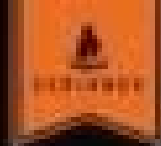


A NOVEL BY

RICHARD
BACHMAN



BLAZE

FOREWORD BY

STEPHEN
KING

Blaze

by

Stephen King

Dont Make Him Mad

GLEN WAS GRINNING. State kid, he said. He hit Blaze in the middle of Blazes dented forehead and his grin faltered as pain exploded up his arm. Blazes forehead was very hard, dented or not.

For a moment he forgot to back up and Blaze shot his fist out. He didnt use his body; he just used his arm like a piston. His knuckles connected with Glens mouth. Glen screamed as his lips burst against his teeth and began to bleed. The yelling intensified.

Glen tasted his own blood and forgot about backing up. He forgot about taunting the ugly kid with the busted forehead. He just waded in, swinging roundhouse punches from port and starboard.

Blaze set his feet and met him.

Also by Richard Bachman

The Long Walk
Roadwork
The Running Man
Thinner
The Regulators

Foreword by Stephen King

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*For Tommy and Lori Spruce
And thinking of James T. Farrell*

These are the slums of the heart.
JOHN D. MAC DONALD

Full Disclosure

DEAR CONSTANT READER,

This is a trunk novel, okay? I want you to know that while you've still got your sales slip and before you drip something like gravy or ice cream on it, and thus make it difficult or impossible to return. It's a revised and updated trunk novel, but that doesn't change the basic fact. The Bachman name is on it because it's the last novel from 1966-1973, which was that gentleman's period of greatest productivity.

During those years I was actually two men. It was Stephen King who wrote (and sold) horror stories and to raunchy skin mags like *Cavalier* and *Adam*, but it was Bachman who wrote a series of novels that didn't sell to anybody. These included *Rage*, *The Long Walk*, *Roadwork*, and *The Running Man*. All four were published as paperback originals.

Blaze was the last of those early novelsthe fifth quarter, if you like. Or just another well-known writer's trunk novel, if you insist. It was written in late 1972 and early 1973. I thought it was great while I was writing it, and crap when I read it over. My recollection is that I never showed it to a single publisher - not even Doubleday, where I had made a friend named William G. Thompson. Bill was the guy who would later discover John Grisham, and it was Bill who contracted for the book. Following *Blaze*, a twisted but fairly entertaining tale of prom-night in central Maine.

I forgot about *Blaze* for a few years. Then, after the other early Bachmans had been published, I took it out and looked it over. After reading the first twenty pages or so, I decided my first judgment had been correct, and returned it to purdah. I thought the writing was okay, but the story reminded me of something Oscar Wilde once said. He claimed it was impossible to read *The Old Curiosity Shop* without weeping copious tears of laughter. So *Blaze* was forgotten, but never really lost. It was once stuffed in some corner of the Fogler Library at the University of Maine with the rest of their Stephen King/Richard Bachman stuff.

Blaze ended up spending the next thirty years in the dark. And then I published a slim paperback original called *The Colorado Kid* with an imprint called Hard Case Crime. This line of books, the brainchild of a very smart and very cool fellow named Charles Ardai, was dedicated to reviving old noir and hardboiled paperback crime novels, and publishing new ones. *The Kid* was decidedly softboiled, but Charles decided to publish it anyway, with one of those great old paperback covers.

The whole project was a blast except for the slow royalty payments. About a year later, I thought maybe I'd like to go the Hard Case route again, possibly with something that had a hard edge. My thoughts turned to *Blaze* for the first time in years, but trailing along behind came that damned Oscar Wilde quote about *The Old Curiosity Shop*. The *Blaze* I remembered wasn't hardboiled noir, but a three-handkerchief weepie. Still, I decided it wouldn't hurt to look. If, that was, the book could even be found. I remembered the carton, and I remembered the squarish type-face (my wife Tabitha's old college typewriter, an impossible-to-kill Olivetti portable), but I had no idea what had become of the manuscript that was supposedly inside the carton. For all I knew, it was gone, baby, gone.

It wasn't. Marsha, one of my two valuable assistants, found it in the Fogler Library. She would not trust me with the original manuscript (I, uh, lose things), but she made a Xerox. I must have been using a next-door-to-dead typewriter ribbon when I composed *Blaze*, because the copy was barely legible, and the notes in the margins were little more than blurs. Still, I sat down with it and began

read, ready to suffer the pangs of embarrassment only ones younger, smart-assier self can provide.

~~But I thought it was pretty good - certainly better than *Roadwork*, which I had, at the time~~ considered mainstream American fiction. It just wasn't a noir novel. It was, rather, a stab at the sort of naturalism-with-crime that James M. Cain and Horace McCoy practiced in the thirties. I thought the flashbacks were actually better than the front-story. They reminded me of James T. Farrell's *Your Lonigan* trilogy and the forgotten (but tasty) *Gas-House McGinty*. Sure, it was the three Ps in place but it had been written by a young man (I was twenty-five) who was convinced he was WRITING FOR THE AGES.

