

Negotiation

by James Lynn Smith

I'd barely finished my workout when the doorbell rang. Having no time to change from my shorts, I went to the laundry room and grabbed an old, undersized T-shirt. It was the one I used the day before to do some painting and there was a big, irregular splotch of green paint on the front. After slipping it on I went to the door.

Two young boys with goodies to sell for some school project stood there mute, mouths open. They were staring at my T-shirt.

"Cool man," the thinner boy eventually said. "Looks like Mutant Man from the comics, don't it Jimmy."

"It sure does, Don," the heavier kid said. "Where'd you get it mister?"

I thought I'd have some fun and try to negotiate a trade of the shirt for one of the chocolate bars in their box of goodies. Not that I'm cheap, but—well, actually I am. "Okay, guys, my name is Mr. Ron Blake. This shirt is part of the uniform for the Society of Anonymous Perpetrators, SAP for short. We perpetrate amusing damage on evildoers. Do you have any enemies in school?"

The kids looked at each other, eyes growing wider. It was Don who spoke. "During break time at school, this guy Bruce picks on me."

"Oh, how's that?" I asked, trying my best to look sincere.

"He told me my mom must be a circus freak because I look like I was drug through a sewer pipe when I was born."

"That's mean," I said, noticing that Don had narrow shoulders, as well as a slender frame and was slightly unkempt. "I'll tell you what. This shirt has magic

powers, but I'll swap it for one of those chocolate bars. With this shirt, you can tell Bruce anything you want and he can't hurt you."

"Like what?"

"Well, what does Bruce look like?"

"He's big around and always looks mad."

"Then you could say that his brows are so low his eyeballs look hairy, and the fat donut around his middle is gonna hold him back unless he wants to tube down the river with it."

Jimmy grinned. "Neat-o. Tell him that."

"But he'll get madder," Don said.

"Hear me out," I said. "All you have to do is point your hand at him, separate your fingers slightly, and say 'alaba-corrupto-kazam.' While you wear this shirt, his nuts will freeze and you can say anything you want. If he tries to move he's in trouble. Like some body part might fall off."

Don paused a moment. "I don't know. I'm supposed to sell candy. They didn't tell me anything about swapping."

"Do it Don," Jimmy said. "I want to see Bruce go down. We can pay for the candy bar with some of the extra money we make."

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It was funny how I got rid of that tight, messed-up shirt and earned a chocolate treat at the same time. I did have a little concern about the problem Don might have making Bruce believe the shirt could stymie him, but kids have to learn about deception. Maybe I was actually doing little Don a favor, even if he might get a few bruises in the process. My conscience was clear—well, almost.

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Two days later I was expecting a package, so when the doorbell rang and I opened the door quickly. But it was Jimmy.

“Mr. Blake, I wanted to know if you have any more SAP T-shirts like you gave Don. Bruce looked scared and backed off when Don said those magic words and told him he had hairy eyeballs and a tube waist. Now all the guys think Don’s great. And Molly Matlage is asking him to come over so they can do homework together.”

This was an unexpected turn of events. I don’t like being puzzled—hurts my brain. Long ago I gave up puzzlement in favor of situational exploitation. “I’ll tell you what. If you can find six dollars, I’ll sell you one. Tell your friends too.”

Little Jimmy looked surprised at the amount and sulked for a short time. Then he said, “I’ll be back, mister. Please don’t sell it yet.”

When he turned away, I knew this would be fun. At the discount clothing store I could get a bunch of smaller-sized T-shirts and splotch the fronts with green paint. Might even net a few dollars in the process.

*

How they got money is a mystery. Perhaps it was from pooled allowances, skimmed project money, or conned parents; I didn’t care. A line of kids was streaming to my door and buying T-shirts with green paint on the front. Then some would come back, reporting success at dealing with bullies. I figured the success was because bullies thought they were part of a green-splotch gang and there is power in numbers. Soon there was a growing union of little SAPs. The members were children of blue collar and prominent people alike. Examples of the latter were Carla, the fire chief’s daughter and Jack, the son of our local TV station news anchor. Many of the kids saw me as their leader and came by asking for advice.

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It was Don who brought up the first troublesome issue. A jobless man who rode his bicycle around town was beginning to stop and talk to kids as they waited for the school bus. No one wanted to talk to him but he still hung around.

“What does he look like?” I asked Don.

“He has long hair and a beard. He sneezes a lot and carries a big handkerchief, but his mustache is messy after he wipes his nose. He’s gross.”

“What’s his name?”

“No one knows. We call him Booger Face. Heard that some people just call him Boo.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“He asked Jimmy if he ever gets naked. Jimmy got kind of nervous and looked away, but said he did sometimes, when he takes a bath. Then Boo asked him if he had a girlfriend. He didn’t say anything until Boo asked him again and Jimmy said ‘yes.’ Then Boo says he likes to take pictures and if Jimmy would bring his girlfriend over to his house, he would pay them money.”

I felt a red flag go up. “What happened then.”

“Jimmy wet his pants, but the school bus came and we all got on. Boo still comes by the bus stop sometimes and just sits on his bike, looking at us. He looks sad but kind of scary too.”

*

If I intervened, I could assuage feelings of guilt I was beginning to have about my T-shirt scam. I asked neighbors—one who was a school teacher—about the man on the bicycle. The teacher told me he thought the man was a war veteran who had a medical discharge, maybe a disability pension. Since he had all his limbs, it must have been a mental issue. He lived with a bony little woman who had orange hair in a small house near Goss Creek, a run-down part of town. I wondered if we should talk it over with the principal or the police, but decided to find out more first hand.

