

OUTLANDISH NEW WAYS TO PUNISH STRANGERS

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Smashwords Edition

to mare,

promises, promises

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The Gravedigger Tales

a brief prologue
EARLY MORNING EYES

An old man mouths the word “walk” to his wife as they leave the restaurant. It’s a question. She doesn’t particularly want to walk home but a suggestion of romance, a caress of her hips, and she narrows her eyes in hesitant agreement. It’s June. With twilight came a light breeze. The streets are quiet, peaceful. They walk leisurely, hands swinging together, fingers lazily entwined.

He takes his hand away to motion at a bright yellow awning hanging over a nearby deli. He signs to her, his thin fingers elaborating on the color yellow. He’s been noticing it more often – yellow seems to be the new color for the city of Philadelphia. His wife smiles and they stop for a single car to pass. He uses the delay as an excuse to brush aside the thin black strap of her dress and kiss the nape of her neck. She smells pinot noir on his breath.

They don’t kiss but smile, the car long passed.

“You need to take it easier on him,” she signs, bringing up an earlier conversation about their oldest son.

“He can be great,” he signs back, stubborn as always.

Her head turns to check the traffic. Her eyes catch his, look past to see no cars coming, then return. He’s staring at her. It’s a familiar look, sort of a sleepy adoration. She sees it occasionally, mainly in the morning. The old man likes to dress by his side of the bed, quietly watching his beautiful wife breathe in and out, watching the covers rise and fall as she sleeps. He knows some mornings she’s awake since her breathing is less

shallow but he lets her pretend all the same. (She doesn't know why she pretends to sleep some mornings.) It's a routine they've had for nearly three decades. And every morning before he leaves for work, he leans in, gently kissing her cheek with adoration in his early morning eyes.

That's the look she sees on the street corner.

He leans in and pecks her lips – quick, soft – and they begin their walk again. As the old man takes a step, and another, the next step finds only air. His foot reaches out expecting solid ground—it finds nothing except darkness, vicious and abrupt...

...there's a scarlet blade...

...grabbing, yanking, pulling...

...the sound of feet running in the distance.

He wakes on his stomach, gasping, his body crumpled against the pavement. His back feels warm, his nose full of dirt. She's there, too, so close...so close he can almost touch her. She's on her back, her head toward his, her docile eyes toward his. The ambulance...well, he can hear it in the distance but her breathing is shallow – incredibly so – and worse with each passing moment.

With the last of his strength he crawls on his belly toward her, only a foot or two but excruciating. He fights very hard. He just wants to touch her, he needs to, to touch her skin and know that she's there, one more time, to...to feel her again, to just – to lie by the side of his wife.

"Don't, please," he begs, gasping in a short breath, stifling back an angry sob.

Her chest lifts, lowers, and he looks into her eyes. She finds him once more in that last second...and then, well, her eyes become tranquil – so calm – and they look right through him.

The little strength left in his body conjures a mad howl – blood around his lips, down his cheek – and he reaches out expecting her outstretched arm to reach back. Of course, she doesn't reach back, and he sobs until his own breath grows shallow, and his

own pleas are but a whisper. As the old man calms, growing tranquil himself, he wraps his hand around hers, tucks each of his fingers between each of hers.

“You’re pretending,” he murmurs, barely audible.

He’s speaking of the mornings she pretends to sleep while he dresses.

The old man takes a final breath and lays back, exhausted.

His fingers loosen.

His body relaxes.

And then the old man...well, his eyes settle their gaze on the yellow of a dandelion growing through the brick sidewalk.

the gravedigger tales

THE COWBOY IN JAKE'S BAR

I haven't slept in days.

The wood bar stretches the length of the place, starting next to the entrance and ending against the back wall. There's a shuffleboard table across from it, a wall of neon beer advertisements above. On a Tuesday night, the place is occupied more by the lingering scent of stale cigarettes than people, though two young men occupy a table near the jukebox. I sit on a stool two seats from the only other patron. He's an older gentleman, salt and pepper hair, a thin, grayish beard, worn, dirty red, flannel shirt, and tight black jeans coated with dirt. He looks grizzled, a face for a hacksaw instead of a razor. His narrow eyes seldom look left or right, his chin low, his brow lower. On his head rests an old-brimmed Australian hat like a crown; it looks as if it had been worn down a hundred years, like he's an old gunslinger, a tired man, a private hero of a private war.