I thought *Blaze* could be re-written and published without too much embarrassment, but it was probably wrong for Hard Case Crime. It was, in a sense, not a crime novel at all. I thought it could be a minor tragedy of the underclass, if the re-writing was ruthless. To that end, I adopted the flat, dead tones which the best noir fiction seems to have, even using a type-font called American Typewriter to remind myself of what I was up to. I worked fast, never looking ahead or back, wanting also to capture the headlong drive of those books (I'm thinking more of Jim Thompson and Richard Stark here than I am of Cain, McCoy, or Farrell). I thought I would do my revisions at the end, with a pencil, rather than editing in the computer, as is now fashionable. If the book was going to be a throwback, I wanted to play into that rather than shying away from it. I also determined to strip all the sentiment I could from the writing itself, wanted the finished book to be as stark as an empty house without even a rug on the floor. My mother would have said I wanted its bare face hanging out. Only the reader will be able to judge if I succeeded.

If it matters to you (it shouldn't - hopefully you came for a good story, and hopefully you will get one), any royalties or subsidiary income generated by *Blaze* will go to The Haven Foundation, which was created to help freelance artists who are down on their luck.

One other thing, I guess, while I've got you by the lapel. I tried to keep the *Blaze* time-frame vague as possible, so it wouldn't seem too dated. It was impossible to take out all the dated material, however; keeping some of it was important to the plot. If you think of this story's time-frame as America, Not All That Long Ago, I think you'll be okay.

May I close by circling back to where I started? This is an old novel, but I believe I was wrong in my initial assessment that it was a bad novel. You may disagree but *The Little Match Girl* it ain't. Always, Constant Reader, I wish you well, I thank you for reading this story, and I hope you enjoy it. I won't say I hope you mist up a little, but -

Yeah. Yeah, I *will* say that. Just as long as they're not tears of laughter.

Stephen King (for Richard Bachman)

Sarasota, Florida

January 30th, 2007

1. In saying this, I assume you're like me and rarely sit down to a meal - or even a lowly snack - without your current book near at hand.

2. With this exception: Bachman, writing under the pseudonym of John Swithen, sold a single hard-boiled crime story, *The Fifth Quarter*.

3. Now out of print, and a good thing.

4. The Bachman novel following these was *Thinner*, and it was no wonder I got outed, since that one was actually written by Stephen King - the bogus author photo on the back flap fooled no one.

5. I believe I am the only writer in the history of English story-telling whose career was based on sanitary napkins; that part of my literary legacy seems secure.

6. I have had the same reaction to *Everyman*, by Philip Roth, Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, and

The Memory Keepers Daughter, by Kim Edwards- at some point while reading these books, I just start to laugh, wave my hands, and shout: ~~Bring on the cancer! Bring on the blindness!~~ We haven't had those yet!

7. Not in an actual trunk, though; in a cardboard carton.

8. A dame with trouble in her eyes. And ecstasy, presumably, in her pants.

9. Also a throwback to the bad old paperback days, now that I think of it.

10. In my career I have managed to lose not one but two pretty good novels-in-progress. *Under the Dome* was only 50 pages long at the time it disappeared, but *The Cannibals* was over 200 pages at the time it went MIA. No copies of either. That was before computers, and I never used carbons for final drafts - it felt *haughty*, somehow.

11. And, of course, it's an homage to *Of Mice and Men* - kinda hard to miss that.

12. Purple, pulsing, and panting.

13. To learn more about The Haven Foundation, you can go to my website. That's www.stephenking.com.

14. I didn't like the idea of Clay Blaisdell growing up in post-World War II America; all that ha come to seem impossibly antique, although it seemed (and probably was) okay in 1973, when I first pecking it out in the trailer where my wife and I lived with our two children.

15. If I had written it today, certainly cell phones and Caller ID would have needed to be taken into consideration.

Chapter 1

GEORGE WAS SOMEWHERE in the dark. Blaze couldn't see him, but the voice came in loud and clear, rough and a little hoarse. George always sounded as if he had a cold. He'd had an accident when he was a kid. He never said what, but there was a dilly of a scar on his adam's apple.

Not that one, you dummy, it's got bumper stickers all over it. Get a Chevy or a Ford. Dark blue or green. Two years old. No more, no less. Nobody remembers them. And no stickers.

Blaze passed the little car with the bumper stickers and kept walking. The faint thump of the bass reached him even here, at the far end of the beer joints parking lot. It was Saturday night and the place was crowded. The air was bitterly cold. He had hitched him a ride into town, but now he had been in the open air for forty minutes and his ears were numb. He had forgotten his hat. He always forgot something. He had started to take his hands out of his jacket pockets and put them over his ears, but George put the kibosh on that. George said his ears could freeze but not his hands. You didn't need your ears to hotwire a car. It was three above zero.

There, George said. On your right.

Blaze looked and saw a Saab. With a sticker. It didn't look like the right kind of car at all.

That's your left, George said. Your *right*, dummy. The hand you pick your nose with.

I'm sorry, George.

Yes, he was being a dummy again. He could pick his nose with either hand, but he knew his right from the left, the hand you write with. He thought of that hand and looked to that side. There was a dark green Ford there.

Blaze walked over to the Ford, elaborately casual. He looked over his shoulder. The beer joint was a college bar called The Bag. That was a stupid name, a bag was what you called your balls. It was a walk-down. There was a band on Friday and Saturday nights. It would be crowded and warm inside. Lots of little girls in short skirts dancing up a storm. It would be nice to go inside, just look around -

What are *you* supposed to be doing? George asked. Walking on Commonwealth Ave? You couldn't fool my old blind granny. Just do it, huh?

Okay, I was just -

Yeah, I know what you was just. Keep your mind on your business.

Okay.

What are you, Blaze?

He hung his head, snorkled back snot. I'm a dummy.

