

PULP ASYLUM



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PULP ASYLUM

Issue Six, April 2025

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On The Cover:

***Frog Boy* by Jean Wills, inspired by the classic sideshow banner by Snap Wyatt.**

Pulp Asylum is created in Columbus, Ohio, by Billy Ramone.

Issue 6/April 2025

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Editor's Note

Gabba Gabba Hey,

The world--not just *Pulp Asylum*, dammit, but the *world*--is a rough place. I'm not saying all of it, mind you, but enough. Grim. Dirty. Brutal. (Why is it alla sudden I got [Rodney Anonymous yelling in my head about blind people can smell how bad it is?](#)). Anyway, no matter who you are you gotta have some way of dealing with the rough stuff of life, right? Or avoiding dealing with it, which is at least temporarily the same thing, kinda. It's just life happening, happening in all its weirdness and wonder, all its sadness and violence. Bend over, here it comes.

And that is what stories are about. At least the ones in this issue. How do you respond to the mess? Sometimes our characters grapple with understanding what's before them. Sometimes, they insist on springing into action. Sometimes they stand back and try to pick their moment . . . or wait until it picks them. Some seek to work it out within themselves, and some look for help elsewhere. Sometimes we think all we need is the nerve to seize the moment. But is it that simple?

After all, overconfidence can be fatal.

Consider, for example, the 1929 murder of Columbus medical student Theora Hix by her lover, Dr. James H. Snook. Snook had nerves of steel. He was a Gold-Medal-winning Olympic marksman. Hell, the dude performed a vasectomy *on himself*. A respected and prominent member of the Ohio State University veterinary faculty, Snook bludgeoned Hix with a hammer, cut her throat, and left her dead in a field west of town. Nerves of steel, yet the story of how met his end in the death chamber of the Ohio Penn is a study in bungling overconfidence.

But don't take my word for it. Now you can judge for yourself: I'm pleased to offer on [the publications page](#) a free downloadable version of *The Murder of Theora Hix: Doctor Snook's Uncensored Testimony*. A true rarity, original copies of which now retail for a hundred dollars or more, the book was published in Columbus to satisfy the raging curiosity of trial-watchers who wanted to know details of Snook's testimony that were deemed too obscene to print in the daily papers. The book was quickly suppressed by city officials, although a few hundred copies survived the clampdown. So far as I know, this pdf, based on a copy in my personal library, is the first time the text has ever been made available electronically.

So who says I don't give you the goods: illicit sex! Vicious blow jobs! Bloody reprisals! Read all about it, kids!

And don't forget where you got it or how cheap it was,

Billy

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SKEINS

Leon Saul

Leon Saul is the author of several short stories, appearing in NonBinary Review, Max Blood's Mausoleum, SCREAMS, and elsewhere. He lives in Southern California with his wife, son, and two ferocious cats.

Natalie sees it on the bathroom wall. Small and dark. Trembling in the still air.

A spider?

She leans forward on the toilet seat, fingers blotching her fleshy thighs. Reaches out with an unsteady hand--

The little object flutters, but doesn't skitter away. No . . . not a spider.

A skein of hair.

Springy and soft, tangled minutely. Pinching it between thumb and forefinger, a slow feather grazes Natalie's insides. Before the queasy feeling can bloom into full-on sickness, she reaches over, yanks open the cabinet door beneath the sink, and retrieves the jewelry case buried beneath her sister's avalanche of makeup. Unclasping the lid, she deposits the tangled hairball inside—flinching as the tiny skein unfurls and what looks like a wiry insect leg twitches from one end. She snaps the lid shut, buries the velvet case back under the rubble of mascara and lipstick.

See, she tells herself, letting the cabinet door swing shut. *That wasn't so hard, was it?*

In her mind's eye, the Head nods—and Natalie shudders as boundless filaments of hair, thick and thin, slither away from its cracked and ancient face.

* * *

In the kitchen, eight-year-old Natalie stands on the balls of her socked feet, head peeking over the island counter. Sitting on a stool opposite, her younger sister, Melody, brushes Malibu Barbie's hair with a miniature comb. Both girls watch their mother, Sylvia, knead

lumps of raw dough on the surface of the countertop. A shaft of sun falls from the skylight, splashing the kitchen island in a radiant parallelogram. Caught in this beam, Sylvia Mercer's hair shimmers like fire.

Natalie gazes, wide-eyed, at her mother's luxuriant hair, which falls straight as a pin past the small of her back, long heavenly gold glistening in the ray of light like dappled honey. Her sister's hair is a similar shade, like the sun on the picture Melody drew at school (now proudly displayed on their refrigerator, under slightly crooked pineapple magnets), under whose spark-like rays the family stands, forming a happy chain outside their home.

In the picture, Mom's and Melody's hair are the same fiery yellow. Shapely and glowing, cascading past their shoulders like ethereal waterfalls. Natalie's hair by contrast is frizzy, thin. Scratched onto the paper with a No. 2 pencil.

Melody often teases Natalie about the way she looks. Her weight, her skin. Sometimes Sylvia notices Melody being mean—the six-year-old swinging her hips like she's balancing an invisible hula hoop, arms akimbo as she taunts her older sister—and forces Melody to say sorry. "We don't talk that way, Cupcake," she warns. A firm yet gentle rebuke. "It's not nice."

Tears threatening to spill from her eyes, Natalie nods. It's bad enough hating the way she looks: round, flat face and small seedlike eyes. Hair like an abandoned bird's nest in winter. Features so kindly bestowed on her by her father.

Natalie adores her dad, despite his nestlike hair. He's something called a bank regulator, and often out of town for weeks at a time. Natalie loves hearing Dad's voice when he calls from places like Boston and New York. "*How's Daddy's little onion*"? he says, causing a smile to part Natalie's lips—making her forget for a moment her SpongeBob teeth as she cradles her mother's phone, wishing he'd come home soon so he could pick her up and squeeze her like a plush doll.

It's fine, though, because she has Sylvia—her lovely, beautiful mother, who bakes the most delicious cookies, even though she rarely eats them—and, okay, her annoying sister, too.

Sylvia presses a layer of shiny foil onto the baking tray, then thinks twice and snatches it up, crumpling the sheet in her fist, when a piece of dough falls off the edge of the countertop.

She directs her gaze at Natalie, there on the other side of the island. “Onion, please pick that up,” she says, a smile crinkling her azure eyes.

Natalie drops to her knees and scrabbles across the floor, hunting for the fugitive dough. She rounds the base of the island, and sees a pale wad wedged in the grout between floor tiles.

Reaching for it, something else catches her attention. Razor thin, snaking like a crack on the floor.

A single strand of hair.

A fine, long thread attached to the clump of beige dough. Curled in a shimmery S, it glistens in the ray of sunlight slanting from above.

It must be Sylvia’s. Not even Melody’s hair is that long.

It seems wrong somehow, isolated there amidst the dust and kitchen crumbs. . . .

Suddenly, Natalie’s stomach lurches. Acid shoots up her esophagus, and wincing, she doubles over, as though she’s about to be sick.

Before she can make it to her feet, a stream of vomit is sluicing from the drawn-back rictus of her lips.

It seems to last forever. Curdled cereal spreads in a scummy lake around the base of the island. Between gasps, she hears herself muttering, “*I’m s-s-sorry.*”

“*EWWW, Natalie!*”

Her sister wavers at the edge of her vision. Waggles the Barbie back and forth in the air, like a priest wielding a cross before a vampire. The doll’s platinum locks pitch and twirl like a wind-tossed flag.

Sylvia swings around the kitchen island—hovers over Natalie’s kneeling form. She points at the mess and orders her daughter to Clean. It. Up. (No gentle inflection honeying her voice; only frustration and disappointment.)

Natalie sits on the kitchen floor, wobbles unsteadily. She closes her eyes. Her chin drips. Her stomach spasms and cramps.

With her eyes closed, she pretends this isn't happening. She hasn't embarrassed herself in front of her mom and little sister. She isn't sobbing.

Her heart is beating in her neck, however. Kicking dangerously hard against her heaving ribs. . . .

She feels something tap her on the shoulder and opens her eyes. A roll of paper towels.

Shame threatens to swallow her whole. Hesitantly, she accepts the roll with a trembling hand. She bends to the floor and then it hits her. The smell. Stomach acid. Bitter bile.

Still, as she sops up the mess—feeling small, squishy curds bunching through the thin paper—a part of her is relieved.

The strand of hair is now hidden, drowned in the putrid lake at the edge of her knees.

* * *

Thursday night. Alone in the apartment.

Natalie, twenty-two, dozes fitfully on the living room sofa. The room is dark save for the light of the television, which plays a '90s sitcom. Canned laughter lulls her into a dreamless sleep.

After a time, her eyelids flutter open.

The show's still on, casting its flickering carousel of light; then the liquid crystal screen recedes and in its place, a window.

Wind skirts through what moments before was the Samsung flatscreen.

Natalie glimpses dunes dotting a saffron-colored vista. They crawl with an undulating mass that slinks across the land like creeping surf—

Stiffening, Natalie wants to run to the screen—the window—and find a way to close it so the mass, whatever it is, can't get inside the apartment. But her body refuses to move.

Instead, she watches as the many sinuous channels or tentacles writhe and twitch and squirm. Then with a shiver of realization, she sees what they are--

So hypnotic is the motion (and the rasping hiss as the many-colored locks ripple toward the window), it takes her a moment to notice, in the distance, the larger shape rising from the ground.

The Head.

Its ancient face weathered and cracked. Thatchy hair snakes from the cracks like grass from concrete fissures. The Head's visage is expressionless, a stark monolith. It gazes at Natalie from afar with a stony impassivity.

As the hair slithers on the other side of the window making dry, rasping sounds like wind-driven sand on blacktop, the Head speaks, though no words are uttered aloud--

The message reaches across the chasm between the vista and the living room, and Natalie leans forward, listening.

* * *

The summer Natalie turns 17, a tumor is found in her mother's left breast, and she begins the first round of chemotherapy in June.

By mid-August, Sylvia is rail thin. She barely eats. Natalie wonders how long a person can survive on cottage cheese and cold garbanzo beans.

Scarecrow. This is the word conjured up when eyeing her mother curled under the afghan, or sleeping in the hospital bed—the clinic a quiet place echoing with the blip of medical gear and the patter of rubber-soled feet—and she immediately regrets it.

The smock hanging off Sylvia's shoulders sags as if on wire. Her skin is leached and bloodless—chalky, brittle, like the flesh might blow away on a breath of wind.

When Sylvia returns home after the second round of chemotherapy, her hair starts to fall. Natalie finds it everywhere. In the bathroom, the kitchen. Weird antennae rising off the wings of chairs. Fluttering from the fronds of the aloe plant on the living room table.

Wild skeins colonize the house. Miniature masses tangled in knots and ragged clumps. Natalie tries to hide her distress. Her mother spends most of her days on the couch, putting on a brave face and trying to conceal her pain. Natalie pretends it doesn't bother her, seeing Sylvia like this. Tries to not notice the golden hair losing its luster, thinning and shedding until, one day, it's gone. In its place a pale, shiny egg, veins webbing the surface in hairline cracks.

If she sees a single strand on a pillow, or the arm of a chair, she panics. Hides in her room and locks the door. Does deep breathing exercises until her heart stops pounding. Sometimes she wakes in the early hours of morning from nightmares of a giant world of hair. It engulfs her, this hirsute sphere: knotted strands enshroud her in a raveling cocoon until she wakes up sweating. She refuses to get out of bed, dreads touching her feet to the bedroom floor—thinking of the hairs embedded there, in the carpet. The thought of those hairs making contact with her skin (even curling against her socks) makes her lightheaded and fills her with repulsion.

* * *

The last day she sees her mother alive, Natalie is standing by her sister in their mother's darkened bedroom.

Sylvia lies awake, supine in the middle of the bed. With difficulty she sits up and beckons them. Her skin is pale, her bones birdlike. The hospice nurse and their father have left the room, giving the girls some privacy.

Ashamedly, both sisters lurk by the door, unsure of how to proceed.

Melody's the first to break out of her spell. She rushes to Sylvia, stifling tears. Her mother hugs her and places a hand on the back of her head. "*You're beautiful,*" she whispers into her daughter's ear. She strokes Melody's hip-length hair. Her fingers, long and fallow, entwine in the hanging locks.

Through strangled sobs, Melody blurts back, "You're so beautiful, Mom! The most beautiful. . . ."

While this is happening, Sylvia looks past Melody's shoulder—at Natalie, who stands just inside the doorway, and doesn't know whether to approach or let Mom and Melody have their moment.

They've always had a special connection, after all.

Eventually Melody pulls away. Sylvia, wiping tears from her eyes, calls her other daughter's name. Breaking out of her paralysis, Natalie approaches the bed. Her entire body buzzes with nerves.

Although she's been home for the last week, Sylvia smells of the hospital. A beige, clinical odor. When Natalie hugs her, she's careful not to touch her mother's head, which is bald and blue-veined, like rivers on a relief map.

