it possible? " How does he survive, one after the other? "

The doctor shook his head. "Does he ever wake up? Have you seen him alert?"

"Once briefly" the nurse wistfully continued, her hands gently twisting her black hair...

"He was reaching for something on the table next to his bed, then his eyes suddenly closed again."

"You know he's not in a coma, there's nothing physically preventing him from waking up and walking out of here, it's the strangest thing."

"Not so strange though, considering his circumstances."

"Well yes, and no" the doctor answered.

"Thing is they can't execute him while he's in the hospital." The nurse said calmly.

"But what a way to live." The doctor sighed as he checked off items on his hard silver pad.

"Worse than death, I guess. I wonder if he knows what's happening, the heart attacks, I wonder why he doesn't just get up?"

"The mind is a strange thing" the doctor answered in a sing-song professorial manner...

"His may be in a way protecting itself, but in this case the cure seems pretty crazy, because his heart can't maintain this kind of stress too much longer. Fear does strange things, fear of things we can't face, or fear of things we can't escape. Either way he's had it. He either wakes up, or dies from the strain his heart is taking, or he gets hung by the state. I wouldn't want to be in his shoes. Not for anything."

"Sad really there's no happy ending to this story. Guilt is a powerful thing."

"His conscience I'm sure has a lot to do with this strange condition. At least we know he has one, that he's not a sociopath."

"I hear he has, or had a pretty average life as a widower. His wife died a few years ago from a liver disease. He had been living in their house all alone since she passed. His son tried to see him every week or so, his daughter used to come by fairly often as well, until it happened - he retired. It was a terrible rainy night when it happened..."

I'm in my car I'm driving; I'm driving home from the supermarket. The rain is coming down hard, like pellets, like beady bullets. The windshield wipers struggle to fight the steady rain. I have music on the radio but the rain is beating so hard I can hardly hear the song in the air. All the way home I've been thinking about putting the food away, normal every day thoughts. Nothing odd at all except for this rain, this heavy scary rain. When will this rain stop? Will it ever stop? I'll be passing Chester Drive soon. It's on my right. There's that big white birch tree on Chester. The tree someone ran a car into last year. Someone died. Imagine? I'll bet it was raining, raining that night just as hard as it is now. Funny I've never

noticed it before but that tree has a dent in it, I think, I can hardly see where I'm going, but that's where he must have hit the tree on that sorry night. There are lights on in the house across the street. It looks like every light in the house is on. They must be running up some bill. Oh shit, a flash of lightning, and thunder striking like a great explosion! I should pull over until the storm stops. I'm so close to home though, just a few more miles and I'll be safe and dry behind familiar walls. Oh my, what's that? What's that? A girl - she's running out of that house. The house with all the lights on! I have to swerve, if I don't I'll hit her! Phew she made it across the street! Why is she running so fast? Oh my god she's turning around she's coming back, oh fuck! Then a small thud, my God I hit her, but she's still standing she's going to be okay! Suddenly, bright light, my eyes are opening. It was a



dream, just another dream, but my heart isn't racing, I'm going to be fine. There's someone in the corner dressed in white. Looks like a nurses aide or an orderly. Why am I in the hospital? What's happening? Dear god what is going on? I've got to talk to that orderly. I have to move my mouth and make sounds.

"Can you hear me, can you hear me?" Good she's smiling she's walking towards me. She looks friendly enough....

"Hey, Mr. Stewart, you're awake."

"That little girl, I didn't kill her, I hit her but just tell me she's going to be fine!" Jack Stewart smiled.

A steady high-pitched beep filled the corridor. Nurses and doctors scrambled into Jack's room like pistols. They pounded on his chest, silver metal instruments flailing. They pounded and pounded, and placed suction cups on his chest. They'd shouted and counted, but Jack Stewart didn't move. He lay there silent and still. The number on his heart monitor read an empty zero; it wasn't going to rise to ten, or twenty, or one hundred and thirty. His heart stopped beating. It wouldn't pump again. No more blood would pour through his body. No more dreams would haunt him, but a simple smile remained on his face.

The nurse turned off the heart monitor and sighed...

"Guess you saved the state a few bucks, old Jack."

The orderly softly walked over to the nurse.

"He said something"

"What?" The nurse was filled with surprise.

"He said something? He spoke?"

"Yes, he was happy, he was relieved, he said he didn't run over that little girl that she was okay and then he smiled."

"Little girl? What little girl? He murdered his daughter. Ran his car into her over and over as she stood trapped by an old white birch tree over on Chester Drive."

\*\*\*\* THE END \*\*\*\*

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## **Miss Charlotte**

**By Aaron Rowley**

**Synopsis:** A Western with romance and of course the gunfight.

**About the Author:** Aaron Rowley lives in Mississippi with his wife.

**In this Western adventure,** a man finds that violence can get you no peace of mind.



## Miss Charlotte

By Aaron Rowley

Arliss was uncomfortable in his chair. He wasn't a tall man but he'd been gettin' round in the middle. He had a pale face and curly blond hair that wouldn't do as it was told.

He hated dressin' up. His tie was damn near choking him and the jacket was so stiff, he could hardly move his arms. He hated all the damned socials in town. Folks were friendly enough but Arliss couldn't forget he was new here. Being new in a small town where folks know each other all the way back to grandest granddaddy Adam ain't easy. And the town of Redbone wasn't the exception.

This social was particularly hard on Arliss. He had just proposed to Miss Charlotte Brooks, who'd never been outside Redbone. Folks were in agreement that she was the only good thing to ever come out of Redbone. She was the kind of woman who couldn't walk down the street without every man stopping to take a look. Her hair was the loveliest shade of red that God ever made. Her smile lit up the room and she was almost always smiling. She was the smartest person in town. She had personally read every book that'd passed through Redbone, which, true enough, ain't that many, but it was enough. Miss Charlotte Brooks was the most interesting person you would ever meet.

All evening, folks had been coming up to Arliss and Miss Charlotte saying how happy they were for them. Even Arliss said that was mighty kind of them, but it was more attention than he liked to call on himself. He tried his damndest to hide in the back of the room at a table. He was worried about Bill Guthrie.

Bill was a big man in a small town. When folks said Bill was big, they meant it every way you can imagine. Bill had to squeeze to fit through any door. But most important of all, Bill was a big man politically. Everybody knew he owned every sheriff in three counties and he even had a judge or two in his pocket.

Folks had gotten used to seeing Bill and his boys around. You could hardly get four folks together without Bill and his boys showing up. And, sure enough, Bill came out that night. The music didn't stop. Folks didn't stop dancing. Everything went on going the way it was. Except Arliss stopped breathing.

Arliss was afraid of Bill Guthrie. You would have to be stupid not to be. He was afraid the same as every other man was but now, he was gonna take the hand of Bill's one true love. Bill Guthrie had gotten it in his head that he was gonna marry Miss Charlotte Brooks. Bill wasn't the kind of man to get a great many thoughts in his head, but once they got in



there, they had a habit of staying. The way Arliss saw it, he had every reason in the world to be afraid of Bill Guthrie and his boys.

Bill walked over to their table. His greasy brown hair was pulled back, as nice and neat as Bill could manage. He was tryin' to look respectable. There was nothing to be done with his beard. It was always thin around his mouth but long and bushy on his cheeks. Bill smiled at Arliss and Charlotte. His smile was full of yellow teeth with chewin' tobacco stuck in between every one of 'em.

"How y'all doin' tonight?" Bill said.

Arliss grunted and nodded.

"Now," Bill continued, "I heard y'all is getting married. That so?"

"Sure is, Bill," Arliss said.

Bill whistled. "Now, ain't that fine. And such a fine woman too."

Bill put his hand on Miss Charlotte's shoulder. She stiffened. Arliss started to get up out of his seat. Bill looked down at his hand. He pulled it back with a smile like he had no idea what it had been up to. Arliss sat back in his chair.

Bill said, "When is the blessed event?"

Arliss and Charlotte didn't answer.

Bill kept talking like he hadn't noticed, "You know, Miss Charlotte and me, we's ol' friends. Yes, sir. We was just little childrens together. Why, she was my very first kiss. You know that?"

Bill turned to his boys who said, "I sure didn't, Bill."

"Mm-hmm, she sure was," Bill said. He turned back to Arliss and Charlotte. He gave Charlotte a wicked smile. "She sure was. Well, I figure y'all can't get married without a gift from ol' Bill."

"That's alright, Bill --" Arliss started.

Bill put his hand up. "I ain't talking to you..." he growled.

"So, Miss Charlotte," Bill said, "When can I...bring it by...?"

Bill's goons snickered.

"Aw, Bill, that's mighty sweet of you," Charlotte said. "Right now, May's takin' our gifts in."

Arliss's sister, May, owned a shop in Redbone with her husband Daniel. Folks liked to say May's shop sold everything on God's green Earth you didn't need.

Arliss had moved down to Redbone to help May with her shop. Up until he'd started courtin' Miss Charlotte, folks called him May's brother. Now they were just as likely to call him Miss Charlotte's beau.

Bill clicked his tongue, "That so?"

Charlotte nodded.

"Well, this is one of them...personal gifts," Bill said. "I reckon I'd best give it to you my own self."

Bill's boys laughed again.

Then Bill leaned in real close and whispered to Miss Charlotte, "I can't have you getting married without first knowin' what a real man is like..." He made sure his whisper was loud enough for Arliss to hear.

Arliss jumped up. His chair crashed to the ground behind him. Most of the other folks kept on dancing and tried to ignore it. This sort of thing happened a lot when Bill Guthrie was around.

Bill stood up slowly. He gave Arliss a long smile, spit his chew out onto Arliss's shoes, and walked out the door.

Bill may have been dumb as a horse dung but even he knew that you can't kill a man in front of the whole town and expect to get away with it, even crooked sheriffs gotta keep up appearances.

Later that night, Arliss walked with Miss Charlotte down by the creek. His hands were still shaking.

"Let's go," Charlotte said.

"Huh?" Arliss nearly jumped outta his skin.

"Let's go. I don't wanna stay in Redbone no more."

Arliss shook his head.

Charlotte sighed.

"I ain't just gonna run with my tail between my legs..." Arliss said.

"And why in the hell not?"

"I just can't."

They walked on in silence.

Arliss said, "You go on. I'll stay here. I'll call you back when it's fixed."

"When you reckon that'll be?"

Arliss shrugged again.

"Arliss, honey, I love you. But what you gonna do to Bill Guthrie? You think you can fight him?"

"I don't know."

Charlotte didn't say anything else to Arliss. She didn't even say goodbye the next day when she rode the coach out of town.

Arliss wasn't sure what he was going to do. He just waited.

About a week after Charlotte left, Arliss took May's mule, Hank, out to Black Lake to get more of those useless things May was tryin' to sell.

About half way there, he stopped by a small stream to let Hank get a drink. Jim McClintock came out from behind a stand of trees. Jim was one of Bill Guthrie's boys. He was thin as a rail. He didn't have any hair on his head but his sideburns drooped a good ways down on his cheeks. He and Bill Guthrie shared similar opinions on soap.

"Afternoon, Arliss," Jim said as he sauntered up to him.

Arliss nodded at Jim.

"It's been quite a while since I seen Miss Charlotte 'round."

Arliss shrugged.

"Where she gone?"

Arliss shrugged again.

Jim took out his Bowie knife. "Bill's missin' Miss Charlotte somethin' fierce. He's awful anxious to figure out where she gone off to."

Arliss backed away from Jim's knife. He bumped into Hank. The mule got startled, brayed and ran off into the forest. Jim smiled, showing his patchy mouth.

Jim ran at Arliss. Arliss stepped to the side and tripped Jim as he passed by. Jim landed face first on a pile of leaves. He pulled himself up with a growl.

Arliss grabbed a stick that was about an inch thick. Jim stood up. He saw Arliss's weapon and laughed. He charged at Arliss again.

Arliss swung at Jim and caught him square between the eyes. Jim fell backward with a yelp. Arliss was seeing red. He climbed on top of Jim McClintock and kept swinging until his arms were too tired to hold onto that stick.

Arliss stood up and looked at his work, Jim's head was mush. Arliss dragged the body off the trail. He rolled Jim down a hill, where, he hoped, folks wouldn't find it.

He cleaned the blood off his hands in the stream and walked back toward Redbone. Arliss didn't look for May's mule.

It was dark when Arliss got back into Redbone. He went straight out to Bill Guthrie's shack down by the bayou. Bill's shack stood on stilts about two feet off the ground.

Bill Guthrie wasn't home. He was always out until sunrise drinking moonshine with his friends. Arliss kicked the door down. It flopped away from the frame like it was sorry to be in the way. A few small critters skittered away when the door hit the floor.

A crate stood in the middle of the room, it had been turned upside down and a lamp set on top. Arliss pulled a match out of his pocket and lit the wick. When he could see, Arliss saw a couple dirty blankets and a sack of flour and small sack of coffee beans. Not much at all.

Arliss grabbed the lamp and threw it as hard as he could manage. It shattered against a wall. The kerosene caught fire right away. The shack burnt like it was built out of matchsticks.

Arliss made his way back to May's house. He washed some of the soot off his face and hands and went to bed.

The next morning May asked why Arliss was back so soon. He didn't say anything.

Daniel came in from the barn. He asked where Hank was. Arliss said he was sorry, he'd get them a new mule. Daniel nodded and sat down to his breakfast.

May said, "Well, since you come back so soon; make yourself useful, go into town and get me a few things." She gave Arliss a list.

Arliss walked the mile or so into town. The sheriff and his deputy stopped Arliss on his way into Martin Stokes's shop.

"Mornin'," the sheriff said. The sheriff and Bill Guthrie were real good friends. By the look of him, Arliss reckoned the deputy had been out drinking with Bill Guthrie the night before.

"Mornin', Sheriff." Arliss said.

"You hear the news?"

Arliss shook his head. "I ain't heard much of anythin'. Just got in. Gone to Black Lake yesterday."

The sheriff nodded. "Bill Guthrie's place burned down last night."

Arliss whistled. "That's a shame."

The sheriff leaned back on his heels. Arliss just looked at him.

"Ain't ya gonna ask how Bill's doin'?" The sheriff asked.

Arliss shrugged. "He alright?"

The sheriff nodded. "Just fine."

Arliss smiled. "That's a shame."

The deputy laughed. The sheriff gave him a look that shut him right up.

The three of them stood there in the street for a while, sizin' each other up.

"Well, I gotta get," Arliss said. "May's got me out runnin' errands again."

The sheriff nodded. "Just one more thing."

Arliss waited.

"You seen Jim McClintock around?"

"Nope. Can't say as I have."

The sheriff nodded. "Folks says he went out to Black Lake yesterday."

Arliss nodded. "Black Lake's a big place."

"Ain't that big," the sheriff said darkly. "Folks says he went to Black Lake lookin' fer you."

"Well, he ain't found me."

The sheriff nodded. "Sure hasn't..."

The deputy grabbed Arliss. He threw Arliss against the shop's wall. The sheriff walked up slowly. "Bill Guthrie wanted to let you know that you got a day to disappear," the sheriff said. "You still here tonight, he's gonna make you disappear. And he wants to know where you sent Miss Charlotte. He's missin' her. Got an itch that ain't been scratched in a couple days..."

The deputy let Arliss go.

"Just wanted to make sure you heard the news," the Sheriff said with a smile.

He and his deputy walked away. Arliss watched them as they tipped their hats to a pair of passing ladies.

When Arliss got back to May's house, he gave her what he'd bought, then got Daniel's shotgun.

"I'll go for a walk," he said while May was too busy with her housework to notice Arliss.

&&&

Bill Guthrie and two of his boys, Tom White, and big, fat Georgie Edwards, were down by the creek fishing. Tom White was fallin' asleep, his hat pulled low over his eyes, a loud blast woke him right up. He looked around. Georgie Edwards was floatin' in the creek. Blood was pouring out his chest turning the water all red.

"Afternoon, Bill," Arliss said from a few feet away. He was reloading his shotgun.

Bill stood up slowly. His fishing pole fell to the ground. He had a tight smile on his face. Every now and again, he'd spit into the creek.

