

FUGITIVE

by Gabriel Heller

The manager conducting the interview leaned back in his chair, crossed his hands in his lap and said, "Have you ever been convicted of a felony, son?" He could look down at the application in front of him on his desk and see that I'd already answered the question, but of course he had to ask me.

"Yes, I have," I said.

"I appreciate that. Honesty's always the best policy." He leaned back and put his hands behind his head. He had small, grayish blue eyes.

On the top of a gray filing cabinet were four dusty surveillance monitors; indistinct black and gray figures were coming and going into the frames.

"Why don't you tell me about it?"

"About what, sir?"

He looked at me. His eyes were pressed into that shapeless doughy face like raisins. "The crime, Mr. Benzilov. What kind of name is that anyway?"

I shook my head. I'd let myself believe that today I'd be hired. He'd sounded enthusiastic on the phone. I told myself it wouldn't be so terrible working in a grocery store, not terrible at all. Now I felt a sinking feeling. Why was I even wasting my breath?

But then I heard myself answering the question, telling him the truth. "It happened fifteen years ago when I was nineteen years old. I was drunk with two friends. We'd ended up inside a stranger's house in the middle of the night."

"What were you thinking?" he asked.

"I don't think we were thinking much of anything. We were just being stupid kids."

"Did you steal anything?"

"No."

He paused, angling his head to the side. "Nothing?"

"If we were going to, we didn't get a chance to."

"How much time did you get?"

“Sixteen months.”

“What was it like?”

“Excuse me?”

His face betrayed no warmth or kindness for me. “How was the time in prison?”

I could close my eyes and still see the light coming down through the bars, the smoke hanging in the day room, the colored plastic chairs all cracked and wobbly around the television. I could hear the echo of voices on the tier; the television showing Wheel of Fortune or Jerry Springer, always the same shows, the crackle of the cheap, transparent radios they let you have.

I could smell the fear and frustration and rage that hung in the air and made your head hurt all the time, the smell of ammonia from the old man’s mop, the smell of food. *You want white milk or brown milk with your food*, the server would ask, with your baked chicken food, your beef stew food, your white bread food, your white rice food, your Jell-O food, your macaroni salad food, your fish sticks food, your bologna sandwich food, whatever we were having that day. Say the word food a hundred times real slow and what the word comes to mean is what we ate.

In a dispute over the telephone three other prisoners beat me till I blacked out. I was in the infirmary for three weeks. After they took my stitches out, they transferred me to the *bing*, “for your own protection”, they had said. The man in the bed next to me, who’d been cut with a razor blade on both sides of his face from temple to chin, more than two hundred stitches in his face, told me, *You can’t even get no pussy books in the bing. You gonna have to beat your dick to memories*. And that had made me laugh.

I remembered the *bing* very clearly, never having to leave your cell, never having to see anybody, except for an hour a day if you felt like walking laps or doing pull-ups. Time went funny in the *bing*. The light in my cell never went out until it burned out and then for many days it never went on and I was in complete darkness, save the line of light under the door where they pushed my food in, and there were no windows except for the one on the door, which was covered by a steel flap, so the C.O. could open it and look in and watch me whenever he felt like it. The cell was six feet by eight feet. There was a bed and a toilet and a sink. People talked about going crazy in the *bing*, but I didn’t mind being

alone. I healed up in there, and then I was back on a different tier with different people around, and the sound of the old man, who mopped the floor, crying in his cell at night in the darkness when we were all just human and full of loneliness and just afraid.

“It was a lot of fun,” I said. “Best year and a half of my life.”

“You’re being facetious now.”

I cracked my knuckles, one finger at a time, realizing that for him it was just a game. He scribbled a note on a piece of paper and looked at his watch.

Although my father had a bad temper and wouldn’t hesitate to show me the belt or the back of his hand, I had never thought of myself as an angry person. I had always been easy-going and mellow—even-tempered. I was the guy who was in the corner at the party, cracking stupid jokes, making people laugh.

On the security televisions behind his head, flickering people came into the frame and then drifted away forever. They were hardly even human from this vantage point. I watched a woman pause with a baby in a stroller, pick a box off the shelf and begin to read the ingredients.

“Nothing but chemicals,” I said. “Don’t buy it, ma’am.”

“What?”

“I’m talking to the woman behind your head,” I said, pointing at the screen.

I could make it a game too. I could make a joke out of it. The silence was long and awkward, but really I didn’t care. He continued to stare at me. I didn’t look away.

“Anything else you want me to know?” he asked finally.

“I’m a good worker. I work hard and I’m motivated. I’m good with people,” I said, surprised by the sound of my own voice, ashamed of the pleading note I heard in it.

