

Story by BillJustBill

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Something Worth Putting Into a Story

Just like Raskilnikov in *Crime and Punishment*, he ended up broke and so pissed off he wanted to murder somebody. Maybe he wasn't the murdering kind but he was the lying, cheating, stealing kind.

It started when Jordan Lowe wrote two pieces, fiction but with a this-is-the-way-it-happened feel. Lots of local color, lots of character, a little sex, not too much, a little violence, not too much.

When a piece really took off and worked all doubts evaporated, something vibrated down deep. And these were dynamite, he knew it the way Catholics know the Pope lives in the Vatican.

They came over him like the measles, his mind deep in the flow. He set everything aside, turned down assignments then impatient with distractions turned off the answering machine on his landline, turned off his cell.

It took him ten weeks. When he had revised and rewritten until there was nothing left to do, he made a cup of instant coffee, all that was left in the cupboard, sat down and slowly read them through, one after the other.

He'd poured his heart into them, they were beautiful, he loved them.

He hand-delivered clean copy to Nanette at the magazine and she promised to get them in to Wally right away, put them on the top of his stack. Two weeks, tops, she said, he'd be hearing.

Three weeks later Nanette called and told him to come down.

In the interim he called back everyone who'd left a message before he turned everything off, everyone he thought might have tried to get hold of him.

Some assumed he had either moved to Los Angeles or was dead, which he thought was an interesting either/or. Many were steamed for not returning calls, for not being there for them, for just generally acting like a self-centered asshole.

"You think you get to do whatever the hell you want to do?" a production manager said to him when Jordan told him he'd been working on his own stuff. "You think there aren't other people who want our work? Sorry, Jordan, you've got the assistant editor totally pissed. He's put your name at the bottom of the waiting list."

Jordan hadn't even known there was a waiting list.

He went through the stack of bills he'd shoved to one side of his worktable, wrote checks, added up his balance and sat looking at the number. He didn't have enough left for next month's rent.

It didn't matter. Wally would buy the stories for a thousand each, maybe two thousand, because he would love them so much, and the first one was pretty long.

He'd pay the rent, everyone would want him before the stories came out, scheduled for two successive issues of the magazine, maybe with a cover blurb that included his name. He should suggest that to Wally if he didn't bring it up. The phone would ring off the hook and for a month or six weeks he would be a half-assed local celebrity in a certain small circle and his rates would go up.

When he got to the magazine, the receptionist asked him to be seated and paged Nanette.

She came out smiling, holding out both hands. After the kiss-kiss, he sat down on the bright red plastic bench and she sat in front of him on the edge of the bright green plastic coffee table. She was wearing a yellow sun dress with a wide skirt. She flounced it out as she sat, showing her legs all the way up to her little yellow panties. Jordan knew

she liked him, but he hadn't realized she liked him that way. She was pretty, twenty-six or -seven, with smooth shoulder-length brown hair, a wide smile and wonderful legs. He should have been paying more attention. He'd like to put them into a story sometime, legs like that.

"The manuscripts are outstanding," she said. "I loved them. You know the part where the Vietnamese boy flies into LAX expecting to meet his parents and they aren't there?"

Jordan nodded.

"It made me cry." Nanette smiled at him, her eyes wet. "Then in the other story, when the girl has that awful sex then comes out of the bathroom with that look on her face? I cried again. God, Jordan, they're just superb."

He felt himself falling in love with Nanette. She was so pretty, she had those legs.

"But Jordan, really, I mean, you know the magazine, you know what our advertising base is like. We're trendy, high-fashion. All the features are short, we keep them short because our advertisers think people prefer pictures to words. You know that, Jordan . . ."

"Jordan?" the receptionist called. "Wally's ready for you."

Nanette fell silent and Jordan stood up.

"I loved them," Nanette said, looking up at him, "I really loved them."

He went down the hall into Wally's office without knocking. Wally didn't stand up or even say hello, but then Jordan didn't expect him to. He sat behind his desk, a cigar dead in the ashtray in front of him, smelling up the room. He looked at Jordan with his head to one side, an eyebrow raised. Jordan sat down in one of two chairs in front of the desk.

"Dr. Chekhov, I presume?" A thick sarcastic tone. He was some ten years older

than Jordan, about forty, his blond hair reached the collar of his jacket. Heavy horn rim glasses with thick lenses hid his eyes. Except for the glasses, Jordan always thought he looked like he should be wearing a velvet smoking jacket and hanging out with the Bloomsbury writers in London a hundred years ago. But that was just an idle thought, one of those quirky things that hang in your mind in case you ever come across the right spot for it.

“You been holed up writing your little heart out, I understand, while the rest of us have been laboring here in the Tower of Babel, trying to make a living and otherwise fucking each other in the ass.”