George always said there was no shame in this, but it was a fact and you had to recognize it. You couldn't fool anybody into thinking you were smart. They looked at you and saw the truth: the lights were on but nobody was home. If you were a dummy, you had to just do your business and get out. And if you were caught, you owned up to everything except the guys who were with you, because they'd get everything else out of you in the end, anyway. George said dummies couldn't lie worth shit.

Blaze took his hands out of his pockets and flexed them twice. The knuckles popped in the cold street air.

You ready, big man? George asked.

Yes.

Then I'm going to get a beer. Take care of it.

Blaze felt panic start. It came up his throat. Hey, no, I ain't never done this before. I just watched you.

Well this time youre going to do more than watch.

But -

He stopped. There was no sense going on, unless he wanted to shout. He could hear the hard crunch of packed snow as George headed toward the beer joint. Soon his footsteps were lost in the heartbeat of the bass.

Jesus, Blaze said. Oh Jesus Christ.

And his fingers were getting cold. At this temperature theyd only be good for five minutes. Maybe less. He went around to the drivers side door, thinking the door would be locked. If the door was locked, this car was no good because he didnt have the Slim Jim, George had the Slim Jim. Only the drivers door was unlocked. He opened the door, reached in, found the hood release, and pulled it. Then he went around front, fiddled for the second catch, found that one, and lifted the hood.

There was a small Penlight in his pocket. He took it out. He turned it on and trained the beam on the engine.

Find the ignition wire.

But there was so much spaghetti. Battery cables, hoses, spark-plug wires, the gas-line -

He stood there with sweat running down the sides of his face and freezing on his cheeks. This was no good. This wouldnt never be no good. And all at once he had an idea. It wasnt a very good idea, but he didnt have many and when he had one he had to chase it. He went back to the drivers side and opened the door again. The light came on, but he couldnt help that. If someone saw him fiddling around, they would just think he was having trouble getting started. Sure, cold night like this, that made sense, didnt it? Even George couldnt give him grief on that one. Not much, anyway.

He flipped down the visor over the steering wheel, hoping against hope that a spare key might flop down, sometimes folks kept one up there, but there was nothing except an old ice scraper. *The* visor flopped down. He tried the glove compartment next. It was full of papers. He raked them out onto the floor, kneeling on the seat to do it, his breath puffing. There were papers, and a box of Junior Mints, but no keys.

There, you goddam dummy, he heard George saying, *are you satisfied now? Ready to at least try hooking up the wiring it now?*

He supposed he was. He supposed he could at least tear some of the wires loose and touch them together like George did and see what happened. He closed the door and started toward the front of the Ford again with his head down. Then he stopped. A new idea had struck him. He went back, opened the door, bent down, flipped up the floormat, and there it was. The key didnt say FORD on it, it didnt say anything on it because it was a dupe, but it had the right square head and everything.

Blaze picked it up and kissed the cold metal.

Unlocked car, he thought. Then he thought: *Unlocked car and key under the floormat.* Then he thought: *I aint the dumbest guy out tonight after all, George.*

He got in behind the wheel, slammed the door, slid the key in the ignition slot - it went in nice - then realized he couldnt see the parking lot because the hood was still up. He looked around quickly the first one way and then the other, making sure that George hadnt decided to come back and help him out. George would never let him hear the end of it if he saw the hood still up like that. But George wasnt there. No one was there. The parking lot was tundra with cars.

Blaze got out and slammed the hood. Then he got back in and paused in the act of reaching for the door handle. What about George? Should he go in yonder beer-farm and get him? Blaze sat frowning with his head down. The dome light cast yellow light on his big hands.

Guess what? he thought, raising his head again at last. *Screw him.*

Screw you, George, he said. George had left him to hitchhike in, just meeting him here, then leaving him again. Left him to do the dirtywork, and it was only by the dumbest of dumb luck that Blaze had

found a key, so screw George. Let *him* thumb a ride back in the three-degree cold.

Blaze closed the door, dropped the gear-shift into Drive, and pulled out of the parking space. Once in an actual lane of travel, he stomped down heavily and the Ford leaped, rear end fishtailing on the hard-packed snow. He slammed on the brakes, stiff with panic. What was he doing? What was he thinking of? Go without George? He'd get picked up before he went five miles. Probably get picked up at the first stop-n-go light. He couldn't go without George.

But George is dead.

That was bullshit. George was just there. He went inside for a beer.

He's dead.

Oh, George, Blaze moaned. He was hunched over the wheel. Oh, George, don't be dead.

He sat there awhile. The Ford's engine sounded okay. It wasn't knocking or anything, even though it was cold. The gas gauge said three-quarters. The exhaust rose in the rearview, white and frozen.

George didn't come out of the beer joint. He couldn't come out cause he never went in. George was dead. Had been three months. Blaze started to shake.

After a little bit, he caught hold of himself. He began to drive. No one stopped him at the first traffic light, or the second. No one stopped him all the way out of town. By the time he got to the Appleton town line, he was doing fifty. Sometimes the car slid a little on patches of ice, but this didn't bother him. He just turned with the skid. He had been driving on icy roads since he was a teenager.

Outside of town he pushed the Ford to sixty and let it ride. The high beams poked the road with bright fingers and rebounded brilliantly from the snowbanks on either side. Boy, there was going to be one surprised college kid when he took his college girl back to that empty slot. She'd look at him and say, *You are a dummy, I ain't going with you again, not here or nowhere.*

Aren't, Blaze said. If she's a college girl, she'll say aren't.

