

Flammability, Incorporeal Creatures and the Parking Lot of Eternity

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John was the best I'd ever seen with a blowtorch. He wielded it like Da Vinci wielded a god-damn paintbrush. He could do things with it that in many places were certainly illegal and definitely deranged, with the possible exception of Japan and/or Australia.

There was this thing about John and the blue-hot propane flames that bordered - nay, even surpassed - the realm of wonder. If Jesus could come down and visit from Heaven and work with a blowtorch next to John, he'd look like a pyromaniac hobo with a messiah complex and a background in carpentry, while John would just shine with a bright white light from within, turn water into beer and beer into piss with just a *look*. John was just *that* good.

So it was a fucking bummer when I learned that his last words actually were: "Don't be a pussy, oxygen tanks do that hissing sound all the time."

As far as classifying bummers goes, this was a triple-A class bummer, the kind of showstopper that had only been theorised up to John's untimely and gruesome death. The kind of bummer that could make Jim Carey's face flat and emotionless and Bill Clinton sworn to celibacy. It ranked way far above the A-plus bummer of being recently divorced, fired, being fired upon and being set on fire at the same time.

Which was bad in and of itself, but not as bad as John getting blown up a day before the Job. That was a sad state of affairs that meant I was now a very sorry son of a bitch with a life expectancy that made the term "lifetime warranty" sound like a tasteless practical joke.

So here I was, melting away in a decrepit diner on route 72, at a swampy nowhere with some supposedly native american though actually gibberish name like 'Alatanoosa' or 'Whahananoka', someplace between Alabama and Tennessee. The coffee tasted like imported dirt, the kind of dirt you read about being very fashionable and exaggeratedly overpriced but at the end of the day, was just dirt. The fried eggs looked like fried eggs, but only in the most rudimentary way: there was an orange bit with some white plastic all around it. I guess my flair for adventure was wearing out so it just sat there, where I happily failed to ingest it.

I really didn't feel like eating at all. Maybe it was the god-damn heat, the stale humid air and the fact that about the same time tomorrow, I would be probably looking at the wrong end of more than a couple of gun barrels because I had promised something I couldn't deliver to some very single-minded people with a propensity for shooting, rather than having coffee and biscuits and sympathizing with the bad card life dealt you.

The reason I couldn't deliver was I couldn't do the Job.

And I couldn't do the Job without John, because John, the flamboyant blowtorch virtuoso with an unmatched record of ninety-two safes, safe-rooms, and bank vaults, an average time of three point three minutes, clean as a germ-obsessed placebo-munching single old lady right before kidney stone surgery and a no-smoking-on-the-job policy that kept my cigarette budget intact, had gone and killed himself in his brother's-in-law chop shop.

I stopped and asked myself at that point whether that unfortunate death, at such a bad time, right before what would now prove to be the last gig in my career was a sign from God to stop doing what I did best: stealing. In a rare know-thyself moment I reminded myself I wasn't half as good at it as some Wall Street people, politicians and the let-me-lend-you-your-own-money cutthroats that roamed the street unabashed.

Logic would then imply that if there was going to be any smiting and all that holier-than-thou business, any God with a sense of perspective, morality and justice wouldn't start dishing it out on my end. And in any case, I decided that if God really had something to tell me, he'd better make a really really good point with lots of compelling arguments, like saving my ass pronto. Or at least point me to a direction, show me the road to salvation that preferably led somewhere warm and sandy in the Pacific, along with a couple of Cayman bank accounts, some instantly gratifying plastic surgery and twelve hundred different driving licenses. I'd have thought about asking for another favor but they said that size didn't matter, bank accounts' notwithstanding.

Realising how God and reality rarely intertwined, I felt some kind of emotional pressure the likes of which I hadn't experienced since high-school and all the awkward parties. A stress relief mechanism kicked in someplace inside me and

I sighed deeply before shouting out an expletive, something eloquent like 'Fuck!'.

