

Fish Farm

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Smashwords Edition

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Jack looked out the third floor window of his shabby walkup onto a cold, gray day. His thoughts mirrored his vision.

“How did it happen?” he thought to himself rhetorically. He knew but it was hard to accept without rage building within him.

He chased the thought away and continued to stare.

The relief was brief.

Again, it flooded his memory.

He thought back to that Wednesday morning. Dressed in his robe with coffee in hand, he had opened the door of his condo and reached for the paper. The two-inch type of the front page burned its message into his brain.

“TYRON COLLAPSES” - it read like a death notice. It was.

He turned and walked slowly back into his house with the paper in hand.

He'd heard rumors but there were always rumors - rumors of triumph and rumors of catastrophe - ever since he began working for Tyron. None of which ever came true, until now!

He sank back into the easy chair and began to read.

“Yesterday, at the close of trading Tyron, one of the largest corporations on the NYSE, declared bankruptcy. Investigations into the collapse have begun. Fraud by executives at Tyron is high on the list of causative factors leading to Tyron's downfall. Tyron's CEO, James Wheeler is suspected of funneling millions of dollars to his own accounts while altering records of company finances...”

It had to be at least two years now.

He mused to himself in amazement that he remembered word for word, after all this time, the text of that article.

With the flashback over, he reentered the present and continued his vacant stare.

Suddenly, the ring of the telephone startled him from his trance.

“Dad! Did you see the TV today?”

“No.”, he replied.

“Turn it on. They have the results of the trial.”

“O.K.” He hung up the phone and snapped on the TV.

“This latest news bulletin - James Wheeler, Hal Meter and several other high-ranking executives who have been found guilty in the collapse of Tyron have been sentenced today.

Mr. Wheeler who has been free on bail over the past two years has been sentenced to a ten thousand dollar fine and six months in jail. The others of those convicted received fines up to five thousand dollars and community service.

Judge Arthur Gavin instructed Mr. Wheeler to report to jail in two weeks

deferring to his attorney's request for time so that he may get his affairs in order.

Here comes John Hurley, Wheeler's lawyer now.

Mr. Hurley - what is your opinion of today's sentencing?"

"I think Judge Gavin was extremely fair. Justice prevailed. The judge's sentence speaks for itself. That's all I have to say. Thank you."

Jack rocked back in his chair and clicked off the TV. His stomach churned and he felt a sickness come over him.

"Six months and ten thousand dollars! Justice prevailed! Extremely fair!"

The words echoed over and over in his head and amplified upon each rebound.

The phone rang again.

"Some bullshit! Some bullshit! What do you think Dad?"

"Well, it's the way things go. Justice in America isn't based on black or white as some people would have you think, it's based on green!

I guess it has always been this way. Maybe someday it may change but I'm not so sure unless someone makes it happen."

"You're right, Dad.

Have you thought about my idea of you moving in with us?

You know how I hate you living down there. I worry every day. I know the neighborhood or should I just call it the 'hood'. It's really unsafe and I worry!"

"Listen Honey - we've been over this a million times. I'm not about to give up my self-respect. I really appreciate your concern and your and Dave's offer, but I can't.

I know the area here is not the best but I'm okay. I just watch my step and it works out fine. Don't worry about me. I'll be fine."

"But Dad..."

"Now, let's not talk about that any more.

How's the kids?"

"They're good. I'll call you tomorrow.

Bye Dad. I love you."

Jack put down the phone and reverted back to the memories and that vacant stare to which he had become so accustomed.

"Hey, Jack did you hear the rumor that's going around?" announced Mark as he peered through the open office door.

"What's it now, Mark?"

"Three thousand are biting the dust. By the end of the week!"

"Where did you hear that?"

"Ned, down in Human Resources, told me and he said he heard it from a couple of pretty good sources."

"Well, if that's true the tide is certainly getting higher. Two thousand last month and now another three! I wonder why?

According to the annual report we're doing great. Revenues are up, profits are up and our stock price is on the rise."

"That's all true but I did see where a couple of the suits were selling pretty good amounts of stock."

"Yeah, I saw that too, but I also heard that both of Wheeler's daughters are

getting married and you know the receptions are not going to be held at the local VFW hall. They'll cost a bundle. That's probably why he's selling."

He remembered all of it like it was yesterday. At the time it was like a faint, distant clap of thunder warning of the approaching storm - an unheeded warning.

Jack's memory fast-forwarded. The tide of lay offs did indeed rise and as it rose, simultaneously, the stock price fell. Which moved more quickly, it was hard to tell.