It wasn't exactly the welcome Jordan expected, but he wasn't surprised, either. Bad boy editorial genius, that was Wally. One wall of his office held an array of photos and awards. Once, waiting for him to read through a piece, Jordan had stepped over and looked at it. There was all the usual stuff, thanks from the little league team, the bowling award and one seemingly ordinary plaque in the middle that might have been from the Rotary or the Optimists. The Gothic script was a little hard to read: “Suck Mine First.”

Now Jordan looked at him and waited.

Nanette had let him know. Coming down the hallway, even before he reached Wally's office, his feeling of accomplishment, his hopes for the future, had begun to vaporize into so much gray mist.

Wally picked up his manuscripts and looked at the cover page of the top story. “Seven grand,” he said.

Jordan knew what he meant. The line beneath his name and address: “word count 7,250.”

“You know how many pages of the book it takes for seven grand? Before pull-outs and illustration?”

Why do you assholes always have to call the magazine the book, Jordan won-

dered. Is it just to make it sound like something that doesn't end up underneath a bowl of dog food every month?

“Why don't you just tell me, Wally” he said, “why don't you just say thanks, but no thanks?”

Wally could never bring himself to anything so pedestrian. He was after all a happening kind of guy, a Bloomsbury guy.

“You know the sound of two hands clapping,” he said. He tossed the manuscripts across the desk. They landed flat in front of Jordan with a thump, raising a little cloud of cigar ash. Wally smiled. “What is the sound of two toilets flushing?”

Jordan stopped at the reception desk.

“Oh, Jordan, I'm sorry,” the receptionist said, “Nanette's gone for the day.”

Peeling out of the parking lot—where to go? Home? A bar?

He found himself in a public lot at the beach, took off his shoes and socks, rolled up his pants and walked down through the soft sand to where the Pacific swells hissed and foamed. A sunny afternoon, a light on-shore breeze. So what? Who cared?

He turned north, the ocean on his left, and walked fast until he was stopped by jutting rocks. He looked out over the gray waves. A couple of herring gulls bickered, the air smelled of dried kelp and dead fish.

That asshole. The stories were too long? Had Wally bothered to read them? Is this the kind of shit Leonardo had to put up with, some Medici fuck telling him he didn't like the color of the stone in the ring on Mona Lisa's hand or some nitpick equally arbitrary and completely beside the point?

Jordan stood there and stared at the sea, sounding the depths of it all. The unfairness. The disappointment. The resentment. The hopelessness. Then he turned and went back the way he had come.

At his apartment, he couldn't think, he didn't want to eat. He wanted to do something—wreak havoc, if there were anyone or anything it was possible to wreak it upon.

Later, the intensity dissipated and his brain engaged, he opened the newspaper and thumbed through the help wanted ads.

It was too depressing to contemplate.

He flipped the page.

His astrological sign. Meet new people, new ventures beckon.

He moped around, got dressed, slacks, jacket, figured he might feel better if he looked better, and went out to the Blue Parrot, a jazz club in La Jolla.

He sat in his car on Prospect Avenue, watching the strolling tourists browsing the boutiques and galleries, smoked a pinch of hash left over in the ashtray listened to a CD. k. d. lang. She was fucked up, too.

When his mood lightened he he went in.

The Blue Parrot, down a flight of wooden stairs on a seaside cliff, its existential coolness outlined in hazy green and blue neon. If Albert Camus had summered in La Jolla he would have been here every night. He would sit at a table in the back, order a Pernod, light a Gauloise, tilt his chair back against the wall, a sardonic look on his face, and let the smoke curl from his mouth up into the nostrils of his thin, aristocratic nose. If the cocktail girl told him smoking was not allowed in California establishments, Camus would look at her as though she were the foreigner, and—in French of course—tell her to fuck off.

Albert Camus spending the summers in La Jolla, he loved the idea, the image, but how could he ever fit it into a story? Too strange, never happen, what's the market? What is the sound of two toilets flushing?

Besides, he had seen pictures, and Camus' nose was neither thin nor aristocratic,

it was just his writing that made Jordan want it to be so.

“Do you know how to say fuck off in French?” he asked Carla, ordering a draft.

“How about this,” she said, giving him the finger.

Carla, always good for a smile and tonight in addition she offered herself up in very tight, white jeans. He had to get that into a story, too, just because her butt had just that certain shape, like a Ming vase. Jordan wanted to lean over the bar and lightly run his fingers over her hips, her rump, getting in touch with the heft, the shape, all in a very respectful way, of course. Things like that shouldn't be allowed slide past, to evanesce into a forgotten past, should be documented somewhere. If he had a few million he would find a sculptor, pay Carla to model, bribe those stiffies at the Museum of Modern Art in New York to put it on display: Carla's butt at twenty-four, a study in perfection. No, a study in lust.

Ah, fuck it. What was the point?

He was aware when Leon took the stool next to his, though he didn't yet know his name.