“And you like to joke around.”

“Yes.”

He pushed his chair back, stood up, and extended his hand. “Thanks for coming in, Frank. We’ll give you a call.”

* * *

As I pushed through the black, swinging doors into the brightness of the store, I felt the ashy taste of failure in my mouth. What was I doing wrong? I had spent a while on my resume. My wife had helped me make

it better. Maybe my desperation was starting to show through. Maybe I should have worn a tie. But for an interview in a grocery store a tie might have looked stupid. It was hard to know exactly.

As a carpenter and house painter, I had made a decent living for almost ten years. But now we were living on credit, on borrowed money. Every day I'd get in my truck with a stack of resumes on the passenger seat and I'd drive around from town to town, looking for some place that might hire me. But nothing had panned out so far.

One thing was clear, they all wanted to talk about my felony. I messed up, I wanted to say. Haven't you ever? It was like a certain disease I had caught, that I carried around with me wherever I went. It stuck to me like a stain. I'd check the NO box on the application only to have them run a background check and call me a liar. I wasn't a liar.

* * *

Cleve, a contractor I'd worked for in the old days, was at the bar when I went in. He was in a worse boat than me. He was more than twenty years older and in poor health—diabetes, obesity, heart problems. He'd died twice, once back in the nineties, and another time in 2005 or 2006. Both times they'd brought him back—the paramedics.

He put down his newspaper and greeted me with a fist bump.

"Haven't seen you here in a while," I said.

"I'm celebrating," he said. "It's my daughter's birthday today."

"Congrats."

"You want to see her?"

He took a photograph out of the breast pocket of his shirt. It was of a young girl, six or seven years old, perched on a rock, clasping her arms around her knees, smiling very brightly. Everything about her was brightness. Behind her was a waterfall and three pine trees, through which the sun filtered.

"That was fourteen-fifteen years ago. She hates me now." He put the picture back in his pocket. "That's life," he said. "They love you one day, hate you the next."

I ordered us each a scotch on the rocks.

A drunk in a blue hard hat got off his stool and came over and stood beside me. "You got a problem with me?" the drunk asked.

I realized he must have been drawn to my crisp white shirt, my inter-

view shirt, which I was still wearing. I must have reminded him of the man who had given him the axe.

“Go sit down,” I said.

“Coward,” he hissed.

I imagined the hard hat rolling on the floor, the crunch of his skull, like a box of crackers, under my foot. His sunken cheeks and loose, flabby neck were covered in gray stubble, and his lips were wine-stained.

Cleve got up and stepped between us.

“Eh, coot?” Cleve said

“What, fucker?” the old drunk said.

“Hey now, what’s your trip, coot?”

“Don’t fucking call me that.”

“Why all the aggression? We’re all in the same situation here.” Cleve raised his glass.

The old drunk stuck up his middle finger in Cleve’s face and turned and went back to his stool. We laughed. It was either laugh or scream or break something. The drunk put his head down on the bar. He was a sad, old drunk, wearing a hard hat in a bar. I had no desire to fight him. Cleve lit a cigarette, which looked very small between his fingers.

“Things’ll get better for us,” he said after some time.

“How do you know?”

“It takes some time to find a job,” he explained. “You’ve got to let the dust settle.”

“I’m getting to that place where I’m starting not to imagine another way. Like the memory of actually having a job is fading.”

Cleve laughed. “You got Alzheimer’s or something? It hasn’t been that long.”

“It feels like a long time.”

I hadn’t worked in any steady way since the New Year. It was already June.

“Have some faith,” he said.

“That’s what’s so hard,” I said.

“You got faith you’re sitting here having a conversation. You got faith you’re talking to me. You’re not dreaming. You’re not in Japan. You don’t know these things in any certain way, but you have faith they’re so. Faith is faith. Just extend it some. Stretch it out. It expands.”

He held his thumb and forefinger together in front of my face, then brought them apart slowly.

* * *

“Just stretch it out,” I repeated to myself, over and over, as I walked out of there, back up under the highway, past the boarded up stores, the abandoned houses. But what was happening here? This didn’t feel like America. We were getting a taste of the third world. I couldn’t even get a job stocking shelves at a grocery store.

I walked for a long time. On the edge of town, I stopped next to a field, in which some cows were grazing, chewing on the long grass, swishing their tails, looking up every now and then, blinking their glassy eyes.

“It expands,” I said. “Just stretch it out.”

But I couldn’t.

I walked back to my car and sat in the front seat with the keys in my hand, smoking a cigarette, thinking, I’ll just drive home now, but knowing I wouldn’t. I believed in fidelity and honor, I really did, but everything in me was twisted up. I was letting myself go.

