

Good Advice

Somehow, getting shot always seems to ruin my day.

It was supposed to be a normal day at work. The house call was a bit out of my way, but I needed the money, so I dutifully got in my car and drove for hours to Charlotte, Vermont—right off of Lake Champlain.

I found the house without a problem. Everything was just like the descriptions: stately Victorian columns, white siding on everything with a coat of drab grey on the walls, a walkway leading straight up to the door, and an expansive, green ranch for miles around. It was perfect. I pulled up to the driveway and got out. Knocking on the door, I checked myself in a pocket mirror, I looked beautiful. To top things off, it was an amazing blue-sky day, and I was about to hit pay dirt.

The lady who answered the door was exactly who I expected. I opened up with some small chit-chat, before going on to the business at hand: her life insurance policy. I knew she didn't have one, not that it was urgent for her—she was only fifty three. Yet, I knew she had a brother in Brooklyn: a successful banker, and quite rich, just the same as I knew she hated it when her brother helped her with money; her brother was always helping her with money. I did my homework, and I knew how to approach my mark.

Soon enough, I had convinced her that I had a policy suited just for her, and she invited me in. I tripped over the doorway, making enough noise in catching myself that anyone else in the house would hear; from the lack of response, I guessed that nobody else was.

The two of us sat down at her living room table and I opened my briefcase to remove a small stack of papers. She looked at them for a moment, obviously starting to entertain second thoughts, so to distract her, I asked for a cup of water, claiming the heat outside had gotten to me a bit.

She stood up and walked to the kitchen.

I stood up and followed her.

She didn't notice me. They never do. I slit her throat as she was pouring the cup. I let the water filter fall to the ground behind me as I made my way out of that house.

I decided to take the back exit, just in case someone was out there. There was, but I never saw him. One moment I was passing by rows of tie-dye shirts, apparently ready for sale, and the next I was on the ground, my mind reeling as my blood poured out of the new hole in my shoulder and onto the trimmed lawn. I felt the shooter prod me in the back just before I lost consciousness. *picture 3*

I didn't take any jobs for a while after that. Regardless of my own injury, I completed my task, and the pay from that was good enough to last a whole six months. Once that ended though, I

started looking around again. I needed work, and I was going to find it and carry it through, healed shoulder or not.

It was another two years before I had a big one. I was sitting at the bar in a club down in Sydney. The job was on one of the local bigwigs. The guy had made some serious enemies during his career, but I never asked why. Only the rookies ask why. In any case, he was heading out of the country soon, and I was biding my time until he started heading to the airport. The bar was close enough that it would be a short drive down to the airport, and I'd still have enough time to plant the poison in the pre-packed meals that would be loaded on the plane by that time.

I went over the plan again in my mind. It was flawless. Once again, I had done my homework.

Fate had a different plan however. I was watching the television above the bar when I heard the screeching of metal coming from outside. Every last bit of attention in that bar became focused on the door, and half the people jumped up to see what was happening.

Needless to say, I was one of them.

You know how sometimes you have bad days? And sometimes you have worse days? And then there are some days that manage to be so incredibly god-awful that you just can't believe it?

This was one of those days.

I stood amidst the crowd in the doorway of the bar, watching as the front of my car, and part of the car parked next to it in the number twenty-seven spot, began to deform. The hood started buckling as the metal framework of the car seemed to bend back in on the engine compartment. The headlights shattered. A tire came off of its wheel as the hubcap was deformed into oblivion. Then, just as suddenly as it had started, it all ended. My car looked like it had been hit, front-on, with a semi. The SUV next to it didn't look much better, but I didn't care about it. The only thing flashing through my mind was the fact that somehow my ride had been totaled—in a very strange way. It would be an understatement to say that I felt something amiss. *picture 4*

Apparently the entire bar, or at least those close enough to the doorway to see, felt the same way. The silence that had settled on the place at the first sound of the metal deforming was shed, as best humans can, by a loud, shrill, piercing scream, the kind of scream that as a kid you're sure has the power to wake the dead.