Jordan gave him the check-out glance, the flicker that men give to men who occupy the next urinal or who sit down beside them at a bar when plenty of stools are empty.

Leon wore Levis and a T-shirt, yellow lightning bolts streaked back on either side of his blue baseball cap, which he wore backwards.

Jordan hated the rubes who wore their logo hats everywhere. He hoped, in vain he knew, that this guy might be something other than a San Diego Chargers fan. Maybe he was the forerunner of a cult just now emerging, a bunch of people who got together on weekends to illegally administer electric shock therapy to one another, maybe that's what the lightning bolts were all about. They would take turns, getting up on the table, lying there laughing as the electrodes were glued to their temples, the juice hit them and

they went into convulsions, the latest thing in weekend recreation. It would make one hell of a feature for the National Enquirer. Yeah, he could picture the headline: “Clear Your Mind: California’s New Craze.”

Did great feature material like that ever sit down next to him at a bar?

Of course not.

The conversation started effortlessly. Leon had a nice way, manly—no, I am not gay—yet friendly, even collegial, a conniving tone, as if to say we’re in this together. He was one of those easy-going people Jordan despised, a Chargers fan who wore his stupid hat indoors. They were all the same: straight-ahead twenty and thirty-somethings who seemed to be all of a piece, no doubts, no inner contradictions, no angst. The path of least resistance opened out before them like a great welcoming lowest-common-denominator freeway. People like Paris Hilton. Jordan couldn’t wait till everything on Paris Hilton’s body started to sag like molten lava.

Leon was one of them, though he’d come up the hard way. He said he’d dropped out of high school to go to work as an apprentice meat cutter—a good union, three hundred a week. But it had its drawbacks.

“You have to put up with the smell. It sucks.”

Then he met a guy who showed him how to smuggle cocaine.

“It’s like being an entrepreneur.” Leon said the word as though he’d just learned it. Working conditions were good, plenty of fresh air, travel to interesting places, no heavy lifting. And the money was good.

“Actually,” he said, “the money is fucking great.”

They talked for a while, buying rounds, agreeing completely on Carla’s butt, and Jordan pointed out that earlier in the evening, when Carla started her shift, the jeans, no doubt freshly laundered, were even tighter.

“It’s like she was poured into them,” he said, “by the magic hand of God, but cer-

tainly a Greater God, not a Lesser God.” He put his head down on his folded arms on the bar and started to laugh at himself in a helpless half-stoned half-drunk way, he was so fucking clever and he didn’t know how he was going to pay the rent.

“You should see my girl,” Leon said. “The most beautiful little butt you ever saw.”

“Better than that?” Jordan straightened up. “Certainly, my friend, it couldn’t be better than that!”

“Different,” Leon said. “Carla is like, well, she’s like an Escalade, a Caddy butt.”
Was Leon catching a contact high?

Jordan agreed. “Nothing subtle about it.”

“Yeah. But my girl, she’s like a Lamborghini, a hand-crafted racing machine.”

“She’s Italian, then, an import?”

“Oh, for chrissake, she’s from right here. You know what I mean.”

Even with a buzz on he was a dolt who wore his hat backwards, completely literal, incapable of recognizing an extended metaphor or playing a word game even for a minute.

But he was someone.

He asked and Jordan told him a little about being a freelance writer, never mentioning the disappointments, the poverty, the absence of appreciation, the stark reality that nobody ever actually read anything anymore or, if they did, gave the least flying fuck about it. It sounded so romantic and devil-may-care, freelance writer, but the truth he avoided, that he couldn’t mention, that he wished he could banish from his mind, the truth was such a sad pile of dog turds.

It was right there on his face, Leon was impressed.

They bonded, or at least Leon bonded. Then Jordan saw that Leon was ready to spill. From the first Jordan knew something was up. Finally Leon got to it: He had a box

under his bed holding three hundred and fifty thousand dollars. He was pretty sure it was about that. Cash, maybe half hundreds and the rest mostly tens and twenties because you just didn't see that many fifties these days.

"It's a big fuckin' box of money. Of course," he smiled, "I only tell you this because you have no fuckin' idea where the fuck my bed is." He winked. "And, shit, I'm not even sure how much I got. Whenever I try and count it, I get bored and light a joint and that's the end of that."

Jordan watched as Leon looked a bit wicked and shook his head at his inability to get organized in the face of ever-present temptation.

"But now," Leon pursed his lips, "I've gotta get serious."

"Why serious? Jesus Christ, you're rich!" Blurting it out, so envious of this brainless nitwit, so dumb, so rich.

"It's all cash, nothing bigger than a hundred. I can't do anything with it. How do I even open a fucking checking account? You think I just go into a bank with a suitcase full of old, dirty wrinkled bills, you think they're not picking up the phone and calling the D.E.A.?"