That made him smile. The smile changed his whole face. He turned on the radio. It was tuned to rock. Blaze turned the knob until he found country. By the time he reached the shack, he was singing along with the radio at the top of his voice and he had forgotten all about George.

Chapter 2

BUT HE REMEMBERED the next morning.

That was the curse of being a dummy. You were always being surprised by grief, because you could never remember the important things. The only stuff that stuck was dumb stuff. Like that poem Mr. Selig made them learn way back in the fifth grade: Under the spreading chestnut tree, the village smithy stands. What good was that? What good when you caught yourself peeling potatoes for two and got smacked all over again with knowing you didnt need to peel no two potatoes, because the other guy was never going to eat another spud?

Well, maybe it wasnt grief. Maybe that word wasnt the right word. Not if that meant crying and knocking your head against the wall. You didnt do that for the likes of George. But there was loneliness. And there was fear.

George would say: Jesus, would you change your fuckin skivvies? Those things are ready to start up on their own. Theyre disgusting.

George would say: You only tied one, dimbulb.

George would say: Aw, fuck, turn around and *Ill* tuck it in. Like havin a kid.

When he got up the morning after he stole the Ford, George was sitting in the other room. Blaze couldnt see him but knew he was sitting in the broke-down easy-chair like always, with his head down so his chin was almost on his chest. The first thing he said was, You screwed up again, Kon. Congratcha-fuckin-lations.

Blaze hissed when his feet hit the cold floor. Then he fumbled his shoes on. Naked except for them, he ran and looked out the window. No car. He sighed with relief. It came out in a little puff he could see.

No, I didnt. I put it in the shed, just like you told me.

You didnt wipe the goddam tracks, though, did you? Why dont you put out a sign, Blaze? **THE WAY TO THE HOT CAR.** You could charge admission. Why dont you just do that?

Aw, George -

Aw, George, aw, George. Go out and sweep em up.

Okay. He started for the door.

Blaze?

What?

Put on your fucking pants first, why dont you?

Blaze felt his face burn.

Like a kid, George said, sounding resigned. One who can shave.

George knew how to stick it in, all right. Only finally hed gone and stuck it in the wrong guy, too often and too far. That was how you ended up dead, with nothing smart to say. Now George was just dead, and Blaze was making his voice up in his mind, giving him the good lines. George had been dead since that crap game in the warehouse.

Im crazy for even trying to go through with this, Blaze thought. *A dum-dum like me.*

But he pulled on his underwear shorts (checking them carefully for stains first), then a thermal undershirt, then a flannel top shirt and a pair of heavy corduroy pants. His Sears workboots were under the bed. His Army surplus parka was hanging on the doorknob. He hunted for his mittens and finally found them on the shelf over the dilapidated woodstove in the combination kitchen-living room. He got his checkered cap with the earflaps and put it on, careful to give the visor a little good-luck twist.

to the left. Then he went out and got the broom leaning against the door.

~~The morning was bright and bitter. The moisture in his nose crackled immediately. A gust of wind drove snow as fine as powdered sugar into his face, making him wince. It was all right for George to give orders. George was inside drinking coffee by the stove. Like last night, taking off for a beer leaving Blaze to figure out the car. And there he would still be if he hadnt had the dumb luck to find the keys somewhere, either under the floormat or in the glove compartment, he forgot which. Sometimes he didnt think George was a very good friend.~~

He swept the tracks away with the broom, pausing several minutes to admire them before he started. How the treads stood up and cast shadows, mostly, little perfect things. It was funny how little things could be so perfect and no one ever saw them. He looked at this until he was tired of looking (and George to tell him to hurry up) and then worked his way down the short driveway to the road, brushing the tracks away. The plow had gone by in the night, pushing back the snow-dunes the wind made across these country roads where there were open fields to one side and tother, and any other tracks were gone.

Blaze tromped back to the shack. He went inside. Now it felt warm inside. Getting out of bed it had felt cold, but now it felt warm. That was funny, too - how your sense of things could change. He took off his coat and boots and flannel shirt and sat down to the table in his undershirt and cords. He turned on the radio and was surprised when it didnt play the rock George listened to but warmed right up to country. Loretta Lynn was singing that your good girl is gonna go bad. George would laugh and say something like, Thats right, honey - you can go bad all over my face. And Blaze would laugh too, but not down deep that song always made him sad. Lots of country songs did.

When the coffee was hot he jumped up and poured two cups. He loaded one with cream and hollered, George? Heres your coffee, hoss! Dont let it go cold!

No answer.

He looked down at the white coffee. He didnt drink coffee-with, so what about it? Just what about it? Something came up in his throat then and he almost hucked Georges goddam white coffee across the room, but then he didnt. He took it oversink and poured it down instead. That was controlling your temper. When you were a big guy, you had to do that or get in trouble.

Blaze hung around the shack until after lunch. Then he drove the stolen car out of the shed, stopping by the kitchen steps long enough to get out and throw snowballs at the license plates. That was pretty smart. It would make them hard to read.

What in the name of God are you doing? George asked from inside the shed.

Never mind, Blaze said. Youre only in my head, anyway. He got in the Ford and drove out to the road.

This isnt very bright, George said. Now he was in the back seat. Youre driving around in a stolen car. No fresh paintjob, no fresh plates, no nothing. Where you going?