As she pulls away for the last time, Natalie can't help but steal a final glance at her mother's scalp, to see if she can spot any hairs.

* * *

The jewelry box is nearly full now.

Natalie empties her backpack of textbooks and dumps the feathery wisps inside. She no longer vomits at the sight of loose hair. Can even pluck twisted skeins off the floor without the use of gloves. The biggest challenge, still, is the bathroom—Melody's hairs clinging to the bowl of the sink, coiled wetly around the rim of the drain.

Backpack slung over her shoulders, she ventures out of the apartment in search of hair. Park benches and restaurant booths. The local rec center—strands twining around grubby gym equipment. Willing the contents of her stomach down, she crams the hairs into her backpack.

One day she cuts off her own frizzled locks—getting as close to the scalp as possible. Bunches the snarls of hair in her fists and tries stuffing them into the maw of the backpack, which, after many weeks, is full.

A sign she's on the right track.

Distantly, through the window, the Head looks on. Ruinous: its visage splintered in vertical rents. The spidering cracks remind Natalie of the veins on her mother's skull. The cracks sprout tentacles of hair. They rasp and slither over the ground in questing skeins and branching tributaries on the other side of the window.

Natalie clears the living room table, removes the scissors speckled with blood, tufts of gummed hair clinging to the blades.

Her oblation is laid out on the coffee table: an amorphous mass comprising hairs of varying length, volume and color. Sunny blonde and ginger red. Cinnamon brown. Midnight blue.

Seated before the table, head dipped down, Natalie prays, focusing all her will. And then--

The agglomeration moves. The mass of hair on the table writhes as if rodents are scurrying beneath it. The pieces somehow lock together, cohere. Gain density in a swirling, riotous profusion.

The matted heap shuttles forward faster than Natalie anticipated.

At its approach, she closes her eyes, no longer afraid. Feels the ends attach to her shorn scalp, burrow into her flesh like vines. Strands of hair tunnel through her skull, ravel around the ridged grooves of her brain like shoots of ivy. And curiously, through all this, she feels nothing--

Not even when her skin cracks and pieces of her fall to the floor.

A smile quirks her lips as the skeins of hair—the many beautiful living tendrils woven tightly through her head—burst forth in a fine, radial spray like spokes of light from the sun.

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JUNE BELL PERKINS' BOY

Hubble Stark

Originally from Mississippi, Hubble Stark writes crime and literary fiction from his home in the Rockies. He holds an MFA from the University of Montana and his work has been featured or is forthcoming in Punk Noir Magazine and Close To The Bone, among other outlets.

“How far do you want me to go?”

The two guys, related somehow, look at each other. The younger one has done all the talking so far.

He shrugs, says, “We want him to get the message.”

“Bones?”

“Whatever you reckon. We want him to get the message,” he says again.

“And,” I say, “what exactly is this message?”

“Does it matter?”

I get this question a lot. People assume because I get paid to turn grown men into sniveling children for a living that I don’t have what you might call a moral compass. Or curiosity. I got both though.

“It matters,” I say.

The diner is all silverware clanks and shouted orders into the kitchen and waitresses refilling steaming mugs of coffee for old men who grew up farming but now only dress sort of like they do. They turned into mechanics after selling the family land once their parents died, or went to work in factories when we still had them in the South. Now they’re retired and pensioned and own their homes and their wives get their hair done once a week and keep the basic cable stations afloat.

Now the younger one looks at the older again. He uncrosses his arms and leans over the Formica table. “Look. He ain’t a good man. He’s been beating our cousin Melissa for a long time now and it ain’t gonna stop unless someone makes it. We were told that’s you.”

“How long?”

“What?”

“How long,” I say, “has he been hurting her?”

“Years, dammit.” The older man twists in the booth, tampers his voice down. He probably knows folks here, doesn’t want to stay any longer than he has to. “We can’t watch it no more,” he says.

“They live together?”

Now the younger man shakes his head. “We run him out of Melissa’s house a while back but he keeps showing up and I’m sure she goes over to his trailer. He’s got her hooked.”

Two men behind us discuss the weather. Won’t be a winter this year, they say. Won’t be a winter.

“Needle?”

“Fent.” The younger man has seen it before in his own circles and the older man bites down on his bottom lip like a Buck knife just split two of his ribs.

“This damn world,” the older one says. “She’ll be dead soon, unless—” He doesn’t say the next part, but he licks his lips and wipes his mouth just as quick and balls his fist, looking square into my eyes. People come to me because they can’t go to the law and I do what I do because I want to help people who ain’t got nowhere else to turn. Like so many others.

I eye the napkin under the older man’s coffee mug. “Write his address.” He does. His fingernails are caked underneath with black. I put the napkin in my shirt pocket without looking and I say, “You got my mail?”

The young man sniffs. His movements are mechanical, rigid. He's gone over this in his mind a hundred times, maybe even practiced, but he still looks like a wind-up toy grabbing the plastic sack off the seat and placing it on the table. With my envelope of cash they've stacked newspapers and fake letters and round citrus fruits in the bag just like they were told to do. I look inside, feign interest, and stand without another word. I like it when things go smoothly. They followed all their instructions to a tee. I walk to my truck just outside. From the driver's seat, I can see our table through the window. The two men still sit on one side of the diner's booth. The younger man is staring down at the table. The older man keeps swallowing so he won't cry in public.

* * *

Transcript of interview recorded 7/17 at Wayne County Police Station

Officer Wright: So you followed the suspect, Ronald Perkins, out of the diner. Then what?

Officer Curtis: He got into his truck and sat there a while then when he left I followed him out of the parking lot to his apartment. Just a little place. He spoke with a neighbor, elderly lady. Uses a walker. He helped her realign her screen door. Then he went inside and I waited in my car until he come out again at six thirty. Suspect went through a fast-food drive thru and back home. No stops. He did not leave again that night. In the morning I switched with another officer who watched his apartment for the next twelve hours during which time the suspect's car remained in the same location at his apartment.

Wright: And your contention is that during this twelve hour period, sometime when the other officer had relieved you, the suspect had actually left his apartment.

Curtis: Correct.

Wright: And was the suspect, Ronald Perkins, known to you before you were assigned to this particular case?

Curtis: Only by description.

Wright: Meaning, not by contact in any form.

Curtis: Correct.

Wright: All right then.

Curtis: I became suspicious when the suspect did not answer his door after repeated knocking by the same elderly woman.

Wright: And yet you did not leave your post or radio your suspicions, a violation of policy and one which in the past you've consistently not observed. This recently led to a period of enforced, unpaid leave, correct?

Recording continues amid an extended pause.

Curtis: Correct.

Wright: All right then.

Curtis: I did not leave my post until I answered a call for domestic disturbance later that evening.

Wright: Near the end of your shift.

Curtis: Correct. I was relieved by the same officer and told dispatch I would investigate on my way home for the evening. Domestic calls are usually routine and involve little more than a noise complaint because some husband didn't want eggs again for dinner.

Wright: This domestic was not routine, though, was it Officer Wright?

Curtis: That would be correct.

* * *

The trailer at the address shares a dead-end half acre with two others. Melissa's boyfriend's trailer is a beat single-wide that at one time might have been blue and certainly came with more glass than currently occupies the widow frames. All around is a graveyard of mufflers and hunks of metal that come out of car engines and coils of black wire and chicken fencing and a single concrete bird feeder mossed and chipped. Junkies like him will keep just about anything around to scrounge through when they need cash, something

to huck to someone less fortunate or more stupid. Hell, with all the cold metal in the yard, I really didn't even need to bring the electrical taped pipe I use to get messages across to folks.

It's getting on dark but the summer weather is hot and I don't mind the walk at all. Honeysuckle season. Find the yellow and white flowers everywhere. Reminds me of my mother. She kept a wooden lattice by our house overflowing with honeysuckle. As a child, I loved to pick through the wall of green for the sweet treat flowers. I'd bring her a few when I went foraging and she'd act like I'd dug up gold bars and presented them to her. Kind of lady she was and I miss her like the devil misses heaven.

Anyhow, I see within the piles of junk a stack of tires and make that my call. I mount the wooden steps to the trailer door, which I see opens in, and knock, listening for footsteps. Ten seconds later, I hear the creak of floorboards coming my way and push myself against the door. A voice says, "Who is it?"

"Evening. You got a stack of tires out here. Interested in selling them?"

I'm right up against the door. Its so thin I believe I can hear his heartbeat on the other side. Finally, he says, "What'll you give?"

"Mind if I step inside? It's hot as fire out here this evening."

A long pause. Wary junky. I'm leaning fully against the door now and I hear him shifting one foot to the other but eventually the knob turns and that's when I push with all my weight.

The door swings open and catches him on the forehead, knocking him back two steps as he reaches for the nickel-plated .45 on the kitchen island but I'm already on him with the pipe. It makes a hollow whistle through the air like a jugmouth being blown over. The pipe catches his hand on the island and I know the first bones are pulverized. He staggers back into the living room, the hall leading to the bedrooms behind him concealed by a hanging sheet, cursing and wailing and spinning like a bear on fire before he crashes down on the musty carpet. I don't let him get back up.

His beard is longer than his hair and both are greasy. I aim the pipe and whistle it down on his knee cap. The cracking used to be sickening but now is only the sound of a right being wronged. He wails again and again and I make sure the knee will never work right again

with the pipe. I look at the other knee but I don't want him to pass out because there's words he needs to hear and remember. He probably ain't been eating right, being a junky and all, so no telling how long the adrenaline will keep him afloat.

He's yelling loud enough for the neighbors to hear and cursing and saying "Please" and "Oh, God almighty, God almighty," and yelling "Fuck fuck fuck you what the fuck" but these are just words and talking and listening at the same time don't much go together so I say, "If you want to keep that other knee hush up." It's a shock to him to hear my voice. His eyes are huge with something besides pain.

He says, "Man, I don't know—"

But that's all he gets out because I grab the busted left knee and squeeze until I can feel the floating displaced bone fragments jumble around and he gasps for air he can't get.

"Don't speak. Listen up. You listening? Nod so I know."

He nods, keens.

"You got another gun?"

He shakes his head and I check his waistband and find nothing. Nowhere else to hide one near him. Tears spew down his face and I admit to myself there's a pleasure that goes along with this work, knowing this sorry excuse for a human won't be getting a pass anymore, won't be slapping around Melissa, whoever she is, anymore. Won't be feeding her pills, won't be making empty promises, won't be keeping her life stalled until they both die. He's the problem and I'm the solution and it's simple as that.

"Melissa," I say, and his eyes peel back. "Your girlfriend? The girl you beat up?" I'm kneeled beside him, pulling off his house slipper. I yank off the dingy sock. His left foot is pale yellow. And he's only got four toes so that's one less than I usually account for but so be it.

I swing the pipe once on his toes. "You don't know her anymore."

I swing again. "You don't see her anymore."

He's gasping and holding onto my shirt but he's weak as a newborn.

The pipe whistles down onto his toes. "You will not ever contact her again."

One more swing. "And if she ever comes back—"

"Hold it."

The voice behind me could only be a cop's. I lick my lips and turn and sure enough there's a gun and the stance they teach at the academy.

"Now just ease up," he says.

The dirt bag on the floor is trying to speak to the cop but he's still gasping for air.

I say, "This doesn't concern the law. He ain't pressing charges. Our score is settled. I was just leaving."

"You're Ronny Perkins."

My name is strange coming from his mouth.

"June Bell Perkins' boy," the cops says.

I don't say anything. Just sniff and stand there with the pipe while the junky writhes at my feet.

"You're getting sloppy, Ronny."

I don't say a word.

"I trailed you from the diner. We know its you been committing all these..." He's looking for the right word because crimes won't do. "Beatings. Well, at least now we know it's you, anyhow. You think you're slick, slipping off without your car. Guess you saw me, huh?"

He already knows I did so I say, "You knew my mamma?"

“Everyone knew your momma, Ronny.” The cop points his gun at the floor. “I’m sorry she’s not here with us still. Miss her at church.”

“Me too. Look, if you know about the other times, then you know why I’m here. This piece of shit has been beating and making an addict out of a certain young woman for a long time now. But he ain’t no more, are you?”

“Shoot him,” the junky yells. “Arrest him, officer. The son of a bitch—” He’s breathing shallow and the knee skin below his shorts is rapidly darkening and blubing. “He walked in and came right at me with that pipe.”

“Shut up you human turd,” the cop says. “Look, Ronny. You need to get gone. But cool it for a while. God knows ain’t nobody mad at what you’ve been doing. Just don’t kill anyone. And get discreet about your business.”

He waves his hand so I’ll walk past him through the kitchen and out the way I came in but a floorboard whining behind me makes me freeze. I turn to see a small dark-haired woman. She’s rail thin and the gun she’s level with my chest should be shaking more in her hands but whatever potent upper Melissa is on keeps her hands still. Her thin arms are bruised like her face and bare feet and her eyes bear a dead frenzy I won’t escape.