Of course he was right. How galling that he was right. Maybe in the old days there was wiggle room with banks and such, but now awareness was way up, everybody with a pile of cash was suspect, everything was reported. The FBI would be on his doorstep twenty minutes after he walked out of the bank.

"Here's what I need," Leon said, his tone becoming confidential, leaning in. "I need a real smart guy who can help me get my money laundered. I'm looking for the lavandería." The laundry.

"Ah," Jordan said, "Entiendo, amigo. Estoy muy sympatico."

"No, Leon said, putting his arm around Jordan's shoulders, "we're not amigos, we're compadres, we're buddies" he raised his glass.

“Compadres in appreciation of Carla’s derriere,” Jordan said as they touched glasses.

“You got that right, buddy,” Leon said, “even if I do have a Lamborghini at home, I’ll drink to that.”

“You know,” Jordan said after an interval, “I just might be able to help you out.” His mind had spritzed out on the possibilities. Jesus Christ, that was a lot of money.

“Yeah? No kidding?”

“Yeah. I know a guy,” Jordan said, thinking ten percent came to thirty five thousand dollars.

Maybe Leon was on the naïve side, but he was shrewd, too. Jordan took in the chubby cheeks, the cherubic look of a guy who had been in high school not that long ago. But more than that, he saw, tucked back in the shadow of Leon’s brow ridge, the flat, assessing eyes of an experienced felon. He wasn’t the first guy Leon had braced in a bar.

If there was any chance at all of making some money off this dude, and he didn’t have too many other ways of making any money, not before the end of the month, he knew he had to make this good.

“This guy I know, he’s a lawyer,” Jordan said, off-hand. “Real smart son-of-a-bitch.”

Keep it casual. The money was minor league. Oh, really? Three-fifty? Big fucking deal.

“Let me ask you,” Jordan said. “I meet a lot of you guys. I mean, this is San Diego, thirty miles from Mexico and I’m a writer. You’re about the twenty-seventh trafficante I’ve met, and every one of you guys has the money in a box under the bed. Is it the drug that makes you all think alike?”

He took a sip of his beer, turned to watch Carla bending to get something, imag-

ined what it would be like to press his hips into her when she was like that. Was she actually working, or did she just do that for the hell of it, to drive the guys nuts, jack up the tips?

“No, man, no, you got it wrong.” Leon Jumped on the defensive. “Never get high on your own supply. Didn’t you see Scarface? I move the stuff, I don’t use the stuff. It’s business, that’s all. A little weed, that’s no big thing, but that’s it.”

“I didn’t mean to imply you were just another runny-nosed crackhead, or anything. I believe you. You’re that rare breed, a businessman. A serious and dedicated young capitalist. It’s just that I hear so many of these cocaine and weed smuggling yarns, you know, all these stories about car chases through the back alleys of Tijuana and Mexicali, shit, man, I saw a promo for Ordinary People on the Turner Network the other night? I thought it was going to be about dopers on the run.”

“Yeah?”

It went right passed him. There was just one thing on his mind.

“But listen, this guy you know, this lawyer, think he’d be interested in helping me out?”

“Well, I dunno. You want to meet him?”

“Sure,” Leon said. “Might as well.” But it was way too late for him to pretend indifference.

“I could give him a jingle.”

They traded numbers.

They had another round, toasted Carla, then Leon had to leave, had to see a guy. Jordan knew he’d got what he came for. Now he was going home to make long, slow, delicious love to Miss Lamborghini. Another reason to despise him.

Druggy boy, what a simp. He’d come here for just one thing, a smart La Jolla money man to launder his cash. He’d come looking among the people he thought had

money, knew about money.

“Carla, c’mere a minute,” Jordan called.

She came down the bar and leaned over to him, elbows propped on the varnished wood.

“Listen, let me ask you,” he needed to check his fundamentals, make sure he was on top of things, “let me ask you, La Jolla people, rich people, they ever give anything away? They big tippers? Whaddaya think?”

Carla looked at him like he’d lost his mind. “Are you kidding? You damn well know rich people are the stingiest people in the world, and these La Jolla bastards are the worst.”

She studied his face. “You’re drunk as hell. Want to stick around and I’ll drive you home?”

“Can I cop a feel?”

“You want a ride or should I take out the baseball bat I got back here and club you one?”

“I’ll take the ride.”

* * *

“Rich or poor, skinny or fat, ugly or beautiful, we’re all playing the same game. We’re turning away from the old traditional values, things like patriotism and following in dad’s footsteps. The drug experience is a really big part of it. It’s here, we’re going to have to learn to live with it.”

Tommy Murdaugh leaned his thick forearms on the wooden table. He had been second string at USC twenty years before, a linebacker. The arms were still impressive, Jordan thought.

The three of them were sitting in Melvin Deli, the downtown sandwich shop on West F Street where the attorneys and paralegals had lunch.

