

THE BACK ALLEY WEBZINE
Volume II, Number 1
July, 2008

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Volume 2, Number 1
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Editor's Note

GEORGIE..... by Patricia Abbott
LAP DANCE.....by Jack Bludis
EAT SHIT.....by Tony Black
A THUG LIKE ME..... by Greg Lee
THE BIG SCORE..... by Chris F. Holm
FRANK NORRIS..... by W.D. Howells
McTEAGUE, PART III (Classic Noir).....by Frank Norris

ARCHIVE: Volume I, Number 1

ARCHIVE: Volume I, Number 2

ARCHIVE: Volume I, Number 3

NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

DOUBLE DERRINGER!

When I started The Back Alley Webzine just over a year ago, my intent was to foster and support the finest in hardboiled and noir short-storytelling. Over the last year, we've presented stories by previous Edgar Award winners, Derringer Award winners, Shamus and Anthony Award nominees, and even an Agatha nominee (how did *that* one sneak in?), along with some exciting work by relatively new voices in the genre.

As I stated in the previous issue, The Back Alley Webzine was privileged to receive two Derringer Award nominations in April.

The first was for Chicago scribe John Weagly's story *In The Shadows of Wrigley Field*, which was nominated in the 1001-4000 word category.

In addition, a story by some upstart named Eric Shane, *Paper Walls/Glass Houses*, was nominated in the 8001-17,500 word category. It is with some humility that I can announce to the world that Eric Shane and I are one and the same.

It is with the greatest pleasure that I can also announce that BOTH OF THESE STORIES WON!

That's right, campers. In its very first year of existence, The Back Alley Webzine managed to garner HALF of the SMFS Derringer Awards handed out.

But wait! There's more! Another one of my stories, *The Gospel According to Gordon Black*, which was published in November 2007 on Kevin Burton Smith's Thrilling Detective Website, was also nominated in the 4001-8000 word category, and - would'ja believe it? - IT WON TOO!

I'd like to take a moment to offer my sincerest thanks to Kevin and to Gerald So, who edited the story, for their fine work and for affording me the opportunity to become the only author ever to win two Derringer Awards in the same year.

The only author not associated with The Back Alley Webzine to win a Derringer this year was Patti Abbott, who won in the 0-1000 word category. It's only fitting, therefore, that we include her in the current issue.

On another completely different front, it appears that we will have to wait for at least another year before being vetted as an MWA Approved Publisher. After

applying last year, MWA sent us several suggestions for changes - which were all implemented - and then asked us to re-apply after the webzine had been in existence for a year. I contacted the Membership Committee in June, as I was preparing this issue. Their reply was complimentary, but succinct. Because Back Alley Books, the imprint of Barbadoes Hall Communications that publishes The Back Alley Webzine, had not published any other authors beside myself prior to June 2007, we would have to wait the entire two years to be approved. That means that The Back Alley can't be an MWA Approved Publisher until July 2009.

It's a tough break but, as I stated in an earlier editor's note, when you join an organization you agree to play by their rules, whether you agree with them or not. I definitely don't agree with MWA's current rules for voting membership, or their (in my humble opinion) arbitrary guidelines for qualified publishers, but the rules are the rules, and until they can be changed they constitute the environment in which we operate.

On the other hand, our mission here at The Back Alley remains the same - to bring you the gritty, hard-hitting kind of stories that you crave. You know, the kind that make you want to shower after reading them, just to wash some of the grime and blood off your soul. You asked for it, and we're gonna keep slinging it your way!

Welcome to the first issue of the second volume of The Back Alley Webzine! We're in this for the long haul!

LINEUP FOR VOLUME II, NUMBER 1



PATRICIA ABBOTT has published stories in journals such as **Fourteen Hills, Inkwell, The Potomac Review** and **The Portland Review**, along with more... um, genre-related publications as **Thuglit, Demolition, Hardluck Stories, Shred of Evidence, The Spinetangler, SHOTS, The Thrilling Detective, Murdaland Mouth Full of Bullets** and, now, **The Back Alley**. She won the 2008 Derringer Award for her story *My Hero*, which appeared in **Muzzle Flash**.



JACK BLUDIS is an accomplished author in many genres. His short story *Munchies* was nominated for the Shamus and Anthony Awards. His book *Shadow of the Dahlia* was also nominated for the Shamus Award. His writing career has spanned four - perhaps five - decades, during which he has been published under myriad names. He has had stories published in anthologies such as *Baltimore Noir* and *Down These Wicked Streets*, and online at **Thrilling Detective**, **3rd Degree**, and elsewhere. He is the author of series featuring Rick Page, Brian Kane and Ken Sligo, all set in post-WWII Los Angeles.



TONY BLACK was born in Newcastle, NSW to Scottish parents in 1972. His crime novel *PAYING FOR IT* is to be published by Random House in the UK in 2008. Ken Bruen kindly praised the book, saying: "*This is one adrenaline-pumped novel that is as moving and compassionate as it is so stylishly written*".

Black currently lives and works in the Scottish capital, Edinburgh. More of his writing can be found online at: **Scotsman.com**, **ThugLit**, **Pulp Pusher**, **Shots Magazine** and **Demolition**.



GREG LEE does many things. But first and foremost, he has always been a writer. He started his writing career by winning the Colorado Language of Arts Award, which merited his first publication "*Under the Pressure to Succeed*" in the **Rocky Mountain News**. Later, he published the Science Fiction short "*Courage and Confidence 101*" in **Samsara Magazine**. This is his first hardboiled publication. Greg also works as a freelance illustrator and software developer. He lives in Colorado with his wife, and is working on his first novel.



CHRIS F. HOLM is a writer and scientist who currently manages a marine biology lab on the coast of Maine. His short fiction has appeared in **Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine**, and he recently completed his first novel, a supernatural thriller titled *THE ANGELS' SHARE*. He won the 2007 SpineTingler Award for Best Short Story for *Seven Days of Rain*, which appeared in **Demolition Ezine**.



FRANK NORRIS holds a very special place in the history of noir fiction. Despite his relative lack of renown today, around the turn of the twentieth century he was setting the world on fire with his naturalistic, dark stories of doomed people.

His greatest contribution, however, came with the first volume of his projected three-volume epic tracing the role of wheat in society, *The Octopus*. Sadly, his trilogy was left unfinished when he died of complications from appendix surgery in 1901.

Continuing in this issue, we present Part III of *McTeague*, and attempt in each issue to include some history or critical analysis of the incredible literary work of Frank Norris.

GEORGIE

by

Patricia Abbott

*Patricia Abbott won the 2008 Derringer Award for her story **My Hero**, which appeared in **Muzzle Flash**. She has had stories published in a number of print and electronic publications, including **Hard Luck Stories**, **Plots With Guns**, **Thuglit**, **Spinetinger**, **Pulp Pusher**, and **Demolition** – and now in **The Back Alley!***

“He’s out there,” my mother says flatly, shaking her head. “Out there and it’s not even eight.”

She’s standing over the sink with her hands in the foamy water, washing her lingerie. Silky, satiny pastels glide through her fingers, bobbing up unexpectedly when they break loose from her grip.

I try not to watch, being at an age when my mother’s undergarments make me queasy. My head’s about six inches over my cereal bowl because I don’t want to get Count Chocula splatters on my last clean shirt. Instead of answering, I shove another spoonful of cereal into my mouth.

“Did you hear me, Rufe?”

My mother raises both her voice and hands as she reaches for the dishtowel. She’s still in her nightgown—a pale green one with a plunging neckline and I can see her soaked tits, a word I recently learned. I gurgle something, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand.

“Nice,” she says, eyeing me slit-eyed through the haze of smoke from the cigarette on the windowsill. The trail of smoke scorches the air and I suck it in. It stings the back of my throat but in a thrilling way. I wonder if I’m going to be a smoker too. Going to be like her.

“Aren’t you gonna be late?” She’s not worried though, knowing I’m never late. Neither was my Dad from what she tells me. There’s almost always a flicker of disapproval on her face for the ways I’m like him—even if the trait seems to be a good one, like being on time or neat. She watches me now, taking huge drags of her Salem as I place my cereal bowl on the counter, find my

books, grab my jacket from the heap of clothes on the other chair and leave. We aren't the kind of family that kisses goodbye and she barely notices when I finally go, absorbed in the pleasure of her cigarette. Her other hand rotates the large, brass table lighter she carries from room to room in her pocket.

I make my way back to the dirt path behind the garage—the spot where Georgie's waiting—stopping to put the lid on the garbage can, then picking a beer bottle off of the lawn—if you can call it a lawn; it's more dirt, rocks and discarded household objects than grass. By the time I reach Georgie, Mom's hanging her stockings and underwear on a line that's strung on the porch. I look back without meaning to. The dirty dishes will still be there after school, her beauty products will sit on the bathroom shelf, her overflowing ashtrays will be on every table top, but those nightgowns will be ready to wear, hanging in her closet on padded hangers if I'm lucky. I dread the possibility of coming home to the extravaganza of billowing color on the porch, but it's her uniform after all.

And, as isolated as our house is, men seem to find their way there.

Georgie doesn't say a word as we walk the half-mile to school. I don't mind his silence, but it's one of the things that drives my mother crazy. He can go for hours, even days, without talking. And then suddenly, some switch in his head clicks on and he talks nonstop. This is not one of those days but we walk along companionably. I tell him about the footsteps I heard on the stairs the night before and he nods every now and then to show he's keeping up.

* * * * *

It was only recently that I discovered my mother's method of supplementing the money she makes selling beauty products over the phone. You have to reach a certain age before noticing certain things and in the year between eleven and twelve, I wised up. Suddenly her short, tight clothes, the care she takes on decorating her bedroom, the noises at night, the expensive bottles of liquor she keeps on the glass cart in the living room, the hushed phone calls, all made sense. Plus I read a book called *East of Eden* and found out that mothers can be such things: prostitutes, that is.

My mother usually works in the daytime hours when I'm at school, but some men—factory workers, men who work the fishing boats, shop owners, high school teachers—can't get away before night. It's not like we ever discuss it. I'm just guessing. When I was six or even ten, I fell asleep by eight or so and never heard those footsteps on the stairs. But lately I hear them once or twice a week. And it's usually the same scraping, metallic sound. Maybe the guy's a dancer and has cleats on his shoes—the ones that tap dancers use.

Georgie and I arrive at school at 8:30 and he makes his way to the special class where he's been every day since first grade. He's nearly fourteen now. On

one of the days when he was talking like a magpie, he told me he'd been watching the same crack make its way down the wall since he was six.

The walls are twelve feet high at least and that wall, in particular, has a hidey-hole closet behind it. That hidden space leads to a tunnel and was once part of the Underground Railroad where escaped slaves hid on their way to Canada. Now it's sealed up and only the crack reminds us of what once happened right here in our own school. That part of the school was a church back then. It still has a sort of peaky roof that makes you think a cross should be at the top.

There's only about a yard between the crack in Georgie's classroom and the floor now and a kid's taking bets on whether it reaches the bottom before Georgie goes off to middle school. Betting on such a thing sounds mean, but Georgie has a fiver on it himself.

"Rufus, would you start putting the desks in a circle." Ms. Proctor likes the desks arranged that way—friendly, she calls it. But every night, starting back around Christmas, the custodian, Mr. Hamilton, moves the desks back into regular rows. He says it's a Maine state law but nobody believes him and we think it has something to do with Mr. Hamilton having a thing that went wrong for Ms. Proctor. The first time Ms. Proctor came into the classroom and saw them forced into rows, she gasped. I think it's the only time I ever heard anyone do that in real life; it seemed to pull some of the oxygen out of the room.

I start moving the desks and the next two kids who come in pitch in and pretty soon, we're sitting in a circle, craning our necks to see what Ms. Proctor's putting on the blackboard behind half of us. That's the trouble with circles.

Ms. Proctor's wearing a white blouse today and the first button is halfway down, so a big V of pinkish skin shows. Her full green skirt billows in the breeze coming in through the row of windows and I see her thighs twice. Her legs are bare and the breeze is giving her calves goose bumps. She can feel someone staring at her and turns around, but by then I have my head burrowed into our math book.

I go up to the blackboard on the third round of math problems. I finally work out the problem and luckily Susan Bower is still standing because the last one to come up with the right answer has to solve another problem. I wonder if that's a state law too. After that we look at a map of China.

"Rice," someone yells out when Ms. Proctor asks what the Chinese eat.

"Rice with chopsticks," another kid says. We all laugh, wondering why the Chinese never discovered the fork. Some girl in the back row picks up two pencils then and pretends they're chopsticks. Pretty soon, we're all doing it and a kid or two sticks the pencils in their noses.

“Respect other cultures.” Ms. Proctor has to shout to be heard and a bunch of pencils clatter to the floor. “Anyone can use a fork. Think how lovely the Chinese look at the dinner table.”

This image is squashed minutes later by her explanation of how the communists in China and Russia might soon be joining forces to A-bomb the U.S. to smithereens. She lets the map snap up when she’s done and we all jump.

It’s mid-morning when I’m sent to the principal’s office. Once I got called in when Georgie punched another kid in the nose.

“Nobody seems to be home at George’s house,” the secretary told me. “Do you know how to reach them?” I shook my head, not even sure where he lived. He’s always been where I expect him to be.

Mr. Kavanaugh’s sitting in his office. He’s a short man and his desk seems too high for him; his head seems to bobble over it. Peering at me, he taps his fingers on his blotter—he always does that—and hums a little of *Seventy-six Trombones Led the Big Parade* while I sit down.

“Rufus,” he finally says, clearing his throat.

I nod.

“Rufus,” he begins again.

Another long pause.

“I noticed on your school records today,” he says, “that your father sells insurance. Can you tell me what company he works for?”

He sounds a little irritated—like he’s been waiting for me to figure out what he wants and give it to him.

“We need it for our files.”

I’m not sure my father ever was an insurance salesman. It’s probably something my mother just put down on some form, but I finally blurt out, “I think Prudential.”

That’s the only name I can come up with except for Mutual of Omaha and I think maybe they only insure animals.

Mr. Kavanaugh nods and steeple his fingers.

“Here in Shelter?” he asks. “The office down on First Street?”

My mind travels to First Street where a big (by Shelter, Maine standards) building sits. I’m pretty sure my father wouldn’t have worked in a fancy building like the one on First Street.

“Not there,” I assure my principal. “He travels most of the time. I think he’s over in Portland or maybe Augusta. He doesn’t get home too much.”

Not once in five years, but I don’t say that.

He nods again. “Rufus, tell me this, have you seen your father in—say—the last two years?”

At least three other kids I know of don’t have fathers at home. Are we all getting called in?

“I don’t see him much— when he’s on the road,” I finally say.

“When exactly was the last time you saw him?” Mr. Kavanaugh asks, pushing on.

With the inspiration born of desperation, I suddenly wipe my eyes with balled-up fists, moan a little, fidget. Mr. Kavanaugh stands up like someone’s blown revelry.

“Well, that’s just fine, Rufus. I’ll note in the file that your father works in Portland. Then we’ll know to call your mother—with any problems that arise.”

In less than a month, I’ll be moving on to middle school classrooms over in the high school so none of this conversation makes sense. He walks me through his secretary’s office and into the outer office. Suddenly I feel sick at my stomach but I’m not sure why. He puts a hand on my shoulder and leans in, concerned.

“You okay, boy?”

I can smell his cologne, his toothpaste even. Another wave of nausea hits me.

I nod and pass into the hallway, which is silent and smells like wax, sweat and the slightly burned coffee from the teacher’s lounge. I gulp in these familiar smells and feel better right away.

* * * * *

At 3:15, the bell rings and I meet up with Georgie at the monkey bars. I tell him about going to Mr. Kavanaugh’s office, about how good Ms. Proctor smells, about seeing her thighs and maybe a flash of her tits, saying the word aloud for the first time. I get home in no time flat and am glad to find my mother has removed her lingerie from the line on the porch. She’s nowhere to be found so I make myself another bowl of Count Chocula and wait to see what happens next.

* * * * *

It’s a night or two later at eleven o’clock when I hear that clackety sound on the stairs again. In a split-second I realize what made me feel ill in Mr. Kavanaugh’s office: his shoes make the same sound: he click-clacked his way to the door of the office with me. And here he is now, clicking up to my mother’s bed. I cover my head with my blanket—even though it’s too warm for wool now—and manage not to hear anything. I fall asleep counting backwards from 1000.

Every few nights, Mr. Kavanaugh comes to have sex with my mother. One night I decide the click-clacking sound is not proof enough. Peering out my door I see his familiar blue suit, dusted with chalk or dandruff or lint, as he climbs the

steps. He stays about two hours. Does it take that long to have sex or do they talk about other things—like me—afterwards? Sometimes my mother tiptoes downstairs and brings back a drink or the newspaper. My mother must be pretty good at sex, better than Mrs. Kavanaugh, whom I see once a year at our Christmas pageant, always wearing the same royal-blue wool coat.

I tell Georgie about this and he finally says, “So are you gonna do anything about it?”

“Like what?” It’s never occurred to me that I could or should do anything about it. “You mean like go into his office and tell him I know about it? Tell him to lay off?”

“Or tell your Mom to lay off,” Georgie says.

That is the most frightening thing I can think of. I imagine her standing at the kitchen stove, her legs crossed, peering at me through the haze of smoke from the cigarette in her mouth, with that look on her face. The look she gives me when I cross her in some way.

“I’ll think about it,” I say. Georgie nods.

I do think about it; I think about how much I hate having a prostitute for a mother. How much I hate Mr. Kavanaugh calling me into his office that day to find out if I knew what was going on upstairs or where my father was. I hate that my clothes are often dirty and that I have to cook for myself. I hate that there is always pee on the floor in the bathroom from the men my mother brings home. I hate how those bottles of expensive alcohol are always full and the refrigerator’s empty. I hate my mother. I feel flattened when I realize that.

“So what are you gonna do about it?” Georgie asks when I tell him I hate my mother.

“I’ll see what happens next.”

He flashes me a disgusted look.

* * * * *

What happens next doesn’t happen till a Friday night, the last Friday before school gets out. I don’t know what it is that wakes me up. It’s after midnight and the house is quiet. No clicks on the floorboards or on the steps to the third floor. I don’t hear my mother snoring, which she’s likely to do on a weekend night when she’s had too much to drink. I don’t smell Canoe cologne. Nothing seems out of place, but I know something’s wrong. The air feels like it did in Mr. Kavanaugh’s office: tight and thick.

I get out of my bed and go to the window. Even though it’s spring, it’s still cold in Maine at night so my window’s shut. It’s pretty dirty too, but through the spattered, dingy glass I see someone standing outside by the garage. It’s my mother. I push the window up and stick my head outside to see better.

“Mom?” I yell, before I can stop myself.

Her head jerks up and she spots me at the window. She either gestures for me to come downstairs or to close the window—I’m not sure which, so I do both. The back door is hanging open when I reach the kitchen and I fly through the opening. She’s still standing in the same spot, shivering and quietly sobbing. My mother never cries and it’s scary now that she’s doing it.

“What is it, Mom?” I ask, not really wanting to know. I want to reach out a hand to her but things are not like that between us.

“I killed him,” she says, finally adding, “He deserved to die.”

I look around, and only after ten seconds or so do I spot the body about ten yards away. It’s a man and he’s propped up against the side of the garage, wearing the same suit I saw him in twelve hours before. Mr. Kavanaugh. I start shivering then too. I can see the cleats on his shoes in the moonlight and in the middle of his chest, a huge stain. It looks black.

“Did you shoot him, Mom?” Maybe a gunshot woke me up.

She raises her arm limply instead of answering. In her hand is a kitchen knife—the big one we never use. It has sat in the same wooden block on the counter for as long as I remember. Right now it’s covered with blood, which runs down Mom’s arm in a trickling stream. It’s also splattered across her chest. Maybe it’s the full moon tonight that makes the blood stand out, but it looks like it’s everywhere.

My mother stands on the dirt path like the Statue of Liberty, holding her torch for another few seconds. Finally, she flings the knife aside. The point of it goes into the earth so that it stands upright two feet in front of us—like some knife-thrower’s trick. We both look at it mutely.

“You sure he’s dead?” I ask, finally looking at Mr. Kavanaugh again. I walk over to him, crouch down, and from the look on his face, decide he must be dead. He has a surprised look and I smell urine as well as Canoe. I don’t touch him.

“Get him out of here,” she says.

I look at her.

“What?”

“Get rid of him,” she repeats. She takes a step or two toward the house and then turns back. “Get Georgie if you need help. He’s big enough, isn’t he?”

“I can’t get rid of Mr. Kavanaugh, Mom.”

Don’t be ridiculous, I think.

I want to remind her I’m only twelve years old and I don’t know how to get rid of a body, but she looks like she’s not in the mood to hear this. Her face’s like a plaster of Paris mask. How can I ask Georgie to help me? *We’re kids*, I want to tell her that but I don’t.

She pauses a second.

“If you don’t get rid of him, they’ll put me in jail. What will happen to you then? Where will you go?” Her voice is cold and matter of fact, as if she’s just pointing out what should be obvious to me. She stands still, waiting for my answer. It feels like an hour’s passed.

“I can cover him up for now, I guess,” I say and she nods as if it’s of little interest to her and walks back to the house. Cover him with what? I go into the garage and find an old tent that probably belonged to the people who lived here before us. It smells of mildew and, half-gagging, I yank it outside and cover Mr. Kavanaugh. When the heavy canvas hits him, he tips over, hitting the ground with a thud and I’m finally sure he’s dead.

I spend the rest of the night looking at Mr. Kavanaugh from my window and listening to my mother’s snore. I don’t then or ever ask her why she stabbed Mr. Kavanaugh with a knife.

“He deserved to die,” was her last remark on the subject. I can’t imagine the necessary questions ever coming from my mouth. I never ask her things like that—even natural things like why my father left, why we have no friends or family, why she hates me. Questions I don’t want the answer to, I guess. I think this is the same. I’d rather not have her explanation. Rather not hear that Mr. Kavanaugh was too neat or always on time.

It’s Saturday morning soon and Georgie isn’t waiting for me on the dirt path. I thumb through the phonebook, looking for his address and, surprisingly, find one. How is it I don’t know where Georgie lives and why have I never thought about it before? But now I need help so I figure out where his house must be and tramp over there.

It’s more like a chicken coop than a house and as soon as I start up to the door, Georgie comes hurrying out, looking surprised. He’s in his underwear and he motions for me to sit down on an old tree stump and goes back inside to dress. The yard is full of tree stumps as though this is his family’s means of heating the house or feeding themselves or maybe some strange hobby they have—hacking down trees. The stumps have blackened tops like someone tried to burn them away. Georgie’s life looks worse than mine.

In a minute, he comes outside and wordlessly we head back to my house where I pull off the canvas and show him Mr. Kavanaugh. He doesn’t say a word, doesn’t even seem surprised. Maybe this sort of thing happens more than I think. My mother’s on the porch, drinking her first cup of coffee, which she always makes the night before and lets build up strength overnight on the sideboard. She doesn’t say anything to us and after a second, we forget she’s even there and go about our business.

Georgie grabs Mr. Kavanaugh’s arms and I take his feet and we carry him over to Mom’s car and dump him into the trunk. Although he’s a very small man, Mr. Kavanaugh’s the heaviest weight I’ve ever lifted and Georgie bears

most it. We sit down on the ground for a minute to recover and then Georgie climbs into the driver's seat. I didn't know Georgie could drive, but he starts the car right up and I get in. We drive into town and right up to the back door of the school where there's a service entrance.

I never once ask Georgie what he's going to do, but there never seems to be any doubt for him. He lets himself inside the school without any trouble, fiddling with the lock for less than ten seconds, and I wonder if he comes here at night or on the weekends sometimes. We carry Mr. Kavanaugh in and I am heading toward his office, not knowing what Georgie has in mind, when he heads instead for his own classroom and I manage to follow him without dropping Mr. Kavanaugh's feet. Twice we stop to rest.

Mr. Kavanaugh smells pretty bad and I think I might get sick if this goes on for too long.

Still I follow Georgie, me wordless, for once. Inside his classroom, we set the body down again and head for the wall, right next to that crack. He pushes a wallboard with the flick of one finger and it swings open with a tiny creak.

I have no time to wonder about any of this because Georgie's picking Mr. Kavanaugh up again. I grab his feet and follow him into the hidey hole and down a flight of steps made of stone. Just when I think it's too dark for us to keep going, a light comes on and I see Georgie's pulled the string.

"Put some lights down here once," he says, without my asking. "At a party for The Railroad. My uncle helped wire it."

We continue along the narrow corridor and suddenly it opens up into a square room. I am about to say I don't think we can just leave Mr. Kavanaugh here when Georgie pushes on the wall and another room opens up.

"Nobody ever goes this far," he says and we set our principal down carefully on the earth floor. We stand and look at him for a few seconds and I think this may be the only funeral service Mr. Kavanaugh has.

Unless somebody finds him someday.

"Okay," Georgie said, "That's it."