* * *

Transcript of interview recorded 7/17 at Wayne County Police Station

Officer Wright: You responded to the domestic complaint made by a neighbor. Then what happened?

Officer Curtis: Inside the trailer I found Ronny--

Wright: Ronny?

Curtis: I mean Ronald Perkins, the suspect, engaged in beating a man with a pipe. I ordered him to freeze so I might apprehend him and save the man on the floor’s life. He was in bad shape from the pipe beating.

Wright: That’s when the woman, Melissa Bowers, appeared with a gun?

Curtis: Correct. She must have been hiding or maybe had only come out of a sleep. We'll know from the toxicology report.

Wright: Leave the speculation aside, Officer.

Curtis: I ordered her to drop her weapon but she fired into Mr. Perkins' chest. When she turned to me I had no choice but to discharge my sidearm. I only fired twice. As soon as she was down, the man on the floor pulled a nickel-plated .45 and fired into the kitchen wall behind me. Reckon if he hadn't been in so much pain I may be dead. But that's more speculation.

Wright: You then shot and killed the unidentified man?

Curtis: Correct.

Wright: Three dead bodies.

Curtis: Correct.

Wright: You claim to have dodged no less than three bullets.

Tape continues amid another prolonged silence.

Curtis: Claim makes it sound a little funny. There weren't nothing funny about what happened in that junky's trailer, Officer Wright.

* * *

"You killed her, Officer?" the junky said.

I didn't answer but jumped over to Ronny and knelt down to check his pulse. So much blood. Melissa Bowens did not leave the ambulance as an option for June Bell Perkins' boy. I'd call one soon enough. But I knew they'd be there quick because when an officer calls they respond lickety split. So I had to wait. Needed time to think.

"Is Melissa dead?"

And this time I had to call it in. One more enforced leave and it'd be my last. The commission wouldn't reinstate my badge.

"Thank God," the junky said. "Call an ambulance, please. Jesus Christ call someone. My knee's in a thousand pieces. You got to call me some help, officer."

I stood, looked around the place. Trash piled. Sink full of unwashed dishes and to-go boxes for some reason and garbage spilling out of the can. On the island, stacks of unopened mail and a blackened pipe and a plastic lighter next to the nickel-plated .45.

"Officer?"

"What?"

"Melissa's dead, ain't she?"

"She's dead."

"Well I'm still alive." Said it like he'd already moved past her. Like he'd been waiting on her death for a while. "Hear me?"

I circled the island, picked out my line of sight to the junky from the kitchen entrance, laid on the crusty linoleum.

"What in the hell are you doing? This dead bastard beat me with a pipe. Call a goddamn ambulance."

"Sure thing," I said. "Look at me, please." When he peeked his head up, I made his Adam's apple explode. I stood and watched him garble blood. He deserved a lot worse.

I'm sure the .45 already had his prints but I made his hand grip the pistol and used his finger to fire a round into the wall of the kitchen where I would have been standing and left the gun lingering beside his body.

When the ambulance arrived, shortly before Wright and the other responding officers, I had

my hands in the air, badge in one and gun in the other, trying to figure out what to say to turn Ronny Perkins into a hero.

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UNWANTED EXPOSURE

Ben Howels

Ben Howels is an ex-lawyer who eventually accepted that he enjoyed fictional worlds a lot more than the office. He primarily writes genre fiction, and he's published about 30 pieces of short fiction in Writing Magazine, Devolution Z, Red Sun Magazine, Shotgun Honey and The Arcanist, amongst others.

Derek felt the tension rise as the light started to fade, the temperature freefalling.

Hundreds of giddy fools milled around him—great shifting waves of them chattering in the spiky air, buttoning up their duffle-coats and cagoules, wrapping their scarves tighter, and joking about going blind. Suddenly, as if responding to some ineffable cosmic sign, they coalesced. Settled. The prepared had brought blankets; the best prepared had brought champagne.

Derek had brought something far more expensive.

The tripod was solidly grounded, the scene selection perfect—his camera angled to capture the event against a jagged, barren clifftop. He made sure the filter was secure, then raised protective glasses, and waited for the first dark sliver to stain the sun.

There.

Smiling, he clicked on his cable release. Along the beach, excited voices hushed, the pending darkness somehow demanding silence. Smartphones clicked meekly; Derek hoped their tepid flashes wouldn't ruin his light. He spent the next hour monitoring his equipment, screen-checking stills, and waiting for the liminal moments. For the *totality*.

Once it began, he removed the solar filters, seeking the images he really wanted—a circular blackness, surrounded by the lights of the corona, prominences and chromosphere. He adjusted the exposures swiftly, managing thirty shots in the window available.

Success.

No, not quite. The final shot on the viewscreen revealed a white glow in its centre. Faint, but unmistakable. Unforgivable.

Curiosity nagging, Derek squinted skywards. Far above, a tiny white beacon strove against the moon's ebony embrace.

He cast a quick glance around him, but nobody else seemed surprised, and when he turned back to the eclipse, the glow had vanished. A plane then. Maybe a passing satellite. With light seeping back into the day, he returned to monitoring his viewscreen, teeth flashing a relieved crescent—only the final exposure had been tainted. No real harm. Packing swiftly, he left just as the best-prepared people on the beach started sounding drunk.

An hour later, and Derek was leaning back into his study chair, trying to ignore the scratching sounds coming from his apartment's walls; something new to worry about, but not now. Now, he was worried about the photos.

Three of them. Not one, but three had been affected. And the ball of light was bigger than he remembered.

Still, there was no benefit in stressing over it. None of the affected shots were the best ones, with the crystal-clear halo. Their placement was odd, though—the third, seventeenth and thirtieth shots, as though the phenomenon had lingered throughout. Surely he would've noticed?

A quick search of the photography forums had revealed nothing. He'd triple-checked his kit to ensure it wasn't faulty. Had his set-up been wrong?

No. Just no. He knew his craft; he hadn't made a mistake. So what had been the problem?

He hunched forward, bringing up the last image, zooming in on the light. Dead centre, pure white, with... no. Not quite pure white. With the image at twenty times magnification, he could see the heart of the circle was discoloured, like the sickly shadow at the core of a zit. The third and seventeenth shots revealed the same thing.

He couldn't tell if the darker middle was grey, black or brown, or whether it bore a discernible shape—at this zoom his pictures usually held their clarity, but the discoloured area was just a smudge. When he squinted, it almost felt as though he could see

movement within.

He rubbed at his eyes, sparking multi-coloured fireworks. Maybe it was just him; he'd clearly had enough for one day. As the laptop's fan droned into silence, he heard the scratching sounds again. He'd get in touch with some exterminators tomorrow.

Next morning, caressed by pallid sunlight, Derek felt the first true tentacles of unease. He hadn't slept well, but that could easily be blamed on the rats in the walls.

The pictures, however, couldn't. Exposures eight through fourteen were now showing the white ball as well, and it was twice the size it had been yesterday.

Concerned he'd lose the rest of the set, he copied the remaining exposures to a separate folder, then virus-checked them. Nothing there – how could there be?—but it made sense to be safe.

A loud scraping noise made him jump, the grating vibration hurting his ears. The nearest wall was a few feet away, but the sound had felt much closer, as though right on top of him.

Had the rats grown overnight, too?

Turning his focus back to the laptop, he brought up shot fourteen, switching to full magnification. The dark smudge was, surprisingly, clearer now—still blurry, but clearer. Not clear enough for him to identify what was trapped, though.

Trapped? Why did he think something was trapped?

But there *was* something within the smudged area—three faint curves, lying close together. The gaps between them wouldn't quite align, as though they were constantly shifting position.

Derek shook his head, then checked the other tainted shots. The crescents were visible in each one, giving the faintest hint of movement, like feathers in a gentle breeze. More than that, they were in different places in each picture; the grid references on the toolbar proved it.

He pulled all of the offending slides up, adjusting their size so he could see them together, the tiles arranged by time order. Whatever the weird shapes were, they seemed to have

oscillated back and forth.

Derek suddenly lurched forward, eyes widening—the shadows in exposure twelve had started wriggling. He was sure of it. Nose squashed against the monitor, he blinked... and found the shadows were static. Nothing more than unidentified smears.

It was only as he sank back into his chair that he realised how he'd felt when he'd shot forwards. It wasn't like he'd moved; it was more like something had pulled him towards it.

The screen flickered, and he stared at it suspiciously. He ran a furred tongue around the inside of his cheeks, trying to distribute some moisture. It didn't work. He hadn't drunk much since yesterday lunchtime, so maybe he was dehydrated.

That's what it was. Had to be.

Derek got up and headed to the door, giving the rat-infested walls—and his laptop—a wide berth. A few minutes later he was approaching the counter at his favourite café.

Sharon poured him his usual decaf, flashing her usual glued-on smile. Derek tried to cling to her verbal inanities, but a fresh aching in his gums made it difficult. All he could manage was a limp smile before he nursed himself to his favourite booth, carefully placing his steaming mug on a wobbly, plastic table.

He liked this spot, being able to see everyone coming in. He'd even managed some award-winning character studies from the cracked-leather chair. He had no interest in other people's comings and goings now though; he just wanted to feel normal. He gingerly raised the mug to his right cheek, the warmth soothing the pain on that side, but it couldn't do anything to stop the scratching sounds. The rats had somehow followed him.

Which, of course, was bollocks. The café had solid walls. He knew that. He had stills of the construction site to prove it. And if nothing was inside the walls, then something was inside of him. Maybe he'd brought a virus back from Brazil? He'd only got home last week, and there was some filthy stuff you could get from the tropics. Like those worms that could burrow into your flesh.

Gods, he hoped it wasn't that.

Swallowing fast, skin prickling, Derek took some deep breaths. Tried to calm down. Tried to

forget all about hot sunshine and slippery, ridged little bodies. About gnawing teeth and peeling flesh. To his surprise, he found it easy to think about something else. Sadly, it wasn't much better. It was the same thing he'd been thinking about on the way to the café: when he'd left his flat, it hadn't been because he'd wanted a drink. It was because he'd felt like he had to get out of there. Out of his own home.

Just thinking about the moving shadows got him hunching his shoulders painfully.

Still. The coffee tasted good, and the warmth of the nearby radiator was having a soporific effect, his fingers tingly, the aches in his mouth slowly numbing. Whatever else he felt, he felt shattered. Leaning forward, he lowered his head to the table, the surface cool on his cheek.

No, not cool—freezing.

Freezing, like the voice that suddenly gibbered in his mind.

Freezing, like the empty abyss between the stars—the cold void that had slowed his blood to a glacial sludge, trapping him until the fabric betwixt was thin enough to allow transition, and the chance to seek warmth again. Gushing, fountaining warmth.

Such a thin barrier to cross. So fragile, like the membrane of a mind.

His mind.

Derek jerked upright, arms splayed, mug shattering. He felt Sharon approach before she arrived; heard her mumbling about accidents happening, and things being alright.

They weren't alright. Sweet Christ, they weren't.

He glanced at her and saw only a meat outline encasing a purple glow. He started salivating. He hadn't eaten in an eternity.

Recoiling—at himself, and whatever was having his thoughts—he lurched from the table, grunting an apology in a voice he barely recognized, and hurried out.

In the street, the scratching noises started again, a rhythmic scrabbling emanating from without and within. His fingers wriggled sinuously against his thighs, keeping time.

As he passed a bookshop, he caught sight of his reflection in the window. It was he, himself, man—foreign yet familiar—and beside his gangly frame, the brightness of the sun. He stopped, leaned closer, eyes unfeeling to the glare. In the middle of the light was a nest of shadows, writhing to be free. Three grey slivers tore at the veil that bound them, like claws trying to rip an egg open from the inside.

A voice spoke to him, reedy and thin, urgent:

“You’ve got to destroy the photos.”

Derek trusted that voice, knew it only too well. It was his.

He started running.

The apartment stairs were taken awkwardly, his front door smashed aside, jagged splinters skittering under the sofa as he lurched towards the desk. When he reached his laptop, he found the images still glaring into the room, each one in motion, zooming beyond the limits of the viewing program, eating up the chasm between the viewer and the totality. Between Derek and the *other*.

He could see the talons clearly now, gouging at a pale latticework. Beyond, a larger shape menaced—tentacles writhing, endless mouths gaping, a form beyond sanity. Ever faster, the shadow drew nearer. Cracks appeared on the LCD, countless lines shivering out from each image.

Fractures in form.

Fractures in reality.

Aeons and milliseconds fused into the same moment, and the glass shattered. Derek didn’t care as his face was shredded. Didn’t care as blood seeped and gushed. Didn’t care as something reached for him from the beyond.

Derek wasn’t really there anymore.

There was just a vessel, waiting to be filled.

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AWAITING THE MONSTER

Livia E. De Souza

Livia E. De Souza lives in Connecticut, where she writes speculative fiction. Her short stories have appeared in Literally Stories, Tales to Terrify, and Bewildering Stories. She can be found online at www.liviaedesouza.com.