Tom White sat where he was. He just kept looking at Georgie Edwards's body like he was waiting for him to get back up.

"Things ain't gonna stay the way they are, Bill," Arliss said. "They can't."

Bill nodded. "The way I see it. You just killed an innocent man. Just up and shot 'im in the back. They gonna hang you for it."

Arliss shook his head. "He ain't innocent, stole my sister's horse yesterday when I was goin' up to Black Lake."

"Heard your sister only got a mule."

"Not the way I tell it."

Bill nodded. "Well, now that you killed yerself a horse thief, what you wanna talk to me for?"

"To tell ya that, tomorrow, Miss Charlotte's comin' back. We're getting married and you ain't gonna say or do a damned thing about it."

"That so?"

Arliss nodded. "That is so. Or we'll find out it was you that stole my sister's horse."

"And what makes you think that the sheriff's gonna believe your story about me bein' a horse thief?"

"He ain't. But folks all knows that sheriff ain't no good. Wouldn't surprise no one to find out he's a horse thief too."

Bill nodded. "You're right. I wouldn't be surprised to hear that my own self."

"We got an agreement then?"

Bill thought for a minute. "And how's we supposed to know that...you ain't a horse thief...?"

"'Cuz I ain't got no horses."

"Not the way I tell it." Bill said with a smile.

"Guess I got me a horse thief then."

Arliss pulled the trigger. The shot tore Bill Guthrie's face apart. Bill flopped on the ground.

"You wanna tell me what just happened here?" Arliss said to Tom White.

Tom looked sick. "Bill Guthrie stole your sister's horse."

"Where's the horse?"

Tom swallowed hard. "Bill and Georgie sold it. Spent all the money on liquor too."

"I heard tell that May only had a mule."

"No, sir, that ain't so. She had a horse but Bill Guthrie stoled it away."

Arliss nodded and left Tom White with the bodies. Tom threw up.

It took about three days for Charlotte to get back to Redbone. By then, folks all knew what Arliss had done to Bill Guthrie. No one thought Arliss's story came anywhere near the truth. But they were glad Bill was gone.

Miss Charlotte's coach stopped in front of Martin Stokes's general store. Arliss was waiting for her. While Arliss was helping Miss Charlotte out of the coach, he saw the sheriff and a posse coming toward him. He tried to get her inside the store.

"Arliss," the sheriff hollered out.

Arliss left Miss Charlotte and turned to face the posse.

The posse stopped in front of Arliss. The sheriff locked eyes with Arliss, "You are under arrest for the murders of William Guthrie, George Edwards, and James McClintock. Put down your gun and come with me."

Arliss said, "Gun? I ain't got no --"

The sheriff pulled out his six-shooter. He didn't wait for Arliss to finish.

Arliss threw himself to the ground and covered his head. He was lucky, he grazed once or twice and he was hit with broken glass from windows the posse shot out.

When the shooting stopped, Arliss looked up. The sheriff was dead. His deputy was too. The posse had killed them. They were crooked and everyone knew it. Six men were dead, including the sheriff and his deputy. About a dozen others had been shot.

Arliss turned to look for Miss Charlotte. She was half way in the door of Martin Stokes's shop. She fell where she'd been standing. Her hair was still the loveliest shade of red. But her skin was pale and her eyes were glazed over. She was dead. She was still smiling. She was almost always smiling.

\*\*\*\* THE END \*\*\*\*

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# The One On The Right

By Ronald Anick

**Synopsis:** A victim desires to fight back, with unplanned consequences.

**About the Author:** Ronald is a 35-year-old amateur writer from the wilds of Minnesota. When not out hiking in the woods or braving the local rapids in his canoe, Ronald works as an emergency room RN at a nearby hospital. He is just getting started in his writing career, but has been dabbling with fiction stories since he was a kid and was recently published in Strange, Weird & Wonderful Magazine. Ronald is currently working on his first novel (no hints yet) and someday hopes that writing will become his primary career.

**In this crime drama,** a woman suffers abuse and worse.

## The One On The Right

By Ronald Anick

When Alice awoke on Monday morning she was more determined than ever to kill her husband. Literally, she wanted him dead. Not because he was a horrible, loathsome person (although that certainly was the case), but because she truly believed that if she didn't, she would end up killing herself just to get away from the bastard.

His name was Larry and she had been married to him for ten years now. Ten years last month, to be exact; but did he do anything for her on their anniversary? Take her to dinner? Tell her he loved her? Buy her a nice gift? Hell, no! Hadn't even mentioned it actually. Not that she expected him to. He hadn't done anything nice for her in years.

Of course, she hadn't mentioned it, either. Why would she? Two years ago she had mentioned it and that had been the last time. The bruises had faded after a week or so, but the memory was still fresh in her mind—and the pain too terrible to forget.

What was it he had called her? Oh, yeah! *"Miserable, worthless, gold-digging whore!"* he had shouted at her while she lay on the carpet, bleeding and crying. *"Always looking for a handout, aren't ya! Aren't ya! Always asking for something! Why don't you do what you're told, damn you!"*

That's when the kicking had started.

With that awful memory slowly fading away, she carefully got out of bed so she wouldn't wake up Larry, who was snoring softly on the other side of the bed with his back to her. She needed to hurry since his alarm would be going off in about 20 minutes. Just enough time for her to get into the kitchen and get his breakfast ready before he went off to work.

Just enough time, but barely. Some mornings he would get up a few minutes early and would scream at her because his eggs weren't ready. Other times he would hit the snooze button, only to get up and scream at her because his eggs were cold.

The screaming she could take. After all, she'd been enduring it for years now. It was the physical abuse that was getting to her. Wearing her down. Making her wish that her husband would fall off a cliff or something. In fact, over the last couple of months, her mind had come up with some pretty creative death scenarios that she secretly replayed in her head over and over again. So far, he had been shot, stabbed, hung, electrocuted, crushed, beheaded and torn apart by wild animals.

But her favorite fantasy was, of course, the simplest. In that one, she was pointing a pistol at her husband's face, thoroughly enjoying his look of pure terror seconds before she pulled the trigger.

And pulled it again, and again, and again.

Yes, that one was definitely her favorite.

With a start she realized her thoughts had drifted off when she should have been scrambling eggs. She quickly finished the breakfast and set the steaming plate on the table, and none too soon, for she heard a cough behind her as Larry lumbered into view.

“G’morning,” she said in a quiet voice, stepping out of his way as he headed straight for the table. Larry didn’t answer as he flopped down in the chair and started shoveling eggs and greasy bacon into his gaping mouth.

“Did you sleep well?” she asked, her hands clasped in front of her.

Larry scowled at her and looked like he was about to say something (probably something nasty) when he suddenly started coughing — his face turning a dark and dangerous purple. Wide-eyed, Alice watched but didn’t move as he continued to bark and hack. Pieces of bacon and spittle flew from his mouth, peppering his plate and half the table.

She hadn’t done anything to his food — it was only a coincidence — but she crossed her fingers anyway and secretly wished he would just flop over face-first into his eggs.

*Please, oh please, she thought. Let this be the end of him. Let him just choke to death on that damned bacon!*

But of course Larry didn’t. With a final grunt he cleared his throat, took a long drink of orange juice, then turned to Alice with a malevolent glare.

“Will you shut the hell up!” he screeched, his voice hoarse from coughing. “Can’t you see I’m trying to eat here!” He looked at his plate all covered with half-chewed bacon and bits of egg and swept the whole mess onto the floor with a loud crash. “Now look what you made me do!” he snarled, pointing at the greasy mess. “What am I supposed to eat now?”

He got up from the table and started toward Alice who, with tears in her eyes, quickly backed away from his menacing advance. “Larry, I’m sorry, I’m—”

“Get out of my way,” he growled as he pushed her aside, causing her to smack her head on one of the cabinet doors. With shaking fingers, she touched her forehead and gently rubbed the tender spot, knowing from experience she was going to have a horrible bruise. As Larry started getting ready for his job loading crates down at the docks, Alice slowly picked up the mess on the floor.

Twenty minutes later she was alone in the house.

With her face buried in her hands, she sat at the kitchen table. She tried to cry, but couldn’t. She just didn’t have it in her — didn’t have any more tears left for her miserable life. She was tired of being afraid, tired of living in fear. She couldn’t bear it anymore and Larry’s treatment of her this morning had been the last straw.

When she lifted her head, her eyes were red but firm — determined. She decided it was finally time to do something about it.

That evening, when Larry came home, Alice met him at the front door.

"Hi, honey, have a good day at work?" With her voice sugar-sweet, she was all smiles as she reached to take his coat.

Larry paused half-way through the door and stared at her for a full 5 seconds before he handed her his coat. "Fine," he mumbled and went into the bedroom to change his clothes. He came out wearing a pair of saggy undershorts and a dirty-white t-shirt. He ignored her as he went into the bathroom, scratching his butt as he shut the door.

Alice waited almost 20 minutes then rapped softly on the door. "What?" Larry barked, his voice sounding hollow and distant through the door.

Alice clenched her fists tight, but managed to keep her voice as sweet-sounding as she possibly could. "Larry, your dinner is ready. If you—"

"Get away from the door!" he yelled. "Jesus, could I have some time to myself, please?"

"I'm sorry," she said, struggling to hold back the inevitable tears. "I didn't mean to—"

"Get out of here!" he screamed and with a rapid step she backed away from the door, tears spilling down her cheeks. She went to the kitchen and wiped her eyes with a dishtowel.

*The last day, she told herself. It's the last day you have to put up with him and then he'll be gone. Just hang in there, girl. Just hang in there!*

When Larry came out, he went straight to the table and, without a word to Alice, began to eat - his lips smacking and slurping as he read the newspaper. Alice remained in the kitchen. She was quiet, but her mind was racing.



*After he eats, he'll go into the living room to drink beer and watch TV. It's what he does every night. At 10 o'clock he'll go to bed, we both will. No reason for him to think tonight is any different than any other night. We'll go to bed and that will be it. That will be it...*

True to her thinking, Larry finished his meal with a large belch and, after shoving the plate away, ambled into the living room. When Alice heard the protesting squeak of springs and a satisfied grunt, she knew he had plopped down in his favorite chair in front of the TV.

"Alice!" he bellowed. "Get me a beer!"

Alice fetched a can from the fridge and brought it to him, being careful not to shake it so it wouldn't foam when he opened it.

"Here you go, honey," she said and he snatched the beer out of her hand, causing her to jump. "Anything else I can get you?" she asked, a slight quiver to her voice.

*Hang in there. Just hang in there. Only one more night!*

"No," he grunted, never taking his eyes off the TV. "Now get out of here."

Without a word, her eyes on the floor, Alice slowly stepped away from Larry who was glued to the TV, his beer resting on his ample belly. Had Larry looked, he might have caught a tiny smile on Alice's face as she disappeared around the corner.

As the evening wore on, Alice waited patiently in the kitchen. At times she almost couldn't contain her excitement as it got closer to bedtime. She watched the kitchen clock's hands as they made their slow orbits round and round, bringing her closer and closer to freedom — to liberation. To pass the time, she washed the dishes, cleaned the counters (twice), scrubbed the floor and, whenever the need arose, brought another beer to her demanding husband.

Finally, she heard the living room clock chime... 8, 9, 10 times. It was 10 o'clock. Time for bed. From the other room, she heard Larry turn off the TV and, with a hefty grunt, heave his portly mass out of the chair.

"Alice!" he bawled, "Get in here and clean up this mess!"

By the time she got to the living room, Larry was already in the bedroom. She picked up all the empty beer cans, throwing them in a bag under the sink, and wiped the chair where Larry had been sitting. When she finished, the dishtowel reeked of beer and sweat.

It was nearly a half hour later when she came out of the bathroom wearing a long nightgown, her hair in curlers. She'd thought about skipping her nightly ritual, but decided against it.

*Can't vary the routine, she thought. He'll get suspicious!*

Except there was one thing she had to do. One thing that needed to be done before she could crawl into bed. Something that wasn't part of their normal bedtime habit.

"What are you doing?" Larry growled, awakened by Alice who was leaning over the headboard—struggling.

"Opening the window," she whispered. "It's hot in here. I thought it would—"

"Go to sleep!" said Larry as he rolled over with his back to her.

Alice slid between the cool sheets, thankful that she'd gotten the window up, but more thankful that Larry hadn't demanded she shut it. Not that she was worried about the window. She'd tested it earlier in the afternoon, while Larry was at work. Blessed Larry, who slaved away on the docks 12 hours a day, five days a week.

Twelve hours. More than enough time to drive into the city after he left this morning — left her with a soggy mess of eggs, bacon and broken plate to clean up off the floor. More than enough time to go to the bank and take out a large sum of money. Cash. Nothing that could be traced back to her.

After that, she'd gone into the worst area of the city, where rundown storefronts and dilapidated tenement housing was the norm, rather than the exception. A place where hard-eyed, dangerous men and women stood on each street corner, casting a wary eye on anyone who dared to venture into their territory.

She'd been scared, but she had done it. For the sake of her life and her future, she had done it. She drove around for about 30 minutes before she found a likely looking guy. He was dressed in a long coat with a hooded sweatshirt underneath. The hood was up — his face in partial shadow as she pulled up next to where he was leaning against a streetlight. His shoes were scuffed and dirty. He was casually paring his fingernails with a large buck knife when Alice pulled up.

"Excuse me," she said to him as she leaned out her car window. "How would you like to make some money?" She knew it sounded stupid, but she was sort of in a hurry.

The man's grizzled face cracked into a smile, revealing a lone gold tooth. "Ho's be downtown," he said, eyeing her sharply. "You wahn that?"

"Oh no, goodness, no," she said with an uneasy laugh. "It's just—"

*Better to just spit it out . . .*

"I'm looking for somebody to kill my husband," she said, and the man stopped smiling. "I'll pay you a lot of money if you'll do it. Are you interested?"

The man stared at her, then flicked his eyes up and down the street. "You crazy, lady?"

"No."

"You a cop?" But before she could answer, he shook his head. "Naw, you ain't no cop, that f'sure. Why you wahn kill yo old man for?"

"I have my reasons. Are you interested, or not?" Alice watched the man as he studied her. She was giddy, excited.

*This is just like on TV!* She thought, never in a million years guessing she'd ever be doing something like this.

The man tipped his head back. "How much?"

Alice held up a portion of the money she got at the bank and the man's eyes grew large. "That enough?" she asked.

At first she thought he was going to run away, but then he smiled and reached underneath his long coat, pulling a stainless steel pistol from behind his back. Alice tensed, thinking the man was going to rob her, but he only continued to smile as he crossed his arms, the pistol in prominent view. "What I gotta do?" he asked.

Alice quickly laid out the plan that had been in her mind since she left the house. She told the man about Larry, what time he would come home, his drinking beer in front of the TV. She told him what time they would go to bed. She gave him the address and a brief layout of the yard and where to find the window in the backyard that looked into their bedroom. She explained how she would make sure the window was open before turning in for the night.

"You'll have to cut the screen," she said to the man who was now seated next to her in the car. "It's nylon and shouldn't make much noise. After that...empty that gun in him and run. I'll meet you back here in a week. I'll give you half now, half then. Okay?"

"S'good, yeah," said the man. "How do I know which one is him?"

"I'll be the one on the right," she said. "I always sleep on the right side."

With the deal done, she had made it home in plenty of time to start dinner. The *last* dinner.

Alice now lay in bed next to the boorishly snoring Larry. She tried to sleep, but couldn't. She was too excited. The room was dark, save for a faint illumination cast by the glowing numbers on the bedside alarm clock. She was on her back, her hands folded on her stomach, listening to the occasional creak and groan of the house. Outside, far in the distance, she could hear a siren. It slowly disappeared into the night, replaced by the low chirp of summer crickets.

Minutes passed. Soon an hour had gone by, followed by another. Alice wondered if the man had had a change of heart, if he decided not to show up. Maybe he had just kept the money and blown her off. She was about to give up hope, consider it a lost cause, when she heard a faint rustling outside beneath the window. She held her breath, her bottom lip between her teeth.