We leave the room, putting everything back the way it was and tramp back along the corridor, turning out the light.

"You come here after school?" I finally ask him. He seems to know everything about the place.

He shrugged, and stops talking right then, my question hanging in the air as we climb back in the car. We drive to my house, parking the car just where it was and I noticed the knife is still in the ground. Georgie sees it too and pulls it out of the earth, starts to hand it over but then doesn't. He heads back to the dirt path, the knife at his side, and in a minute, he's gone.

"Why's he taking that knife?" my mother asks from the porch and I jump about a foot. "I don't know if that's such a good idea."

She's sitting with her legs on the rail. For once she's not smoking or drinking anything.

"He's probably gonna put it out there with Mr. Kavanaugh's..." I shut up before I say *body*. My mother nods and for the first time, I wonder if she's crazy and not just mean or a slut. Then she gets up and goes inside.

There's a lot of fuss for a month or so about just what happened to Mr. Kavanaugh. A lot of guessing. I think nobody's that sad to have him disappear because the next time I see Mrs. Kavanaugh she's wearing a new coat. My mother stops bringing men upstairs at night for a while. But inflation finally gets to her and she starts it up again. When she leaves her cigarettes lying around now, I smoke one. But I'm still on time and neat like my Dad.

Since, I'm going to middle school in the fall, I may never find out who the new principal is.

Georgie'll still be there though.

Keeping an eye on things.

END

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LAP DANCE

by

Jack Bludis

*Jack Bludis has written dozens of books under a number of pseudonyms. His most notable works, however, have been published under his own name, and feature post-WWII private eyes with names like Rick Page, Ken Sligo, and Brian Kane. He has been nominated for the Shamus and Anthony Awards, and currently lives in Baltimore. His most recent book is **Shadow of the Dahlia**.*

"Where did you go with him?" I asked the pole dancer.

I had just bought her a watered-down drink for twenty-bucks. I was drinking Sam Adams from the bottle.

"I don't know what you mean."

Her accent was clipped, East European. She was small and big-boned, but her weight was well distributed.

"Last night, you went someplace with this guy," I said.

I showed her the photo for the third time, and for the third time, she said, "I do not know him." She said it clearly and firmly.

"You have to pay for her time, pal," some guy said.

I figured him for a bouncer, and like the bouncers in most places like the Hooker Club, he had the WWF build and enough tattoos to paper a wall.

"I'm paying for her time," I said, and I gestured to the drink.

"Then don't hassle her."

He looked askance at the girl. I doubted she was twenty-one yet, but fake identification is not hard to put up. The big guy was not on the door when I came in. I showed him the photo.

"Bachelor party. Yeah, he was in here."

The dancer looked surprised.

"Did you see him leave?" I asked the bouncer.

"Can't say I did."

"Somebody tells me he went someplace with this young lady. Her name's *Velveeta*. Does she know that's a cheese? Or do you guys just grab these names off the shelf to make fun of them?"

"I am cheese?" the girl called *Velveeta* asked.

The bouncer grinned.

"Finish up in here before I get Vendetta on your ass."

I was surprised that his speech was relatively clean English. If he had an accent at all, it was someplace in town, Bronx or Brooklyn. Hell, maybe Staten Island. The accents all run together when you've lived in Manhattan most of your life.

I wasn't looking for trouble, but I had been looking for Roddy Trobridge since noon, and I had only twenty hours to find him before he embarrassed his bride or—more importantly—her self-made man of a father by not showing up at the wedding.

I had checked Roddy's bachelor-party friends, who all told the same story. They had arrived at Hooker's at about eight last night and left about ten. *Velveeta* gave Roddy a lap dance then went over in a corner with him for something else. Three of his friends named different sex acts. The fourth, Ambrose Thomas II, also his bride-to-be's brother, said there was no sex involved.

"He wouldn't do that to my sister," he told me.

When I asked each of them separately, the other three said that they left first and together. Ambrose Two said that he and Roddy left immediately after the others.

I repeated a vague version of that story to the bouncer, or doorman, as they preferred being called these days, and asked him what he saw.

"Don't know what you're talking about."

"I've got somebody who says he had sex with *Velveeta* here."

"Our girls don't have sex with the customers."

"I'm a PI, not a cop."

He tilted his head and grinned. "Any sex, our girls have, they go someplace private, but we don't encourage it. We got nothing to do with it."

"Did you see these guys leave?"

"They all left together," he said.

I hadn't told him anyone's version of the story.

Velveeta was still paying attention. I didn't think she understood very well, but the thing that transcended language was her facial expression. She was confused, and she was afraid of something, most likely, the doorman.

"A hundred dollars for an hour off premises," I said to *Velveeta*.

She looked to the bouncer, who gave her his eye-ball permission.

"Make sure she's back in an hour and leave that cash here--just to make sure she gets it."

Yeah, to make sure *she* gets it.

"I go get my coat," she said, and Leon followed her to the dressing room.

* * * * *

She was marching ahead of me wrapped in a trench coat that almost dragged the sidewalk.

"Da Motter-fucker calls me, *Velveeta*."

It wasn't easy to keep up, but I wasn't going to fall behind and let some cop think I was chasing her.

"Da bastard, he thinks we don't know nothing because we don't speak much of the English."

"Why don't you tell him about it?"

"Let dem make fun of me till I get my money. Then I am gone from this Big Apple to find some little apple where no one will know me. Maybe I find a nice Polish man who will love me."

She swung her ass under the coat, like a parody of what she was.

"You coming wid me?"

"Trying to keep up."

She made an abrupt left-hand turn down Ninth Avenue and another quick turn to a stairway between an electronic store and a tee-shirt store. Over the doorway to the stairs was *The White Way Hotel*.

Ninth Avenue was not exactly the Great White Way, but it was coming up in the world—what real estate wasn't?

I followed her quickly past the registration desk on the second floor. The clerk looked up, seemed to accept that it was with Velveeta, or whatever her real name was, and he went back to turning the pages of *Hustler*.

At the end of the hall was a small room. Instead of the by-the-hour that I had expected, it was an actual bedroom, probably hers or one she shared with someone. There was a bed, two chairs, and a crowded clothes rack. There was an alcove, with a sink, a tub, and commode. Not great accommodations, but probably better than Warsaw or wherever she was from.

"Take off your clothes," she said.

"Not necessary. I just want to ask you some questions and get some straight answers."

"You already pay a hundred dollars. You queer or something?" The last word came out like *Some-sing*.

I was also surprised that she did not use the more current *gay*. But who knew how they were talking in Eastern Europe. She bounced on the bed and her

coat came open. Her thighs showed all the way to the crotch of a thong that went all the way into her crack.

I showed her the picture again.

"I give him a blow job. Yeah. Then he goes away with his friends, he tell me he is getting married on Saturday. Dat's tomorrow."

"Did you leave the club with him?"

She grinned at me before she spoke.

"I see from you pants that you not so queer like I think."

"Tell me about him." I waved the photo.

"He was too much drunk. He does not even do the spit. Lots of guys would not pay if they do not do the spit"

"There's more to it."

"There is nothing more. I tell him no, I won't go with him someplace else, and he leaves with his friends."

"All of them together?"

"Something like that."

"You're not sure, are you?" I said.

"Three of them go, then that one, he goes with another. They keep calling each other 'brud-in-law.' It seems like they are good friends. Look, I see you are interested in me. You have a whole hour. We can do more than talk, don't you think?"

I had been doing private investigation work for twenty years, and I had been working seedy clubs in Manhattan, Brooklyn and New Jersey for a lot of that time. I rarely found a hooker who wanted to do something physical for her money when she could get away with just talking. What she wanted was for me to stop asking questions.

"What's the bouncer's name?"

"His name is Leon. Why you ask that?"

"What did Leon tell you to tell me?"

"He did not tell me nothing."

She raised her chin, indignant that I questioned what she said.

"Is he the one who named you Velveeta?"

"Get off of dat Velveeta crap. Is bad enough I have to smile and look stupid when they call me that. My name is Sophie."

"What did Leon tell you to tell me?"

"What I tell you, I tell you from my own free will."

Own free will struck me as a strange choice of words for someone who barely knew the language. It was probably a line that Leon had told her to use.

"You're getting a hundred bucks for just talking to me. How about if I give you another twenty to tell me the truth?"

"Your time is flying, Mister."

"I thought I had plenty of time. Who told you to tell that story?"

"I tell you what I see. This is maybe the third time you call me a liar. I don't like it...You sure you don't want to have a good time?"

She was attractive and she seemed clean, but I have an aversion to prostitutes who are strangers. If you're going to come down with a disease, a prostitute was usually where you were going to get it, unless you're terribly indiscriminant with your sex life. I'd been careful over the years and I hadn't gotten so much as a fever blister.

I didn't feel like standing, so I sat at the edge of the bed.

"Another twenty bucks, that's forty. You tell the truth and I won't bring you into it."

"Into what?"

"I won't tell anybody where I got the information. I have to find this kid so he doesn't miss his wedding."

Kid was a relative term. Roddy Trobridge was in his late twenties, I was in my fifties.

"You like me. I know that."

She was right about that, but I didn't trust her, and I wasn't going to take the chance of getting herpes or AIDS just because I liked her.

"I got the rubbers," she said. She leaned over to the night stand and opened the drawer. One of her breasts popped out of the costume she was still wearing. It was part of the game.

"Put it back." I said

She looked down at her breast, decided the ploy wouldn't work, and she tucked it in.

"How about if you tell me the truth?"

"You give me anudder hundred dollars?"

"Forty. That's it."

"Sixty and it's a deal."

I opened my wallet and pulled out three twenties. I had left another hundred with Leon at the club. She'd be lucky to get another twenty out of that.

She reached and I pulled the bills away.

"You bastard."

"I have to believe your story first."

She clenched her jaw and rolled of her eyes.

"If you make it up, I'm going to know."

The focus of her eyes bounced all over the place: my face, my crotch, the wall behind me, the window to the air-shaft. She wanted to tell the truth, but she didn't know how she could get away with it.

"You don't tell Leon?"

I shook my head. I kept looking at her, until she maintained eye contact.

"Him and his friend, the one he calls 'brud-in-law,' they come back here to the hotel."

I waited and her eyes began to fill with tears.

"Your friend, the one in the picture, he can't do it. He tries but he can't. I do everything I know, but he won't come up."

She waited a long time before she spoke again, and I wondered if she was making it up.

"He falls asleep right here on da bed." She patted the place behind me.

"The other one, the brud-in-law, he wants to take a turn. But I tell him no, not unless he pays me too. The bastard, he grabs my earring...look!"

She showed me where her earlobe was freshly torn. She wore clip-on earrings, but they had pinched away the scab and she was bleeding again.

"He tells me at least I am going to go down on him, so I do. It is because I don't want him to hit me. Dat's the whole story."

"How did you get him out of bed?"

"We call a taxi and dat's it. His friend and the driver, they help him to da taxi. Is the last thing I see from them."

I had been watching her the entire time, looking for tics or stammers or places where I thought she might be lying. Women like her were good at it. She could be better than most, but I thought she was finally telling the truth.

"What time was that?"

"After twelve, I tink."

"What cab company?"

"Cab company?"

"Which one did you call?"

"Billy, da boy at the desk, he calls them for us."

I rose to leave.

"I am going to take a beating from this," she said.

"Nobody will know you talked to me."

Although I believed most of the last story, something still bothered me.

* * * * *

I got the name of the cab company they called and let her walk back to the Hooker Club alone. I drove to the dispatch office of the cab company, and asked about the pickup the night before last. I explained what that I was trying to find a young man who was about to be married, without telling him what I thought was going on.

"Are you kidding? Theater night? I got a couple of dozen cabs picking people up between twelve and twelve thirty."

"This one was phoned in."

"Eh, let me take a look. But most of them don't even get where they're going before somebody grabs 'em... You're not a cop right?"

"Private investigator." I showed my license and my business card, it took him about three minutes to come up with what I needed.

"We got a call eleven fifty-eight, that exact address. Driver says he took somebody to 79th and Riverside Drive."

"What was his next fare?"

"Picked up somebody and 79th and West End, took 'em all the way across town."

"Driver on tonight?"

"He's going off in twenty minutes."

I slid a twenty across the counter at him.

"Not necessary, pal," he said. That wasn't a first, but it was a rarity.

* * * * *

Fifteen minutes later, the driver came in, Pakistani, I think. I showed him my PI license and asked him to describe the people he picked up at the White Way Hotel.

"Just one fellow," he said.

"Not two?"

"Only one," he said.

"Drunk?"

He shrugged.

"You took him to the yacht basin?"

"Yes," he said, but he was fidgety.

I knew the West Side, and I took a shot at a scenario:

"OK, you took two men to the yacht basin. You drop the blond guy off. Where did you take the other one, the one with red hair?"

The driver looked at the dispatcher, who read off his next pickup and drop-off. Pick up, 79th and West End Avenue, drop-off the Fifth Avenue and 78th, about the same place where Ambrose the First had his apartment. He called himself *Ambrose the First* as if he had no last name.

I had been in the business long enough to know that I had a serious problem. Papa claimed to be looking for son-in-law-to-be, and son knew where he was.

It would be difficult to clear everything up without pissing off the client, and I wasn't going to do by phone. I grabbed a cab that had come in for gas and went to Ambrose the First's apartment building.

I called from the lobby. Without even a *Hello*, he snapped at me, "Have you found Roddy?"

"Not yet, but I'd like to talk to you."

"If you haven't found him--"

"I'd like to come up." I said it firmly.

* * * * *

It wasn't the penthouse, but it was a whole floor. There was no butler, just a pretty maid in French black, white, and ruffles. The outfit was so tasteful it didn't even show her knees.

I saw through the arch to the living room that the apartment gave a view all the way across the park. Ambrose the First's building was near the base of an almost straight shot by vehicle to the yacht basin. I'd bet my fee against a dollar that Ambrose the First had a yacht there.

The entire apartment was furnished with classic pieces, including statues and bric-a-brac, and oriental carpets that could cover Central Park. The maid took me through to what she called, "the den," where Mr. Thomas sat behind a big desk.

Den, hell, it was an office, with TV screens and computer monitors running various stock market tickers along the bottom. Some architect, interior designer, or both had worked the screens and keyboards into the décor.

"If you didn't find him, why are you wasting my time?" he said, and he gestured to an easy chair in front of his desk. I sank about eight inches into it.

"Do you know where he is?" I asked.

"If I knew where he was, I wouldn't have hired you?"

"If you don't know, your son does."

"What are you talking about?"

I gave him a rundown, and the more I talked, the more his face grew red. Although he might direct his anger at me, I was not the one he was angry with. From time-to-time, he glared, as if he thought that would change my story, but he didn't stop to ask questions, he just listened all the way through to my trip to the cab company.

"Your son lives here, doesn't he?" I said.

He thought about a lie, but decided against it.

"He lives in the building, yes."

When I was finished, he stared, not at me but at something in his imagination.

Finally, he spoke.

"A whore told you this?"

"And a cab driver and a dispatcher. Would you like me to talk to your son?"

He tightened his jaw and narrowed his eyes. "Who else have you told this to?"

"Just you."

"And only you know the whole story?"

"As far as I can piece it together, unless my contacts left out some details."

"She's not only leaving out things, but she's putting things in. My son would never let Roddy do that."

"Don't you think we should ask him?"

"Why should we?"

"It's less than fifteen hours from the wedding—that is, if you want the wedding to happen."

"Did you cash my check?"

"Yes, sir."

He pulled open a top drawer, and took out a check register. The figure he filled in was \$5,000. The company on the check was one I had never heard of, with an upstate address. The signature was not quite the same as on the other.

"This is for your discretion. It includes your expenses. You can keep the advance."

Ten thousand dollars buys a lot of discretion for less than a day's work. It wasn't the first time something like this happened, and it wouldn't be the last.

* * * * *

Because I'm a private investigator, I turn all the pages in the *Times*, the *Daily News*, and the *Post*. I read all the caps and many of the articles. The wedding went off without a hitch, with the *Times* making a big deal of it. There were some nice pictures of a sober Roddy Trobridge and his happy bride.

They were only happy for about a week.

I read in the back pages of the *Times* that the bridegroom drowned off his father-in-law's 90-foot yacht near Bermuda on the honeymoon. The *Times* noted his death by drowning. Both the *News* and the *Post* mentioned that he was drunk, something that both papers also said his new wife denied.

I told the story to a detective friend in the NYPD, but Bermuda was far out of their jurisdiction, and proof of anything, even the initial story, was problematic.

For the hell of it, I went back to the Hooker Club and asked for Velveeta.

"That's a cheese," Leon said.

"Is she around?"

"Don't know what you're talking about."

I thanked him and I was gone.

It would be nice to think that my extra hundred bucks put Sophie over the hump so she could find her Polish bridegroom in that little apple she was

looking for, but that kind of thing only happens in the...hell, they don't make movies that schmaltsy anymore.

The five thousand weighed on me like thirty pieces of silver. For a while, I watched my back more closely than ever.

It's been a couple of years and I've loosened up some, but in my end of the business, the big money end, you always watch your back.

END

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EAT SHIT

by

Tony Black

*Tony Black's first novel **PAYING FOR IT** was published by Random House UK in July, 2008. Ken Bruen kindly praised the book, saying it "...blasts off the page like a triple malt . . . one adrenaline pumped novel that is as moving and compassionate as it is so stylishly written".*

*Black lives and works in the Scottish capital, Edinburgh. More of his fiction can be found at **Thug Lit, Pulp Pusher, Demolition, and Out of the Gutter.***

"He said that to you? ... I don't, you wouldn't shit me on this, Eddie?"

Miami Mike carried two Buds back from the bar, he swayed a little - nights like these, with old Eddie from the block could turn tasty, full-on tasty.

"He said it, I tell you now, God as my judge ... it's what he said, Mike."

Mike slammed down the Buds, white foam, froth, whatever, flowed down the sides and onto the table top.

"Whoa ... calm the fuck down, man ..."

The beer spill pooled on the checkered paper tablecloth, a red candle in a dancing-girl statuette, her hooters glowing from within, trembled in prelude to a fall.

"This kinda shit, it's way outta line," said Mike, "run this by me again, from the top, don't leave anything out ... and I mean anything."

Eddie picked up his Bud, ran a hand over the bottleneck, slugged deep. His lips twitched. Nerves on edge, and out there for all to see.

"Well, you asked ..."

"She's at it again, the fucking Party Queen," said Gloria.

Eddie struggled to the edge of the bed, wiped the sleep from his still-tired eyes, "You're kidding me."

"You can't hear her?"

"Honey, I took a bucket of Moggies, how else you think I sleep here."

Eddie slapped palms on his face, shook his head, seemed like the neighborhood joined in, "Oh, yeah now I'm hearing ..."

Gloria stood at the window, looked out with a face ominous as thunder. She tugged at the heavy drapes and light came flooding into the bedroom.

As he smarted, Eddie noticed the Lucky in her fingers; she'd started smoking again already. Was the stress. He knew it was all wrong. They were being held to ransom in their own home.

"I can't take much more of this," said Gloria, "this is some kinda retirement!"

Eddie rose, went to her side. He tried to take the Lucky from her; Gloria snatched her hand away.

"What are you going to do about this? We can't live like this anymore, Eddie...we *can't!*"

Gloria yanked open the window, roared, "Turn that fucking music down you crazy fucking bitch! Turn it the hell down or I'll come over there and wrap that fucking boom-box round your scrawny motherfucking neck!"

"So that was the start of it, huh?" said Mike.

"Yeah, like I say...since we moved from back East, all we had was like, y'know...parties from the get go."

Mike leaned in, stroked the base of his Bud like it was a lapdog, "She's round the clock with this?"

"Hey, buddy...lemme tell ya, when we was growing up back in the old brownstone, we had it peaceful compared."

Mike looked thoughtful. Eddie scoured his mind for the word.

Oh yeah, he thought ... contemplative.

"What you thinking, Mike?"

He rose, tipped back the rest of his Bud. "Thinking it's your turn to get the Buds in, pal."

Eddie made the run to the bar, returned; careful not to spill any beer like Mike had done last time.

"Well, I'm all ears."

Mike played with the edges of his moustache, greying now, but the jaw was still firm, carrying none of the meat Eddie was, "Then what happened?"

"The bitch's daddy comes round, he's some big ass lawyer, slaps a stack of papers on me and next I know I got a restraining order and he's saying I done harassed his daughter."

"That it?"

"No, man...he's suing my ass."

"You spoke to this girl of his?"

"Man, yeah, 'course...but nice like, fuck this is Miami I ain't looking for no aggravation. I had enough of that thirty years renting Pintos to fat ass out-of-towners."

"This restraining order...what it say?"

Eddie sighed, lowered his eyes, rapid fired on the Bud, "That's the worst," he put down the beer, stared at his palms like they had the answer written there, "...claims I *sexually* approached her."

Mike banged the table. The dancing girl fell over. The candle went out, "The low motherfucker!"

Eddie stayed silent. He looked at his oldest friend, his one remaining relic from childhood. He knew the look on his face, he'd seen it before. Was like back in '68 when he took the Louisville slugger to the basketball court, took down five, six guys who'd welshed on the drags.

"Eddie, here's what you do...next letter he sends you, you wipe your ass on it."

"*What?*"

Mike grabbed Eddie's arm, there was darkness in his eyes, this look Eddie had never seen before. The thirty years that had passed before they'd hooked up again held some blind spots...he saw that now.

"Okay, okay ... but, then what?"

Mike released his arm, "I'll keep you posted."

A pool-side party was in full swing as Mike pulled up outside Eddie and Gloria's condo. It was a neat set-up, he thought. Sun-dried adobe brick, bit of a hacienda feel happening. Nice. He could see why Eddie had sprung for the condo, made their old stomping ground on the Lower East Side look just like the hell on Earth it surely had been.

He lowered his mirrored Ray-Bans and scoped his friend's home. Looked quiet; drapes shut. No-one home? Or, if they were, keeping totally out of sight. *No way to live*, thought Mike. *Not at all*. Not for a friend of his.

He retread the times Eddie had shared his lunchpail with him when they were kids. Mike could still remember how it felt to have an empty belly. But he'd worked out of that world; so had Eddie, he deserved better.

There was some dance music playing. Loud as all fuckery. Mike was five-hundred yards from the pool but he could still make out every line of Marky-frickin-Mark's *Good Vibrations*. It was obviously a track daddy's girl enjoyed. *'Yeah, do it, do it ...'* said Mike.

Pulman appeared. "You want I should grab the slut?"

"Slut?" said Mike.

"Yeah, she's a slut, look the way she's dancing...that's filth, man!"

The girl was groin-grinding two beach bums, surfer-types with blond bangs and over-tanned complexions.

"She's gonna have those guys dicks out like two ski-poles any minute, wait see."

Mike took off his shades, "She's some piece a'work alright."

"Look, now..." She took off her bikini top and tweaked at her erect nipples, the surfers poured beer on her breasts and she encouraged them to lick it off.

"See, I fucking told ya!"

"Sexual suit, huh?" said Mike.

"Come 'gain?"

Mike put his shades back on, walked back to the SUV.

"Yo, boss...you want I should snatch her?"

"What for?"

"Take her to the border. Make her suck Mexican dick for a month—fifty cents a throw! See how loud she wants to play fucking Marky Mark then."

Miami Mike gunned the engine, motioned Pulman to get in.

Daddy had a practice in the sweet side of the street. Old colonial mansion, painted white and bathed in sunlight. If there was royalty in Miami, they'd keep a joint like this. But Mike knew there was no royalty in Miami. Not the type with crowns and robes and shit anyways. The royalty he knew carried Mossbergs in the trunk and hired people like Pulman to shoot them.

The lawyer wore a light linen suit, black shirt beneath with a flower-print tie. He topped the outfit off with red-toed cowboy boots.

"That's our man," said Mike.

"You sure?" asked Pulman, "Motherfucker looks like Boss Hogg!"

"That's him."

Mike didn't need to say anymore. Pulman got out the SUV and crossed the street. As he went, Mike watched his muscle-bound factotum walk towards the sidewalk.

The SUV's windows were blacked out, they kept Mike's identity hidden from the street as Pulman grabbed the lawyer round the neck and wrestled him to the ground like a steer. It was a carefully-practised maneuver, all over in under a minute.

The lawyer screamed like a stuck pig in the back of the vehicle. It took two raps on the side of the head from Pulman to quiet him down.

They drove out to the flats. It was hot, topping eighty Fahrenheit. A dust trail blew up behind them.

When Mike stopped the SUV, he slowly turned to face the lawyer for the first time.

"Do you have any idea who I am?" said a crumpled suit, covered in blood from a fierce nosebleed.

"Do I look like I care who you are?" said Mike.

The lawyer flustered, raised a finger, "I will, t-tell y-you..."

Pulman grabbed the finger, snapped it back. The lawyer shrieked then folded like a knife, cradling his hand.

"Look, boss...he's crying!...Straight up, he's crying like a fucking girl? I never seen that before, you seen that before, boss?"