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The next day I put on one of the larger T-shirts with a green splotch and

positioned myself so I could see the school bus stop. Kids were there, but no Boo. As I started to leave, I saw the bicycle coming. It was him. He stopped, got off the bike and stood holding it, watching the kids while the bus approached.

Crossing the street I started walking toward him as kids loaded onto the bus. Boo seemed not to notice me until I was abreast of him and the bus was moving away.

“Hello,” I said. Interesting bike you have there. What is it?”

He looked at the sky, apparently uncomfortable and then down at the bike. “It’s a Schwinn.” His accent was unabashedly southern hillbilly.

“Does it give you good mileage?” I saw him frown and jerk his head slightly, as though struggling with the concept of humor.

“Ain’t no problem w’ that.”

“What’s your name.”

He grinned. A gold tooth gleamed amid the brown ones. “They’s power in a name. It’s a secret. Keeps ‘em away if it’s secret.”

“Keeps who away?”

He sneezed loudly and blew a massive discharge into a wadded handkerchief. When he removed it, I saw the smear that inspired the moniker ‘Booger Face.’

“They’s everywhere. I got protection, though. Keep it in my pocket.” He pulled out a shiny token of some sort, probably a kid’s play money gold piece.

An idea formed in my head, but details would have to unfold as I went along. “You remember seeing some of these kids wearing what looked like a T-shirt with green shapes on the front? Like the one I’m wearing?”

He squinted and nodded.

“Well they’re not regular kids like they seem. If you ever saw one with that shirt on, it means he isn’t even human. He’s an alien in disguise. And so am I.”

His eyes grew large and he extended the ‘gold piece’ toward me. “I’m protected. I’ll send a force agin’ you.”

“What, you’ll release the giant kraken? Oh I know, it’ll be ‘Mucus Monster.’ Your house is probably full of booger freaks, but I’m not afraid. Do you know who I am?”

He knitted his brows.

“I am Mutant Man, supreme leader of the SAP. We have UFOs ready to raze the hell out of your house with antihistamine bombs. If you even talk to one of the aliens that looks like a kid again, you will receive the wrath of the green giant.”

His eyes grew bigger.

I was on a roll so I cupped my ear. “You hear that sound? That’s the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, coming for you right now.”

Boo jumped on his bike, pushing the pedals so hard the back wheel scratched off. Alternately standing on one pedal after the other, he pumped his way rapidly into the distance.

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Follow-up conversations with the kids revealed that Boo was not seen after that day. I felt a little better about the joke I played on the kids, but not well enough to keep me from thinking about other mischief I was willing to concoct—as long as it didn’t cost much.

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In time, little Don took to coming over to my house while I exercised. He didn’t say much, but would lift some of the lighter weights I used when I didn’t need them. Between exercises when I took a break, we would talk together. I enjoyed leading him on to see how long it took to see the joke. But one day *he* came out with a zinger.

“Mr. Blake, how do you make a girl get hot?”

“Whoa. Are you ready for this kind of thing?”

“I’m nine years old, and I hadn’t done it yet.”

“Don, believe me, there’s plenty of time.”

“But friends my age say they are doin’ it.”

“Mostly a pack of lies. Have your parents talked to you about this sort of thing yet?”

“I don’t think they even talked to each other about it. I was probably accidental.”

“Well, sex is more than mechanics. It’s a matter of emotion, fantasy and conditioning. That takes time.”

“My mom uses conditioner when she washes her hair. It don’t take long.”

“I said ‘conditioning.’ Never mind. I’ve been chastised by a mother for enlightening her son prematurely. I’ll leave this subject to your parents and teachers.”

“My science teacher acts like an elephant farted if somebody uses a naughty word. He’s not going to help.”

“Sorry, Don. Closed subject. Anything else?”

He was quiet for a moment. “I was watching a TV movie about these people who explored caves. They didn’t have flashlights but carried torches. They seemed to burn a long time. How did they make them?”

“Any rags wrapped around the end of a stick will burn easily if pored with gasoline. But to make it last longer, you need to have soaked the rags in grease or oil.” I didn’t know if this was leading to anything productive so I changed the subject. “How’s Jimmy doing?”

“Jimmy is not easy to talk to now. He’s got a job after school. His mom don’t poke into everything he does, like mine. He delivers stuff.”

“What does he deliver? And where?”

“I don’t know. Somewhere close to Goss Creek.”

“Wow. That’s a rough part of town for a little guy to be in.”

After my exercises were done and Don had left, I thought about Jimmy again. *What is happening with him?* Had my little T-shirt deception helped him go from fearless to foolish? My penchant for being carefree and amused was no longer operating. I decided to visit his parents.

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Eldorado street is halfway between the Goss Creek area and the better part of town. It was 6 pm when I walked along the cracked, mildewed sidewalk to the wooden porch, stepped up to the screen door, and knocked. The main door was open. Apparently there was no air conditioning. A rather attractive, not quite middle-aged woman approached the door.

“Hello?” she said.

“Mrs. Cain, you are Jimmy’s mother? I’m Ron Blake.”

“What now, is he in trouble again? I’ll swear, since his dad got sent off, that boy has been a pill.”

“His dad sent off? Is he in a military service?”