That made some heads in the diner turn and raised the attached eyebrows apprehensively. It also gained me the attention of the establishment's chef- du-cuisine, a six-foot-three, two-hundred and fifty pound red-haired, bush-bearded wild-eyed man-like Alabama creature with a meat cleaver, a stained apron and a murderous gleam in his eye. He pointed that cleaver towards my direction and said with a slight snarl "Now yo' better watch that god-damn filthy mouth a yours, 'less you got dental, son."

I think I nodded faintly and muttered "I'm sorry" in an absent-minded fashion before I put ten bucks on the table, got up and left. He probably felt that'd given me a good old fashioned run-down, but I was simply in a hurry.

I looked at my watch, one of the few items I had actually bought with honest money from a winning lottery ticket back when I kept saying to myself that heists were 'a temporary thing'. It was half past ten in the morning, and I had more or less twenty two and a half hours to live. As I looked at the bland green and brown Southern scenery, I noticed a couple of dogs humping without a care in the world, oblivious to pretty much everything else.

I was about to think something profound about nature and the will of life to survive and continue, when I noticed they both had "stuff" dangling underneath. Even nature had a way of giving me the finger. I looked up into the blighting sun and all I could see was white and red dots for the next ten minutes. I'd left my glasses inside the diner. I said to myself, fuck that, I don't need sunglasses. I'm Bobby. I'm going to do what it takes, and I sure as hell can do it without sunglasses. In retrospect, that might have been a mistake cause those sun-

glasses had a history of their own, but it was time for action not remembrance. So I acted on impulse, without pausing to ruminate on the outcome of my actions, and especially what those actions might incur precipitate in relation to my person.

Now, thinking back to that particular moment in time, the moment I decided to act was the moment I kept thinking to myself 'Bobby, that doesn't mean shit. John blowing up doesn't mean shit. You can still do this. You can still get rich, or die trying', that must have been the moment that would probably get the most votes in the 'Most Regrettable Moment in Your Entire Life' category. It would also get lots of points in the 'Shit I Wish I Hadn't Done' category, but the real winner in that one was calling up Eileen. I'd done mistakes before, but it always amazed me how impossibly fast I regretted calling Eileen on that particular day. I panicked.

I rang her three times before she picked up. When she did, it sounded like she hadn't talked to a real person in about three years:

"Mmbby? Mmmby Baahow? My Bobby Bear?"

I took little notice that she had been stuffing herself, probably a bad case of munchies.

I said "Yeah, Eileen," managing to keep my tone of voice even, normal. It really felt like biting the bullet when I said "it's me, Papa-Bear,". It also made me cringe as the connotations that old term of endearment implied flashed across my mind's eye. Jesus Christ, not Eileen. What was I doing? Was there no other way? Was this a possible way out or was it just a faster way under?

"Awww, Papa-Bear.. Is, this really you Bobby? I miss you so much, you know."

She sounded quite sincere but then again crazy people always do since they do believe you are actually an ursine

humanoid, complete with fur, claws, a fluffy tummy, and an unhealthy hunger for honey and Taco Bell.

“Right, Eileen. That’s, me.. Yeah. Papa-waka-bear. Huh..”

The words seemed to be drip-fed to my brain from some sort of mental black hole that spewed forth nothing that made sense. Fortunately that strongly resonated with Eileen’s sense of reality:

“Oh, Papa-waka-bear, so strong and furry and manly..With lots and lots of furry shouldery hair for me to rub and that sweet tummy..Can I see you Bobby? Just this once, I won’t be a bother, really. We don’t need to go boat-pedaling or skating. Just see you, maybe let me rub your tummy. And have sex?”

I closed my eyes and recalled a picture from the past: myself laden with honey from tip to toe, tied to a bed with a Winnie the Pooh plushie wearing a strap-on dildo and Eileen shouting “Rawr! I’m your honeycomb slice, Papa-Bear!”. I decided then and there that I’d have to appeal to whatever core of sanity remained in her mind, or else I could just go drown myself in a really shallow body of water, like, say, a gutter.