Mike turned away, spoke quietly, "Yeah, I've seen that before."

"W-what do you want from me?" screamed the lawyer.

Pulman laid a hand on his chest, "Boss, let me ass-fuck him, please, huh?"

Mike turned front again, watched Pulman in the rear-view, he saw him eye the lawyer up and down, grab his thigh...

"Go on, Boss...I ain't gave no-one a good ass-fucking for the longest time."

Mike laughed. The lawyer seemed to let out a whimper, then wet himself.

"Man, he's pissed in his pants!"

Mike stopped laughing. "Get this motherfucker out of here!"

Pulman opened the door and kicked the lawyer off the seat. He landed face down in the dirt.

"I think he lost some teeth that time," said Pulman.

The lawyer tried to run, his arms and legs splayed out like a newborn foal struggling on new limbs. Mike let him get a hundred feet before sending Pulman to the trunk.

The first shot from the Mossberg stopped the runaway in his tracks.

It was the strangest thing, thought Eddie. It had been quiet for days. Party girl seemed to have shipped out, then the *For Sale* sign went up.

A knock at the door startled him amidst the silence.

"I wondered if I may..."

It was the lawyer again. Eddie's heart sank.

"I ain't got a goddamn thing to say to you. What is it now? You got a new suit to slap on me?"

The lawyer raised his hands.

"No, no...q-quite the reverse."

There was something strange about him, and it wasn't the Band-aid above his eye. He seemed...different. Quieter somehow.

"Please, may I c-come in?"

Eddie opened the door.

Inside, the lawyer politely asked to sit, produced a bottle of twelve-year-old Scotch from his briefcase.

"I wanted to, *a-hem*, er, I wanted to offer my sincerest apologies for my daughter's over-exuberant behavior..."

Eddie rose, ranted, "You fucking roach! You tried to sue my ass...you filed a restraining ..."

"I-I know...I was very misguided, it would appear I was misinformed...may I offer my sincere apologies, and if I may also, I would like to compensate you."

"What?"

"I did some calculations, you've been here for three months, is that correct?"

"Yeah. What the...you know I have..."

"These condos attract four-thousand dollars a month rental and so I thought twelve-thousand would be..."

"Fifteen," spat Eddie.

The lawyer fumbled for words, looked startled, his bead eyes narrowed some more then seemed to wet up, "But...y-yes, of course. Fifteen-thousand."

Mike's advice was playing to a tee, but Eddie wondered about the next part. He was ready to let it slide, accept the check and kick the lawyer out on his ass. End of story.

But then lawyer daddy spoke up.

"I-I believe you have a letter of mine, if I may have it returned I w-would be most grateful."

Eddie went to the dresser where he kept the letter. He returned to the lawyer, slowly taking the document from its manila envelope then, he presented it, brown streaks of his own shit, still fresh, showed the length of the page.

Slowly, trembling, the lawyer accepted the offering. He stared at it for a moment and then, tore it with his teeth and began to chew on it.

"All the way down," said Eddie.

"Y-yes, yes of course."

"Eat shit!" said Eddie, smiling, "Eat shit you motherfucker."

END

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A THUG LIKE ME

by

Greg Lee

Greg Lee has always been a writer. He started his writing career by winning the Colorado Language of Arts Award, which merited his first publication "Under the Pressure to Succeed" in the Rocky Mountain News. Later, he published the Science Fiction short "Courage and Confidence 101" in Samsara Magazine. This is his first hardboiled publication. Greg also works as a freelance illustrator and software developer. He lives in Colorado with his wife, and is working on his first novel.

My specialty is...well, let's just say that I fell into it a couple years back. It involved a lot of beer and a nine millimeter. A gun instead of a girl. You know, the usual greed. I try not to think about it much. Why cry over spilt milk, as my mother used to say.

"So... Mac, whadda ya think?" the ugly thug named Murphy says to me behind a smoke screen from his Marlboro. My name isn't Mac, but it caught on about the same time I fell into this gig and it kind of stuck.

"Kneecaps next," I say with a shrug. "And if not, try alcohol where the bullet holes are." The massive lump of flesh on the concrete floor—lying in a puddle of his own miscellaneous bodily fluids—moans his protests, though with the duct tape, there ain't much. He's bleeding, but not bleeding out. Right now he's very much aware of his own delicate mortality, and that's exactly where I want the old, fat bastard.

Murphy gives me a yellow, toothy grin of approval. It's a jackal's grin, and there's no play-acting on his part.

"And if that don't work?" he says on queue.

"Light a match."

Now the millionaire-turned-money-launderer does his best impression of a fish out of water as he tries his binds for the hundredth time. His eyes become saucers as he looks up at us.

“Yeah, gonna cook him up good!” Murphy again shows way too much enthusiasm, and what troubles me is that I know it’s genuine. I’m play-acting. He’s just a punk. Not like me, but a genuine, idiotic punk that will wind up guest-starring on Cops someday. The guy can’t get it through that thick skull of his that ninety-percent of this game is psychological. Gus keeps sending me these wack-jobs to train and I’m starting to take their general lack of intelligence as a personal insult against my character.

Among other things, that’s Murphy’s main problem: No imagination.

Murphy’s my latest protégé.

Lucky me.

Regardless of the fact that he just said we were going to cook him, Murphy pulls his knife instead—a ridiculous thing that proves he’s trying to compensate for something. I keep my poker face, but inside I’m screaming: You’re overdoing it! We’re not going to get anything! You’re going to give him a heart attack!

“Oh yeah, old man!” Murphy’s bouncing around like a kid warming up for the multi-colored plastic balls in the playpen. “I’m gonna gut you...gonna gut you!”

The old man’s shaking bad now. He’s probably just soiled himself for the second time. And here’s Murphy, pushing him farther.

“Yep,” I say, still trying to play along. “And after that...”

My pocket starts playing a tune from *The Godfather*. The guys love it, and that’s the only reason I have it set. When I pull it from my pocket, I see my handler’s number on the ID.

“Excuse me,” I say politely down to my guest. “I’ll be right back.”

As I walk out the door, I whisper into Murphy’s ear, “Don’t do anything until I get back.”

“Oh yeah, baby! Gonna cut you up good! I’m gonna get me an ear like in Iraq!”

He thinks I’m playing the good cop. Even if this were true, he’s overdoing it. He’s seen every damn gangster movie out there and studies them like the Bible.

“Vietnam, you idiot. And I mean it,” I hiss through my teeth. My phone keeps ringing in my hand, but I hold my gaze with Murphy. It takes a bit—my phone eventually goes to voice mail—but finally Murphy sees the steel in my eyes. Then his face falls like a kid who just heard Disneyland fell ill to a match and a can of gasoline.

“I’ll...leave you some fun...” Murphy starts his I’m-a-big-boy speech, but I cut him off.

“Don’t. Do. Anything.” It’s taken me quite a bit of restraint not to just slap the kid. I try to keep my voice low and away from our guest so I don’t undo some of our hard work. “Just keep him scared. Nothing else.”

I brush pass him and out the back door before Murphy can queue up another line from one of his B movies.

No imagination.

* * * * *

Inside my jacket I have a pack of smokes. I slip one between my lips while I dial. I think his name’s Phil, but I honestly can’t remember. Don’t care too much, either. Names are liabilities in my profession, which is why I haven’t heard my own birth name since mom died.

The phone connects without a greeting as I’m still fishing for my lighter.

“Go,” I say.

I step into one of the alley’s shadows, behind the old, condemned warehouse that should be put out of its misery. Somewhere nearby I can smell urine and maybe something more solid along with it. I try to ignore it.

“Gus says he needs you back, right quick.”

“I ain’t done here.”

“Yeah, well leave it to the kid.”

I snort a laugh. Still can’t find the damn lighter.

“He’s not ready to go solo. He’ll kill the old man and get nothing.”

“Not your concern. Gus says he needs you now. As in yesterday.”

As in yesterday.

Phil’s another one who lays this gangster crap on five layers too thick. The ones who stick around, the ones that last longer than a couple years—like yours truly—know that shit like that’s for late-night cable.

But Phil’s my handler, and I’ve been working with him for six months now.

I don’t know what happened to the last guy, and I don’t want to know.

“Okay. Tell Gus I’ll be there in ten.”

I head back inside, pocketing the smoke I was about to light. Since I’m now officially on the move, I doubt I’ll have time to enjoy it, and I don’t want to stink up my BMW. Never enough time to enjoy things. Story of my life.

As I step back into the buzzing pale-yellow fluoresces, I find Murphy straddling the guy like a two-bit stripper trying to demote herself to street whore. He’s still got that damn Australian knife out, and now he’s holding it behind the guy’s ear lobe like he’s ready to slice himself a hunk of apple. The man is

wailing out a sad, pathetic plea underneath the duct tape that would have pulled on a string in my heart ten...no, fifteen years ago.

I see there's no new blood. Just in time.

Murphy's got such a hard-on for bleeding the guy that he doesn't hear me enter. Sloppy. So damn sloppy. I let the door slam hard behind me. His shoulders flinch when the door claps like a thundercloud, but when he turns around to face me he's all cool again.

"Quick call, eh?"

"Yeah," I say, gesturing Murphy to get off, which he hesitantly does with a completely over-the-top look of disappointment. Leave this guy to Murphy. Yeah, right. We'll have Miami Forensics on us within the hour.

"What'd the boss say?"

I want to tell him to mind his own damn business, but I have a vague idea how Murphy got into this gig and I doubt it was for his intuition. He's got the same chin as Giacosa, Gus' worthless cousin.

"He said he needs me downtown on an urgent matter. Wants you to take care of this piece of shit."

Murphy's eyes light up like a Christmas tree. But the old man's face has hit a new low. Maybe too far to be useful.

I storm forward, pushing Murphy aside. With one smooth move, I yank the duct tape off of his mouth like I'm trying to start my fifteen-year-old lawn mower.

"Me or him. Where's the mon—"

"Locker!" he screams so loud that even I flinch. He's spitting everywhere. "I-I got it in a locker at the YMCA! Southeast side, A-45! Key's at my apartment!"

I look back at Murphy with a thin smile. The man's in tears at my feet, babbling on and on about being sorry. Now Murphy's back to being the ten-year-old kid again who just found out Santa's prints were on the gas can.

"Take him back. Tell Phil," I say, pocketing the duct tape. "And don't hurt him until Phil says so."

Murphy knows he's done for the night. He looks down at his ridiculous knife with utter bewilderment, like he doesn't know what to do with his life from this point on. No more for him tonight. No more ever if I could have my way.

* * * * *

I'm at Gus' for a grand total of two minutes. Gus is the type to offer you a drink no matter what time of day it is and no matter how long he wants you around. You can be his favorite cousin or a street urchin and he'll still offer you a

scotch. He's just that kind of guy. He's smooth. He's considerate. He's at the top, above the dirt and slime that comes with the job. He's not like me.

But Gus ain't pouring me a drink this time. That's alarm number one. Without any formalities at all, he tells me to head to the safe house by the pier—not one of my regulars. He has something I need to take care of. Something he only trusts ol' Mac with. Lucky me.

I eye a small, but noticeable shine on his bald head. Sweat? Could that be sweat? The guy runs his air conditioner like it supplies his office with actual oxygen. That's alarm number two.

When I'm in the car, driving to a safe house I normally don't frequent, I realize what alarm number three was. He couldn't, or wouldn't, give me that very simple assignment through Phil. And he didn't once look me in the eye; not in that whole damn time. And Gus is a good poker player.

It's been a while since I've had a three-alarm buzz in my head. I know I'm getting old because I don't enjoy the rush anymore—actually, I never did. I know most guys keep a bullet in the chamber, but I don't. Before I get out of the car, I pull the action back, take off the safety, and put it back in my holster with a shaky hand. Unlike some macho guys, I don't consider carrying a loaded gun pointed at my Johnson a manly perk of the job.

The walk up to the small house is only about ten steps, but I've already thought of a dozen escape plans that include Mexico, Canada, the west coast, or Europe. I also think about my retirement stash taped to the bottom of my sink. But by the time I hit the doorstep and my hand touches that cold brass knob, that buzz in the back of my head has been neatly filed away. My brow is now dry as an autumn leaf. It's my specialty, after all.

"Big Mac!" a goon whose name escapes me says with open arms. "We've been waiting and waiting!"

"Well, your waiting's over," I reply with my best million-dollar smile. "What do you got for me?" I have my thumb hooked in my waistband like I had too much to eat—another beer-loaded night for me, my posture says. But it's also exactly two inches from my pistol beneath my sports jacket.

"Got a real doll in here for ya," the goon who suddenly reminds me of Murphy says. He's got a wickedly yellow smile, and it makes my stomach churn. "We've been sitting on her like we were told. Kept our hands to ourselves like good boys."

"Good self control," I bark a fake laugh. I don't like this one bit, and I feel that three-alarm buzz I filed away coming back.

"If you want any help with this one, Mac," a second goon says, stepping out from behind the bathroom door. He's redoing his fly. I hadn't noticed him before, and that alone gets my nerves dancing. "We'd be happy to lend a hand."

“Oh yeah!” the first goon says. “Real happy!”

Giving them the laugh that goes with my million-dollar smile, I pat goon number two on the shoulder. “Don’t you worry, boys. I’ll let you know.” I head down to the cellar, careful to close the door behind me. I can still hear their pre-teen chuckles as the old staircase creaks under my weight. I file away potential alarm number four. Whatever happens tonight, I gotta keep my cool if I’m going to get through it. After all, it still might be nothing.

It’s dark down here. Pitch black, in fact. For now I wait on the lights. I hear muffled breathing, a sound that you learn to identify only after years of ugly experience. It’s ragged, panicked breathing that’s from the nostrils. That’s because the mouth has something more important to deal with instead of air. Like a gag. Or a gun.

After I feel my loafers hit the concrete, I pause long enough to extract a pair of latex gloves from my pocket. In darkness, the sound of latex snapping into place echoes like a gunshot on a Sunday morning. I hear the muffled and staggered breathing shorten.

All psychological.

“I don’t know who you are or what you’ve done,” I say, starting my little spiel. Done it a thousand times, and I imagine I might do it a thousand more before something retires me. I try not to think about the alarms in my head, especially when retirement comes to mind. “But you need to know a few ground rules before we begin.”

I reach out for the light switch.

“One,” I say. “I’m not going to lie to you. Ever.”

I hit the switch.

“Two,” I continue. “I’m going to hurt you bad in the next few days...”

And I’m going to enjoy every minute of it. You probably won’t. That’s how ground rule number two usually finishes. Occasionally I vary it depending on my mood and if the guy looks tough to crack. But my sales pitch tonight falls a bit short. Tonight’s flavor of choice is something along the lines of hot wax stuck to the roof of my mouth. And after I hit the lights and my brain finally registers what my stupid eyes see, my tongue has just stabbed itself into that hot wax. It burns like hell, and I’m suffocating.

She’s about eighteen. And she’s beautiful. But not the kind of beautiful that makes a guy run pick-up lines in his head before she can even bat an eyelash. Not to me, at least. Not now.

Strapped to a chair with a silver strip of duct tape across her mouth, she looks at me with the biggest eyes I have ever seen. She’s still wearing her school clothes—something trendy, expensive, and borderline Britney Spears—but she looks like she took a spill in the gutter before she wound up on my plate. She’s

shaking all over, like any poor kid would whose just been kidnapped and taped to a chair. Otherwise she looks unharmed.

“Oh fuck,” I whisper. She’s eighteen, alright. Yes, I’ve done some work on kids and women before. And yes, I hated every minute of it. I’m not a monster. It’s just my job to play a monster. It’s a part of the slime that comes with my life. But this is different. Much different.

I’m not guessing that she’s eighteen. I know she’s eighteen. I know because she’s the striking image of her mother, and I haven’t seen her in eighteen years, give or take nine months.

Five alarms, baby. My head is on fire.

* * * * *

I get maybe thirty minutes alone with Heidi. Then Gus himself shows up. The big boss never shows up. That would have been alarm number six if I hadn’t already made up my mind twenty-nine minutes ago on how I was going to play this.

“How’s it going, old man?” Gus says from upstairs. New, yellow light spills in from the cellar stairwell, and I can see his hearty pear shape casting the most anti-heroic silhouette down on the wall before us.

“Good,” I lie. “Bring the boys down. She’s ready.”

I hear a shuffle of feet as Gus, the two thugs, and at least two more come marching down. “What’d I tell you,” I hear Gus bragging to his right-hand man, Martin. I’m sure it’s Martin. He never leaves home without the guy. “Mac is the best.”

The cellar suddenly becomes very crowded as they all beset her like a semi-circle of piranhas. The two thugs from before, as well as Gus’ left hand man whose name I never caught, immediately begin to undress Heidi with their eyes. They don’t know who she is. But, of course, Gus knows. If Gus saw their faces, he’d cut off their fingers.

I can see a wave of utter relief hit Gus’s face when he sees the girl unharmed. “That didn’t take long at all. And you didn’t put a scratch on her.”

“I prefer it clean,” I say, and that’s no lie. Now it’s show time, and even though my pulse is off after the fuzzy, mechanical rabbit, my composure is ice. I casually walk up to Heidi, who’s either doing a grand-stand performance herself, or is genuinely scared out of her wits—probably a bit of both—and I carefully wrap my fingers around her throat. Her eyes respond instantly, bright, glossy, and Bambi-like.

“Tell him what you just told me,” I say. Then, deep inside, I begin to pray.

"I...I...don't know..." she starts, but something's wrong. She can't get anything else out. New tears quickly join her moist cheeks, and her chest starts to tremble, like she's hyperventilating. "I...I can't..."

"Come on!" I shout. "No more games. Out with it!"

She breaks down then, and I can feel her moist cheeks on my wrist as she bows her head and cries.

"Mac, what the hell is this?" Gus' left says. When I turn, all of the men have bewildered looks on their faces. Only Gus looks as broken as the girl. He's doing his best to hide it. I hate to see Gus this way.

"Damn it. Martin," I spit. "Give me your silenced piece." I reach out for it, my other hand still around the girl's throat. He looks questioningly at Gus, whose face has just turned stark white.

"Mac," Gus starts to whisper, but then he catches himself. He knows we're in too deep now. That's why he called me. I'm the one who's used to wading through this shit, not him. That's why I'm the specialist. He's going to trust my call. That's why I'm here.

He looks at Martin, and then takes in a big, deep breath, like he's about to go venture the deep end of our scum-covered pool. Then, he gives a solemn nod.

Martin pulls out his gun. It's the nicest piece among the boys. He's got the long barrel of a silencer already screwed on—one of the many reasons why he's Gus's right.

I let go of the girl's throat, and place the barrel carefully against her forehead. Her eyes sharpen when she feels the cold metal, and her crying instantly stops, like she has a light switch inside her brain. I'm impressed.

"For the last time," I shout. "Tell me where..."

Then we are all deaf. Never fire a gun underground. Trust me on that.

It would have been a different story if I had pulled the trigger with Martin's gun. Still holding it against her head, I fired my pistol out from under my jacket, straight into Martin. Even without his shooter, I know he's the most dangerous, so I drop him first.

Before the others can even gasp, I kill them all. Whirling, I fire my pistol at the thugs on the right, and Martin's pistol at the thugs on the left. They go down in a hail of gunfire. I'm not the best of Gus's thugs in a firefight, but we're practically standing within arm's reach of each other in this tiny cellar, and I have two full clips versus their holstered guns and slack jaws.

A ragged breath's length later, only Gus and I are left standing. His eyes are wide, and the blood has completely deserted his face.

"You've been good to me, Gus," I say, but I soon realize that I can't even hear myself. I guess that Gus must have read my lips or my face, because he only vacantly nods in response.

I put one in his head, as merciful as I can be. Gus slumps to the ground like all of the strings holding his rag doll body up were cut at once. Snip.

“And I’m sorry,” I whisper, but again no one hears me.

* * * * *

Twelve hours later, Heidi and I are across state line number three, into Louisiana. This will be hour thirty for me without sleep, but my passenger is sawing logs in a fetal position. She hasn’t stirred for hours and I’m envious. Just looking at her adds ten pounds to my eyelids, but I don’t stop. I don’t dare. Not yet.

I had always dreamed about this day. Never did I have silly illusions about becoming the next Gus and making it big in the crime world—all of the little Murphys running around doing the shit work while I got rich and fat, sitting on my throne of drugs, booze, and women. That wasn’t for me, and never once did I think it could be. No, if I wanted to one day vanish—and I had fantasized about this day for years—I needed to be someone who could vanish. A Gus couldn’t just vanish.

My fantasy was to one day grab that day-pack I had squirreled away, take my modest but small fortune taped underneath my bathroom sink, and throw it all into my old ‘87 Camaro I had stored away off-site in a container no one’s ever seen before. I would just drive west, maybe to Mexico or California, and get as far away as I could.

A Mac like me could disappear as long as I didn’t do anything stupid. My job was all about the stupid—getting back what wasn’t rightfully theirs and dealing with people whose greed got the best of them. If I didn’t burn any bridges, I could just vanish. If I didn’t do anything that would put a price on my head, no one would care enough to follow. Like run with money that wasn’t mine.

Or shoot a Gus in the head.

When I find an old motel that looks like it could quite possibly be abandoned in the outskirts of Baton Rouge, I decided it’s time to stop. I’m not sure how much longer I can last, and the steering wheel’s starting to look mighty comfortable.

She’s still out when I go pay for our room with cash, but she’s yawning and rubbing sleep from her eyes when I get back. I toyed with the idea of carrying Heidi up to the room like a father would his eight year old daughter, something real sweet and paternal like, but she wakes up before I get the chance. I wouldn’t know how to do it anyway, so it’s just as well. Also, she’s still looking at me like I’m a mad man. She doesn’t know me, who I really am, and I have decided to keep the connection between her mom and me a secret. Either

the right moment hasn't arrived yet or I haven't found enough courage. I honestly can't tell which.

Gus didn't know about me and Heidi's mom Rachel. No one did. Even though we were kids back then, just a pair of stupid teenagers with raging hormones and puppy love, we were careful. She was the daughter of Sonito, from Northside—we had to be careful. I was young, not suicidal. If he had known, Gus wouldn't have sent me. If he had known, I would never have known Heidi here even existed. Part of me hates him for not knowing. Part of me is thankful, for Heidi's sake, at least.

The hotel room looks like one of the dungeons I usually work in—or used to work in, I suppose—and I laugh when Heidi wrinkles her nose.

"It's just for a couple hours," I assure her. "Then we'll keep rolling west."

She looks at me with her mother's hazel eyes again, and I feel a string in my heart reverberate. "And how long will we keep running?"

I shrug.

"Until it's safe, or when you want to stop. But it isn't safe yet."

Back in Miami, I imagine that people have just started to notice that Gus and his boys are missing. I didn't do anything amateur-like, like torch the house as I know Murphy would have, so it might be a while before they find the bodies. I also wiped down everything Heidi and I touched as we left.

As for the gunshots? Well, Gus picked that location for a reason. People in that neighborhood don't look around when there are gunshots. If we're lucky, when the police eventually get called to investigate the smell in a week or two, they'll think it was a Sonito family retaliation.

I drop Heidi's luggage on the uneven bed. It's a large, black duffle bag that I know holds either a brick of cash, drugs or both. I noticed that her eyes haven't left the bag since I took it out of the trunk.

On our way out of town, we stopped by her ex-boyfriend's place and picked up what Gus and probably half of the Miami underground were after. Valdez or Sonito property, I imagine. Like always, I just don't want to know, and I would have rather left it to rot too if Heidi hadn't begged. She told me that Valdez's boys had gotten to the boyfriend before her, and the bag was all that was left of her old life. I wouldn't have been a great father—I caved too easily on everything.

I pat the bag warmly for her to see. I know she still hasn't figured out who I am or why I saved her, but I imagine that she thinks it has a lot to do with the bag.

"I'm going to grab a quick shower. Try and get some sleep."

We both hear the activities in the next room, something kinky and loud, and she gives me a queer look.

“Just try,” I say again. I snatch up my day-pack and head into the airliner-sized bathroom.

Normally, after a job, I shower. I know it takes days to get gunpowder residue off your person, but I’m old-fashioned and usually try anyways. I initially went into the john to do just that, but now that I’m slumped against a wall of mildew and god knows what else, I find that I’m just too damn tired. I look at the old and cracked face in the mirror and realize that I should have run years ago.

I want to reminisce. I want to bring up memories of Rachel, to remind myself of why I did what I just did, but I’m too tired.

I can’t even remember Rachel’s face right now—all I see beneath my eyelids is Heidi’s face soaked in tears. God, when was the last time I saw Rachel’s glowing face? Fifteen years ago?

I didn’t know about Heidi then—how could I? Rachel was so beautiful that day, even lying in a pine box with a summer’s dress on and her bosom ceasing to rise and fall. I vaguely remember a little girl there crying, a red face soaked with tears, a confused little girl who didn’t belong at a crime family’s funeral. Do I really remember that, Heidi back then, or did my imagination just fill in some gaping holes?