At every round of lay off announcements, Jack anxiously awaited his notice. It never arrived and each time he felt a sigh of relief.

Then, Tuesday morning, July 8th, eight A.M. Bam! Right between the eyes!

A team of security guards stood at the door as Mark exited the building. He walked towards Jack's car as it entered the parking lot. He was carrying two large, plastic shopping bags, one in each hand. He nodded for Jack to pull over.

Jack stopped and rolled down the window.

"Go get your shit! The party's over."

"What's going on?"

"Didn't you listen to the radio this morning? Our stock fell by ninety percent in over night trading and this morning we declared bankruptcy. They're letting people in one by one to clean their desks. The Feds are up stairs right now.

Better go get in line to get your stuff", he then turned and continued walking towards his car.

Jack's thoughts continued to drift.

"I can't tell you how sorry I am. She put up one hell of a fight."

"Thanks Arnie, I appreciate your coming."

"I'm sorry Jack. I don't know what else to say."

"I understand. Thanks Ann."

The line stretched around the room and out into the hall of the funeral home.

Sally had lots of friends. She was the kind of person who was always there for others and now it was their turn and they were all there for her.

Jack drew in a deep breath through his nose and swallowed hard as he continued to greet the horde the well wishers.

Sally got sick about two months after he had lost his job at Tyron.

"It was a terrible time to get ill", he thought to himself but then again it's never a good time to get cancer.

"That's not what I meant!" he mentally chided himself.

No medical insurance, it disappeared with job. Then eight months of operations and chemo. The cancer consumed her and all that they had, which wasn't that much after the 401K collapsed with Tyron.

His memories rolled forward.

"Alright Dad. Do you think you have everything? Look around again just to be sure. Check the basement again."

"I'm sure. I can't take much with me anyway. It's only three rooms you know."

"Okay, grab the box and let's go."

Jack reached down and picked a large cardboard carton packed with pictures and a few books. Lying on the top was a large frame displaying military medals and decorations.

“Be careful. You don’t want to drop it.”

They walked through front the door out towards the car. Jack stopped about halfway there, turned and looked back at the house.

“Thirty-five years, gone in a flash”, he muttered and got into the car.

Then once again he lapsed back into reality.

“Oh shit”, he thought to himself.

“You can’t keep rolling this stuff over and over in your head. It’ll drive you crazy for sure.”

“Go out and get some air. Have a smoke and forget it”, he muttered to himself.

He stepped through the apartment doorway, closed the door and rattled the handle.

“Gotta make sure it’s locked, not that it would really make any difference”, he thought.

“If they want to get in, the lock will only slow them down for a couple of minutes. And besides, what’s there to steal?”

He proceeded down the winding stairs to the front of the building and over to the bench near the sidewalk. He drew a cigar from his pocket, unwrapped it, snipped the end and lit it.

As the first puff of smoke issued from his nose, he was for a second, back to the Club. A snap shot of the first fairway, with its lush green hue, flashed through his mind. It was a site he was never to see again. Its image faded as he exhaled with long, slow sigh.

“How ya doin’ Jack?” came a voice over the tap, tap, tap of the bouncing basketball on the adjacent playground.

“Not bad, Hal”, he replied unconvincingly.

“How about you?”

“Okay, for an old man I guess. The knee is acting up a little again. Other than that, not bad.”

Hal, a tall, light skinned black man with gray hair and slight limp sat down beside him.

“I guess it’s that old wound from Nam again. They never did get that piece of metal completely out.”

“Did you hear about Matty. They walked him down to the bank and made him cash his social security check and took the money.”

“What do you mean ‘Took the money’?”

“The dues! I thought I told you the other day. I guess they haven’t gotten to your building yet.

They got a new thing goin’. They come to everybody’s door and say they’re collectin’ for the Fire Prevention Fund. They call it the FPF. They get fifty dollars a month from everybody. Matty didn’t pay so they marched him down to the bank and got the money out of him.”

“What’s this FPF stuff anyway?”

“Here’s what they say. They’ll make sure that no fires start in your apartment if you pay your dues. If you don’t pay, they’ll make sure that a fire does start.

You know Petey, the guy that lives in the building next me? He refused to

give anything. He's a pretty tough guy, an old Navy Seal from Nam.

Well, a week or two ago he leaves his house to go to the store and when he gets back his door is knocked off the hinges and his bed is on fire. Lucky he got home when he did so he could put it out in time or the whole place woulda went up!"

"What happened after that?"

"Petey payin' dues like everybody else."

"Who are these guys?"

