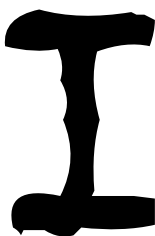


Meat Bubbles



carefully peel up my shirtsleeve with bloody fingers. The scalpel wound across my left arm looks like a splayed cunt.

My guts churn, and blood hums in my ears.

I look down at the middle-aged man with the phlegm-coloured complexion. His linen shirt is splattered with viscera, and the stagnant-looking puddle of crimson fluid under his dented skull seems to be spreading.

I glance around the lounge-bar of the Intercontinental Hotel. It's scattered with stooped bureaucrats and young-looking Turkish guys in thin leather jackets. They are all avoiding eye contact with one another – and with me.

The barman is wearing a too-tight dinner jacket. He has a shaved head and scabbed knuckles. I stagger over to him.

“Are you gonna call the cops?”

He shakes his head.

“The whole of Paignton is a fucking crime scene. Why add to the mess?”

I nod my thanks.

“Don't thank me. Guys like you can't help fucking up. This time next week you'll be eating powdered eggs in a locked room full of sex offenders.”

I laugh, in spite of myself, and then I pass out.

Three Days Earlier.

Khandi Kane is a honey-coloured blonde with an X-rated

mouth. She is outside the Burning Wheel, smoking a high-tar cigarette.

She is wearing a crop-top, and her stomach is a mess of ruptured stitches and pink ribbon scars. She catches me staring, and not for the first time either.

“Take it from me, sweetheart – it’s better to be stitched up by a sober vet than a drunk doctor.”

She laughs drunkenly and weaves her way down the Esplanade – in the direction of the Intercontinental Hotel. I consider following her, but think better of it and walk back inside – back into the noise.

The Burning Wheel is a cinderblock cesspool, full of smut-hounds trying to slip a finger into Paignton’s ripped backside. It’s a seaside stomp-house where bad people go to have a good time. Inevitably, it’s where I like to hang out on a Friday night...

Wet-Look is a greasy ex-cop with a sick sense of humour. He has ripped more than a few backsides in his time. He is wearing an off-white shirt, and hooker-tight jeans. His greasy hounds-tooth jacket is nowhere to be seen.

He has a thick neck and a puffy face, and stinks of yesterday’s cigarettes. Like me, he looks like he hasn’t slept for a month.

He is delicately sipping at his Bacardi-based cocktail through a straw. It is called a Clubfoot, and smells like raw sewage.

He clears his throat and raises his glass.

“To absent friends...”

I stare blankly at him. “You don’t have any friends, Wet-Look.”

The skin around his moist blue eyes crinkles as he flashes me something akin to a wolfish grin. “That’s what you think, sun-beam. Have you thought about what I said?”

“Huh?”

“Are you ready to re-enter the fray? Feel the taste of meat between your teeth once again?”

“Huh?”

“Take it from me, too much matrimonial casework turns you into a ruddy panty-sniffer.”

“Don’t you mean, sheet-sniffer?”

He shrugs.

“You name it, I’ve sniffed it, sun-beam... all in a day’s work for old Wet-Look.”

He passes me a business card and struggles to his feet.

“His name is Jerry Connelly. He’s a cop, so you’ll fucking hate him, but the money will be good.”

“Probably. I hate all cops.”

He flashes me his over familiar grin again.

“Present company excluded, right?”

“You’re not a cop anymore, Wet-Look.”

He shrugs, and drifts through the gloom.

On the pokey dance floor, a group of bedraggled, off-duty prostitutes get their grind on. One, a Chinese girl named Vivienne Wu, drags me out of my seat and onto the makeshift dance floor. She tries to kiss me with red scabbed lips, but I shrug her off.

The crush of bodies seems to soak up the music, and it sounds vague and pointless. It is so hot I am sweating like a junkie between spoons.

A skinny guy leers at Vivienne. His name is Frank Cutler, and he is a needle-poking no-mark. She slaps him, and he crumples to the floor dramatically. Then he reaches for the flick-knife in his back-pocket.

I reach for the pig-knife in my boot, but hesitate with my fingers on the handle. I have spilled too much blood recently. A lot of it inside this dirty fucking building.

Before I can intervene, Feral Errol charges through the crowd like a human snow-plough. He's the bouncer, and his shaven skull is visibly cracked and dented in places. He keeps an ancient .44 calibre Bulldog revolver tucked into the waistband of his tracksuit bottoms, but prefers to use his fists and feet.