I settle with splashing water on my face. I even toy with the idea of changing my clothes—hell, I should do it just so I can burn them in the morning—but my clumsy fingers can’t even undo the buttons on my shirt.

When I come out of the bathroom, my sack under my arm, Heidi levels my gun at me.

“You sick old perv,” she spits. She’s holding it like an amateur, like she fears it rather than respects it. It’s obvious that she’s surprised by the weight, but still does her best to keep it upright. I can’t even remember when I put the thing down. “I will never be your little whore!”

I see that she’s come to a conclusion about why I helped her. Though she couldn’t be farther from the truth, I can see why.

“No, wait,” I say, putting my hands up slowly. I start to chuckle. She’s so cute with a pistol. “You don’t understand.”

And I guess she never will. It’s like god himself took a Louisville Slugger and tried to knock my heart right out of my chest. I’m vaguely aware of the fact that I’m in the air, flying backwards. Then I see the muzzle flash. Then I hear the explosion. It’s like my brain couldn’t register all that just happened, so it decided to show me the pointers in slow-mo instant replay.

I crash off the wall, feeling something behind me crunch, and then I’m falling.

I don’t know why I can hear this time, but I can. I should be deaf. She had two pistols to choose from, and she chose mine instead of the silencer. Silly.

“I’m so sorry!” I hear her crying over me. In the corner of my eye I can see my pistol tossed aside. Everything’s going blurry, and the fire in my chest is drowning me alive.

“God, I’m so sorry!” she says again, but it’s like she’s a thousand miles away, and getting farther and farther with every heartbeat I feel aching in my chest.

* * * * *

It’s funny that the first thing that I realize is that my hands are tied behind my back. Not *Where am I?* or *Am I really alive?* but the nasty cords someone used to tie my wrists. They bite deep into my flesh, and I wonder if I’m bleeding. I can’t feel my fingers.

The second thing I notice is that I have no strength. Not even enough to lift my head up and see who’s in front of me. Yes, I have to lift my head, I realize. I’m not face-down on shag brown carpet anymore. I’ve been propped up in a chair. How long have I been out? How long have I been dead?

“Wake-y, wake-y, Big Mac,” I hear a shrill voice say, like a kid adventuring into puberty. “Time to pay the piper, old man.”

The voice sends a river of ice water through my veins, but not because I’m surprised to hear it. Somehow I expected it. Somehow I knew it would come to this.

“Murphy.”

I’m amazed I can flap my lips but not lift my head. I feel his cold talons dig into my chin, and he lifts it for me.

“So good to see you again,” he gives me his decaying, yellow grin. Then I feel that ridiculous knife of his bury itself into my chest, right where the bullet struck me.

My body convulses like he just hooked up my nipples to a car battery.

“You fuck!” I shout. “You’re supposed to ask me a question first!”

The knife pulls back. Oddly, the pain instantly stops. It feels distant now, like a pin-prick.

“Okay, you want a question? Here’s a question: Why’d ya do it, Mac?”

Thump. The knife goes right back in. Same spot, like he’s a surgeon. I shake hard in the chair I’m tied to.

Murphy’s laughing now.

“She’s not even your kid, man! You threw away your career, your life, for some punk that ain’t even yours!”

He pulls the knife out again, and my body stops shaking.

“No,” I whisper. “You don’t understand...”

“Of course I understand, Mac,” Murphy says. Stab. “This is all some silly guilt trip that started eighteen years ago, right? Left poor old Rachel alone so you could pursue...what? Lots of money? Wealth? Happiness? How much does a guy like you make, Mac? How much shit can you buy in a month? And you still got regrets?”

I’m shaking my head feverishly now, like I’m a delusional drunk in denial of the truth. Maybe I am.

“You threw away your whole life for a girl that doesn’t even look like you!”

“But she’s Rachel’s!” I suddenly scream. “She’s Rachel’s daughter! It doesn’t matter if she’s mine! She could have been! If we hadn’t lost the baby, she could have...”

Stab.

“But she’s not,” Murphy laughs. “And even if she was yours, she wasn’t worth throwing your life away for. Look at you! She left you for dead after you saved her ass. She’s just a thug. A thug like you and me.”

“No,” I whisper. Stab. More convulsions. “She wouldn’t have been! She wouldn’t have been if...”

“If what?” Murphy says, pulling the knife back out. “If you had chose Rachel instead? If you had been around, been a dad instead of a thug?” Murphy laughs. “She’s a thug. And a stupid thug. Look at all you did for her, and she’s still going to get pinched.”

It takes me a long moment to realize what Murphy’s saying. He sees the light in my eyes and nods.

“Yeah. She left your body in that motel. With your gun. The bullet will match that gun, which will match your fingerprints and hers. And then that gun of yours will match the pile of bodies in Miami. You know that girl has gotten her fingers inked before. She’s got a week maybe before Miami’s finest send them over, and then she’ll have her very own turn on the electric chair. Good save there, Mac. You sure know how to choose them.”

Everything’s getting blurry again. I look up at Murphy, my eyes suddenly very tired. His face is starting to smudge like an oil painting under a hair dryer.

“So if you still want to save her...” Murphy continues. “Better get your ass moving.”

He sinks the knife into me again, like he’s trying to jump-start my cold, dead heart.

* * * * *

I feel the carpet on my cheeks as much as I can smell it, and in the distance I can hear my Camaro roaring to life. I try to get up, stumble, fall, and then try again. Like a dying fish I flop back onto the floor. God, it feels like there's a bonfire in my chest, and it's spreading.

The most I can manage is rolling over, and that alone takes a world of effort. Like an idiot, I slide a finger into my shirt and feel where the bullet struck me. Yeah, I'm wearing a Kevlar vest. If I had told you earlier, it wouldn't have been much of a story, but let me assure you that getting hit with a 9mm point blank wearing a vest is no light matter. I know I'm lucky to be alive. Very lucky, assuming I can still pull through this. Internal bleeding and all hasn't been ruled out. I wonder how many ribs are broken.

I roll my head right, and I see a shiny, copper cylinder. A nine-mike shell casing. Imaginary Murphy was right. She's an amateur. More amateur than he is.

I swim through the pain and struggle to get moving. I got to be quick. I can't hear the three or four person orgy in the other room anymore, and that certainly means they phoned the cops. If I'm going to save Heidi, the police can't find a body here, or any guns. If they come and all they find is a little blood and a broken wall mirror, they won't have enough. That CSI shit is expensive.

I gather up both pistols, the spent casing, and my day-pack. The girl was kind enough to leave me my retirement fund, though I doubt that it was intentional. No time to wipe anything down. I cracked my head and bled all over the wall when Heidi shot me, but that can't be helped now, and it certainly won't look like enough to keep the police interested. At the very most, they'll think it was just a drug deal gone wrong and both parties fled. I stumble out the door in less than thirty seconds.

Strolling down the street, I see the first police cruiser roll up with its gumbdrops in disco mode. I can't walk too straight—the pain is so bad I'm amazed I can even walk at all—so I try to feign a hangover rather than a bullet wound. An amateur would hide or maybe put his head down and try not to make eye contact. But the thing to do here is to be like anyone else. Look. Rubberneck. I stop, watch the cruiser roll by, and get my full gander as I watch him park. In the parking lot I just struggled through not three minutes ago, the cop pops his door open and rushes inside my room with a hand on his hip iron. Then I move on. Casually. Modestly.

I move on.

* * * * *

I don't know what happened to Heidi after that. Hopefully her days of being a criminal—a thug, as Murphy would have put it—are over, and she'll use whatever she thought was worth throwing her life away for on something smart and inconspicuous, like stock in Microsoft. I wish her the best, though I pray never to run into her again.

As for me? Well, I'll survive. I always do. No one's come for me yet, and I count my blessing every day. I can't exactly say that I'm making an honest living and doing the American Dream thing, but I'll get by. Old habits are hard to break, I suppose.

Just no more Murphys for me. No more being a thug.
I've moved on.

END

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THE BIG SCORE

by

Chris F. Holm

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It was just past six AM when the trawler emerged from the fog, running dark despite the weather and listing slightly to port. She was a run-down old thing, scarred and dented and spotted with rust. Mike Malloy didn't need to see her markings to know whose she was—that piece of shit belonged to Jimmy Bradfield. The *First Light*, she'd been, when she was worth a damn. Jimmy's pop used to say she'd make it all the way to Spain if you asked her nice, and the way he kept her, you'd believe it. When his old man died, Jimmy christened her the *Big Score*, and truth to tell, she hadn't seen an honest day's work since. *By the look of her*, Mike thought, *Jimmy should have stuck to lobster*.

Mike returned his attention to his traps—the empties a jumbled mess beside him on the deck, the baited pots stacked and ready to drop. His boat rocked in the choppy morning surf, clanking against the dock. The briny stench of herring prickled in his sinuses as he snatched a handful from the barrel and stuffed it in to a mesh bait bag. The bag he placed in an empty lobster trap, and the trap went on the stack. All told, he had a dozen left to fill. Most folks, they'd have a deckhand do it—it was messy work, and the herring stank like hellb—but Mike didn't mind. He liked getting here before the rest of the crew. Liked the quiet. Gave him time to think.

At first it didn't seem like much of anything, just a low diesel rumble, common enough out on the water. But this was different. Off, somehow. Mike glanced up. The *Big Score* was coming in fast—too fast. She didn't slow. Didn't turn. Too late, he realized what was going to happen.

The wharf shuddered as the boat struck, just fifty yards from where Mike stood. He was over the deck rail in a flash, scrambling down the length of the small floating dock and up the ladder to the wharf.

The boat rocked from the impact, engines whining. Again, she slammed against the pilings. There was a shriek of rending metal, and a brittle crunch of wood. Mike sprinted toward the point of impact, mindful of the sudden cant of the boards beneath his feet. He hesitated just long enough to spot his landing and then leapt, hitting the deck hard.

“Jimmy!” he called.

No answer.

“Jimmy, what the hell are you doing?”

He scaled the stairs to the bridge. Empty. He grabbed the wheel and gave her a little gas, cutting away from the wharf. The hull protested a moment as it ground against the piling, but then it came clear.

Mike brought her in nice and easy and cut the engines. Big as the old boat was, tying her up himself was a little tricky, but he managed. He surveyed the damage. The wharf was a pretty dinged up, and his wake was littered with splinters from the damaged piling, but it looked like it’d hold. He wasn’t as sure about the boat.

Mike walked the length of the deck. Jimmy wasn’t on it. There was a heap of empty lobster pots on the aft deck, surrounded by a tangled mess of line and buoys—his pop’s old green and white. *Ain’t seen those in the water in a damn sight*, Mike thought, *not since Jimmy let his license lapse*.

Mike searched cabin, the engine room, and the hold, looking for Jimmy and inspecting the hull. The boat was a mess, but it didn’t look like it’d founder. Jimmy was nowhere to be seen. His wetsuit, weights, and tanks were all laid out in the cabin, though God knows why—scallop season was still a few months away, and somehow, Mike didn’t see Jimmy as much of a hobbyist. Wasn’t any profit in it.

Mike’s head caught on to what his gut had been telling him ever since he hit the deck: Jimmy was in the water. Whatever dumb-ass scam he’d been running, he must have gone out alone. A ship this big in fog this thick, running without lights? It’s awful easy to run afoul of something, and if he got tossed, he could be anywhere.

“James Bradfield?”

The call came down from the wharf just as Mike emerged from the cabin. A short, stocky guy with dark hair and dark eyes, yellow slicker half-zipped over a cable-knit sweater. He didn’t wait for an answer; he swung first one leg, and then the other, onto the ladder that descended to the dock, his loafers struggling for purchase on the spray-slick rungs.

“Don’t bother,” Mike said. “Jimmy ain’t here.”

The man paused, unconvinced. “But this is his ship.”

“Boat,” Mike replied, idly. “And believe me, he ain’t on it.”

The man looked dubious, but he returned to the wharf nonetheless. Mike hopped off the boat and scaled the ladder with ease. Up close, the guy was full of twitchy energy—he shifted constantly from foot to foot, and his hands tugged at the hem of his sleeves. *Nervous*, Mike thought. *Nervous or eager*.

“I have business with Mr. Bradfield. He’s expecting me.”

“Look, I’m sure he *was*, but that boat came in empty. I had to guess, I’d say Jimmy’s in the drink, which means he ain’t got a lot of time. Now if you’ll excuse me...”

Mike started up the pier toward town, but the man sidestepped in front of him, a smile breaking on his face. “Let’s not play these childish games, Mr. Bradfield. If my offer was not to your liking, perhaps we could discuss it over breakfast. I’m sure there’s something I can do to sweeten the pot.”

“You got the wrong guy, pal. Name’s Malloy—Mike Malloy. I swear I have no idea who you are or what you’re doing here, and I really don’t care. But if you don’t get the hell out of my way, you and Mr. Bradfield won’t be discussing much of anything ever, you get me?”

The man sized Mike up a moment and stepped aside. Mike pushed past him and sprinted for his pickup. He glanced in his rearview — the guy was right where he’d left him, face set in a scowl. And then, with a squeal of tires that echoed through the still morning air, Mike pulled out of the lot, heading toward town.

* * * * *

Frank Simmons sipped lukewarm coffee from a Styrofoam cup and watched the two men argue over the wheel of his rented Taurus. The coffee was bitter, the argument brief. Even with the window cracked, he couldn’t quite make out their exchange. Whatever was said, the fisherman took off like a bat out of hell, pulling out of the wharf’s lot maybe fifteen yards from where Simmons sat. He set the coffee in the cup-holder and fished out his cell, punching in a number.

“You there yet?” Drake said, by way of greeting.

“A couple of flights and a three-hour drive from Bangor later, yeah. Should have taken me two, but the whole fucking state is covered in fog, and I haven’t seen a proper highway since I landed.”

“And Impaglia?”

Simmons peered through the windshield at the man standing on the pier. “I’m looking at him now.”

“He make you?”

“Not a chance. Far as he knows, everything’s roses. Listen, I need you to run a plate for me. Ford pickup, green. Mid-eighties, I’m guessing. Maine tags: Hotel Charlie Lima eight eight seven.”

“No problem. Lemme put in a call to my guy, and I’ll get back to you.”

“You know where to find me.”

“This shakes out, you owe me a bottle of scotch,” Drake said.

“This shakes out,” Simmons replied, “I’ll buy you a case.”

* * * * *

“You all right, Mike? You look a little peaked.”

Sheriff Caleb Trask sat behind his scarred mahogany desk, cleaning his glasses with a handkerchief and looking concerned. Mike flashed him a wan smile from his seat across the desk. “I’m fine. Just a hell of a morning is all.”

“You did good, Mike.”

“I should be out there. Helping them look.”

“We got two dozen boats in the water already,” Trask replied, “and another dozen coming in out of Milbridge. If he’s out there, we’ll find him.”

“You really believe that?”

Trask sighed.

“I’ll tell you, I can’t count the number of times I’ve hauled Jimmy in here for one damn-fool scheme or another. Poaching, illegal salvage, fishing without a license—you name it. Hell, when the Staties busted up that heroin operation out of Lewiston last year, they liked Jimmy for bringing it down across the border. Lucky he didn’t land his ass in jail over that one. The story broke before they made their move, and the dope just up and disappeared. So do I think we’re gonna find him? Jimmy Bradfield’s a bad penny. He’ll turn up, you wait and see.”

The clock on the wall caught Mike’s eye. It was ten past ten.

“Ah, hell,” he said, “my crew! I gotta get down to the dock, tell them we ain’t heading out—”

“Already taken care of,” Trask replied. “I had one of my boys go down there and let them know. You want my advice? Go home, Mike. Relax. Maybe pop in on your mom. How’s she doing, by the way?”

“She’s fine,” Mike lied. Truth was, she’d been a mess since the stroke, and the shit-hole she was stuck in wasn’t helping. Mike had done everything he could to get her into someplace better, but without a little money to grease the wheels, she wasn’t going anywhere.

“That’s good to hear,” Trask said. “You tell her I said hi.”

“Thanks, I’ll do that.”

Mike got up and headed for the door.

“Hey Mike?” Trask called. “You *did* do good. Remember that.”

Good, right. But sometimes, Mike thought, good just ain't good enough.

* * * * *

The midday sun was a pale white smudge in the fog-laden sky as Mike's truck rocked to a halt in the driveway of his old Cape. Once blue, the house had been beaten gray by decades of biting salt air. He scaled the steps of the porch and then paused, keys in hand. The door was ajar, the jamb splintered. He touched the door and it swung inward.

Mike stepped inside. The place was a mess. Dishes, shattered on the kitchen floor. Furniture slashed open, hemorrhaging batting. Drawers and cupboards emptied, their contents scattered.

There was a knock behind him. Mike wheeled around, expecting an ambush. When it wasn't one, he felt foolish, his face flushing crimson.

It was a man in a rumpled suit, carrying a Manila folder and wearing sunglasses despite the fog. He stood in the open doorway, looking around in evident surprise.

"Mike Malloy?" he asked.

"Who the hell are you?" Mike replied, wincing inwardly at the waver in his voice.

"Forgive me," the man said, pulling a billfold from his coat pocket and flipping it open. "I'm Special Agent Frank Simmons with the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Are you Mike Malloy?"

"Yes," Mike replied. "Is this about my house?"

"I suspect so, yes. You mind if I come in?"

Mike nodded, and the man stepped inside, taking off his sunglasses and tucking them into his pocket. Mike righted two dining room chairs and collapsed into one of them. Simmons sat down in the other.

"So what's this all about?"

Simmons took a picture from the file and handed it to Mike. "Do you know this man?"

"Yeah," Mike replied. "I mean, no, not really. I met him this morning, out on the docks. He thought I was someone else. Who is he?"

"His name is Antonio Impaglia. A collector, to hear him tell it. A high-end fence, more like. Did he tell you what he was looking for?"

"No," Mike replied. "He didn't. All he said was he had a meeting with Jimmy Bradfield. I told him Jimmy wasn't coming, and he got it in his head I was Jimmy skipping out on him. Whatever he's looking for, I ain't got it."

Simmons looked around the room. "He seems to think you do."

"So what is it he's looking for? Drugs? Money?"

"No," Simmons replied. "Tony's tastes are a touch more refined than that."

“Meaning what?”

“What do you know about American history, Mr. Malloy?”

“Only what they teach you in school,” Mike replied, “and probably a fair bit less than that.”

“Well, then, let me give a little refresher. In 1812, the U.S. declared war against the British, in response to their seizure of thousands of American sailors who they forced to serve in the Royal Navy in their fight against Napoleon. The British responded by barricading American ports from Chesapeake Bay to Narragansett. Maine was one of several states that wanted nothing to do with the war, and in fact continued trading with the British under false flags. When Maine fell to the British in 1814, these waters became a central shipping route for military supplies and civilian goods to and from Britain.”

“Look,” Mike interrupted, “that’s all very interesting, but what the hell does it have to do with my place getting tossed?”

“I’m getting there. See, by 1814, the U.S. had gotten wise to the fact that our fledgling military couldn’t take on the Royal Navy alone, so they began funding privateers—pirates, essentially. These ships-for-hire decimated the British fleet, capturing or destroying God knows how many ships during the course of the war. And something else happened in 1814 as well.”

“What’s that?” Mike asked, making no attempt to hide his impatience.

“Napoleon fell. With him out of the way, the British were sure we’d soon follow. So the Crown sent to their top generals a gift, intended to inspire them into victory: two flintlock pistols, commissioned by Napoleon himself and taken from him when Paris fell. But those pistols never arrived on these shores. They were lost, as was the ship that carried them.”

“Wait a minute. You think this guy’s after a couple of antique guns?”

“Yes.”

“And he thinks I’ve got them?”

“Yes.”

“That’s ridiculous. That ship could have gone down *anywhere*.”

“True,” Simmons replied, “but Tony thinks it’s here.”

“So let’s say he’s right, and pirates funded by the U.S. government sank a British ship carrying stolen French treasure off the coast of nowhere, Maine. Wouldn’t they have looted the thing first?”

“Sure, but the operative word is *looted*. Anything they took they would have sold, but the pistols were never seen again.”

“This ship, it was British navy?”

“Yes,” Simmons replied, “which means according to U.S. law, it’s still the property of the British government, no matter where it went down.”

“So this Impaglia guy, he hires Jimmy to go out and find the wreck, only Jimmy disappears, and now he thinks *I’ve* got the guns.”

“Looks like.”

“Shit.” Mike grabbed a beer from the ruins of his kitchen and popped the cap off on the table. He took a long, slow swig; it was lukewarm, but it did the job.

Another six or so of these, he thought, and this all won’t seem so bad.

“This Bradfield,” Simmons asked, “you know where he lives?”

“Yeah. The road ain’t marked, though. You’ll have a hell of a time finding it alone.”

“You mind riding along?”

Mike shrugged. “Beats sitting here,” he replied, downing his beer and tossing the empty onto the rubble-strewn floor.

* * * * *

If anything, Mike thought, this place looks worse than mine.

Jimmy lived in an old hunting cabin maybe seven miles out of town, and a good two miles from the nearest paved road. Simmons’ Taurus protested heartily as he pushed the needle past sixty down the single winding rutted lane, bottoming out twice. It wasn’t any use, though. They were too late. The place was a wreck, and Impaglia was long gone.

Mike eyed the jagged holes in the drywall, the floorboards pried up.

“What now?” he asked.

Simmons shrugged.

“Now we have a look around, see if Tony missed anything.”

They made quick work of the cabin; it was just two rooms and a bath, all of them turned inside out. Impaglia hadn’t missed a trick—every inch of the place was picked over, poked at, or downright destroyed. When they finished inside, they circled the house to the shed. The fog pressed close, obscuring all but the faintest suggestion of the forest around them. Simmons disappeared into the shed. Mike waited outside, arms crossed against the cold. A few feet away, something caught his eye. A rough-hewn cross, just two pieces of scrap wood nailed hastily together, jutting from the ground in the shadow of an ancient sugar maple. Carved into the center was a name: *Spike*.

Funny, Mike thought. As far as he knew, the only dog Jimmy ever had was a mean little Terrier named Ahab. Little bastard yipped all day and bit anybody unlucky enough to wander within reach. Wasn’t a soul alive who missed that dog when it finally gave up the ghost, Jimmy included. But if that was the case, then what the hell was buried here?

Mike knelt beside the grave, brushing aside the mat of leaves and pine needles that lay atop it, but the ground beneath was undisturbed. Whatever was in there had been in the ground a few months at least.

“Hey,” Mike called, “when did this Impaglia guy get turned on to these pistols?”

“Couple weeks ago, we think,” Simmons replied, his voice muffled by the shed walls. “Some sea captain’s papers sold at auction to an anonymous bidder. Word is, he was on the crew that brought down the ship, and he kept himself a journal. Why?”

Mike straightened, and wiped his hands on his jeans.

“No reason,” he said.

Whatever Jimmy’d stashed here, Mike wanted nothing to do with it.

“Shed’s clean,” Simmons said, stepping back outside, “or at least as clean as anything else around here.”

“So what’s the plan?”

“I figure it’s time to check in with the Sheriff, see if I can’t get a line on where Impaglia’s staying.”

“What makes you think he’ll stick around? I mean, if he’s got the guns—”

“Tony doesn’t have the guns,” Simmons replied.

“What makes you so sure?”

Simmons nodded toward the cabin. “The whole damn place is torn apart. The shed, too. If he’d found them, he’d have stopped looking. Of course, it’s possible that Bradfield absconded with them himself.”

Mike shook his head. “Without his boat?”

“Perhaps he arranged safe passage on another.”

“Maybe,” Mike replied, “but if I was gonna disappear, I’d make damn sure I sunk my boat. Nobody thinks twice around here about a guy going missing, so long as his boat goes down.”

“Either way, the play’s the same. I stick with Impaglia, see where he leads.”

“And me?”

Simmons smiled. “You, Mr. Malloy, have done enough for one day. To be honest, I shouldn’t have involved you at all. You have someplace you can stay until all this blows over?”

“Just my place. Way I figure it, he knows I ain’t got what he’s looking for, so it’s as safe as any.”

“I’m sure you’re right,” Simmons replied. And as darkness descended, they headed for the car, their footfalls muffled by the pressing fog.

* * * * *

Mike scaled the steps to his side door as the last gray trace of evening sun dipped beneath the western horizon. The porch light above him cast halos in the fog that only served to amplify the darkness beyond. The door was closed but unlatched, its lock bent to hell from its meeting with the pry-bar. He kicked it open, shutting it behind him and setting the chain. The place smelled like fridge, and something crunched beneath his feet as he stepped into the room. He fumbled for the light switch, but stopped short. His hand connected with something warm. Fabric rustled in the darkness. Too late, he reacted, throwing up his arms in defense. The blow hit him just above the temple. White-hot pain, a sense of falling, and then, for a while, nothing.