“Listen, Eileen.. We can’t.. I can’t do all that, okay? I wish I could, but..”

That was a lie. That was a lie. That was a lie. I was lying to her, but that’s okay cause she’s crazy.

“Ohh. Why can’t you Papa-Bear? We could have so much fun together! We could ride the tram around the city, and I could feed you cotton candy and berries. Like last time, don’t you remember? Didn’t you have fun? Please, Bobby. Can’t I see you once more? Why did you call me then? Do you really want to hurt me, Bobby?”

Her voice reminded me uncannily of Boy George and that made my eyes hurt just by thinking about it. I felt my stomach knot at the thought of all the things I would have to endure to get on her good side. Or it might have been the coffee-like dirt-brew. I took a deep breath before uttering the words as if they were my last:

“I need to see you Eileen.”

“Oh, Bobby! You really can’t tell how happy that makes me! I feel like leaping outside the window and flying to your arms, Papa-Bear!”

Oh God, shit no. She was crazy enough to actually pop out the window and crack her head open on the street below.

“No, no, Eileen! Don’t do that honey, no. You gotta wait a couple of hours, I’ll drop by your place. Okay?”

“But whoosy-cooshy-huggy of mine, I’ll be fly to you in a jippy if you just say the word!”

“No, no! Just sit tight, will ya? I’ll bring you chocolate chip cookies, your favorite. Just don’t go anywhere. And Eileen, take your meds, please. You’re still on meds, right?”

“Oh, you mean those horrible pills? They were so bitter and bad for me, unlike you Bobby. No, no, daddy paid off the bad men in white and now I’m home again. Free as a bird. Your little nightingale.”

That was probably wrong. No meds, rampant insanity mixed with nymphomaniac tendencies. And ursine fantasies. For a moment I thought it’d be a better bet to just reason with Falconi, but the fact that the last guy who tried that ended up as hand-made soap bars with Falconi’s signature on it left me with little doubt about where my chances lay. I’d stick with the looney. At least she seemed to still have this thing for me.

“Okaaaay, Eileen. Now, see Papa-Bear’s in trouble and I need your help. So, make sure you can get a hold of daddy

and tell him that you might need that jet of his for a trip. And some pocket money too. Tell him you're going shopping in New York, okay?"

I listened myself saying all that and momentarily asked myself 'Are you a bad person for doing this, Bobby?', and then the answer came guilt-free 'No, Falconi is a bad person because he wants you dead for something you didn't even do'. It also helped to think of myself as Papa-Bear and not Bobby Barhoe.

"We're going shopping? Oh, Papa-Bear I always knew you were so much fun!"

"Yeah, I'm a god-damn roaming circus. So, see you in a couple of hours."

"Don't take long, Papa-Bear! I want to squash you in my arms and feel your tummy and tussle your hair and then su--"

Damn you to hell John Staikos, this was all your fault.

"Yeah, yeah, okay Eileen. Anything you like. Bye!"

"Wait, wait!"

"What?"

"Whoopsy-kissy?"

I hesitated just for the tiniest moment and I could almost picture the sad, watery eyes and then the coming onslaught of cries, curses and finely sharpened blades being hurled against me, so I made something like a smooching sound. It might have sounded like a fart, I'm not sure, but she sounded positively satisfied:

"I love you Papa-Bear! I can't wait to snuggly-wuggly you in my arms and tie you down and -"

"Goodbye!"

I hang up in the nick of time. The ordeal was over for now, but doubts started assaulting me like journalists outside a rehab facility for famous people. Was this my only option?

Would she come through? What if she had been waiting for that call, that one call that I might have given her in such a time of extenuating circumstances and dire need, just so I could come running to her for help and then dice me up because I shot the best-man on our wedding day and ran off in her father's Porsche?

I had to keep reminding myself I wasn't the bad person here, even as I strode back into my piece-of-shit Taurus. These were desperate times, and they obviously required insanely desperate measures.