Jordan had called Tommy Murdaugh the next day, told him the deal: a kid named Leon, a dealer with a cash problem. “And listen, I need something out of it. Finder’s fee. Ten percent.”

Tommy laughed. “Oh, hell why not? Bring him by the office, we’ll do lunch.”

Jordan buzzed Leon’s cell, told him eleven forty-five and gave him the address.

Tommy kept them waiting. Jordan watched as Leon picked up a back issue of the Kiplinger Newsletter, advice for rich assholes.

As for himself, he whiled away the time admiring the silky thighs and deep cleavage of the receptionist, a rangy dark-haired beauty who sat behind an oak refectory table the size of a wing off a Piper Cub. From time-to-time she refreshed the display by re-crossing her legs, her micro skirt riding up, heavy breasts above the polished table as she bent to her work. Jesus, he thought, I’ve got to get her into a story.

Tommy emerged from an inner sanctum, paisley tie askew, the sleeves of his button-down shirt rolled up, a cheerful grin on his flushed face. Tommy was looking as happy and prosperous as if he had just convinced a querulous widow that half the estate was a reasonable probate fee. Jordan made the introductions. There was a faint odor of whiskey on his breath that the mint didn’t quite mask.

He’d known Tommy for years. After USC, he went to Stanford Law, then married the daughter of one of the partners. Tommy and his wife moved in the right circles, he had every opportunity to follow his father-in-law to the top, but he was lazy, had a taste for booze, fooled around not quite discreetly. The only thing his son-in-law status bought him was tenure. At forty-six he was still only an associate, reporting to a partner five years younger.

At the deli, they ordered sandwiches and Cokes and took them to a table in the back. Jordan watched Tommy wolf down an egg salad.

Leon, clearly nervous, leaned across the table. “Is this conversation privileged?”

Are you my lawyer?"

"Gimme a dollar."

Leon took out a roll, peeled off a hundred dollar bill and handed it to Tommy.

"Fuck that dollar shit, you're my lawyer now."

"That's right, kid," Tommy laughed. He slipped the bill into his shirt pocket.

Leon told him about his money, and then Tommy took the floor.

It was all such bullshit, Jordan thought. Tommy sounded exactly like what he was, a semi-functioning alcoholic.

Leon was boring, too. He didn't see nobody was impressed with his C-note client status. A dumb kid from a dumb place called Lemon Grove. The fun at the bar, the fake camaraderie, the laughs, it was all in the cool jazz and the way that damn neon at the Blue Parrot gave everything a quarter of a turn to the left.

Tommy got down to it. "I would have to talk with the partners before I could represent you." His voice had the full-bodied smoothness of a premium Scotch. "Now don't take this wrong, but I'm almost certain they wouldn't allow me to handle your case. Of course, even if I don't represent you beyond today, this whole luncheon is privileged."

Luncheon. What a crock of shit. Jordan watched Leon's face fall, read him like the big E on the eye chart. If Tommy Murdaugh was on his side, his problems were solved. But Tommy wasn't gonna be on his side.

Jordan was disappointed, too. No deal, no payoff.

"It's not a reflection on you or your particular lifestyle," Tommy said. "The partners are very conservative. I'm sure you understand. Don't take it personally."

Don't take it personally? Fuck you, Jordan thought, you second-string washout. How the hell else should he take it? How the hell should I take it?

But he smiled and nodded, and that was how it was left. Out on the sidewalk they shook hands all 'round and that was it.

* * *

In the days that followed Jordan did his best to get back in circulation. At a party one night, standing in somebody's kitchen, someone mentioned something about Tommy Murdaugh, how he had left his wife and kids. Jordan paid no attention, he had his own problems.

Then one day the phone rang—finally—and he had a corporate gig, a client based in San Francisco. He had no idea how they'd gotten his name, and he wasn't about to jinx anything with questions.

They flew him up for a meeting and handed him off from one guy to another in offices and laboratories, spent the day explaining exactly what they were after.

They were paying two grand, half up front plus expenses and Jordan and a photographer named Don Shapero were on their way to Phoenix to do a brochure on a new contact lens.

They spent the day at the Biltmore Hotel, a big stone hulk in the middle of a golf course, ugly as sin, but some kind of landmark, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. Jordan talked with the ophthalmologists who had developed the lens, the polymer chemists in charge of manufacturing and the dispensing opticians who were the power behind the deal. Shapero said he missed his wife, flew home that afternoon.

Since he was the client's dime, his apartment smelled and the cable-TV company had unplugged him for nonpayment, Jordan stayed over.

The next morning he was sitting in the coffee shop of the Camelback Inn, trying to ignore the canned music and pondering a weird facet of human behavior. All of the contact lens experts, to a man, wore glasses. Whenever Shapero lifted his Hasselblad to snap a shot for the brochure, the contact lens guys all whipped off their specs. It was weird. If you were developing a new contact lens, you had to pretend you didn't wear glasses.