"A bunch of guys from the neighborhood here. Young guys you know.

They started their own gang - they call themselves the Firemen. They wear a little tat on the arm. It's a flame with the letters FM in it.

Petty crooks and dealers who decided this is an easy way to make money.

Let's face it; they're right! They're dealing with a bunch of old people. How hard is it gonna be?"

"So why doesn't somebody call the cops?"

"Are you kiddin'?"

The cops don't want any part of down here. And second, who's gonna call?

If they find out who did you can be god damn sure that guy's gonna have some serious problems if you know what I mean."

They sat silently, Jack slowly puffing on the cigar and Hal thumbing through the newspaper he had brought with him.

"Any good news in there?"

"Yanks won three in a row. That's about it."

They continued to sit with Hal sporadically commenting on the items he was reading in the paper and Jack courteously responding.

Then, after an hour or so, with his cigar consumed to an inch beyond his lips, Jack arose.

"Well, that's about it for today. Gotta go up and get supper together.

See ya tomorrow."

The front door of the building closed behind him with its familiar squeal of metal on metal and he proceeded up the narrow stairs towards his apartment.

As he slid his hand up the banister his grasp weakened. There was something slippery on the banister, preventing a firm grasp. He looked closely in the dim shadow of the hallway. It looked like blood. He lifted his hand towards his face. It was blood. All over the hand rail and the steps.

He continued up the staircase trying to avoid stepping in the trickle that covered each step. He arrived at the second floor and moved down the hall toward the next flight. As he made the turn, he saw the blood stream leading through the open door of apartment 2-B.

He approached the door and carefully pushed it wide open with one hand not knowing what to expect. He cautiously peered in.

"Mrs. Murray?"

"Ellen?"

He carefully stepped over the blood trail and into the apartment.

In the kitchen he found her seated on the floor leaning against the cabinet door, bloodied and sobbing.

“What happened?”

“He...He...” she gasped.

“Who? What?”

“He came to rob me” she stammered.

“Are you hurt?”

Let me call the police.

Where’s the phone?”

“No! No! Don’t! He said if I did he’d be back to kill both Suzy and me.

Please don’t. I’m okay.”

With Jack’s help, she to lifted herself from the floor.

“Are you sure you’re alright?”

“I’m okay.”

“Where did all this blood come from?” he asked as he looked for her wounds.

“From him.”

She got to her feet and hobbled over to a chair near the kitchen table.

“Would you give me a glass of water?”

Jack obliged.

“Now what exactly happened?”

“I was sitting right here, getting Suzy’s dinner ready. I was opening the can of cat food when I heard a noise at the front door. It was like a thud. I started to get up to see what was going on and suddenly there he was in the kitchen doorway.

A big guy, with plenty of tattoos holding a crowbar.

‘I need some cash. Whatta you got?’ he said.

I told him that I didn’t have any except what’s in that drawer.”

She pointed to the open drawer at the other side of the kitchen.

“He looked in the drawer. There was only about twenty-five dollars and some change in there. That got him real mad.

‘You got more than that’ he yelled.

I told him I didn’t but he didn’t believe me. I really didn’t.

Then, he went over and grabbed Suzy by the back of the neck and said ‘If you don’t tell me where the rest of it is this cat is history’ and then he turned on the gas stove and was bringing her over towards the flame.

When I saw that I guess I just snapped. I had the can lid on the table and I grabbed it and sliced it down his face and neck. The blood started pouring out and he dropped Suzy and the crowbar and grabbed his neck. I could see the blood was shooting through his fingers.

When he saw all that blood he yelled ‘Don’t you tell anybody or I’ll be back for both of you.’

Then, I guess he panicked because there was an awful lotta blood and he ran for the door and took off down the stairs.

There’s the crowbar over there.”

Jack looked over to where she was pointing to see the blood covered crowbar lying on the floor near the doorway.

“I gotta call the cops.”

A recorded voice issued for the phone “You have reached the police department for an emergency please press.....”

"If you do I'll tell them it never happened, so don't."

"He'll be back anyway, even if you don't call the police."

"Maybe not! Don't call", she replied in a quivering voice.

Jack lowered the phone from his ear. He knew this wasn't going to be the smartest thing he'd ever done but the look of terror on her face convinced him. He hung up the phone and helped to clean up the blood from the floor and the cabinet doors.

He had a hard time sleeping that night. Maybe he should have called the cops after all. If something else happened to the old lady, he'd be to blame. Then again, if he did call, like she said, she would deny everything, so what would be the point?