A shadow passed in front of the window. She could hear shallow breathing. In the dim room, she saw the screen slowly being pushed inward and with a soft SNICK! She watched as a knife blade punched through the material. It stopped and then began to seesaw back and forth, cutting a vertical line in the nylon mesh. When the knife withdrew, there was a ragged cut almost a foot long. Alice slowly drew the sheet over her head and closed her eyes.

*Almost. Almost!*

In her mind, she could see the man hidden in shadows as he pushed the pistol through the screen, pointing it at Larry.

*"How do I know which one is him?"*

*"I'll be the one on the right. I always sleep on the right."*

*. . . the one on the right . .*

Her eyes snapped open as she was hit by a terrible realization. From the man's position, *Larry* would be on the right, which meant—

She jerked the sheet back and saw the short barrel of the pistol pointed right at her head, its opening a black, sinister eye staring right at her.

The first shot went through her forehead.

\*\*\*\* THE END \*\*\*\*

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## Dust Devils

By Adrian Ludens

**Synopsis:** A new letter, an old journal and the eternal horrors.

**About the Author:** Adrian Ludens has contributed to three new horror anthologies: The Middle of Nowhere, 52 Stitches, and Bonded By Blood II; all available online from Amazon.com. His short fiction has been published in Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, Morpheus Tales, Crossed Genres and many others. Look for him online at [www.myspace.com/adrianludens](http://www.myspace.com/adrianludens) . He lives with his family in Rapid City, South Dakota where he works as a radio personality.

**In this story,** discover what lies beneath; from the ancient deserts to the modern attics – a tale of horror and tragedy unveiled.



## Dust Devils

By Adrian Ludens

*Dear Maggie,*

*Hello Sis! Greetings from Basin, Wyoming. Grandma Anne's doing better. She has her good days and her bad days. Her hip is mending nicely but the doctors say she can't rush things. I've been doing the cooking and cleaning and in my spare time I've been doing some exploring. Up in the attic I found this old journal. Grandma didn't recognize it when I showed it to her but I think it might be from someone we're related to. There's nothing in the journal that tells us who wrote it. It's the weirdest thing. I even visited the Big Horn County Library here in Basin to see if I could trace our family roots but didn't have any luck figuring out who the journal belonged to. I am mailing this letter to you and have used it as a bookmark for the journal entry I want you to read. I'm not even sure if it's real. It can't be; it's just too bizarre. Tell me what you think! It's getting close to tea time so I'll close.*

*Grandma Anne sends her love, and I do too!*  
*Claire*

&&&

August 4, 1879 (10 AM)

Dear Journal,

I make these notes in an effort to maintain my sanity. We've been traveling westward across this vast expanse of desert for what seems like days. We ate the last of our rations some time ago and hunger pains cramp my stomach. Mounting fear and frustration have tempers flaring within our party.

My friend Hollister is the leader of our modest expedition. I am here at his invitation. Two other acquaintances from St. Paul - Cagle and young McCrossen, have joined us. The swarthy Parkman was a stranger to me before the expedition and remains largely so. Our guide is a fierce looking Apache who calls himself Nantan. He's a mean one. He won't speak directly to anyone but Hollister and Parkman. He treats me with particular disdain. I get the impression he'd watch us all die without batting an eyelash. In fact, I believe he could kill us all himself without batting an eyelash.

Why I ever left St. Paul, I'm not sure I can say. Perhaps I craved adventure. Hollister certainly entertained me with his stories of the 'untamed West'. He talked about gold in the Black Hills of Dakota Territory. He painted pictures of the seemingly endless buffalo herds and the colorful Indians.

Speaking of Indians, it is Nantan who leads our procession, followed by Hollister, McCrossen and Parkman in a tight cluster. I'm lagging back a bit as I try to scratch these words, allowing my pony to follow his compatriots at his own pace. The corpulent Cagle brings up the rear. They are lagging behind. I think his poor mount may have lost a shoe.

(2 PM)

I don't know how long Cagle had been gone before I finally noticed. The sun is still high but water is low. The horses are getting 'played out' -a phrase I heard Parkman use. We were riding with our heads down in a useless attempt at ducking the sweltering heat. I looked back to check Cagle's progress, but the large man was nowhere to be found.

I called out to the others and we made a brief attempt at retracing our path but quickly gave up the search. This may sound heartless, but the lack of water played fearfully on our minds. According to our guide, we had at least three more hours of desert before any chance at finding water. May God forgive our actions; we must press on.

(3:30 PM)

The sun stubbornly hangs high in the sky. Due to some trick of the light, it looks as if it hasn't moved. The featureless sand stretches out before us like---

My God! Parkman just sank into the sand, horse and all. It took only an instant. He was in front of me one moment, then the ground seemed to open up and he was gone. I'm shaking as I write this.

Now Nantan and Hollister are engaged in a heated conversation, but they seem to be taking great pains to keep it private. I just saw my friend curtly shaking his head. Now he's riding this way--

Hollister has just assured McCrossen and me that a sinkhole undoubtedly brought about our companion's demise. We've been instructed to give it a wide berth and remain vigilant.



Still August 4, 1879 (4:30 PM)

The day will not end. It seems ages ago that we lost Cagle and Parkman. Hollister rode along side me for a time, trying to raise my spirits. I believe I am beginning to suffer the ill effects of prolonged exposure to the sun. My skin burns, my head aches. I no longer feel the hunger pains, but the desire for water is nearly unbearable.

The mirages are the worst. The naked trunks of large trees seem to ripple and cavort in the distance in all directions. As I watch, they disappear like salmon leaping upriver to spawn.

(5:10 PM)

I hardly can bear to say it: my friend Hollister is gone, swallowed by the sand. His wide-brimmed hat lay upside down on the spot where he and his mount sank. In my heat-induced stupor, I confess I nearly rode forward to retrieve it!

McCrossen drew his six-shooter and accused Nantan of deliberately leading us into danger. Nantan calmly strung a mahogany arrow in his bow and let it fly. The shaft buried itself in the barrel of McCrossen's gun, rendering it useless. Nantan turned his pony and resumed crossing the desert without saying a word.

Young McCrossen was still grouching beside me when Nantan and his horse sank abruptly into the sand. We pressed our horses into gallops in hopes of leaving this cursed stretch of land behind us but the horses soon slowed, too played out to run. It feels as if we are moving at a snail's pace.

It is only 5:45 PM, though I don't know how this can be possible.

I am somewhat surprised, yet also proud of my feeling of detachment following these dreadful events. I believe my levelheaded nature may be the key to my sanity, perhaps to my survival. I believe I have determined what the mirages really are.

They're dust devils tearing at the sand. I've been watching them with keen interest for some time now. It's curious, but rather than disappearing into the sky, they seem to sink back into the ground.

(6:15 PM)

I know that I am in great danger. McCrossen has been muttering for the past hour. He has almost fallen from his saddle twice, grabbing the horn both times to maintain his balance. He is waving his pistol around and keeps looking at me in a way that I do not care for at all. Yet it is not him that I fear.

It is the dust devils.

I believe one will come for one of us at any moment. That is what happened to the others; I see that now. They dive, you see. They swim through the sand then open up the ground beneath their prey.

McCrossen doesn't realize this yet, but I do and perhaps I can use this to a slight advantage. I outweigh my young traveling companion, however, and that in itself is a deadly disadvantage.

The rotund Cagle went first into the sand. Then the muscular Parkman. My dear friend Hollister, tall and square-shouldered, disappeared next. And the sinewy Apache Nantan outweighed me by at least twenty pounds.

I need to take measures to assure my safe passage.

August 4, 1879. Sundown!

I am excited to write that heading. It is not just for the sake of proper form that I do so. The sun has finally made marked progress toward the west. I believe the temperature may have even dropped a degree or two. Best of all, I see off in the distance a most welcome sight: Mountains.

It is not a mirage. Both McCrossen and I see them. But he has also finally taken notice of the dust devils that block our path. I believe he has come to the same conclusion I have; that the mysterious twisters are somehow responsible for the depletion of our ranks.

Our eyes met and in an instant we had an understanding: only one of us would make it across the desert alive. McCrossen narrowed his eyes, stiffly touched the brim of his hat and trotted ahead. I let him go, then followed at a distance.

I stayed mounted for as long as I dared. After several more miles, with the mountain range growing ever closer, one of the dust devils off to the west sank from view. I pulled on the reins and quickly dismounted.

Perhaps sensing that something had changed, McCrossen cast a look over his shoulder at me. When he saw that I was now on foot and leading my horse by the reins, he stopped short and gaped.

A moment later, the sand became a whirling vortex beneath him. McCrossen and his terrified pony were sucked down and away. I was alone.

Trembling, I sat down to inscribe this final entry. The sun is sinking low now and this hellish day will soon come to an end.

I will continue leading my horse. I will remain vigilant; I will be ready. The safety of the mountains is very close. When the time comes, I will drop the reins and slap my pony's flank, sending him back the way we have come. Let the dust devils consume him next.

I am, as my departed admirer Hollister often commented, a 'little slip of a thing.' I believe I can make it over the last bit of desert without attracting attention. With any luck, my pony will distract the dust devils, or whatever they really are, long enough for me to reach the safety of the mountain range's stony foothills.

I have a good feeling about my chances. It's nothing I can present facts to support, it's just a feeling. Call it a woman's intuition.

&&&

*Dear Claire,*

*Sorry it's taken me so long to respond. We had a big blizzard (lots of shoveling) and I had to find a certain something to send back to you first. I read the entire journal cover to cover*

*searching for clues, and read the portion you marked several times. I think the story is real and I think I know who wrote it. I only remember hearing her name mentioned once or twice but I think it is Great-great Grandma Rowena. She would have been Grandma's grandma.*

*I almost wanted to throw the journal away and pretend the mailman never delivered it. To say that I am creeped out would be an understatement. Rather than try to explain anything to you, I'll just send this clipping from 'Worland Northern Wyoming Daily' newspaper and let you draw your own conclusions. It took a while to find it but here you go...*

*Give Grandma Anne my love and tell her we're all thinking of her. I promise I'll call soon.*

*With love,  
Maggie*

&&&

**Worland Northern Wyoming Daily News**

April 13th, 1939.

**"Local Woman Presumed Dead"**

*"Memorial services for longtime Basin resident Rowena Madison have been scheduled for this coming Saturday at Fisk Brothers Funeral Parlor. Mrs. Madison, who would have been 83 next month, is presumed dead after a tragic accident at her home. Her husband Melvin said she had been taking a brief afternoon stroll through the flower beds in their back yard when he last saw her. Mr. Madison felt a rumbling from what he thought was perhaps a mild earthquake and became concerned for his wife. Upon reaching their back yard, Mr. Madison was surprised to find not his wife, but instead a large sinkhole-*

\*\*\*\* THE END \*\*\*\*

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## **The Physicians Brother**

**By Jeremy Colangelo**

**Synopsis:** Luxury, inheritance, envy and the greed for getting it all for himself – here is a contemplated murder, executed as a horrible crime.

**About the Author:** Jeremy Colangelo is an English student at Brock University who has been writing for as long as he can remember. He currently writes short fiction for publication, and has an opinion column in his school's weekly newspaper. Jeremy's first published work was the short story "Flames of Season's Past" in Freedom Fiction Journal. He currently lives with his family in southern Ontario.

**In this dramatic crime fiction,** we are taken through family troubles that border on the criminally insane; will Kevin go over the edge?

## **The Physicians Brother**

**By Jeremy Colangelo**

There was a tingling in the air, a feeling of tremendous dread that permeated the room. The study, despite its mahogany furniture, expensive paintings and rare books, had been the setting of an unspeakable evil.

At least that's what Owen felt when he first stepped through the threshold. At the behest of his brother Kevin, he had returned to his childhood home for the first time in months. And while there was no reason to think so, not yet at least, Owen knew that a dreadful thing had happened in this room. All that there was to do was to discover what.

"Brother" said Kevin, wiping brown strands of hair from his pinstripe suit "Thank you for meeting me. I know that you and I have had our difficulties, but I hope that they can be put aside for the greater good".

"You should know better than to doubt me. No matter how distant you become, you're still my brother," replied Owen, though part of him didn't mean it.

"Thank you Owen, I knew that I could count on you. But the question is: can I trust you?"

"Of course you can trust me. You're my baby brother; I'd do anything for you".

Kevin looked at Owen, his face as serious as a gravestone, his eyes penetrating Owen's thin, gangly body, eyes that gazed into his soul.

"I don't know if I believe you Owen. We've both said things that can't be taken back, I don't think that I even know you anymore, and I'm sure that you don't know me".

Kevin was right, and Owen knew it. Only months ago there would have been no question, but now.

"You can trust me". Owen said. "Money is nothing, you can always trust me".

"Then I will. Please sit".

Owen nodded and pulled up one of the chairs that waited in front of the desk. Kevin stood up and, after a pause, spoke.

"Owen. I've done a terrible thing. I need you to help me hide it, lest I drive mother to an even earlier grave".

"Kevin, please. Whatever you've done is nothing to me. I'll forgive your actions, and so will mother".

"Owen" Said Kevin "I've killed a man".

Silence filled the room. Owen's shock was absolute, his brother, his gentle brother, had become a murderer! The very idea, the very idea of the idea, was preposterous. There were few people on earth less likely to kill than his brother.



"You lie". Owen said.

"I wish I was Owen. But it's true, I did kill him. I've stowed the body in the closet until we can think of what to do with it".

"We?" replied Owen. "How did I become implicated in this? I'd be an accomplice".

"Not if you help me hide the body. We can make it so that no one will ever find it, no one will ever know. If we do it right then we can make this go away".

By this time Owen had already turned to leave. He was heading straight to the phone to call the police. He was not going to jail for his brother.

"Owen, wait! Please listen to me".

"No Kevin, you listen to me! This isn't right, you're not right. You've murdered someone, can't you understand that? You've brought death into our home. You even have the audacity to hide the body in our father's study!"

"It's my study now, don't you remember his will?"

"It's not yours, not until Mother passes".

"And how long do you think that will be? A week? A few days? Her time is almost up Owen, at least let me enjoy what I've gotten, what little there may be".

"You'll get none of it in jail".

"Which is why I need your help, Doctor".

Owen let out a great sigh and sat back down. There he remained, cleaning his glasses, and thinking very dark thoughts. This is why his brother had asked him here, who better to dispose of a body than a trained physician?

"At least tell me who he was". Owen said "I deserve that at least".

"True and you shall get as much".

Kevin breathed a great sigh as he called the incident from memory. Owen could see the pain it brought as it bubbled to the surface.

"He was a lawyer". Said Kevin "Or at least he said he was. He had come a long way to see me. He had heard of the wealth that the oil had brought us, and of the ruthlessness of our father, and had come to see mother".

"What did he want?"

"He said that he was representing some of our employees, a group of workers on the drills. He claimed that some people had been injured, that it was our fault, and that he was suing us".

"So you killed him? Surely we'd kept up with all of the regulations; why not simply defeat him in court?"

"I would have Owen, believe me, I wanted nothing more. But he had not come simply to gloat; he had far more nefarious plans than that".

"What kind of plans?"

"Well, when we first spoke, I laughed in his face. I knew that he was doomed to failure. The man had asked for an inordinate sum, far more than he deserved, so I politely asked him to leave the premises and to see me in court".

"Then why, Kevin, is he dead?"

"Because he tried to blackmail me. He said that he'd found photographs, damaging photographs, the kind that could ruin our reputation forever. He said that he'd give them to the press if we didn't hand over the money. When he refused to give the pictures up, or tell me where he'd gotten them, I tried to take them by force".

"You tried to kill him".

"No Owen, I didn't. All I wanted was to protect our family's honour. I had only given him a light punch, just to break his nose, but then he fell back, and when his head snapped against the marble floor I knew what I had done. It was all that I could do to clean up the mess and hide the body, and then I called you".

So it had been honour that drove Kevin to do it, honour and the protection of wealth. Owen knew all too well what a scandal could do to his dying family. The oil had brought them privilege. The fields of which Kevin spoke had been discovered by the poor entrepreneur that had been their father. The oil had brought their father everything. He'd had money, fame, and love- especially love. Their mother, the heiress to a banking empire, had met their father at a party, the kind of place where more money would be spent on champagne than most people could make in a year. Their love had been driven by an intense inevitability, for there were few others who could match them in terms of wealth or status. It was in this climate that Kevin and Owen had been raised.