Blaze didnt say anything.

You aint going to Ocoma, are you?

Blaze didnt say anything.

Oh, fuck, you are, George said. Fuck *me*. Isnt the once you *have* to go enough?

Blaze didnt say anything. He was dummied up.

Listen to me, Blaze. Turn around. You get picked up, its out the window. Everything. The whole deal.

Blaze knew that was right, but wouldnt turn back. Why should George always get to order him around? Even dead, he wouldnt stop giving orders. Sure, it was Georges plan, that one big score even small-timer dreams of. Only we could really make it happen, hed say, but usually when he was drunk

or high and never like he really believed it.

They had spent most of their time running two-man short cons, and mostly George seemed satisfied with that no matter what he said when he was drunk or getting his smoke on. Maybe the Ocoma Heights score was just a game for George, or what he sometimes called mental masturbation when he saw guys in suits talking about politics on TV. Blaze knew George was smart. It was his guts he had never been sure of.

But now that he was dead, what choice? Blaze was no good by himself. The one time he'd tried running the menswear con after Georges death, he'd had to book like a bastard to keep from being picked up. He got the lady's name out of the obituary column just the way George did, had started in Georges spiel, had shown the credit slips (there was a whole bag of them at the shack, and from the best stores). He told her about how sad he was to have to come by at such a sad time, but business was business and he was sure she would understand that. She said she did. She invited him to stand in the foyer while she got her pockabook. He never suspected that she had called the police. If she had come back and pointed a gun at him, he probably would have still been standing there waiting when the police had up. His time sense had never been good.

But she came back with a gun and pointed it at him. It was a silver lady's gun with little swoops on the sides and pearl handles. The police are on their way, she said, but before they get here, I want you to explain yourself. I want you to tell me what kind of a lowlife preys on a woman whose husband is even cold in his grave yet.

Blaze didn't care what she wanted him to tell her. He turned and ran out the door and across the porch and down the steps to the walk. He could run pretty good once he got going, but he was slow getting going, and panic made him slower that day. If she had pulled the trigger, she might have put a bullet in the back of his big head or shot off an ear or missed him entirely. With a little short-barreled shooter like that, you couldn't tell. But she never fired.

When he got back to the shack, he was half-moaning with fear and his stomach was tied in knots. He wasn't afraid of jail or the penitentiary, not even of the police - although he knew they would confuse him with their questions, they always did - but he was afraid of how easy she saw through him. Like it wasn't nothing to her. They had hardly ever seen through George, and when they did, he always knew it was happening and got them out.

And now this. He wasn't going to get away with it, knew it, kept on anyway. Maybe he wanted to get back inside. Maybe that wouldn't be so bad, now that George was wasted. Let someone else do the thinking and provide the meals.

Maybe he was trying to get caught right now, driving this hot car through the middle of Ocoma Heights. Right past the Gerard house.

In the icebox of New England winter, it looked like a frozen palace. Ocoma Heights was old money (that's what George said), and the houses were really estates. They were surrounded by big lawns in the summertime, but now the lawns were glazed snowfields. It had been a hard winter.

The Gerard house was the best one of all. George called it Early American Hot Shit, but Blaze thought it was beautiful. George said the Gerards had made their money in shipping, that World War I made them rich and World War II made them holy. Snow and sun struck cold fire from the many windows. George said there were over thirty rooms. He had done the preliminary work as a meter reader from Central Valley Power. That had been in September. Blaze had driven the truck, which was borrowed rather than stolen, although he supposed the police would have called it stolen if they'd been caught. People were playing croquet on the side lawn. Some were girls, high school girls or maybe college girls, good-looking. Blaze watched them and started feeling horny. When George got back and told him to wheel it, Blaze told him about the good-looking girls, who had gone around to the back by then.

I saw em, George said. Think theyre better than anybody. Think their shit dont stink.

Pretty, though.

Who gives a rats ass? George asked moodily, and crossed his arms over his chest.

Dont you ever get horny, George?

Over babies like that? You jest. Now shut up and drive.

Now, remembering that, Blaze smiled. George was like the fox who couldnt reach the grapes and told everyone they were sour. Miss Jolison read them that story in the second grade.

It was a big family. There was the old Mr. and Mrs. Gerard - he was eighty and still able to put away a pint of Jack a day, thats what George said. There was the middle Mr. and Mrs. Gerard. And then there was the young Mr. and Mrs. Gerard. The young Mr. Gerard was Joseph Gerard III, and he really was young, just twenty-five. His wife was a Narmenian. George said that made her a spic. Blaze had thought only Italians could be spics.

He turned around up the street and cruised past the house once more, wondering what it felt like to be married at twenty-two. He kept on going, heading home. Enough was enough.

The middle Gerard had other kids besides Joseph Gerard III, but they didnt matter. What mattered was the baby. Joseph Gerard IV. Big name for such a little baby. He was only two months old when Blaze and George did their meter-reading bit in September. That made him - um, there were one-two-three-four months between September and January - six months old. He was the original Joes on the great-grandson.

If youre gonna pull a snatch, you got to snatch a baby, George said. A baby cant ID you, so you can return it alive. It cant fuck you up by trying to escape or sending out notes or some shit. All a baby can do is lie there. It dont even know its been snatched.

They had been in the shack, sitting in front of the TV and drinking beer.

How much do you think theyd be good for? Blaze asked.