“In prison. You with Social Services or something?”

“No, but I know the kids Jimmy pals with. I was concerned when I heard he had some kind of delivery job down in the Goss Creek area. It’s a rough part of town. Maybe you know.”

“He didn’t tell me anything about a delivery job. If I had more time at home, maybe I could keep up with him. But with two jobs and going through a divorce, it’s tough.”

“I know it must be difficult now.”

“Difficult *now*? It was difficult before. My husband drooled at any female with more than one buttock and only worked at expanding his gut, Jimmy needed

dental work, and I was saddled with two jobs. Everywhere I turned, there was a need to take care of. I felt like a service station.”

“I’m sorry Mrs. Cain. I hate to stir up bad memories.”

“It’s Clara. And I’m sorry too. I didn’t mean to dump on you. But sometimes—”

“Life sucks,” I said.

“Amen to that.”

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I would have to find out about Jimmy’s job from him—if I could locate him. It was not quite dark yet so I detoured from my way home, driving down Goss Street and nearby avenues. No Jimmy. The area reeked of idleness and danger. The male denizens loitered in groups with heavy, tattooed arms big as legs hanging out of sleeveless shirts. I felt them eyeing me with suspicion. Surely most of them had peanut-sized brains and followed the malicious lead of some sociopathic punk. When I stopped at an intersection a young, tattooed woman with a miniskirt so skimpy you could almost see her plumbing knocked on my window. She had enough inked skin to cover a roadmap. I lowered the window and she moved closer. The congestion of facial studs and hoops made her look like a bionic accident.

“Searchin’ for some action, daddy?” she said.

“Actually, I’m trying to find a boy.”

“If lookin’ for a boy is your thing, this is the wrong street, honey.”

“I don’t mean it that way. His name is Jimmy. He may be in trouble. Have you seen him or heard of him?”

She laughed. “Everybody’s in trouble here, man. I don’t know no Jimmy. You want a quickie, okay. Otherwise bye-bye.”

Driving through the intersection, I felt like an earthworm slithering past the

open maw of a mudcat. This neighborhood gave me the creeps. I wanted to be home in bed, covering my head with the blanket.

*

Sleep did not come easily. The next morning I went back to look for Jimmy again. I felt it safer to go earlier in the day. While driving into the neighborhood along Goss street, I thought of how lucky I was to have this time. I had worked for the utility company for 15 years before the layoff. But an unexpected inheritance from an aunt lightened the burden. Perhaps I would return to work some day, but for now life was easy as long as I marshaled my money carefully. As I mentioned, I'm a bit cheap on money issues.

Thought on the merits of cheap versus gout-ridden overindulgence was interrupted when I spotted a kid with a wagon loaded with papers. He took what appeared to be a stack of brochures from someone in front of Apex Health Supplements. It was Jimmy. I pulled near the curb and shouted. "Jimmy."

He turned and moved closer with the wagon. "Mr. Blake? Why are you over here?"

"A question for a question. I heard you were delivering stuff in this area. What's going on?"

He produced a paper, a low-budget local issue circulating only in this part of town. It had little news, but many ads which probably supported it. He then pulled a short stool off the side of the wagon and sat with the stack of brochures, inserting them in the papers. "I'm delivering free papers to businesses down here. They pay me extra if I can put in more ads before I deliver 'em."

"Don't you think this area is a bit dangerous to work in?"

"I don't deliver at night."

"Still, there are derelicts around."

"They're not all bad. Some people are just not lucky with money. But nice

people live around here too. Like this store right here. They help people who need it.”

“How do they do that?”

“I guess with food and a place to sleep. Word gets around. This morning, I saw somebody helping a guy that was sleeping on the street into the side door of this store.”

“Let me see a copy of the store’s brochure.” He handed it through the window and I looked at it. “Apex Health Supplements, LLC.” was atop the page, then a bulleted blurb with details lower down. It appeared to be honey for muscle-building freaks, offering massive bulk and eternal life. “I’m still concerned about your working this area, Jimmy.”

“We need the money, Mr. Blake. Mom has two jobs and my dad don’t help. He was drunk a lot even before his—”

“Yeah, your mom told me. Sorry it turned out that way.” I paused, trying to think of something to say. Having nothing more to offer I said, “Be careful. See you later,” and pulled away from the curb.

*

I headed back feeling dissatisfied and empty. Jimmy was bright and conscientious, to a fault. Also generous, as is often the case with some children of alcoholic parents. Basically he felt he was the “man of the house.” Arriving back home, I looked at the brochure. The bullets caught my attention:

- Clinical tests show our herbal supplies work.
- Secret components work with your food intake to bulk muscles fast.
- Free samples available, then subscribe to our plan.
- Lawful importation of rare, highest quality ingredients.

I didn’t believe for a minute that such a store could make much money in that part of town. Perhaps it was a front for money laundering. But Jimmy

indicated they gave hand-outs to down-and-out people. Confused and without any other source of information, I looked again at the brochure, trying to play detective and fathom some secret. I felt there was a code that could be read by those outside the normal circle of readers. *What if I took the first words of each sentence and put them together?* That didn't make sense. What if I then reversed the order? Lawful-free-secret-clinical. That was also senseless. I scratched my head and tried one more thing. *Now take only the root in each word:* It came out "Law-free secret clinic."

"Damn," I said, under my breath. "That line raises a flag. I'm going back there early this afternoon." I recalled that in the alley against the building and near the side door, there was a large electrical utility box.