Chapter 2

"Hey, ya know what I heard?"

I heard the boy that was runnin' that FM gang I was tellin' you about the other day got himself pretty cut up."

"What do you mean, 'Cut up'?"

"Well, the way I heard it, he was jumped by an up town gang and they cut him good. Almost ear to ear. He just made it to the hospital in time. Gave him a couple of pints to save him. Too bad."

"What do you mean 'Too bad'?"

"They shoulda let the son of a bitch die. That's what I mean.

Goin' around takin' advantage of everybody like they do. Especially the old people, like us."

"Is he still in the hospital?"

"Not from what I hear. Couple people said they seen him walkin' around with a big bandage on his neck.

The gang kinda stopped collectin' those dues for a week or so while he was gone but from what I heard they're right back at it again now."

"Did they ever come to get dues from you Hal?"

"Not yet. But I think they're comin'.

They're kinda workin' their way down the block from buildin' to buildin'. They haven't got to mine yet. I'm pretty sure that they'll be comin' soon and to your buildin' too."

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. I'd like to say that I'm not gonna give 'em nothing but who knows. If they got Petey to pay up, I don't know. He's a tough buckaroo and he paid.

What about you, Jack?"

"I don't know either. I guess I'll have to wait and see."

They both sat on the bench in silence, Jack puffing on his cigar and Hal staring into the distance.

"Did you ever hear of Patrick Henry?"

"Patrick who? Where does he live?"

"No. Patrick Henry was a famous patriot during the Revolutionary War. He

said 'United we stand, divided we fall'."

They both again sit silently.

"Do you know what that means Hal?"

"Yeah, sure. Ya gotta stick together or you're done for."

"Right."

Silence again.

"Who are we gonna unite and what are we gonna do? We're all old guys."

"We're old but we're not dead and we're not stupid."

There was a pause.

"Did you ever play Bocce, Hal?"

"No."

"How would you like to learn? There's a Bocce court down at the other end of the park. Nobody ever uses it. I've got the balls. Let's go down tomorrow and I'll show you how to play."

"I guess. It's gotta be better than sittin' here all day."

"And, Hal ask Petey to come too. Okay?"

"Sure."

The next day they met at the park.

"Hey, Hal you made it, and you brought Petey with you."

"Yeah, Jack this is Petey, Petey this is Jack" as they shook hands.

"You guy ready for some Bocce lessons?"

"Guess so."

"You know, when I was a kid, I used to ride my bike down to the park in the summer and watch all the old Italian guys play Bocce. They spent the whole day there puffing those short, little cigars, tellin' stories and playing. Some would play Bocce while the others played Pinochle on the picnic tables then they'd switch back and forth.

They used to let me play once in a while and that's how I learned. It was a lot fun. I even saved my money and bought a Bocce set. Here let me show you. It's kinda like bowling and horseshoes combined."

He took out the balls.

"I've had these since I was a kid.

"See this little one, it's the pallino. The first player throws the pallino and then he throws a second big ball and tries to get close as he can to the pallino. Then the next guy throws to try to get even closer. The guy who's furthest away always gets the next shot until we run out of balls. Closest to the pallino gets one point for each. Thirteen wins."

They began to play.

"Hal tells me you live over by him in the gray brick building."

"Yeah, been there for about three years now."

"How is it?"

"Are you kiddin'? It's like all the other places in this neighbor, for shit!

But everybody's gotta live somewhere and I guess this is it for us."

"How'd you wind up here?"

"I wound up broke, that's how. Not a pot to piss in."

"Hal told me that you were a Navy Seal during Nam. How long were you in

the service?"

" 'Bout eighteen years."

"And you didn't get a good pension?"

"That's a long story. A long sad story."

"We've got all afternoon."

"I don't even wanna talk about it."

He paused.

"Let Hal tell ya. He knows the whole thing."

Jack turned to Hal and saw him get an approving glance from Petey.

"When Petey was in Nam he had a commanding officer, well, they didn't see eye to eye about a lot of stuff."

"Stuff? What kind of stuff?"

"Treatment of civilians for one. One day a girl in the village that they secured came to Petey and told him the Lieutenant forced her into sex. He told her that otherwise her whole family would wind up being collateral damage, if you know what I mean. "

"Sure, I do."

"Well, then when Petey went to the Lieutenant and told him what he heard the guy threatened him.

You don't know Petey very well, but I do and he's not the kinda guy that's gonna back off, so he told the Lieutenant he was goin' higher up with this stuff."

He paused.

"And?"

