

Fear and Loathing in the Marches

***An In Nomine* Story**

The only thing that really worried me was the ethereal.

It had flew onto the hood of the car, five miles and twenty minutes ago, and loudly demanded drugs. It wanted a *pillowcase* full of drugs, and when I gave it one it had burrowed into it like a psychotic puppy and came out the other side cackling and smeared with a witch's brew of dangerous and illegal narcotics. You could see the cocaine and the crystal meth fighting each other on the broken landscape it called a face.

It reminded me of my editor. Especially when it curled up in the back seat and started muttering about deadlines. Put a worse suit on it and nobody would know the difference. Building on that, my thoughts were interrupted in the middle of an evil, twisted plan -- one involving my former editor, this replacement, a quart of tequila, five Tijuana whores, and the Governor of California -- by my companion. "As your moral advisor I suggest that you stop the car and listen to me."

Traitor! I turned and screamed at -- what the Hell! When did I get a woman for a moral advisor! Where's my attorney? I reasonably asked her that one. "What did you do with my attorney! You shot him, didn't you? Shot him in the head and left him out for the bats and snakes." She had a lovely face and that was the way that he would have wanted to go, after all. "And now we're driving out into the desert so that you can get me, too!"

I fumbled for my gun. Any gun. They must have been buried with my attorney. Or maybe they were in the trunk. I yelled for my editor to stop giggling and open the God-damned trunk. While he was ripping the lock off, I settled for snarling obscenities and keeping my eyes on the road. This was the battiest of bat countries, after all. The bastards come when you least expect it, little Luftwaffes of terror strafing innocent journalists on their way to -- I realized with a cold sweat that the drugs had definitely kicked in. I couldn't remember where we were going. I would have to hide that, before my moral advisor caught on. If she was going to kill me and then lay me out next to my attorney, I didn't want to hear her lecture me first.

So we drove. I turned on the radio; she turned it off. I adjusted the mirror to check on my editor; she adjusted it

back. I found a gun and shot her; she didn't blink a hair as the gun didn't go off. So I shot her again; nothing. Cheap piece of junk, so I threw it out the window. It went off and managed to bring down one of those damned bats. Landed right on the hood like a mutant figurehead. I grinned. That'll put the Fear into the little bastards.

My editor finally pulled out the really big guns from the trunk. My moral advisor sighed. "Those won't work around me."

"These are good guns! Expensive guns! They always work!"

"Can they aim and fire themselves?"

I kicked myself for not asking my friendly, neighborhood arms dealer that very question before I guaranteed his methamphetamine habit for the next ten years. "No."

"Then they won't work."

That did it. This country may have been endlessly circling the drain for the last forty years, with a collection of grinning zombies in ties and good hair leading the charge as they munched down on their followers' sheep brains

and ask for more - and no salt worries for them, no; they were all too stupid to realize that sea salt should have put them back in their rotten graves, so they asked for seconds and straightened their decaying ties and love beads -- but our incestuous love-in with our guns remained. This was America. Guns worked.

"This isn't America."

How did she hear that? Was she a telepathic moral advisor -- that would be worse than I thought. Could she see the sick and rotten worm-thoughts that slithered in and out of my brain, scaring small children and the more cowardly dogs? I hated her, of course -- I had hated her on sight -- but I'm not a vile man. The worms were too much for anyone without my keen judgment in massive drug use to handle. And even I didn't know their color. Or was I muttering aloud?

"I'm reading your mind. **And** you're muttering aloud. And the worms are blue."

Blue! Of course! *Good* moral advisor; the blue worms could be fought with a simple cocktail of Miller Lite, vodka and amyl nitrate. Luckily, I always carried that particular witch's brew around my neck; you never knew. The

worms screamed as I drank it down. They knew when they were licked. Oh, yes, they did.

My moral advisor could see that the screaming mellowed me out. She looked at me. "Can we talk, now?"

I was willing to humor her, although I wanted to know where she got the wings. "We can talk."