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Having donned worker's overalls from my days with the utility company, I parked and approached the Apex store, tools in hand, as if I were assigned to do an electrical inspection or repair. I noticed the one-story building was considerably larger than the part Apex appeared to occupy. Yet there were no other front entrance doors in the building, so there was more to Apex than the space for their health supplement business.

I crouched down and took my time unscrewing the cover over the utility box when a small delivery van for Apex entered the alley. Two men got out and opened the rear doors of the van to help a man with a bleeding abdomen approach the side door of Apex. I listened for words.

The wounded man rasped, "Is this place safe, Sal?"

The man called Sal said, "It's copasetic, Bruce. Doc'll fix you up in no time. This is just between us guys. We know you're good for the fee." His accent sounded like urban Jersey with a touch of Brooklyn.

When they disappeared in the side door, I heard a click, then another click.

The first suggested the latch for a crash-bar, the second the turning of a deadbolt key. The picture was becoming clearer, one of an illegal clinic probably for abortions and patching up gang members and mobsters without any kind of report. *I'll bet the fees are exorbitant too.*

In a few minutes three men came back outside, two on either end of a six-foot, black plastic bag with something inside. They hefted it through the rear doors of the van and closed them. The third man went back inside and I heard the click of the crash bar lock, but not the dead bolt. Though the crash bar alone would normally prevent entry, it seemed a little careless. *I guess police rarely dig uninvited into issues down here.* I watched the two men enter the van and drive away.

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The next day I tended to overdue personal and housekeeping chores. By mid-afternoon the phone rang. My calls, if any, are usually later. Curious I picked up. "Hello."

"Mr. Blake, this is Clara Cain, Jimmy's mother."

"Sure I remember, but just call me Ron. How can I help you?"

"I'm worried sick. Jimmy didn't come home last night. Have you seen him?"

"I saw him yesterday, stuffing ads into a wagon-load of neighborhood newspapers. That's what he's been doing to raise some money."

"That sounds like him. He's so idealistic I sometimes want to scream."

"Have you called police?"

"A lot good that'll do. They don't care about what happens in this part of town. They eventually come around but nobody will talk to them. People are afraid of reprisal from criminals."

I noticed her diction and vocabulary were more upscale than her

socioeconomic status suggested. “Reconsider calling the police, Clara. But I’ll see what I can find out.”

I dreaded what I was about to do. Another late day trip into the Goss Creek area felt like traipsing into a pit of vipers. Since I last saw Jimmy at Apex, that’s where I would go first.

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Parking across the street from Apex Health Supplements, I began my watch. A shabby looking man shuffled to the door and started to enter. A man inside gave him the wait sign and came out. He then escorted the derelict to the alley entrance and pounded on the door. I had put on my utility overalls again so I could get close without raising suspicion. Tool box in hand, I walked across the street to the large electrical utility box near them. Someone inside came to the door and opened it. The derelict and his attendant entered and the door began its gradual closing behind them. I grabbed some duct tape and raced to the door, stretching it across the recess in the latch. When the door closed, I did not hear the click of the crash bar latch. If the deadbolt were neglected again, I could enter and look around when everyone left.

I went back to my car and waited for what seemed hours. The disheveled man taken in never came back out. At 7:00 pm the van returned. The alley door opened and someone from inside tugged out black, partly filled garbage sacks and put them in the van. Soon some of the lights inside Apex went off and the van pulled around to the front, picked up two passengers and drove away.

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Now was my chance, provided my crash bar fix wasn’t discovered and the dead bolt was not locked. I crossed the street and tugged on the alley door. It opened easily. The hallway was dimly lit and doors on either side were shut. I opened one on the side near the front of Apex and saw the room where herbal

supplements were displayed. *Other stuff is probably on the back side.* The next door I opened led to a dark room. After fumbling for the light switch, I flicked it and instant glare assailed me.

When my eyes adjusted I saw what was undoubtedly a surgical suite. Yet in some ways it was crude, mostly the operating table and cabinets. Instruments, however, appeared state-of-the-art. There was even what I assumed to be a laser for cauterizing wounds. Oddly, one wall posted not schedules and anatomical diagrams but newspaper clippings. They concerned shootings and fights for which police never found perpetrators. There was also a couple about children in need of organ transplants.

Puzzled, I continued my inspection and saw white plastic and metal cases with handles. A refrigerator ice compartment held what appeared to be dry ice, rapidly sublimating. *That'll be gone soon.* An ice maker, like one found in motels was also in an adjoining room. Then a top-load deep freezer blocked my way to what may have been a back door. I opened the top and looked in.

A jolt of adrenalin hit my chest. Cold eyes stared back at me. I dropped the lid and cursed. When the shock subsided, I lifted the lid again. A frost-covered body stared upward, unseeing. Crudely placed staples held the sliced flesh of his belly and chest together. A chill crept up my spine. *Organ harvesting.* It was the derelict I saw earlier.

Hoping there was no connection, I noted that Apex's interest in youths needing transplants coincided with Jimmy's disappearance.

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I heard the sound of a motor outside. *Damn, they're coming back.* Racing for the alleyway door, I ripped the duct tape off and scampered outside before the van could reverse and back in. Hidden behind the adjacent building's trash bin, I saw the van's rear approach the alley door.

There were two people. The driver exited, came to the van's rear doors, and opened them. I didn't see his companion, but the two then went together to the front entrance. In a few minutes, the alleyway door opened from the inside and the driver tugged a heavy, black plastic bag into the van.

