

**Unwise Guys**

By J. C. Bass

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## The Stakeout

A brand new black Lexus was parked on Illinois street across from a squatty ash colored night club. The lot around the building was littered with scattered trash, beer bottles, candy wrappers and cigarette butts. A dumpster overflowed with empty beer cases and boxes full of liquor bottles. A green station wagon was the only car sitting in the lot.

Traffic was light on Illinois Street, though it lead to the busier part of downtown. In the distance were the high rises that housed money and those who worked to protect it. Undoubtedly there were countless ambitious employees still within, even at the dinner hour, doing extra work and fighting to get ahead, hoping for that long-awaited promotion.

Inside the Lexus were two well-dressed gentlemen eating sandwiches. The owner of the car was Jimmy, an overweight middle-aged man with graying hair and chubby cheeks. The passenger was Rocco, a good-looking man in his late twenties who had a penchant for Italian suits and shoes.

"Watch that you don't get crumbs on the seats," Jimmy said.

"I got it," Rocco said.

"And make sure none get in the floorboard either. I wanna keep that new car smell as long as possible."

"What is it about a new car that gives it that smell? What, do they clean it with something?"

"I think it's the glue."

"Glue? What glue?"

"They glue the dashboard on or something. Something takes glue."

Rocco inhaled deeply. "I don't think it's glue. It doesn't smell like any glue I've ever smelled."

Jimmy thought for a moment. "Or maybe that's books I'm thinking of."

"Books?"

"Yeah, that's it. It's the glue they use in the binding that makes books smell like they do. I don't know what makes a car smell like it does."

"Well it isn't glue. I know glue smell and this isn't it."

"What, you go around sniffing glue? That explains a lot about you, kid."

Rocco shook his head. "I know what it smells like, that's all. And I've never smelled glue that reminded me of new car smell."

"Maybe it isn't glue. I don't know."

"I bet it's something they clean it with. Some secret thing."

Jimmy swallowed a bite of his pastrami sandwich. "Nah, it's not that."

"How do you know? What else could it be?"

"If it was some cleaner, they'd sell it. It would be on the market."

"I'd keep it secret," Rocco said. "I wouldn't want anybody knowing how to get that smell. That's the best part about buying a new car, the smell. Everybody wants that smell."

"Smell doesn't sell a car, kid."

"It helps."

"Every car has that smell. Now if there was some secret scent that made you want to buy a car, they'd only put it on the expensive ones. That way when you came in, they could talk you

into one of those easier than they could the other ones. But even if you buy a cheap new car they usually have that smell. So it isn't that."

Rocco took a bite of his sandwich and thought. "Hell, maybe it is the glue."

They ate in silence for a while. Rocco finished his sandwich and crumbled up the paper. He reached out and turned on the radio, starting to flip through stations.

"What are you doing?" Jimmy asked.

"I'm getting us some music to listen to."

"Don't touch that, I got it the way I want it."

"I'm not gonna change anything."

"Leave it alone," Jimmy said. "You'll mess up my dials."

"Well can't we listen to something?"

Jimmy finished his sandwich and carefully wiped his hands on a napkin. "Everything on the radio is garbage, I don't wanna listen to that."

"Surely you could find something you like."

"I don't use the radio."

"What about CD's?"

"I only use those when I have a lady friend in the car with me," Jimmy said. "Helps to set the mood. I got some Marvin Gaye in the trunk, if you want."

"Nah. Your old-guy creepy love music isn't exactly what I had in mind. Can't we just turn on the radio?"

"There's nothing on there I like. Nothing but booty music."

"Booty music?"

"Yeah, like they have in clubs. Booty music. Always 'bitch' this, and 'whore' that. That's filth, I don't wanna listen to that garbage."

Rocco laughed. "There's more on the radio than just that, you know."

"It's everywhere nowadays. I remember on pop stations they used to play music for everyone, family friendly songs. Now you turn it on and you got this weird freaky stuff. They were playing the top 40 in the movie theater when I was taking my daughter to see *Happy Feet* and-

"*Happy Feet*? What the hell's that?"

"Something about dancing penguins. It's a kid's movie. But anyway, I'm sitting there with Amy, and they started playing some freaky sex song. I had to cover the girl's ears. And what does she do when she gets home? She asks her mother what a disco stick is."

Rocco laughed.

"That's not funny, she's six years old!"

"Jimmy relax. That's from some Lady Gaga song. Disco stick doesn't really mean anything."

"Well she thinks it does. And I don't get it, you go into a club and what do you see? A whole bunch of beautiful young women dancing to that stuff. Back in my day, you kept that kind of talk in the bedroom where it belonged. Nowadays they broadcast it all over TV and the radio."

"But that Marvin Gaye stuff isn't exactly rated G either. So what's so different about him?"

"Marvin's subtle. These people today aren't. Whatever happened to romance? When I want a little boom-boom, I take a lady out for a nice lobster dinner. I don't pump her full of booze and weird booty music like they do at these clubs."

"You realize how old you sound, right?"

"Listen kid, when you get to be my age, you'll be saying the same thing. So get ready, cause your time is coming."

Rocco leaned back in his seat, looking around at all the cars passing by. "So how long do we have to wait for this scumbag?"

"His shift will be over in an hour."

"Who is he?"

"He owns the club. That's his car," he said, pointing across the lot to the green station wagon.

"So we just wait?"

"Yep."

Rocco studied the car. "That's a shitty little station wagon."

"I don't care for it."

"You'd think with how much money that club makes, he could do better."

"You think he's getting rich off of that thing? No way. Clubs cost a lot of money to run."

"How much?"

"More than you'd think. That pissy little thing is probably all he can afford," Jimmy said.

"I want my own place like that one of these days."

"You want my advice? Don't. They ain't worth it. They're all money pits. You're better off investing your money."

"Like what, stocks? I don't know nothing about that."

"I got a guy for that."

"Really?" Rocco asked. "Can I get in on it?"

"Wait a few years. You're just getting started, so you don't have enough to do anything with."

"What did you invest in?"

"He put me into some kind of space mining thing."

"Space mining?"

"Yeah," Jimmy said. "This company is building a rocket that's gonna go up into space and put down a little robot on some comet that's passing by."

"What, like *Armageddon*?"

"What?"

"That Bruce Willis movie where they gotta go up into space and save the world."

"I don't know nothing about that," Jimmy said. "This drills into asteroids."

"Yeah, that's what they did. They drilled into this asteroid that was heading for Earth and dropped a nuke in the hole."

"Huh. Well maybe it's the same thing. But anyway, the little robot is gonna mine minerals or something."

"How are they gonna bring 'em down?"

Jimmy thought. "I dunno. How did they do it in the movie?"

"They had one of those little space shuttle, things."

"I bet that's it."

"So when are they sending it up?"

"They're just building the rocket. It's still too early for all that. But if it turns out to be a big deal, who knows? I could be sitting pretty in twenty years."

"That's a long time to wait, though."

"You gotta plan for your future, kid. Think long term."

"Maybe I should save up and do that, too. We could have our own little space rock named after us."

A few feet ahead of them, a boy of about ten put a quarter into a newspaper bin. He grabbed the entire stack of newspapers and started walking away.

"Look at this," Jimmy said, rolling down the window. "Hey kid?"

The kid turned and looked at him.

"What do you think you're doing?"

The kid gave a little shrug.

"You only put in a quarter, kid. That means you only get one. You put the rest of 'em back, you hear?"

"You're not the boss of me."

"Oh I'm not, huh?" Jimmy opened the car door, and the kid quickly put the newspapers back and then ran off.

Jimmy went to the machine and turned to Rocco. "Can you believe that?" He put a quarter in.

"Get me one too," Rocco said.

Jimmy grabbed two papers and returned to the car. "Kids these days. That's the problem with your generation, Rocco."

"My generation? That kid was like twenty years younger than me."

"Well, this younger generation, then. They think they're entitled to everything. When I was his age, if I wanted money, I went out and got me a little paper route."

Rocco laughed. "You had a paper route? Seriously?"

"Yeah. So?"

"I just can't picture you running around on a bike and delivering papers."

"Hey, I was a great paper boy," Jimmy said. "I got up before dawn every day that summer and made my deliveries. And I was always on time, too, everybody always got their paper, no slip ups. Remember Gretta Manalti?"

"Grandma Cookie? Yeah, every kid in my neighborhood knew her. She used to bake and we'd come running by cause she gave out food."

"Well I went to visit her in the home before she died. The woman didn't even recognize her own son, but she remembered that I delivered her paper on time. It just goes to show, if you do a good job, people will remember."

"My first job was working at the Abercrombie and Fitch store at the mall," Rocco said. "I used to love that stuff when I was a teenager. That was a pretty sweet job too, cause I always got first dibs on the new gear that came through. But then Extra Ed started coming in and swiping stuff out of the back and got me fired."

Jimmy laughed. "Good ol' Extra Ed. Yeah, he makes all his money selling clothes. He had this factory connection in Singapore where he could get these suits before they went to the stores. Real nice suits and he'd sell 'em to us for cheap. The boss used to get 'em by the dozen. Anyway, they had some weird type of fabric they were made from and something about the material always attracted flies. So whenever the boss would go outside, he would just get mobbed by all these mosquitoes and fruit-flies and things. It was a sight to see. You'd think he was a bugzapper. When he found out it was the suits, he really gave Extra Ed an earful."