Part I

Every day, the teahouse is filled with people dressed like me. Our bodies are swathed in white lace, and we keep our hair long and loosely braided, with fine threads of pure silver woven through. We dress like virgin sacrifices from an illustrated storybook. Yet, instead of being bound to a rock jutting over rough waves, or led up a mountain to be abandoned, we sit upright in chairs at small, wooden tables, each one of us alone.

The wall behind me is covered in shelves, each heavy with different teas in labeled cannisters. I have a pot of Ceylon in front of me. It is the same tea I have sipped during most of my waking hours for the past five years. The people at the tables around me have their own favorites, and most drink the same tea every day.

I drink the same tea every day.

I look forward to a day when I will never drink tea again, when my tongue won't discern traces of the light, amber colored liquid even in my dreams.

But first, it must awaken.

Mrs. Harris is the teashop owner and she knows well what waits in the basement. She knows, so she keeps the door locked.

A few months ago, a newly hired server sliced her own wrist, and pressed the open wound against the bottom of the door, allowing the blood to run freely down the basement steps.

I don't know what happened to the server, but I never saw her again, not after that day. She wasn't one of ours, though our aims are the same.

In times like these, we cannot afford to be complacent any longer.

It is why we dress in white, why we wash and perfume our bodies every morning. Each one of us hopes to nourish it, to give it everything of ourselves, to offer our bones and blood to a creature none of us have seen, yet each of us adores.

We take turns guarding the teahouse at night. Mrs. Harris has joked to curious outsiders that hers is the only teashop in the city with a private security force some thirty strong. She has long since stopped caring about our constant presence. Each of us pays for our tea, and consumes as much as we feel will justify our presence.

I have despaired before, but hopelessness is not a constant thing. It is a feeling of loss that repeats: a fall for every time I have been able to lift myself back into the vaulted space of renewed faith.

I have seen others lose hope, but have never seen anyone truly relinquish their watch. Those who cannot raise themselves back up merely subsist in this space. They are desperate, not for the end to come, but for some sign that their years have not been wasted.

Part II

The moment it finally stirred, the moment it began inching up the stairs on its long belly, step by excruciating step, I was distracted. I was filling a fresh cup with that tea which had long since lost its flavor to my tongue. I heard the murmurs of the others before I heard the thing itself.

I set my tea down, and rose to my feet. Soon, every other person in the teahouse was standing, listening intently to the sound of the scales scraping the aged hardwood. Someone asked Mrs. Harris for the key to the basement, and she wordlessly obliged.

A hand, not mine, opened the door, and we were face to face with the creature we had pined for, silently worshipped by our very presence day after day. Its long body was covered in brittle scales, and it was thinned and emaciated by the decades spent far from the elements. Its fins reminded me of dried corn husks, desiccated and yellowed, seeming paper thin against its body.

Internally, I wept.

It slithered painfully across the floor of the teahouse, and two of us were at the door quickly to guide its body onto the sidewalk.

We walked beside it, our white-clothed bodies studding its presence, protecting it from pedestrians and passing cars.

Its progress was painfully slow at times, and we could not help but attract onlookers as we walked along, escorting this twenty-foot long, scaled, weakened creature through the city streets.

It had one destination in mind, and each of us knew where we were heading.

It moved from the pedestrian path to the stone littered riverbank. Its body moved with greater ease the nearer it got to the river.

I think it could smell the water.

When it was beginning to submerge itself, it floated, as though lifeless, just beneath the surface.

A young woman of ours dropped down on the riverbank and seized a sharp rock. She began striking at the flesh of her legs, tearing the skin, and loosing a trickle of blood onto the pebbles.

I realized her purpose immediately, and seized a stone of my own. I helped her, striking at her legs until the quick-flowing blood covered both my dress and her own.

We waded together into the water, and I held her hand. The crimson of her blood dispersed in the river, and the creature began to move. We walked in the direction of the sea, and the creature followed, seeking to gain on the woman whose blood was willingly shed.

When her strength began to fade as a result of the blood loss, another joined me and, together, we dragged the bait through the river, each of us struggling against our soaked clothes.

As we passed beneath the bridge, the creature finally latched onto the flesh. I heard the young woman cry out, but still we carried her body, attracting the attention of both bystanders and the police.

We stopped a while and allowed the creature to feed as the police officers made their way onto a boat and into the river. By the time they reached us, the creature had fed enough to sustain itself. It disappeared deep beneath the surface, and headed in the direction of the ocean.

The young woman's mangled body was brought out of the river. She was still alive, and carefully explained her injured presence within the waters, thereby saving us all.

Part III

Champagne-soaked nights are followed by bleary-eyed mornings on the riverbank. The pebbles are not yet as familiar to me as the round, wooden tables of the teahouse. The scent of tea and scones has been replaced by the smell of the breeze wafting off of the water.

I have not seen the young woman who fed the monster of her own body since that day. I think of her often, just as I know the other must. A tinge of jealousy possesses me when I do.

We stand at the banks, weary but waiting. Though none will say it, I know we each pray that this wait will not be as long.

Sometimes I think of Ceylon, and find that I miss the taste.

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MILKMAN'S ON HIS WAY

Mark Mitchell

Mark Mitchell graduated from Cal State Long Beach with a degree in Screenwriting. He currently lives in the greater Los Angeles area where he is a member of The Blank Page Writers Club. His short fiction has appeared in A Thin Slice of Anxiety, Hightower Magazine, and Canyon Voices Literary Magazine as well as the anthologies Nightmare Fuel: Body Horror (Cloaked Press) and Through the Briar Patch (Hollow Oak Press). Follow him on instagram @markmitchell.writer.

All I had wanted was a quart of milk.

A brief trip down to the corner store in the rain would take me roughly ten minutes. In the broad scheme of things, not long at all. But in that small fraction of time my entire world changed.

I stood in the back doorway of the kitchen with a fixed gaze on the scene in front of me. Rain pelted the brim of my fedora and beaded on the back of my trench coat. Around my feet water droplets collected in a soft pitter patter.

A pan sizzled on the stove. The smell of burnt bacon failed to mask the acrid stench lingering in the air underneath. On the windowsill a radio played some Big Band remote out of New Jersey. Glenn Miller or Tommy Dorsey.

I had been cradling the quart of milk in my arm. Forgetting it was there, the paper bag slipped from my grasp and smashed on the black and white checkered floor. Ivory milk gurgled out of the neck of the broken glass bottle and slowly inched its way toward the pool of lukewarm blood extending from my wife's outstretched hand.

Her face was frozen in a surprised expression. That gleam which made me fall in love with her had vacated her brown, doe eyes leaving behind a piercing lifeless stare. I counted five bullet holes in her dress and apron before I had to look away.

All I had wanted was a quart of milk.

The milk had been intended for my growing boy who would now be forever stunted in his development. Locked in the innocence of his adolescence. He sat slumped over in the red upholstered chair at the laminate table we still owed payments to the department store for. In front of him a plate of half eaten flapjacks.

That quart of milk had cost me forty nine cents and my entire family.

After what felt like an eternity, my knees faltered and I fell into the kitchen. I braced myself against the counter and covered my mouth to stifle a gasp. When I recovered I went back to the doorway and looked up and down the street.

A low grumble of thunder came from the edge of town. A lone car made its way up the street. Its wiper blades danced with a rhythmic thump. The car passed by the house. The driver didn't even look over.

I closed the door behind me. The door I'd left unlocked to go to the store. The door I found wide open roughly ten minutes later.

All I had wanted was a quart of milk.

I was careful not to step in any of the puddles on the kitchen floor. Not the white one. The red one. Or the pink one forming in between.

I turned the radio off and removed the pan from the stove. Rain drummed on the roof, but outside of that, the kitchen was quiet. Dead quiet.

Fighting the instinct to roll my wife over or prop my son up, I grabbed the phone off the receiver and waited for the operator to come on the line.

"Give me the downtown precinct," I said. I sucked air over my teeth and added, "Homicide division."

The operator connected the call and a burly voice met me on the other end.

"Homicide," the voice said.

"Bill? It's Rick." My voice started to shake. I turned my back on the kitchen and leaned my head against the wall, taking a deep breath.

"Rick...What's wrong?"

"It's Nancy an-an-and...Theodore..."

I clenched my jaw to keep my teeth from chattering.

All I had wanted was a quart of milk.

"Where are you?" Bill asked. "Are you alright?"

"I'm at home," I said. "Come quick."

I hung the phone up before he could reply. I couldn't stand being in the kitchen anymore and needed to get out. After rummaging in a drawer for the pack of cigarettes I knew my wife hid from me, I took a seat on the stoop outside the kitchen door.

Rain fell around me, but because of the overhang, I was able to keep the pack of cigarettes from becoming saturated. I fumbled one of them into my mouth and lit it with a shaky hand from the book of matches. It had been seven years since the last time I smoked. A promise I'd kept to my wife, knowing full well it wasn't a two way street. She knew I knew she had a secret pack for her more stressful days. And this had become a stressful day.

Waiting for Bill to arrive, I stared at the glowing end of the cigarette between my first two fingers and thought of all the other promises I had made to my wife. Her body hadn't even fully cooled yet and I'd already broken one promise. I knew before her body was in the ground, I'd probably be breaking more.

I lit a second cigarette with the stub of my first and exhaled a cloud of smoke. Like riding a bike. Even after seven years, my lungs knew the drill. They hardly burned at all.

A maroon sedan four door pulled up at the curb, followed soon after by a couple of police cruisers. The doors all seemed to pop open in union. A grave looking man in his fifties, stood from the passenger side of the maroon vehicle and positioned an ash gray fedora on the top of his head.

As Bill approached the house, I stood to meet him. I tossed the cigarette away, unconcerned about where it would land.

"Hi Rick," Bill said.

He held his hand out to me. I shook it.

"They in there?" he asked.

I nodded, then looked off toward the horizon.

Bill signaled for his men to head inside. A couple of detectives were followed by another man with a camera. Lightning lit up the kitchen as the flash bulbs from the camera popped and crackled.

The rain had downgraded to a drizzle by now. Bill reached into his inner pocket and pulled out a notepad. It took him a few more seconds to locate a working pen.

"Any idea who might have done it?" he said with a hesitant softness.

“I might,” I said. Then shrugged. “Could have been anybody. I left the door unlocked going to the store.”

“Meet anyone along the way?”

“No,” I said.

“No suspicious people lingering anywhere? Old friends...nemeses?”

I shook my head.

One of the detectives came out and whispered something in Bill’s ear. He nodded. The detective went back into the house. Bill pulled out a gold cigarette case with the initials B.H. + L.H. engraved on the front. Probably an anniversary gift from his wife Lydia.

He offered the case to me and I took one of his cigarettes out. If I was breaking promises today, might as well go all the way. He lit the end of my cigarette before lighting his own.

“Hang around will, ya,” he said, blowing out a puff of smoke. “We’ll have some more questions for you.”

“Where would I go?” I said, failing to meet his eyes. He lingered for a moment, then stubbed out his cigarette and went into the kitchen.

I took a drag off the cigarette and looked out at the street. With the rain relenting, the neighbors had become more curious and gathered on the sidewalk. I could only imagine what they were speculating about. Some of them probably thought I had something to do with it.

A couple more vehicles pulled up. A cop got out and started a perimeter line now that spectators were gathering nearby. The coroner got out of the second vehicle. He cleaned his glasses with the end of his tie and grabbed his bag of tools. As he walked up to the house, he purposely avoided looking in my direction.

Bill came back out and walked over to me. I finished my cigarette he’d provided me and snuffed it under my heel. I stood to meet him.

“Pretty grisly in there,” Bill said as if I weren’t the one who discovered the tragedy. He fought off a shiver. “You know I have to ask this...”

For the first time I found his eyes.

“You really think I’d shoot my own wife and kid?”

“Of course not,” Bill said. “But I have to ask.”

“No,” I said. “I didn’t do it.” I looked over Bill’s shoulder. The coroner had finished his preliminary assessment and exited the kitchen. He stopped by the stoop and put a handkerchief to his mouth. His cheeks expanded. The handkerchief went back in the pocket and he looked over at me for a brief moment. A nod of the head. His form of an apology for what happened. Then he was back in his car driving away.

“You mind coming down to the precinct and giving your statement?”

“Sure,” I said and pulled at my lower lip. I needed to keep my hands busy so they wouldn’t shake. Bill studied me.

“I know what you must be thinking,” he said. I looked back up at him.

“What am I thinking?” I asked.

“If I were you, I’d be pretty upset...” After I scoffed, he added, “And rightfully so, but you have to let us do our job, alright? I don’t want—”

All I had wanted was a quart of milk.

“—you doing anything rash. We’ll find whoever did this, ok?”

When I didn’t respond, he nudged my shoulder with some force.

“Ok?” he said again.

“Yeah,” I said. “Sure.”