He stamps on Cutler's wrist and it snaps like an old branch. The crowd roars its approval, and the shit-stain howls as a toothless biker drags him out of the fire-exit and dumps him in the beer garden. Someone flips the tape over and the music re-starts.

I pick up Cutler's blade and drop it in my pocket, next to the business card Wet-Look gave me. Errol winks at me and heads back to his stool next to the door.

It is after 2am when I get back to my rooming house. I feel dog-tired, but pour myself a drink anyway. I head down to use the payphone in the lobby and call Alouette for the first time in months. My ex-wife.

"This is going nowhere, Joe. You know that, don't you?"

I drink an inch of carny vodka from the tumbler in front of me and wait for Alouette to say something else. Soon, the only thing I can hear is the dial tone.

I retrieve the business card from my back pocket and stare at it, draining my glass. I dial the number on the card. Even though it is late he picks up first time.

"Yes?"

"Connelly? My name is Joe Rey. A mutual friend

gave me your business card. He said you could use a man like me...”

My meeting with Connelly lasts less than 20 minutes. We meet at the Sunshine Café – a transport café on the outskirts of Paignton, next to the town dump. He is middle-aged and soft-looking. He drinks black coffee and tells me that the last time he ate food here he found a tooth in his fried breakfast. He smiles apologetically. I have no idea why – it wasn’t his fucking tooth.

“I knew your father, Rey.”

I nod – glad I’m still chewing my food, so I don’t have to respond. Not even I knew my father.

“Arrested him once, as I recall. Another story for another time, perhaps?”

I shrug.

When I finish my breakfast Connelly offers me £1,000 to track down a man known as ‘The Surgeon’ – strictly off the books. It’s his ‘last case before retirement’ – the one job that will torment him on golf courses and foreign fucking holidays if he doesn’t nail the perp.

I gesture over my shoulder at a pair of drunken old cops called Benson and Hedges. Ash from their high-tar cigarettes drops onto their half-eaten meals as they circle racing tips with stubby biros.

“Don’t have much faith in Paignton’s finest, do you?”

He smiles apologetically – again.

I pocket the money and stand up, without saying goodbye.

It’s time to get to work. Connelly said that he will pay me £2,000 if I find ‘The Surgeon’ within a week...

Felix Rodriguez has a skinny pimp moustache, but he isn't a pimp, he's a pusher. He has been blind in his left eye for several years, and it is far darker than the right one. He used to look pretty distinguished – like burned-out gentry – but his appearance has deteriorated rapidly since I last saw him.

His flat is squalid, but I guess that is all you can afford when your job consists of selling rocks of crack to schoolchildren for £7.50 a pop. In spite of his career choices, he is an old-fashioned scumbag – the kind of guy who cuts you first as a warning.

He looks like he has been getting high on his own supply, and even his pencil-thin moustache smells of crack smoke. He is naked save for a paisley bathrobe.

“Jesus, Felix. I've seen healthier looking bodies dangling from the meat-rack.”

He offers me a grim laugh that quickly degenerates into a coughing fit. His bedsit smells of sour milk and anal mucus. The radiator under the window is reeking heat, and I can feel myself start to sweat.

I figured that the cops wouldn't waste their time rousting a sloppy operator like Felix, so I would waste mine instead.

“Is this a social call, Joe, or are you looking to have a good time?”

I consider exchanging pleasantries, but I don't see the point.

“Have you heard of a guy they call The Surgeon?”

He looks at me stony-faced, but the twitch in his good eye gives him away.

I toss him a £20 note.

“Sure. Spend enough time in the gutter and you

hear plenty of stories. Some of these stories are pretty... interesting."

"How interesting?"

"Interesting enough."

I drop another banknote on the scarred coffee table.

He nods at the money.

"Don't fuck around, Felix, or I'll slice off one of your nipples with your own pocket knife."

He glares at me, and fires up his crack-pipe.

"They say he is from Poland. Goes by the name Andrzej Bulzacki. Used to work as a plastic surgeon in Krakow before he moved to Paignton. His ex-brother-in-law was mob affiliated, and the local Poles used him to stitch up knife-wounds, gouge out bullets, that sort of thing. Word has it that, four years ago, he stole sixteen condoms full of raw Turkish smack out of a teenage drug-mule who died in transit. The Turks and the Poles both put a price on his head, but he seemingly disappeared into thin air."