"You know, I've always wondered why they called him that," Rocco said.

"Extra Ed? He's got an extra nipple. Or so I hear."

"Wow. What would you do with three?"

"What are you, kidding? What do we need two for?"

"Good point, I guess."

The streets were clear of most of the traffic now. A brisk night wind hinted at the coming of winter.

Marvin Gaye played through the speakers of the Lexus. Both men were sound asleep. Rocco had covered himself with the remnants of his paper as if it were a blanket. Jimmy's mouth gaped open and he snored loudly.

Rocco rolled over and attempted to adjust his makeshift newspaper blanket. As he did, his eyes fluttered open, and he took a look around.

"Hey Jimmy."

Jimmy gave a little snort, but didn't wake.

"Jimmy!"

"Wha-" Jimmy jerked upward. "I'm awake, momma!"

"I'm not your mother."

Jimmy rubbed his eyes. "Did we fall asleep?"

"Yeah." Rocco looked at his watch. "Aw shit. We've been out almost two hours!"

Jimmy squinted into the darkness of the streets around them. "Relax, kid. Look. The guy's car is still there, he hadn't left yet."

"Oh, thank God. I thought we had messed up."

"Nah, it's okay. Tell you what, kid. Why don't you hop on up to Dunkin Donuts and get us a couple coffees."

"Can't we drive?"

"No, I wanna keep watch. The guy's bound to be leaving soon."

"Alright," Rocco said. He left the car.

Jimmy yawned. After a moment of silence, he considered the radio. He flipped it on, changing through the stations. He stopped when he found the news.

*Witnesses confirm that the suspect was seen beating McDaniels to the ground. McDaniels is a noted philanthropist and spends much of his free time volunteering at local homeless shelters. McDaniels has been in a coma since the incident last Friday, and doctors say he is still in critical condition.*

"Ugh," Jimmy groaned. "Terrible."

*The suspect, forty year-old Hargis Fowler, was caught yesterday after leading police on a high-speed chase where he struck a bus full of nuns on their way to choir practice. The bus subsequently hit a delivery truck full of newborn puppies, causing both to crash, killing all on board.*

"Good Lord!"

*A candle-light vigil is being held for the puppies. No word yet on the nuns.*

"That's a crying shame," Jimmy said.

*In other news, ninety-six year old Gertrude Thomas was found in a roadside ditch this morning after gang members murdered her with an axe for her Bingo winnings...*

"Gah!" He quickly changed the channel. "What is this world coming to?" He found another news station. He pulled a tube of chapstick from his pocket and began dabbing his lips.

*Scientists say a recent study proves that using chapstick is linked to a series of diseases, including delusional parasitosis and bowel tumors.*

Jimmy suddenly stopped.

*Symptoms of these include fatigue, dry mouth, an inability to focus, chills, warmth, and hunger. Any such symptoms should be reported to your doctor immediately, as they could be signs of rare but serious medical conditions.*

Jimmy suddenly looked quite grave.

*In other news, a recent study has proven that sitting for long periods in a car is linked to several forms of eye cancer and testicular diseases not covered by your insurance company.*

Rocco opened the door, carrying the coffees. "Hey, I thought you didn't listen to the radio?"

Jimmy turned it off. "I don't. Two seconds I had that thing on and all I hear about is dead puppies, butchered grannies, and how I'm gonna get some terrible disease."

"Well that's why I don't pay attention to the news," Rocco said, handing Jimmy his coffee. "There's nothing I can do about it, so why bother? I let the rest of the world worry about that stuff."

"Then how do you keep up with world events?"

"I watch *SportsCenter*."

Jimmy sighed. "Did you get creamer?"

"I got sugar."

"Sugar's not healthy."

"Who says?"

"I read it in a magazine."

"Yeah, well I don't care. It'll help keep me awake. You know, we could have missed this guy."

Jimmy shrugged. "Yeah but we didn't."

"Well I don't want to mess this up. I heard the boss really has it out for him."

"Yeah, the guy's a real scumbag. He has some of his employees pushing dope out where the boss's kid goes to school."

"Ah, no wonder," Rocco said. "Oh, you'll never guess who I saw at Dunkin'."

"Who?"

"Eric Pallagonia."

"Eric Plucky-Duck?" Jimmy asked. "I thought he moved out of town?"

"He did, he's here visiting family. You remember that wife of his, the one with the-"

"Yeah," Jimmy said, laughing. "I remember. How could I forget?"

Rocco chuckled. "Yeah well, she's divorcing him. He seemed like he didn't want to talk about it. I think he cheated on her."

"No kidding? With a wife like that at home? Oh man."

"Yeah. She's taking the kids, the house, everything. From what he said, she's got some hot-shot lawyer who's really putting the screws to him."

"Ouch."

"Yeah, he seemed pretty out of it. It's a shame. Hey, why do they call him Plucky-Duck, anyway?"

"He's got Tourette's."

"The thing where you cuss a lot?"

"Yeah, but instead of cussing, he quacks. Can't help it. It just comes out of him."

"I wondered what that was," Rocco said. "I always thought he was just burping, or something."

"Nope. Quacks. Poor bastard. What's he doing for a living now?"

"He's a competitive duck hunter."

Jimmy shook his head. "You know, it's a shame that people can go out and shoot a bunch of poor defenseless ducks like that. That's terrible."

"Oh come on. Don't tell me you're one of those anti-hunting animal freaks."

"What, I'm a freak cause I respect animals? I wouldn't go around shooting cats, would I?"

"Yeah, but cats are different. Cats are pets."

"Anything can be a pet, kid. A duck could be a pet. You could have a damn polar bear as a pet if it were legal. I just don't see the point of going out and shooting defenseless animals for fun."

"Well it's not like they hunt them until they're gone, Jimmy. It's not like it was in the old days, they make sure they do it in season, now. They keep track of the numbers and stuff."

"Still, a duck is just out there trying to live its life, not bothering nobody, and all of a sudden, BOOM! Some yokel with a shotgun comes and blows the thing away."

"Well you eat meat, don't you?"

"Yes, but-"

"And you are aware where meat comes from, right?"

"Yes, but-"

"Well okay, then how can you-"

"Lemme finish, kid," Jimmy said. "I go to that grocer down on 85th. They get all their stuff from local farm places. All of it's free range. Those ducks and chickens and cows and stuff live long full lives, and have everything they could ever want. They're downright spoiled."

"How do you know?"

"It says so on the package."

"Okay, but they're still killing animals."

"But they wait till they're more mature and they've bred them and everything. They get a chance to pass on their genes, you know? Have a little family."

Rocco paused. "Wait a minute. So you think it's okay to kill a duck as long as it has a family?"

"No kid, that's not what I'm-"

Rocco looked out the window. A fat man was standing next to the green station wagon. "Hey, there's the guy. He's going to his car."

Jimmy looked out and saw. "Okay, let's go."

They got out of the car and began walking toward the parking lot.

"My point is this," Jimmy continued. "They live happy lives, pass on their genes, and do everything a duck could ever want to do. Then, when they're ready, somebody sneaks up behind them and pops 'em one. They never see it coming."

"How is that different from hunting, though? Ducks have that chance out in the wild, too."

"Yeah, but they're not guaranteed all that stuff out in the wild. Most of them wouldn't have it so good. But on the farm they can grow up to be fat and happy."

"But in the end you still put a bullet in them."

Jimmy put up a hand. "Hold that thought." He turned to the man at the car. "You Boris?"

The man standing by his car was heavy-set and balding, with thick hairy arms and a Hawaiian shirt that was plastered to his sweaty chest. He ogled Jimmy with beady little eyes. "Yeah. Who wants-"

Jimmy and Rocco pulled out handguns and fired a barrage of bullets into the man. Blood splattered onto the ashen gray wall behind him as he convulsed, groaned, and finally fell

backward onto the filthy pavement. They took a glance around, then put the guns back into their jackets. They walked back to Jimmy's car.

"Alright, so about these ducks..." Rocco continued. "You say it's okay if they've been treated well, but not okay if they're out in the wild?"

"The point is that when they kill them on the farm, the ducks don't see it coming. So they don't experience fear. Out in the wild, they're chased and shot at and all that stuff. It's cruel."

Rocco stopped. "Alright, then." He pointed back toward the club. "So what's the difference between shooting a duck in the wild and this?"

Jimmy glanced back where he was pointing. "What, that guy?"

"Yeah. What's the difference?"

Jimmy laughed. "Ducks are innocent. That guy was an asshole."

Rocco nodded. "Alright. I'll give you that one." They walked back to the car. "So do they taste better if they're on these farms?"

Jimmy shrugged. "Not as much fat on 'em. I can't really tell a difference, other than that."

They got back into the car. "Maybe I'll try some meat from that place," Rocco said.

"You should," Jimmy said. "The boss turned me on to it. You know, these big chain places pump all their stuff full of chemicals."

"No kidding?"

"Yeah. It's completely unnatural."

Jimmy steered the Lexus off into the night, a silent street left behind them.

## Concrete Galoshes

The factory had been abandoned years ago. The floor was covered in dust and old metal shavings. A chilling draft blew in through the broken windows. Chains hung forgotten from the ceiling, swaying back and forth and clanking against one another.