When Mike woke, he was tied to a chair in the middle of his kitchen. His head was throbbing, his vision blurry. He raised his head, or tried to. It was suddenly too heavy for his neck—all he got for his trouble was the sudden urge to vomit. He rested for a moment and tried again. Better. His vision was improving as well—still a little fuzzy around the edges, but clear enough to see he wasn't alone.

“Good, you're up! Now why don't you tell me where the fuck you put my guns?”

Though the man was standing, he wasn't much taller than Mike was seated. His slicker hung open, revealing a glimpse of shoulder-holster beneath.

“Impaglia,” Mike croaked.

“Please,” Impaglia replied, “we're all friends here. Call me Tony. Now, Mike, where the hell are my guns?”

“You know I don't have them. You searched the place yourself.”

Impaglia laughed. “Is *that* what you think? Boy, you're in so far over your head you're lucky you're still breathing. This wasn't me—I had my hands full at the Bradfield place, for all the goddamn good it did me.”

“Then who?”

“I'm sorry, am *I* the one tied to the chair? How about I ask the questions for a while, and maybe later we can switch.”

“Look, I swear I don't have them.”

Impaglia shook his head. “You know what your mistake was, Mike?”

“What?”

“You should have said *What guns?*”

Mike attempted a smile. It came out more of a grimace.

“You know what *your* mistake was, Tony?”

“What?”

“If you wanted to tie a lobsterman to a chair, you shoulda learned to tie a proper knot.”

Mike rose from the chair, the rope falling to the floor behind him. Impaglia went for his gun. Mike twisted, grabbing the chair-back behind him.

Steel scraped leather as Tony's piece cleared its holster, and then the chair snapped across his back, splinters clattering to the floor. Impaglia pitched forward, his cheek slamming against the countertop. He fell limp to the floor, gun still in hand. Mike hesitated, eyes on the gun. If it was a bluff, he wasn't about to bite.

He bolted for the door, skittering on the rubble and nearly going down. He threw open the chain and burst into the night, Impaglia's crumpled frame still motionless behind him. A quick look back and he was gone, swallowed by the fog as he sprinted toward town.

* * * * *

"Come on, come on, pick up," Mike said into the receiver. He was standing at a pay phone outside Tanner's Auto Repair, a squat cinderblock structure about a half-mile from his house. The sign in the darkened storefront read *Closed*, and the lot was shrouded in shadow, but still, Mike felt exposed.

Four rings. Five. Finally, someone answered.

"Sheriff's Office—Trask speaking."

"Cal, it's Mike. Listen, I need to talk to Simmons. Impaglia's at my place, and—"

"Mike, just slow down a minute and tell me what's going on."

"I just need to speak to Agent Simmons. Is he there? Do you know how I can get a hold of him?"

"Mike, what are you going on about? Are you in some kind of trouble? And who the hell is Agent Simmons?"

Mike's stomach lurched. He clenched shut his eyes and sat down hard on the pavement. How could he have been so stupid? *You know I don't have them*, he'd told Impaglia, *you searched the place yourself*. But he hadn't. It was Simmons. Simmons ransacked his place, and when he didn't find what he was looking for, he just moved on to Plan B. *Guy flashed a fucking badge and I never doubted him for a second*.

"Mike? You there? Is everything all right?"

Mike realized he was still holding on to the receiver. "Yeah, Cal, I'm here. Listen, I'm sorry I bothered you. I think this day is catching up with me, is all."

"You sure?"

Mike sighed. "Yeah, I'm sure." He replaced the phone on the cradle and buried his face in his hands. He sat like that for what seemed like forever, too defeated to care if he was seen. Finally, he rose and fished a couple of quarters from his pocket, his face set in a frown of grim determination. He fed one into the phone and dialed.

One way or another, it was time to finish this.

* * * * *

The shrill bark of the telephone echoed through the quiet house. Antonio Impaglia lay on the kitchen floor, willing it to stop. Each ring was worse than the last, an ice pick to his temple when all he wanted was to sleep. He was so very tired, and his head was fucking killing him. But the ringing would not be ignored.

He opened his eyes and looked around. His vision swam; his stomach heaved. *Great*, he thought. *Concussion*. Still the phone rang. It hung on the far wall, beside the fridge. He crawled toward it. When he was close enough to reach, he yanked the cord. The handset fell from the cradle. He snatched it up and pressed it to his ear.

“Yeah?” he said. His voice sounded tinny to his ears, thin and far away.

“I know where Jimmy stashed the guns,” said the voice in the receiver. “If I tell you where they are, you have to take them and leave, you got me?”

“Who the hell is this?” Impaglia asked.

“I’m the guy whose kitchen you’re in,” Mike replied.

Impaglia struggled to focus. “Why the hell would you wanna give me the guns?”

“Because I value my life. Because those guns are more trouble than they’re worth. And because the other guy who’s looking for them tore apart my house and then showed up posing as a cop to drag me all over town, helping him look.”

“Simmons told you he was a *cop*?” Impaglia snorted. “That’s fucking rich.”

“Yeah,” Mike said, “a real laugh riot. The way I figure it, he doesn’t like you very much. *I* don’t like you very much, either, but I’m willing to overlook that fact if it means screwing Simmons out of what he’s after.”

“That’s mighty big of you,” Impaglia said.

“It is, isn’t it? But here’s the catch. Anything happens to me, it’s *your* name the cops are gonna get—I’ve already made the arrangements. This is one loose end that doesn’t feel like getting tidied up.”

“All I want is the pistols, and then I’ll go. You have my word.”

“Thanks, Tony, that means a lot. Now listen very carefully.”

* * * * *

Impaglia grunted with exertion as the spade pierced the rocky earth. The shovel was one of those little half-sized things, too short for the job, really, but it was all Bradfield had in his shed. The headlights of Tony’s rented Malibu stared into the darkness, reflecting off the fog. It was enough light to work by, but a couple feet in any direction, the world was lost in a sea of milky white.

A few feet down, he hit something. Impaglia dropped to his hands and knees and began clearing it of dirt, his face slick with sweat despite the chill night air. His fingers found the edges, and he brushed them clear. It was a small

wooden crate. He popped the Malibu's trunk and fished out the tire-iron. Back at the hole, he wedged it beneath the lid, and slowly levered open the crate.

"Hiya, Tony."

Impaglia spun, tire-iron clattering to the ground. Standing behind him was Simmons. A nine millimeter glinted in his hand, leveled at Impaglia.

"That son of a bitch," Impaglia muttered. "He set me up!"

"Our fisherman friend? I suppose he did, didn't he? Of course, he thought he was fighting for truth, justice, and the American way, so you really can't blame him. Dumb shit thought I was a Fed, if you can believe it—he called every motel in town until he found me. Had to help me get the bad guy. That's you, Tony, in case you haven't been paying attention."

Impaglia laughed. "Is *that* why he said he called?"

"That's right," Simmons replied. "I say something funny?"

"You don't get it, do you? He made you, man. He knows you're not a cop. He set us *both* up. You and me, we gotta get the hell out of here before the cavalry arrives."

Simmons shook his head and smiled. "You really think I'm gonna buy that shit after what you pulled?"

"It's the truth."

"The truth, huh? Like when you told me you were going out of town to line up a buyer?"

"Listen, about that—I can explain..."

"Save it," Simmons spat. "I put Drake on your tail the second I told you about the job. What's the matter, Tony, the life of a fence a little lacking in excitement? Or let me guess—you're sick of getting stuck with twenty percent when you're the one doing all the work. Am I close?"

Impaglia frowned but said nothing. His hand crept toward the gun beneath his jacket.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Simmons said. "I'd hate to have to kill you. Actually, you know what? That's not exactly true."

The gun thundered in Simmons' hand. Impaglia pitched backward, landing sprawled atop the crate. Simmons kicked him aside and shot him again. His body rocked with the impact of the bullet, and then lay still. Blood pooled on his slicker and ran in rivulets toward the ground. Sightless eyes stared skyward, glinting by the light of the headlights.

Simmons knelt beside the crate and tore free the lid, exposing a layer of shrink-wrapped bricks, each a sickly yellow-white. He grabbed a couple, tossing them aside. Beneath them was more of the same.

This can't be happening, he thought.

Panic set in, and he kept digging. Soon, the ground around him was littered with bricks, a few hundred grand worth of heroin at least. When the crate

was empty, he collapsed atop it, sobbing. There were no guns here. No riches. Just a shit-load of smack and a fucking dead body.

And as the cry of the approaching sirens echoed through the night, Frank Simmons began to run.

* * * * *

Sunlight danced on the water beneath a cloudless sky as Mike Malloy brought his boat around and cut the engines. The buoy bobbed green and white off the port bow. Bracing himself against the deck rail, he snagged it with the gaff hook and threaded the line onto the wheel of his pot-hauler. The motor whined against the strain as it dragged the trap toward the boat.

It had been three weeks since Jimmy'd gone missing. Three weeks since Trask and his boys had found Simmons cowering in the woods a scant mile from Jimmy's cabin. Simmons hadn't talked, but the dead body and the half a mil in heroin said plenty.

Jimmy washed up a week later. The fog had long since burned off, and the cops had found a dinged-up channel-marker about a half-mile out. By the look of the thing, he must've hit it full-bore. Poor bastard never stood a chance. What exactly he'd been doing out there was the cause of much debate, but Mike thought he had a pretty good idea.

The trap clanked against the hull, and Mike shut off the hauler. He hefted the trap onto the deck and opened it. Inside was a warped and blackened wooden box, wrapped in plastic.

I've gotta hand it to you, Jimmy, Mike thought, *you picked a hell of a hiding place.* Ain't no one but a lobsterman who'd ever think to look there, and not a one of them would ever dare to snag another man's traps. In this case, though, Mike figured Jimmy wouldn't mind.

Mike cut away the plastic and swung open the box, a smile breaking across his face. The velvet within was sodden, the brass fittings of the pieces tarnished, and their iron dulled with age. Still, he couldn't deny this was one hell of a big score.

Mike tossed Jimmy's trap back in the water. Case in hand, he watched it disappear beneath the swells, and then swung the boat around, heading for port.

END

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FRANK NORRIS

by
W. D. HOWELLS.

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W.D. Howells was an American realist author and a literary critic. The author of several novels (Their Wedding Journey, 1872; A Modern Instance, 1882; The Rise of Silas Lapham, 1885 among others) Howells was a strong proponent of the rejection of the romantic literature of the middle nineteenth century, in favor of a view of life that was more realistic, harder-edged, and not always happily ended. He is quoted as saying, "We hope the time is coming when not only the artist, but the common, average man...will reject the ideal grasshopper wherever he finds it...Because it is not like a real grasshopper"

This article was written shortly after Frank Norris's life was cut untimely short, following an infection resulting from an appendectomy.

[Introduction]

THE projection which death gives the work of a man against the history of his time, is the doubtful gain we have to set against the recent loss of such authors as George Douglas, the Scotchman, who wrote *The House with the Green Shutters*, and Frank Norris, the American, who wrote *McTeague* and *The Octopus*, and other novels, antedating and postdating the first of these, and less clearly prophesying his future than the last. The gain is doubtful, because, though their work is now freed from the cloud of question which always involves the work of a living man in the mind of the general, if his work is good (if it is bad they give it no faltering welcome), its value was already apparent to those who judge from the certainty within themselves, and not from the uncertainty without. Every one in a way knows a thing to be good, but the most have not the courage to acknowledge it, in their sophistication with canons and criterions. The many, who in the tale of the criticism are not worth minding, are immensely unworthy of the test which death alone seems to put into their power. The few, who had the test before, were ready to own that Douglas's study of

Scottish temperaments offered a hope of Scottish fiction freed the Scottish sentimentality which had kept it provincial; and that Norris's two mature novels, one personal and one social, imparted the assurance of an American fiction so largely commensurate with American circumstance as to liberate it from the casual and the occasional, in which it seemed lastingly trammelled. But the parallel between the two does not hold much farther. What Norris did, not merely what he dreamed of doing, was of vaster frame, and inclusive of imaginative intentions far beyond those of the only immediate contemporary to be matched with him, while it was of as fine and firm an intellectual quality, and of as intense and fusing an emotionality.

I

In several times and places, it has been my rare pleasure to bear witness to the excellence of what Norris had done, and the richness of his promise. The vitality of his work was so abundant, the pulse of health was so full and strong in it, that it is incredible it should not be persistent still. The grief with which we accept such a death as his is without the consolation that we feel when we can say of some one that his life was a struggle, and that he is well out of the unequal strife, as we might say when Stephen Crane died. The physical slightness, if I may so suggest one characteristic of Crane's vibrant achievement, reflected the delicacy of energies that could be put forth only in nervous spurts, in impulses vivid and keen, but wanting in breadth and bulk of effect. Curiously enough, on the other hand, this very lyrical spirit, whose freedom was its life, was the absolute slave of reality. It was interesting to hear him defend what he had written, in obedience to his experience of things, against any change in the interest of convention. "No," he would contend, in behalf of the profanities of his people, "that is the way they *talk*. I have thought of that, and whether I ought to leave such things out, but if I do I am not giving the thing as I *know* it." He felt the constraint of those semi-savage natures, such as he depicted in *Maggie*, and *George's Mother*, and was forced through the fealty of his own nature to report them as they spoke no less than as they looked. When it came to *The Red Badge of Courage*, where he took leave of these simple aesthetics, and lost himself in a whirl of wild guesses at the fact from the ground of insufficient witness, he made the failure which formed the break between his first and his second manner, though it was what the public counted a success, with every reason to do so from the report of the sales.

The true Stephen Crane was the Stephen Crane of the earlier books, the earliest book; for *Maggie* remains the best thing he did. All he did was lyrical, but this

was the aspect and accent as well as the spirit of the tragically squalid life he sang, while *The Red Badge of Courage*, and the other things that followed it, were the throes of an art failing with material to which it could not render an absolute devotion from an absolute knowledge. He sang, but his voice erred up and down the scale, with occasional flashes of brilliant melody, which could not redeem the errors. New York was essentially his inspiration, the New York of suffering and baffled and beaten life, of inarticulate or blasphemous life; and away from it he was not at home, with any theme, or any sort of character. It was the pity of his fate that he must quit New York, first as a theme, and then as a habitat; for he rested nowhere else, and wrought with nothing else as with the lurid depths which he gave proof of knowing better than any one else. Every one is limited, and perhaps no one is more limited than another; only, the direction of the limitation is different in each. Perhaps George Douglas, if he had lived, would still have done nothing greater than *The House with the Green Shutters*, and might have failed in the proportion of a larger range as Stephen Crane did. I am not going to say that either of these extraordinary talents was of narrower bound than Frank Norris; such measures are not of the map. But I am still less going to say that they were of finer quality because their achievement seems more poignant, through the sort of physical concentration which it has. Just as a whole unhappy world agonizes in the little space their stories circumscribe, so what is sharpest and subtlest in that anguish finds its like in the epical breadths of Norris's fiction.

II

At the other times when I so gladly owned the importance of this fiction, I frankly recognized what seemed to me the author's debt to an older master; and now, in trying to sum up my sense of it in an estimate to which his loss gives a sort of finality for me, I must own again that he seemed to derive his ideal of the novel from the novels of Zola. I cannot say that, if the novels of Zola had not been cast in the epic mould, the novels of Frank Norris would not have been epical. This is by no means certain; while it is, I think, certain that they owe nothing beyond the form to the master from whom he may have imagined it. Or they owe no more to him, essentially, than to the other masters of the time in which Norris lived out his life all too soon. It is not for nothing that any novelist is born in one age, and not another, unless we are to except that aoristic freak, the historical novelist; and by what Frank Norris wrote one might easily know what he had read. He had read, and had profited, with as much originality as any man may keep for himself, by his study of the great realists whose fiction has illustrated the latter part of the nineteenth century beyond any other time in the

history of fiction; and if he seemed to have served his apprenticeship rather more to one of them than to another, this may be the effect of an inspiration not finally derived from that one. An Italian poet says that in Columbus "the instinct of the unknown continent burned;" and it may be that this young novelist, who had his instincts mostly so well intellectualized, was moved quite from within when he imagined treating American things in an epical relation as something most expressive of their actual relation. I am not so sure that this is so, but I am sure that he believed it so, and that neither in material nor in treatment are his novels Zolaesque, though their form is Zolaesque, in the fashion which Zola did not invent, though he stamped it so deeply with his nature and his name.

I may allow also that he was like Zola in his occasional indulgence of a helpless fondness for the romantic, but he quite transcended Zola in the rich strain of poetry coloring his thought, and the mysticism in which he now and then steeped his story. I do not care enough, however, for what is called originality in any writer to fatigue myself greatly in the effort to establish that of a writer who will avouch his fresh and vigorous powers to any one capable of feeling them. I prefer, in the presence of a large design left unfulfilled, to note the generous ideal, the ample purpose, forecast in the novel forming the first of the trilogy he imagined.

In one of those few meetings which seem, too late, as if they might have been so many, but which the New York conditions of overwork for all who work at all begrudge, I remember how he himself outlined his plan. The story of the Wheat was for him the allegory of the industrial and financial America which is the real America, and he had begun already to tell the first part of this story in the tragedy of the railroad-ridden farms of California, since published as *The Octopus*. The second part, as he then designed, was to carry the tale to Chicago, where the distribution of the Wheat was to be the theme, as its production had already been the theme in the first. The last part was to find its scene in Europe, among the representative cities where the consumption of the Wheat was to form the motive. Norris believed himself peculiarly qualified for the work by the accidents of his life; for he was born in Chicago and had lived there till he was fifteen years old; then he had gone to California, and had grown up into the knowledge of the scene and action which he has portrayed so powerfully; later, he had acquainted himself with Europe, by long sojourn; and so he argued, with an enthusiasm tempered by a fine sense of his moral and artistic responsibility, that he had within himself the means of realizing the whole fact to the reader's imagination. He was aware that such a plan could be carried out only by years of

ardent and patient study, and he expected to dedicate the best part of his strong young life to it.

III

Those who know *The Octopus* know how his work justified his faith in himself; but those who had known *McTeague* could not have doubted but he would do what he had undertaken, in the spirit of the undertaking. Norris did give the time and toil to the right documentation of his history. He went to California and renewed his vital knowledge of his scene; he was in California again, studying the course of the fact which was to bring him to Chicago, when death overtook him and ended his high emprise. But in the meantime he had given us *The Octopus*, and before that he had given us *McTeague*, books not all so unlike in their nature as their surfaces might suggest. Both are epical, though the one is pivoted on the common ambition of a coarse human animal, destined to prevail in a half-quackish triumph, and the other revolves about one of the largest interests of modern civilization. The author thought at first of calling *McTeague*, as he told me, *The Golden Tooth*, which would have been more significant of the irregular dentist's supremacy in the story, and the ideal which inspired him; but perhaps he felt a final impossibility in the name. Yet, the name is a mere mask; and when one opens the book, the mask falls, and the drama confronts us with as living a physiognomy as I have seen in fiction. There is a bad moment when the author is overcome by his lingering passion for the romantic, and indulges himself in a passage of rank melodrama; but even there he does nothing that denies the reality of his characters, and they are always of a reality so intense that one lives with them in the grotesquely shabby San Francisco street where, but for the final episode, the action passes. What is good is good, it matters not what other things are better or worse; and I could ask nothing for Norris, in my sense of his admirable achievement, but a mind freed to criticism absolute and not relative. He is of his time, and, as I have said, his school is evident; and yet I think he has a right to make his appeal in *The Octopus* irrespective of the other great canvases beside which that picture must be put. One should dissociate it as far as possible from the work of his masters—we all have masters; the masters themselves had them—not because it is an imitation, and would suffer from the comparison, but because it is so essentially different, so boldly and frankly native, that one is in danger of blaming it for a want of conformity to models, rather than for too close a following. Yet this, again, does not say quite the right thing, and what I feel, and wish others to feel, in regard to it, is the strong security of its most conscientious and instructed art. Here is nothing of experiment, of protest, of rebellion; the author does not break away from form in

any sprawling endeavor for something newly or incomparably American, Californian, Western, but finds scope enough for his powers within the limits where the greatest fiction of our period "orbs about." The time, if there ever was one, for a prose Walt Whitman was past; and he perceived that the indigenous quality was to be imparted to his work by the use of fresh material, freshly felt, but used in the fashion and the form which a world-old art had evolved in its long endeavor.

McTeague was a personal epic, the Odyssey of a simple, semi-savage nature adventuring and experiencing along the low social levels which the story kept, and almost never rose or fell from. As I review it in the light of the first strong impressions, I must own it greater than I have ever yet acknowledged it, and I do this now with the regret which I hope the critic is apt to feel for not praising enough when praise could have helped most. I do not think my strictures of it were mistaken, for they related to the limits which certain facts of it would give it with the public, rather than to the ethical or aesthetic qualities which would establish it with the connoisseur. Yet, lest any reader of mine should be left without due sense of these, I wish now to affirm my strong sense of them, and to testify to the value which this extraordinary book has from its perfectly simple fidelity: from the truthfulness in which there is no self-doubt and no self-excuse.

IV

But, with all its power, *McTeague* is no such book as *The Octopus*, which is the Iliad to its Odyssey.

It will not be suggesting too much for the story to say, that there is a kind of Homeric largeness in the play of the passions moving it. They are not autochthons, these Californians of the great Wheat farms, choking in the folds of the railroad, but Americans of more than one transplantation; yet there is something rankly earthy and elemental in them, which gives them the pathos of tormented Titans. it is hard to choose any of them as the type, as it is hard to choose any scene as the representative moment. If we choose Annixeter, growing out of an absolute, yet not gross, materiality, through the fire of a purifying love, into a kind of final spirituality, we think, with misgiving for our decision, of Magnus Derrick, the high, pure leader of the rebellion against the railroad, falling into ruin, moral and mental, through the use of the enemy's bad means for his good cause. Half a score of other figures, from either camp, crowd upon the fancy to contest the supreme interest, men figures, women figures; and, when it comes to choosing this episode or that as the supreme event, the

confusion of the critic is even greater. If one were to instance the fight between the farmers and the sheriff's deputies, with the accompanying evictions, one must recall the tremendous passages of the train-robbery by the crazy victim of the railroad's treachery, taking his revenge in his hopeless extremity. Again, a half score of other scenes, other episodes rise from the remembered pages, and defy selection.

The story is not less but more epical, in being a strongly inter-wrought group of episodes. The play of an imagination fed by a rich consciousness of the mystical relations of nature and human nature, the body and the soul of earthly life, steeps the whole theme in an odor of common growth. It is as if the Wheat sprang out of the hearts of men, in the conception of the young poet who writes its Iliad, and who shows how it overwhelms their lives, and germinates anew from their deaths. His poem, of which the terms are naked prose, is a picture of the civilization, the society, the culture which is the efflorescence of the wheaten prosperity; and the social California, rank, crude, lusty, which he depicts is as convincing as the agricultural California, which is the ground of his work. It will be easily believed that in the handling nothing essential to the strong impression is blinked; but nothing, on the other hand, is forced in. The episode of Venamee and Angele, with its hideous tragedy, and the long mystical epilogue ending almost in anti-climax, is the only passage which can be accused of irrelevance, and it is easier to bring than to prove this accusation.

As I write, and scarcely touch the living allegory here and there, it rises before me in its large inclusion, and makes me feel once more how little any analysis of a work of art can represent it. After all the critic must ask the reader to take his word for it that the thing is great, and entreat him to go see for himself: see, in this instance, the breadth and the fineness, the beauty and the dread, the baseness and the grandeur, the sensuality and the spirituality, working together for the effect of a novel unequalled for scope and for grasp in our fiction.

V

Fine work we have enough of and to spare in our fiction. No one can say it is wanting in subtlety of motive and delicate grace of form. But something still was lacking, something that was not merely the word but the deed of commensurateness. Perhaps, after all, those who have demanded Continentality of American literature had some reason in their folly. One thinks so, when one considers work like Norris's, and finds it so vast in scope while so fine and beautiful in detail. Hugeness was probably what those poor fellows were

wanting when they asked for Continentality; and from any fit response that has come from them one might well fancy them dismayed and puzzled to have been given greatness instead. But Continentality he also gave them.

His last book is a fragment, a part of a greater work, but it is a mighty fragment, and it has its completeness. In any time but this, when the air is filled with the fizz and sputter of a thousand pin-wheels, the descent of such a massive aerolite as *The Octopus* would have stirred all men's wonder, but its light to most eyes appears to have seemed of one quality with those cheap explosives which all the publishing houses are setting off, and advertising as meteoric. If the time will still come for acknowledgment of its greatness, it will not be the time for him who put his heart and soul into it. That is the pity, but that in the human condition is what cannot be helped. We are here to do something, we do not know why; we think it is for ourselves, but it is for almost anyone but ourselves. If it is great, someone else shall get the good of it, and the doer shall get the glory too late; if it is mean, the doer shall have the glory, but who shall have the good? This would not be so bad if there were life long enough for the processes of art; if the artist could outlive the doubt and the delay into which every great work of art seems necessarily to plunge the world anew, after all its experience of great work.