He rested his hand on my shoulder in a more caring way. Even gave it a slight squeeze.

“I’m sorry, Rick,” he said. “I’m really sorry.”

“Thanks,” I might have said.

Bill walked away to see over the rest of the investigation. The dusting for prints. The search for bullet casings. Footprints in the planter. In essence: a lead.

The minutes and hours passed by as if in a dream. My mind swirled with visions of how it had gone down. Was it the act of one cowardly perpetrator? Or was it multiple shooters? Did my wife or kid experience any pain? They were only having breakfast when they were struck down. Who could be so cruel?

I began to make a list in my head of who might be behind this act of aggression. Lord knows I've made many enemies in the past. Could have been any number of them who had bided their time, waiting to strike when I had let my guard down.

Of course this was all my fault. I was the one who had left the door unlocked. A trip to the store for a quart of milk. Ten minutes tops. How could I have been so careless?

I punched the wood siding of the house in frustration. Now my hand hurt along with my boiling anger. I nodded to a couple of the officers who saw my outburst, assuring them I'm ok and wouldn't be doing it again. They went back to their work.

Soon my wife and son were carried out in body bags. They'd never occupy this pile of bricks I used to call home again.

The excitement had died down with the rain. The neighbors went back inside, probably disappointed I wasn't leaving in cuffs. Overhead the dark gray clouds lightened and patches of blue appeared. I wished they'd go away. I much more preferred the gloom right now.

Bill offered to give me a ride down to headquarters so that I could give my statement. My schedule had suddenly freed up and had no excuse not to go with him. Several hours later after the sun had retreated past the horizon, Bill brought me back to the house.

I got out of the car and met Bill leaning out the window.

"You going to be ok?" he said.

"Yeah," I said. "Thanks for the lift."

We both looked at the dark house. No one had thought to leave a light on. The house almost blended in perfectly with the black, starless sky. Almost as if it had never existed to begin with.

"Hey," Bill said, calling me back to his attention. "If you think of anything, give us a call. Don't try to be a hero. All right?"

I nodded. "Those days are behind me."

"Good." Bill nodded. "Sorry once again. That's a stroke of bad luck," he said. He signaled to his driver and the maroon sedan made its way down the street.

I stood facing the house. Afraid to go inside. There was nothing there for me anymore. I instead made the roughly ten minute walk to the corner store to buy a bottle of booze. They say the first night would be the hardest, though I didn't see how it could have gotten any

easier the following night.

Police tape held the kitchen door closed. I used my house key to cut through the tape. The door was unlocked. Just like it had been that morning.

Spoiled milk and iron hung in the stale air of the kitchen. My wife and son were no longer there, but I didn't need their physical bodies to remember where they had been. I only needed to close my eyes to see that again. Those images would be burned in my mind forever.

I snaked a glass from the cabinet, careful to step over the evidence markers laid out all over the floor. In the living room, I pulled a chair over to the front window and fell into it.

Two quick plugs in succession of the rye whiskey warmed my stomach, cooling some of the bubbling anxiety I felt. I filled the glass to the brim and sat in silence with no lights on.

The neighborhood was quiet. None of the neighbors came over to give their regards. Not even to hand deliver a glass container of casserole to help keep my strength up. Nothing. Which was how I wanted it. To be left alone.

I thought about that morning. How I had only wanted a quart of milk. Now I wanted something else. A rain check; reimbursement made out to my dead wife and son. Someone had sent me a message. It would be rude not to respond.

Time passed like the headlights of the cars on the street. The light swept left to right, highlighting my features for a brief second before they were returned to the dark. I quaffed my drink and stumbled out of the chair.

I had broken my promise to my wife about smoking and contemplated the other things I'd promised her through the years. By breaking those other promises, I would be keeping the one promise that really mattered: If anything ever happened to her or Theodore, I would make the responsible party pay.

All I wanted now was redemption.

Bill asked me not to take matters into my own hands and I told him I wouldn't. But I never promised anything to him.

I had a sudden hankering to hear a song. The song Nancy and I first danced to, back when I had been a young, naive boy of sixteen. The record scratched and a muffled dissonance filled the house until the first few bars of The Lullaby of Broadway came through the speaker.

I trudged into the bedroom, humming along with the Andrew Sisters in a gruff, strained

voice. Up on the shelf in the back corner of the closet sat the hat box I promised my wife never to touch again. A layer of dust cascaded down as I reached the box to me. The worn lid slid off easily.

Inside was my former life. A handgun with additional rounds. The gun as clean and ready as the day I put it in there. I examined the gun and stowed it away in the holster I'd strapped over my arm. It felt right. Like coming home.

I slipped additional rounds into the pocket of my trenchcoat and took one more draught straight from the bottle of rye. Right as the song hit the last refrain, I stepped out into the night, leaving the door unlocked behind me. There was nothing of value left for me in that pile of bricks.

All I wanted now was redemption.

Making my way down the street, I could hear the final chorus ringing out the open door of my house. The Andrew Sisters had it right. I lowered my hat to cover my eyes.

The milkman's on his way.

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GARGOYLE

Keira Reynolds

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He had learned to breathe life into stone.

It had taken seven long years of apprenticeship, but at last Epiphianos's masterpiece was complete and had won the approval of his guild-mistress and of the guild council. Now he was a journeyman mason. Someday, gods and goddesses willing, he would be a master mason with a workshop and apprentices of his own.

He laid out his tools in the traditional pattern on the earth before the gargoyle he had just finished carving and reached out a hand to trace the lines of its limestone face one last time. The ears pricked forward, the fierce eyes seemed to meet his, the nostrils flared, and the bat-like wings arched over its back. When his fingers brushed a carved fang, a sharp edge cut his finger. It was a small, shallow cut. Two or three drops of blood soaked into the stone. The cut soon stopped bleeding, and Epiphianos forgot about it.

The gargoyle, one of many carved to decorate the new temple, served practical and spiritual purposes as well as ornamental ones. The open mouth with its stone fangs connected to a groove carved into the gargoyle's back. Tomorrow the gargoyle would be hoisted into its place high above under the eaves of the temple where that groove would collect rainwater from the roof and the open mouth would spit that water out, directing it away from the walls of the temple where it would otherwise have stained the stone and weakened the mortar.

Spiritually, the gargoyle was supposed to protect the temple and those who worshipped there. Or so the followers of the Old Gods believed. Those who followed the New Gods were inclined to scoff at such beliefs, dismissing them as superstition.

Epiphianos was not sure what he believed, but these were troubled times. He was not going to

risk offending either the Old Gods or the New, if he could help it. He was a stone mason, and the son and grandson of stone masons. His parents and grandparents had never had much to say about gods, old or new, but what they had taught him was a deep pride in his craft. He leaned forward, breathed into the stone nostrils, and whispered two words in the ancient tongue, two of the very few words in the old language that he, or anyone else, still remembered. ‘Protect us.’

His guild-mistress, Flaviana, smiled and laid a hand on his shoulder. ‘Why do you do that, Epiphianos? No one believes those old stories anymore. I’m pretty sure you don’t believe them yourself. So why do you still perform those old rites?’

Epiphianos shrugged. ‘Grandmother always did that when she finished a gargoyle. I do it in memory of her. It doesn’t cost me anything to do it, and who knows, maybe there might be something in the old stories after all. But mostly I do it because she would be disappointed if I didn’t.’

‘Fair enough. You just keep turning out high-quality work like that, and you can perform all the old rituals you want. Well, within reason. Don’t start dancing naked around my workshop. That might distract the apprentices.’

Epiphianos laughed and gathered up his tools, storing them away in his tool chest, locking it, and hanging the key on a chain around his neck. He paused for one last look at his masterpiece. After tomorrow, when the gargoyle was hoisted into place and the scaffolding was taken down, he would never see it again save at a distance, and never again lay hands on it – save in the unlikely event that it needed repair in his lifetime.

‘Come on.’ Flaviana interrupted his thoughts. ‘Your tools will be safe here with the night watch. I want to buy my new journeyman a flagon of ale.’

One flagon of ale turned into several, and it was some hours later before Flaviana and Epiphianos left the Goat’s Head tavern. The sun was setting as they walked, a little unsteadily, down the street toward the building that housed Flaviana’s home and workshop.

Shouts, and the sound of running feet, came up the hill toward them from the direction of the harbour. Red flames flickered above the rooftops and the streets filled with black smoke. A panicked crowd of men, women, and children emerged from the smoke, running up the street, some carrying torches, some clutching hastily gathered belongings, all running as fast as they could away from the harbour.

Flaviana grabbed a man by the shoulder as he ran by. 'What is it?' she demanded. 'What's happening?'

'Raiders!' the man replied, panting. 'Slavers! They're stealing whatever they can carry, and burning what they can't, slaying those who resist, and enslaving those who don't. Run, if you value your freedom and your lives!' He shrugged off Flaviana's grip and ran with the others.

'Where are you going?' Epiphianos called after him.

'To the temple,' the man shouted back over his shoulder as he ran. 'Pray the gods and goddesses grant us sanctuary!'

'I don't have a lot of faith in that plan,' said Flaviana. 'I hear the raiders have burned cities and temples up and down the coast. The gods and goddesses didn't stop them then. I don't think they're going to stop them now.'

'Nor do I,' Epiphianos agreed. 'But everyone seems to be heading there. If there's any hope of organising any effective resistance, that's where it will have to be.'

'True enough. Let's go.'

They hurried back up the hill. A large crowd was gathered around the nearly finished temple. There were a few soldiers of the town guard, armed with spears and swords, but most were civilians armed only with whatever makeshift weapons they could find. Some had begun tearing down scaffolding to build barricades. As Flaviana and Epiphianos hurried to join them they passed by Epiphianos's masterpiece. He reached out to stroke a stone wing as they passed and whispered once more in the ancient tongue: 'Protect us.'

'May the gods and goddesses hear your prayers,' said Flaviana, picking up a carpenter's axe and handing Epiphianos a mason's hammer. 'We're going to need all the protection we can get. Here they come.'

The raiders came charging up the street, wielding torches, swords, axes, and spears, howling like dogs and cutting down stragglers as they came. Those who resisted they butchered. Those who pleaded for mercy they clubbed and knocked down, leaving them lying in the dust to be bound by the slavecatchers who followed in the rear. They paused for a moment when they saw the crowd

before them, waiting to meet them behind hastily constructed barricades, clutching improvised weapons. There were fewer raiders than townsfolk, but while the unarmoured and poorly armed townspeople milled about in panic and confusion, the heavily armoured raiders moved as one in a well-disciplined pack. The raiders roared, beat their weapons on their shields, and charged.

A raider swung a sword at Epiphianos's head, and he blocked it with the haft of his hammer, the force of the blow jarring his arm. Flaviana struck at the raider with her axe, and the raider stumbled away, howling and clutching his face, blood streaming between his fingers. But the sword-blow had taken a bite out of the haft of Epiphianos's hammer. He wasn't going to be able to block many more blows like that before the hammer-haft snapped like a dead twig in a storm.

Above the roaring and the stamping, above the pounding of Epiphianos's heart and the hiss of his breath and the surging of his blood, there came a loud, rending crack, as though a rockslide had broken loose from the face of a cliff. The gargoyle moved. Its wings lifted, meeting above its head with a clap like thunder. It stretched out its neck, opened its mouth, and roared.

Epiphianos dropped the hammer and clasped both hands over his ears. The noise rattled the teeth in his skull and travelled all the way down his spine, though his feet and on down into the earth on which he stood. He fell to his hands and knees as the earth swayed and buckled beneath him.

Many of the raiders, those in the front rank, dropped their weapons and turned, attempting to flee. They ran into those behind, who had been stunned by the noise but had not yet seen what caused it. They milled in confusion, pushing and shoving one another in the narrow street. The gargoyle ploughed into them.

Raiders screamed and died, battered by stone wings, ripped apart by stone talons, crushed between stone jaws. Some tried to fight back, but their weapons rang uselessly on stone. Those who could turned and fled. The gargoyle pursued them a short distance, but then stopped and turned back toward the temple. The townsfolk, emboldened and vengeful, hunted the raiders through the streets all the way to the harbour. Few raiders made it alive back to their ships that night. One ship alone made it out of the harbour to the safety of the open sea. The other ships the townspeople burned in the harbour.

Back at the temple the gargoyle paced, growling. The remaining townsfolk, those who had not pursued the raiders, cowered from the gargoyle. Epiphianos ran to the chest where he had stowed his tools. Taking the key from around his neck, he unlocked the chest and retrieved his

tools. Holding the tools before him and chanting another of the few phrases his grandmother had taught him in the ancient tongue, he approached the gargoyle.

The creature lowered its head, swaying from side to side, pawing the earth and growling. But as Epiphianos approached it backed away. He drove it slowly, step by step, back to the place where it had originally stood, the place where he had first carved life from stone. The words of binding were on his lips. He had only to say them aloud, and lay out his tools in the correct pattern, and the gargoyle would once again be a carved block of stone, frozen and immobile, lifeless.