In the middle of the great empty building, a man stood with his hands bound and clasped to one of these chains above his head. The man was soaked in sweat, and his beady little eyes blinked furiously as he looked around. A gray strip of tape was across his mouth. His feet were also bound, and he was standing in the middle of an old metal box.

Out of the darkness, two figures approached.

"So I told my lawyer that I was being harassed by these guys, right?" Jimmy said, carrying a large bucket of water. "So then he called that operator and said that he was holding him personally responsible and that if I heard from his company again, we'd take 'em for all they're worth."

Rocco had a bag of cement slung over his shoulder. "Wow. Do you think there's any money in that?"

"Nah, I doubt it. My lawyer says they've got all the rules figured out, so they can still get away with it. But you should be able to sue 'em. I mean, I signed up for the 'do not call' list and everything, but they still keep hassling me."

"Man I hate those guys. They only call when I'm eating or screwing. It's like they always know. So you can't actually sue them?"

"I could try but I doubt it would be worth it. Before it actually went to court, they would just agree to stop calling me."

"Is your guy gonna charge you for that?"

"What, for the phone call? Sure. He is a lawyer," Jimmy said.

"How much is he gonna charge?"

"His hourly rate. Why?"

"Well, think about it. You're gonna give this guy probably a hundred dollars just to scare off one telemarketing company? It's not like you're getting them all at once. Is it really worth it?"

"Hey, that's a small price to pay for peace of mind. He's got five or six scared off already. Half a G's a lot of money, but to keep my phone from ringing off the hook? I can live with that."

"Why can't you just tell the telemarketers that you're a lawyer? Cut out the middle man."

Jimmy frowned. "Aw shit..."

They sat their wares next to the man, who had managed to raise his feet outside the metal box and had kicked it away. Rocco retrieved it.

"Quit it Lenny, you're just making this harder." He placed the man's feet back into the box.

Lenny made a sound through the tape.

"What?" Rocco said. He pulled it off.

"You don't have to do this," Lenny said.

"Yeah we do," Jimmy said. "Boss's orders. Put the tape back on, kid."

"No wait, I-"

Rocco put the tape back on. "You know, Lisa used to work for one of those telemarketing companies."

"No kidding?" Jimmy said.

"Yeah. She was really good at it, too. I guess it's cause she has a sexy voice. She would always flirt with the guys and get them to buy something."

"What was she selling?"

"These special pants that can absorb grease and stuff. The idea is that you can wipe your hands on them and the stains will always come out in the wash."

"Huh. Well that's useful, I guess."

"Sure they are. I got a pair myself," Rocco said. "I wear them around the house on weekends. It's nice because if I'm eating something, I don't have to use a napkin, I just wipe it all on my pants."

"Ew! That's disgusting."

"That's what they're for. The motto is 'A napkin you can wear.'"

"That's unbelievable. What, do you go to the bathroom in them too?"

"No, it's not like they're diapers," Rocco said. "...Although they really do soak stuff up."

"Jesus. Like people need one more reason to act like slobs."

Rocco waved him off. "Anyway, you'll never guess what Lisa told me about those places. Her company did this study about which operators had the most sales, and they found out that women with sexy voices did the best."

Jimmy scoffed. "I could have told them that."

"Yeah well, you know these big corporations. They probably burned through a million dollars just figuring out that men like women who flirt with them. Anyway, you know what they started doing? They started hiring phone sex operators."

"Ha!" Jimmy said. "No kidding?"

"Seriously," Rocco said. "They had a whole team of them. Lisa shared a cubicle with one. She said the woman had a voice that would give a dead man a hard-on, and she sold so much that they promoted her after the first month. Now she's a shareholder and she's on the board of directors."

Jimmy laughed. "Funny old world, huh?"

"Yeah, you bet. Especially because the broad was as big as a house."

"Ouch. That's a buzz-kill."

"Yeah, no kidding. Think of all the guys that got their rocks off to that voice. I wonder what they would think if they took a look at her."

Jimmy motioned to the bag of concrete. "Alright, kid. I guess you should open the bag."

"You know, this seems like a lot of trouble," Rocco said. "Can't we just do it some other way?"

"The boss said give him concrete galoshes."

"Yeah, but I always thought that was...you know..."

"What?"

"One of those things you just say, but don't mean."

"Oh," Jimmy said. "Figure of speech?"

"Yeah, that's it."

"Nah," Jimmy said. "The boss was very specific."

Rocco shrugged. "Well, okay. It's his dime."

Rocco cut open the bag with a small pocket knife and tore the remainder of the seal off. "Here, help me hoist it."

"Nah, you do it."

"Come on, this thing weighs like a hundred pounds."

"I know," Jimmy said. "I got a bad back."

"Why do you always seem to have a bad back when it comes time to do some lifting?"

"Kid, it doesn't go away. I have it all the time. Now you carried it this far, surely you can pour it, too."

With some effort, Rocco hoisted the bag off the ground and began pouring the cement in the box around Lenny's feet. "What the hell did you do to your back anyway?"

"It happened years ago. Just a silly accident."

"Well what happened?"

Jimmy shrugged. "About eight or nine years ago, I went downtown to the library and-

"The library?" Rocco scoffed. "What would you do that for?"

"What are you, kidding? To read books."

"Yeah, I know that. But what for?"

"What for? Cause I like reading, that's what for."

"I never really saw the point."

"Yeah well that's you, not me. And if you read on the weekends instead of sitting around in your own filth, you might actually learn something."

"Yeah, like how to bum my way out of lifting heavy cement bags," Rocco said. "How the hell did you throw your back out at the library?"

"I'm getting to it. I was there a little while and I had been looking for this old book about the Roman Empire and I couldn't find it, so I went down to talk to this cute little thing that runs the desk. Anyway, I was flirting with her. You know, working my charm. And she looks up the book on her computer and tells me it's upstairs."

"Did you get her number?"

"What? Uh, no. She was...engaged or something." Jimmy took a look at the cement. "We can start adding the water now."

"You gonna lift it, or do I need to do that too, old man?"

"I got it, I got it," Jimmy said. He lifted the bucket of water and poured some in, as Rocco continued to pour the cement mix.

"So what was this silly accident, anyway?"

"They got this long staircase made of marble. It's beautiful. So I'm going up, and there's this big woman walking up in front of me. And when I say big, I mean big. Bless her heart, I don't know why she was walking up those steps."

"Maybe she was doing it for the exercise."

"Well she certainly needed it. Anyway, she's walking kind of slow, right? And I'm there behind her, and suddenly she slips, like her foot caught or something. Next thing I know, she stumbles backward, and I got no time to react."

Rocco laughed. "You got crushed by a fat lady at the library? Oh man, that's classic."

"No, no. I didn't get crushed. Like I said, I had no time to react, so I just did what came natural. I reached my arms out to catch her so she wouldn't fall. Caught her under the arms and tried to hold her up as she came crashing down. It was like suddenly catching three hundred pounds. Slipped a disk and dislodged a vertebrae."

"Ouch."

"Damn right, ouch. My back hasn't been right ever since."

"Well that's what you get," Rocco said.

"That's what I get?"

"Yeah, you should have known better."

"I was going out of my way to help the lady," Jimmy said. "I didn't want the poor girl to fall."

"Yeah, but you didn't have to catch her. That's a lot of weight to grab all at once, especially on some steps."

"So what would you have done?"

"Me? I would have let her go," Rocco said.

"Get outta here."

"No, I would. If a fat lady can't walk up some steps, then she should take the elevator."

"You'd let a poor lady fall and bust her butt on some marble stairs? She could get hurt."

"Better her than me. I got stuff to do."

Jimmy scoffed. "Unbelievable, kid. See, that's the problem with your generation."

"Oh here we go again." Rocco looked to the man who was bound in front of him. "Get ready, Lenny. Here comes some bull."

"Your generation has no concept of chivalry," Jimmy said. "Back in my day, a man opened a door for a woman."

"We still do that."

"Not always. You might do it on a date to impress a new lady friend, but not all the time. And when you go out to eat, I bet you don't even pull the lady's chair out for her, do you?"

"Sometimes."

"Ha! My ass, sometimes. I bet you don't even do that for your own mother."

"Hey, now let's not go overboard, here," Rocco said. "I do everything for my mother. I open doors, I pull out chairs, I even put my arm around her as we cross the street. And if she needs some stuff done at her house, I go and do that too. Just because I don't do it for every woman doesn't mean I don't do it for her."

"Alright, fine. That's great kid. But back in the old days, we did that for every woman, not just our mothers. And I still do that."

"Okay. If you wanted to open the door for that big lady at the library, that's fine. But trying to catch her as she's falling off some steps? I don't know, man. That just seems a little much for me."

"It's about the idea of it, kid. That's what you don't get. You're supposed to do it even though you might get hurt. That's what chivalry means."

"So that was your natural reaction? To reach out your arms and catch this lady?"

"Yeah, it was."

Rocco shook his head. "I don't know what to say to that."

Jimmy laughed. "What can I say? I'm a sweet guy."

"Yeah, and look where it got ya. Now you can't even lift anything."

"Alright, let me ask you this. What if it were a beautiful woman on those steps? Would you have a problem with it then?"

Rocco thought. "What, like a supermodel?"

"Sure, why not? A supermodel."

Rocco shrugged. "Sure, I'd do it. That would be a great story for our grandkids." He popped Lenny on the arm and laughed.