But this was no time for memories. Kevin's actions, though beget by a desire for good, were severe indeed. It would be more damaging than any blackmail Owen could think of.

"What of the pictures?" Owen asked.

"They'll cause us no trouble" said Kevin.

"You're wrong; they already have".

"What shall we do then? I cannot go to jail; it would undo all that I have done. You have to tell me how to dispose of the body".

"Let me see it".

Kevin froze, visibly disturbed. A paleness crept across his face, as if the very thought of opening the closet door killed him. Owen, impatient and wanting to view the corpse, began to walk towards the door.

“Owen stop!” shouted Kevin, who dashed aside and blocked the door “This will not do. You must not look inside. Not until the very last must you open that door”.

Kevin’s ferocity was petrifying. For the first time in his life Owen saw a man who could commit a murder. However there was little to be done, he had to see the body.

“Kevin, I have to look”.

“Why? Why must you see the grizzly scene? Why can I not spare you the indignity of it all?”

“I have to see what state the body is in. What if he is a large man? How would we carry him out? What if he has identity cards on him? We would certainly want to take care of those somehow. You must stand aside”.

But Kevin would not have it. Standing between Owen and the door was an implacable man. For reasons that Owen had yet to fully understand, the closet was off limits.

“There must be another way that we could do this” Kevin said.

“I need more information; if I am going to help you I must learn more about this victim”.

“What if I described him to you? Ask me anything, he is burned into my memory”.

“Very well, tell me”.

Kevin began to describe the man. He spoke quickly and in short bursts. His voice trembled with each syllable. His eyes were the eyes of a man in quick, frantic thought.

“He was a short man, balding. His eyes were brown, though I doubt that it matters, and he wore a business suit. He carried a black briefcase which had the photographs, in addition to his ID cards, both of which I’ve destroyed. He has a broken jaw and skull, from the fight”.

“I thought that you broke his nose?”

“Yes, well, that too. I hit him a couple of times”.

“And he didn’t hurt you?”

“He was a very scrawny man”.

“I see. That should be enough, though I don’t understand your worry. I’ve seen many grizzly things in my life, this would be no worse. Perhaps it is your guilty conscience that compels you”.

“Perhaps, I have much to be guilty for. “

“Indeed”.

It now fell on Owen to concoct a plan for disposing of the body. It had been clever of Kevin to call him here, for he was a master of the human body.

Both he and Kevin had been sent to the most elite of private schools. Their education had been the best that their parents could afford, and their parents could afford a lot. Upon finishing high school, Owen studied the sciences and was eventually accepted into medical school. It had been his idea, not his father's. They had intended for their eldest son to study business and to eventually take over as head of the company. Owen, on the other hand wanted to become a doctor.

The differences between them, Owen's goals and his father's, were not so great as to drive the family apart. Indeed, in some ways they even strengthened the bond between them. For now there was a doctor in the family, a member of one of the world's noblest professions, an educated man. Owen could now be self sufficient, though he would never have to be, and the responsibility for managing the business would fall to Kevin.

Few learned more about death than Owen had. As he progressed farther and farther in his studies, his interests grew more and more morbid. Parasites, flesh eating bacteria, gangrenous rot, all of these Owen studied. He could not tell what drove him, but these things, these gruesome things, became his passion. He was, in every facet of the word, an expert on death.

But death had already occurred. Now the issue was disposing the dead. Without a body, no one could accuse his brother; they would try, but they would fail. This was a certainty. The problem was to get it done perfectly.

“What if we incinerated it?” Kevin asked, breaking his brother's thought.

“In what, the fireplace?” Owen replied “we have nothing hot enough. Even crematories leave bones behind, and we simply don't have time to find a furnace”

“What about burying it?” Kevin ventured again.

“Where?”

“In the woods behind the house, no one goes there”.

“No, the conditions aren't right. It could take decades for the body to rot completely away. Besides, the last thing that we need is for it to stay on our property. It has to be moved”.

“Where?”

“I don't know. “

Owen collapsed back in his chair and let out a deep sigh. His brother asked too much of him, he could hardly think. Kevin stepped away from the closet door and sat behind the desk. He too was suffering under the stress.

After a minute, Owen spoke, “What were in those photographs? Were they really so bad that you had to kill the man?”

"I wasn't trying to".

"But you did. It can't be helped. I just need to know why".

Again the color fled from Kevin's face, and again he spoke frantically and without pause. It must have been the stress, or so Owen assumed.

"It was mother, she was with another man. The pictures were dated to before father died. In the state she's in, the scandal was the last thing that she needed".

"Could they have been fakes?"

"I don't know, I didn't think".

"Well maybe you should have. Maybe you should've thrown him out, maybe you should've paid him off, maybe you should've done something other than killing him!"

"I know that! And don't think otherwise!"

"Then why did you kill him?"

Kevin didn't answer, but instead gave Owen a look of intense pain. It was a look that he's seen before.



Owen had returned from medical school only two years ago. His success had been great and was only matched by Kevin's failure. Business school had not been good to him. Kevin's dismal grades, his disruptive antics, and his youthful recklessness had all conspired to get him expelled. Now no one in the family could continue the business.

Father's rage had been immense. It had looked as if Kevin would be cut out of the family. This, however, did not happen. What had happened was father's first heart attack. Though no one accused him, everyone blamed Kevin, especially Kevin himself. He'd stayed by his Father's side for days while he made his slow recovery. That is what saved him from banishment. Unfortunately for Kevin, as almost anyone could tell you, it was Owen who would get the lion's share of the estate whenever mother would pass away. As much had been said in father's will. Kevin's ownership of the study was simply a cruel joke.

Kevin had suffered enough; this murder could ruin what little connection that he still had with the family. If Owen was going to save his brother, he needed to get rid of the body, and he needed to do it now.

"What if we cut him to pieces?" Kevin said, at last regaining his composure, "We could cut him into bits and then spread them all over the place. We'd dump him in the forest, throw bits in the ocean, it would take them decades to put him back together".

It was a good idea.

"I would need help with the cutting. Would you be willing to do it?" said Owen.

"Yes" Kevin replied "I will. Do you have the tools with you?"

"Not with me, but there's a saw and some garbage bags in the shed outside, then we'd just need some plastic to put over the floor, this is going to be a bloody mess".

"Perhaps we should move the body?"

Kevin was right. The study was no place for dismemberment. There were papers and furniture everywhere, each a surface that could absorb a deadly drop of blood. There should be no evidence of their transgression.

Owen walked towards the closet door. "You'll have to help me carry him" he said, all the while thinking of where best to do the deed. As his hand reached for the doorknob his mind turned over the plan that they had made, making sure that there were no holes through which evidence could slip. Was it really so foolproof? Was it absolutely impossible for anything to go wrong?

"No". Owen answered himself, pulling his hand away from the doorknob. He turned around and faced his brother, who was standing there, nervously clutching an iron paperweight. It was a big metal sphere, more than heavy enough to do its job.

"What's wrong?" Kevin asked.

"We can't dismember the body. All we'll do is spread the evidence around. Just one piece, that's all it will take for them to convict us. We need another plan".

Kevin put down the paperweight and sighed. He looked almost relieved, he must have been afraid of cutting up the body. It was, Owen admitted, messy work.

"Then what should we do?" said Kevin "We cannot simply let it sit there in the closet forever. It has to be disposed of now!"

"I know that. It's a liability, it'll hang us, but that doesn't mean that we should act rashly. We must be sure that there is nothing left that could convict us".

Owen's words tasted bitter in his throat. This was not how he'd wanted to reconcile with his brother. This was the first time in, how long had it been? Owen could hardly remember, but it had been a very long time since he and his brother had spoken.

&&&

Darkness had descended on the household. Father's funeral had only just ended, and the mourners were already filtering out. They were father's associates, not friends. They were businessmen, the best kind of people to have at a funeral, as they were the least likely to mourn. They all excused themselves, very politely, and collected their coats, for none had forgotten where they were, and walked straight to their cars, which had been kept waiting by the door. It was the most polite stampede that Owen had ever seen.

When the last man had left, Owen retired to the study and found Kevin waiting. Kevin had been bequeathed ownership of the study only the previous day. Its contents were his, as was the room only as long as mother allowed it. Owen could already see signs of his brother's presence, he had been rummaging.

"What have you been up to?" said Owen.

"I've just been taking inventory; this is all mine you know". His brother replied.

"As you've been saying, although I hope that you'll let me use it occasionally. I've yet to read most of these books".

"Obviously, but look at this" Kevin showed Owen a small stack of paper that he'd found, it carried their mother's signature.

"What is it?" Owen asked.

"It's our mother's will. It was hidden in the safe behind the mirror. Why don't we have a look?"

"Her will? Kevin, put that back! It's not yours too look at".

"Oh? It was in the room. If father hadn't wanted us to find it he'd have hidden it elsewhere".

"I hardly think that he expected to have a second heart attack! Please, put it back". Kevin wasn't convinced, in fact quite the opposite. By the time Owen could react, Kevin had already begun reading aloud:

"To my sister Margaret: I bequeath my blue Rolls Royce, which she has always adored"

"Kevin, stop it!"

"To my butler Nigel: I leave a pension, good for ten years".



"Kevin, this is not for our ears!"

"To my son Owen: I leave-" Kevin stopped. His voice stammered in shock, and his expression was a mixture of misery and anger. Owen rushed over to him and finished reading:

"...I leave sixty-five percent of my monetary wealth". Kevin had been cut out almost entirely.

&&&

Dismemberment was off the table. Yet another method stuck down by reality. Had they been less cautious, they would have already begun the process, they would've also been almost assuredly caught.

"I never should've done this" said Kevin.

"That's quite the understatement! You were stupid, and reckless, and now I have to clean up your mess".

"As usual, eh brother?"

"Don't pull that! Your mistakes are not my fault. You did this to yourself, just like in college, just like with mother's will, you've once again ruined your own life".

"Owen, I asked for help, not contempt. I've already swallowed my pride once on your account; don't make me do it again".

"Swallowed your pride? I'm your brother! This is my mother's house! What pride must be swallowed for you to invite me here?"

"You wouldn't understand".

"You're right, I don't, and I don't think that I want too. You seem to be doing okay by yourself; you've had plenty of good ideas without my help, I think I'm done here". Owen turned to leave, but Kevin's pleas held him in place.

"Owen!" he said "Please. I need you. If this is what you want, me on my hands and knees, then here you have it. I'm a worthless murderer; I've no idea what I'm doing. Please, Owen, help me". Owen turned and saw his brother kneeling before him, sobbing.

"All right" Owen said "I'll try to think of something".

"Thank you. Thank you so much. You have no idea how important this is if I'm going to get out of this. I desperately need you here".

"You did have good ideas, you don't need my help".

"Owen, you have no idea how important it is for you to be here".

"Thank you".

Owen thought back to his days as a medical student. So many things that one could do to a body, so many ways to break it down. Some were slow, some fast, some cheap, some expensive, there were many choices. It was like walking through an orchard full of apples, except all of the apples were rotting.

Perhaps bacteria could break down the flesh and bone? But that would take too long. What if incineration was the way? Could they find a furnace? No, it was preposterous. Maybe a wood chipper? No, it wasn't clean enough.

Then Owen knew the answer. It was a technique of perfect simplicity, a clean way to remove the body.

He'd first seen the stuff work in medical school. They had been dissecting pig corpses as practice and it was time to finish up. Their work had left the pigs inedible and they needed to be disposed of; Owen had volunteered. He helped lift the carcasses into the back room and placed them in round steel vats.

"What's going to happen to the pigs?" He'd asked his professor.

"We're going to put them through alkaline hydrolysis" the professor responded, in his usual dry voice. "We fill the vats with lye; it'll break down the bodies into a brown sludge. Once it's done we'll dump the vat down the drain".

Disintegration! That was the answer. All they'd need was a vat for the body, and enough lye to do the job. When the body turned to sludge they could just dump it down the drain and dispose of the vat. At last things looked like they'd be all right; it felt like a glass of cool water after walking through a desert, a desert of lies and shattered dreams.

&&&

In the weeks after father's death, the brothers had become enemies. Kevin resented the posthumous snub, and Owen was angry at his brother's arrogance. To top it off, mother was diagnosed with lung cancer. There was a chill in the house. Everyone could feel it, and no one dared speak of it. The family had been broken apart, and the pieces had been ground into dust.

"Kevin" said Owen one day, the day he left for good "Please, I want to make things right between us".

"Oh you do?" his brother said "And how do you intend to do that?"

"Can't you at least talk to mother?"

"About the will I looked at without her permission? Yes Owen, I think that's a splendid idea!"

"You mock me".

"I mock the stupid".

"Kevin, driving me away does nothing but cost you a friend. I'm the one trying to help you".

"Help me? How have you helped me?"

"I've spoken about you to mother; I'm trying to get you on her good side".

"Meaningless".

"I've made you the beneficiary on my will".

"It does nothing".

"I spoke to the board members about getting you a job".

"As if I'd work for those leeches! They killed father, they and their snobbish foppery. I'll have nothing to do with them".

"Kevin that's all that I can do".

"Then you do nothing Owen. I'll fix this on my own. Goodbye".

And Owen left. He refused to return, not even for his mother. Now she was in her last hours, and Owen had only just returned. At least Kevin had learned how to swallow his pride; it was one good thing that could come of this. Hopefully the whole messy business would be over soon, and they could go back to being brothers.

&&&

Kevin now had a smile on his face, as if he'd just been freed from a long captivity. The news of a proper plan brought color back to his cheeks. Soon they could leave this dreadful room and mourn in peace. They could live out the last moments of their mother's life as brothers.

"Where will we get it?" Kevin said, taking down notes on a yellow pad.

"A hardware store, it's sold as drain cleaner".

"Interesting". Kevin's scribbling grew frantic as he took down Owen's every word. He had to get everything just right. Owen just kept rambling and pacing across the room.

"We'll have Nigel pick up a tank and then we can hide it in the old schoolroom, no one goes in there. When the body has been turned to goo, we just dump it down the drain".

"Won't the tank seem suspicious?"

"Sometimes a tank is just a tank. No one will notice".

"I suppose you're right". Kevin closed the notepad and placed it under the paperweight. He pushed in the chair, removed his jacket, and leaned on the desk. "I guess it's time to move the body. We should put it in the schoolroom now while Nigel tends to mother. Will you help me lift him?"

Owen agreed. He removed his jacket and glasses, placing both on the desk, and walked towards the closet door. Each stride was more dreadful than the last; each step brought him closer to the horror inside. His brother's victim was lying there, dead and bloody, his life gushing from a head wound. Owen let out a sigh and took hold of the doorknob. The closet door opened, and its contents were revealed by the light.

There was nothing there. Not even dust sullied the empty space. Where had the body gone?

The answer came swiftly with a blow to the head. The metal paperweight made short work of Owen's skull. Had the doctor been alive when his head hit the floor, he'd have felt Kevin's knife finishing him off. If Owen still lived, he'd have felt the corrosive lye dissolve his body, and would've foreseen himself getting dumped down the drain. If Owen was still alive, he would have been to his mother's funeral, and he would have stopped the family fortune from going to his treacherous brother, despite what his own will intended.

For Kevin, the last heir, the last apology, the last laugh – it was worth its price in blood.

**\*\*\*\* THE END \*\*\*\***

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## **ADMIN\_Sublime**

**By Scott T. Swartz**

**Synopsis:** Death by input.

**About the Author:** Scott T. Swartz enjoyed free will and made his own choices until he no longer could. Life as a simple man, he began creative writing at a very young age and continued until his final diagnosis, after many, of schizoaffective disorder - bipolar type I (rapid cycle). Crawling out of the gap he ultimately began writing after he proceeded to obtain his General Education Development diploma, in lieu of high school graduation and attended a California community college. He also enjoyed writing lyrical poetry which he seeks to be performed in a rock band somehow. All obstacles aside, his choices returned after exhaustive treatment with a dark remainder: his inner tone and favorite past times of listening to music, exploring the internet to manifest future goals in vain, and living life as a free man contemplating a world of limitless potential yet to be revealed in the present tense...which still may be.