But it wasn't as weird as when he looked up from his English muffin and saw Tommy Murdaugh sitting across the restaurant. The woman close beside him on the banquette was the receptionist from his office.

Tommy looked right at him, smiled and waved hello.

Remembering the gossip, Jordan knew that Tommy had managed to steal Leon's drug money.

Tommy spoke to the brunette, then came over to his table, pulled out a chair and sat down.

"Hey! What are you doing here?" Tommy said.

Jordan went right to it. "So you got away with Leon's box of goodies?"

Jordan watched him cave.

"I couldn't help it." Tommy grinned like a naughty-boy. "He made it too easy for me. He called me the next day, practically begged me to take the money. What could I do?" Tommy shrugged. "I said I'd talk with him—really, that's all I was thinking. He brought the money in two suitcases. I mean, listen, right there in a Safeway parking lot with people walking past, with his own hands he took a suitcase out of the trunk of his Taurus and put it in the backseat of my Benz!"

Confession came easy. Jordan could see how forgiveness had always been generously bestowed on the jock, the son-in-law. He was wearing a gold Rolex Jordan hadn't seen before; his face was puffy and raw, the look of a newlywed, happily pussy-whipped.

"How much was there?"

Tommy hesitated an instant too long. "One-fifty and change. But what the hell, it was like a gift. Listen, I figure I owe you something. Five grand, okay?"

Five grand. Jordan felt like he was embroiled in a scene from an old Richard Widmark movie. This he would never put in a story.

"You're a shitty liar. You think Leon didn't tell me how much money he had? I

want a hundred thousand dollars. Right here, right now. And consider yourself fortunate that I'm not a greedy person."

Tommy wheedled and squirmed. Finally Jordan took out a quarter and tapped it on the glass table top and asked the waitress where the telephone was. It was a pretty fucking good acting job, worth a hundred grand. He had a cell phone in his pocket, and for all he knew, the number Leon had given him was a cheap throw-away. Druggy boy probably had a box of throw-aways he kept right next to his box of money.

The brunette, Judi (with an "i", she said), came over to sit with him while Tommy went for the money.

They looked at each other in silence for about twenty seconds. Jordan could tell from the way she had walked across the coffee shop that she knew exactly how hot she was. Her toenails were painted the same terracotta hue as the trim on her beige sandals, and she had great legs. She was wearing tennis shorts and a skimpy sleeveless blouse that somehow she had not managed to button much above the waist. She wasn't wearing a bra and her breasts were delectable where they disappeared, her nipples outlined against the white fabric. Jordan felt his forehead twitching. He couldn't just put her in a story, she was a story.

He had to say something.

"What kind of contact lenses do you wear?"

She told him about her contacts, giving her long, dark hair a flip.

"Tommy is a lucky guy to have found someone with your spiritual quality," he said to her. "You must have a great deal of inner strength." Where was all this coming from?

She gave him a warm smile and he felt her foot brush against his leg under the table. His imagination put a spin on it. If things were different . . .

"What are your plans, you and Tommy?"

She told him they'd found a motivated seller with a Seven-Eleven store in Scottsdale and this morning a realtor was picking them up to go look at condos. The Seven-Eleven had gas pumps, and the condo had its own satellite dish with two hundred and sixty four channels.

They must have had the money in their room, all counted and tied in bundles, Jordan thought, because Tommy came back in no more than ten minutes. The cash was wrapped in a white plastic laundry bag.

Jordan kept an eye on the mirror as he drove the rental back to the airport just in case Tommy the aging action figure decided to follow along and see if he could get the money back.

He found some rock 'n' roll on the radio and turned it up loud and kept time on the steering wheel.

"It's a beautiful morning in Phoenix," he sang, making up his own melody, "if you don't mind the smog."

He watched the rearview and sang and thought about Tommy Murdaugh and his lady.

What an unimaginative, second string chiseler he had turned out to be. The real measure of a man was what he did once he made his big score. Onward to a future of achievement and satisfaction, a Seven-Eleven store and a condo in Scottsdale. What a sucker. Inside two weeks Judi would be screwing the pro at the tennis club while poor old Tommy was down at the Seven-Eleven, counting the quarters from the slushy machine.

It would make a hell of a movie for TV. Jordan could see one of those sensitive, boy-next-door actors, a Brokeback Mountain type, playing Tommy, and this season's hot new teeny singing sensation in her first big dramatic vehicle as Judi. A revealing human drama, sure to grab a big share of the up-scale demographic if they pushed it with the

right hype.

Jordan tried out a few promotional tag lines before he hit on one he liked, giving it the cadence and dignity of a major network promo:

“He was a lawyer turned thief, she was a receptionist with great legs. They had it all—convenience store shopping and satellite TV. And suddenly they faced the ultimate challenge—all those expenses and short a hundred grand.” He cackled with laughter.