I am not saying, I hope, that Frank Norris had not his success, but only that he had not success enough, the success which he would have had if he had lived, and which will still be his too late. The two novels he has left behind him are sufficient for his fame, but though they have their completeness and their adequacy, one cannot help thinking of the series of their like that is now lost to us. It is Aladdin's palace, and yet,

*"The unfinished window in Aladdin's palace
Unfinished must remain,"*

and we never can look upon it without an ache of longing and regret.

Personally, the young novelist gave one the impression of strength and courage that would hold out to all lengths. Health was in him always as it never was in that other rare talent of ours with whom I associate him in my sense of the irretrievable, the irreparable. I never met him but he made me feel that he could do it, the thing he meant to do, and do it robustly and quietly, without the tremor of "those electrical nerves" which imparted itself from the presence of Stephen

Crane. With him my last talk of the right way and the true way of doing things was saddened by the confession of his belief that we were soon to be overwhelmed by the rising tide of romanticism, whose crazy rote he heard afar, and expected with the resignation which the sick experience with all things. But Norris heard nothing, or seemed to hear nothing, but the full music of his own aspiration, the rich diapason of purposes securely shaping themselves in performance.

Who shall inherit these, and carry forward work so instinct with the Continent as his? Probably, no one; and yet good work shall not fail us, manly work, great work. One need not be overhopeful to be certain of this. Bad work, false, silly, ludicrous work, we shall always have, for the most of those who read are so, as well as the most of those who write; and yet there shall be here and there one to see the varying sides of our manifold life truly and to say what he sees. When I think of Mr. Brand Whitlock and his novel of *The Thirteenth District*, which has embodied the very spirit of American politics as American politicians know them in all the Congressional districts; when I think of the author of *The Spenders*, so wholly good in one half that one forgets the other half is only half good; when I think of such work as Mr. William Allen White's, Mr. Robert Herrick's, Mr. Will Payne's—all these among the younger men—it is certainly not to despair because we shall have no such work as Frank Norris's from them. They, and the like of them, will do their good work as he did his.

W. D. HOWELLS.

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McTEAGUE

Part Three

by

Frank Norris

Classic Noir

*Frank Norris was a naturalistic writer of the very late nineteenth century, who produced some of the darkest, hardest-edged prose of his day. **McTeague** is, perhaps, his best-known work, if only because it was the foundation for the infamous Erich von Stroheim silent film **Greed**. Largely inspired by the novels of Emile Zola and the scientific work of Charles Darwin, much of Norris's literary work focused on the efforts of ordinary men to conquer - or at least control - the raging beast within. **McTeague**, the story of an ill-fated love triangle in nineteenth century San Francisco, is still considered to be one of the great American classics, ranking up there with the works of Theodore Dreiser and William Faulkner. How great an author Norris might have become in the fullness of time we will never know, as he died in 1902, just three years after publishing **McTeague**, at the very young age of thirty-two.*

*The Back Alley is serializing **McTeague** over seven issues, and will include articles by scholars who focus on the work of Frank Norris to help the reader understand and appreciate this very early example of naturalistically noir fiction.*

The Story So Far:

McTeague, a hulking, slow-witted former car-boy in a silver mine, has opened a sham dentist parlor on Polk Street in late nineteenth century San Francisco. Schooled only by observing an itinerant dental butcher, and some superficial readings of 'Allen's Practical Dentist' books, he engages mostly in pulling teeth and administering gas (most likely ether or nitrous oxide). His best friend,

budding socialist Marcus Schouler, introduces him to a distant cousin, Trina Sieppe. Trina has a broken tooth which needs mending. While Trina is waiting to have the tooth fixed, McTeague's housekeeper Maria Macapa sells her a lottery ticket. McTeague determines that Trina's tooth can't be saved, and he has to pull it and the one next to it and fashion replacements for them. It's an operation that takes a couple of weeks and several visits to complete. At a final session, he is forced to place her under anesthesia with gas. While she is asleep, McTeague is seized by an impulse that he fights mightily, but unsuccessfully. Yielding to what he calls his 'brute', McTeague kisses Trina forcefully. Ashamed, he returns to his work, and when Trina awakens she tells him that she 'never felt a thing'. McTeague, perhaps out of guilt, immediately- if somewhat roughly- proposes marriage to Trina. She becomes very upset, refuses his proposal, and begins to vomit.

As it happens, Marcus Schouler is also in love with Trina, a fact which McTeague knew even as he kissed her and asked her to marry him. As he lies in his dental parlor, guilt-ridden, he isn't aware that Maria Macapa is robbing him blind, taking instruments and dental gold foil to sell to a Jewish pawnbroker named Zerkow.

McTeague joins with Marcus one afternoon, while Marcus – who works as an assistant for Grannis, the dog doctor – is walking some of Grannis' 'patients'. Over a couple of beers, Marcus asks McTeague what is bothering him. After considerable persuasion, McTeague confesses that he loves Trina Sieppe. Marcus realizes that McTeague would marry Trina that very afternoon if she would have him, but Marcus does not think that he himself cares for her that much. He tells McTeague that he will 'pull out', and make way for McTeague to court Trina, in the interest of their friendship. McTeague is overcome with emotion.

To cheer his friend up, Marcus plays a trick on him. He demonstrates how he can put an entire billiards ball in his mouth. McTeague is dumbstruck. Marcus takes the ball out, and then challenges McTeague to do the same thing. He does, but the ball becomes stuck. McTeague begins to panic, until the ball comes loose of its own accord. Laughing over the joke, Marcus suggests that McTeague begin his courtship of Trina as soon as possible. In a piece of foreshadowing, Marcus points to two dogs snarling at each other through a picket fence and says, "By damn they don't love each other. Just listen; wouldn't that make a fight if the two got together? Have to try it some day."

Having received his friend's blessing, McTeague begins to court Trina. Because her family is from the Old World, all his dates with her are taken as family outings – picnics at the bay, family suppers at her home, and a memorable trip to Schuetzen Park across the bay. After that trip, he begins to see her every Sunday and Wednesday, and one day she meets him at the train without her family. They take a walk, and McTeague confesses to Trina his deepest desire – to have a large gilded tooth mounted outside his dental parlor to announce to one and all his profession.

Once again McTeague asks Trina to marry him, and he kisses her. Alarmed, she takes off and returns to her home, where she asks her mother what she should do. Trina can't decide whether to marry McTeague – on the one hand she finds herself aroused by him, but she is also frightened by his size and rare outbursts of temper. She realized at last that McTeague had awakened the Woman in her, and that she was, for better or worse, irrevocably bonded to him.

Marcus suggests to McTeague that he take Trina to the theater – something that would be a completely novel experience for both of them. McTeague takes Trina and her family to the theater in San Francisco. Never having seen a vaudeville show before, McTeague is amazed at all the different acts, and only leaves reluctantly when Trina's young brother August wets the pants of his new Lord Fauntleroy suit.

Upon returning to McTeague's dental parlors, where McTeague intends to treat the family to dinner, they are called down by Maria Macapa, who excitedly proclaims that Trina's lottery ticket had the winning number, and that she has won five thousand dollars! Everyone is excited, except for Marcus Schouler, who realizes that by giving Trina up to save his friendship with McTeague, he has also given up any chance of sharing in his cousin's amazing new wealth.

"You fool, you fool, Marcus Schouler! (he exclaims) If you'd kept Trina you'd have had that money. You might have had it yourself. You've thrown away your chance in life -- to give up the girl, yes -- but this," he stamped his foot with rage -- "to throw five thousand dollars out of the window -- to stuff it into the pockets of someone else, when it might have been yours, when you might have had Trina AND the money -- and all for what? Because we were pals . Oh, 'pals' is all right -- but five thousand dollars -- to have played it right into his hands -- God DAMN the luck!"

Chapter 8

The next two months were delightful. Trina and McTeague saw each other regularly, three times a week. The dentist went over to B Street Sunday and Wednesday afternoons as usual; but on Fridays it was Trina who came to the city. She spent the morning between nine and twelve o'clock down town, for the most part in the cheap department stores, doing the weekly shopping for herself and the family. At noon she took an uptown car and met McTeague at the corner of Polk Street. The two lunched together at a small uptown hotel just around the corner on Sutter Street. They were given a little room to themselves. Nothing could have been more delicious. They had but to close the sliding door to shut themselves off from the whole world.

Trina would arrive breathless from her raids upon the bargain counters, her pale cheeks flushed, her hair blown about her face and into the corners of her lips, her mother's net reticule stuffed to bursting. Once in their tiny private room, she would drop into her chair with a little groan.

"Oh, MAC, I am so tired; I've just been all OVER town. Oh, it's good to sit down. Just think, I had to stand up in the car all the way, after being on my feet the whole blessed morning. Look here what I've bought. Just things and things. Look, there's some dotted veiling I got for myself; see now, do you think it looks pretty?" -- she spread it over her face -- "and I got a box of writing paper, and a roll of crepe paper to make a lamp shade for the front parlor; and -- what do you suppose -- I saw a pair of Nottingham lace curtains for FORTY-NINE CENTS; isn't that cheap? and some chenille portieres for two and a half. Now what have YOU been doing since I last saw you? Did Mr. Heise finally get up enough courage to have his tooth pulled yet?" Trina took off her hat and veil and rearranged her hair before the looking-glass.

"No, no -- not yet. I went down to the sign painter's yesterday afternoon to see about that big gold tooth for a sign. It costs too much; I can't get it yet a while. There's two kinds, one German gilt and the other French gilt; but the German gilt is no good."

McTeague sighed, and wagged his head. Even Trina and the five thousand dollars could not make him forget this one unsatisfied longing.

At other times they would talk at length over their plans, while Trina sipped her chocolate and McTeague devoured huge chunks of butterless bread. They were to be married at the end of May, and the dentist already had his eye on a couple of rooms, part of the suite of a bankrupt photographer. They were situated in the flat, just back of his "Parlors," and he believed the photographer would sublet them furnished.

McTeague and Trina had no apprehensions as to their finances. They could be sure, in fact, of a tidy little income. The dentist's practice was fairly

good, and they could count upon the interest of Trina's five thousand dollars. To McTeague's mind this interest seemed woefully small. He had had uncertain ideas about that five thousand dollars; had imagined that they would spend it in some lavish fashion; would buy a house, perhaps, or would furnish their new rooms with overwhelming luxury -- luxury that implied red velvet carpets and continued feasting. The old-time miner's idea of wealth easily gained and quickly spent persisted in his mind. But when Trina had begun to talk of investments and interests and per cents, he was troubled and not a little disappointed. The lump sum of five thousand dollars was one thing, a miserable little twenty or twenty-five a month was quite another; and then someone else had the money.

"But don't you see, Mac," explained Trina, "it's ours just the same. We could get it back whenever we wanted it; and then it's the reasonable way to do. We mustn't let it turn our heads, Mac, dear, like that man that spent all he won in buying more tickets. How foolish we'd feel after we'd spent it all! We ought to go on just the same as before; as if we hadn't won. We must be sensible about it, mustn't we?"

"Well, well, I guess perhaps that's right," the dentist would answer, looking slowly about on the floor.

Just what should ultimately be done with the money was the subject of endless discussion in the Sieppe family. The savings bank would allow only three per cent, but Trina's parents believed that something better could be got.

"There's Uncle Oelbermann," Trina had suggested, remembering the rich relative who had the wholesale toy store in the Mission.

Mr. Sieppe struck his hand to his forehead. "Ah, an idea," he cried. In the end an agreement was made. The money was invested in Mr. Oelbermann's business. He gave Trina six per cent.

Invested in this fashion, Trina's winning would bring in twenty-five dollars a month. But, besides this, Trina had her own little trade. She made Noah's ark animals for Uncle Oelbermann's store. Trina's ancestors on both sides were German-Swiss, and some long-forgotten forefather of the sixteenth century, some worsted-legged wood-carver of the Tyrol, had handed down the talent of the national industry, to reappear in this strangely distorted guise.

She made Noah's ark animals, whittling them out of a block of soft wood with a sharp jack-knife, the only instrument she used. Trina was very proud to explain her work to McTeague as he had already explained his own to her.

"You see, I take a block of straight-grained pine and cut out the shape, roughly at first, with the big blade; then I go over it a second time with the little blade, more carefully; then I put in the ears and tail with a drop of glue, and paint it with a 'non-poisonous' paint -- Vandyke brown for the horses, foxes, and cows; slate gray for the elephants and camels; burnt umber for the chickens,

zebras, and so on; then, last, a dot of Chinese white for the eyes, and there you are, all finished. They sell for nine cents a dozen. Only I can't make the manikins."

"The manikins?"

"The little figures, you know -- Noah and his wife, and Shem, and all the others."

It was true. Trina could not whittle them fast enough and cheap enough to compete with the turning lathe, that could throw off whole tribes and peoples of manikins while she was fashioning one family. Everything else, however, she made -- the ark itself, all windows and no door; the box in which the whole was packed; even down to pasting on the label, which read, "Made in France." She earned from three to four dollars a week.

The income from these three sources, McTeague's profession, the interest of the five thousand dollars, and Trina's whittling, made a respectable little sum taken altogether. Trina declared they could even lay by something, adding to the five thousand dollars little by little.

It soon became apparent that Trina would be an extraordinarily good housekeeper. Economy was her strong point. A good deal of peasant blood still ran undiluted in her veins, and she had all the instinct of a hardy and penurious mountain race -- the instinct which saves without any thought, without idea of consequence -- saving for the sake of saving, hoarding without knowing why. Even McTeague did not know how closely Trina held to her new-found wealth.

But they did not always pass their luncheon hour in this discussion of incomes and economies. As the dentist came to know his little woman better she grew to be more and more of a puzzle and a joy to him. She would suddenly interrupt a grave discourse upon the rents of rooms and the cost of light and fuel with a brusque outburst of affection that set him all a-tremble with delight. All at once she would set down her chocolate, and, leaning across the narrow table, would exclaim:

"Never mind all that! Oh, Mac, do you truly, really love me -- love me BIG?"

McTeague would stammer something, gasping, and wagging his head, beside himself for the lack of words.

"Old bear," Trina would answer, grasping him by both huge ears and swaying his head from side to side. "Kiss me, then. Tell me, Mac, did you think any less of me that first time I let you kiss me there in the station? Oh, Mac, dear, what a funny nose you've got, all full of hairs inside; and, Mac, do you know you've got a bald spot -- " she dragged his head down towards her -- "right on the top of your head." Then she would seriously kiss the bald spot in question, declaring:

"That'll make the hair grow."

Trina took an infinite enjoyment in playing with McTeague's great square-cut head, rumpling his hair till it stood on end, putting her fingers in his eyes, or stretching his ears out straight, and watching the effect with her head on one side. It was like a little child playing with some gigantic, good-natured Saint Bernard.

One particular amusement they never wearied of. The two would lean across the table towards each other, McTeague folding his arms under his breast. Then Trina, resting on her elbows, would part his mustache—the great blond mustache of a viking -- with her two hands, pushing it up from his lips, causing his face to assume the appearance of a Greek mask. She would curl it around either forefinger, drawing it to a fine end. Then all at once McTeague would make a fearful snorting noise through his nose. Invariably -- though she was expecting this, though it was part of the game -- Trina would jump with a stifled shriek. McTeague would bellow with laughter till his eyes watered. Then they would recommence upon the instant, Trina protesting with a nervous tremulousness:

"Now -- now -- now, Mac, DON'T; you SCARE me so."

But these delicious tete-a-tetes with Trina were offset by a certain coolness that Marcus Schouler began to affect towards the dentist. At first McTeague was unaware of it; but by this time even his slow wits began to perceive that his best friend -- his "pal" -- was not the same to him as formerly. They continued to meet at lunch nearly every day but Friday at the car conductors' coffee-joint. But Marcus was sulky; there could be no doubt about that. He avoided talking to McTeague, read the paper continually, answering the dentist's timid efforts at conversation in gruff monosyllables. Sometimes, even, he turned sideways to the table and talked at great length to Heise the harness-maker, whose table was next to theirs. They took no more long walks together when Marcus went out to exercise the dogs. Nor did Marcus ever again recur to his generosity in renouncing Trina.

One Tuesday, as McTeague took his place at the table in the coffee-joint, he found Marcus already there.

"Hello, Mark," said the dentist, "you here already?"

"Hello," returned the other, indifferently, helping himself to tomato catsup. There was a silence. After a long while Marcus suddenly looked up.

"Say, Mac," he exclaimed, "when you going to pay me that money you owe me?"

McTeague was astonished.

"Huh? What? I don't -- do I owe you any money, Mark?"

"Well, you owe me four bits," returned Marcus, doggedly. "I paid for you and Trina that day at the picnic, and you never gave it back."

"Oh -- oh!" answered McTeague, in distress. "That's so, that's so. I -- you ought to have told me before. Here's your money, and I'm obliged to you."

"It ain't much," observed Marcus, sullenly. "But I need all I can get now-a-days."

"Are you -- are you broke?" inquired McTeague.

"And I ain't saying anything about your sleeping at the hospital that night, either," muttered Marcus, as he pocketed the coin.

"Well -- well -- do you mean -- should I have paid for that?"

"Well, you'd 'a' had to sleep SOMEWHERE, wouldn't you?" flashed out Marcus. "You 'a' had to pay half a dollar for a bed at the flat."

"All right, all right," cried the dentist, hastily, feeling in his pockets. "I don't want you should be out anything on my account, old man. Here, will four bits do?"

"I don't WANT your damn money," shouted Marcus in a sudden rage, throwing back the coin. "I ain't no beggar."

McTeague was miserable. How had he offended his pal?

"Well, I want you should take it, Mark," he said, pushing it towards him.

"I tell you I won't touch your money," exclaimed the other through his clenched teeth, white with passion. "I've been played for a sucker long enough."

"What's the matter with you lately, Mark?" remonstrated McTeague. "You've got a grouch about something. Is there anything I've done?"

"Well, that's all right, that's all right," returned Marcus as he rose from the table. "That's all right. I've been played for a sucker long enough, that's all. I've been played for a sucker long enough." He went away with a parting malevolent glance.

At the corner of Polk Street, between the flat and the car conductors' coffee-joint, was Frenna's. It was a corner grocery; advertisements for cheap butter and eggs, painted in green marking-ink upon wrapping paper, stood about on the sidewalk outside. The doorway was decorated with a huge Milwaukee beer sign. Back of the store proper was a bar where white sand covered the floor. A few tables and chairs were scattered here and there. The walls were hung with gorgeously-colored tobacco advertisements and colored lithographs of trotting horses. On the wall behind the bar was a model of a full-rigged ship enclosed in a bottle.

It was at this place that the dentist used to leave his pitcher to be filled on Sunday afternoons. Since his engagement to Trina he had discontinued this habit. However, he still dropped into Frenna's one or two nights in the week. He spent a pleasant hour there, smoking his huge porcelain pipe and drinking his beer. He never joined any of the groups of piquet players around the tables. In fact, he hardly spoke to anyone but the bartender and Marcus.

For Frenna's was one of Marcus Schouler's haunts; a great deal of his time was spent there. He involved himself in fearful political and social discussions with Heise the harness-maker, and with one or two old German, habitués of the place. These discussions Marcus carried on, as was his custom, at the top of his voice, gesticulating fiercely, banging the table with his fists, brandishing the plates and glasses, exciting himself with his own clamor.

On a certain Saturday evening, a few days after the scene at the coffee-joint, the dentist bethought him to spend a quiet evening at Frenna's. He had not been there for some time, and, besides that, it occurred to him that the day was his birthday. He would permit himself an extra pipe and a few glasses of beer. When McTeague entered Frenna's back room by the street door, he found Marcus and Heise already installed at one of the tables. Two or three of the old Germans sat opposite them, gulping their beer from time to time. Heise was smoking a cigar, but Marcus had before him his fourth whiskey cocktail. At the moment of McTeague's entrance Marcus had the floor.

"It can't be proven," he was yelling. "I defy any sane politician whose eyes are not blinded by party prejudices, whose opinions are not warped by a personal bias, to substantiate such a statement. Look at your facts, look at your figures. I am a free American citizen, ain't I? I pay my taxes to support a good government, don't I? It's a contract between me and the government, ain't it? Well, then, by damn! if the authorities do not or will not afford me protection for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, then my obligations are at an end; I withhold my taxes. I do -- I do -- I say I do. What?" He glared about him, seeking opposition.

"That's nonsense," observed Heise, quietly. "Try it once; you'll get juggled." But this observation of the harness-maker's roused Marcus to the last pitch of frenzy.

"Yes, ah, yes!" he shouted, rising to his feet, shaking his finger in the other's face. "Yes, I'd go to jail; but because I -- I am crushed by a tyranny, does that make the tyranny right? Does might make right?"

"You must make less noise in here, Mister Schouler," said Frenna, from behind the bar.

"Well, it makes me mad," answered Marcus, subsiding into a growl and resuming his chair. "Hullo, Mac."

"Hullo, Mark."

But McTeague's presence made Marcus uneasy, rousing in him at once a sense of wrong. He twisted to and fro in his chair, shrugging first one shoulder and then another. Quarrelsome at all times, the heat of the previous discussion had awakened within him all his natural combativeness. Besides this, he was drinking his fourth cocktail.

McTeague began filling his big porcelain pipe. He lit it, blew a great cloud of smoke into the room, and settled himself comfortably in his chair. The smoke of his cheap tobacco drifted into the faces of the group at the adjoining table, and Marcus strangled and coughed. Instantly his eyes flamed.

"Say, for God's sake," he vociferated, "choke off on that pipe! If you've got to smoke rope like that, smoke it in a crowd of muckers; don't come here amongst gentlemen."

"Shut up, Schouler!" observed Heise in a low voice.

McTeague was stunned by the suddenness of the attack. He took his pipe from his mouth, and stared blankly at Marcus; his lips moved, but he said no word. Marcus turned his back on him, and the dentist resumed his pipe.

But Marcus was far from being appeased. McTeague could not hear the talk that followed between him and the harness-maker, but it seemed to him that Marcus was telling Heise of some injury, some grievance, and that the latter was trying to pacify him. All at once their talk grew louder. Heise laid a retaining hand upon his companion's coat sleeve, but Marcus swung himself around in his chair, and, fixing his eyes on McTeague, cried as if in answer to some protestation on the part of Heise:

"All I know is that I've been soldiered out of five thousand dollars."

McTeague gaped at him, bewildered. He removed his pipe from his mouth a second time, and stared at Marcus with eyes full of trouble and perplexity.

"If I had my rights," cried Marcus, bitterly, "I'd have part of that money. It's my due -- it's only justice." The dentist still kept silence.

"If it hadn't been for me," Marcus continued, addressing himself directly to McTeague, "you wouldn't have had a cent of it -- no, not a cent. Where's my share, I'd like to know? Where do I come in? No, I ain't in it any more. I've been played for a sucker, an' now that you've got all you can out of me, now that you've done me out of my girl and out of my money, you give me the go-by. Why, where would you have been TO-DAY if it hadn't been for me?" Marcus shouted in a sudden exasperation, "You'd a been plugging teeth at two bits an hour. Ain't you got any gratitude? Ain't you got any sense of decency?"

"Ah, hold up, Schouler," grumbled Heise. "You don't want to get into a row."

"No, I don't, Heise," returned Marcus, with a plaintive, aggrieved air. "But it's too much sometimes when you think of it. He stole away my girl's affections, and now that he's rich and prosperous, and has got five thousand dollars that I might have had, he gives me the go-by; he's played me for a sucker. Look here," he cried, turning again to McTeague, "do I get any of that money?"

"It ain't mine to give," answered McTeague. "You're drunk, that's what you are."

"Do I get any of that money?" cried Marcus, persistently.

The dentist shook his head. "No, you don't get any of it."

"Now -- NOW," clamored the other, turning to the harness-maker, as though this explained everything. "Look at that, look at that. Well, I've done with you from now on." Marcus had risen to his feet by this time and made as if to leave, but at every instant he came back, shouting his phrases into McTeague's face, moving off again as he spoke the last words, in order to give them better effect.

"This settles it right here. I've done with you. Don't you ever dare speak to me again" -- his voice was shaking with fury -- "and don't you sit at my table in the restaurant again. I'm sorry I ever lowered myself to keep company with such dirt. Ah, one-horse dentist! Ah, ten-cent zinc-plugger -- hoodlum -- MUCKER! Get your damn smoke outa my face."

Then matters reached a sudden climax. In his agitation the dentist had been pulling hard on his pipe, and as Marcus for the last time thrust his face close to his own, McTeague, in opening his lips to reply, blew a stifling, acrid cloud directly in Marcus Schouler's eyes. Marcus knocked the pipe from his fingers with a sudden flash of his hand; it spun across the room and broke into a dozen fragments in a far corner.