"Ah, so it was just because she was a big lady. See, that proves my point, kid. Your generation has no concept of chivalry."

"Well yeah, it's because she's big. Think about it, it's common sense, Jimmy. That was three hundred pounds you were trying to lift. A supermodel is a lot lighter. I could catch one of those no problem."

"So you're saying it's just about the weight? Not because she's unattractive?"

"Just about the weight."

"Okay, okay," Jimmy said. "Well lemme ask you this. What if she was real petite, but dog ugly? Would you catch her then?"

Rocco thought for a moment. "I...how ugly?"

Jimmy waved him off. "Point proven. Mix in more cement."

Rocco mixed in a little more and gave it a splash of water. Lenny, whose feet were now covered by the wet cement, mumbled something through the tape.

"What?" Jimmy asked.

Lenny mumbled again. Jimmy removed the tape.

"You guys don't have to do this, you know."

"Do what?"

Rocco sat the empty bag aside. "I think he means the cement, Jimmy."

"Oh. Sorry Lenny, but you gotta go."

"Come on, just give me a second chance," Lenny said.

"It's not up to us. Boss's orders."

"I got ten thousand bucks stashed away. Cash. I'll split it with you guys."

Jimmy narrowed his eyes. "Are you offering me a bribe?"

"Come on, thirty-three hundred each. And I'll get out of town. You'll never hear from me again."

"That's disgusting," Jimmy said. "You hear that Rocco? Lenny thinks we're some kind of bribe-taking low-lifes."

"Do you have it on you?" Rocco asked.

"Rocco!"

"I gotta collect from a few people," Lenny said. "But you guys could help with that. We could have the whole bundle tonight."

"That's insulting," Jimmy said.

"I don't know," Rocco said. "Three grand is nothing to sniff at."

"Are you kidding me? The boss gave us orders."

"Well you heard the guy. He said he'd get out of town."

Jimmy groaned. "Unbelievable, Rocco. Your generation is worse off than I thought."

"I'll leave, I swear," Lenny said. "I'll go and you'll never see me again. I'll go to Europe or Asia or something. I'll get so lost nobody will ever find me."

"No can do," Jimmy said.

"Come on, please! My word is good, you guys know that. Come on, we've known each other for years!"

"You know Jimmy, I'm not even sure what he did," Rocco said.

"What does it matter? The boss says he goes, so he goes."

"Come on, that's not fair!" Lenny said. "It was no big deal, just a misunderstanding."

"What kind of misunderstanding?" Rocco asked.

Lenny sighed. "Look, I just...I got a little carried away gambling, and I borrowed some money. I got a little behind, that's all."

"How much money?" Jimmy asked.

Lenny sighed. "...Fifty thousand."

"Ouch," Rocco said. "Fifty grand? How the hell did you get down that much?"

"I borrowed a whole bunch of money from your boss," Lenny said. "There was this big dog race coming up and I had a sure thing."

"Yeah," Jimmy laughed. "Always a sure thing with these degenerate gamblers."

"Believe me, if you had heard about this, you would have put money on it too. I had an in with a security guy who worked at the racetrack. His sister in law had a cousin who was dating the caddy of this guy who played golf with my buddy Cliff. So we were practically brothers. Anyway, for a cut of the winnings, he was gonna let us fix the race."

"How?" Rocco asked.

"Well, me and Cliff bet on the second-best dog, which was a four to one shot. The rest of the field was a bunch of nobodies, so we were sure he could do it as long as the favorite was out of the way. So the plan was that the security guy would let us go in and do something to the favorite to make him not run so good."

"Wait, you were gonna hurt the dog?" Jimmy asked. "That's disgraceful, it's just a poor animal!"

"No no no," Lenny said. "We didn't want to hurt the thing. I mean, I'll admit, it sure would have been a lot easier. But try telling that to Cliff. The guy is one of these PETA freaks. I had a hard time convincing him to help me do anything to the dog."

"So what were you going to do?" Rocco asked.

"I had this idea that maybe if the dog was a little...out of sorts, that maybe he wouldn't run so fast."

"Out of sorts how?" Jimmy asked.

Lenny shrugged. "Well like I said, we didn't want to harm the thing. So it couldn't be anything permanent."

"Uh huh..."

"So we just thought that maybe if we got it a little stoned, it would run slower."

Rocco stared. "...Stoned? Like, with pot?"

"Yeah."

"That's terrible!" Jimmy said. "You're a disgrace!"

Rocco started laughing.

"That's not funny Rocco. It's just a poor dog."

"Oh come on," Rocco said, still laughing. "That's hilarious."

"Drugs are no laughing matter. What if the poor thing got addicted to it?"

"Jimmy, pot isn't addictive," Rocco said.

"Yeah, but it's a gateway drug."

"What's it going to lead to, kibble? It's a friggin dog."

"Alright, alright."

"Well like I said, we didn't want to hurt the thing," Lenny said. "We just wanted to make him a little slower out of the gate."

Jimmy shook his head. "Unbelievable."

"So how did you get the thing stoned?" Rocco asked.

"Well that's where everything went wrong. See, I thought maybe we could just put the pot in some brownies or something and feed it to him. But Cliff wouldn't have that, cause chocolate isn't supposed to be good for dogs. So I thought maybe some cookies or something but Cliff didn't like the idea of doing it with food at all, since their diet is so strict. He said that if we were

going to do it, it was going to have to be the old fashioned way. We thought maybe we could pull it off with a bong or something."

Rocco was doubled over with laughter. Jimmy just shook his head.

"I know it sounds crazy, but it was as good a plan as we could come up with on short notice."

"I bet," Jimmy said.

"Anyway, the security guy snuck us in and we managed to get inside the stable with Sugarfoot."

"Sugarfoot?" Rocco asked.

"Yeah, that was the name of the favorite."

"...The hell kind of name is Sugarfoot?"

"Who cares?" Jimmy said. "Go ahead, Lenny."

"Anyway, we have the bong and we start it smoking. Now, we figured we could just put it up to the dog and let it inhale for a while. But as it turned out, that was easier said than done."

"Imagine that."

"Well anyway, the dog didn't really like it. And we knew we had to act fast, because the security guy could only keep the trainers away for so long. So we did the only thing we thought that would work. We started smoking it ourselves, hoping the dog would get a contact high."

Rocco was finding it hard to contain himself. He was laughing so hard he started wheezing.

"After a couple minutes, Cliff thought it was working because he had curled up in the hay and started licking himself."

"Who, Cliff?" Rocco asked.

"What? No, the dog."

"Oh."

Lenny continued. "And by this time we were already high out of our minds, so we stopped the bong and got ready to leave. Now, I've smoked my fair share of grass before, but Cliff is a bit of a health freak, I mean, the guy doesn't even drink. So needless to say he's a lightweight. He's spending like fifteen minutes staring at his hand while I'm trying to tell him we need to get the hell out of there before the trainers come. Finally I manage to get us out of the stables and clear of the trainers. So then all we had left was to place the bet. So Cliff takes the money and goes to place the thing while I grab us a good seat and something to snack on. Cliff comes back and the race starts, and everything is going just right. Sugarfoot is slow out of the gate and our dog is running way out in front of the pack. It was funny to hear all the guys around us who had bet on the favorite yell and scream cause their dumb dog wasn't running. After going about a third of the way round the track, Sugarfoot just laid down in the dirt and went to sleep."

"So how did you guys lose?" Jimmy asked.

Lenny sighed. "Well, the dog we were hoping would win was named Footloose. And he didn't disappoint. He won by about twelve lengths. Only problem was Cliff..."

"What did he do?" Rocco asked.

Lenny shook his head. "That dumb bastard was so stoned that he bet on the wrong dog."

"Oh man," Rocco laughed. "Are you serious?"

"Yeah. Apparently we spent so much time with Sugarfoot that Cliff got him mixed up with Footloose. We ended up betting on the dog we had just gotten stoned."

"Wow. I bet you were mad at Cliff," Jimmy said.

Lenny looked down at the cement around his feet. "Well normally I would say that life is too short to hold a grudge, but I think I'm gonna hold one anyway."

"Did you try explaining everything to the boss?" Rocco asked.

"Yeah, I tried. I was hoping he would just see it as a whimsical series of events, but he didn't quite see it that way."

"Yeah," Jimmy said. "Whimsical isn't a word I would use to describe the boss, especially where fifty-thousand dollars is concerned."

Lenny sighed. "Look, I know I messed up, guys. I really did. But if you could just give me time--"

"The boss says no, Lenny. I'm sorry, but you know how he is on these things."

Lenny nodded. "Yeah, I know. I guess I've always had it coming."

"You're a good guy, Lenny," Rocco said. "You just got in over your head. But I hope you understand we gotta do this. The boss's word is scripture."

"I know," Lenny said. "I wish it wasn't the case, but there's nothing I can do."

Jimmy looked at his watch. "Well, we have to wait for the cement to dry. You up for burgers, Rocco?"

"Sounds good."

"Lenny?"

Lenny smiled. "I'd like that."

Lenny had his hands free from his binds and was using them to shovel fries in his mouth. The gray concrete that held his feet was nearly solid, and he couldn't have moved if he wanted to. A six pack sat on a little ratty box in front of him and every now and then he'd stretch for a beer and one of the guys would hand it to him.