* * *

In the middle of the room was a stage, bathed in neon light, on which three women were dancing and taking off their clothes. One of them was Ani, and she winked at me when she saw me come in. The bartender came over and asked me what I’d drink. I said I’d think about it. I had four dollars in my pocket. There I was in the mirror behind the liquor bottles, not looking so good. Big bags under my eyes, my beard untrimmed, in need of a haircut. Ani was behind me on the stage, dark red in the light. She looked very alone while she danced. She covered her breasts with her arms, hugging herself. A man with a well-trimmed beard put bill after bill between her feet, moving his head up and down as she danced. Immediately, of course, I despised him.

When the song was finished she put on her dress, went around the stage, and said a few words to the man who’d tipped her so well. Then she came over and sat down on the stool next to me.

“What’s going on?” Ani asked. “You look like shit.”

“I had an interview.”

“That doesn’t quite explain it.”

She took one of my cigarettes and lit it and exhaled the smoke through

her nose and mouth. She had dyed red hair now and very light brown eyes.

"I hate dancing when I have my period," she said.

"Thanks for sharing," I said.

She smiled. On the other side of the small stage, the man with the well-trimmed beard was watching us.

"Who's the guy?" I asked.

"Just a customer."

"A big fan."

"What's wrong with that?"

"I'm just saying. He keeps looking over here."

"Don't worry about him," she said.

"I'm not worried."

"You know what happened to me earlier?" she asked. "Come on, don't look over there. Look over here. Look at me. So you wanna hear the story of what happened to me?"

"Go ahead," I said.

"This cripple came in earlier and he liked me a lot. I'd seen him before and he always tips me a lot. But this time he was tipping a lot a lot. He wanted a lap dance so I'm like fine. I gave it to him at his table. Then he wanted to go into the back room, so I'm like fine, so I took him and wheeled him back in his wheelchair. When we were alone he said he'd give me four hundred dollars to suck his dick. Now I sucked a lot a dick, but I never sucked no dick at the club and I never sucked no cripple's dick before period, but I was like fine four hundred bucks what the fuck. So then he unzips his pants and takes it out and the shit's like the size of my forearm."

I laughed.

"It's not funny," she said.

"It is funny."

"It's traumatic."

"What did you do?"

"I didn't do shit. He was just sitting there with this fucking humongous dick and it was like one of those moments when your whole life like flashes in front of your eyes and you see everything real clear for a second."

I could see her biggest fan, in the mirror, rubbing his sculpted beard, all those dollars in his pocket.

“Are you listening to me?” said Ani. “Quit looking at him. Just ignore him. He won’t do nothing.”

“So what happened with the cripple?”

“I told him to put his dick away. We had to wait awhile before he could fit the fucking thing back in his pants. Then I wheeled him back. He called me a cold bitch. That’s what he said. He said, “you cold bitch,” as I was wheeling him. He said that I was prejudiced against cripples. That bothered me a lot. I don’t think I’m prejudiced against cripples or cold or a bitch for that matter.”

“No, you’re real warm,” I said.

“Fuck you I am.”

Just then the song that had been playing ended and the DJ came on the microphone and announced that Ani was the next dancer.

“Fuck, I can’t believe this shit,” she said. “A bitch can’t even get a break around here.”

She crushed out her cigarette. “I’ll be back.”

As I watched her dance, I felt myself leave my body and for a moment there was only pain—without form, without end. Then her biggest fan stood up and came around the stage, and I came back into myself with a vengeance.

My heart was pounding.

He sat down in the stool that Ani had been sitting in. He took a cigarette from behind his ear and put it between his teeth. He had big, perfect teeth.

“What happened, brother? You look like you got a problem,” he said. His Zippo lighter made a pleasing, three part sound when he opened it, lit the cigarette, then closed it. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” I said.

His tongue ran back and forth across his lower lip. “You keep looking over and staring at me? Do you know who I am?”

I didn’t say anything.

“What happened, brother, can’t you talk? I asked you a question.”

I turned and looked at him directly.

“Back up or I’m going to kill you,” I said.

He crushed out his cigarette and laughed. He put his hands up and wiggled his fingers. “Back up or I’m going to kill you,” he repeated in a high-pitched, mocking voice.

“Okay, fine,” I said, closing my eyes and shaking my head. “That’s fine.”