McTeague rose to his feet, his eyes wide. But as yet he was not angry, only surprised, taken all aback by the suddenness of Marcus Schouler's outbreak as well as by its unreasonableness. Why had Marcus broken his pipe? What did it all mean, anyway? As he rose the dentist made a vague motion with his right hand. Did Marcus misinterpret it as a gesture of menace? He sprang back as though avoiding a blow. All at once there was a cry. Marcus had made a quick, peculiar motion, swinging his arm upward with a wide and sweeping gesture; his jack-knife lay open in his palm; it shot forward as he flung it, glinted sharply by McTeague's head, and struck quivering into the wall behind.

A sudden chill ran through the room; the others stood transfixed, as at the swift passage of some cold and deadly wind. Death had stooped there for an instant, had stooped and past, leaving a trail of terror and confusion. Then the door leading to the street slammed; Marcus had disappeared.

Thereon a great babel of exclamation arose. The tension of that all but fatal instant snapped, and speech became once more possible.

"He would have knifed you."

"Narrow escape."

"What kind of a man do you call THAT?"

"'Tain't his fault he ain't a murderer."

"I'd have him up for it."

"And they two have been the greatest kind of friends."

"He didn't touch you, did he?"

"No -- no -- no."

"What a -- what a devil! What treachery! A regular greaser trick!"

"Look out he don't stab you in the back. If that's the kind of man he is, you never can tell."

Frenna drew the knife from the wall.

"Guess I'll keep this toad-stabber," he observed. "That fellow won't come round for it in a hurry; goodsized blade, too." The group examined it with intense interest.

"Big enough to let the life out of any man," observed Heise.

"What -- what -- what did he do it for?" stammered McTeague. "I got no quarrel with him."

He was puzzled and harassed by the strangeness of it all. Marcus would have killed him; had thrown his knife at him in the true, uncanny "greaser" style. It was inexplicable. McTeague sat down again, looking stupidly about on the floor. In a corner of the room his eye encountered his broken pipe, a dozen little fragments of painted porcelain and the stem of cherry wood and amber.

At that sight his tardy wrath, ever lagging behind the original affront, suddenly blazed up. Instantly his huge jaws clicked together.

"He can't make small of ME," he exclaimed, suddenly. "I'll show Marcus Schouler -- I'll show him -- I'll -- --"

He got up and clapped on his hat.

"Now, Doctor," remonstrated Heise, standing between him and the door, "don't go make a fool of yourself."

"Let 'um alone," joined in Frenna, catching the dentist by the arm; "he's full, anyhow."

"He broke my pipe," answered McTeague.

It was this that had roused him. The thrown knife, the attempt on his life, was beyond his solution; but the breaking of his pipe he understood clearly enough.

"I'll show him," he exclaimed.

As though they had been little children, McTeague set Frenna and the harness-maker aside, and strode out at the door like a raging elephant. Heise stood rubbing his shoulder.

"Might as well try to stop a locomotive," he muttered. "The man's made of iron."

Meanwhile, McTeague went storming up the street toward the flat, wagging his head and grumbling to himself. Ah, Marcus would break his pipe, would he? Ah, he was a zinc-plugger, was he? He'd show Marcus Schouler. No one should make small of him. He tramped up the stairs to Marcus's room. The door was locked. The dentist put one enormous hand on the knob and pushed the door in, snapping the wood-work, tearing off the lock. Nobody -- the room was

dark and empty. Never mind, Marcus would have to come home some time that night. McTeague would go down and wait for him in his "Parlors." He was bound to hear him as he came up the stairs.

As McTeague reached his room he stumbled over, in the darkness, a big packing-box that stood in the hallway just outside his door. Puzzled, he stepped over it, and lighting the gas in his room, dragged it inside and examined it.

It was addressed to him. What could it mean? He was expecting nothing. Never since he had first furnished his room had packing-cases been left for him in this fashion. No mistake was possible. There were his name and address unmistakably. "Dr. McTeague, dentist -- Polk Street, San Francisco, Cal.," and the red Wells Fargo tag.

Seized with the joyful curiosity of an overgrown boy, he pried off the boards with the corner of his fireshovel. The case was stuffed full of excelsior. On the top lay an envelope addressed to him in Trina's handwriting. He opened it and read, "For my dear Mac's birthday, from Trina;" and below, in a kind of post-script, "The man will be round to-morrow to put it in place." McTeague tore away the excelsior. Suddenly he uttered an exclamation.

It was the Tooth -- the famous golden molar with its huge prongs -- his sign, his ambition, the one unrealized dream of his life; and it was French gilt, too, not the cheap German gilt that was no good. Ah, what a dear little woman was this Trina, to keep so quiet, to remember his birthday!

"Ain't she -- ain't she just a -- just a JEWEL," exclaimed McTeague under his breath, "a JEWEL -- yes, just a JEWEL; that's the word."

Very carefully he removed the rest of the excelsior, and lifting the ponderous Tooth from its box, set it upon the marble-top centre table. How immense it looked in that little room! The thing was tremendous, overpowering -- the tooth of a gigantic fossil, golden and dazzling. Beside it everything seemed dwarfed. Even McTeague himself, big boned and enormous as he was, shrank and dwindled in the presence of the monster. As for an instant he bore it in his hands, it was like a puny Gulliver struggling with the molar of some vast Brobdingnag.

The dentist circled about that golden wonder, gasping with delight and stupefaction, touching it gingerly with his hands as if it were something sacred. At every moment his thought returned to Trina. No, never was there such a little woman as his -- the very thing he wanted -- how had she remembered? And the money, where had that come from? No one knew better than he how expensive were these signs; not another dentist on Polk Street could afford one. Where, then, had Trina found the money? It came out of her five thousand dollars, no doubt.

But what a wonderful, beautiful tooth it was, to be sure, bright as a mirror, shining there in its coat of French gilt, as if with a light of its own! No danger of

that tooth turning black with the weather, as did the cheap German gilt impostures. What would that other dentist, that poser, that rider of bicycles, that courser of greyhounds, say when he should see this marvellous molar run out from McTeague's bay window like a flag of defiance? No doubt he would suffer veritable convulsions of envy; would be positively sick with jealousy. If McTeague could only see his face at the moment!

For a whole hour the dentist sat there in his little "Parlor," gazing ecstatically at his treasure, dazzled, supremely content. The whole room took on a different aspect because of it. The stone pug dog before the little stove reflected it in his protruding eyes; the canary woke and chattered feebly at this new gilt, so much brighter than the bars of its little prison. Lorenzo de' Medici, in the steel engraving, sitting in the heart of his court, seemed to ogle the thing out of the corner of one eye, while the brilliant colors of the unused rifle manufacturer's calendar seemed to fade and pale in the brilliance of this greater glory.

At length, long after midnight, the dentist started to go to bed, undressing himself with his eyes still fixed on the great tooth. All at once he heard Marcus Schouler's foot on the stairs; he started up with his fists clenched, but immediately dropped back upon the bed-lounge with a gesture of indifference.

He was in no truculent state of mind now. He could not reinstate himself in that mood of wrath wherein he had left the corner grocery. The tooth had changed all that. What was Marcus Schouler's hatred to him, who had Trina's affection? What did he care about a broken pipe now that he had the tooth? Let him go. As Frenna said, he was not worth it. He heard Marcus come out into the hall, shouting aggrievedly to anyone within sound of his voice:

"An' now he breaks into my room -- into my room, by damn! How do I know how many things he's stolen? It's come to stealing from me, now, has it?" He went into his room, banging his splintered door.

McTeague looked upward at the ceiling, in the direction of the voice, muttering:

"Ah, go to bed, you."

He went to bed himself, turning out the gas, but leaving the window-curtains up so that he could see the tooth the last thing before he went to sleep and the first thing as he arose in the morning.

But he was restless during the night. Every now and then he was awakened by noises to which he had long since become accustomed. Now it was the cackling of the geese in the deserted market across the street; now it was the stoppage of the cable, the sudden silence coming almost like a shock; and now it was the infuriated barking of the dogs in the back yard -- Alec, the Irish setter, and the collie that belonged to the branch post-office raging at each other through the fence, snarling their endless hatred into each other's faces. As often

as he woke, McTeague turned and looked for the tooth, with a sudden suspicion that he had only that moment dreamed the whole business. But he always found it -- Trina's gift, his birthday from his little woman -- a huge, vague bulk, looming there through the half darkness in the centre of the room, shining dimly out as if with some mysterious light of its own.

Chapter 9

Trina and McTeague were married on the first day of June, in the photographer's rooms that the dentist had rented. All through May the Sieppe household had been turned upside down. The little box of a house vibrated with excitement and confusion, for not only were the preparations for Trina's marriage to be made, but also the preliminaries were to be arranged for the hegira of the entire Sieppe family.

They were to move to the southern part of the State the day after Trina's marriage, Mr. Sieppe having bought a third interest in an upholstering business in the suburbs of Los Angeles. It was possible that Marcus Schouler would go with them.

Not Stanley penetrating for the first time into the Dark Continent, not Napoleon leading his army across the Alps, was more weighted with responsibility, more burdened with care, more overcome with the sense of the importance of his undertaking, than was Mr. Sieppe during this period of preparation. From dawn to dark, from dark to early dawn, he toiled and planned and fretted, organizing and reorganizing, projecting and devising. The trunks were lettered, A, B, and C, the packages and smaller bundles numbered. Each member of the family had his especial duty to perform, his particular bundles to oversee. Not a detail was forgotten -- fares, prices, and tips were calculated to two places of decimals. Even the amount of food that it would be necessary to carry for the black greyhound was determined. Mrs. Sieppe was to look after the lunch, "der gomisariat." Mr. Sieppe would assume charge of the checks, the money, the tickets, and, of course, general supervision. The twins would be under the command of Owgooste, who, in turn, would report for orders to his father.

Day in and day out these minutiae were rehearsed. The children were drilled in their parts with a military exactitude; obedience and punctuality became cardinal virtues. The vast importance of the undertaking was insisted upon with scrupulous iteration. It was a manoeuvre, an army changing its base of operations, a veritable tribal migration.

On the other hand, Trina's little room was the centre around which revolved another and different order of things. The dressmaker came and went, congratulatory visitors invaded the little front parlor, the chatter of unfamiliar

voices resounded from the front steps; bonnet-boxes and yards of dress-goods littered the beds and chairs; wrapping paper, tissue paper, and bits of string strewed the floor; a pair of white satin slippers stood on a corner of the toilet table; lengths of white veiling, like a snow-flurry, buried the little work-table; and a mislaid box of artificial orange blossoms was finally discovered behind the bureau.

The two systems of operation often clashed and tangled. Mrs. Sieppe was found by her harassed husband helping Trina with the waist of her gown when she should have been slicing cold chicken in the kitchen. Mr. Sieppe packed his frock coat, which he would have to wear at the wedding, at the very bottom of "Trunk C." The minister, who called to offer his congratulations and to make arrangements, was mistaken for the expressman.

McTeague came and went furtively, dizzied and made uneasy by all this bustle. He got in the way; he trod upon and tore breadths of silk; he tried to help carry the packing-boxes, and broke the hall gas fixture; he came in upon Trina and the dress-maker at an ill-timed moment, and retiring precipitately, overturned the piles of pictures stacked in the hall.

There was an incessant going and coming at every moment of the day, a great calling up and down stairs, a shouting from room to room, an opening and shutting of doors, and an intermittent sound of hammering from the laundry, where Mr. Sieppe in his shirt sleeves labored among the packing-boxes. The twins clattered about on the carpetless floors of the denuded rooms. Owgooste was smacked from hour to hour, and wept upon the front stairs; the dressmaker called over the banisters for a hot flatiron; expressmen tramped up and down the stairway. Mrs. Sieppe stopped in the preparation of the lunches to call "Hoop, Hoop" to the greyhound, throwing lumps of coal. The dog-wheel creaked, the front door bell rang, delivery wagons rumbled away, windows rattled -- the little house was in a positive uproar.

Almost every day of the week now Trina was obliged to run over to town and meet McTeague. No more philandering over their lunch now-a-days. It was business now. They haunted the house-furnishing floors of the great department houses, inspecting and pricing ranges, hardware, china, and the like. They rented the photographer's rooms furnished, and fortunately only the kitchen and dining-room utensils had to be bought.

The money for this as well as for her trousseau came out of Trina's five thousand dollars. For it had been finally decided that two hundred dollars of this amount should be devoted to the establishment of the new household. Now that Trina had made her great winning, Mr. Sieppe no longer saw the necessity of dowering her further, especially when he considered the enormous expense to which he would be put by the voyage of his own family.

It had been a dreadful wrench for Trina to break in upon her precious five thousand. She clung to this sum with a tenacity that was surprising; it had become for her a thing miraculous, a god-from-the-machine, suddenly descending upon the stage of her humble little life; she regarded it as something almost sacred and inviolable. Never, never should a penny of it be spent. Before she could be induced to part with two hundred dollars of it, more than one scene had been enacted between her and her parents.

Did Trina pay for the golden tooth out of this two hundred? Later on, the dentist often asked her about it, but Trina invariably laughed in his face, declaring that it was her secret. McTeague never found out.

One day during this period McTeague told Trina about his affair with Marcus. Instantly she was aroused.

"He threw his knife at you! The coward! He wouldn't of dared stand up to you like a man. Oh, Mac, suppose he HAD hit you?"

"Came within an inch of my head," put in McTeague, proudly.

"Think of it!" she gasped; "and he wanted part of my money. Well, I do like his cheek; part of my five thousand! Why, it's mine, every single penny of it. Marcus hasn't the least bit of right to it. It's mine, mine. -- I mean, it's ours, Mac, dear."

The elder Sieppes, however, made excuses for Marcus. He had probably been drinking a good deal and didn't know what he was about. He had a dreadful temper, anyhow. Maybe he only wanted to scare McTeague.

The week before the marriage the two men were reconciled.

Mrs. Sieppe brought them together in the front parlor of the B Street house.

"Now, you two fellers, don't be dot foolish. Schake hands und maig ut oop, soh."

Marcus muttered an apology. McTeague, miserably embarrassed, rolled his eyes about the room, murmuring, "That's all right -- that's all right -- that's all right."

However, when it was proposed that Marcus should be McTeague's best man, he flashed out again with renewed violence. Ah, no! ah, NO! He'd make up with the dentist now that he was going away, but he'd be damned -- yes, he would -- before he'd be his best man. That was rubbing it in. Let him get Old Grannis.

"I'm friends with um all right," vociferated Marcus, "but I'll not stand up with um. I'll not be ANYBODY'S best man, I won't."

The wedding was to be very quiet; Trina preferred it that way. McTeague would invite only Miss Baker and Heise the harness-maker. The Sieppes sent cards to Selina, who was counted on to furnish the music; to Marcus, of course; and to Uncle Oelbermann.

At last the great day, the first of June, arrived. The Sieppes had packed their last box and had strapped the last trunk. Trina's two trunks had already been sent to her new home -- the remodelled photographer's rooms. The B Street house was deserted; the whole family came over to the city on the last day of May and stopped over night at one of the cheap downtown hotels. Trina would be married the following evening, and immediately after the wedding supper the Sieppes would leave for the South.

McTeague spent the day in a fever of agitation, frightened out of his wits each time that Old Grannis left his elbow.

Old Grannis was delighted beyond measure at the prospect of acting the part of best man in the ceremony. This wedding in which he was to figure filled his mind with vague ideas and half-formed thoughts. He found himself continually wondering what Miss Baker would think of it. During all that day he was in a reflective mood.

"Marriage is a -- a noble institution, is it not, Doctor?" he observed to McTeague. "The -- the foundation of society. It is not good that man should be alone. No, no," he added, pensively, "it is not good."

"Huh? Yes, yes," McTeague answered, his eyes in the air, hardly hearing him. "Do you think the rooms are all right? Let's go in and look at them again."

They went down the hall to where the new rooms were situated, and the dentist inspected them for the twentieth time.

The rooms were three in number -- first, the sitting-room, which was also the dining-room; then the bedroom, and back of this the tiny kitchen.

The sitting-room was particularly charming. Clean matting covered the floor, and two or three bright colored rugs were scattered here and there. The backs of the chairs were hung with knitted worsted tidies, very gay. The bay window should have been occupied by Trina's sewing machine, but this had been moved to the other side of the room to give place to a little black walnut table with spiral legs, before which the pair were to be married. In one corner stood the parlor melodeon, a family possession of the Sieppes, but given now to Trina as one of her parents' wedding presents. Three pictures hung upon the walls. Two were companion pieces. One of these represented a little boy wearing huge spectacles and trying to smoke an enormous pipe. This was called "I'm Grandpa," the title being printed in large black letters; the companion picture was entitled "I'm Grandma," a little girl in cap and "specs," wearing mitts, and knitting. These pictures were hung on either side of the mantelpiece. The other picture was quite an affair, very large and striking. It was a colored lithograph of two little golden-haired girls in their night-gowns. They were kneeling down and saying their prayers; their eyes -- very large and very blue -- rolled upward. This picture had for name, "Faith," and was bordered with a red plush mat and a frame of imitation beaten brass.

A door hung with chenille portieres -- a bargain at two dollars and a half - admitted one to the bedroom. The bedroom could boast a carpet, three-ply ingrain, the design being bunches of red and green flowers in yellow baskets on a white ground. The wall-paper was admirable -- hundreds and hundreds of tiny Japanese mandarins, all identically alike, helping hundreds of almond-eyed ladies into hundreds of impossible junks, while hundreds of bamboo palms overshadowed the pair, and hundreds of long-legged storks trailed contemptuously away from the scene. This room was prolific in pictures. Most of them were framed colored prints from Christmas editions of the London "Graphic" and "Illustrated News," the subject of each picture inevitably involving very alert fox terriers and very pretty moon-faced little girls.

Back of the bedroom was the kitchen, a creation of Trina's, a dream of a kitchen, with its range, its porcelain-lined sink, its copper boiler, and its overpowering array of flashing tinware. Everything was new; everything was complete.

Maria Macapa and a waiter from one of the restaurants in the street were to prepare the wedding supper here. Maria had already put in an appearance. The fire was crackling in the new stove, that smoked badly; a smell of cooking was in the air. She drove McTeague and Old Grannis from the room with great gestures of her bare arms.

This kitchen was the only one of the three rooms they had been obliged to furnish throughout. Most of the sitting-room and bedroom furniture went with the suite; a few pieces they had bought; the remainder Trina had brought over from the B Street house.

The presents had been set out on the extension table in the sitting-room. Besides the parlor melodeon, Trina's parents had given her an ice-water set, and a carving knife and fork with elk-horn handles. Selina had painted a view of the Golden Gate upon a polished slice of redwood that answered the purposes of a paper weight. Marcus Schouler -- after impressing upon Trina that his gift was to HER, and not to McTeague -- had sent a chatelaine watch of German silver; Uncle Oelbermann's present, however, had been awaited with a good deal of curiosity. What would he send? He was very rich; in a sense Trina was his protege. A couple of days before that upon which the wedding was to take place, two boxes arrived with his card. Trina and McTeague, assisted by Old Grannis, had opened them. The first was a box of all sorts of toys.

"But what -- what -- I don't make it out," McTeague had exclaimed. "Why should he send us toys? We have no need of toys." Scarlet to her hair, Trina dropped into a chair and laughed till she cried behind her handkerchief.

"We've no use of toys," muttered McTeague, looking at her in perplexity. Old Grannis smiled discreetly, raising a tremulous hand to his chin.

The other box was heavy, bound with withes at the edges, the letters and stamps burnt in.

"I think -- I really think it's champagne," said Old Grannis in a whisper. So it was. A full case of Monopole. What a wonder! None of them had seen the like before. Ah, this Uncle Oelbermann! That's what it was to be rich. Not one of the other presents produced so deep an impression as this.

After Old Grannis and the dentist had gone through the rooms, giving a last look around to see that everything was ready, they returned to McTeague's "Parlors." At the door Old Grannis excused himself.

At four o'clock McTeague began to dress, shaving himself first before the hand-glass that was hung against the woodwork of the bay window. While he shaved he sang with strange inappropriateness:

*"No one to love, none to Caress,
Left all alone in this world's wilderness."*

But as he stood before the mirror, intent upon his shaving, there came a roll of wheels over the cobbles in front of the house. He rushed to the window. Trina had arrived with her father and mother. He saw her get out, and as she glanced upward at his window, their eyes met.

Ah, there she was. There she was, his little woman, looking up at him, her adorable little chin thrust upward with that familiar movement of innocence and confidence. The dentist saw again, as if for the first time, her small, pale face looking out from beneath her royal tiara of black hair; he saw again her long, narrow blue eyes; her lips, nose, and tiny ears, pale and bloodless, and suggestive of anaemia, as if all the vitality that should have lent them color had been sucked up into the strands and coils of that wonderful hair.

As their eyes met they waved their hands gayly to each other; then McTeague heard Trina and her mother come up the stairs and go into the bedroom of the photographer's suite, where Trina was to dress.

No, no; surely there could be no longer any hesitation. He knew that he loved her. What was the matter with him, that he should have doubted it for an instant? The great difficulty was that she was too good, too adorable, too sweet, too delicate for him, who was so huge, so clumsy, so brutal.

There was a knock at the door. It was Old Grannis. He was dressed in his one black suit of broadcloth, much wrinkled; his hair was carefully brushed over his bald forehead.

"Miss Trina has come," he announced, "and the minister. You have an hour yet."

The dentist finished dressing. He wore a suit bought for the occasion -- a ready-made "Prince Albert" coat too short in the sleeves, striped "blue" trousers,

and new patent leather shoes -- veritable instruments of torture. Around his collar was a wonderful necktie that Trina had given him; it was of salmon-pink satin; in its centre Selina had painted a knot of blue forget-me-nots.

At length, after an interminable period of waiting, Mr. Sieppe appeared at the door.

"Are you reatty?" he asked in a sepulchral whisper. "Gome, den." It was like King Charles summoned to execution. Mr. Sieppe preceded them into the hall, moving at a funereal pace. He paused. Suddenly, in the direction of the sitting-room, came the strains of the parlor melodeon. Mr. Sieppe flung his arm in the air.

"Vowaarts!" he cried.

He left them at the door of the sitting-room, he himself going into the bedroom where Trina was waiting, entering by the hall door. He was in a tremendous state of nervous tension, fearful lest something should go wrong. He had employed the period of waiting in going through his part for the fiftieth time, repeating what he had to say in a low voice. He had even made chalk marks on the matting in the places where he was to take positions.

The dentist and Old Grannis entered the sitting-room; the minister stood behind the little table in the bay window, holding a book, one finger marking the place; he was rigid, erect, impassive. On either side of him, in a semi-circle, stood the invited guests. A little pock-marked gentleman in glasses, no doubt the famous Uncle Oelbermann; Miss Baker, in her black grenadine, false curls, and coral brooch; Marcus Schouler, his arms folded, his brows bent, grand and gloomy; Heise the harness-maker, in yellow gloves, intently studying the pattern of the matting; and Owgooste, in his Fauntleroy "costume," stupefied and a little frightened, rolling his eyes from face to face. Selina sat at the parlor melodeon, fingering the keys, her glance wandering to the chenille portieres. She stopped playing as McTeague and Old Grannis entered and took their places. A profound silence ensued. Uncle Oelbermann's shirt front could be heard creaking as he breathed. The most solemn expression pervaded every face.

All at once the portieres were shaken violently. It was a signal. Selina pulled open the stops and swung into the wedding march.

Trina entered. She was dressed in white silk, a crown of orange blossoms was around her swarthy hair -- dressed high for the first time -- her veil reached to the floor. Her face was pink, but otherwise she was calm. She looked quietly around the room as she crossed it, until her glance rested on McTeague, smiling at him then very prettily and with perfect self-possession.

She was on her father's arm. The twins, dressed exactly alike, walked in front, each carrying an enormous bouquet of cut flowers in a "lace-paper" holder. Mrs. Sieppe followed in the rear. She was crying; her handkerchief was rolled into a wad. From time to time she looked at the train of Trina's dress

through her tears. Mr. Sieppe marched his daughter to the exact middle of the floor, wheeled at right angles, and brought her up to the minister. He stepped back three paces, and stood planted upon one of his chalk marks, his face glistening with perspiration.

Then Trina and the dentist were married. The guests stood in constrained attitudes, looking furtively out of the corners of their eyes. Mr. Sieppe never moved a muscle; Mrs. Sieppe cried into her handkerchief all the time. At the melodeon Selina played "Call Me Thine Own," very softly, the tremulo stop pulled out. She looked over her shoulder from time to time. Between the pauses of the music one could hear the low tones of the minister, the responses of the participants, and the suppressed sounds of Mrs. Sieppe's weeping. Outside the noises of the street rose to the windows in muffled undertones, a cable car rumbled past, a newsboy went by chanting the evening papers; from somewhere in the building itself came a persistent noise of sawing.

Trina and McTeague knelt. The dentist's knees thudded on the floor and he presented to view the soles of his shoes, painfully new and unworn, the leather still yellow, the brass nail heads still glittering. Trina sank at his side very gracefully, setting her dress and train with a little gesture of her free hand. The company bowed their heads, Mr. Sieppe shutting his eyes tight. But Mrs. Sieppe took advantage of the moment to stop crying and make furtive gestures towards Owgooste, signing him to pull down his coat. But Owgooste gave no heed; his eyes were starting from their sockets, his chin had dropped upon his lace collar, and his head turned vaguely from side to side with a continued and maniacal motion.