Jimmy and Rocco had managed to scrounge up some chairs and were sitting in front of Lenny, enjoying their food. Jimmy munched meticulously on one fry until it was finished. Then, as he went to take a bite of his sandwich, he stopped.

"What?" Rocco asked.

Jimmy stared at the filet in front of him. "Do you think fish can feel pain?"

"Course they can. They got brains, don't they?"

"Nah, I don't think they can," Lenny said.

"No?" Jimmy asked.

Lenny shook his head. He had a splatter of mayo on his chin. "I don't think so."

"How do you know?" Rocco asked.

"That's just what I heard."

Jimmy considered a moment. "I think I heard that too." He took a bite of his filet.

"Who says they can't?" Rocco asked.

"I don't know," Lenny said. "That's just what I've always heard."

"Yeah, but who said it?"

"Who knows? I guess some scientist guy on TV."

"I never heard that."

"He's right Rocco," Jimmy said, chewing his food.

"Well maybe he is, but how does a scientist know?"

"They use science. That's what they do."

"Yeah but it's not like they can get in a fish's head and see if it feels pain."

"I'm sure there's some way they figured out how to do it," Lenny said. He stretched for a beer. Rocco got up and handed it to him.

"I can't imagine how," Rocco said. "Seems to me like they just guess stuff sometimes."

"Why would they do that?" Jimmy asked.

"Dunno. Maybe to make money."

"Make money!?! How the hell would they make money off something like that?"

"Who knows? Scientists gotta make money somehow. Maybe they tell somebody they found out that fish can't feel pain and they get paid a bunch of money for it."

"That's ridiculous," Jimmy said. "They got no reason to lie about that."

"Look, I'm not saying they're wrong. I just don't see how they can tell if a fish feels pain."

"Maybe they shock 'em with something," Lenny said.

"That's terrible!" Jimmy said, with a mouthful of food.

"Well they gotta find out somehow," Lenny said.

"No. Uh-uh," Jimmy said, shaking his head. "You can't just go around shocking poor little fishes."

"I don't think that would help much anyway," Rocco said.

"Course it would," Lenny said. "You just shock it and see if it flops around."

"It's a fish," Rocco said. "Course it's gonna flop."

"There's no way they're doing that," Jimmy said. "No way. The government wouldn't let them."

"Maybe they would," Lenny said. "Maybe they wanna know."

"But if they shock 'em, they're gonna flop," Rocco said.

Lenny shrugged. "Maybe they don't shock them."

"Course they don't," Jimmy said.

"But somehow, somebody got the idea that fish don't feel pain," Rocco said. "I just want to know how."

Jimmy crumpled up his sandwich and stuffed it in a bag. "That's it. I'm off fish."

Rocco laughed. "What, just like that?"

"Yep."

"Come on, maybe the scientists are right. Who knows?"

"Yeah, but think about it," Jimmy said. "Some places go to a lot of trouble to make sure that cows and chickens and pigs don't feel pain when they die. But if those people think that fish can't feel pain, then they aren't going to go to that trouble. And if those scientists are wrong, then those fish are suffering and nobody knows."

"So you're quitting fish?" Rocco asked.

Jimmy threw up his hands. "I'm quitting fish."

"Well then lemme have your filet, I'm still hungry."

Jimmy waved him off and looked over to the concrete. He tested it with a finger. "Concrete looks dry. Can you move your feet Lenny?"

"If I say yes, can we wait another hour?"

"Don't stall Lenny. It'll only make it harder."

Lenny sighed. "Okay. Just let me chug another beer and I'll be ready."

"You know, I'm sorry about this Len," Rocco said. "Truth be told, I always thought you were a pretty decent guy."

"Yeah Lenny," Jimmy said. "But you know how it is. If the boss let one person slide, he'd have to let all of them. Next thing you know, everybody would be trying to pull one over on him."

Lenny finished chugging his beer. His face was flushed and he belched. "Yeah, I understand. I guess I had it coming. My mom always told me I'd regret dropping out of medical school."

"You were in med school?"

"Yeah. I was gonna be a dermatologist."

"No kidding?" Rocco said. "Hey listen, I got this rash on the side of my hip that-

Jimmy waved him off. "Maybe right now isn't appropriate, Rocco." He put an arm on Lenny's shoulder. "Alright, you ready?"

Lenny nodded, looking dejected. "As ready as I'll ever be, I guess."

Rocco untied his hand from the chain. "Alright Jimmy, how do we do this?"

Jimmy looked at the block of cement around Lenny's legs. "I guess...I guess we just...lift him?"

"Lift him? You were bitching about lifting a bag of cement, how the hell are we going to lift him and the cement?"

Jimmy scratched his head. "I guess we could drag him."

"How far is it to the dock, anyway?"

"It's just outside."

"Jimmy, this building is huge, that's like a hundred yards."

"Well I didn't hear you complaining before."

"That's cause I thought you had a plan."

"I don't know, I've never done this before. Normally the boss says we clip a guy, and we clip him, that's it. I don't usually play around with concrete."

Rocco sighed. "Fine. We'll drag him."

The bay was deserted and the bright half-moon showed through the clouds, illuminating the empty dockyard. In the distance, the lights of the city twinkled like home-made electric stars glistening in the darkness. Only the night-owls were out at this hour, so the sounds of the city across the bay were just a steady ambient hum.

The cement block had been tilted backwards, and both men grasped Lenny under the arms and dragged him to the edge of the dock. The sound of it grating against the concrete of the ground was like heavy-handed nails on a chalk board. The men panted and groaned until they finally sat Lenny up on the end of the dock. He stood there like some grotesque half-finished statue. They adjusted Lenny until the cement block was half hanging over the edge. Lenny stood as still as he could, looking sick and staring up at the sky.

"Oh God," Lenny said. "How could I let it come to this?"

Jimmy arched his back, groaning. "Oh, damn it. My back is killing me."

"Blame the fat lady," Rocco said. "Let's hurry up, I'm freezing."

Jimmy's cell phone rang. He answered.

"Yeah? Yeah, we're here with him." Jimmy looked confused. "...Uh, are you sure?" There was another long pause. "Okay. No, no, it's fine. Yeah, we'll manage. Okay. Alright. Bye."

"Who was that?" Rocco asked.

"The boss," Jimmy said. "He said Where's Waldo just came and paid off Lenny's debt."

"What?!" Lenny exclaimed.

"Waldo Bulleri?" Rocco asked.

"Yeah."

"Oh thank God," Lenny said.

"So what, we cut him loose?" Rocco said.

"Yeah, guess so."

"Oh thank you," Lenny said. "Thank you, thank you."

"Don't thank me," Jimmy said. "Thank Where's Waldo."

"You know, I've always wondered why they call him that," Rocco said.

"Because whenever you need him, you can't find him. And then when you finally do, it turns out he was right in front of you the whole time."

"Thank you," Lenny said, crying. "Thank you so much."

"Okay, so how do we get him out of the concrete?" Rocco said.

Jimmy studied it. "Hmm. I have no idea."

"What?" Lenny said. "What do you mean?"

"I mean I guess you'll just have to learn to live like that."

"You can't be serious."

Jimmy laughed. "No, I'm kidding. We'll figure something out. I'll call somebody, see if we can get a pick-ax, or something."

Rocco smiled at Lenny. "Guess somebody up there still likes you."

"Yeah," Lenny said, grinning. "I guess so."

Rocco patted him on the back. As he did, Lenny leaned forward and suddenly the cement block shifted a bit. For a horrible moment, Lenny's weight was teetering on the edge of the dock, and then suddenly, the cement slipped off and he splashed into the water, disappearing into the darkness.

Rocco stared horrified into the water. Air bubbles floated to the surface, but nothing else could be seen. Jimmy walked up and looked over the dock, his mouth agape. He glared over at Rocco. Rocco couldn't help but cringe.

"Oops."

## The Gift

The moon shown dim through a haze of clouds that blotted out the stars. A great deal of snow and ice was on the ground. As the car pulled into the empty parking lot, the tires kicked up little bits of brown slush that had accumulated. It parked next to a brick building and the two men got out.

Jimmy and Rocco were bundled up as much as could be. Jimmy tapped a button and popped the trunk of the Lexus. He wore all black and Rocco had done the same, save for a frilly blue and white scarf. They walked to the back of the car.

"So I'm standing there for like ten minutes while she's helping this person," Rocco says. And she sees me standing there, but she doesn't say nothing. So I wait. And when she finishes up with the lady in front of me, she turns to me and gives me this look." Rocco lifted the trunk. "What do we need again?"

"Just grab the bags," Jimmy said.

Rocco lifted the heavy bags and put them on the concrete. "Anyway, she gives me this look like I'm so kind of idiot or something, and then she says 'What, can't you read the sign?' And I'm like, 'What sign?' So she points to this sign that says I need to go to the waiting area."

"So you were standing in the wrong place?"

"Apparently," Rocco said. "But like I said, I had been standing there for ten minutes. She can't look up from the person she's helping and tell me to go wait in the waiting room? How hard is that? It's not like she's so busy she can't even look up and take two seconds to say that to me. Just point. But don't give me some kind of look when I've been standing there ten minutes."

"I bet she gets fifty people a day that do that," Jimmy said. "Maybe she was at the end of her rope."