The derelict's body; about the right size. While the driver was in the van's back space, I ran to my car across the street. Hopping in, I found my penlight and illuminated the address and phone number still attached to my visor when I visited Jimmy's mom. I punched numbers into my cell phone. "Clara? I want you to call the police and tell them Apex Health Supplements on 125 Goss fronts an illegal clinic where organ harvesting takes place. Hope I'm wrong, but Jimmy's disappearance may be connected. Don't have time to explain it to cops myself. I'm going to follow a van that's just pulling away from Apex." Without giving her a chance to respond, I hung up.

I turned into the street without switching on the headlights. My older car still had that option. My pulse was racing, but I followed the van to the north end of Goss Street, onto Goss Creek Road, and into a rundown neighborhood of old, small houses on big lots. It pulled into the driveway of a house with 633 on the mailbox. I parked and then crept toward the house. Two men came out and, illuminated by the van's headlights, walked toward it. There was hedge near the driveway and I moved behind it.

I recognized one man I had seen at Apex when I pretended to service the electrical utility box. And the other was even more familiar. It was the man they called Boo.

"How's it going?" the driver asked.

Boo looked at his companion. "That's a high-falutin boy, ain't he, Sal?"

"Hey, messin' with this kid's makin' me feel schleppy. He whines like a little princess and almost plotzed when he saw me puff a bunt. Told me it wasn't

good for me. Where's he get off bein' such a prig?"

"I know." Boo said. "Good mind t' thrash the chubby little sum-bitch. But wife won't let me."

The driver looked at them sternly. "Hey, don't get your panties in a twist about the kid. Doc says to keep his bod in good shape. Gettin' things ready for him now." He looked at his wristwatch. "Well, I got a dumpster delivery on board now. Doc told me to just stop by and check on things."

When the van pulled away, I saw the two men go back inside. *Exactly the kind of sub-species vermin that takes money to kidnap a kid.* I returned to my car and called Clara. "I'm ninety percent sure I've located Jimmy. He's being held temporarily at 633 Goss Creek Rd. Have you called the police about Apex?"

"Yes I have. They promised to look into it tomorrow. And they say they will start to look for Jimmy right away too, but I know them. For our neighborhood, 'right away' will only happen on paper. They'll send someone out to see me and I'll tell them what you just told me." Her voice quavered. "And then, they'll act tomorrow. But it can't wait that long. What you said makes me think they these kidnapers already want to cut my boy up for body parts." Her tone changed. "I'm coming out there myself, with a gun."

"Careful Clara, You might underestimate police response time. Maybe there's a trust issue in your neighborhood, and—"

"I'm coming, now."

I knew from her tone it was final. "What exactly do you have for protection? I don't have anything."

"J-22 semiautomatic pistol."

"A Jennings. It won't stop a close frontal attack, but it is a deterrent."

"It's got hollow-point bullets in the clip."

"That would make a nasty mess of a face, if you could hit it. Bring some

kitchen knives too. Rope, chain, anything.”

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Nearly 20 minutes passed before I saw her car approaching. She pulled up behind me and got out, bringing a bag.

“I brought a middle-sized kitchen butcher knife, but didn’t find a chain or rope. Here’s the J-22.”

“Okay, we ought to sneak up and see if we can peek in windows first. Maybe we can see something.” We approached the house crouching. Might as well be Laurel and Hardy for all our expertise. In truth I felt jumpy as a bucket of fleas.

I came to a first window but saw no opening in the blinds. The next window had blinds open, but I saw nothing of interest inside. Then we came to what must have been the dining room window, and there were two bent places in the slats, one high and one low. I crouched to the low spot but saw only the back of a chair.

Clara peered through the high spot and inhaled sharply. “He’s there,” she said in a whisper. My boy is in there, tied to a chair in the dining room.”

Moving up, I took a look. Jimmy was sitting and saying something I couldn’t quite understand. Boo was not visible but the other man turned toward Jimmy. I could hear him well.

“Shut up, shrimp. You want I should put the tape over your trap again?” It was the man they called Sal. Jimmy simmered down, and the man returned to an easy chair beside a lamp and reopened his People magazine.

I felt a presence behind me. I spun around and a messy, hairy face assaulted my eyes. It was Boo.

He waved his pistol at us. “Thought we heard somthin’ out here. Y’all git inside.”

There was no need for grammar correction to know we were in the clutches of a slimy low-life. We walked around to the back door and entered. Boo ushered

us into the dining-living room and Sal stood to face us. Jimmy's legs were tied to the chair and his hands were tied together in front.

"Mom," Jimmy said, voice trembling.

"Jimmy," she said, rushing to him and kneeling to hold his face. "Are you hurt?"

"Okay, enough of this soupy gabble hear," Sal said, loudly. "The kid's okay. Boo, tie 'em up."

"Why you call me Boo? My names Hector. And why you poke a stick at my dog in the back yard? He don't do you no harm."

"Everybody calls you Boo 'cause you're scary. And I hate dogs. Now get some rope or duct tape."

"You wouldn' be so pushy if my wife was here."

"Whatever," Sal said and stared at us. "You two, empty all your pockets—slow like. Throw the stuff out here so I can see it."