The bartender brings me a 6 oz. draft. I drink the mug, set it down, and motion for another. This continues for several minutes, the only lapse of beer to my lips due to the bartender's two-step and the drip-drizzle of the tap. He grows annoyed that his attention has been occupied solely by me and moves on, passing the cowboy like he doesn't exist. The grizzled man's eyes lift from his drink as the bartender passes in front of him. He looks at the bartender, back at his drink, then over at me.

"If'n you wan' call me some'in, go on an' call me the gravediggah," he announces, returning to hunch over his drink.

I look around.

Apparently he's talking to me.

My eyes blink slow, dazed. The skin around them is purple and bagged, and the skin of my face has taken on the sheen of plastic. It's hard to focus on anything, and in my peripheral are constant glitches of black (like the flickering edges of an old movie on a projector).

"What?" I spit; it's not my intention to be rude, but just holding my head up is a bit of a task. I should be overjoyed that I'm near home, that the job is done, the task carried out to a bloody T, but I'm not. I'm not happy or sad or angry; it's a placid feeling that fills my stomach alongside the beer. It's a...an absence, a void.

Glitch glitch.

"Why's that?" I ask when the old man doesn't respond.

His cold brown eyes narrow at me.

"You special, son?" he asks, grimly. "I berry thuh ded."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I dig 'bout three, fo' hours, an' I set up. An' then I wait. I wait for the nex' grave needed diggin'," the cowboy says, leaning over as he speaks. His voice is low and I can't place it. He could be southern, he could be mildly handicap – I don't know. I'm not ever sure he's real, as I've been hallucinating lately. But he goes on to tell me that he likes to dig graves. It's the only thing he's ever done. The only job he ever had. The "only thin' I bin good at."

"How long have you been doing it?"

"Too long. I don't rightly know."

"What's the worst part?"

I had assumed digging would be the worst part.

“Them...smaller graves. For kids. Knowin’ that, one a’ them young’uns passed on. That an’ that ev’ry shovel full a’ dirt tells me I’m old. Soon I’m a’ be someone’s shovel full a’ dirt. Just don know.”

The bartender serves me another.

“Just passin’ through,” I answer when the Gravedigger asks where I’m from, not realizing it doesn’t answer his question. When the bartender nods at what I say and ignores the Gravedigger a second time, I’m forced to ask:

“Are you real?”

Our conversation trudges in and out of four stories – the caffeine junkie in West Virginia, the porn star in Florida, a brief interlude about Japanese prison guards, and the Gravedigger’s wife in New Orleans (I exclude the tale of the blackjack dealer in North Carolina and omit the end of the caffeine junkie) – and all of it starts with his answer to my question:

“I don’t rightly know.”

Silence.

“Fair enough,” I respond.

THE CAFFEINE JUNKIE

A few days earlier, in Huntington, West Virginia, a young man had been walking down the street. He had close-cropped hair was styled and gelled up in typical fashion. His shirt was a boring plaid, the collar up. His jeans had the holes and paint smears already imprinted; an extra twenty dollars for spontaneity. Even his step was lame, stiff. His smile, forgettable.

My heart didn't beat faster as I saw him approach.

My palms didn't sweat.

Breathing remained normal.

He disappeared into a coffee shop named The Bohemian Bean. It was mid-day but the street was empty. There was an alleyway to the side but I didn't plan on using it – I didn't want this to be private. I didn't want someone to find him after everything was over – I wanted witnesses. I wanted it to be public.

I wanted this to be seen.

And so I approached The Bohemian Bean.

"I didn't know if he'd remember my face," I tell the Gravedigger. "We'd only met a few times. I remembered his face but I didn't know if he'd remember mine."

He walked out and passed me and didn't look up, didn't try to meet my eyes; I had a feeling he wouldn't. And he walked toward me, closer...

Closer...

It was a familiar feeling, walking the sidewalk toward a man I wanted to murder.

Closer...

"Fuck," I sigh, "I wanted to. I wanted to smash his face in. He needed to be bloodied up a bit. But it was stupid."