"That's the funny thing," Rocco said. "It was eight in the morning. The place just opened. I mean I might understand a bit if it was the end of the day. Maybe the lady's pissed off and just wants to go home. But eight? Come on."

"You know, it seems like there are certain places that just aren't friendly," Jimmy said. "I've noticed the same thing at the DMV."

"Oh, don't even get me started on the DMV," Rocco said. "But you'd think this little office wouldn't be so bad. All they do is take people's pictures and put it on their license."

"Nah, they do more than that. They gotta answer phones and stuff," Jimmy said. "I imagine they gotta answer all kinds of stupid questions. That's what gets them pissed. Just think how you'd feel if a million people asked you a bunch of stupid questions all day. You'd be pissed too."

"I don't know," Rocco said. "It just seems like these people are always giving me problems. It's not a big deal or anything, it's just that they're always giving me dirty looks."

Jimmy opened one of the duffel bags and began checking supplies. "Maybe they just don't like you. Check your bag and see if you got the plastic baggies."

"How can they not like me? They don't even know me." Rocco opened the bag. "Yeah, I got 'em."

"Sometimes you can take one look at a person and tell you don't like them. Maybe that was it."

"Why would that be it? There's nothing about me that would make people do that."

"I don't know," Jimmy said. "Sometimes that happens. Some people in life just automatically don't like you."

"What, are you saying I got something wrong with me?"

"No, it isn't you specifically. You know how it is. Sometimes you take a look at a person and you know from the start that you don't like them. I'm just saying, maybe that was it."

"But I get this a lot," Rocco said. "It's like the time I went to open up a bank account and the lady went off on me. I didn't do nothing to piss her off, she was just mean."

"Well, maybe you got one of those faces, I don't know."

"What do you mean?"

Jimmy moved to the manhole cover. "Get the crowbar."

Rocco grabbed the crowbar out of one of the bags. "What do you mean, 'one of those faces?'"

"Some people just have a look that makes people not like them."

Rocco stared. "So this is my fault?"

Jimmy laughed. "Rocco, I'm just talking here. Some people got a look about them that other people don't like."

"You're saying I got a look."

"I'm saying you could. Everybody could. I could have a look. Maybe some people don't like the way I look, so they treat me rude. It happens. Some people do that. Personally, I never judge anybody at first glance."

"Oh, of course not," Rocco said. "St. Jimmy wouldn't dream of such a thing. But what, you think I have that kind of look?"

"Rocco, I didn't say that."

"You said I could."

"Yes Rocco, we all could. Now pry open that cover."

Rocco started working with the crow bar. "I don't think I have a look. Maybe she was racist against Italians." He pried the manhole cover off.

Jimmy shined a flashlight down into the hole. "Man, that's further down than I thought. I'm gonna need to change my shoes." He went to the car.

"Okay, so let me get this straight. According to you, some people got a look about them that other people don't like. And maybe I got a look like that, so the lady at the office didn't like me?"

"It happens, Rocco."

"Well what if I walked in there and treated her rude just for no reason like that?" Rocco said. "How would she feel?"

"It happens all the time. Why are you making such a big deal about it?"

"Cause I don't have a look. There's nothing wrong with me. I can understand not liking somebody at first glance, but there's gotta be a reason. Maybe they look shady or whatever. But I walked into that office wearing nothing but D and G. I was looking good, Jimmy."

Jimmy sat in the back of the car, slipping his other shoes on. "What's D and G?"

"Dolce and Gabbana."

"Never heard of it."

"Why am I not surprised?"

"Sometimes it doesn't matter how you dress. Some people just take one glance at you and don't like you. Can't you think of somebody you've seen that you didn't like, but you didn't really have a reason?"

Rocco thought for a minute. "Yeah, actually."

"Who?"

"George Clooney."

"Clooney?" Jimmy asked. "You don't like Clooney?"

"No."

"Why not?"

Rocco shrugged. "No reason."

"You gotta have a reason."

"You just said I didn't have to!"

"Yeah, but this isn't some schmo," Jimmy said. "What's wrong with Clooney?"

"Jimmy, that was the whole point. You said pick somebody I didn't like for no good reason. I thought of Clooney."

"What, you just picked him at random?"

"No. I just don't like him."

"Jesus," Jimmy said, shaking his head. "Clooney. Of all the people in the world..."

"What, you got some kind of crush on him?"

"He's a good actor! How can you not like Clooney?"

"You said I didn't need a reason. I just don't like him. I don't know why. First time I looked at the guy, I knew I didn't like him."

"That's crazy," Jimmy said.

"You said it yourself. Some people you look at and you just don't like."

"And you saw Clooney, and you didn't like him?"

"That's right," Rocco said.

Jimmy shook his head. "Unbelievable. No wonder the lady at the office didn't like you." He walked back to the manhole cover. "Alright kid, you go first."

Rocco picked up a duffel bag and shined the flashlight down the hole. "God, I bet it stinks down there."

"Well we're about to find out. Go on."

"Why can't we just break through a window or something?"

"Alarm, Rocco. Use your head."

"So we gotta go through the sewer?"

"It's the only way," Jimmy said. "There's a floor grate in the back storeroom that we're gonna cut through. We'll go in through there."

Rocco positioned himself to go down the manhole. "Jimmy, tell me honestly. Do I have a look?"

"Oh for Christ's sake..."

"Come on."

Jimmy sighed. "Kid, if you don't like Clooney for no good reason, then there's no hope for the rest of us. Everybody has a look."

"Well, at least it's not just me." Rocco climbed down and Jimmy followed.

Water ran though the sewer in a stream. It would have been pitch black if it weren't for their flashlights. The brown block walls were slick with rivulets of leaking water.

"Oh that's great," Rocco said, his voice echoing through the sewer. "That's just great. Look at my shoes, Jimmy."

Jimmy shined his light on Rocco's shoes and winced. Rocco had stepped in a big puddle of some gooey gray substance that looked like snot.

"What the hell is this?" Rocco said.

"I have no idea," Jimmy said. "But that's why I changed my shoes."

"Oh what, you couldn't tell me? That's why you made me go first isn't it?"

Jimmy snickered. "Shit rolls downhill, kid."

"Son of a bitch!"

Jimmy shined his light down the tunnel. "We go this way for a little while. Should be the fifth grate we find." They trudged along. "Man, it's freezing down here. My face is getting numb."

"Should have worn a scarf."

Jimmy laughed. "Yeah. That's what I should have done."

"Hey, don't knock the scarf. Lisa got me this. It's Armani."

Jimmy glanced back and shined his light on Rocco's scarf. "You're kidding me."

"No," Rocco said, showing him. "Feel it."

Jimmy felt it. "It doesn't look like Armani."

"It is. She got it online."

"Uh-huh," Jimmy said, sounding skeptical.

"Hey, Lisa knows her stuff. If she says it's Armani, then it is."

"You wanna see a scarf, you should see the one I got the boss last year for Christmas," Jimmy said. "Now that was a scarf."

"Why do we have to get him gifts, anyway? The man has all the money in the world."

"Kid, you've got a lot to learn about the way people behave. It's not about the money. It's about the gesture. The boss is the reason that all of us are prospering. He puts food on our table. Sure, we're the ones that go out and earn. But he's the one that goes to bat for us if we get in trouble. He makes the deals that keep us in the comfort we're used to. Christmas is our chance to give back."

"Well I don't see why we couldn't just get him a normal gift. This seems like a lot of trouble."

"The boss doesn't like normal gifts. I learned that the hard way," Jimmy said. "Like that scarf I got him last year. I don't think he ever wore it. He thanked me, but I could tell he liked some of the other gifts better. You should have seen what Benny got him. He managed to track down some old stuff that the boss's old man had. He found this old metal truck. A ratty old thing, I thought. But apparently it belonged to the boss's old man. You should have seen the look on his face, Rocco. He wept."

"Damn. He actually cried?"

"Big huge tears."

"Well he better like what we're doing."

"Oh he will."

The storeroom was very dark. Boxes filled wire metal shelves that stood against the walls. The room was about twenty by twenty, filled with boxes of all sizes. With some effort and grunting, the floor grate was lifted away and shoved to the side.

Rocco climbed through and collapsed with his duffel bag onto the tile floor, breathing heavily. Jimmy followed behind. He stood up and looked around the storeroom, shining his light.

"Alright kid. Now we just gotta find the box where the alarm is. Then once we shut the battery off, we'll have full run of this place."

"Wait," Rocco said, panting. "Gimme a minute."

Jimmy looked at his watch. "Come on, Roc. I wanna get to sleep at a decent hour."

"Damn it, hold on. That thing was heavy. Plus you made me carry all the tools."

"Well somebody has to. I got a bad back."

"Yeah yeah, I know. You've always got a bad back when it comes time to lift something. Just lemme rest a minute."

Jimmy sat down on one of the boxes. He took a glance around the musty storeroom. "See Rocco? This is what I love about Christmas."

"What, breaking and entering?"

Jimmy laughed. "No. The season of giving. I love giving gifts. It's true what they say, you know. It's better to give than to receive."

"Then how come you didn't get me anything?"

"You didn't get me anything either. You expect me to give you something and not get anything in return?"

"I thought it was the season of giving," Rocco said.

"You gotta give to get, Roc. What, you're mad I didn't get you anything?"