"And then the Lieutenant went back to the girl and made her accuse Petey of forcin' her into the sex before he could report it on up."

"So what happened then?"

"I did three years in the brig and got kicked out of the service. That's what happened", Petey interjected.

"How?"

"Shay, that was the guy's name, he got the girl to testify against me and he got some of the guys in our company to say it was true too. From what I got later on, he told them 'If you don't go with me and say what I tell ya, you'll be the point man from here on out'.

You know what that means; you'll probably be a short timer. You'll probably be goin' home real soon, in a box. So some of them got scared real quick and they went with Shay and I got my three years."

He paused.

"And here's the bitch of it. He wound up in the Pentagon, a full bird colonel. I heard he retired a couple of years ago. Nice pension. The whole deal."

"And what happened to you? How did you wind up here?"

"When I got out of the service, well, kicked out, I of course, went lookin' for a job. What kinda job are you gonna get with my record? Not a good one, that's for sure.

So I kinda bounced around from one shitty job to the next and I finally wound up here. Broke! Never got a military pension, of course. They took my chances of that when they put me in the brig.

All I got is some social security and not even much of that.”

“Sounds like you really got a screwin’.”

“I’d say so. And ya know what! I think about it every goddamn day. I don’t know what’s worst, what really happened or just the thinkin’ about it day after day after day.”

“I kinda know what you mean.”

“Well, I guess there’s nothin’ ya can do about it now.”

“Maybe not, but I’m not so sure”, replied Jack and they continued the Bocce.

“Hey, ya know Hal, you never told me how life treated you. We talked a lot but every time I brought it up you kinda danced around it.

Since we’re here spilling out our guts I think it’s your turn now.”

“Ain’t my turn. No use whinin’ ‘bout things gone by.”

“I don’t think anybody’s whining, just telling like it is. What do you think Petey?”

“I guess. I showed you mine maybe you should show us yours Hal?”

“Well I suppose but ain’t a hellava lot to tell.

Grew up down south. Didn’t have shit.

Dad got sick and we lived on Social Security. He got what the doctor called dementia. He was a pretty old guy when I was born.

Ma couldn’t work. She had to take care of him. She wasn’t gonna put him in any home and I didn’t blame her. The homes in those days were run by the state and they were pretty poor.

Wasn’t no Visiting Nurse stuff either, not in those days.

After a while the money we were getting’ just wasn’t enough so she hadda get a job. She use ta lock him in the bedroom and go to work and hope for the best.”

“How about your brothers and sisters. Couldn’t they help out?”

“Got no brothers or sisters.

Anyway, the town we lived near was a good old southern football town. When you when to high school you were expected to play unless you were crippled. Everybody had to play. They’d won thirty-two games in a row when I got there and were state champs for five years straight.”

“So did you play?”

“Are you kiddin’? Two hundred and ten pounds, six foot two. Didn’t have much a choice.

Ma didn’t want me to play. She was always worried that I’d get seriously hurt and I could understand that.

Havin’ one person she loved bein’ a mess, was all she could bear. But she finally agreed to let me play and I did like it and I was good at it too.

Don’t mean to be braggin’, but real good. All-State three years runnin’. Still got the rushin’ record at the high school from forty-five years ago.

When I got outta high school I had a bunch of college offers. I went State cause it was close to home and I could help out Ma when I had to. In the end it didn’t make a lot of difference cause Dad died before I started college.”

He paused for a moment.

“Well, anyway, like I was sayin’. I got a scholarship to State. They called it a

scholarship but I kinda looked at it as contract to play football. I don't remember seein' the inside of too many classrooms but I do remember seein' lots of locker rooms.

I played four years. Started three of 'em. Second team All-American as a senior.

Then after the season when I was a senior, I got a Certificate of Attendance, no diploma, just the handshake and the certificate.

You know, in those days, that was generally the way things worked. Most all the guys I played with got the same deal.

I went home and got a job driving a bulldozer. That was about the best I could do. But believe it or not that was a pretty good job in my town and I guess I only got it cause I was kinda the local football hero."

"So you were a heavy equipment operator all your life?"

"Nah, only for a year or two.

One day I read in the paper about a guy I played with at State. He was playin' pro ball and doin' okay so I decided to call my old coach and ask him to help me out. I knew I was better than the guy playin' in the pros."

Again he paused

"And so?"

"Well, this was the fifties you know. Coach told me that there wasn't too much room for a black guy in pro ball unless you were like Jim Brown."

"What about the guy you saw in the paper, the guy you played with?"

"He was a white guy."

"So then what?"