* * *

Jordan sat at the counter of the Colony Kitchen restaurant in San Ysidro, the last freeway exit before Mexico.

He checked his watch and looked around, scanning the few customers. The meeting was set for midnight, he was fifteen minutes late and his guy wasn't here.

He ordered breakfast.

The source was a disgruntled guy of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, the Border Patrol, who had agreed to take him into the evidence rooms in the tan building that straddled thirty lanes of almost-always backed-up traffic waiting to cross the entry point into the U.S. from Mexico.

Urban folktales had been floating around for years about the shelves jammed with illicit contraband, torn plastic garbage bags leaking amphetamine and methaqualone capsules that crunched underfoot, marijuana strewn all over the floor from the holes the field mice gnawed in order to escape from the burlap bags where they were trapped at harvest time.

The guy said there was two hundred thousand pounds of marijuana in storage and the place was some kind of unholy mess.

It wasn't a great story but it was a story he could sell.

He looked around, making sure he hadn't missed his guy in his Border Patrol outfit, his migra suit.

Either he would show up or he wouldn't, either he would call again or he wouldn't. Jordan didn't really care because everything in his world was once again spinning the right way round.

The contact lens job was done, they'd paid him, reimbursed the expenses, and he had the hundred grand from Tommy Murdaugh. That bundle of money was stashed still in the Camelback Inn laundry bag under the backseat of his car, the safest place he knew. No one would bother that old tin can, an aging Pontiac with a bad case of parking lot rash.

When his food came, Jordan ate slowly, savoring the scrambled eggs, the bacon, the toast, plenty of refills on the coffee, marveling at how good it made everything taste when you were rich. This must be how the fat cats felt, always lighthearted, no cares, no worries. No wonder they always looked so plump and merry.

Jordan looked around, making sure his guy hadn't come out of the men's room.

Oh, well, what the hell, there was always tomorrow.

He waved the waitress over for a refill and from the inside pocket of his jacket took out a pamphlet. "Secure Investing for the Long-Term, The Smart Way to Save."

Jordan smiled, thinking how, on top of everything else, he had been reimbursed for his expenses at the Camelback Inn. That was deeply ironic. He would love to get that into a story somehow.

* * *

Leon came in the restaurant wearing the full dress uniform of a Marine corporal, hat squared away, the visor pulled low over his eyes, on his arm a chubby high school girl with blonde ringlets in a pink formal with a white gardenia on her wrist. It was true artistry the way Leon moved his cocaine across the border.

The instant he saw Jordan at the counter, he turned and pulled the girl back outside.

“What? What’s going on?” Crissy was miffed at the change in direction, he’d promised her a burger and a shake.

“Shut up.”

He was paying her a hundred bucks to spend three hours, driving down to Tijuana then back again, nothing else, not even a handshake at the end of the evening, just the ride. She would do what she was told.

Moving fast, he walked her back to the Taurus and put her in the passenger seat.

“Keep your mouth shut,” he said. “I won’t be long. There’s an extra fifty in it for you.”

He went to the back of the car, opened the trunk and rummaged around until he found the tire iron.

The parking lot was out behind the restaurant. Leon picked a dark place at the back corner of the building, up against some oleanders that were blooming, fragrant in the night air.

He had to wait nearly thirty minutes. He was ready to wait all night—hell, he was ready to wait forever—standing there, hefting the tire iron, thinking how much he wanted to hurt that smart-ass son-of-a-bitch.

Standing in the dark, he thought about hitting him in the face, in the head, again and again, just battering the bastard right to death, right there. He pictured his brains spilling out of his crushed skull.

No, he needed to ask a couple questions.

When Jordan came strolling past the corner, Leon stepped out and hit him in the chest with the jack handle, taking a full two-handed swing, giving it everything he had, hoping just as the steel bar connected that it would pop the bastard’s heart like a water balloon.

Jordan stood there and swayed, and Leon loved the shock, the breathless wide-

eyed look on his face.

“Little surprised to see me, huh?” he said, and stepped in and kicked him in the balls as hard as he could.

Jesus, that was just about the most satisfying feeling in the world. Leon smiled, having a really good time.

Jordan lay curled on the asphalt driveway, retching, bringing up everything he'd eaten.

Leon looked around, making sure they were alone. He stepped into it and kicked Jordan in the midsection. Jordan was vomiting and whenever he caught his breath, kind of half-sobbing, curled up, holding his balls, so Leon didn't have a clear shot, the kick wasn't as satisfying as that first one. Still, it felt pretty damn good.

A guy came out of the restaurant walking toward them. Leon held the tire iron down along his pants leg against the dark blue of his dress uniform on the side away from the guy.

“He okay?” the guy said as he reached them.

He was older, looked like a working stiff on the swing shift.