Rocco waved him off. "Nah, I don't care. Actually, I've noticed it's better not to start that gift giving stuff unless it's a gag. Me and my brother used to give each other gifts at Christmas. It got real competitive. He was always trying to outdo me. You know, be the better brother. So of course, I had to kick it up a notch too. It got expensive. So we just stopped and decided to give nothing but gag gifts."

"Like what?" Jimmy asked.

"Fake plastic dog shit, whoopee cushions, stuff like that. One Christmas, I got him this really crazy hot sauce that's supposed to be one of the hottest in the world. And this stuff is serious, Jimmy. It has a warning label and everything. One drop will burn you up. Anyway, he tried it, and went berserk. It was hilarious. But that wasn't all. I joked with him that that sauce would burn a whole right through him. And I bought this special prank toilet paper, right? It had this chemical in it that turned everything red when it hit the water. So when he stood up to flush and he looked in the toilet, he thought there was blood everywhere." Rocco started laughing.

Jimmy stared. "That's terrible!"

"No, man. If you had been there, you'd be laughing too. You should have seen the look on his face. When he came out of the bathroom he was as pale as a ghost. It was the best Christmas ever."

Jimmy shook his head. "I guess we have a different idea of what makes a good Christmas. Come on, get up. I don't want to linger here."

"So what are we looking for?" Rocco asked.

"A breaker box," Jimmy said. "The power for the alarm isn't on the normal power supply, which is why we couldn't just cut it from outside. You have to be inside to cut it off."

Jimmy and Rocco looked around the storeroom with their flashlights until they found it. "This is it," Jimmy said. He opened the box and unplugged something.

"Is that all?" Rocco asked.

"Yep," Jimmy said. "And everything else will be on, except for the alarm. Let's go."

They opened the door to the storeroom and walked out. The place was lit by fish tanks, each one glowing a pale blue. The aquariums were filled with all types of fish, from the tropical and exotic to the mundane. They looked around.

"So what are we looking for exactly?" Rocco asked.

"The crown jewel," Jimmy said. "I heard the boss talking about it when we were all at Dinglehopper's the other day." Jimmy led them to an especially large aquarium, where one fish lived all by itself.

"There it is, Roc." They both stared, mouths agape at the beauty of the fish in front of them. A small, spiny and brilliantly colored yellow fish with stripes of black and baby blue swam around, nipping at little bits of things near the bottom. Its little flippers maneuvered its body gracefully through the water.

"It's called the Pythagorean Salt-Water Tetra. The boss is crazy about them. He wants a breeding pair, but unfortunately they only have one. It'll have to do."

Rocco stared. "It's pretty."

"Yeah. And expensive, which is why we're stealing it."

"Come on, it's a fish. How much could it be?"

Jimmy pointed to a small placard beneath the aquarium.

Rocco read it. "Holy shit."

"Yeah."

"For a fish?"

"Yep."

"Holy mother of God. What does it eat, diamonds?"

"It's one of the rarest salt-water aquarium fish you can get. According to the boss, it's because they don't breed unless aquarium conditions are perfect."

"Remind you of your wife?"

Jimmy stared as Rocco snickered. "Very funny. Come on. Hold the plastic baggie and I'll snag it with the net."

"Alright."

Rocco dragged the bag full of tools out of the manhole and into the slush and snow of the parking lot. Jimmy followed behind, carrying the plastic bag with the fish inside.

"Man it's colder than a witch's tit out here," Rocco said, rubbing his hands together. He looked around to make sure that nobody saw them exit the manhole. All was quiet. "I'd give anything for a coffee."

Jimmy looked into the plastic bag. "Hey Roc, does this fish look happy to you?"

Rocco took a look. "Not really. Probably cause you kept popping him with that net."

"I didn't pop him. He kept swimming away." Jimmy studied the fish closer. "Seriously, he doesn't look too good. His fins are down. It's like he has no strength."

"Maybe he's just tired. We probably woke him up."

Jimmy stared at Rocco. "Fish don't sleep. There's something wrong with him."

"Who cares, it's a fish? Let's go, I'm freezing."

"This isn't just any fish, Rocco. This is gonna be the boss's fish. What if this thing croaks as soon as we give it to him? The boss will think it's our fault."

"Oh come on. Let's just take him back to your aquarium. I'm sure he'll be fine."

"I hope."

Jimmy's basement housed a full bar, a large screen television, a pool table, and a massive saltwater fish tank. The floor was a beautiful mahogany and the walls were decorated with old movie posters from the fifties. The two men stood at the fish tank, watching.

"He doesn't look happy," Jimmy said.

"Maybe it's because of the other fishes," Rocco said. He tapped the tank.

"Stop it," Jimmy said. "You'll scare him."

"Maybe that's why he was in a tank all by himself," Rocco said. "Maybe he doesn't like being with other fish."

"What kind of fish doesn't like being with other fish?" Jimmy said.

"I don't know. But he was all alone in his fish tank at the store. I'm sure they had good reason."

"It was probably because of how expensive he was."

"That's what I'm saying," Rocco said. "They didn't want the other fish bothering him. You don't put a celebrity with normal people. They get the VIP treatment."

Jimmy nodded. "That's true. But there's nothing I can do, I don't have another fish tank."

Rocco studied the fish. He shook his head. "I don't know, Jimmy. I think he's gonna die."

"Don't say that. He's not gonna die."

"Well then what are we gonna do?"

Jimmy thought. "I guess I might could find something to put the other fish in. Help me look."

Jimmy's kitchen had immaculate marble counter tops and stainless steel appliances. He searched through one of the cupboards while Rocco rummaged through another. As he did, the pans shifted and made a clatter.

"Shh!" Jimmy said. "It's two in the morning, you'll wake my old lady."

They looked for a few moments more. "Here," Rocco said, pulling out a large pot.

"No, not that one."

"Why not? It's perfect."

"We use that for chili, put it back."

"What does it matter what you use it for?" Rocco said.

"Because we use it all the time. I don't want some slimy fish swimming in it. That's disgusting."

"So wash the thing after! Who cares?"

"I care. I can't eat chili out of that thing knowing there was a fish swimming in it."

"Oh for the love of-"

The light flicked on. A heavy set woman of around forty stood there in a robe. Her eyes were squinting in the light. "Jimmy, what the hell are you doing?"

"It's alright, Margie," he said. "We've just got to grab a few things."

"It's two in the morning! What are you looking for?" She saw Rocco. "Is that my chili pot?"

"Uh, yes ma'am."

"We just need a few pans, that's all," Jimmy said. "Just go back to bed."

"Well what do you need them for?"

Jimmy sighed. "Marge, just go back to bed. We just need to store a few things, that's all."

"Well don't use the good chili pot. Use the plastic stuff."

"Okay," Jimmy said. "Now get some sleep hon."

Marge sighed and walked away. "Why couldn't I have married that architect?" she muttered.

Rocco put the chili pot back. Jimmy grabbed some of the plastic containers from the cupboard. "Alright. This will do it."

The other fish were stuck in several different plastic containers. Jimmy stroked an orange cat and leaned up against the bar, watching their gift swim in the tank all by itself.

"What's its name?" Rocco asked.

"Caesar," Jimmy said, petting the cat's fur. "He's real sweet."

Rocco reached out to pet it. The cat swiped at his hand.

"Ow, damn," Rocco said, looking at the scratch. "I thought you said he was sweet?"

"He is. Maybe you just have a look he doesn't like."

Rocco glared. "Very funny."

They continued to watch the fish. "He doesn't look any happier," Rocco said.

"No he doesn't," Jimmy said. "I don't know. Maybe he misses his old fish tank."

"Well there's nothing we can do about that." He took a closer look at the fish. "What the hell is wrong with this thing?"

"We fed him. We gave him a nice place to relax. We even took the other fish out. He's got everything in this tank that he did at the store. I can't explain it."

"Then he must be sick. That's the only thing that makes sense. Maybe when we took him outside in the bag, he caught a cold."

Jimmy furrowed his brow. "I don't think fish can catch colds, Rocco."

"Why not? Dogs can. Why can't a fish?"

"Cause they're under water. Colds don't go underwater. You ever heard of catching a cold while under water?"

"Sure I have. My mom used to tell me to come out of the pool before I catch a cold."

"She meant that you would get a chill," Jimmy said. "You don't actually catch the cold from the water."

"Well how do you know? You're not a doctor."

"It's common sense!"

"No, it's common sense that anything that's breathing can catch a cold, Jimmy. Besides, what else could it be? This fish is sick."

Jimmy sighed. "So what do we do?"

Rocco shrugged. "We take him to a fish doctor."

"...A fish doctor?"

"Yeah. A fish doctor."

"There's no such thing as a fish doctor, Rocco. There are only vets, and I'm pretty sure they don't treat fish."

"Why not?"

"Because fish don't get sick!"

"They do too! Look, this thing is gonna die unless we get him some help. And if it dies, we got nothing good to get the boss for Christmas. We'll have to go to J. C. Penny and get him a tie or something."

Jimmy groaned. "We're not doing that. We'd never live it down."

"So let's find a vet."

A very large newly built brick house stood at the cusp of a sloping hill of snow. The porch light was on and illuminated the two men as they approached the door. Rocco carried an oversized brandy snifter that contained the sullen looking fish.

"So you know this guy?"