While Boo left the room for restraint material, I moved toward Clara to help her up so that we were both standing with our backs to Jimmy, facing Sal. Reaching into my pocket, I retrieved the J-22, barrel first, and lay it down in front of me. I knew that with the pistol out first, Sal wouldn't be as attentive as I further emptied my pockets. Clara everted the pockets in her lightweight jacket to show they were empty.

"Show me what's in the bag." Sal said to her.

Reluctantly, she took the knife out and put it down in front of her.

While reaching back for my wallet, I discovered I had put my cell phone in the adjacent back pocket. I carefully fished it out, and flicked it backward so it fell into Jimmy's lap. Next I pulled keys from my pocket and dropped them slightly behind me. Pretending it was an accident, I then turned and bent over to retrieve them. It brought my face near Jimmy's.

Boo called out something from the other room, apparently unable to find restraints.

Sal swore. "In the toolkit, moron." Then he issued a longer string of obscenities.

Under the noise of argument I whispered to Jimmy, "Work the cell under your thigh and find an excuse to go to the bathroom. Call 9-1-1. This is 633 Goss Creek Rd." I then straightened and threw the keys in front of me. Next were my pocket knife and a few other items.

*

We were fastened to the chairs with duct tape. Unlike Jimmy, our wrists were bound to the arms of the chair but our ankles were also bound to the chair legs.

Sal punched his cell phone. "Doc? Uninvited guests here. Two adults lookin' for the little runt. What do you want to do?" He listened for a moment and shut off the cell phone.

"What are you going to do with us?" Clara asked.

"No comment," Sal said. "And I can always tape your trap shut."

Boo grinned. "Interestin' thing about tape on the mouth. Can't breathe there. Ragweed can make your nose stuff up. We could bring some in, shake it in your face and watch you smother. I bet you wouldn't want to talk so much then." His laughter sounded like a sick donkey bouncing down a canyon wall.

I bent over as though relieving stress from my position and swayed from side to side. Each time my head was close to Clara, I quietly revealed a bit of my plan.

We sat for what seemed 10 minutes, then Jimmy said. "I've got to go to the bathroom." He was ignored until he said it again. "Please, I've got to go."

"Well tinkle in your trousers, shrimp." Sal said.

Boo snickered.

“It’s more than that. I’ve got to go bad,” Jimmy said.

“Damn, I don’t want you to stinkin’ up the place. Boo, untie him and take him to the john but keep the door cracked.”

When Jimmy was led to the bathroom, I knew we needed to create some distraction so Boo couldn’t hear the 9-1-1 call. With the door partly closed behind Jimmy, I signaled to Boo by clearing my throat and whispering. It was intentional that he couldn’t quiet hear.

“What’d you say?” he asked and came a little closer.

“There’s a lot of power in a name. In Greek mythology, Hector was the greatest Trojan warrior. You must have powers no one knows about.”

“I’ve got powers I can set agin’ enemies.”

“Why do they call you Boo?” Clara asked. “I think you really must be a nice man.” Her nails dug into the chair arm, obviously not meaning those words. “Ron told me you said your wife kept anyone from thrashing Jimmy. Where is she now?”

“She ain’t here. Can’t say no more.”

We kept his attention on us for a few more minutes before Sal interrupted.

“What the hell’s going on over there? Boo, get that imp out here and tie him up again.”

As Jimmy passed by us, I made a questioning facial gesture. Boo was tying him again when he mimed a sentence to me. It seemed like, “Not yet, I called Don.”

I was all but crushed. *Damn, what can a kid do?* 9-1-1 was the quickest way for help. But in Jimmy’s mind, maybe not. Now about all we could hope for was that Don could provide information about our deaths, after the fact.

The crunching of driveway gravel announced an arrival. Sal stood and pulled back the curtain over the door glass.

“It’s Doc, in the van,” he said and unlocked the door.

Boo stood back, looking down as though the imperial wizard was about to appear.

The front door swung inward and a thin, angular woman with faded, orange hair entered.

I did a doubletake. *The wife. She’s Doc?* This was worse than I thought.

“So we have adult visitors, huh?” She said. “Hector did anyone see you when you brought them in here?”

“I don’t think nobody’s seen us.”

“Did they, yes or no?”

“I don’t—No, nobody saw.”

“Sal, take a break with Hector, outside. I want to talk to our guests.”

She pulled up a chair in front of us, with Jimmy behind her, and placed her black leather bag by her side.

Adding a few more pounds and a little hair dye, “Doc” could be attractive. Maybe she had been in days gone by.

Crossing her ankles primly she eyed us for a moment. “I sense a mother and a detective. Am I right?”

Neither of us answered.

“You obviously followed the van to get here and to do that you’re familiar with Apex. No more secrets here, so you two relax. Maybe we can make some kind of deal if we get to know each other a little better. She looked at Clara.

“You’re the mother?”

Clara teared and nodded.

“And this fellow is a boyfriend, husband or somebody special?”

To get Clara off the spot, I answered. "I am a friend of the boy."

Clara burst out, "Please don't hurt my boy. I'll do anything."

"I'll bet you would. Look darling, it's not my style to let anyone hurt. Hardly any pain at all in what I do. A lot of good, actually. I get around obstacles. Otherwise, legal procedures, delays, and religious purists would stand in the way of my delivering much needed health benefits."

I couldn't stifle my utterance. "I'm sure those benefits cost them plenty. But what about the price your unwitting donors pay?"