All at once the ceremony was over before anyone expected it. The guests kept their positions for a moment, eyeing one another, each fearing to make the first move, not quite certain as to whether or not everything were finished. But the couple faced the room, Trina throwing back her veil. She -- perhaps McTeague as well -- felt that there was a certain inadequateness about the ceremony. Was that all there was to it? Did just those few muttered phrases make them man and wife? It had been over in a few moments, but it had bound them for life. Had not something been left out? Was not the whole affair cursory, superficial? It was disappointing.

But Trina had no time to dwell upon this. Marcus Schouler, in the manner of a man of the world, who knew how to act in every situation, stepped forward and, even before Mr. or Mrs. Sieppe, took Trina's hand.

"Let me be the first to congratulate Mrs. McTeague," he said, feeling very noble and heroic. The strain of the previous moments was relaxed immediately, the guests crowded around the pair, shaking hands -- a babel of talk arose.

"Owgooste, WILL you pull down your goat, den?"

"Well, my dear, now you're married and happy. When I first saw you two together, I said, 'What a pair!' We're to be neighbors now; you must come up and see me very often and we'll have tea together."

"Did you hear that sawing going on all the time? I declare it regularly got on my nerves."

Trina kissed her father and mother, crying a little herself as she saw the tears in Mrs. Siette's eyes.

Marcus came forward a second time, and, with an air of great gravity, kissed his cousin upon the forehead. Heise was introduced to Trina and Uncle Oelbermann to the dentist.

For upwards of half an hour the guests stood about in groups, filling the little sitting-room with a great chatter of talk. Then it was time to make ready for supper.

This was a tremendous task, in which nearly all the guests were obliged to assist. The sitting-room was transformed into a dining-room. The presents were removed from the extension table and the table drawn out to its full length. The cloth was laid, the chairs -- rented from the dancing academy hard by -- drawn up, the dishes set out, and the two bouquets of cut flowers taken from the twins under their shrill protests, and "arranged" in vases at either end of the table.

There was a great coming and going between the kitchen and the sitting-room. Trina, who was allowed to do nothing, sat in the bay window and fretted, calling to her mother from time to time:

"The napkins are in the right-hand drawer of the pantry."

"Yes, yes, I got um. Where do you geep der zoup plates?"

"The soup plates are here already."

"Say, Cousin Trina, is there a corkscrew? What is home without a corkscrew?"

"In the kitchen-table drawer, in the left-hand corner."

"Are these the forks you want to use, Mrs. McTeague?"

"No, no, there's some silver forks. Mamma knows where."

They were all very gay, laughing over their mistakes, getting in one another's way, rushing into the sitting-room, their hands full of plates or knives or glasses, and darting out again after more. Marcus and Mr. Siette took their coats off. Old Grannis and Miss Baker passed each other in the hall in a constrained silence, her grenadine brushing against the elbow of his wrinkled frock coat. Uncle Oelbermann superintended Heise opening the case of champagne with the gravity of a magistrate. Owgooste was assigned the task of filling the new salt and pepper canisters of red and blue glass.

In a wonderfully short time everything was ready. Marcus Schouler resumed his coat, wiping his forehead, and remarking:

"I tell you, I've been doing CHORES for MY board."

"To der table!" commanded Mr. Sieppe.

The company sat down with a great clatter, Trina at the foot, the dentist at the head, the others arranged themselves in haphazard fashion. But it happened that Marcus Schouler crowded into the seat beside Selina, towards which Old Grannis was directing himself. There was but one other chair vacant, and that at the side of Miss Baker. Old Grannis hesitated, putting his hand to his chin. However, there was no escape. In great trepidation he sat down beside the retired dressmaker. Neither of them spoke. Old Grannis dared not move, but sat rigid, his eyes riveted on his empty soup plate.

All at once there was a report like a pistol. The men started in their places. Mrs. Sieppe uttered a muffled shriek. The waiter from the cheap restaurant, hired as Maria's assistant, rose from a bending posture, a champagne bottle frothing in his hand; he was grinning from ear to ear.

"Don't get scairt," he said, reassuringly, "it ain't loaded."

When all their glasses had been filled, Marcus proposed the health of the bride, "standing up." The guests rose and drank. Hardly one of them had ever tasted champagne before. The moment's silence after the toast was broken by McTeague exclaiming with a long breath of satisfaction: "That's the best beer I ever drank."

There was a roar of laughter. Especially was Marcus tickled over the dentist's blunder; he went off in a very spasm of mirth, banging the table with his fist, laughing until his eyes watered. All through the meal he kept breaking out into cackling imitations of McTeague's words: "That's the best BEER I ever drank. Oh, Lord, ain't that a break!"

What a wonderful supper that was! There was oyster soup; there were sea bass and barracuda; there was a gigantic roast goose stuffed with chestnuts; there were egg-plant and sweet potatoes -- Miss Baker called them "yams." There was calf's head in oil, over which Mr. Sieppe went into ecstasies; there was lobster salad; there were rice pudding, and strawberry ice cream, and wine jelly, and stewed prunes, and cocoanuts, and mixed nuts, and raisins, and fruit, and tea, and coffee, and mineral waters, and lemonade.

For two hours the guests ate; their faces red, their elbows wide, the perspiration beading their foreheads. All around the table one saw the same incessant movement of jaws and heard the same uninterrupted sound of chewing. Three times Heise passed his plate for more roast goose. Mr. Sieppe devoured the calf's head with long breaths of contentment; McTeague ate for the sake of eating, without choice; everything within reach of his hands found its way into his enormous mouth.

There was but little conversation, and that only of the food; one exchanged opinions with one's neighbor as to the soup, the egg-plant, or the stewed prunes. Soon the room became very warm, a faint moisture appeared

upon the windows, the air was heavy with the smell of cooked food. At every moment Trina or Mrs. Sieppe urged some one of the company to have his or her plate refilled. They were constantly employed in dishing potatoes or carving the goose or ladling gravy. The hired waiter circled around the room, his limp napkin over his arm, his hands full of plates and dishes. He was a great joker; he had names of his own for different articles of food, that sent gales of laughter around the table. When he spoke of a bunch of parsley as "scenery," Heise all but strangled himself over a mouthful of potato. Out in the kitchen Maria Macapa did the work of three, her face scarlet, her sleeves rolled up; every now and then she uttered shrill but unintelligible outcries, supposedly addressed to the waiter.

"Uncle Oelbermann," said Trina, "let me give you another helping of prunes."

The Sieppes paid great deference to Uncle Oelbermann, as indeed did the whole company. Even Marcus Schouler lowered his voice when he addressed him. At the beginning of the meal he had nudged the harness-maker and had whispered behind his hand, nodding his head toward the wholesale toy dealer, "Got thirty thousand dollars in the bank; has, for a fact."

"Don't have much to say," observed Heise.

"No, no. That's his way; never opens his face."

As the evening wore on, the gas and two lamps were lit. The company were still eating. The men, gorged with food, had unbuttoned their vests. McTeague's cheeks were distended, his eyes wide, his huge, salient jaw moved with a machine-like regularity; at intervals he drew a series of short breaths through his nose. Mrs. Sieppe wiped her forehead with her napkin.

"Hey, dere, poy, gif me some more oaf dat -- what you call -- 'bubble-water.'"

That was how the waiter had spoken of the champagne -- "bubble-water." The guests had shouted applause, "Outa sight." He was a heavy joshier was that waiter.

Bottle after bottle was opened, the women stopping their ears as the corks were drawn. All of a sudden the dentist uttered an exclamation, clapping his hand to his nose, his face twisting sharply.

"Mac, what is it?" cried Trina in alarm.

"That champagne came to my nose," he cried, his eyes watering. "It stings like everything."

"Great BEER, ain't ut?" shouted Marcus.

"Now, Mark," remonstrated Trina in a low voice. "Now, Mark, you just shut up; that isn't funny any more. I don't want you should make fun of Mac. He called it beer on purpose. I guess HE knows."

Throughout the meal old Miss Baker had occupied herself largely with Owgooste and the twins, who had been given a table by themselves -- the black walnut table before which the ceremony had taken place. The little dressmaker was continually turning about in her place, inquiring of the children if they wanted for anything; inquiries they rarely answered other than by stare, fixed, ox-like, expressionless.

Suddenly the little dressmaker turned to Old Grannis and exclaimed:

"I'm so very fond of little children."

"Yes, yes, they're very interesting. I'm very fond of them, too."

The next instant both of the old people were overwhelmed with confusion. What! They had spoken to each other after all these years of silence; they had for the first time addressed remarks to each other.

The old dressmaker was in a torment of embarrassment. How was it she had come to speak? She had neither planned nor wished it. Suddenly the words had escaped her, he had answered, and it was all over -- over before they knew it.

Old Grannis's fingers trembled on the table ledge, his heart beat heavily, his breath fell short. He had actually talked to the little dressmaker. That possibility to which he had looked forward, it seemed to him for years -- that companionship, that intimacy with his fellow-lodger, that delightful acquaintance which was only to ripen at some far distant time, he could not exactly say when -- behold, it had suddenly come to a head, here in this overcrowded, over-heated room, in the midst of all this feeding, surrounded by odors of hot dishes, accompanied by the sounds of incessant mastication. How different he had imagined it would be! They were to be alone -- he and Miss Baker -- in the evening somewhere, withdrawn from the world, very quiet, very calm and peaceful. Their talk was to be of their lives, their lost illusions, not of other people's children.

The two old people did not speak again. They sat there side by side, nearer than they had ever been before, motionless, abstracted; their thoughts far away from that scene of feasting. They were thinking of each other and they were conscious of it. Timid, with the timidity of their second childhood, constrained and embarrassed by each other's presence, they were, nevertheless, in a little Elysium of their own creating. They walked hand in hand in a delicious garden where it was always autumn; together and alone they entered upon the long retarded romance of their commonplace and uneventful lives.

At last that great supper was over, everything had been eaten; the enormous roast goose had dwindled to a very skeleton. Mr. Sieppe had reduced the calf's head to a mere skull; a row of empty champagne bottles -- "dead soldiers," as the facetious waiter had called them -- lined the mantelpiece. Nothing of the stewed prunes remained but the juice, which was given to

Owgooste and the twins. The platters were as clean as if they had been washed; crumbs of bread, potato parings, nutshells, and bits of cake littered the table; coffee and ice-cream stains and spots of congealed gravy marked the position of each plate. It was a devastation, a pillage; the table presented the appearance of an abandoned battlefield.

"Ouf," cried Mrs. Sieppe, pushing back, "I haf eatun und eatun, ach, Gott, how I haf eatun!"

"Ah, dot kaf's het," murmured her husband, passing his tongue over his lips.

The facetious waiter had disappeared. He and Maria Macapa foregathered in the kitchen. They drew up to the washboard of the sink, feasting off the remnants of the supper, slices of goose, the remains of the lobster salad, and half a bottle of champagne. They were obliged to drink the latter from teacups.

"Here's how," said the waiter gallantly, as he raised his tea-cup, bowing to Maria across the sink. "Hark," he added, "they're singing inside."

The company had left the table and had assembled about the melodeon, where Selina was seated. At first they attempted some of the popular songs of the day, but were obliged to give over as none of them knew any of the words beyond the first line of the chorus. Finally they pitched upon "Nearer, My God, to Thee," as the only song which they all knew. Selina sang the "alto," very much off the key; Marcus intoned the bass, scowling fiercely, his chin drawn into his collar. They sang in very slow time. The song became a dirge, a lamentable, prolonged wail of distress:

*"Nee-rah, my Gahd, to Thee,
Nee-rah to Thee-ah."*

At the end of the song, Uncle Oelbermann put on his hat without a word of warning. Instantly there was a hush. The guests rose.

"Not going so soon, Uncle Oelbermann?" protested Trina, politely. He only nodded. Marcus sprang forward to help him with his overcoat. Mr. Sieppe came up and the two men shook hands.

Then Uncle Oelbermann delivered himself of an oracular phrase. No doubt he had been meditating it during the supper. Addressing Mr. Sieppe, he said:

"You have not lost a daughter, but have gained a son."

These were the only words he had spoken the entire evening. He departed; the company was profoundly impressed.

About twenty minutes later, when Marcus Schouler was entertaining the guests by eating almonds, shells and all, Mr. Sieppe started to his feet, watch in hand.

"Haf-bast elevun," he shouted. "Attention! Der dime haf arrive, shtop eferyting. We depart."

This was a signal for tremendous confusion. Mr. Sieppe immediately threw off his previous air of relaxation, the calf's head was forgotten, he was once again the leader of vast enterprises.

"To me, to me," he cried. "Mommer, der tervins, Owgooste." He marshalled his tribe together, with tremendous commanding gestures. The sleeping twins were suddenly shaken into a dazed consciousness; Owgooste, whom the almond-eating of Marcus Schouler had petrified with admiration, was smacked to a realization of his surroundings.

Old Grannis, with a certain delicacy that was one of his characteristics, felt instinctively that the guests -- the mere outsiders -- should depart before the family began its leave-taking of Trina. He withdrew unobtrusively, after a hasty good-night to the bride and groom. The rest followed almost immediately.

"Well, Mr. Sieppe," exclaimed Marcus, "we won't see each other for some time." Marcus had given up his first intention of joining in the Sieppe migration. He spoke in a large way of certain affairs that would keep him in San Francisco till the fall. Of late he had entertained ambitions of a ranch life, he would breed cattle, he had a little money and was only looking for someone "to go in with." He dreamed of a cowboy's life and saw himself in an entrancing vision involving silver spurs and untamed bronchos. He told himself that Trina had cast him off, that his best friend had "played him for a sucker," that the "proper caper" was to withdraw from the world entirely.

"If you hear of anybody down there," he went on, speaking to Mr. Sieppe, "that wants to go in for ranching, why just let me know."

"Soh, soh," answered Mr. Sieppe abstractedly, peering about for Owgooste's cap.

Marcus bade the Sieppes farewell. He and Heise went out together. One heard them, as they descended the stairs, discussing the possibility of Frenna's place being still open.

Then Miss Baker departed after kissing Trina on both cheeks. Selina went with her. There was only the family left.

Trina watched them go, one by one, with an increasing feeling of uneasiness and vague apprehension. Soon they would all be gone.

"Well, Trina," exclaimed Mr. Sieppe, "goot-py; perhaps you come visit us somedime."

Mrs. Sieppe began crying again.

"Ach, Trina, ven shall I efer see you again?"

Tears came to Trina's eyes in spite of herself. She put her arms around her mother.

"Oh, sometime, sometime," she cried. The twins and Owgooste clung to Trina's skirts, fretting and whimpering.

McTeague was miserable. He stood apart from the group, in a corner. None of them seemed to think of him; he was not of them.

"Write to me very often, mamma, and tell me about everything -- about August and the twins."

"It is dime," cried Mr. Sieppe, nervously. "Goot-py, Trina. Mommer, Owgooste, say goot-py, den we must go. Goot-py, Trina." He kissed her. Owgooste and the twins were lifted up. "Gome, gome," insisted Mr. Sieppe, moving toward the door.

"Goot-py, Trina," exclaimed Mrs. Sieppe, crying harder than ever. "Doktor -- where is der doktor -- Doktor, pe goot to her, eh? pe varyy goot, eh, won't you? Zum day, Dokter, you vill haf a daughter, den you know berhaps how I feel, yes."

They were standing at the door by this time. Mr. Sieppe, half way down the stairs, kept calling "Gome, gome, we miss der drain."

Mrs. Sieppe released Trina and started down the hall, the twins and Owgooste following. Trina stood in the doorway, looking after them through her tears. They were going, going. When would she ever see them again? She was to be left alone with this man to whom she had just been married. A sudden vague terror seized her; she left McTeague and ran down the hall and caught her mother around the neck.

"I don't WANT you to go," she whispered in her mother's ear, sobbing. "Oh, mamma, I -- I'm 'fraid."

"Ach, Trina, you preak my heart. Don't gry, poor leetle girl." She rocked Trina in her arms as though she were a child again. "Poor leetle scairt girl, don' gry -- soh -- soh -- soh -- dere's nuttun to pe 'fraid oaf. Dere, go to your hoasban'. Listen, popper's galling again; go den; goot-by."

She loosened Trina's arms and started down the stairs. Trina leaned over the banisters, straining her eyes after her mother.

"What is ut, Trina?"

"Oh, good-by, good-by."

"Gome, gome, we miss der drain."

"Mamma, oh, mamma!"

"What is ut, Trina?"

"Good-by."

"Goot-py, leetle daughter."

"Good-by, good-by, good-by."

The street door closed. The silence was profound.

For another moment Trina stood leaning over the banisters, looking down into the empty stairway. It was dark. There was nobody. They -- her father, her

mother, the children -- had left her, left her alone. She faced about toward the rooms -- faced her husband, faced her new home, the new life that was to begin now.

The hall was empty and deserted. The great flat around her seemed new and huge and strange; she felt horribly alone. Even Maria and the hired waiter were gone. On one of the floors above she heard a baby crying. She stood there an instant in the dark hall, in her wedding finery, looking about her, listening. From the open door of the sitting-room streamed a gold bar of light.

She went down the hall, by the open door of the sitting-room, going on toward the hall door of the bedroom.

As she softly passed the sitting-room she glanced hastily in. The lamps and the gas were burning brightly, the chairs were pushed back from the table just as the guests had left them, and the table itself, abandoned, deserted, presented to view the vague confusion of its dishes, its knives and forks, its empty platters and crumpled napkins. The dentist sat there leaning on his elbows, his back toward her; against the white blur of the table he looked colossal. Above his giant shoulders rose his thick, red neck and mane of yellow hair. The light shone pink through the gristle of his enormous ears.

Trina entered the bedroom, closing the door after her. At the sound, she heard McTeague start and rise.

"Is that you, Trina?"

She did not answer; but paused in the middle of the room, holding her breath, trembling.

The dentist crossed the outside room, parted the chenille portieres, and came in. He came toward her quickly, making as if to take her in his arms. His eyes were alight.

"No, no," cried Trina, shrinking from him. Suddenly seized with the fear of him -- the intuitive feminine fear of the male -- her whole being quailed before him. She was terrified at his huge, square-cut head; his powerful, salient jaw; his huge, red hands; his enormous, resistless strength.

"No, no -- I'm afraid," she cried, drawing back from him to the other side of the room.

"Afraid?" answered the dentist in perplexity. "What are you afraid of, Trina? I'm not going to hurt you. What are you afraid of?"

What, indeed, was Trina afraid of? She could not tell. But what did she know of McTeague, after all? Who was this man that had come into her life, who had taken her from her home and from her parents, and with whom she was now left alone here in this strange, vast flat?

"Oh, I'm afraid. I'm afraid," she cried.

McTeague came nearer, sat down beside her and put one arm around her.

"What are you afraid of, Trina?" he said, reassuringly. "I don't want to frighten you."

She looked at him wildly, her adorable little chin quivering, the tears brimming in her narrow blue eyes. Then her glance took on a certain intentness, and she peered curiously into his face, saying almost in a whisper:

"I'm afraid of YOU."

But the dentist did not heed her. An immense joy seized upon him -- the joy of possession. Trina was his very own now. She lay there in the hollow of his arm, helpless and very pretty.

Those instincts that in him were so close to the surface suddenly leaped to life, shouting and clamoring, not to be resisted. He loved her. Ah, did he not love her? The smell of her hair, of her neck, rose to him.

Suddenly he caught her in both his huge arms, crushing down her struggle with his immense strength, kissing her full upon the mouth. Then her great love for McTeague suddenly flashed up in Trina's breast; she gave up to him as she had done before, yielding all at once to that strange desire of being conquered and subdued. She clung to him, her hands clasped behind his neck, whispering in his ear:

"Oh, you must be good to me -- very, very good to me, dear -- for you're all that I have in the world now."

TO BE CONTINUED IN THE NEXT ISSUE

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SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

The Back Alley is a webzine devoted to the hardboiled and noir genres of popular fiction. We welcome submissions of stories which fall within the guidelines of these genres, and historical/critical/analytical nonfiction related to these genres.

The discussion, even among those who are well-read in these literary forms, surrounding just what constitutes hardboiled or noir fiction is ongoing, often confrontational, and seldom results in anything resembling agreement.

Basically, hardboiled crime fiction involves a stronger description of violence, sex, and contains harsher language than you might find in traditional crime fiction. The protagonist more often than not is a private investigator. This investigator may fall under the tradition of Chandler's Marlowe and his successors such as Lew Archer and Spenser, in which the crimes are vicious but the detectives are not. They may more closely resemble the work of Carroll John Daly or Mickey Spillane, where the detective is as likely to engage in violence as the criminals are.

Noir stories often defy description, except that you are aware from the beginning that the protagonist and those around him are probably doomed no matter what they do to prevent it. The source of their damnation is their own personal weaknesses and frailties. They give in to temptation and, as in the story of Adam and Eve, their own choices condemn them. Greed, avarice, lust, and envy figure heavily in noir stories. Often, the noir protagonist believes him(her)self to be virtuous or to be acting correctly. It is only later that they discover that their decisions - well-meaning or not - have led to their undoing.

There is an ongoing discussion on the Rara Avis list regarding the nature of hardboiled versus noir literature. Jim Doherty has stated that "*...hard-boiled describes an attitude that's tough and colloquial, while noir describes an atmosphere that's dark and gloomy*".

In response, Jack Bludis, in an attempt to take the two genres down to their bare essentials, has asserted that "*hardboiled = tough; noir = screwed*".

More often than not, the discussion comes down to an uneasy truce based on a statement something like, "*Well, I know it when I see it.*"

Which, when all is said and done, will also be the reasoning we will employ when deciding whether to accept a story for **The Back Alley**.

Since I have failed so miserably at describing exactly what hardboiled and noir fiction is, I would like to take a moment to describe exactly what it is not.

We do not want to see any story involving a cat, talking or otherwise, unless the cat is dead by the end of the story. We love cats, have a bunch of them ourselves. They have no place in hardboiled stories, especially if they talk, think, reason, or engage in any other behavior than eating, sleeping, and licking their butts. Don't submit cat mysteries. We will reject them and then post ugly comments about your mama.

If there is an 'Inspector' in your story, there had also better damned well be some rats, roaches or other vermin. We will consider making an exception for building inspectors, but only if they are brutally victimized. If you have ever built a house, you know why.

If Aunt Lucy is solving the crime, she had better also have some prison tats, drink like Foster Brooks, and spray the bad guys with an Uzi. The only tea I want to read about in these stories is Mexican pot.

We are open to foul language, substance abuse, graphic and frequent violence, and sex. If you don't know how to write sex, don't submit any. Most people don't know how to write it. If your early writing career was spent typing with one hand, feel free to toss in a little of the ol' wokka-wokka. If it's embarrassing, we'll ask you to cut it.

We don't want to read international thrillers, gaslight armchair detectives, kung-fu adventures, serial killer stories, forensic procedurals, police procedurals, courtroom procedurals, or medical mysteries. We do not want to read anything that takes place more than ten years in the future. We do not want to read anything that takes place more than one hundred years in the past.

If you are still in doubt, query.

Okay, as to the mechanics: We are looking for stories up to 10,000 words. We will entertain submissions that are longer, up to novella length, but query first. We are only accepting electronic submissions, because we are tree huggers and we don't like dealing with all that SASE crap.

Here is the procedure for submitting your story.

Format it in the standard method (one inch margins, double spaced, yada yada yada. If you don't know, consult Writers Digest or google it.). Save your story in RTF format. Close it to strip out all the weird but cool formatting like

em dashes and smart quotes, and reopen it to assure yourself that you are not going to offend us. Close it and attach it to an email. In the body of the email, write your query. Impress us. We like that.

Send the email to: BarHallCom@aol.com Slug your email *Back Alley Submission*.

Make some microwave popcorn. Pop open a cold one. Wait a while. Weeks, maybe. We have day jobs.

Eventually, we will let you know what we think. Seems pretentious, considering that we're only paying twenty bucks or so a story, but we do care about the quality of the material we will publish in our webzine. We may ask you to edit your story, and if we do we will tell you what we would like changed. If you don't want to edit it, we're cool with that, but we won't publish it.

If we decide to publish your work, you lucky dog, we will send you two signed copies of the contract and an SASE. Sign them, and send ONE back. We will then issue checks for the story payment. Sounds convoluted, but it works for us.

We will be buying first serial rights only. Should we decide at some point in the future to publish a print anthology of stories originally published in **The Back Alley**, and to use your story in that anthology, we will contact you to offer to buy those rights separately. Please be aware that first periodical rights will include the right to include your stories in our archived editions of **The Back Alley**. However, our contract will state that you are free to sell reprint rights to your story elsewhere six months after initial publication.

Any other questions, query.

We're looking forward to reading the fruits of your genius.