I got back on route 72, heading for Memphis. While the radio waves reeked with country, bluegrass and heart-felt messages to the parishioners to pledge their support to the Church of Latter Day Saints With Semi-Automatic Rifles, I casually gazed outside the window and couldn't help notice that this countryside was so flat and uninteresting that if there was some kind of hell waiting for everyone, this would be it. I was about to start a self-gratifying rant, using phrases like "Good job right there, Bobby", "Sure I can vouch for that sleezeball Mr. Falconi", "Heck no, nothing can go wrong, we're all pros here. Right?" when a big brown legged thing just popped right in front of the Taurus. I applied pressure to the braking pedal and then the laws of physics worked their magic.

Now, despite appearances I'm a fairly well-educated man and I know that Taurus is just a fancy word for bull. I also know that for a car to decelerate from eighty miles-per-hour to zero, it takes a couple hundred feet, and that's because no-one in his right mind would design a car that could turn its occupants into mush or tarmac jelly (depending on the seat belt arrangement) when they wanted it to stop.

That being said, I wasn't really suprised when the Taurus

hit that horse. I wasn't really surprised when the airbag tried to rob me of what looked like my early dying breath. Surprise wasn't achieved even when the car swiveled and landed sideways in a gravelly ditch. It wasn't the fact that I was still in one piece, nor the fact that the horse - had it been given the oral faculty post-mortem - could not say the same for itself.

It was the shaman.

There I was, still trying to decide whether or not I was still alive and with my brain between my ears, when I saw through the hazy smoke and vapor of the smashed front of the car the figure of a lone man, looking directly at me with a deeply sombre gaze, as if I had just killed his horse. He was dressed in a brown leather jacket, criss-crossed leather vest, and soft tan shoes. I'd wager he was some kind of a disco enthusiast with a slightly bent sexual orientation, if it wasn't for the feathery hat. He was the spitting image of some Cherokee. Or Navajo. I don't know, I just know they named cars after them.

He spoke with a peculiar voice that had the impossible qualities of gravel and running water at the same time:

"Are you hurt?"

I would normally have taken the time to think about faking some injury so I could sue the guy for damages. But under the circumstances, namely that if all went according to plan I had less than a day to live combined with the fact that this guy's entire estate consisted of a dead horse, a tipi and his grandparents in a convenient ash form, I instinctively opted for the truth. Everything was connected to the proper slots and I literally (and sadly, figuratively as well) saw no great blinding light at the end of a tunnel.

He came closer, shook open my jammed door and helped me get out of the car.

“Yeah, I think I’m okay. Where did you, ahm.. I mean, the horse just popped out of nowhere, and..”

“I know, Bobby.”

His words were calm, serene.

What did he mean by that? What did he know? I wondered, briefly seeing a universal balance to this. My impending doom, a horse dying. Could it be, that somehow the cosmic forces contrived to give me another chance? Was this some sort of karmic exchange? A life, for a life? An offering, a sacrifice to the powers beyond reach? Was he a holy man? Some sort of shaman? An emissary of fate? Was this the break I so desperately needed? How does he know my name?

His next words shook me out of my reverie:

“The plates.”

“Excuse me?”

“Says here on the car plates, ‘BOBBY B’. Isn’t that your name?”

I felt a bit silly. I had been thinking out loud.

“Well, yeah. Bobby Barhoe.”

“What kind of a name is that, Barhoe? Seriously?”

“Yeah, why not. I never really thought about it much. I actually think it sounds sturdy, homely. Like, say -”

“Burroughs?”

“Yeah, kinda like that one. Or Thibodeau.”

“That doesn’t sound sturdy or homely, that sounds like someone fell down the stairs.”

“I think it’s a good name. And so is Barhoe, don’t mind me saying.”

“Well, I really don’t Bobby.”

“And you are?”

“I’m The Sad Son of A Bitch Whose Horse Runneth

Over.”

“Really? That’s kind of tragic, isn’t it?”