"What'd hittin' him 'ave solved?" the Gravedigger responds.

"Nothing. But it sure made me feel great."

"You hit 'em?"

"Yeah, later. Can't have witnesses. I just waited until dark..."

Three steps and a handrail led to the only red door on the block. It was also the only place that didn't have its porch light on since I had broken the bulb.

It was dark.

He wouldn't see me coming.

"But it was stupid, ya said so yerself."

It was trash night, black bags lining the street on either side.

"Yeah. Stupid to do it in public."

I didn't feel the need to hide. I waited on the edge of the sidewalk one house down. It wasn't much past ten when he finally appeared. Upturned collar, stiff walk, forgettable smile. I didn't move, patiently waiting.

"So you beat up an uns'spectin' man?"

He had another coffee, juggling it between hands as searched for his key. Found it. Up one stair. Two. Three. Stuck the key in the lock. Twisting it must have been the last thing he remembered.

"Goddamn right I beat him up."

One quick rap to the back of his head and he began to fall... I didn't want to risk the chance that he was a black belt in Judo. His body hit the door and—the coffee exploded in a cyclone of caramel colors—I pulled him back down his three stairs. The cardboard cup landed on the stoop with a hollow *tink-tink*. The young man fell to the trash bags in front of his house, not quite conscious, disoriented, confused; then I used my hands. I wanted to feel bones crack, blood splatter. I was going to murder him directly in front of his unlit porch and red door. Let him die in those douche bag clothes. Leave him in trash.

When I stopped, a single drop of his blood trickled down my cheek like a tear.

I should have left but I didn't. Three extra minutes I stayed. Three minutes I sat on his stoop and caught my breath. Three minutes I thought about whether or not to kill him, finish him – he wasn't dead, just unconscious. Hurt, but not seriously. Three minutes of pros and cons. The only pro was emotion – one reason, and a thousand ways. I wanted to kill him simply because I wanted him dead—well, more accurately, I didn't want him alive. The cons were all logic, evidence and motive and probability.

Three minutes passed.

He wasn't dead. I didn't like knowing he was alive.

By the end of three minutes I had decided he would live and I left him there and drove for Raleigh, North Carolina to meet a man they called Blackjack.

A SMALL TABLE

I buy a pitcher and bring it over to the small table. The gravedigger waits, sullen. He always appears sullen and I don't expect he has any other appearance. I fill my glass and take a seat. When I offer him some, he covers the mouth of his mug with a weathered hand. A haze grows in the bar, one like a thin mist rising with my blood-alcohol level. Glitch glitch – the flicks and flashes in my peripheral have developed into static bursts, my eyes the receiver from a poor antennae. I've grown to ignore them, as my days often follow sleepless nights. Sometimes the bits of delirium cause a jolt, an involuntary startle as though waking from a nightmare, but I've learned to manage that, too.

“So why'd ya travel to beat some'un a couple hundred miles from here? Ain't it fine enough he don't live near you?” the gravedigger asks.

“It's a long story. One I'm not fond of telling.”

“Involves a girl, huh.”

“Yeah. It involves a girl.”

We both look to our glass mugs and a moment of silence follows. It's comfortable, familiar. We're mourning, both of us in our own private memories – wisps of women, of love and pain and regret – each memory dissipating like smoke when you reach out to grab it and hold it.

“I didn't travel a couple hundred miles just to beat this guy up,” I say in a defiant tone. “I was on my way elsewhere and this guy happened to be on the way. If he wanted to vanish, he should've gone farther.”

The gravedigger eyes me square, blinks, inhales, and looks off. I get the distinct feeling he's just summed me up in that brief stare, got a bit out of me that I didn't know myself, and now he's ready to move on in the conversation.

"What?" I ask him.

He lets out a grizzled old sigh.

"Feel bettah after doin' it?"

I shrug.

"One thin' about revenge – it ain't got an endin', kid. It's a dirt road with a God'amn dead end. You ain't gonna get there, believe me."

"Okay."

"Yeah, okay," he scoffs, dismissing me for dismissing him. "Know best, do ya? Where were you headed, if'n you weren't just to beat this gentleman?"

"I was going to see my brother in Florida."

"Good? Bad?" he doesn't specify but he's asking about our relationship.