"I got a factory job. Worked there for forty years. The company got sold and the pension was sold off. That happened a lot in those days. They'd buy a company, steal the pension money and then collapse the company. "

"Do you have a family?"

"Yeah, I raised a family. Wife died in eighty-five. Cancer!

My son lives in California. I keep in touch but he's gotta live his own life too. He's doin' alright but not great.

Anyway, I got my Social Security. They couldn't steal that and I get food stamps and a little rent help by the government, so I'm hangin' in.

That's about it, man and here I am."

"It must really piss you off when you watch football today? Guys making millions."

"Born too soon I guess but that's the way it is. What can ya do?"

With the Bocce game completed they all walked home.

Chapter 3

"Bang! Bang!"

He slowly opened his eyes and glanced at the clock.

"One A.M. What the hell is going on?" he thought.

"Bang! Bang!"

It was the front door.

He meandered to the door and looked through the peep hole.

“Bang! Bang!”

Mrs. Murray continued to pound on the door.

He opened it as she was about to strike again.

“Please let me in”, she gasped.

“What’s the matter? What happened?”

She hurried over and slumped into the chair trying desperately to catch her breath.

“I think he’s dead! I know he’s dead!”

“Dead!

Who’s dead?”

“The man in my apartment.”

“In your apartment?”

“He’s the same man that broke in the last time. He still has a bandage on his neck.”

“How’s he dead?”

“About two hours ago I was in the kitchen and I heard the door bust open again like last time. He came right into the kitchen and said he was going to kill me and Suzy.

I told him, ‘Take what ever you want but don’t hurt us.

I didn’t tell anybody about what happened before.

I didn’t call the police like you said.’

Then he said, ‘But you might be tellin’ somebody down the road and if my homies find I been cut up by an old lady like you that ain’t gonna be good for my rep. I gotta make sure there’ll be no talkin’’. And then he came at he with his knife.

I ‘d been making tea for myself and I’d just poured the cup and it was still boiling hot. I just threw it at him. It hit him right in the face and he fell backwards and hit his head on the radiator.

Then he didn’t move. He just laid there.

I got a knife out of the drawer and sat by him in case he woke up. I probably should have just run out but I was so scared I didn’t really know what I was doing.

If he would have woke up I don’t know what I would have done.

But I sat there frozen for a good half hour and he never moved. I tried to see if he was breathing and he wasn’t.

I don’t what to do. If I call the police then what are ‘homies’ as he called them, going to do to me and Suzy?

What can I do? What can I do?”, she wailed.

“You stay here and let me go down and see. I’ll be right back. Give me the key.”

“Here’s the key but you don’t need it. The door’s pried wide open.”

He slowly walked to the floor below in measured, stealthy steps and cautiously peered into the apartment. He rounded the corner into the kitchen.

There he was. Lying there, face up, eyes closed, next to the radiator with a pool of blood radiating from the back of his head.

Jack bent down and put his hand on the chest of his tea stained shirt. It was cold and motionless.

He felt his wrist. It was cold and pulse less.

“Dead alright”, he thought out loud.

He heard the muted creak of a foot step in the hallway. Silence. Then another.

He slowly picked up the dead man’s knife from the floor beside him, pulled away from the body and backed into the shadows of the pantry.

Another creak came from the hallway. He carefully peered around the corner of the pantry door.

It was Mrs. Murray standing in the doorway with her hand over her mouth staring at the lifeless corpse on the floor.

“I thought I told you to stay upstairs.”

“I couldn’t. I was so afraid.”

She paused.

“What am I going to do?”

“What am I going to do?”, she repeated.

“I’m not sure but I know what you are not going to do”, he replied.

“You’re not going to call the cops. As soon as they come everybody will know what happened. When I say everybody, I mean everybody on the street including his boys and they won’t take too kindly to it.

If they find out the whole story, you won’t last too long.

Maybe it’ll look like an accident. It’ll look like you fell off the roof or maybe look like suicide, but in any case you’ll wind up like him. These guys have no trouble killing anybody that harms one of the gang or insults the gang’s honor, not even old ladies.

As a matter of fact, killing an old lady would probably give their reputation a boost. It would show that nobody, no matter who, can get off hurting one of them without paying the price.

I think they’d kill a baby if they thought it disrespected them.”

“What should I do?”, she again repeated nervously.

There was silence.

“Well, we can’t just leave him laying here on the kitchen floor.

Let me go upstairs for a minute and this time you stay here. Keep the door shut.

I’ll be back in a minute - Okay?”

“Okay”, she answered meekly.