Epiphianos hesitated.

‘You saved us,’ he said aloud, looking into the stone eyes. ‘You protected us, as I asked. It seems a poor thanks, to rob you of life, when we owe you ours.’

The gargoyle whined. Epiphianos looked up. Behind and above the temple the mountain loomed over the town in the moonlight like a stone sentinel. The gargoyle followed Epiphianos’s gaze, stretching its stone neck to look up and back over its shoulder, gazing at the mountain before turning back to meet Epiphianos’s eyes once more. Something unspoken passed between them.

Epiphianos’s heart was pounding, and his hands were shaking. His knees threatened to give way beneath him. He took a deep breath, laid his tools on the earth at his feet, and stepped over them toward the gargoyle. He laid one hand on the stone snout. It was hard and cold to the touch, but it throbbed with life.

‘Protect us,’ he whispered. ‘Return when needed. Until then, fly free.’

He stepped back and lifted one hand, indicating the mountain. The gargoyle stretched its wings. It leapt into the air and soared high. It circled the town once, roaring as it passed over the burning ships in the harbour, then turned toward the mountain, dwindling with distance, and disappeared at last, lost among the crags and the trees in the pre-dawn light.

Flaviana let out a long breath. She picked up Epiphianos’s tools and handed them to him. ‘Now that,’ she said, ‘is what I call a masterpiece.’

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CLASSIC PULP:

THE B-FLAT TROMBONE

Samual Hopkins Adams

Samuel Hopkins Adams (1871 -1958) was an investigative journalist known in the early decades of the 20th century for his muckraking exposes of public health hazards and the corrupt patent medicine industry. He was also a prolific fiction writer. Among his most popular works was his story "Night Bus" (1933), which became the source of the classic Hollywood movie, It Happened One Night (1934). In the 1920s and 30s, he also wrote, under the pen name Warner Fabian, several racy best- sellers featuring flappers and jazz clubs that were later adapted for the screen for such stars as Colleen Moore and Clara Bow.

"The B-Flat Trombone" is the opening story from his 1911 book, Average Jones, an off-beat collection of tales about the titular character, who investigates unusual advertisements.

Three men sat in the Cosmic Club discussing the question: "What's the matter with Jones?" Waldemar, the oldest of the conferees, was the owner, and at times the operator, of an important and decent newspaper. His heavy face wore the expression of good-humored power, characteristic of the experienced and successful journalist. Beside him sat Robert Bertram, the club idler, slender and languidly elegant. The third member of the conference was Jones himself.

Average Jones had come by his nickname inevitably. His parents had foredoomed him to it when they furnished him with the initials A. V. R. E. as preface to his birthright of J for Jones. His character apparently justified the chance concomitance. He was, so to speak, a composite photograph of any thousand well-conditioned, clean-living Americans between the ages of twenty-five and thirty. Happily, his otherwise commonplace face was relieved by the one unfailing characteristic of composite photographs, large, deep-set and thoughtful eyes. Otherwise he would have passed in any crowd, and nobody would have noticed him pass. Now, at twenty-seven, he looked back over the five years since his graduation from college and wondered what he had done with them; and at the four previous years of undergraduate life and wondered how he had done so well with those and why he had not in some manner justified the parting words of his favorite professor.

“You have one rare faculty, Jones. You can, when you choose, sharpen the pencil of your mind to a very fine point. Specialize, my boy, specialize.”

If the recipient of this admonition had specialized in anything, it was in life. Having twenty-five thousand a year of his own he might have continued in that path indefinitely, but for two influences. One was an irruptive craving within him to take some part in the dynamic activities of the surrounding world. The other was the “freak” will of his late and little-lamented uncle, from whom he had his present income, and his future expectations of some ten millions. Adrian Van Reypen Egerton had, as Waldemar once put it, “—one into the mayor’s chair with a good name and come out with a block of ice stock.” In a will whose cynical humor was the topic of its day, Mr. Egerton jeered posthumously at the public which he had despoiled, and promised restitution, of a sort, through his heir.

“Therefore,” he had written, “I give and bequeath to the said Adrian Van Reypen Egerton Jones, the residue of my property, the principal to be taken over by him at such time as he shall have completed five years of continuous residence in New York City. After such time the virus of the metropolis will have worked through his entire being. He will squander his unearned and undeserved fortune, thus completing the vicious circle, and returning the millions acquired by my political activities, in a poisoned shower upon the city, for which, having bossed, bullied and looted it, I feel no sentiment other than contempt.”

“And now,” remarked Waldemar in his heavy, rumbling voice, “you aspire to disappoint that good old man.”

“It’s only human nature, you know,” said Average Jones. “When a man puts a ten-million-dollar curse on you and suggests that you haven’t the backbone of a shrimp, you—you—”

“—naturally yearn to prove him a liar,” supplied Bertram.

“Exactly. Anyway, I’ve no taste for dissipation, either moral or financial. I want action; something to do. I’m bored in this infernal city.”

“The wail of the unslaked romanticist,” commented Bertram.

“Romanticist nothing!” protested the other. “My ambitions are practical enough if I could only get ’em stirred up.”

“Exactly. Boredom is simply romanticism with a morning-after thirst. You’re panting for

romance, for something bizarre. Egypt and St. Petersburg and Buenos Ayres and Samoa have all become commonplace to you. You've overdone them. That's why you're back here in New York waiting with stretched nerves for the Adventure of Life to cat-creep up from behind and toss the lariat of rainbow dreams over your shoulders."

Waldemar laughed. "Not a bad diagnosis. Why don't you take up a hobby, Mr. Jones?"

"What kind of a hobby?"

"Any kind. The club is full of hobby-riders. Of all people that I know, they have the keenest appetite for life. Look at old Denechaud; he was a misanthrope until he took to gathering scarabs. Fenton, over there, has the finest collection of circus posters in the world. Bellerding's house is a museum of obsolete musical instruments. De Gay collects venomous insects from all over the world; no harmless ones need apply. Terriberry has a mania for old railroad tickets. Some are really very curious. I've often wished I had the time to be a crank. It's a happy life."

"What line would you choose?" asked Bertram languidly.

"Nobody has gone in for queer advertisements yet, I believe," replied the older man. "If one could take the time to follow them up—but it would mean all one's leisure."

"Would it be so demanding a career?" said Average Jones, smiling.

"Decidedly. I once knew a man who gave away twenty dollars daily on clues from the day's news. He wasn't bored for lack of occupation."

"But the ordinary run of advertising is nothing more than an effort to sell something by yelling in print," objected Average Jones.

"Is it? Well perhaps you don't look in the right place."

Waldemar reached for the morning's copy of the Universal and ran his eye down the columns of "classified" matter. "Hark to this," he said, and read:

"Is there any work on God's green earth for a man who has just *got* to have it?"

"Or this:

“WANTED—A venerable looking man with white beard and medical degree. Good pay to right applicant.”

“What’s that?” asked Average Jones with awakened interest.

“Only a quack medical concern looking for a stall to impress their come-ons,” explained Waldemar.

Average Jones leaned over to scan the paper in his turn.

“Here’s one,” said he, and read:

WANTED—Performer on B-flat trombone. Can use at once. Apply with instrument, after 1 p. m. 300 East 100th Street.

“That seems ordinary enough,” said Waldemar.

“What’s it doing in a daily paper? There must be—er—technical publications—er—journals, you know, for this sort of demand.”

“When Average’s words come slow, you’ve got him interested,” commented Bertram.
“Sure sign.”

“Nevertheless, he’s right,” said Waldemar. “It is rather misplaced.”

“How is this for one that says what it means?” said Bertram.

WANTED—At once, a brass howitzer and a man who isn’t afraid to handle it. Mrs. Anne Cullen, Pier 49½ East River.

“The woman who is fighting the barge combine,” explained Waldemar. “Not so good as it looks. She’s bluffing.”

“Anyway, I’d like a shy at this business,” declared Average Jones with sudden conviction.
“It looks to me like something to do.”

“Make it a business, then,” advised Waldemar. “If you care really to go in for it, my

newspaper would be glad to pay for information such as you might collect. We haven't time, for example, to trace down fraudulent advertisers. If you could start an enterprise of that sort, you'd certainly find it amusing, and, at times, perhaps, even adventurous."

"I wouldn't know how to establish it," objected Average Jones.

The newspaper owner drew a rough diagram on a sheet of paper and filled it in with writing, crossing out and revising liberally. Divided, upon his pattern, into lines, the final draft read:

HAVE YOU BEEN STUNG?

Thousands have.

Thousands will be.

They're Laying for You.

WHO?

The Advertising Crooks.

A. JONES

Ad-Visor

Can Protect You Against Them.

Before Spending Your Money Call on Him. Advice on all Subjects Connected with Newspaper, Magazine or Display Advertising. Free Consultation to Persons Unable to Pay. Call or Write, Enclosing Postage. *This Is On The Level.*

Jones, Ad-Visor

"Ad-Visor! Do you expect me to blight my budding career by a poisonous pun like that?" demanded Average Jones with a wry face.

"It may be a poisonous pun, but it's an arresting catch-word," said Waldemar, unmoved.

"Single column, about fifty lines will do it in nice, open style. Caps and lower case, and black-faced type for the name and title. Insert twice a week in every New York and Brooklyn paper."

"Isn't it—er—a little blatant?" suggested Bertram, with lifted eyebrows.

"Blatant?" repeated its inventor. "It's more than that. It's howlingly vulgar. It's a riot of glaring yellow. How else would you expect to catch the public?"

"Suppose, then, I do burst into flame to this effect?" queried the prospective 'Ad-Visor.' "*Et après?* as we proudly say after spending a week in Paris."

“*Après?* Oh, plenty of things. You hire an office, a clerk, two stenographers and a clipping export, and prepare to take care of the work that comes in. You’ll be flooded,” promised Waldemar.

“And between times I’m to go skipping about, chasing long white whiskers and brass howitzers and B-flat trombones, I suppose.”

“Until you get your work systematized you’ll have no time for skipping. Within six months, if you’re not sandbagged or jailed on fake libel suits, you’ll have a unique bibliography of swindles. Then I’ll begin to come and buy your knowledge to keep my own columns clean.”

The speaker looked up to meet the gaze of an iron-gray man with a harsh, sallow face.

“Excuse my interrupting,” said the new-comer.

“Just one question, Waldemar. Who’s going to be the nominee?”

“Linder.”

“Linder? Surely not! Why, his name hasn’t been heard.”

“It will be.”

“His Federal job?”

“He resigns in two weeks.”

“His record will kill him.”

“What record? You and I know he’s a grafter. But can we prove anything? His clerk has always handled all the money.”

“Wasn’t there an old scandal—a woman case?” asked the questioner vaguely.

“That Washington man’s wife? Too old. Linder would deny it flatly, and there would be no witnesses. The woman is dead—killed by his brutal treatment of her, they say. But the whole thing was hushed up at the time by Linder’s pull, and when the husband threatened

to kill him Linder quietly set a commissioner of insanity on the case and had the man put away. He's never appeared since. No, that wouldn't be politically effective."

The gray man nodded, and walked away, musing.

"Egbert, the traction boss," explained Waldemar. "We're generally on opposite sides, but this time we're both against Linder. Egbert wants a cheaper man for mayor. I want a straighter one. And I could get him this year if Linder wasn't so well fortified. However, to get back to our project, Mr. Jones—"

Get back to it they did with such absorption that when the group broke up, several hours later, Average Jones was committed, by plan and rote, to the new and hopeful adventure of Life.

In the great human hunt which ever has been and ever shall be till "the last bird flies into the last light"—some call it business, some call it art, some call it love, and a very few know it for what it is, the very mainspring of existence—the path of the pursuer and the prey often run obscurely parallel. What time the Honorable William Linder matured his designs on the mayoralty, Average Jones sat in a suite of offices in Astor Court, a location which Waldemar had advised as being central, expensive, and inspirational of confidence, and considered, with a whirling brain, the minor woes of humanity. Other people's troubles had swarmed down upon him in answer to his advertised offer of help, as sparrows flock to scattered bread crumbs. Mostly these were of the lesser order of difficulties; but for what he gave in advice and help the Ad-Visor took payment in experience and knowledge of human nature. Still it was the hard, honest study, and the helpful toil which held him to his task, rather than the romance and adventure which he had hoped for and Waldemar had foretold—until, in a quiet, street in Brooklyn, of which he had never so much as heard, there befell that which, first of many events, justified the prophetic Waldemar and gave Average Jones a part in the greater drama of the metropolis. The party of the second part was the Honorable William Linder.

Mr., Linder sat at five P. M., of an early summer day, behind lock and bolt. The third floor front room of his ornate mansion on Brooklyn's Park Slope was dedicated to peaceful thought. Sprawled in a huge and softly upholstered chair at the window, he took his ease in his house. The chair had been a recent gift from an anonymous admirer whose political necessities, the Honorable Mr. Linder idly surmised, had not yet driven him to reveal his identity. Its occupant stretched his shoeless feet, as was his custom, upon the broad window-sill, flooded by the seasonable warmth of sunshine, the while he considered the

ripening mayoralty situation. He found it highly satisfactory. In the language of his inner man, it was a cinch.