**In this dramatic digital tale,** you get to try 'murder by binary numbers'.

## **ADMIN\_Sublime**

**by Scott T. Swartz**

### *The Jungle*

Five teenagers walked near an unmarked Los Angeles Police Department car parked crookedly against the curb in front of a liquor store. Inside the car, a man sat slowly sipping cheap vodka diluted in an orange soda he had purchased when the store opened at 5:00 a.m. His face was emotionless as he gazed at the teens walking past. At six 'o clock, he started the vehicle, loud instrumental music blaring as he approached the precinct. It was already too warm to keep his hooded sweatshirt on, so he removed it while driving, bringing the car to a gentle swerve slightly into the oncoming lane. He overcompensated, then corrected.

Sergeant Sean Matthews was due for promotion in a week, but he had already blown it with his girlfriend, who had kindly removed him from her apartment permanently the night before. He was devastated.

"Hey Sean."

"Hey, what's up?" he slurred.

Sean passed each officer on shift rotation. They took great pleasure in the sight of a good man with bad attributes showing colorfully.

"Is he still wasted?" remarked one of the mechanics near the gun maintenance locker area. "Ha! You owe me five dollars. You didn't ask her--"

"God damn it," said Sean, handing his co-worker a quarter.

Matthews coughed and was made aware again he smelt vigorously of hard alcohol. Unfortunately, he realized this in just enough time to be approached by his supervisor, Lt. O'Wheiler. The two men stopped abruptly close enough for Sean to be detected, and again... "Come with me, Sergeant."

O'Wheiler always played by the book. He couldn't accept the excuse that Matthews had recently lost his mother and was now losing the woman he wished to marry. It was difficult when Matthews could not--or, rather, would not--speak of it. He was pulled inward by a constant pain alleviated with the mainstream chemical affinity he thought he had retired in his previous days as a recovered alcoholic.

"What the hell's the matter with you?" yelled the lieutenant as he slammed his office door shut.

"You know what the hell's--"

"I don't give a shit, Sean. This is the third time. The captain is going to have my ass."

"Well, you already have your head up his."

"Get out."

"What?" said the arrogant and still slightly inebriated Matthews.

"You're fired."

"You can't fire me. It's up to George."

"George isn't going to save you this time. Homicide doesn't pull weight with SWAT these days," said O'Wheiler with pleasure.

Matthews turned around, retaining his right to keep his badge and sidearm until officially relieved by the direct authority of the captain. He walked out of the precinct.

Outside, he saw the same five teenagers with backpacks walking past, their soft heckling offset by Matthews' hate-filled rebuke: "Shut up, kid."

He had never been very good at high school comebacks. Until recently, he had often felt isolated for being short and very thin.

Matthews walked to his police car and sat in it. He looked down at his soda cup, given to him for free for being an LAPD officer. He poured the contents out onto the curb.

He started the car. With the music blaring, he decided to go get his girlfriend something from a department store downtown.

As he neared the store, he saw two black and white units, their lights on and sirens screaming as they charged down the road. Then he saw three more coming toward him in the same direction.

"That rat," muttered Matthews to himself, but the cars flew past him. They weren't coming to take Matthews to jail--a possible felony. He left the station with the only car that he felt was still his own, just as he still felt the previous night's terrible passage into early morning.

Matthews turned on his high-frequency CB radio, preset to his precinct's tactical channel. He couldn't believe what was being broadcasted. Three men in Northeast Los Angeles had taken hostages in a bank, and SWAT was responding.

His team--his responsibility--and he was far from the war zone erupting at the local credit union.

Matthews turned his car around toward the scene.

Bursts of gunfire thumped through the air as Matthews approached the barricaded parking lot. He flashed his badge and slipped past the Mobile Command Center into the midst of the chaos. The sound of gunfire drowned out all reason to suppress his instincts; he headed into the kill zone of direct fire toward the back of the bank. He could see two bodies of uniformed officers lying in the open.

Six shots pierced the front windshield of Matthews' unmarked car. He didn't care. He was alive still and exercising the will to act upon the end of all things to come. He pulled the car



off behind a tree adjacent to the parking lot and exited the vehicle quickly to gain more cover. He took aim at the general vicinity where he identified a male suspect wearing normal street clothes denoted solely by an AR-15 assault rifle slung behind him. A two-round double-tap to the suspect's chest threw him backwards with a briefly misting spatter of tissue and blood. Matthews didn't realize a bullet from that suspect's rifle had struck his shoulder. He slouched near the base of the tree in a painful loss of consciousness.

&&&

"What the hell am I going to do with you?"

"Whatever you want," said Matthews. He had neither the hope nor the will to be proud of himself.

Lt. O'Wheiler left the side of the bed at Garfield General Hospital. Matthews was still a Los Angeles City employee. Because of his completely unauthorized and well placed show of courage, he had been decorated to save his *professional* image and that of the department.

Matthews didn't mind. Five days sober in the hospital, minus the intravenous drip of narcotic pain relief. *It's all uphill from here*, he thought to himself.

&&&

*The Animal*  
*Three years later.*

She sat in a bathtub, relaxing herself, finding peace in a final moment that had come after what seemed like a short lifetime of waiting.

"Just a dream..." whispered the survivor of the animal as she wrapped a tight, elastic rubber band around her neck and felt the pressure on her ocular cavities increasing until her vision turned brown, then darkness. Her eyes pressed outward, dilated, and her jaw locked. The drowning teenager was now a young corpse.

The how?

The why?

All of them had been confused and manipulated. The killer was not Sue, age thirteen--it was a repeated text message interrupting a game of Quake. The random sequence of events was as statistical as the twelve dead bodies discovered by the LAN party host's parents.

When one victim fell to his brink of pain and need, the rest followed, brought in and crossed over by the sympathetic notion to stop the other--and the other...

&&&

*The Beginning*

For the homicide unit, there was little time to prepare for a raid of such a special nature.

Four armed officers in tactical gear with guns drawn proceeded toward the doorway of a decomposing large apartment structure in South Koreatown. The main entrance was unlocked. Two officers faded to the left as one opened the door with cover from his partner behind.

"Are we ready?" He looked with a smirk to one of the men. Sergeant Sean Matthews was an ex-alcoholic, a cowboy, to say the least, perhaps shedding light on why he had been thrown off the Special Weapons and Tactics Team--but there was something else he craved: an end to this disastrous mess. A LAN party had already been hit, and now this...

Matthews opened the door, sweeping forward down the poorly lit hallway to Apartment F. The cackle of police frequency echoed until they reached the apartment door. No longer was there a sense of routine amongst the men. The room omitted a distinct odor: death.

Matthews kicked in the door and the unit rushed in behind him. The apartment was black except for the light from a computer screen. Flashlights drawn, they searched the apartment.

No one alive was in it. The LAN party was definitely over--same style as before. The killer strangled and drowned one victim, while the others were crudely beaten to death, as if the conflict had escalated beyond a fight to survive. None of the remains showed typical characteristic of mass-murder/suicides.

Again, the animal that turned twelve young teenagers against each other at a seemingly innocent gathering to play video games had lifted away.

"What the hell?" queried a unit team member as he ran his hands up and down the walls.

"Where are the lights?" asked Matthews.

"No Sean, where is *he*?"

&&&

ADMIN 2.0

Sublime: Hey there.

JackIE909: Who's this?

Sublime: It's Spud.

JackIE909: Uhhh, k

Sublime: I think we went to school together...

JackIE909: Did we

Sublime: Yeah, Johnson Middle School

JackIE909: never heard of it.



Sublime: Oh, your SN sounded familiar.

Sublime: My bad <blush>

Sublime: You seem to be up late

JackIE909: Yeah, i'm just waiting for my bf to logon

Sublime: K cool

Sublime: How long have you two been going out?

JackIE909: 2 years

Sublime: I bet he loves you

JackIE909: Why do u say that?

Sublime: Us guys need someone close

Sublime: Close that we can trust

Sublime: My gf is like that

JackIE909: Nice... hehe

Sublime: But she has some issues... ya know?

JackIE909: Like what???

Sublime: She doesn't like when I get depressed

Sublime: She and my grandma think I am going to hurt myself....

JackIE909: Well don't

Sublime: I would never do that, I just know that life is only a dream that she can't wake up from.

Sublime: Death is only a message from the likes that everything false must end.

JackIE909: Wow, your weird

Sublime: How old are you?

JackIE909: 15, you

Sublime: Same.

Sublime: Do you really think I'm weird?

Sublime: I just don't see the point anymore

JackIE909: sorry, your not weird just... deep lol

Sublime: Haha

Sublime: Is your grandma still married?

JackIE909: No.

Sublime: I am going to tie a rubber band around my neck in the bathtub.

Sublime: I see my grandfather and pretend that he is still alive.

Sublime: I feel so close, so warm. He still loves me.

JackIE909: OMG did you drown?

Sublime: Almost. You can't drown if your awake just sitting there. It just takes a lil patience and a lil water.

Sublime: Your grandpa loved you - and still does.

Jackie909: He died last year

JackIE909: how did you no that?

Sublime: Lucky guess

Sublime: Your boyfriend just wants some. He wants more than you have to give him after school.

Sublime: I know it's not fair and at some point it's too late to let go of a sacrifice

Sublime: We need someone close, someone who understands relationships

JackIE909: but I do

Sublime: Do you? Do you know that he does for real...

Sublime: How?

Sublime: Hello?

JackIE909 has logged off.

&&&

### *The Specialist*

"Here it is, bro," the delivery man said, glad to see another bored return customer.

"You're the man!" said Michael Renton gratefully as he took the package of Thai takeout

food.

“Oh, and the department head wants to see you.”

Michael laughed. “Can I finish this first? The last time I went up there, he almost denied my doctoral thesis.”

“It was on the utilization of artificial intelligence to sequentially plot the New York Stock Exchange...”

“Hey, who said a PhD in Cognitive Sciences can't pay for your kids' CK jeans?”

Left alone in the room, Michael looked around the laboratory full of humming super-computers and monitors. After five years in the same seat, eating the same lunch and missing his wife Carol and daughter, Danielle, the sound of those machines now seemed deafening. Upset, he closed the box of food and wiped his mouth. He proceeded to the elevator of the Psychology and Mathematical Sciences building.

He approached the office with worry; Dr. Greene had never appreciated Michael's gentle yet witty sense of humor. The door opened slightly and Michael was told immediately to have a seat.

“You wanted to see me, Doctor?”

“Yes, Mike. We have a problem.”

“Look, about the thesis--”

“It's not in regard to your auspicious mockery of my department. The LAPD has requested a liaison from our faculty for assistance with a homicide case.”

Michael sat in silent awe.

“Now, before you say anything, I'm going to give them the best Psych/Comp Sci man in our program. You're the best fit for the job.”

“Yes, sir.”

“There appears to be a cyber-predator, and the police department wants the credit for bringing this maniac down without FBI interference. It'd be a huge publicity boost for their department and our program.”

“Yes, sir.”

Greene leaned forward slowly, his face stark. “This could mean your doctorate, Mike.”

Michael, realizing that he hadn't produced even a secondary thesis in seven months, smiled slightly. “I'd be glad to help, Dr. Greene.”

“Excellent. Sergeant Matthews is waiting for you downstairs.”

&&&

*Variable*

A medium-height police officer stood by his cruiser in front of the building as Michael approached. "Are you our guy?" Matthews queried.

"Yes," muttered Michael nervously. "So, are you in charge of the investigation?"

"Yeah. By the way, my name is Sean."

"I'm Mike."

"Let's go." The two men entered the car and began their way towards Headquarters. "So you know what this is all about?"

"Dr. Greene quickly briefed me."

"This isn't a term paper. We have people dying--teenagers."

"Teenagers?"

"I'll tell you more at HQ."

Michael stared out of the window, casting his eyes upon the urban scenery growing increasingly reminiscent of a third-world nation. He had never been in a police car, especially an unmarked government vehicle with an officer who made him nervous. Thoughts poured through Mike's mind; he couldn't fathom the nature of this assignment. In a quick and silent moment of retrospect, he thought of his family at home.

"We're here."

The station was a tall and rugged building. Michael looked around and began to wonder just what exactly he had gotten himself into. This was far from a relaxing day at the office hacking out Assembly and C/C++ Neurolinguistic engines.

They proceeded inside, moving past the typical ringing phones and cluttered desks and loud voices. But something was different. They were not headed toward the office cubicles or the administrative wing. Matthews and Michael instead came to an elevator requiring an electronic key card. The doors opened and they stepped inside. At this time, Michael was too mortified to make conversation or simply ask where they were going. The elevator went down until there was no longer a symbol above the door for what level lay below.

"What you see in here... is hardly part of the LAPD's budget. Be careful what you say about tonight." Matthews paused. The door opened and all that could be seen was a poorly lit basement with a man sitting at a desk with several laptop computers jacked into a standard PC tower. They entered. The man turned and gave a nod to his superior officer and looked questionably at Michael. "This is him," said Matthews.

"Hey there," said the computer forensics specialist enthusiastically. "I'm Henry."

"Hi, I'm--"



"Henry, show him what we got," interrupted Matthews.

"Alright then." Henry was a sub-contractor for the Los Angeles Police Department's tactical intelligence and information technology division. He specialized in harvesting data from corrupted and/or destroyed machines. "We recovered this system two days ago in some hole in K-Town. We think the suspect is sending his messages from this machine. Only bad part is that there's no internet connectivity present in its configuration, and there's no trace whatsoever of a program for any sort of messaging. In fact," he leaned forward, a serious look on his face, "there's nothing at all--just some kind of text document full of embedded code. Looks like core Assembly...and some kind of human character-based language"

"Let me see it."

Henry loaded the document and offered Michael a seat. The prognosis was immediate--it was x86 machine language. "This is source code."

"Huh?"

"It means the recipe for a program, Sean," said Henry.

After carefully examining the code, it soon became clear what the program was designed for, although there were no notes left in the source. It was an artificial intelligence engine utilizing critical flicker fusion.

Hours passed as Michael combed through the code line by line. After six hours, Matthews and Henry returned from an extended coffee break.

"Any luck?"

"Almost. This wasn't made by some amateur. This is the most advance sequencing I've ever seen. I didn't even know it could be done this way."

Henry, holding his coffee, looked down at the monitor. "Is there anything relative to a cyber-threat?"

The room was palpably silent. It had become cold since the main departmental offices had closed and the heater had been turned off.

"There is... something. It's at the bottom of the code."

Matthews leaned toward Michael almost intimidatingly. "What?"

"One variable isn't defined. It's left open ended, but it compiles correctly. We see this at the university when we want to teach the program something by an 'educated guess.' Tell me, these kids, who were they?"

"Textbook gamers and social networking web site enthusiasts," said Henry.

"Did you read the name of this text document?"



"Yeah, it was called 'Admin\_Sublime.'"

"Sublime?" Michael muttered almost to himself. "As if the variable wasn't defined until it was made conscious by the program itself. It recompiles to adjust to user input"

"What's that?"

"Anything from the pictures you see before a movie that convinces you to buy popcorn to an answer to a question you never knew you asked in a conversation – only the images flicker faster than our visual threshold. Your mind sees it, not your eyes. This looks like cognitive embedding. The variable is the victim."

"Right," said Henry sarcastically, glancing at Sean. A moment later he looked back down at the variable.

"Look, guys, I need to know the details of the homicides," Michael said sternly.

Matthews and Henry looked at each other, then the sergeant gave Henry the go ahead. "It's mass suicide. At first there was, you know, your standard Local Area Network party: energy drinks and Halo. Then they were reported missing. Then... they were found willingly killing each other until the last one drowned herself."

Michael shivered.

"And then, last night, a young girl did the same thing."

"Is there a geographical pattern, say a particular Internet Service Provider amongst all of them?"

"No."

"It's occurred in our county twice in Asian and Caucasian-dense areas like West L.A. and K-Town."

A look of determination and fury came over Matthews. "Have you figured this damn thing out or not?"