He left briefly and returned with a small roll of wire and a large plastic leave bag.

“Get your vacuum cleaner and the hose with it.”

She left the room to fetch the vacuum.

He cut a short piece of the telephone wire he had brought with him. He proceeded to fold the man’s outstretched arms over across his chest . He placed the hands together. On the back of each hand was a large tattoo, “FM”. He bound them with the wire.

With another piece of wire, he looped it through the bend of the knees and

drew them together, wrapped the other end of the wire behind the neck. He tucked the knees to the chest pulling the body into a fetal position and tied it tight.

Mrs. Murray returned with the vacuum. She stopped in the doorway and gasped.

"I had to tied him up so we can get him into the bag. If I waited much longer he'd stiffen up and I'd never be able get him bundled like this.

Give me the bag."

She handed him the bag.

"Now, open the end and when I lift him up you slide the bag over his head as far as you can. Okay, here we go,"

Jack lifted and she slid the bag over the head and half down the back.

"Now, I'll lift the other end and you pull the bag all the way down. Okay, one, two, three - pull."

Jack reached over and drew the opening of the bag closed.

"Give me the vacuum hose and plug the vacuum in."

He used both hands to hold the bag opening tightly around the hose.

"Okay, start up the vac."

The motor whirred and the bag slowly collapsed into the shape of its contents. When most all the air had been withdrawn, he removed the hose and tied the opening shut with a piece of the wire.

"Clean out the bottom of the bedroom closet and bring me the biggest towel that you have."

She left, returned with towel and went to clean the closet.

Jack stretched the towel on the floor and rolled the bag on to it. He then proceeded to drag the towel with the bag riding on it towards the bedroom.

He finally got to the closet door. He was breathing heavily. He stopped and sat on the bed for a rest as she finished unloading the items from the closet floor.

"He's not as light as he looks", he said wryly.

"Okay, let's see if he fits."

Jack rolled the bag into the closet. It just fit.

"Beautiful", he exclaimed with a sense of morbid pride as he shut the closet door.

"Now, what?", she asked.

"I can't just leave him there."

"I'm not sure what to do next. I've got to think about it but we've got plenty of time. He's going to be fine in that bag with the air sucked out of it. He should last at least a couple of weeks I would think and in the mean time, we'll figure out what to do with him.

Let's go in and clean up the kitchen."

"I can't stay here with him in the closet like that. I'll be scared to death. What if he wakes up?"

"Wakes up!

What are you kidding? Unless I see Jesus Christ coming through that door, he's not waking up. I'm sure."

"I still can't stay here. I'm scared."

"Okay, you come up and stay with me. You can have my bed. I'll do the sofa.

Then after we get rid of him you can come back.”

“Oh, thank you. Thank you.”

She paused.

“What about Suzy?”

He paused.

“Okay, the cat can come too. Just be sure to bring the litter box.”

And with that they left the apartment, locked the door as best they could and retired upstairs to Jack’s place

Chapter 4

He hadn’t slept well in days. He’d been back to the down stairs apartment a dozen times, sometimes in the middle of the night, checking the bag in the closet. It was as if he looked enough times, it would magically disappear. He hoped it would. That would mean the whole thing was just a bad dream.

It was always there!

No smell yet and it was about four days now. Sucking the air out of the bag seemed to be working pretty good. He’d also put moth flakes around the bag. That was the only odor seeping from under the closet door.

“So far, so good”, he thought but he knew this couldn’t continue. He couldn’t just leave it there forever. But what to do with it, that was the question?

Just dump it on the street? How would he even get it down the stairs without being seen. It was enough trouble just dragging it from the kitchen to the bedroom.

Besides, even if he could dump it, as soon as the body was found, surely a police investigation would follow. Could they trace any thing back to him or the old lady? He’d seen a lot of TV crime shows and the investigations looked pretty sophisticated. So who knows?

“Probably a good chance”, he thought.

Jack arose from the sofa as the sun streamed in through the window. Last night was a little better than usual. He’d got about four hours sleep. That was two hours more than previous nights.

It was eight o’clock. The bedroom door was still closed. She wasn’t up yet.

That was another problem. He certainly wasn’t going to let her stay with him indefinitely and he knew that she wasn’t going back down stairs while the body was still in there.

He dressed himself and walked down to the front of the building, again checking the closet on the way. The weather was warm and the breeze light. He sat down on the bench and lit his usual, daily cigar.

“So this where you guys hang out.”

“Hey, Petey. Yeah this is it.

Sit down.

Do you smoke? I got an extra one right here”, and he patted to his shirt pocket.