"Yeah," Jimmy said. "We threw him a welcoming party when he moved in a couple years back. Sometimes his kid mows our lawn." Jimmy rang the doorbell. "Just let me do the talking, though. I don't think he'll be very pleased about this."

After a moment, Jimmy rang the doorbell again. A few lights came on and a balding man in a red robe came to the door. "Jimmy? What the hell..."

"We're sorry to bother you Mike, but you gotta help us out. We got a sick fish on our hands and if we don't get it fixed, we're gonna be in a lot of trouble."

The vet stared at Jimmy for a long moment, as if straining his mind to interpret the words through his fog of sleep. He looked down at the brandy snifter with the fish in it. "You're kidding me, right?"

"Well, uh, no," Jimmy said. "We don't know what's wrong with him. We think maybe he..." he sighed before he could say it. "...caught a cold or something."

"Caught a cold?" he asked. "What is this, some kind of joke?"

"Mister," Rocco started. "It's freezing out here, and this air can't be good for him. Can we just come in?"

"Guys, it's three in the morning. I've got to get up--"

"Just take a look at him, will you?" Jimmy asked.

The vet sighed and made way for his guests. "Jesus Christ..."

"Thank you," Jimmy said upon entering the living room.

Antique chairs decorated a Victorian style living room with burgundy drapes and elegant gold crown molding. A small hand-made oak coffee table sat in front of a large antique couch. "Just set it there, I guess," the vet said. "I'll be back."

"Thank you, we really appreciate this," Jimmy said.

Rocco sat the fish on the table and took a seat. "Man, this is a sweet set up." He picked up a small crystal decoration and examined it.

"Don't touch anything," Jimmy said. "We're already putting this guy out, as it is."

"He must be doing pretty well to afford a place like this," Rocco said, looking around. "What do you think he makes?"

"I don't know," Jimmy said, glancing around at some of the paintings on the wall.

"You think it's a million?"

"Nah," Jimmy said. "Not that much. Maybe seven, eight hundred grand."

"For a vet? There's real doctors that don't get paid that much."

"He's got his own practice," Jimmy said. "Owns the building and everything."

"Still, that's pretty thick for a vet. Maybe he's got some side thing going on?"

"Who cares? Maybe he plays the stock market."

Rocco kept looking around. "I feel like I'm in an old castle." He bounced a bit on the couch. "Could use a Lay Z Boy though."

"It's antique furniture, Roc. It's supposed to be uncomfortable."

The vet came back with a bag of tools.

"Thanks again, Mike. Like I said, we really appreciate it."

Mike gave a tired grunt. He sat down across from the table. "I'll see if I can tell you what's wrong, but even if I can, I don't know if there's anything I can do."

"Whatever you can do, we'll be grateful."

Mike removed a large magnifying glass from the bag. He peered through it.

"You know, there's that flu bug that's been going around," Rocco said. "Maybe he just needs some Benadryl."

Mike looked away from the fish and stared at Rocco. "...Benadryl? You want to give a fish Benadryl?"

Rocco shrugged. "They got the liquid kind, right?"

Mike looked to Jimmy, who was shaking his head.

"Forgive my friend. He has low blood sugar."

Mike sighed and went back to the fish. He narrowed his eyes and then looked closer.

"Huh...well I'll be damned."

"What?" Jimmy asked.

Mike looked up. "He's got a broken fin."

"A broken fin?" Rocco said. "How did that happen?"

"I don't know," Jimmy said. "Maybe you bumped him with the net when you got him out."

"Hey, I just held the bag. You used the net."

"Well whoever did it broke his fin," Mike said. "And he's not going to be very happy until it heals."

"How long will that be?" Jimmy asked.

"I don't know. Probably a few weeks. But there's no guarantee it will heal at all."

"We're giving it to a friend in a few days. If he sees that it's not swimming, he's gonna think something's wrong with it. He'll think we messed it up."

"You did mess it up," Mike said.

"Yeah but we didn't mean to!" Jimmy said. "I'd never hurt a poor little fish on purpose."

"Maybe it'll heal faster if we put a cast on it," Rocco suggested.

Mike and Jimmy stared at him. "A cast on it!?" Jimmy said. "And how do you suggest we do that? It's a fish! How the hell would you put a cast on a fish?"

Mike rubbed his forehead.

"Look, I don't know, I'm just trying to help!" Rocco said. "That's what you'd do for anything else, right? Why should a fish be different?"

"Because it's under water, Rocco! How would we even do that?"

"Well he's the expert!" Rocco said, pointing to Mike.

"Expert? I'm a vet. I treat cats and dogs, or maybe on a weird day, a ferret. I've never treated a fish before."

"But doesn't it make sense?" Rocco said. "If a bird broke its wing, you'd put a cast on it."

Mike chuckled and shook his head. "Yes, I guess I would."

"Well there ya go," Rocco said. "Now we just gotta come up with a way to put a cast on."

"Rocco, sometimes you come up with the dumbest things," Jimmy said. "Even with a cast on, the fish is gonna look sick for the boss."

"Well maybe we can explain it. We'll tell him he was like that when we bought him. We'll say it was the pet store's fault. He'll still like the fish."

Jimmy turned to Mike. "Is there anything we can do for the thing?"

Mike shook his head. "We can give him some medicine to make sure the wound doesn't get infected. But other than that we can't do much. Like I said, there's no guarantee that he'll be able to swim again if the fin doesn't heal."

"But about the cast-" Rocco started.

"And yes," Mike interrupted. "Ideally, we'd put a cast on. But this fish is too small to have bones, it has cartilage. That doesn't heal in the same way."

"But isn't it worth a shot?"

"I wouldn't know the first thing about how to put a cast on a fish!"

"Just think how you would do it with a normal animal," Rocco said.

Mike sighed. "I'd sedate the animal and then set up a plaster mold. But plaster isn't going to work under water."

"What about a splint? Like for a broken finger."

"Oh boy," Jimmy said. "Where would we get a splint that small, Rocco? You don't think."

"We could use a toothpick."

Jimmy groaned and sat down. Mike couldn't help but smile a bit. "A toothpick?"

"Sure, why not? It's wooden and it's small enough. You think you could fashion something out of that?"

"Mike, I'm sorry for him," Jimmy said. "I don't know what to say."

"That's okay," Mike said, chuckling a bit. "I guess in theory, it could work, but it would be a real longshot. We'd have to sedate the fish first before I could even try to apply the thing, but that will kill it if I don't get the dose perfect. I'd just have to somehow calculate its body weight and see how much to give it. "

"I think it's worth a shot, don't you?" Rocco said.

Mike sighed. "Look, I normally have a great deal of affection for animals. And I appreciate that you want to save this one, I really do. But I gotta say: Can't you just get another fish?"

"That's unfortunately not an option," Jimmy said. "What you're looking at doc, is a Pythagorean Salt-Water Tetra, one of the rarest goldfish known to man. And let's just say the price reflects that."

"Okay," Mike said. "So what, like two-hundred bucks?"

Jimmy leaned forward and whispered in his ear. Mike's eyes went wide. "You're serious? You two paid that much for a fish?"

Jimmy shrugged. "What can we say? We love our boss."

Mike sighed. "Oh boy..."

"So what do you say, doc?" Rocco asked. "You wanna go for it?"

Mike sighed. "I'll get the toothpicks."

Rocco and Jimmy were coming down the stairs to Jimmy's basement. "Can you believe that guy? He's a magician," Jimmy was saying. "The way he used those tweezers and a little bit of liquid cement...it was unbelievable."

"Well at least we know why he makes the big bucks," Rocco said, carrying the brandy-snifter with the fish in it. "He really perked up once the doc crushed that pill and gave it to him. What was it called?"

"Adderall," Jimmy said. "It's the stuff you give to little kids to make 'em focus."

"Well he's sure zipping around now," Rocco said. "Still a little awkward, but at least he looks happy."

"Just wait till we get him in the fish tank. I bet he'll be doing back-flips like a dolphin."

They entered the basement and Rocco sat down the snifter and prepared the net. Jimmy glanced at the plastic containers that housed the other fish. "Uh, Rocco? Did you put the tops on these containers?"

"Yeah," Rocco said. I saw the way Caesar was eying them. I didn't want him to climb up there and grab your fish."

Jimmy peeled the top off one of them and looked in. He glared at Rocco. "You stupid son of a bitch!"

"What?"

"YOU SUFFOCATED ALL MY FISH!"

"What? No I didn't."

"Take a look!"

Rocco looked in the container. Several fish floated at the top.

"Are they dead?"

"Yes, Rocco they're dead! That's generally what happens when you deprive something of oxygen!"

"Well how was I supposed to know?"

"It's Tupperware, Rocco! The containers seal. That's the point of them, they're not supposed to let the air in."

"I just didn't want the cat to get to them!"

"Well good going, now they're all saved from the vicious cat! Too bad they can't breathe!"

"Jimmy, I'm sorry."

Jimmy groaned. "This is a disaster. Every one of my fish are dead."

"It was an accident, Jimmy. I thought I was doing the right thing. How long do you think they've been like that?"

Jimmy sighed. "I don't know."

"Well the Tetra lasted for longer in the bag. You'd think there would be enough air in those containers for them to breathe while we were gone."

"You'd think."

Rocco looked them over. "You think the doc could help? I mean, if he can put a cast on a fish, then maybe he can give one CPR."

Jimmy sighed. "Just shut up Rocco."