Below, in Kennard Street, a solitary musician plodded. His pretzel-shaped brass rested against his shoulder. He appeared to be the “scout” of one of those prevalent and melancholious German bands, which, under Brooklyn’s easy ordinances, are privileged to draw echoes of the past writhing from their forgotten recesses. The man looked slowly about him as if apprising potential returns. His gravid glance encountered the prominent feet in the third story window of the Linder mansion, and rested. He moved forward. Opposite the window he paused. He raised the mouthpiece to his lips and embarked on a perilous sea of notes from which the tutored ear might have inferred that once popular ditty, *Egypt*.

Love of music was not one of the Honorable William Linder’s attributes. An irascible temper was. Of all instruments the B-flat trombone possesses the most nerve-jarring tone. The master of the mansion leaped from his restful chair. Where his feet had ornamented the coping his face now appeared. Far out he leaned, and roared at the musician below. The brass throat blared back at him, while the soloist, his eyes closed in the ecstasy of art, brought the “verse” part of his selection to an excruciating conclusion, half a tone below pitch. Before the chorus there was a brief pause for effect. In this pause, from Mr. Linder’s open face a voice fell like a falling star. Although it did not cry “Excelsior,” its output of vocables might have been mistaken, by a casual ear, for that clarion call. What the Honorable Mr. Linder actually shouted was:

“Getthehelloutofhere!”

The performer upturned a mild and vacant face. “What you say?” he inquired in a softly Teutonic accent.

The Honorable William Linder made urgent gestures, like a brakeman.

“Go away! Move on!”

The musician smiled reassuringly.

“I got already paid for this,” he explained.

Up went the brass to his lips again. The tonal stairway which leads up to the chorus

of *Egypt* rose in rasping wailfulness. It culminated in an excessive, unendurable, brazen shriek—and the Honorable William Linder experienced upon the undefended rear of his person the most violent kick of a lifetime not always devoted to the arts of peace. It projected him clear of the window-sill. His last sensible vision was the face of the musician, the mouth absurdly hollow and pursed above the suddenly removed mouthpiece. Then an awning intercepted the politician's flight. He passed through this, penetrated a second and similar stretch of canvas shading the next window below, and lay placid on his own front steps with three ribs caved in and a variegated fracture of the collar-bone. By the time the descent was ended the German musician had tucked his brass under his arm and was hurrying, in panic, down the street, his ears still ringing with the concussion which had blown the angry householder from his own front window. He was intercepted by a running policeman.

"Where was the explosion?" demanded the officer.

"Explosion? I hear a noise in the larch house on the corner," replied the musician dully.

The policeman grabbed his arm. "Come along back. You fer a witness! Come on; you an' yer horn."

"It iss not a horn," explained the German patiently, "it iss a B-flat trombone."

Along with several million other readers, Average Jones followed the Linder "bomb outrage" through the scandalized head-lines of the local press. The perpetrator, declared the excited journals, had been skilful. No clue was left. The explosion had taken care of that. The police (with the characteristic stupidity of a corps of former truck-drivers and bartenders, decorated with brass buttons and shields and without further qualification dubbed "detectives") vacillated from theory to theory. Their putty-and-pasteboard fantasies did not long survive the Honorable William Linder's return to consciousness and coherence. An "inside job," they had said. The door was locked and bolted, Mr. Linder declared, and there was no possible place for an intruder to conceal himself. Clock-work, then.

"How would any human being guess what time to set it for," demanded the politician in disgust, "when I never know, myself, where I'm going to be at any given hour of any given day?"

"Then that Dutch horn-player threw the bomb," propounded the head of the "Detective

Bureau” ponderously.

“Of course; tossed it right up, three stories, and kept playing his infernal trombone with the other hand all the time. You ought to be carrying a hod!”

Nevertheless, the police hung tenaciously to the theory that the musician was involved, chiefly because they had nothing else to hang to. The explosion had been very localized, the room not generally wrecked; but the chair which seemed to be the center of disturbance, and from which the Honorable William Linder had risen just in time to save his life, was blown to pieces, and a portion of the floor beneath it was much shattered. The force of the explosion had been from above the floor downward; not up through the flooring. As to murderously inclined foes, Mr. Linder disclaimed knowledge of any. The notion that the trombonist had given a signal he derided as an “Old Sleuth pipe-dream.”

As time went on and “clues” came to nothing, the police had no greater concern than quietly to forget, according to custom, a problem beyond their limited powers. With the release of the German musician, who was found to be simple-minded to the verge of half-wittedness, public interest waned, and the case faded out of current print.

Average Jones, who was much occupied with a pair of blackmailers operating through faked photographs, about that time, had almost forgotten the Linder case, when, one day, a month after the explosion, Waldemar dropped in at the Astor Court offices. He found a changed Jones; much thinner and “finer” than when, eight weeks before, he had embarked on his new career, at the newspaper owner’s instance. The young man’s color was less pronounced, and his eyes, though alert and eager, showed rings under them.

“You have found the work interesting, I take it,” remarked the visitor.

“Ra—ather,” drawled Average Jones appreciatively.

“That was a good initial effort, running down the opium pill mail-order enterprise.”

“It was simple enough as soon as I saw the catchword in the ‘Wanted’ line.”

“Anything is easy to a man who sees,” returned the older man sententiously. “The open eye of the open mind—that has more to do with real detective work than all the deduction and induction and analysis ever devised.”

“It is the detective part that interests me most in the game, but I haven’t had much of it, yet. You haven’t run across any promising ads lately, have you?”

Waldemar’s wide, florid brow wrinkled.

“I haven’t thought or dreamed of anything for a month but this infernal bomb explosion.”

“Oh, the Linder case. You’re personally interested?”

“Politically. It makes Linder’s nomination certain. Persecution. Attempted assassination. He becomes a near-martyr. I’m almost ready to believe that he planted a fake bomb himself.”

“And fell out of a third-story window to carry out the idea? That’s pushing realism rather far, isn’t it?”

Waldemar laughed. “There’s the weakness. Unless we suppose that he under-reckoned the charge of explosive.”

“They let the musician go, didn’t they?”

“Yes. There was absolutely no proof against him, except that he was in the street below. Besides, he seemed quite lacking mentally.”

“Mightn’t that have been a sham?”

“Alienists, of good standing examined him. They reported him just a shade better than half-witted. He was like a one-ideaed child, his whole being comprised in his ability, and ambition to play his B-flat trombone.”

“Well, if I needed an accomplice,” said Average Jones thoughtfully, “I wouldn’t want any better one than a half-witted man. Did he play well?”

“Atrociously. And if you know what a soul-shattering blare exudes from a B-flat trombone—”
” Mr. Waldemar lifted expressive hands.

Within Average Jones’ overstuffed mind something stirred at the repetition of the words “B-flat trombone.” Somewhere they had attracted his notice in print; and somehow they

were connected with Waldemar. Then from amidst the hundreds of advertisements with which, in the past weeks, he had crowded his brain, one stood out clear. It voiced the desire of an unknown gentleman on the near border of Harlem for the services of a performer upon that semi-exotic instrument. One among several, it had been cut from the columns of the *Universal*, on the evening which had launched him upon his new enterprise. Average Jones made two steps to a bookcase, took down a huge scrap-book from an alphabetized row, and turned the leaves rapidly.

“Three Hundred East One Hundredth Street,” said he, slamming the book shut again. “Three Hundred East One Hundredth. You won’t mind, will you,” he said to Waldemar, “if I leave you unceremoniously?”

“Recalled a forgotten engagement?” asked the other, rising.

“Yes. No. I mean I’m going to Harlem to hear some music. Thirty-fourth’s the nearest station, isn’t it? Thanks. So long.”

Waldemar rubbed his head thoughtfully as the door slammed behind the speeding Ad-Visor.

“Now, what kind of a tune is he on the track of, I wonder?” he mused. “I wish it hadn’t struck him until I’d had time to go over the Linder business with him.”

But while Waldemar rubbed his head in cogitation and the Honorable William Linder, in his Brooklyn headquarters, breathed charily, out of respect to his creaking rib, Average Jones was following fate northward.

Three Hundred East One Hundredth Street is a house decrepit with a disease of the aged. Its windowed eyes are rheumy. It sags backward on gnarled joints. All its poor old bones creak when the winds shake it. To Average Jones’ inquiring gaze on this summer day it opposed the secrecy of a senile indifference. He hesitated to pull at its bell-knob, lest by that act he should exert a disruptive force which might bring all the frail structure rattling down in ruin. When, at length, he forced himself to the summons, the merest ghost of a tinkle complained petulantly from within against his violence.

An old lady came to the door. She was sleek and placid, round and comfortable. She did not seem to belong in that house at all. Average Jones felt as if he had cracked open one of the grisly locust shells which cling lifelessly to tree trunks, and had found within a plump

and prosperous beetle.

“Was an advertisement for a trombone player inserted from this house, ma’am?” he inquired.

“Long ago,” said she.

“Am I too late, then?”

“Much. It was answered nearly two months since. I have never,” said the old lady with conviction, “seen such a frazzled lot of folks as B-flat trombone players.”

“The person who inserted the advertisement—?”

“Has left. A month since.”

“Could you tell where he went?”

“Left no address.”

“His name was Telford, wasn’t it?” said Average Jones strategically.

“Might be,” said the old lady, who had evidently formed no favorable impression of her ex-lodger. “But he *called* himself Ransom.”

“He had a furnished room?”

“The whole third floor, furnished.”

“Is it let now?”

“Part of it. The rear.”

“I’ll take the front room.”

“Without even looking at it?”

“Yes.”

“You’re a queer young man. As to price?”

“Whatever you choose.”

“You’re a *very* queer young man. Are you a B-flat trombone player?”

“I collect ’em,” said Average Jones.

“References?” said the old lady abruptly and with suspicion.

“All varieties,” replied her prospective lodger cheerfully. “I will bring ’em to-morrow with my grip.”

For five successive evenings thereafter Average Jones sat in the senile house, awaiting personal response to the following advertisement which he had inserted in the *Universal*:

WANTED—B-flat trombonist. Must have had experience as street player. Apply between 8 and 10 p. m. R—, 300 East 100th Street.

Between the ebb and flow of applicant musicians he read exhaustively upon the unallied subjects of trombones and high explosives, or talked with his landlady, who proved to be a sociable person, not disinclined to discuss the departed guest. “Ransom,” his supplanter learned, had come light and gone light. Two dress suit cases had sufficed to bring in all his belongings. He went out but little, and then, she opined with a disgustful sniff, for purposes strictly alcoholic. Parcels came for him occasionally. These were usually labeled “Glass. Handle with care.” Oh! there was one other thing. A huge, easy arm-chair from Carruthers and Company, mighty luxurious for an eight-dollar lodger.

“Did he take that with him?” asked Average Jones.

“No. After he had been here a while he had a man come in and box it up. He must have sent it away, but I never saw it go.”

“Was this before or after the trombone players came?”

“Long after. It was after he had picked out his man and had him up here practicing.”

“Did—er—you ever—er—see this musician?” drawled Average Jones in the slow tones of his peculiar excitement.

“Bless you, yes! Talked with him.”

“What was he like?”

“He was a stupid old German. I always thought he was a sort of a natural.”

“Yes?” Average Jones peered out of the window. “Is this the man, coming up the street?”

“It surely is,” said the old lady. “Now, *Mister* Jones, if he commences his blaring and blatting and—”

“There’ll be no more music, ma’am,” promised the young man, laughing, as she went out to answer the door-bell.

The musician, ushered in, looked about him, an expression of bewildered and childish surprise on his rabbit-like face.

“I am Schlichting,” he murmured; “I come to play the B-flat trombone.”

“Glad to see you, Mr. Schlichting,” said Average Jones, leading the way up-stairs. “Sit down.”

The visitor put his trombone down and shook his head with conviction.

“It iss the same room, yes,” he observed. “But it iss not the same gent, no.”

“You expected to find Mr. Ransom here?”

“I don’t know Mr. Ransom. I know only to play the B-flat trombone.”

“Mr. Ransom, the gentleman who employed you to play in the street in Brooklyn.”

Mr. Schlichting made large and expansive gestures. “It iss a pleasure to play for such a gent,” he said warmly. “Two dollars a day.”

“You have played often in Kennard Street?”

“I don’t know Kennard Street. I know only to play the B-flat trombone.”

“Kennard Street. In Brooklyn. Where the fat gentleman told you to stop, and fell out of the window.”

A look of fear overspread the worn and innocent face.

“I don’t go there no more. The po-lice, they take there.”

“But you had gone there before?”

“Not to play; no.”

“Not to play? Are you sure?”

The German considered painfully. “There vass no feet in the window,” he explained, brightening.