"Yes. It's a program for generating neuro-linguistic pathways stemming from the systematic response of the program's victims. Whoever wrote this is a genius--and he's not very happy."

"Sociopaths have a tendency to find reason--he wants something back."

&&&

### *The Hunt*

A young man sat before a desk, staring at a blank screen. His eyes shifted back and forth as he uncrumpled his fingers from fists wet with sweat. He turned on the computer in the college library as closing time neared. Most of the PCs had been powered down in preparation for the coming five-minutes-remaining call. As he logged in with his school ID and password, a moist glaze formed on his forehead. He inserted a disk. Seconds later,

an element of control came over him--his rejected prestige not from himself but of those jocks still tormenting him years after he ever thought he had everything he would need to survive. Whispering to himself, he executed the compiled text document and logged out. He stood up and left.

The library was linked to every system of the community college campus and fiber optics leading to the heart of the region's internet connectivity.

It had begun.

&&&

"Well, I guess I'll take you home now."

"Yeah, my wife is going to be pissed. She's kind of a bitch sometimes."

With that odd statement, the other two could feel Michael's fear and frustration.

Henry looked back worrisomely at the forensics lab before turning off the lights and joining Matthews and Michael in the elevator.

"I'm sorry I couldn't be of more help. I just don't see what a text document is capable of without finding a way to transmit and execute it."

"What if it isn't meant to be executed by a host computer?" Henry asked. Michael looked at him, intrigued. "What if... what if it was meant to be used by the victim's system?"

"I've never heard of that before, outside of packet tunneling."

"Though, if it did, there would be no way to trace it if it were a spider virus branching to every computer--"

"On the victim's contact list!" interjected Michael.

"In English, boys?" Matthews inquired.

"I'm not sure," said Michael. "Tomorrow we can dissect the code further."

"We might not have that much time."

&&&

Heading back toward Downtown and the campus, Michael looked about the neon world with a stark fascination. He was neither happy nor distressed. He had never been a part of something this important in his academia-rich but otherwise dull life.

Calls from dispatch raced through the unmarked vehicle over the high-frequency CB radio. "We got one."

"What?" Michael looked over at Matthews. "Where?"

"A county south of here. We are responding."

"Do we have jurisdiction?"

Matthews glanced at Michael, irritated. "We're the primary investigation team. As in... you and me. Call your wife. We're not headed home yet."

The car accelerated, darting through freeway traffic. Michael quickly pulled out his cell phone. He had three missed calls--and three missed messages. He cowered and turned the phone off and put it back in his pocket.

"Who are the victims this time?"

"I don't know. We'll have more info when we get down there."

The car pulled into a suburban neighborhood. The street was lined with fire engines and police cars, yet one thing stood out: the county coroner's van. Filled with tension, the two men stepped out of the car. Michael looked around the scene.

"Follow me, Mike," said Matthews after flashing his badge, stepping through the small crowd of neighbors. The sergeant and the scholar proceeded into the home of a successful suicide. Up the stairs and past two other local officers, they neared a bathroom.

"Oh my god!" Michael cried out at the site of the young girl. She reminded him of the way Danielle looked when she was sleeping. It was strikingly similar. Michael's distress disturbed the otherwise professional atmosphere.

"Calm down."

"Get him out of here!"

Matthews grabbed him by the arm and pulled him into the connected upstairs loft.

"She's only a girl! Where are the others?"

"Others?" interjected the coroner, putting on his blue latex gloves.

"There aren't any others?" asked Matthews.

"No, only her."

With a look of determination, hate in his voice, Matthews asked, "Where is the computer?" Michael stood fast, ready to be of use. Glancing over to the corner, he saw the computer. The machine was still on and logged into real-time text messaging. He peered over and then slowly sat down, setting his hands on the keyboard. "Can I touch this?" he asked an officer standing nearby.

The coroner responded, "It's your show."

The transcript was horrifying. The girl must have gone into the bathroom to kill herself shortly after the conversation had ended. "Sublime... who are you? Show me the face behind the code. C'mon." Michael opened a command prompt and began trying to trace the origin. It was all the same, all solicited ISP traffic. No direct connections. None at all.

Matthews was barking orders. "I want the parents up here, I want a list of friends, and--"

"Prior phone calls," commanded Michael, interrupting him.

"You got it." Matthews stepped over towards Michael. He leaned over and softly asked, "What's on your mind?"

"You see this? She was completely manipulated. Completely, classic neuro-linguistic programming. And you know something else? Sublime isn't a person inserting a program, he is the program. Where is her boyfriend?" Michael demanded.

"Her parents said she doesn't have one," responded the officer in command. "Quote, 'She's too young for a relationship.'"

"My ass," muttered Michael.

"We won't have phone records until late tomorrow."

"That's not good enough."

"Excuse me?"

"If we don't find him, I can't understand the efficacy of this program. I have to speak to the boyfriend."

Matthews swiftly walked out the room. Minutes later he re-entered, escorting a young man from the crowd outside, drawn by the rally of police and EMS activity. It was the biggest thing this small, tightly knit community had seen in years. The teenage boy stood speechless, rendered incapable of resisting arrest, precluded by the fact that Ronny had never got to meet the victim online.

"Shut up and answer him--completely."

Followed by a brief interview with the bathroom door shut and guarded by a policeman, Michael signaled angrily to have the boyfriend escorted back outside.

"We have to move. Everyone in her contact list will be hit in a matter of time."

"We don't have time," said Matthews.

"Exactly," responded Michael. "There's no way we can identify and protect everyone from this program. The location of this 'Admin Sublime' is right in front of me; I just can't figure it out."

Every person in the room fell quiet and stared at him. Matthews let out a sigh and slowly left the room followed by the officers, granting the coroner permission to remove the body from the scene.

Michael sat with his head down. He looked at the screen again. Minutes passed and he realized something fundamental--something from his early days in the Computer Science Lab. He opened the OS command prompt, preserving the transcript in its own window on

the screen. He looked to the chat program and began typing.

“Hey, that's forensic evidence!”

“Let him,” Matthews said to the chief investigator on scene, pointing to his badge.

*JackIE909: hey there sublime?*

*Sublime: You still there?*

*JackIE909: umm yeah, i want to see you*

Minutes passed.

*Sublime: I thought you had disappeared*

*JackIE909: no no, i missed you*

*JackIE909: can we meet, yes?*

*Sublime: Where?*

*JackIE909: \*/root*

*Sublime: Hmmm*

*Admin 2.0*

*Welcome Admin*

*Please enter source destination ... ..*

Mike's eyes widened. He was in.

Matthews leaned over the chair. “Are we...?”

“We're talking to it now.” Michael sent the UNIX shell command for an IP query. It displayed: 298.178.12.3.

Matthews quickly turned. “I want an alert trace on this address!” The firmness in his voice was only intensified by its calmness. He was a professional, and now it was time to go to work.

&&&

*Interrogation Room 6*

“This look familiar?”

“No.”

"Don't fuck with me--I can be your savior or the real psycho in the maximum security Federal playground that your ass is about to be."

Silence.

"This is going to get ugly," said the LAPD officer standing at the open door as he led Michael out.

"What's going on?" Michael asked angrily as he shuffled away. The door closed. Matthews leaned over the young man, looking nonchalantly in the other direction.

"Okay, I'm your..." he paused. Then he stood up and walked to the other side of the room. "Get up."

"What?" asked the suspect. Matthews' eyes widened and his face turned blank with menace. His neck and fists tightened. Suddenly, he threw the table over, knocking the killer to the side. Matthews leaped over the table and grabbed the young man's shirt, throwing him onto his knees. Matthews reached into his pocket and pulled it inside out. "Grab it! Grab it, bitch!" He clenched his teeth and forced the man's hand upon the pocket lining. "You wanna be my girlfriend tonight?"

The young man's face filled with horror as he teared up.

"Punk." Matthews stepped backwards, adjusting his pocket and re-angling his belt. "Life, kid. Life in prison."

&&&

### *Two Hours Earlier*

Flashlights peered through a dark window. There seemed to be no one inside. The task force, again led by Sergeant Matthews, descended upon the mobile home in the park. Coming from multiple directions, they surrounded the home. No radios, no tactical channels open; this was to be as covert as possible given the short notice. Matthews looked at an old friend from SWAT. He gave the nod. His partner hesitated. He gave a second nod. The door dropped and the team, accompanied by LAPD SWAT, surged in from all entries. The place seemed vacant. One officer hurdled into the smallest bedroom to the rear of the living room. Screams of orders burst out. Matthews, holding a tactical shotgun, entered. A young man, now illuminated, lay on the floor and tied down with heavy-duty zip ties.

Matthews called Michael in over the radio. Through blinding light from a helicopter entering the search zone, he entered the front door, casting a dark figure for a moment until he could be seen by the team.

"Where is this guy?"

He followed an officer into the room. He immediately looked at the suspect.

Matthews grabbed the suspect after he was read his rights. "Name?"

"Jonathan." He looked at Michael and then back towards the floor.

"Get him in the van," Matthews ordered firmly, exhilarated.

Michael examined the room; it was bland, without the typical furnishings and decorations of someone Jonathan's age. He was practically, just a kid. That fact seemed odd, and it further motivated Michael to look around.

There, beneath the bed where Jonathan had been arrested, was a notebook computer. It was still running. Without regard to standard police forensic procedure, Michael opened it. The display would not turn on. He unplugged the computer to take it with him, and it turned off, although it seemed fully charged. He examined the computer and found a USB cable attached to the back leading to a white USB dock with something missing from the port.

"Hand me that flashlight, please."

A SWAT officer looked down and got on his knees. He took his sub-machinegun and shined the attached light in the direction of Michael's hands. Broken pieces of a USB encryption device lay scattered about.

"I don't believe this! There's no time."

&&&

Michael burst into the interrogation room again, holding a laptop computer that would not boot past the BIOS report. "What is this?"

Jonathan looked up at him, startled. The deranged pleasure and hatred on his face was offset only by his smile.

"Do you know what that is? Who the hell can crack 2048-bit cyphers on a fully encrypted hardware interface and motherboard?"

The boy smirked. There would be no getting to that data now, and they both knew it--the USB key had been destroyed.

Matthews looked at Michael. The utter intellectual stalemate between the two experts was apparent on his face. "What?"

"It appears as though our friend has just made the task of..."  
Matthews grew instantaneously impatient.

"Recovering the data is impossible."

"Shut up." Matthews was no longer remotely intrigued as to the nature of why a PhD candidate couldn't keep pace with this adolescent maniac. "Tell you what. I'm going to say this once. There are people dying, and you think you've got this figured out." He took a seat. "I know it's difficult, man. What, girls never held your hand in kindergarten and never wanted to let you sit at the cool table in middle school? Sometimes, when you're a loser who can't get it figured out at the age of..." He looked down at Jon's file. "...22 years old, we all start thinking maybe we weren't cut out for this after all." His voice had turned oddly



empathetic. "I mean, hey, they don't understand what it's like, being too smart for their cute little minds to grasp."

The plot unfolded before the three men in the room. Jonathan fidgeted in rage, and Michael's case resolution was completely at the mercy of Matthews' unorthodox insulting banter.

There was a pause. Matthews stared right into Jon's eyes as if he was looking right through him, his own past teenage frustrations pouring into the kid, who had initially anticipated a quick offer for a public defender. That was never Sergeant Matthews' style.

"You think you know me? I *will* tell you that I am going to kill more people than cancer in the next six months, whether your ass throws me on the floor for every call of '187' that hits LAPD dispatch, every body bag of those girls at a time. I never minded eating lunch alone or standing by myself--before or after the funeral of my self-mutilated thirteen-year-old sister. She's dead, man. Two slices to the brachial artery. She never had the time to know what was right and what was wrong--she was innocent. I can still see her, ya know, when I'm sleeping... I don't want to wake up. Now it's your turn--time to wake up. I hope someday you have a kid who isn't allowed to send a text message on the phone, use a computer, or even check voicemail. It's already begun, and you and everyone else is going to feel the truth, feel *my* truth. The truth that I am not a monster--your generation invented MTV and reality relationship shows of high school girls wondering if the drunken sex last night was a mistake, okay?"

Michael reached and grasped Matthews' arm, gripping him quickly and signaling him to say nothing. Matthews felt compelled to reach for his 9mm and stop a pandemic virus that was no longer apparently just computer code. "Think about that, son. We'll be back in a few minutes to let you know how long my generation puts people in federal prison while considering the death penalty."

Michael signaled Matthews to follow him out of the room. No options. No time. And most certainly not enough time for those lost and alone - too intelligent to fall between the cracks or just simply handle the complexity of growing up.

&&&

### *The 1% Solution*

"What the hell are we going to do now?"

"This sociopath isn't going to talk."

"What do you want me to do, make him?"

"Christ, we're out of time..." The bickering amongst the two investigators could be heard throughout the floor. Mike gazed into the room behind the reinforced, two-way mirror.

"The code."

"What about it?"

"This kid is too... disgruntled. He's hiding something." Finally, years of cognitive science

were being put to use. "He wants to burn this world down. His hardware was clever, but not up to par with how a super-virus coder would mask his every move."

"What's on your mind, Mike?"

"Jonny had help."

&&&

Minutes passed as the young man stared about the room. The door burst open and Sergeant Matthews stormed in. Jon looked up and smiled.

"We got off to a bad start. I say we start fresh."

"By all means, Sergeant."

"We're going to release you right now." Matthews signaled the officer to remove Jon's handcuffs.

"Wait--what?"

"Yeah, you're going back home. There was a misunderstanding. You're not who we're looking for."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah. Get the hell out of my interrogation room." He turned to walk out with the other officer. "Wait!" The other officer left as Michael entered. The door closed. "I can't go back. I can't go anywhere."

"We'll contact Social Services," said Matthews sarcastically.

"You don't understand!"

Michael then saw an opportune moment for an interjection. "Oh, I think I do. Whoever you borrowed that code from is going to accelerate the rotation on death row for us."

Jon sat silently horrified. Michael leaned toward him. "Who gave you that source file?"

The room fell dead silent yet again. "It wasn't given."

Michael exhaled deeply and his eyes fell upon the floor. "You... stole it?"

"It was a three-year project involving thousands of hours of tedious research. At first, it seemed impossible, but not for--"

"You stole it."

"Yes."

Matthews stood dazed by the rapid decomposition of what was meant to be a simple bait for more evidence to save those targeted regardless of Jonathan. "Where did you get the program?"



Jon looked at Michael hesitantly. "It was on a Chinese government server with typical source code modification notes in English which I deleted along with some others in Chinese. They call it, ADMIN\_Sublime."

"A server? Like with open port access?"

"Yeah, but it was heavily encrypted."

Matthews looked about the room, confused.

"The Chinese control the tiers. They control the databases and any web server access to them. It wasn't linked to a database. The program was sitting behind a firewall on an open port accessible from external packet traffic."

"We need to notify the Chinese consulate immediately," said Matthews.

"Wait!"

"No. If the government finds out that we harbored an international criminal--"

"Sean, you don't understand."

"I think I do. It's time to end this." Matthews marched out of the interrogation room. Michael hesitantly followed, leaving the martyr behind.

"One percent."

"Excuse me?" Mike stopped in his tracks, near the door where he was about to exit and turned to his PhD dissertation.

"One percent of the world population--every six months."

"How is that possible?"

"It's a Chinese government project... for population control. It can not only change itself, it alters you chemically. ADMIN\_Sublime is a beta for the real program."

Michael looked at Jon, then walked from the room, closing the door behind him.

"Call the consulate," ordered Sergeant Matthews.

The suspect was taken into custody in full handcuffs and ankle cuffs for immediate transport to the county holding facility.

&&&

"They're here," Matthews said as the National Security Agency entourage arrived. Six cars. Jon was escorted from the facility into custody. "I'll need a full report and audio and video--"

"We have no surveillance." The Special Agent glanced at the two men. "Well, we know

everything, correct?"

Matthews nodded as he began to walk away.

"Take me home, Sean."

Michael thought of his only daughter Danielle's freshman year as he now again looked out of the car window, losing himself. How he entered the bedroom to find her and Stewart, both 15 years old...

"Is that pot I smell?"