"Don't know your background, honey, but I know about poverty and riches. The latter is best. Once I was a nurse practitioner and, later, on a team for liver-kidney transplants. It was hard work, but I loved it. Thought helping everyone was the real goal in life. But then someone started raiding our drug supplies. Bitch managed to frame someone else. Guess who? I pleaded with the hospital staff to look more closely, but they fired me and reported it to police. So I slapped the chief surgeon and turned the hospital administrator's desk over on him.

"I was finally exonerated, but my temper tantrum was all they could remember. No one would hire me."

I wondered if Doc was trying to justify her acts.

She paused and took a breath. "I was destitute. No money, no family. Then I met Hector. I know they call him Boo, but he wasn't always the way he is now. He was charming and helpful, even if countrified and a bit crazy. Crazy enough to sign up for the war. Under stress of duty, his brains scrambled. More than PTSD. Now even his hygiene and grammar are worse than Dogpatch."

Her apparent need for understanding gave me a glimmer of hope. "Please let us go," I said. "We understand what you experienced and can speak on your behalf if it comes down to that."

Having no indication this helped, I switched directions. "At least let Jimmy

go.”

Her brows knitted. “Enough chat. I’m going to make an exit for a little while. Stay put—as if you have a choice.” She picked up her bag and walked into another room.

*

It seemed like half an hour passed. Doc wasn’t making a sound. Reading, using the internet, we couldn’t tell. I thought about yelling and screaming. But the house wasn’t that close to another and her goons would be upon us in a moment. Then I heard stirring.

Doc walked into the room and went to the front door. “Come in here Sal. Hector, you stay and keep watch.”

Sal lumbered in and looked at us, then Doc. “Yeah?”

“Help me administer this hypo to our guests. Keep them from jerking while I do the injection.” She raised the hypodermic syringe and pressed the thumb rest to clear air from the contents. A little geyser of fluid arced through the air.”

I pulled at the tape lashing my arms to the chair to no avail. *I’m sure that hypo’s a cocktail for sleep and paralysis.* All I knew to do was jerk, yell and squirm before ending up as organ-empty remains in a dumpster somewhere. I looked at Clara.

Clara’s face told me she, too, was going to put up a fight.

I grunted loudly as Sal restrained my wriggling. Doc touched my right arm. She patted the major vein and brought the needle to it.

A loud bang against the side of the house startled her. Sal looked up. Then another thump was followed by more. A volley of strong impacts against the house was well under way when Boo ran in and slammed the door behind him.

“Rocks is spewing out of the ground,” he said in a loud, shaky voice. “Invisible forces out there.”

Doc regained her composure and turned toward Sal. “See what the hell that was.”

He went to the door, pulled back the curtain and looked out the little window. “Looks like a flame. Now more. Damn, a hundred flames out there.”

Pelting of the house walls continued for a full 10 minutes. A window broke and an entrant rock bounced off the floor and impacted the opposite wall. Then another window shattered as a small stone entered.

A loud chorus of children’s voices broke the night’s silence. “Let our leaders go. Let our leaders go...” Simultaneous with the chanting, the torch bearers began circling the house like a moving carousel.

Surely this disturbance was alarming neighbors. *Maybe they’ll phone for help.* In the distance I could hear the wail of a siren. *Firetruck coming.* Then I remembered talking to Don some time back about making torches.

The siren became louder as the firetruck pulled close by.

“Sal peeked out. “Fire truck and—What the hell? It’s a TV van from local news. They’re puttin’ up a light. All these kids, they have T-shirts with green smears on the front.”

“Hector, turn on the TV. Channel 5,” Doc said.

When the picture on the old TV finally came in, a young girl, wearing a T-shirt with green splotch on the front was answering the newsman “...Yes, my dad is the fire chief and my name is Carla. But I am a member of the SAP. We all wear this shirt as a uniform. Some of our leaders and friends were kidnapped by evil people and are in this house.”

“Who was kidnapped?” the newsman asked.

“Jimmy Cain, our vice president and Mr. Ron Blake who started SAP. Jimmy’s mother is in there too. Jimmy says they grabbed him in an alley and have a gun.”

“They have a gun?”

“Yes sir, that’s what Jimmy said when he called our president Don.”

Doc reacted angrily. “Sal, how did he call? When? The kid’s pulled one over on you. You’re not much better than Hector. Now it’s a hostage thing in full view of the public.”

Daring to take a deep breath, I felt that widespread news about a gun in here would surely attract police.

I looked at the TV screen again.

“Viewers, the police finally have the word. The original 9-1-1 call by a neighbor was only about fire. And it seems the fire chief has convinced the kids to extinguish their torches. But they are amassing again around the house and chanting.”

I wondered how the news van got word of the disturbance so soon until remembering the kid named Jack was the son of the local news anchor. He was also a little SAP. Soon I heard another siren, then two.

“Doc, it might be cops,” Sal said. “We gotta get out before they come.”

She stood still, eyes squinting as though in thought.

I knew her getting through the gang of kids might take a little time. And she didn’t know if the police were informed well enough to stop her or not. They would probably meet her on the drive out. One way or the other, it was all over except an improbable escape.

“Sal, I have an idea,” she finally said. “You and I are going to walk out of here as freed victims of a hostage situation *before* they alert a SWAT team. Hector, untie that boy and get his clothes off. Then tie him up again.” She began undressing. Bra thrown on the table, dress on a chair. High heels thrown aside. “Sal, you’re tall. Near you, at a distance, I’ll look like the boy when I put his clothes on. Firemen and police, let alone the news people, don’t know you from

our tied-up visitor over here.”