Enough so youd never have to spend another winter day freezing your ass off selling fake magazine subscriptions or collecting for the Red Cross, George said. Hows that sound?

But how much would you ask?

Two million, George said. One for you and one for me. Why be greedy?

Greedies get caught, Blaze said.

Greedies get caught, George agreed. Thats what I taught you. But whats the workman worthy of? Blaze-a-rino? Whatd I teach you about that?

His hire, Blaze said.

Thats right, George said, and hit his beer. The workmans worthy of his fucking hire.

So here he was, driving back to the miserable shack where he and George had been living since drifting north from Boston, actually planning to go through with it. He thought he would be caught for two million dollars! You could go someplace and never be cold again. And if they caught you? The worst they could do would be put you in jail for life.

And if that happened, youd still never be cold again.

When the stolen Ford was back in the shed, he remembered to brush the tracks away. That would make George happy.

He made himself a couple of hamburgers for his lunch.

You really going through with it? George asked from the other room.

You lyin down, George?

No, standin on my head and jerkin off. I asked you a question.

Im gonna try. Will you help me?

George sighed. I guess Ill have to. Im stuck with you now. But Blaze?

What, George?

~~Only ask for a million. Greedies get caught.~~

Okay, only a million. You want a hamburger?

No answer. George was dead again.

Chapter 3

HE WAS GETTING ready to do the kidnapping that night, the sooner the better. George stopped him.

What are you up to, dinkleballs?

Blaze had been getting ready to go start the Ford. Now he stopped. Gettin ready to do it, George.

Do what?

Snatch the kid.

George laughed.

What you laughin at, George? *As if I dont know*, he thought.

You.

Why?

How are you gonna snatch him? Tell me that.

Blaze frowned. It turned his face, already ugly, into the face of a troll. The way we planned it, guess. Outn his room.

Which room?

Well -

How are you gonna get in?

He remembered that part. One of the upstairs windows. They got those simple catches on em. You saw that, George. When we was bein the lectric company. Remember?

Got a ladder?

Well -

When you get the kid, where you gonna put him?

In the car, George.

Oh my fuckin word. George only said this when he had bottomed out and was at a loss for all other expression.

George -

I *know* youre gonna put him in the fuckin car, I never thought you were gonna carry him home pigga-back. I meant when you get him back here. What are you gonna do then? Where you gonna put him?

Blaze thought about the shack. He looked around. Well -

What about didies? What about bottles? And baby food! Or did you think he was gonna have a hamburger and a bottle of beer for his fuckin dinner?

Well -

Shut up! You say that one more time and Im gonna puke!

Blaze sat down in a kitchen chair with his head down. His face was hot.

And turn off the shit-kicking music! That woman sounds like shes about to fly up her own cunt!

Okay, George.

Blaze turned off the radio. The TV, an old Jap thing George picked up at a yard sale, was busted.

George?

No answer.

George, come on, dont go away. Im sorry. He could hear how scared he was. Almost blubbing.

Okay, George said, just when Blaze was about to give up. Heres what you have to do. You have to pull a little score. Not a big one. Just a little one. That mom-n-pop where we used to stop for suds o

Route 1 would probably be okay.

Yeah?

You still got the Colt?

Under the bed, in a shoebox.

Use that. And wear a stocking over your face. Otherwise the guy who works nights will recognize you.

Yeah.

Go in Saturday night, at closing. Say, ten minutes of one. They don't take checks, so you ought to get two, three hundred bucks.

Sure! That's great!

Blaze, there's one more thing.

What, George?

Take the bullets out of the gun, okay?

Sure, George, I know that, it's how we roll.

It's how we roll, right. Hit the guy if you have to, but make sure it doesn't get to no more than page three in State and Local when it makes the paper.

Right.

You're an asshole, Blaze. You know that, right? You're never gonna bring this off. Maybe it'd be better if you got caught on the little one.

I won't, George.

No answer.

George?

No answer. Blaze got up and turned on the radio. At supper he forgot and set two places.

Chapter 4

CLAYTON BLAISDELL, JR., was born in Freeport, Maine. His mother was hit by a truck three years later while crossing Main Street with a bag of groceries. She was killed instantly. The driver was drunk and driving without a license. In court he said he was sorry. He cried. He said he would go back to AA. The judge fined him and gave him sixty days. Little Clay got Life with Father, who knew plenty about drinking and nothing about AA. Clayton Senior worked for Superior Mills in Topsham where he ran the picker and sorter. Co-workers claimed to have seen him do this job sober upon occasion.

Clay could already read when he started the first grade, and grasped the concept of two apples plus three apples with no trouble. He was big for his size even then, and although Freeport was a tough town, he had no trouble on the playground even though he was rarely seen there without a book in his hand or tucked under his arm. His father was bigger, however, and the other kids always found it interesting to see what would be bandaged and what would be bruised when Clay Blaisdell came to school on Mondays.

It will be a miracle if he gets his size without being badly hurt or killed, Sarah Jolison remarked one day in the teachers room.

The miracle didnt happen. One hungover Saturday morning when not much was doing, Clayton Senior staggered out of the bedroom in the second-floor apartment he and his son shared while Clay was sitting crosslegged on the living room floor, watching cartoons and eating Apple Jacks. How many times have I told you not to eat that shit in here? Senior inquired of Junior, then picked him up and threw him downstairs. Clay landed on his head.