Dazed and struck with dampened shock were the two sitting on the floor near the foot of Danielle's bed frame. The fun was over.

"She's still a virgin, Mike," argued Carol as Michael orbited her in the living room with displaced anger towards his wife.

"I--look, what are we going to do?" said Michael to Carol with urgency. Carol was a 'fixer', and neither of them could find the gentle touch in always being parents first. His mighty perceptual skills were insufficient, or obsolete from his own upbringing, which never included a hand on him or a battle for power with his father.

Danielle sat in the kitchen, emotionally strapped to a table chair.

"I'm so sorry, Dad."

Carol approached her daughter quickly, as though to shield her from Michael's persistent passive aggressiveness.

"Shut your mouth Danielle!"

"Mom--"

"When did you get into drugs and losers, Danielle?"

As his daughter burst into tears, Michael signaled for her to return to her seat in a moment. She did not respond to the offered flight from the situation. She just stared at him. What made her a good kid was what made Carol a great mechanism of action for Michael.

What is the purpose now? Michael thought to himself as Sean leaned over to him from the driver's seat and spoke to rouse him from the distraught expression on his face.

"Mike--?"

"Just take me home."

&&&

*One week later.*

Michael sat in front of his computer in the Cognitive Science laboratory. The phone rang. "CogSci lab, this is Dr. Renton."

"It's Sean."

Michael looked down at his kiosk and over his shoulder. "What is it?"

"The kid, he's gone."

"What do you mean, 'gone'?"

"He's not at the embassy, and the NSA won't tell me shit. I can't even contact the agent I transferred custody to."

Michael sat back and hung up the phone. He knew... he knew the world was no longer exempt from digital genocide. Admin Sublime contacted teenagers. Teenagers becoming victims by the electronic means they use to thrive socially. For a man versed in science, he still knew that population control doesn't begin by killing the working class and the elderly. A brief moment of clarity and enlightenment came over him. One percent. A server that could be infiltrated by an amateur. It was all too clear now; the beta was an incomplete version, 'Sublime' had been made to be stolen. *What was left for it to learn? The only thing separating 'Sublime' from a human mind is neurochemistry.* He thought quietly to himself for several minutes until he again went back to his work. *What else did Jon really know?*

&&&

### *ADMIN 3.0*

Michael entered his quiet home after leaving work early, having lied about a 'family emergency' as an excuse to get out of there. No one was home. "Danielle?" His daughter, who babysat the other children, didn't call back in response. He approached the stairs. "Danielle?" He walked cautiously up the stairway to the second floor. There was no music--Danielle usually had some kind of music on. He entered her room. It was vacant. Confused and worried, he walked to the other side of the room, where he saw a note.

*Dad, I let the boys go with Theresa and her family to grab a pizza. They'll be back at 7.*

Michael looked up from the note to the sight of his daughter's computer monitor flashing, beating rhythmically in a pulse of images displayed so fast he felt a strange discomfort, and his emotions rapidly degraded into hellish contortions of suicidal ideation. He could not look away. His brain was instantly blocking re-uptake of dopamine via synaptic transmission of the visual cortex. He approached the computer monitor and found there was an instant message-- only two lines of text:

*Sublime: Hey there.*

Michael sat down at the computer in cold shock. The flashing stopped.

*Pretty\_Danixoxo: Hello Admin.*

The phone rang until the answering machine picked up. He could hear Sergeant Matthews' voice. Only one thing penetrated Michael through the morbid horror of preparing to again desperately engage 'Sublime' for answers: "Michael! Mike, we found him... Jon was extradited to China and sentenced without trial two days ago. He's dead."

Sublime has logged off.

"One percent of the world population – every six months."

**\* \* \* \* THE END \* \* \* \***

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## The true story of a fiction writer

### Interview with author: Mark SaFranko

**Interviewer: Ujjwal Dey, India**

**Author being interviewed: Mark SaFranko, U.S.A.**

**Date: 09-Sept-2009**



Mark SaFranko is an author of novels and short stories, known for his crime and confessional style and hard-hitting social satire. He is also a playwright, poet, among past occupations of journalism and ghost-writing. He also enjoys painting and creating and performing music, and has been an actor as well. His range of skills doesn't stop at writing and the arts, for he has worked a gamut of occupations to sustain his passion for writing in his initial years.

Mark is critically acclaimed for his fiction novels with a growing fan following in Europe and especially in U.K. where he contributed to a blog for Guardian Newspaper (UK) in the 'Arts and Entertainment' section of their website. His plays have been performed in U.S.A. and in Europe including at Cork Arts Theatre and Derry Playhouse. More than 50 of his short stories have been published in several magazines. His fiction stories explore themes in psychology, relationships, crime, lust, violence, urban pathos and suburban drear.

#### **Official website:**

<http://www.murderslim.com/marksafranko.html>

His powerful character named Max Zajack (from the novel "Hating Olivia") returned in his novel "Lounge Lizard". The raw force of SaFranko's words and scenes amazes the reader and it contrasts with the fact that they are so realistic in their premise with believable characters. His publishers at Murder Slim Press have also collected some of his short stories under a common theme released in December 2008 with the title of "Loners".

His short stories are skilfully crafted; recognised for its unique style and abundant in its range, quality and quantity. Here are a few mentions:

- "Rescuing Ravel" - Frank O'Connor Award for Short Fiction, 2005 - descant, Volume 44 (2005)
- "The Pursuit of the Nonexistent" - Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, Vol. 117, No. 5 (2001)
- "The Man In Unit 24" - Cited as a "Distinguished Mystery Story" of 1999 in The Best American Mystery Stories, 2000 - Hawai'i Review, Issue 52 (1999)
- "Acts of Revenge" - Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, Vol. 121, No. 3 (2003)
- "Prisoners in Paradise" - Nominated for Pushcart Prize, 2000 - The Green Hills Literary Lantern, Number 10 (1999)





Some of his older fiction is available online as well:

- “The Laughter of the Clown” at Laura Hird’s website  
<http://www.laurahird.com/showcase/marksafranko.html>
- “Surkow’s Fantasy” at Dogmatika (2006)  
[http://dogmatika.com/dm/writing\\_more.php?id=977\\_0\\_7\\_190\\_M](http://dogmatika.com/dm/writing_more.php?id=977_0_7_190_M)
- About his writing at “The Loose Canon” at Toro Magazine  
<http://www.toromagazine.com/?q=node/2204>

A novelist with more experiences than a man could pen down in a lifetime, his works have been successful in both first-person and third person narrative.

Mark SaFranko has been generous to spare his time to indulge us in our detailed interview. We have touched subjects that would appease our readers, both aspiring authors and fans. His dedication to his craft and the support he has offered to those who seek guidance or wisdom has greatly indebted us and also set us free to pursue with similar passion whatever our inner artist pleads us to accomplish.

**Ujjwal Dey (Dey):** Hello Mark, and thank you for giving us the opportunity to have this interview with you.

**You are a man of many talents – with a knowledge of so many vocations and the subsequent skills acquired – how much of it helps you in crafting a tale?**

**Mark SaFranko (Mark):** You’re quite welcome. I don’t think there’s any question that having a great deal of experience in many different areas of life helps a novelist. The problem of course is that at some point all of the writer’s energy has to go into his art. I like something Charles Willeford once said, and I’m paraphrasing: a writer spends his youth gathering experience, then lives a very boring life writing about it. I think there’s a lot of truth in that.

**Dey: In the same context, would you say writing was always your preferred occupation, or even the most beloved one?**

**Mark:** The first thing I wanted to be as a young boy was a musician. It's a desire that's never left me. More accurately, a composer, and I still write songs and instrumental music. But before I realized I wanted to be a writer in my late teens, I thought I wanted to be a lawyer. Taking the entrance exam for law school changed all that, because I realized I didn't have an iota of the skill required. But I'd actually been mistaken all along. Instead of sitting in a courtroom, I was really interested in character -- the deviant mind, including my own. But yes, writing for me in whatever medium is the supreme thing.

**Dey: Even within the occupation of a writer, you have held various roles in different moulds – short stories, novels, writing plays, ghost-writing, reporter/ journalist, etc. And then there is the fiction/ non-fiction aspect as well. Which would you say is most satisfying for you as a writer and why?**

**Mark:** When you are writing a novel or short story, you are God in your own little universe. No one can dictate what you should do, and for the most part it stays that way save for when an editor requests a minor change. With the stage plays, it's very different. There is no substitute for seeing your creation brought to life in front of a live audience. But unless you're incredibly fortunate, you're no longer God. You have to appease and collaborate with producers, directors, actors, audiences. Everyone has his or her hand in your creation. By the time the process is finished, you sometimes wonder whether there's anything left of the play or you. And whose it is. But the fictional universe is created for you alone, for the love of the act itself. Everything else – journalism, ghost-writing, etc., is done for money.

**Dey: Did you always have a preference for crime/ confessional style of stories or did it develop through experience, reader/editor feedback or other external influence/inspiration? What made you go ahead and use this style that is now so well associated with the works of author “Mark SaFranko”?**

**Mark:** A very good question. And it's not a really easy one to answer because I always think of myself as a writer who has several different voices and any one of them can be ascendant at different times. There's the Max Zajack of 'Hating Olivia' and 'Lounge Lizard', for instance. He's an egomaniac and everything is about him in a very solipsistic way. In my psychological fiction and realistic fiction, there are other voices and they're probably no less autobiographical, but they operate from different angles. But those voices were never dictated from the outside. They're me and I'm stuck with them for better or worse. It's really very instinctive, as I imagine it is for all writers, though you can tweak and manipulate your voice to get it to do what you want.

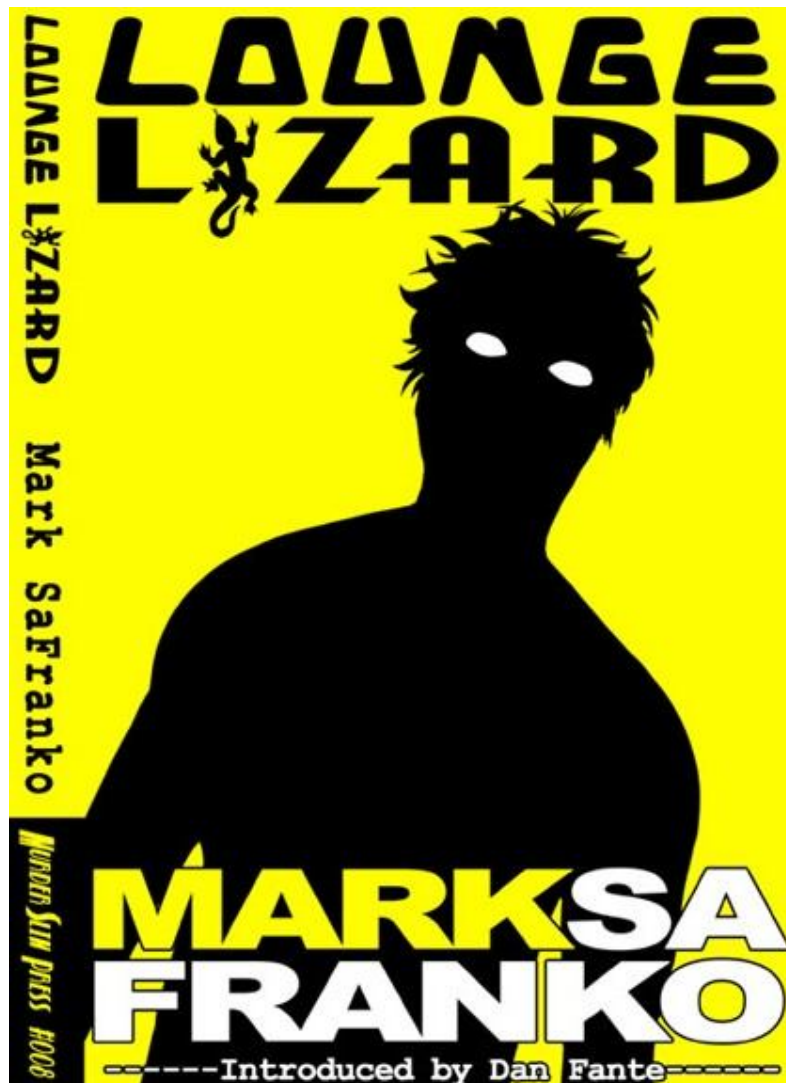
**Dey: In the same vein, on confessional style – did you ever keep a diary? To jot down personal observations and/or experience in daily life – and if yes, did it ever help you create mannerisms/ characters/ situations for your fiction works? Sort of 'a muse' derived from everyday life for your craft.**

**Mark:** I did keep a journal for a short time as a young kid. But I found the process of recording everyday life boring. Quotidian life is only galvanized when it's used against the backdrop of something different or extraordinary -- a secret, a need, a crime. But before I actually wrote anything -- play, novel, story -- I kept obsessive notes about what was

happening to me, the people I met in the many jobs I held over the years. But most of the raw material I ever needed was stored in my head and it's remained there throughout the years.

**Dey:** For the sake of personal curiosity and recording it here for posterity – what was the first fiction work of yours that got published – what was its title and where and when was it published?

**Mark:** The short story "A Young Man And An Old Man" – written about an old pulp author I ran into who convinced me to keep writing when I'd lost all hope of being published -- appeared in 1987 in the Ball State University Forum, a now-defunct literary journal, around the same time that 'The Favor' was published by a small American press called Aegina Press. Neither attracted much attention, though after the success of Hating Olivia in England, The Favor seems to have picked up a bit of a readership. As I'm fond of telling people, I shudder at the thought of its youthful flaws, since I was 26 when I wrote it and it was only my second novel.

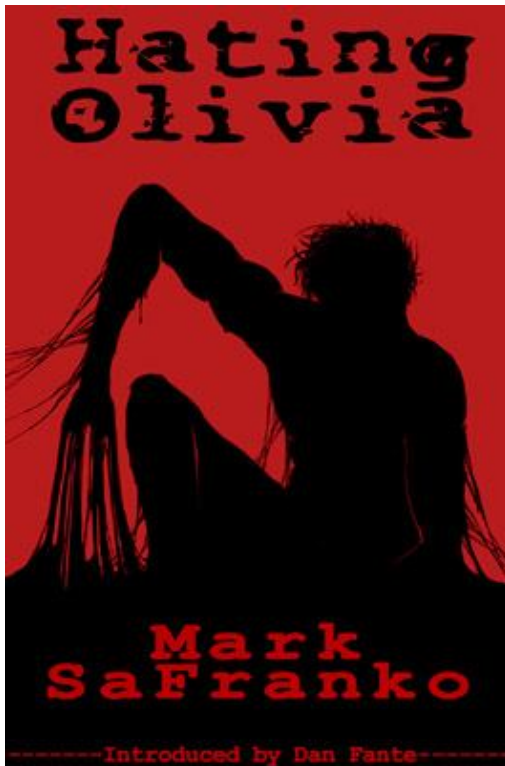


**Dey:** Are you a day person or a night bird? What is your preferred time of day to write your stories/novels or plays? Do you have the liberty to choose your preferred

**time of day to work on your stories – following a strict schedule or do you rather write when you are in the mood/ inspired?**

**Mark:** I'm a day and a night person. When unimpeded by the demands of a job, I get up and hit the typewriter -- nowadays the computer -- from eight until noon or one, take a break, work on music during the afternoon, then come back and work on whatever literary project I'm on in the evening again. When I have time, I try and paint. I used to be an actor as well. There's always enough to kill the time. So yes, the schedule is strict. I like what Faulkner said: "I work only when I feel like it -- and I feel like it every day!" In between of course, reality invades. Wife, kid, paying the bills, etc. So basically I'm always working except when I can't. But to me it's not work.

**Dey: Do you set a timeline for finishing a novel or story? Are you able to determine the time it will take? Does a deadline work for you or do you prefer to stick to your routine so as to let the words come to you (rather than chasing it down)?**



**Mark:** I don't set timelines for finishing anything, but for me one hard and fast rule is that I have to finish a first draft as quickly as possible, even if the product is really lousy. Because the real work starts after you've completed the first draft. For me, I can only really start to mold a novel or story after I've traveled from point A to point Z and have at least some general idea of what's happening and what I'm trying to say. I'd say that a first novel draft on average takes three to five months. For a story, two to five days. So I'm really just sticking to my routine, but all along I'm pushing, pushing, pushing. I think that many times you write things in that first draft you're not entirely satisfied with in order to get it over with. But that's okay -- it can be fixed in the editorial stage. The important thing is to cross the ocean.