I felt almost giddy, as I stood up and reached over the bar and grabbed the nearest bottle. I swung it, and he tried to duck away, but I caught him on the side of his head. He staggered and brought both hands up to the place where I’d hit him. I hit him again in the middle of the forehead and the bottle broke. He was covered in gin. The music stopped, and I heard someone screaming. I thrust the bottleneck hard, like a dagger, and got him once in the cheek and once in the eye, and he doubled over, holding his face, and I picked up the stool I’d been sitting on and hit him as hard as I could on the back of his head and he went down and I kicked him a few times in the ribs and rolled him over with my boot. He was half-conscious and bleeding badly. There were shards of glass glinting in the blood. I heard Ani yelling, “Get the fuck off him! Get the fuck off him!” Poor Ani. I bent down and stabbed him twice in the neck and blood shot out in a thick hot jet. Some hands grabbed at me and I broke free of the hands and ran out through the front door.

I ran and ran and then when I saw nobody was following me I slowed and walked real fast. The rust colored light was exploding in the windows above my head. Pigeons perched on rooftop edges, watching. The crisp sudden shadows of them as they moved over the street and across the bright red brick of the abandoned buildings. My own shadow falling on the sidewalk and bending up and falling on the brick. The violent, roaring shadows of trucks tearing over me as I went along next to the elevated highway. Everything was brilliantly alive.

When I reached my car, I realized I still had the bloody bottleneck in my hand and I dropped it in the gutter. I was bleeding from a big mouth-like cut on my palm. I took off my interview shirt and wrapped it around the wound, found my keys, and drove off.

* * *

The front of our house was dark and empty, but the kitchen light was on. I parked at the end of the block. I let myself in as quietly as I could. I heard water running. My wife’s white jacket was hanging on the back of a chair. There were a few long red hairs stuck to the collar. I went to the edge of the living room, and peeked around the corner into the kitchen. I saw her hand holding a yellow sponge and washing the dishes.

“Is that you, Frank?” she said.

I moved back into the shadows and stood very still.

“Frank?”

“Yeah, it’s me.”

She turned the water off.

“Where have you been? I was getting worried.”

“You know where I was.”

“At your interview?”

“Of course.”

“And then you went out to celebrate.”

“Don’t mock me, Marie. I can’t do it.”

“What are you talking about?” She came out and put her arms around me. “Mr. Berry called this evening.”

“Mr. Berry?”

“He said he interviewed you today.”

“Yeah, of course.”

“He told me to tell you that he wants to hire you.”

“What?”

She hugged me again, tighter. “I know it’s not much, not the kind of work you really want, but it’s something, it’s a start. I’m just so happy,” she said. And then she noticed my hand. “Jesus, what happened to you?”

“I cut my hand. Let me just go wash up. I’ll come back down, and we’ll celebrate.”

“Jesus, you’ve got blood on you, Frank.”

“That’s what happens when you cut your hand.”

“But it’s all over you.”

“I’ll tell you about it just as soon as I come down.”

“Frank, what happened?”

“Let me just get this blood off me. Let me just put something on my hand. I cut it on some glass. I’ll be down in a second.”

I went upstairs and washed the man’s blood off my face and arms, and I washed my hand as well as I could, and got all the bits of glass out. I dried off and went in the bathroom and wrapped one of Marie’s handkerchiefs around my hand.

Then I went in my son’s room, quietly so as not to wake him. He was asleep in his crib. Whale sounds were coming from the sound machine.

I stood there looking down at him, watching him breathe. His tiny hand lay next to his face, which was turned to one side, illuminated by

the blue light from the sound machine. Next month he would be one year old. I closed my eyes.

I wanted another chance to live.

Then—how much later? a minute? ten minutes?—there was a loud knock on the door. I kissed my hand and touched it to his wispy head. I couldn't believe it was happening like this and so fast. I tiptoed out of his room, shut the door behind me, and ran to our bedroom. The knock came again. "Police!" I heard. I opened the window, climbed out onto the ledge, and jumped into the tree that grew right outside it, banging my hurt hand, gritting my teeth against the pain.

I climbed down, hopped a fence, ran through our neighbor's yard, hopped another fence and another. Despair had endowed me with a terrible strength. I came out on the street adjacent to ours, and I went around the corner to where I parked the car.

I sat in the driver's seat, getting my breath. I could see the lights silently turning red and blue against the trees and houses down at the other end of the block. There were four or five police cars in front of our house.

With the headlights off and the motor running, I watched from the end of the block.

"You morons," I said. "I'm right here."

I lit a cigarette. Two policemen came out of my house and one of them shook his head. Then my wife came out. She was bathed in the police lights, alone in the middle of our yellow lawn. Such a beautiful, tired woman, who had always tried real hard to see the good in me and always claimed she could.

Don't think for a second that I didn't understand what I was losing. I crushed my cigarette out in the ashtray, backed the car around the corner and drove towards the highway.