Two things became very clear to me—firstly something had seriously begun to screw with me, to my detriment, and secondly, I didn't understand a bit of how or why. I needed a place to go—a place to catch up with reality and decide on a new course of action. The job was as good as gone; there was no way I could make it to the airport on time now.

I started running.

It took me a while on foot, but I finally reached the relative safety of #336, a nondescript, drab, grey building off of the Pacific Highway. This was my safe house. I could stop and think here.

Climbing up the front stairs, and making my way to the bedroom to collapse on the bed, I tried to do just that: stop and think. I even managed it for a bit, before I was interrupted.

I never heard the door to the bedroom open. The first I knew that he was there was when he sat down next to my feet on the bed, and I turned over with a start.

“Where the hell did you come from?”

“I didn’t.” He looked like he was young, maybe seven or eight years younger than me, and he wore a black beret with a plaid shirt. He looked vaguely Spanish.

I sat up. “Look, I don’t know what that’s supposed to mean, and I sure don’t know who you are, so why don’t you tell me something about yourself real quick now.”

“I was clear, I didn’t come from anywhere. I’ve always been here.”

“For how long? You must have been waiting for me to get back.”

“Not here in this room, but here as in watching you. And always.”

I had a sinking feeling in my gut. This guy had me under surveillance and I never knew it.

“Who put you up to it?”

“Who? Who do you think? It was the old man. He said you needed some looking after.”

If things were strange a moment before, they had just become downright weird. I’d never heard of any “old man,” and I certainly couldn’t imagine why anyone I’d never heard of would want me under surveillance.

“Look gal,” he moved over and sat down next to me on my right, “Here, have a drag.” He pulled out a pair of fags, and handed me one, taking the other for himself. It took him a moment to find a lighter, and we sat there in silence on the bed, as the smoke began to thread its way around the dimly lit room, making everything seem even more colorless than it had before. *picture 1*

“There’s something you’ve got to understand,” he began. “It’s time you found out about something.” He jabbed me in the shoulder with his left index finger, right on top of the scar that bullet had left, some two and a half years earlier. “You’ve had a string of luck, the way I see it. You were left for dead in a field in Vermont, and you still made it back from that. Even now, you were determined to go get yourself killed by the security force at the airport that you didn’t know was in place, but your car gets itself some serious issues, and you come down here, trying to figure out what’s going on.”

I stared at him dumbly now, more out of shock than anything else. He continued though.

“Now, I know you aren’t religious, heck, you haven’t even looked seriously at a church since your father died when you were six, but even you have to admit that it looks like you’re being watched out for. Well, there’s a thing about that; you only get so many ‘Get out of Hell’ cards free Hon, and that was your last one, earlier today. If I were you, I’d do some serious thinking about your life, and figure out really quickly just how many chances you really want to keep taking...”

I came to, and it was seven a.m. the next morning. He was nowhere to be found. My memories from the day before were a bit hazy, but I remembered enough to give my therapist a call. We chatted for a bit, and within two more appointments, I was on a new drug that would, sure-thing, get rid of my hallucinations, once and for all. I kept on living my life.

“And damnit, you better take me more seriously than I took him myself!” I yelled at the youth. He stared back, baggy clothes and tattoos marking him as a ganger. “It took me three thousand years to pay off my debt, and you’re going to be facing the same, or worse, if you don’t get your sorry ass in order, and there won’t be any way I’ll be saving you again. There’s only so much a guardian angel can do!” I slapped him. That seemed to shake him out of his stupor, and he slowly nodded his head. I could tell he was giving my words careful consideration. Finally though, he nodded his head.

“All right lady, you know things about me that I can’t figure out how you learned, no matter how I try thinking about it. Plus, you scare me, damn bad. I’ll work on it.” As he started walking away, I knew I had gotten through to him, and that he’d not need my services again.

One more time, I returned back to #336. The grey, drab, brick walls looked not a bit different than they did the day I threw my life away. Hell, that might even have been the same chair there, just inside the screen door. *picture 2*

I never did see him again, my old angel. But that was where it started. It took me three thousand years of punishment to repent for my sins, and when I was done, well, since I’ve been done, I’ve been doing what I can to help out those who really need it. After all, you know the saying: if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em.