His father went down, got him, toted him upstairs, and threw him down again. The first time, Clay remained conscious. The second time, the lights went out. His father went down, got him, toted him upstairs, and looked him over. Fakin sonofabitch, he said, and threw him down again.

There, he told the limp huddle at the foot of the stairs that was his now comatose son. Maybe you should think twice before you tote that fucking shit into the living room again.

Unfortunately, Clay never thought twice about much of anything again. He lay unconscious in Portland General Hospital for three weeks. The doctor in charge of his case voiced the opinion that he would remain so until he died, a human carrot. But the boy woke up. He was, unfortunately, soft in the head. His days of carrying books under his arm were over.

The authorities did not believe Clays father when he told them the boy had done all that damage falling downstairs once. Nor did they believe him when he said the four half-healed cigarette burns on the boys chest were the result of some kind of peelin disease.

The boy never saw the second floor apartment again. He was made a ward of the state, and went directly from the hospital to a county home, where his parentless life began by having his crutches kicked out from under him on the playground by two boys who ran away chortling like trolls. Clay picked himself up and re-set his crutches. He did not cry.

His father did some protesting in the Freeport police station, and more in several Freeport bars. He threatened to go to law in order to regain his son, but never did. He claimed to love Clay, and perhaps he did, a little, but if so, his love was the kind that bites and burns. The boy was better off out of his reach.

But not much better. Hetton House in South Freeport was little more than a poor farm for kids, and

Clays childhood there was wretched, although a little better when his body was mended. Then, at least he could make the worst of the bullies stand away from him in the play yard; him and the few young children who came to look to him for protection. The bullies called him Lunk and Troll and Kong, but he minded none of those names, and he left them alone if they left him alone. Mostly they did, after he licked the worst of them. He wasn't mean, but when provoked he could be dangerous.

The kids who weren't afraid of him called him Blaze, and that was how he came to think of himself.

Once he had a letter from his father. *Dear Son,* it said. *Well, how are You doing. I am fine. Working these days up in Lincoln rolling Lumber. It would be good if the b*****ds didnt steal all the Overtime HA! I am going to get a little place and will send for You once I do. Well, write me a little Letter and tell Your old Pa how it goes. Can you send a Foto.* It was signed *With Love, Clayton Blaisdell.*

Blaze had no photo to send his father, but would have written - the music teacher who came on Tuesdays would have helped him, he was quite sure - but there was no return address on the envelope which was dirty and simply addressed to *Clayton Blaisdell JR The Orfan-Home in FREEPORT MAINE.*

Blaze never heard from him again.

He was placed with several different families during his Hetton House tenure, every time in the fall. They kept him long enough to help pick the crops and help keep their roofs and dooryards shoveled. Then, when spring thaw came, they decided he wasn't quite right and sent him back. Sometimes it wasn't too bad. And sometimes - like with the Bowies and their horrible dog-farm - it was real bad.

When he and HH were quits, Blaze knocked around New England on his own. Sometimes he was happy, but not the way he wanted to be happy, not the way he saw people being happy. When he finally settled in Boston (more or less; he never put down roots), it was because in the country he was lonely. Sometimes when he was in the country he would sleep in a barn and wake in the night and get out and look at the stars and there were so many, and he knew they were there before him, and they would be there after him. That was sort of awful and sort of wonderful. Sometimes when he was hitchhiking and it was going on for November, the wind would blow around him and flap his pants and he would grieve for something that was lost, like that letter which had come with no address. Sometimes he would look at the sky in the spring and see a bird, and it might make him happy, but just as often it felt like something inside him was getting small and ready to break.

Its bad to feel like that, he would think, *and if I do, I shouldnt be watching no birds.* But sometimes he would look up at the sky anyway.

Boston was all right, but sometimes he still got scared. There were a million people in the city, maybe more, and not one gave a shake for Clay Blaisdell. If they looked at him, it was only because he was big and had a dent in his forehead. Sometimes he would have a little fun, and sometimes he would just get frightened. He was trying to have a little fun in Boston when he met George Rackley. After he met George, it was better.

Chapter 5

THE LITTLE MOM-N-POP STORE was Tim & Janets Quik-Pik. Most of the rear shelves were overflowing with jug wine and beer stacked in cardboard cases. A giant cooler ran the length of the back wall. Two of the four aisles were dedicated to munchies. Beside the cash register stood a bottle of pickled eggs as large as a small child. Tim & Janets also stocked such necessities as cigarette sanitary napkins, hot dogs, and stroke-books.

The night man was a pimple-pocked dude who attended the Portland branch of the University of Maine during his days. His name was Harry Nason, and he was majoring in animal husbandry. When the big man with the dented forehead walked in at ten minutes of one, Nason was reading a book from the paperback rack. The book was called *Big and Hard*. The late-night rush had dried up to a trickle. Nason decided that after the big man had bought his jug or his six, he'd close up and go home. Maybe take the book along and beat off. He was thinking that the part about the traveling preacher and the two horny widows might be good for that when the big man put a pistol under his nose and said, "Everything in the register."

Nason dropped the book. Thoughts of beating off left his mind. He gaped at the gun. He opened his mouth to say something intelligent. The kind of thing a guy being stuck up on TV might say, if the guy being stuck up happened to be the hero of the show. What came out was Aaaa.

Everything in the register, the big man repeated. The dent in his forehead was frightening. It looked deep enough for a frog-pond.