“Yeah,” Leon said, “my buddy had a little too much tequila. I'm gonna let him get it out before I take him home.”

The working stiff wasn't coming anywhere close to the smelly mess around Jordan. He nodded and went on his way. Leon stood over Jordan and watched as the guy got into a car and drove off.

When the coast was clear, Leon bent down and took a grip on Jordan's hair and yanked him up to his knees. It was like pulling on a rag doll. He tapped him lightly alongside the head with the tire iron.

“Where is my money? Where is that shyster lawyer?”

Jordan made a blubbery noise.

Leon tapped him a little more firmly, a little love tap.

“Either you tell me and tell me right now where my money is, or I’m gonna fucking kill you, asshole.” Leon was surprised at the venom in his voice, that he meant exactly what he said. He thought he was cool, didn’t realize an icy killing rage had come over him. He looked around, making sure they were still alone. He itched to murder the punk, just on general principles.

“My car,” Jordan blubbered, “in my car.”

“And the lawyer, where’s the fucking lawyer?” The steel bar made little taps against Jordan’s head, almost by itself, keeping time with the blood Leon felt pulsing behind his eyes.

“Phoenix,” Jordan said, “Scottsdale,” then he muttered something that Leon didn’t catch.

“What? Say that again!”

“A Seven-Eleven store,” Jordan said. Leon could see he was trying hard to speak up, the fucking pussy.

“The fucker’s got a Seven-Eleven store in Scottsdale, Arizona?” Leon asked. What a bizarre fucking thing that seemed to be.

Through his hand buried in hair, he felt Jordan try to nod his head.

“Take out your car keys.”

Jordan took them out and dropped them on the asphalt.

“Which car is yours?”

“Pontiac,” Jordan answered, “green Pontiac.”

That was all he needed, at least for now. Leon took the tire iron back and gave the asshole a serious crack on the head, put him right out.

He dragged him over to the oleanders, rolled him under the bushes.

The money, wrapped in plastic, was in the first place Leon looked, tucked under

the backseat. Using the tire iron, he ripped the shit out of the inside of the car anyway, just for the hell of it.

He stood in the dark in his Marine dress blue uniform, breathing hard, the tire iron in one hand, the plastic bag of money in the other, looking over the tops of the cars in the parking lot at the shrubs on the back wall of the restaurant.

He could go over there and kill him, just finish him off. It would be easy. He had it coming. He glanced over at the Taurus, Crissy's blonde curls visible in reflected light. She could place him at the scene. He'd have to do her, too. Put her some place. With him. Leon pondered it, weighing the tire iron in his hand.

It wasn't worth it. Let the bastard live. Maybe he'd cross paths with him again someday. Time enough to hurt him again.

* * *

The next thing Jordan knew someone was helping him up. He couldn't see out of his left eye and his knees were weak.

"You shouldn't drink so much, man. All the beauty that ever existed in the universe is right here, right now . . ." the guy was saying.

Then, "Jesus, you're all bloody!"

Jordan peered at him. He couldn't tell if the long-haired kid was stoned or born-again, or maybe both. He didn't care. Jordan pointing the way, the kid helped him over to his car.

The inside was destroyed. The headliner hung down in ragged tatters, all the seats had been sliced open and ripped apart. The rear seat had been pulled out, and of course the money was gone.

Jordan got in and slumped behind the wheel. The Samaritan urged him to stay cool and have a nice day and hurried across the lot to a van and drove away.

The stinging and whirling began to fade and were replaced with throbbing pain.

The car keys were gone. Maybe Leon had thrown them into the bushes. If he was able he'd take a look in the morning. Or maybe he would call a cab and go home and never bother with the car again.

He eased down across the shredded seats.

The hum of traffic on the freeway drifted in the window with the pungent scent of sagebrush. It hurt to move. He'd stay here till morning. He would try to sleep, one side of his face drying to a crust, his ribs cracked and aching, a deep throbbing in the pit of his stomach.

The itinerant wordsmith, having lost his money, betrayed his partner in crime, spends the night with his aches and tribulations in a tired and raggedy old Pontiac.

He'd tried, God knows he'd tried. The artistic life, that had lost its charm. Those stories would go way in the back of a drawer he never opened.

A life of crime. Look where that got him.

That was it, enough. He'd get home somehow. He'd take some Vicodin left over from the dentist. Then, when he felt up to it, he'd call those contact lens guys in Frisco, the smart, organized guys with the deep pockets.

He'd sell out, he'd try and sell out, he'd do his damndest to see if he could find a buyer for what he had to offer.

He'd call Nanette, pretty Nanette, gone-for-the-day Nanette.

Had Wally sent her out to break it to him easy?

Maybe she'd think she owed him for that. He'd take her out and get her drunk, see if he could get her to spread those lovely slender legs for him. If he could, if that came to pass, that would be something special, certainly something worth putting into a story.

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