Upon that surprising phrase Average Jones pondered. “You were not to play unless there were feet the window,” he said at length. “Was that it?”

The musician assented.

“It does look like a signal to show that Linder was in,” mused the interrogator. “Do you know Linder?”

“I don’t know nothing only to play the B-flat trombone,” repeated the other patiently.

“Now, Schlichting,” said Average Jones, “here is a dollar. Every evening you must come here. Whether I am here or not, there will be a dollar for you. Do you understand?”

By way of answer the German reached down and listed his instrument to his lips.

“No, not that,” forbade Average Jones. “Put it down.”

“Not to play my B-flat trombone?” asked the other, innocently hurt. “The other gent he

make play here always.”

“Did he?” drawled Average Jones. “And he—er—listened?”

“He listened from out there.” The musician pointed to the other room.

“How long?”

“Different times,” was the placid reply.

“But he was always in the other room.”

“Always. And I play *Egypt*. Like this.”

“No!” said Average Jones, as the other stretched out a hopeful hand.

“He liked it--*Egypt*,” said the German wistfully. “He said: ‘Bravo! *Encore! Bis!*’ Sometimes nine, sometimes ten times over I play it, the chorus.”

“And then he sent you home?”

“Then sometimes something goes ‘sping-g-g-g-g!’ like that in the back room. Then he comes out and I may go home.”

“Um—m,” muttered Average Jones discontentedly. “When did you begin to play in the street?”

“After a long time. He take me away to Brooklyn and tell me, ‘When you see the feet iss in the window you play hard!’”

There was a long pause. Then Average Jones asked casually:

“Did you ever notice a big easy chair here?”

“I do not notice nothing. I play my B-flat trombone.”

And there his limitations were established. But the old lady had something to add.

“It’s all true that he said,” she confirmed. “I could hear his racket in the front room and Mr. Ransom working in the back and then, after the old man was gone, Mr. Ransom sweeping up something by himself.”

“Sweeping? What—er—was he—er—sweeping?”

“Glass, I think. The girl used to find little slivers of it first in one part of the room, then in another. I raised the rent for that and for the racket.”

“The next thing,” said Average Jones, “is to find out where that big easy chair went from here. Can you help me there?”

The old lady shook her head. “All I can do is to tell you the near-by truck men.”

Canvass of the local trucking industry brought to light the conveyor of that elegant article of furniture. It had gone, Average Jones learned, not to the mansion of the Honorable William Linder, as he had fondly hoped, but to an obscure address not far from the Navy Yard in Brooklyn. To this address, having looked up and gathered in the B-flat trombonist, Average Jones led the way. The pair lurked in the neighborhood of the ramshackle house watching the entrance, until toward evening, as the door opened to let out a tremulous wreck of a man, palsied with debauch, Schlichting observed:

“That iss him. He hass been drinking again once.”

Average Jones hurried the musician around the corner into concealment. “You have been here before to meet Mr. Ransom?”

“No.”

“Where did he meet you to pay you your wages?”

“On some corner,” said the other vaguely.

“Then he took you to the big house and left you there,” urged Jones.

“No; he left me on the street corner. ‘When the feet iss in the window,’ he says, ‘you play.’”

“It comes to this,” drawled Average Jones intently, looking the employee between his

vacuous eyes. “Ransom shipped the chair to Plymouth Street and from there to Linder’s house. He figured out that Linder would put it in his study and do his sitting at the window in it. And you were to know when he was there by seeing his feet in the window, and give the signal when you saw him. It must have been a signal to somebody pretty far off, or he wouldn’t have chosen so loud an instrument as a B-flat trombone.”

“I can play the B-flat trombone louder as any man in the business,” asserted Schlichting with proud conviction.

“But what gets me,” pursued Average Jones, “is the purpose of the signal. Whom was it for?”

“I don’t know nothing,” said the other complacently. “I only know to play the B-flat trombone louder as any man in the world.”

Average Jones paid him a lump sum, dismissed him and returned to the Cosmic Club, there to ponder the problem. What next? To accuse Ransom, the mysterious hirer of a B-flat trombone virtuosity, without sufficient proof upon which to base even a claim of cross-examination, would be to block his own game then and there, for Ransom could, and very likely would, go away, leaving no trace. Who was Ransom, anyway? And what relation, if any, did he bear to Linder?

Absorbed in these considerations, he failed to notice that the club was filling up beyond its wont. A hand fell on his shoulder.

“Hello, Average. Haven’t seen you at a Saturday special night since you started your hobby.”

It was Bertram. “What’s on?” Average Jones asked him, shaking hands.

“Freak concert. Bellerding has trotted out part of his collection of mediaeval musical instruments, and some professionals are going to play them. Waldemar is at our table. Come and join us.”

Conversation at the round-table was general and lively that evening, and not until the port came on—the prideful club port, served only on special occasions and in wonderful, delicate glasses—did Average Jones get an opportunity to speak to Waldemar aside.

“I’ve been looking into that Linder matter a little.”

“Indeed. I’ve about given up hope.”

“You spoke of an old scandal in Linder’s career. What was the husband’s name?”

“Arbuthnot, I believe.”

“Do you know what sort of looking man he was?”

“No. I could find out from Washington.”

“What was his business?”

“Government employment, I think.”

“In the—er—scientific line, perhaps?” drawled Jones.

“Why, yes, I believe it was.”

“Um-m. Suppose, now, Linder should drop out of the combination. Who would be the most likely nominee?”

“Marsden—the man I’ve been grooming for the place. A first-class, honorable, fearless man.”

“Well, it’s only a chance; but if I can get one dark point cleared up—”

He paused as a curious, tingling note came from the platform where the musicians were tuning tip.

“One of Bellerding’s sweet dulcets,” observed Bertram.

The Performer nearest them was running a slow bass scale on a sort of two-stringed horse-fiddle of a strange shape. Average Jones’ still untouched glass, almost full of the precious port, trembled and sang a little tentative response. Up-up-up mounted the thrilling notes, in crescendo force.

“What a racking sort of tone, for all its sweetness!” said Average Jones. His delicate and fragile port glass evidently shared the opinion, for, without further warning, it split and shivered.

“They used to show that experiment in the laboratory,” said Bertram. “You must have had just the accurate amount of liquid in the glass, Average. Move back, you lunatic, it’s dripping all over you.”

But Average Jones sat unheeding. The liquor dribbled down into his lap. He kept his fascinated gaze fixed on the shattered glass. Bertram dabbed him with a napkin.

“Tha—a—anks, Bertram,” drawled the beneficiary of this attention. “Doesn’t matter. Excuse me. Good night.”

Leaving his surprised companions, he took hat and cane and caught a Third Avenue car. By the time he had reached Brooklyn Bridge he had his campaign mapped out. It all depended upon the opening question. Average Jones decided to hit out and hit quick.

At the house near the Navy Yard he learned that his man was out. So he sat upon the front steps while one of the highest-priced wines in New York dried into his knees. Shortly before eleven a shuffling figure paused at the steps, feeling for a key.

“Mr. Arbuthnot, otherwise Ransom?” said Average Jones blandly.

The man’s chin jerked back. His jaw dropped.

“Would you like to hire another B-flat trombonist?” pursued the young man.

“Who are you?” gasped the other. “What do you want?”

“I want to know,” drawled Average Jones, “how—er—you planted the glass bulb—er—the sulphuric acid bulb, you know—in the chair that you sent—er—to the Honorable William Linder, so that—er—it wouldn’t be shattered by anything but the middle C note of a B-flat trombone?”

The man sat down weakly and bowed his face in his hands. Presently he looked up.

“I don’t care,” he said. “Come inside.”

At the end of an hour's talk Arbuthnot, alias Ransom, agreed to everything that Average Jones proposed.

"Mind you," he said, "I don't promise I won't kill him later. But meantime it'll be some satisfaction to put him down and out politically. You can find me here any time you want me. You say you'll see Linder to-morrow?"

"To-morrow," said Average Jones. "Look in the next day's papers for the result."

Setting his telephone receiver down the Honorable William Linder lost himself in conjecture. He had just given an appointment to his tried and true, but quite impersonal enemy, Mr. Horace Waldemar.

"What can Waldemar want of me?" ran his thoughts. "And who is this friend, Jones, that he's bringing? Jones? Jones! Jones?!" He tried it in three different accents, without extracting any particular meaning therefrom. "Nothing much in the political game," he decided.

It was with a mingling of gruffness and dignity that he greeted Mr. Waldemar an hour later. The introduction to Average Jones he acknowledged with a curt nod.

"Want a job for this young man, Waldemar?" he grunted.

"Not at present, thank you," returned the newspaper owner. "Mr. Jones has a few arguments to present to you."

"Arguments," repeated the Honorable William Lender contemptuously. "What kind of arguments?"

"Political arguments. Mayoralty, to be specific. To be more specific still, arguments showing why you should drop out of the race."

"A pin-feather reformer, eh?"

The politician turned to meet Average Jones' steady gaze and mildly inquiring smile.

"Do you—er—know anything of submarine mines, Mr. Linder?" drawled the visitor.

“Huh?” returned the Honorable William Linder, startled.

“Submarine mines,” explained the other., “Mines in the sea, if you wish words of one syllable.”

The lids of the Honorable Linder contracted.

“You’re in the wrong joint,” he said, “this ain’t the Naval College.”

“Thank you. A submarine mine is a very ingenious affair. I’ve recently been reading somewhat extensively on the subject. The main charge is some high explosive, usually of the dynamite type. Above it is a small jar of sulphuric acid. Teeth, working on levers, surround this jar. The levers project outside the mine. When a ship strikes the mine, one or more of the levers are pressed in. The teeth crush the jar. The sulphuric acid drops upon the main charge and explodes it. Do you follow me.”

“I’ll follow you as far as the front door,” said the politician balefully. He rose.

“If the charge were in a chair, in the cushion of an easy chair, we’ll say, on the third floor of a house in Brooklyn—”

The Honorable William Linder sat down again. He sat heavily.

“—the problem would be somewhat different. Of course, it would be easy to arrange that the first person to sit down in the chair would, by his own weight, blow himself up. But the first person might not be the right person, you know. Do you still follow me?”

The Honorable William Linder made a remark like a fish.

“Now, we have, if you will forgive my professorial method,” continued Average Jones, “a chair sent to a gentleman of prominence from an anonymous source. In this chair is a charge of high explosive and above it a glass bulb containing sulphuric acid. The bulb, we will assume, is so safe-guarded as to resist any ordinary shock of moving. But when this gentleman, sitting at ease in his chair, is noticed by a trombonist, placed for that purpose in the street, below—”

“The Dutch horn-player!” cried the politician. “Then it was him; and I’ll—”

“Only an innocent tool,” interrupted Average Jones, in his turn. “He had no comprehension of what he was doing. He didn’t understand that the vibration from his trombone on one particular note by the slide up the scale—as in the chorus of *Egypt*—would shiver that glass and set off the charge. All that he knew was to play the B-flat trombone and take his pay.”

“His pay?” The question leaped to the politician’s lips. “Who paid him?”

“A man—named—er—Arbuthnot,” drawled Average Jones.

Linder’s eyes did not drop, but a film seemed to be drawn over them.

“You once knew—er—a Mrs. Arbuthnot?”

The thick shoulders quivered a little.

“Her husband—her widower—is in Brooklyn. Shall I push the argument any further to convince you that you’d better drop out of the mayoralty race?”

Linder recovered himself a little. “What kind of a game are you ringing in on me?” he demanded.

“Don’t you think,” suggested Average Jones sweetly, “that considered as news, this—”

Linder caught the word out of his mouth. “News!” he roared. “A fake story ten years old, news? That ain’t news! It’s spite work. Even your dirty paper, Waldemar, wouldn’t rake that kind of muck up after ten years. It’d be a boomerang. You’ll have to put up a stronger line of blackmail and bluff than that.”

“Blackmail is perhaps the correct word technically,” admitted the newspaper owner, “but bluff—there you go wrong. You’ve forgotten one thing; that Arbuthnot’s arrest and confession would make the whole story news. We stand ready to arrest Arbuthnot, and he stands ready to confess.”

There was a long, tense minute of silence. Then--

“What do you want?” The straight-to-the-point question was an admission of defeat.

“Your announcement of withdrawal. I’d rather print that than the Arbuthnot story.”

There was a long silence. Finally the Honorable Linder dropped his hand on the table. “You win,” he declared curtly. “But you’ll give me the benefit, in the announcement, of bad health caused by the shock of the explosion, to explain my quitting, Waldemar?”

“It will certainly make it more plausible,” assented the newspaper owner with a smile.

Linder turned on Average Jones.

“Did you dope this out, young fellow?” he demanded.

“Yes.”

“Well, you’ve put me in the Down-and-Out-Club, all right. And I’m just curious enough to want to know how you did it.”

“By abstaining,” returned Average Jones cryptically, “from the best wine that ever came out of the Cosmic Club cellar.”

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