*

A police car drove up. Two officers approached the fire and news staff. They learned names of the two adult victims, but there were no visual identifications.

“Want the megaphone, Lieutenant?” one officer said.

“Not yet. Get the phone number for this place. I want to find out exactly what’s going on in there. ”

After five minutes, the Lieutenant made the call. It rang several times with no response. He was willing to wait.

*

“Drivin’ me crazy,” Sal said. “you gonna answer?”

“You are,” Doc answered. “Listen, but don’t talk ‘til I tell you.”

Sal held the phone to his ear. “Yeah?”

I could imagine what he was hearing. “You cannot escape, but if you release the hostages it will go far better for you.”

Sal was silent.

Doc whispered to him, “Tell him we want transportation out and we will keep one hostage, the mother.” She heard him repeat her words. “Say that in good faith we will release the boy and the man now.”

He mouthed her additional words.

“Tell him that’s all we are going to do until they get a helicopter here for us. Say to hold their fire and don’t come closer...Back everybody away from the van. The hostages we mentioned are coming out.”

Sal echoed her final message.

I thought that would be a transparent ruse. Such negotiation probably reaches this point only after hours. However, things were still muddled and no one knew who she was, nor that a woman other than Clara was in here. Doc apparently

planned to cautiously approach the police in disguise but then make a quick breakaway to the van.

No one knew Sal and only some kids really knew me. So how quickly could kids sense a ruse as the two approached and alert the adult authorities? By the time the trick was discovered, the van could be racing toward the road.

Doc found a cap with bib and arranged her thin hair underneath so it wouldn't show. Then with Jimmy's solid white T-shirt, pants, and shoes she walked toward the door. "Let's go Sal."

"What about me?" Boo said.

"You stay and tie the boy again. You're immune to the forces. Evil police can take you in, but I can get you out."

He looked troubled. "I don't know."

Sal swung a right upper cut to his jaw and Boo fell heavily against the table and toppled unconscious to the floor.

"You could have waited a second or two," Doc said. "But come on, let's go." She opened the front door.

When the door closed, I called to Jimmy, "Over here. That knife on the floor. Cut us loose." Clad only in his underwear, he followed my request.

I then went to Boo, taped his ankles together and wrists together behind his back.

That done, I stood by the window alternately looking outward and at the TV set showing what those outside assumed to be a hostage release. Clara was riveted to the TV.

The pretend hostages walked toward the police and the crowd of kids, now farther back. Sal kept his head down to avoid suspicion until they were close to the van. But a kid in the crowd said loudly, "That's not Mr. Blake and that's not Jimmy."

En masse, yelling “SAPS unite,” kids ran toward the two while, to no avail, police ordered them back. I saw them grasp at Sal’s belt and jacket as he swung about, violently throwing them in all directions. One kid swung a charred, burnt-out torch at Doc, and it streaked across the waist of her white T-shirt, leaving an upturned arc on the belly cloth much like a big smile. Another little SAP grabbed her collar and ripped it downward exposing her left breast. Doc then tore away and fled for the Apex van. I heard Clara giggle.

The torn, sullied T-shirt and her exposed breast looked like a big smiling face with one floppy eye running atop a pair of skinny legs.

Sal pulled his gun, and the children shrank back along with two firemen who joined the fracas. He turned and ran toward the back yard fence. I knew if he cleared both sides, he would get to Goss Creek and cross it. No vehicles could follow. He stopped at the angry growling inside the fence, discharging his weapon blindly into the dark. Only vicious barking followed.

We heard the loud command, “Police. Stop running and put your weapon down.” The lieutenant lowered the megaphone, signaled to the other officer who closed in on Sal.

By this time, Doc had backed into the news van, changed direction and pulled onto Goss Creek Rd. A second police car swiftly arriving with blinking lights blocked her exit. It was hard to see, but she dropped her head on the steering wheel, likely with resignation.

*

“Look, we’ve got an alien,” Jimmy said. He had wrapped the Bra around Boo’s face and tied it in back. With a marker he found on the floor he drew circles around the bra points so Boo looked like he had the two big goggle eyes of a fish.”

Police entered to find raucous laughter and a dazed ‘Booger man’ sitting on a chair by the table. “This one of them too?” the lieutenant asked. He smiled.

“Found another man at the Apex Health Supplements. Claimed to be only a van driver, but from what inspectors saw in the place, he’s in on it too. Amazing that people were being murdered for body parts in an improvised clinic, right under our noses. These kids deserve a commendation. But who exactly is this woman imitating the boy and trying to escape in the van?”

“Hector’s wife,” I said pointing to him. “She’s the *de facto* doctor and surgeon at the clinic and also appears to be the brains.”

The door opened wider and Don came in, ushered by Carla’s father. He looked at Boo, pointed, and mocked. “It’s an alien, but we can send a *force* agin’ him.”

*

I soon developed a relationship with Clara, and helped her cope with divorce and two jobs. Eventually, a promotion necessitated only one. The Apex participants were all sent to federal prison, except Boo. He was declared mentally incompetent and is now in an institution for the criminally insane.

I am contemplating employment again. In a way I’m apprehensive because the discipline might restrict my talent as a prankster and make me fall from grace in the SAP’s Clownish Caper Special Interest Group.

By the way, I made up that title too. Is there a better way to be properly unserious in life?

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