Harry Nason recalled - in a frozen sort of way - what his boss had told him he should do in the event of a hold-up: give the robber everything with no argument. He was fully insured. Nason's body suddenly felt very tender and vulnerable, full of bags and waters. His bladder loosened. And all of a sudden once he seemed to have an absolute assful of shit.

Did you hear me, man?

Aaaa, Harry Nason agreed, and punched NO SALE on the cash register.

Put the money in a bag.

Okay. Yes. Sure. He fumbled among the sacks under the counter and dumped most of them on the floor. At last he managed to hold onto one. He flipped up the bill-holders in the cash drawer and began to drop money into the bag.

The door opened and a guy and a girl, probably college kids, walked in. They saw the gun and stopped. Whats this? the guy asked. He was smoking a cigarillo and wearing a button that said POT ROCKS.

Its a hold-up, Nason said. Please dont, uh, antagonize this gentleman.

Too much, the guy with the POT ROCKS button said. He started to grin. He pointed at Nason. His fingernail was dirty. Dudes ripping you off, man.

The hold-up man turned to POT ROCKS. Wallet, he said.

Dude, POT ROCKS said, not losing the grin, Im on *your* side. The prices this place charges are everybody knows Tim and Janet Quarles are, like, the biggest right-wingers since Adolf -

Give me your wallet or Ill blow your head off.

POT ROCKS suddenly realized he might be in some trouble here; for sure he wasn't in a movie. The grin went bye-bye and he stopped talking. Several zits stood out brightly on his cheeks, which were suddenly pale. He dug a black Lord Buxton out of his jeans pocket.

Theres never a cop when you need one, his girlfriend said coldly. She was wearing a long brow

coat and black leather boots. Her hair matched the boots, at least this week.

~~Drop the wallet in the bag, the hold-up guy said. He held the bag out. Harry Nason always thought he could have become a hero at that point by braining the hold-up man with the giant bottle of pickle eggs. Only the hold-up man looked as if he might have a hard head. Very hard.~~

The wallet plopped into the bag.

The hold-up man skirted them and headed for the door. He moved well for a man his size.

You pig, the girl said.

The hold-up man stopped dead. For a moment the girl was sure (so she later told police) that he was going to turn around, open fire, and lay them all out. Later, with the police, they would differ on the hold-up man's hair color (brown, reddish, or blond), his complexion (fair, ruddy, or pale), and his clothes (pea jacket, windbreaker, woolen lumberjack shirt), but they all agreed on his size - big - and his final words before leaving. These were apparently addressed to the blank, dark doorway, almost a moan:

Jeezus, George, I forgot the stocking!

Then he was gone. There was a bare glimpse of him running in the cold white light of the Schlitz sign that hung over the store's entrance, and then an engine roared across the street. A moment later he wheeled out. The car was a sedan, but none of them could ID the make or model. It was beginning to snow.

So much for beer, POT ROCKS said.

Go on back to the cooler and have one on the house, said Harry Nason.

Yeah? You sure?

Sure I'm sure. Your girl, too. What the fuck, were insured. He began to laugh.

When the police asked him, he said he had never seen the stickup guy before. It was only later that he had cause to wonder if he had not in fact seen the stickup guy the previous fall, in the company of a skinny little rat-faced man who was buying wine and mouthing off.

Chapter 6

WHEN BLAZE GOT UP the next morning, snow had piled in drifts all the way to the eaves of the shack and the fire was out. His bladder contracted the second his feet hit the floor. He hurried to the bathroom on the balls of his feet, wincing and blowing out little puffs of white vapor. His urine arched in a high-pressure flow for perhaps thirty seconds, then slowly faded. He sighed, shook off, broiled by the wind.

Much bigger wind was screaming and whooping around the house. The pines outside the kitchen window were dipping and swaying. To Blaze they looked like thin women at a funeral.

He dressed, opened the back door, and fought his way around to the woodpile under the south eave. The driveway was completely gone. Visibility was down to five feet, maybe less. It exhilarated him. The grainy slap of the snow on his face exhilarated him.

The wood was solid chunks of oak. He gathered a huge armful, pausing only to stomp his feet before going back in. He made up the fire with his coat on. Then he filled the coffee pot. He carried two cups to the table.

He paused, frowning. He had forgotten something.

The money! He had never counted the money.

He started into the other room. Georges voice froze him. George was in the bathroom.

Asshole.

George, I -

George, Im an asshole. Can you say that?

I -

No. Say George, Im the asshole who forgot to wear the stocking.

I got the m -

Say it.

George, Im the asshole. I forgot.

Forgot what?

Forgot to wear the stocking.

Now say all of it.

George, Im the asshole who forgot to wear the stocking.

Now say this. Say George, Im the asshole who wants to get caught.

No! That aint true! Thats a lie, George!

Its the truth is what it is. You want to get caught and go to Shawshank and work in the laundry. Thats the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Thats the truth on a stick. Youre bullshitting. simple. *Thats* the truth.

No, George. It aint. I promise.

Im going away.

No! Panic seemed to stop his breath. It was like the sleeve of the flannel shirt his old man had crammed down his throat once to stop him bawling. Dont, I forgot, Im a dummy, without you Ill never remember what to buy -

You have a nice time, Blazer, George said, and although his voice was still coming from the bathroom, now it seemed to be fading. You have a good time getting caught. Have a good time doing time and ironing those sheets.

Ill do everything you tell me. I wont fuck up again.

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