“Na, thanks anyway but gave up smoking when cigarettes were thirty-five cents a pack. I know if I smoke a cigar I’ll be right back. I use to do a pack and

half a day. I don't want to take a chance, if you know what I mean"

"Sure. I understand.

Hey, how did you like that Bocce?"

"Pretty good. A lot of fun."

"Wanta play tomorrow? I'll get Hal."

"I'd like to but I'm going fishing. Did you ever fish?"

"When I was a kid. Not since."

"Did you like it?"

"Yeah, it was fun. Nice and relaxing. Quiet. I'd even say serene".

"Wanta go tomorrow?"

"I'd need equipment and a license. I'm sure you need a license. When I was a kid you did."

"No. Not where I'm going. I'm going to a friend of mine's place up state.

I was in the service with him and we've kept in touch for years. When he got out he bought a farm, a fish farm. He raises trout and sells them. He also has a big pond, I guess you could almost call it lake. He stocks fish in there and charges people to fish. You don't need a license because it's not public waters. And he supplies the rod and reel and all the fishing stuff."

"How much does it cost?"

"For me and you, free.

I've known Larry for thirty years.

I just bring him a case of beer.

What do you think? "

"Is Hal going?"

"Can't. He's got some stuff he's gotta do."

"Well, sounds like a good time. I'll be like a kid again.

Sure. Sign me up. I'll go."

"I'll pick you up at about eight-thirty.

It'll take around an hour to get there. Just gotta hope for good weather. It's supposed to be nice.

And, bring a couple of extra cigars. Larry's a cigar guy."

The horn blew at eight-thirty. It was an old, beat up jalopy, with a hubcap missing and a dent in the front fender. About a ninety-two.

Jack opened the door.

"Throw those papers in the back".

Jack picked newspaper from the seat and threw it in the back on top of the others lying there and sat down.

"I got the beer in the trunk. Away we go!"

"Where'd you get this?", asked Jack.

"My daughter's kid. She went to college with it and when she graduated, like all the kids today, first thing, get a new car. So I got this.

Look's like shit but runs good. Good for around here too. Who's gonna steal it?"

It took about an hour like Petey had said.

With the radio not working, idle banter flowed back and forth as they rode.

"Larry's Fishin' Hole - No license Required", it read.

Petey turned down the long dusty, rutted road at the sign. They bounced their way toward the distant house at the end of the lane.

Another sign by the house read "You are Here at Larry's - Fish are There", and a big red arrow pointed towards the lake.

Petey pulled up in front of the house and they got out.

The house door opened and burly, unshaven Larry stepped out.

"What do we got here? Two fishin' city slickers?", he jested as he reached and grasped Petey's hand.

"How ya been Petey?"

Ya look okay.

Aint seen ya since last year."

"Doin' good Larry. Doin' good.

This is Jack a buddy of mine from around the corner by me."

Jack reached out and shook Larry's hand.

"Got the beer?"

"Sure! In the trunk with a bag of ice on it like usual".

Petey got the beer and they all went inside.

It was a dingy little room, with dingy furniture and a dingy kitchen off to the side.

"Rusty! Get off the sofa".

The red mongrel, startled by the command, jumped from the sofa.

"Grasp one of the beers and sit down. Let's talk a bit and then we'll get to some fishin'", he said in a gravelly voice as he popped open the beer can.

"How's things down by you? Just as shitty as here I suppose."

"Yeah, probably worst. Here, at least, you don't have street gangs."

"Street gangs! We don't even have streets!", Larry replied with a laugh, as he reached for another beer.

"So, what's with these gangs anyway?"

Petey, silently glanced at Jack.

"Go ahead Petey, tell 'em what happened to you the other day. Down at the bank."

Hesitatingly, Petey began the story of how he was forced to pay the Firemen and how the entire neighborhood was slowly being overrun by the young thugs.

"That's some shit!" responded Larry.

"How do you let 'em get away with that? Maybe you gotta get yourself a gun. I got one right here I'll loan ya.", and he pointed to a twelve gauge standing in the far corner.

"I know you're pretty good with it. I saw you in Nam shootin' a lot of them gooks, like tin cans off a fence post. You know how to handle yourself."

He stood up, walked to corner, brought the gun over and handed it to Petey.

"What about you Jack? I got one you can use too, if you want it."

"It's not that simple Larry.

First of all, there's dozens of them and they pretty much run the neighborhood. You can't just go around shooting them.

If you threaten them, you're going to have to lock every door, every window and never leave the house or you'll be a dead man.

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