Felix looks up at me earnestly, and I nod for him to continue.

"Three years ago a man matching his description was found floating in Paignton harbour with a bullet in his skull. I have it on good authority that it wasn't Andrzej. Three weeks ago, I hear a rumour that some guy is going around performing surgery on working girls. Just little things, nips and tucks, but it piques my interest. I'm a businessman after all. So I ask around, and I hear a story that he did some work on a Polish girl I used to sell to. Gave her a Cantonese makeover, on behalf of a wealthy client. A man with serious money to burn."

"Hold up: a Cantonese makeover?"

He chuckles. "I heard this dude cut a Polish chick

so she looked fucking Cantonese! Can you believe it: Polish pussy, Chinese face.”

I don’t know what to say, so I say nothing.

“And you know who is supposedly bankrolling this shit? Harlan fucking Deloitte. You know the name?”

I nod. Harlan Deloitte is old money. Paignton’s wealthiest man, by some distance. The dude is a motherfucking philanthropist.

“Like I said: interesting fucking story.”

Felix’s face is flushed with excitement. I toss him another twenty, and he grins uneasily.

“Hey Joe, you’re not gonna mention my name are you?”

I shrug. “Depends how hard they stomp me.”

He chuckles nervously. “That’s a joke, right?”

“Sure.”

Felix stands to show me out, and his bathrobe falls open. His dick is the only healthy thing about him. It looks like a midget’s wrist.

That afternoon I hit the juice pretty hard. For a while I drink shots in the Dirty Lemon with a woman who has a crooked face and a minor stammer. She tells me that she has a five-year-old son – fathered by a man who is now in prison. I ask where the kid is, and she tells me that she doesn’t know. Another dispatch from the bowels of hell...

Her coke-stash looks like it has been cut with carpet cleaner, and when she returns from the toilet her nose and mouth are caked in blood. I stumble out of the pub, tripping down the wheelchair ramp in my haste to leave.

I stop in every pub on the way down to the

seafront – even fucking Winstons. Later that night I head to an unlicensed strip-club called Heaven’s Basement. A woman who claims to be Miss Teen Paignton 1987 invites me outside for a cigarette. I don’t smoke, but I go outside anyway.

All I remember after that is sweaty skin, thudding cocks and clenched yellow teeth.

Eight hours later.

When I come to, I’m lying on a greasy chenille bedspread. I have blurred vision and a dry mouth.

I glance around the room. Tara. She used to turn tricks for a guy named Carl Wexler – the only pimp in town who worked with transsexual hookers – but she has since branched out on her own. Operates out of a building, previously owned by a guy named Swollen Roland. He left town last year. In a fucking box.

“Did we?”

“Don’t flatter yourself, Joe. One of the girls found you passed out in Palace Avenue Gardens.”

“Seriously? Jesus. Where are we now?”

She rolls her thickly-lashed eyes. “Merritt Flats.”

“Seriously? Jesus... can I have a glass of water?”

“Sure, honey. Help yourself.”

As I stand up I notice that the stain on my pillowcase looks like a shadow on a diseased lung.

When I fill my glass full of cloudy-looking water the run-off fails to drain away due to the layer of hairy scum around the plug-hole.

“Joe. I would like you to meet my friend, Natalia.”

A fat girl is sitting in an armchair puffing on a

cigarette. Her left hand is stuffed down the front of her queen-sized pantyhose. Her right hand pokes at a runny-looking cheese omelette with a plastic fork. I already know what kind of vulgar dreams I will be having tonight.

I look up at her face: it looks wrong, like it has been cut off and sewn back on too quickly.

“Motherfucker...”

I slump back onto the bed, fighting the rising taste of sick in my throat.

“Who did this to you?”

Her skin is reddened and puckered at the edges. Her whole face creases as she starts to cry. I look around the room for a drink. I see a tumbler on the bedside table. The brown liquid looks like coagulated blood. I hesitate, then wet my throat. It burns all the way down.

“My friend Khandi hooked us up. She said that it wouldn’t hurt. She said that her boyfriend was a doctor. I only wanted a tummy-tuck.”

I swallow back the bile once again, and start to get dressed.

It’s time to meet the fucking Surgeon.

It’s time to get paid in full.