“No, not really. I’m Steve Johnson.”

“What kind of an indian name is that?”

“Now look here, I’m tired of this shit. We don’t have war or tribal names any more. That was like a hundred and fifty years ago. Almost all the tribes have been integrated into the american way of life. I went to college. I got into a greek society, got drunk and wedgied and did all that frat-house shit just because I lacked the necessary maturity and personality like every other post-adolescent male. And on an athletic scholarship.”

“Baseball?”

“Track and field.”

“Oh.”

“That doesn’t mean I’m not a shaman though.”

“It doesn’t?”

“Shamanistic rituals form the basis of a hard core of belief in ourselves as existentialist individuals against the harsh realism and pragmatistic atavism of today’s profit-driven societies. Part of the SSSD manifesto clearly states that great pains and efforts should be -”

“I’m sorry, I’m not familiar with that SS thing. Is it, like, Hitler’s SS?”

“What? No, no. It’s Societe des Shamans et Sorciers-Docteurs.”

“Oh, is that German?”

“It’s french for the Society of Shamans and Witch Doctors.”

“So you got your own thing going?”

“Well, the internet’s helped a lot, you know? Coming together, feeling the buzz, spreading the word, but what’s -”

“Listen, I’m in a bit of a hurry, and since the car’s busted I was wondering if you could drop me off at Memphis. I really need to be there if only for a really short while and maybe I could just, you know, buy you a beer?”

“A beer?”

“Yeah. A Bud, maybe? No?”

“You want me to give you a ride on my dead horse and pay for it with a beer?”

“Well, I thought you might have a real car yourself.”

“I said I went to college, I didn’t say I had money to throw away.”

“What kind of a cheapskate can’t afford a shitty car?”

“Says the guy in the Taurus.”

“It was a bargain deal. Look, we could on like this for hours but it really won’t add up to much believe me. In about twenty hours or so, give or take, some really pissed people with very little in the way of ethics considerations concerning the sanctity of human life are going to be looking for me, and though my instincts tell me to run and hide, I can’t really do that. You might think I’m pulling your leg, having killed your horse and so on but -”

“Yeah, you vouched for Dempsey, and when he vanished into thin air with thirty million in Falconi’s bonds, he gave you a shot and wanted you to do the Veteran’s Fund job. Problem is, John Staikos blew up along with his brother’s-in-law chop shop, and took the job with him. You’re not a gun-crazed ape so you can’t deal with Falconi guns blazing. You are the careful, studied planner who has taken everything into consideration and has mathematically proven you need John to pull off the job. You can’t just pretend to do the job and get caught because then Falconi would do you in the jail anyhow. You can’t find a replacement - no less in such a short notice -

because John was the only guy who has cut open a vault like that, ever. You're thinking about flying away with Eileen's help. Maybe hide in Mexico, or in the Andes. Or maybe the Amazon."

"How the fuck do you know all that?"

"I told you, I'm a shaman. I resonate with mother Earth. I communicate with the spirits. I conversed with John. We were drinking buddies. He asked me to help a friend in need."

"What, seriously?"

"John says you'd be hard to convince. What you've got planned, it won't work out."

"What, you talked to him? When? I mean, how? He's dead! I mean, why? God, I'm confused. Did he say it won't work? How does he know? Can he see the future? How can he do that, he's dead! Isn't he? Was it all an elaborate ruse? Are we still on?"

"I'm afraid he's pretty dead. Bought the proverbial farm. It won't work because it's stupid, that's why. But, you're still on."

"We are? How? Can someone else do the job for him? Oh, I know! Can he possess Falconi, or do some of that weird ghost shit, scare him away? Is he a ghost? Or a ghoul? These things exist, right? I mean, you talk to dead people."

"You're weird. He's neither. He's in an incorporeal form. His spirit still roams the Earth freely, but it's trapped in the Parking Lot of Eternity. If he doesn't find the exit soon, he'll be trapped there, forever searching for his green Honda Accord."