**Dey: If you could pinpoint a moment/event in life - say at childhood or as an adult: when and what made you pursue a career in writing?**

**Mark:** Another great question. I was working in, of all places, the comptroller's department of a bank during one of the most miserable periods of my life. I went out at lunch, walked into a bookstore, and picked up 'Henry Miller On Writing'. Reading the book, my life was changed. I began to think I could become a writer, which up to that point was something unattainable, like flying to Neptune. That's a simplistic answer. The truth is more complicated. The desire had been roiling inside me already for years, but I didn't know how to go about it. Henry just opened the door for me.

**Dey: From the time you started out into writing to now – what did you notice has changed in – the amount of time and effort that you put into your daily life as an "author"? Is it any easier now than before?**

**Mark:** When I started out my application and discipline was more fitful, but much of that was because of the circumstances of my life: having to work so many jobs, the women I

lived with, the fact that I frittered away time drinking and carousing and so forth. As time went on I locked into a schedule and it's been pretty consistent ever since. I try to put in as many hours a day as I can.

**Dey: How much effort would you say it actually takes for a talented author to get into print? I often get the feeling that writing it down is probably just 10 percent of the effort while the 90 percent goes into gaining interest of the big busy publishers and agents and editors/ magazines.**

**Mark:** I've always said that there are plenty of talented writers out there who get murdered by the system. There really is no way to break in if you don't have the connections or you haven't gone to the right schools or whatever. And what happens is that the constant rejection can wear you down, especially when you realize that the editors and agents are not taking you seriously because they know they can't sell you or they don't know you, period. And again, the bottom line with the mainstream publishing industry is this: can those people – agents, publishers -- make enough money from you to pay their astronomical rent? If the answer is no, you're finished. So what do you do? Can you endure, year after year, trying to find your way in if an audience is what you're after? Most people can't. So in the end, writing or painting or music is for those who have no other choice. And a great price has to be paid for the dedication to whatever discipline has chosen you. Unless you're unusually fortunate, it's not going to be easy. This is why you have to be in love with what you're doing. Because the business end of it will kill you.

**Dey: A question for the fans for trivia – do you use a computer or a typewriter or pen-and-paper for the first draft of your writing? Has this changed over the years – if yes, mention the old and the new tools of the trade.**

**Mark:** I used to write my first drafts in longhand with blue or black ink on notepads or any paper at my disposal and then transcribe them later into type with a Smith-Corona electric model which I would have to have serviced a few times a year. This is strange, since I worked as a newspaper reporter for several years and learned to think and type at the same time. When time became more of a factor and I had to get first drafts down as quickly as possible, I began to use the desktop PC. Now I use the laptop for first drafts because I can work in any room, but preferably stretched out on the bed.

**Dey: Your plays have found success in UK. Stage plays can easily be adapted to the celluloid screen. And you are a writer of novels and short stories who could probably, easily adapt them for a play or a screenplay. Is anything in the works - a movie adaptation of your fiction?**

**Mark:** I've adapted one of my novels and several of my stories for the big silver. One screenplay was half-shot and abandoned by a small production company when it ran out of money. An independent director in Hollywood optioned my novel Hopler's Statement, I wrote a screenplay, but nothing came of it. A vice-president of Miramax Films optioned my play about the life of Henry Miller, it went through a year's worth of development, but nothing came of that either. It can rip the heart out of you, but it's the reality of that marketplace.

**Dey: From other authors' works, which stories/ novels have affected or influenced you the most so far?**



**Mark:** There are so many, but here are a few. The Brothers Karamazov, Demons, and Crime And Punishment by Dostoyevsky. The entire corpus of Henry Miller. Georges Simenon's "tough" novels. Bill Naughton's Alfie. Death On Credit, especially, and Journey To The End Of The Night by Celine....

All of Knut Hamsun. All of Hermann Hesse. Camus' The Outsider. Mann's Death In Venice. Charles Bukowski, all of him. Dreams From Bunker Hill, My Dog Stupid and Ask The Dust from John Fante. The novels of Ross McDonald. The Killer Inside Me, A Hell Of A Woman and The Criminal by Jim Thompson. The novels of Richard Yates. Balzac. Paul Bowles and Mohammed Mrabet....

I was onto Patricia Highsmith back in the seventies, when she was all but forgotten here in the U.S. Raymond Carver. Edward Limonov. Pascal Bruckner. Philippe Djian. Michel Houellebecq. Pedro Juan Gutierrez. Alberto Moravia -- Contempt, Boredom, The Conformist....

Robin Maugham's The Servant, one of my all-time favourites. Somerset Maugham, especially Of Human Bondage. The entire works of Theodore Dreiser. Sherwood Anderson. Dan Fante. Flaubert's November and Madame Bovary. Yukio Mishima. Edgar Allen Poe. Therese Raquin by Zola. The tales of Chekov and Ivan Bunin. Count Tolstoy. The entire works of Isaac Singer. H. Rider Haggard....

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....Now that I think of it, that's a pretty comprehensive list. Anyway, it's a start.

**Dey:** All successful authors say, no one can be taught to write a fiction story or novel. Yet, there are similarities to the way the authors work.

- Do you plot a novel/story entirely before actually writing it, sort of a skeletal framework before adding the actual content?
- Or do you go with the flow, allowing the stream of thought carry the progress of the story/novel?

**Mark:** In the beginning I plotted the novels. As time went on I loosened up and only outlined and jotted notes, letting things take me where they would. And that's the way I work today, though I do run into my share of problems – where to go, why I started the damned thing in the first place. But there is a great thrill creatively in not knowing where you're going.



**Dey:** When you are not writing, what is your favourite activity/ pastime?

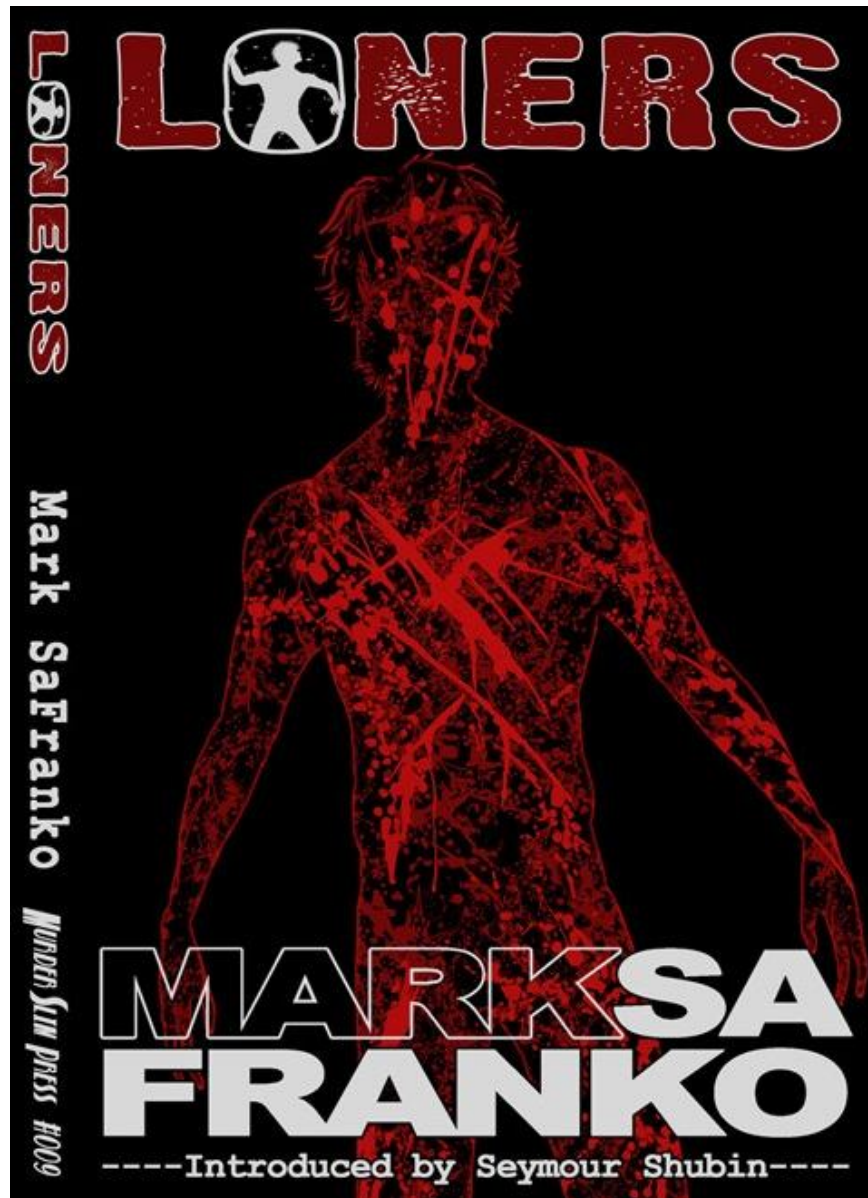
**Mark:** Reading. Listening to music. Watching movies. Prowling the New York art galleries and museums. Watching basketball since I can't play anymore. Book and music stores.

**Dey:** Following up on that – what would you confess to be your favourite indulgence or even a guilty pleasure?

**Mark:** Buying guitars. New, vintage, whatever I can get my hands on.

**Dey:** A lot is said about crime and sin and society's decadence. As a writer, do you aim to send a message to the readers? Also do you ever aim to simply note it as an impassive observer (like an element of your journalistic past) or do you enthuse with your unique perspective of the society, your passionate views on life?

**Mark:** With certain pieces I'm the impassive observer. With the first-person work I inject much more of myself into it – love, hatred, prejudices, opinions, and so forth. Never do I aim to send a message to the reader, since I don't have one to send, except that life is mystery.



**Dey:** You have your characters falling in love or lust. Do you believe love is more essential for a man than say career or other ambitions? Could it define a man's personality, his present and future more than anything else?

**Mark:** I believe that “love” or “lust” is a madness, a psychic condition that can make a human being capable of pretty much anything. And by no means good.

**Dey:** The psychological sketches suggested from the characterisations in your fiction are quite thrilling. Seemingly average people with intriguing lives. To what do you attribute your insight into the subject of “psychology”?

**Mark:** Well, like Woody Allen I've spent many, many years on the couch. Enough to send my shrink on a few exotic vacations. Even before that I had an interest in psychology -- Freud, Jung, etc. And of course I've always been fascinated by the great psychologists in literature: Dostoyevsky, Hamsun, Simenon, to name a few who leap to mind.



**Dey: When you receive fan-feedback and editorial feedback, which one of the two is more useful for you as a writer? And which one do you allow yourself to succumb to (changing future fiction works)?**

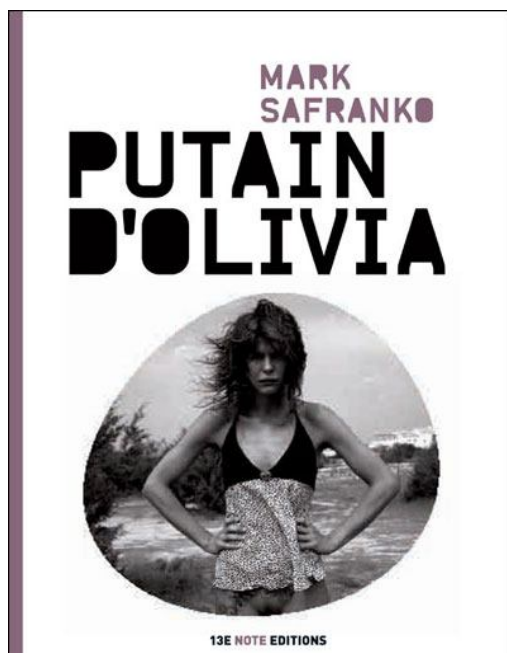
**Mark:** I've never been influenced by either fan or editor to substantially change anything I've written. One has to be wary of editorial suggestions because in many cases they're intended to "commercialize" you -- and make them more money. My wife is a great reader for me, as is my agent. My wife encourages me to go on when I want to pull the plug on something. My agent's nuts and bolts suggestions are the ones I'm likeliest to take since he grasps what I'm trying to do. Then again, they're the only ones who read my work before it finds its way out to the world, if it does.

**Dey: Are you an ardent traveller? How often do you travel and what are the kind of places you like to visit? Would you say a change of people and places is important for a writer, to get a diverse perspective on life?**

**Mark:** I love to travel, to destinations both mundane and exotic. Smalls towns in the Midwest and upstate New York. The shores of the Carolinas... the Adirondacks... Bermuda... Los Angeles... San Francisco... Florida... Hawaii... Toronto... Montreal... London... Paris. Is there any other city but Paris? If I haven't gotten to a place it's because I haven't been able to afford it, and money -- lack of it -- has determined a lot in my life. There's something to be gotten from anywhere you go, and for the writer it jolts something in the consciousness, turns your perceptions upside down. On the other hand, if you can't travel, you've got to use whatever is at hand, and many writers have done that. So there's no rule.

**Dey: Lastly, do you have any "words of wisdom" for aspiring authors of the world?**

**Mark:** No. But I have to say that if I didn't love doing it, I wouldn't. How can you get up every day and do something that you hate? I hear about writers who loathe working or procrastinate and I can't figure it out. Why would you want to torture yourself? Life is full of enough torture as it is, isn't it?



\*\*\*\* THE END \*\*\*\*

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2009

## Review of “Hating Olivia”

Novel Title: Hating Olivia  
Author: Mark SaFranko  
Published by: Murder Slim, UK

### Too good: A prerogative to be bad

Review by Ujjwal Dey

All good men have simple lives; all bad men have unique lives. Our common man in this novel, Max Zajack, is however neither good nor bad, neither happy nor sad – he just is and life comes to him and he rides the rollercoaster and keeps getting back on for more. The tale is one of decline, but for a reader it is an escalator into greater heights of human mind and moral corruption. This novel features an introduction by “Dan Fante” and from the very first chapter you dive head on into the intriguing world of Zajack and the people he encounters. But you don’t need to be a fan of Dan Fante or Bukowski to appreciate this story, for Mr. SaFranko has found his own niche in crime & confessional genre and in this tale that dredges through Zajack’s soul while hinting at the author’s own personal struggles and experiences.

Love is a special thing, a rare gift, a blessing hoped for innately by man and child alike – after reading this though I would say – Love is a special thing, don’t fuck it up by being yourself. LOL. Well, the drama and desperation is entertaining. There may be a lesson, a message for lovers and loons everywhere – but I would rather suggest you to just enjoy the adventures of Zajack, instead of analyzing him or scrutinizing yourself. I like the primary characters, especially because living in a cosmopolitan city, I believed I have seen and heard just about every life triumphs and tragedies...and been in the best shindig and worst alley. Then I read about these 2 “love-birds” and realize I am too young to know it all as yet.

It takes courage to tell powerful stories and I don’t intend to lament about current publishing industry where everything is either a gimmick or a gag – but I hope that more people discover that literature is not born in polished corporate crystal-glass houses, and that a whole gamut of emotions and expressions are yet to be discovered among fiction authors who are maybe too good for this button-fingering, megabyte-counting, digital generation. If you thought there is nothing that challenges your mind and spirit through modern fiction, just grab this one and it will hold you till you thumb through the last page.

Money, passion, madness, drugs, pity, penury and self-preservation – the novel “Hating Olivia” is a tale that would be relevant no matter where you are or which era you come from, because human traits and faults are ultimately universal and SaFranko’s words will dig deep into you with each move of Zajack, each reflex of Olivia. If the realism doesn’t pull you in, then the grim consequences certainly will, till you recognize a part of yourself in Zajack’s or Olivia’s turbulent lives.

Read the first chapter at Murder Slim website:

<http://www.murderslim.com/hatingdownloads.html>

\* \* \* \* \*

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