
Baccalaureate

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I

SHIT,” I GROANED ALOUD and flicked my cigarette to the floor. I used my boot to grind it into the ground as I rubbed my head in frustration. Four hours. Four of the freaking longest hours of my life I had been standing here trying to blend in and now I’d lost the stupid SOB. I lit a fresh smoke and pulled out my cell phone. Within minutes I was on foot, moving quickly down the street, my head filled with thoughts of my new plan of attack. The phone call had been short and sweet, a check-in really. My employer had to know the status of things, especially when they took longer than normal. My employer—how ‘bout we call him Arthur?—was a nice enough guy, when you rubbed him the right way. When you didn’t, you found yourself on the other end of a gun. Or sometimes a garrote. Depended on his mood, I guess you could say. He was a good employer, just not one to mess with. To date, I hadn’t messed with him. I was paid well to do my job. Damn well, considering. A few times a month my phone might ring or a letter might arrive from a distant city. The computerized voice on the phone or the letter would only give a few instructions, a name and a city. The rest was up to me. I feel lucky to have this job, luckier than most of the jerks I see wandering to and from their boxy offices every day. I was pretty much free to come and go as I pleased, except when on an assignment. Then I got in, got the job over with and got out. Money deposited in my account. A fake W-2 at the end of the year. I sucked a lungful of smoke as I brought the latest

letter and its instructions to my mind's eye. It was concise and unyielding:

Harold Smith.452 Gray St. Cleveland OH. Option #1

Option #1 meant painful and drawn out. Not exactly my favorite, but not the worst option either. My cigarette was down to the filter and I flicked it into a gutter. My feet were beginning to feel like lead in my loafers. I should have worn the boots. Who the hell thought this would take so freaking long? I reached my hotel and made my way to my suite. My pockets were stuffed with garbage that I had been collecting all day. Gum wrappers, empty smoke packs. I dumped it all out and then disposed of it properly. My gun slid easily out of its holster; I love the sound of metal on leather. I poured a Scotch and water and sat down to think this plan through some more.

II

The dawning of a beautiful new day brought a renewed calm and peace to me. I had worked out the plan and slept like a baby. I was ready to get this job over with.

Decked out in a splendid suit that I had just bought, I tucked my gun back into its holster and made my way back downtown. The hustle and bustle of the morning rush was over, traffic not so heavy on the sidewalks anymore. I smiled at the people I passed and even tipped an imaginary hat to a few good lookers along the way. My spirit soared at the thought of getting the job over and getting home to my quiet apartment in San Fran.

The briefcase I carried was heavy and felt awkward in my hand. I switched it from hand to hand as I walked, trying to get used to the feel of it. I entered the restaurant at exactly 11:48 and was seated almost immediately. My lunch was superb; the taste lingered in my mouth and made me want to order again. At 12:45 on the dot, and right on schedule, Mr. Smith was shown to his seat in the back. I paid my check and left a hefty tip for my waiter. True to form, Mr. Smith excused himself from his colleagues and headed for the loo. My briefcase and I were close behind. He held the door for me and gave me a quick nod before heading to a stall. I lingered around the trough biding my time. Shortly he emerged and gave me a sideways glance as he washed his hands.

“You okay?” he asked. I smiled and nodded as I pulled out my gun. His eyes widened and his jaw dropped. “Here. Take it all.” He started to remove his watch and wallet before I shook my head.

“Out. Now,” I said quietly, and motioned for the door with my gun.

He gulped—I actually saw his Adam’s apple bob—and pleaded in a nasally voice, “Just take what you want and let me go.”

I smiled—it’s so nice to be friendly—and shook my head again. My gun never wavered from his head as I gestured yet again to the door. He gave a small squeak and slowly walked around me. When he got to the door I held his arm and jammed the gun into his ribs. “Walk slowly and carefully. We are going to go out the back door nicely and friendly like or I’m going to kill you. Understand?” He nodded once, uncertainty filling his eyes. “Oh yeah,” I said, “and smile.” A stupid half smile, half scowl appeared on his face as we walked out arm in arm. No one stopped us or seemed to notice us strolling out the back door.

III

His white, pasty, naked body seemed to be swallowed whole by the hotel bed. We were, at present occupying a room at another hotel not far from my own. I had rented this room yesterday from a desk clerk who sneered when I said I actually wanted to rent the room for a few days, not hours. I was reasonably certain that no one would come running if they heard strange noises coming from our room. My briefcase was open on the scarred fake wood table. I turned the lights out one by one until only a faint glow came from the bathroom and the television. I wouldn’t need much light to get this job done. Mr. Smith seemed comfortable enough. I had taken great efforts to bind his arms and legs snugly, but not too snugly. His mouth gag was soft and hopefully non-chafing. His eyes darted around the room and he whimpered a few times. I sat next to him and stroked his head a few times. His breath caught in his throat and he tried to pull away. Time to get to work.

As you might have noticed, I am not a very moral person. I’m not even sure what society considers a moral person these days. I am a college graduate. Even did a few semesters towards my master’s. I consider myself a learned man. A man with a full understanding of the world and how it works. The one thing I don’t

know is why these people are chosen to become corpses at my hands. Not that it matters. They die anyway. Sometimes though, as they are about to fade from this world, they inquire as to why. *Damn if I know* is my standard answer. More often than not they ask. Sometimes I think that it might help them pass easier if they knew why. My education provided me with a diploma, a degree in literature to be precise. I was so damn proud of that piece of paper and even more proud when I walked back onto campus the next year to start the master's. My puffed up ego deflated quickly when jobs were nowhere to be found. Personnel managers stared at me from behind their desks, their fat asses glued to their chairs. So sorry they would say and shake their heads. You have no work experience. Your degree won't help you here. Finally, my shredded resume in hand, I took odd jobs for minimum wage. I dropped out of the Master's Program soon after. The road to Arthur and his dream job was a fluke. An ad in a mercenary magazine that a customer happened to leave in his booth. It's been ten years and I'm a millionaire several times over. My life has never been the same. It gets better every year. My diploma was the first thing to be murdered, shredded by my able hands and flushed to oblivion with the rest of my born identity. Morality and ethics? We choose our own path. Mine is paved in gold.

IV

Mr. Smith screams behind his gag as I make his departure from this earth slow and painful. His eyes are as glazed as those of the many personnel managers that I sat across from so many years ago. I smile at those eyes. Smile at their fat asses making fifty grand a year and loving it. I laugh out loud imagining their fat lazy wives that they go home to every night. These managers stuck in their own version of hell.

Mr. Smith has ceased screaming. I close his eyes carefully. He deserves at least that. I glance at the ID card that slipped from his wallet. Dr. Harold Smith it reads below his picture. English Literature Department Chair. I smile back at his picture and recall a favorite passage from John Keats: "Stop and consider! life is but a day; / a fragile dew-drop on its perilous way!"