"Yeah, okay, I've heard stupid names before. So, how can he do the job from over there?"

"He can't. We have to bring him back. Well, you actually."

“Bring him back from the dead? As in, raise him from the dead? As in, resurrection?”

“Technically, it’s not exactly like that. There have been precedents. Lazarus, Jesus. Disney, Elvis. Hitler. It’s more like, re-rolling the last dice.”

“What, like in a game?”

“Isn’t life but just a game?”

I thought to myself, what cheesy philosophical bullshit-kind of a thing to say.

“You’re not real. Right? The accident.. The dead horse.. I was badly injured. I’m in a coma. And I’m seeing these visions, and you’re like a spiritual guide but in reality, you’re just a figment of my imagination, a creation of my subconscious mind which is trying to -”

And then he suddenly punched me real hard in the face, made my jaw go numb for like a minute or two. And then I knew that for all intends and purposes this was probably real enough.

“Did you imagine that? I don’t think so. And to get down to business, John wants that second chance. But to do that, someone has to vouch for him. If he fails to get that second chance, that someone gets to serve at the Parking Lot of Eternity for, well, all Eternity.”

“Is that like a valet service for the damned then?”

“You could say so, yes.”

“So how are you going to do it?”

“Do what?”

“You know, save John. Give him his second chance, all that.”

“I’m not doing anything like that. You are though.”

“I am? Am I sure I’m not imagining this?”

He looked at me in a way that said “do you want another

punch in the face”.

“Yeah, I think I’m sure. Come to think of it, I’m done for either way, right?”

“The smart money’s on that.”

I gave the whole ridiculous idea some thought, and counted my options. One, I could kick him in the nuts and stop a passing car. If I was lucky and the driver wasn’t a serial killer, or a gun nut with lax rules about target practice I might make it to Memphis and Eileen. And then.. Then what?

He might be nuts but he was probably right. What if I did run away to the Amazon? Falconi would scour the Earth to get me. I’d have a considerably shortened expiration date and the overall idea of growing old and senile around scantily clad teens that didn’t speak a word of English was being thrown out the window.

I was scared. I was panicked. The instinct of fleeing in the face of insurmountable odds and grave danger overcame my cold, calculating sense of reason, even though I was starting to reconsider the wording ‘reason’. If all that were true, if indeed there was the slightest hope of John coming back from the dead, and doing the job, what did I have to lose apart from my sanity?

“Okay. I’ll do it. What do I have to do?”

“Collect spirit shards.”

“What, like play Zelda?”

“No. Real spirit shards, from willing souls.”

“Will it hurt?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

All that sounded a bit funny, so I enquired further.

“How do you know it doesn’t hurt?”

“I don’t.”

“What do you mean you don’t know?”

“I haven’t done it before.”

I should have known I’d hear that.

“Oh, that’s just classic. I mean, what is this? You haven’t done it before?”

“Have you seen lots of people come back from the dead and talk about it?”

“Not really, no.”

“It’s because it’s pretty fucking rare.”

“Oh, yeah. And how are we going to pull that soul catching off then?”

“Spirit shard collecting.”

“Whatever, I’m game. But do you know how to do your stuff?”

“I’m qualified. I’ve taken classes.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“I am. We need to act quickly. And you need to get us some transportation.”

“Why me?”

“You’re the white, respectable-looking guy.”

“I’m a god-damn thief.”

“Respectable-looking. Don’t blame me for your society’s prejudice against native americans.”

“I thought it was your society as well. That you had integrated and so on.”

“That’s just what we tell folks at job interviews. Now, remember I’m only doing this as a favor to John. I’m not sure I like you.”

“He owes you money, right?”

“Yeah. Two hundred bucks. Said he had some debt he needed to pay off fast.”

“That’s funny, he owed me two hundred bucks.”

“Well, dress me up like Custer and shoot me full of arrows. That’s karma, comin’ like a lion.”

“Don’t do that, I hate Culture Club.”

“Don’t do what?”