"Strained..."

* * *

"Hello?"

"David?"

"Yeah. Who's this?"

"It's me—it's your brother."

"Lee?"

"Yeah."

"Holy shit... It's uh...it's been a while."

"Are you still in Florida?"

"Yeah."

"How long has it been?"

"Uh, almost six years. I think."

"No, I meant since the last time we talked."

"Oh. I don't know – not since the funeral. Almost two years?"

"I'm going to be in your area tomorrow..."

"Oh yeah? What are you doing down here?"

"...visiting you? I don't really have any other reason. Is that..."

"Um... Sure? Yeah, I mean, sure. Come up. It's been so long—what am I doing? Of course. I'd love to see my big brother. Get down here. I'll show you around – it'll be awesome. How have you been?"

"Good. I'll talk to you tomorrow when I get there."

"Oh. That quick, huh?"

RAIN & RAINBOW

Lakeland, Florida was incredibly bright – too bright. The sun glared off everything, even surfaces that had no right to reflect. And there were people, a lot of people: walking dogs, jogging, couples holding hands. If ever there were two things I didn't want to deal with, it was an excessive amount of people and sunlight – especially on the day I arrived at my brother's house. (*The night before, I had been standing naked on the side of a deserted road in Raleigh, North Carolina – not two miles from Blackjack's house – while my blood-soaked clothes burned in a pile on the ground, along with the plastic that had covered the interior of my truck. I dressed to a symphony of wet crackling as the blood boiled.*)

I pulled up to my brother's address and waited, bracing myself: I prepared myself to see my brother, whom I hadn't seen in years; I readied myself to stand, as I had been seated for some time and the feeling of being stopped was unique; also, to leave the car was to leave sanctuary, my own private haven. I hadn't had to speak to anyone – not while getting gas, not the Caffeine Junkie, not Blackjack – and I had been satisfied with the disconnection. Two days without sleep and most of that time I had been driving or quietly watching from the car. When I entered Florida, I hadn't even noticed the landscape changing, flora and fauna I had never seen before. I didn't like to leave Philadelphia. Driving, my eyes followed the road and the lines, the lines, the lines; sometimes they were faded near gone, or yellow with those bumps in case you drift, or a dotted white.

Seated, eyes closed, I breathed in air that was softer than I was used to. Bracing myself. The hallucinations had started in my peripheral but they were small for now, just pops and clicks—

“Hey,” came a pleasant voice, and a person leaned next to my car window.

My fist connected with a cheekbone.

I didn't even realize my window was down.

David backed from the car in pain. He had a hand over his face where I had hit him, and he was bent down, recovering.

I opened the door and exited the car slowly.

My first instinct was to stand near him and wait until he was no longer hurt. Seeing as it was my brother, I forced myself to rest a hand on his back, something I did hesitantly.

"I'm sorry. You startled me—"

"Yeah, yeah, I noticed. Ow." He rubbed his cheek a moment and stood to face me. His expression wasn't anger but good humor. The punch hadn't landed square or very hard, as I had been seated. It was a modest blow that left a small red blotch below his eye.

Even staring at him close, I hardly recognized him as my brother. It was hard to acknowledge that this was the last of my blood.

"How have you—" I used my normal, cautious tone but he cut me off with a large hug.

"It's good to see you, you violent fuck," he snorted, half-amused and half-serious. His voice was deeper. He had thin sideburns down to his chin and well-managed, low-trimmed stubble. He had brown hair like mine. His eyes were brown; mine were hazel. There were some physical characteristics that we shared – the shape of our face, the ridge of our eyes, the slope of our nose – but he carried himself in a different manner, so much so that our physical similarities were lost in the differences by which we composed ourselves. He stood slightly hunched, probably from sitting at a computer. He smiled and seemed positive. I, on the other hand, stood perfectly straight, with a solemn face and stern eyes, not so much positive or negative – more neutral, gray, bureaucratic.

"You comin' here after buying this car from the Duke boys?" he asked, looking over my blue Ford pick-up truck.

"No."

I didn't know who the Duke boys were but I was defensive about where I had come from and what I had done.

"Oh...kay," he was taken aback by the seriousness by which I answered him.

He was the rainbow and I, the rain.

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