"Good. First, you're dead."

I didn't know how to handle that, so I looked ahead. Come to think of it, this didn't look like the Nevada desert, unless of course I was taking peyote again.

"Hunter. Look at me." Her hand turned my head. Her eyes were cornflower blue. "You died. The gun went off. Now we have to figure out what to do with you."

"Who the Hell is we?"

The light flashed about her and I realized that the wings were really there. And the halo. And the harp, and I saw that God really did have a bastard sense of humor. After all of this, those idiots with the crystals and the fluffy white

heads were right after all. There were angels, and they looked insipid.

Except that this one had a certain something about the eyes. "I can read your mind, remember? Even if you weren't mumbling. I haven't enjoyed trying to keep you out of trouble, and how I'm going to explain this to Mother -- right, no whining. There's no whining in Flowers.

"It's like this. You died. You somehow managed to connect yourself to this car and this road. You'll be driving on this road forever -- with the bats, I should add -- until you decide to give it up and go where you're supposed to."

I didn't want to believe her, but then I saw a dinosaur herd, all with the face of Pat Boone, scamper across my rear view mirror. I've been twisted enough to imagine that, but never enough to add the pink tutus. I was Somewhere Else, that was certain.

I cagily assessed my assets. Drugs, a car, booze, guns, my editor, a dead bat -- I could use all of this, just as soon as I lost the angel. Of course, I didn't know what to use it for, but like that psychotic Patton once said -- shit, I never saw the movie. He probably said something about going

in guns blazing and shooting everything that moved or twitched; I'd go with that.

I looked around. "So, we're in Hell?"

My moral advisor shook her head. "You never earned it." I was surprised that she didn't sound surprised.

I looked around again, took in the bats and the road and the writhing cacti. "So, this is Heaven, then?"

She blinked. "No. First, you didn't earn that, either, and second..." she pointed up. "The stars are spelling out rude words. Do you think that we'd let that go on?"

Her logic was potent. "Not Heaven, not Hell, not Earth, so where are we?"

"The Marches," she replied, her sunny expression leaking away. "Where all your dreams come true."

I started to smile. Then I remembered a dream or two that I once had, back when the drugs were having a banshee convention in the lizard part of my brain, and I began to shudder.

"Pretty much. I can't make you let go of this; you have to choose to of your own free will. And if you do, you'll either have to go back and try again -- or you'll just fade away. That's the hand that you've been dealt; there aren't any other choices. So, what do you want to do?"

I drove a while and looked at the desert. The sun would probably be coming up soon, or whatever freaky substitute there was for a sun. The cacti were singing, the wind was crying; it made you think.

On the one hand: this was a seriously fucked-up place to hang your head. On the other, I was **here**. I had looked old No-Nose in the eye sockets, kicked him in the pelvis without warning, and ran away with his scythe. My editor was fiddling with it now, in fact. I was ahead of the game, and when you had previously looked at your favorite gun and think, *Hell, maybe I'll luck out and just be able to quit it all* that's nothing to sneeze at. Besides, as far as I could tell the massive amounts of drug ingesting that my editor and I had done had no noticeable effect on the amount and extent of our collection. If this wasn't Heaven, it would do until we found a bathroom.

My moral advisor closed her eyes. "I wish I could say that I was surprised. Fine. We'll be coming up to a town,

soon. Well, sort of a town and sort of a mutual hallucination."

"That's what a town **is** -- and what's this 'we', angel?" Damn, I had bought into her head-trip. Even with the wings, that was sloppy of me. Behind us, my editor cackled and started to call ahead for rooms. Even in the afterlife, you can't escape those damn cell phones.

"You're stuck with me for a while. Until you change your mind, whenever that is. As your moral advisor I suggest that you calm down about it and have another beer."

What kind of moral advisor counsels her charge to indulge in the evils of ethyl alcohol?

"One that's dealt with you for going on forty years. Now keep your eyes on the road. This is bat country."

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