

Dirty Laundry

By Todd Robinson

“How long has she been missing?”

“Two days,” Nathan said, putting his Rolling Rock bottle on my desk.

Condensation off the bottle dripped onto my desk calendar.

That annoyed me.

Everything Nathan Underwood did annoyed me. From his idiotic growth of hipster chin scrub down to the way he sat on the corner of my desk like he owned the place.

Not that I owned the place, either. The ‘office’ for 4DC Security occupied the space beside the liquor room above The Cellar, Boston’s favorite dank pit for cheap beer and God-awful garage bands. The only reason he was up there in the first place was because he was offering me money, which everybody knew he had. He hardly ever shut up about it.

The ‘she’ in question, was Nathan’s girl, Matilda. We’d all heard of Matilda, but nobody had ever seen her. Considering that Nathan spent a lot of time at The Cellar, never with the girlfriend, led many to speculate that she didn’t, in fact, exist. Some of that speculation also touched upon what kind of girl would date a blazing jackass like Nathan Underwood.

Millionaire or not.

Yet there he was, offering me money to find the girl who I had trouble believing existed in the first place. So much so that I had twenty riding on it with my partner. Junior’s bet was that she was real, but looked like the backside of a leprous rhinoceros

“Where do you think she ran off to?”

Nathan’s good eye shot me a hard look. His glass eye stayed where it was. “I didn’t say ran off, I said missing.” The hard look didn’t impress me. Nathan was tall, but softer than a marshmallow in the sun.

“Okay, fine. Any ideas where I should start?”

“She said she was going to do the laundry. She never came back.”

Then she must have had some clothes with her, I thought. Another indication that she just up and left the turkey, but I didn’t say it.

“You got a picture?”

He placed a 5x7 on the desk. Matilda was a tall, thin girl, with reddish-brown hair and slate-blue eyes that looked through you, even in a photograph. The only thing that kept her from being stunning was the sadness behind the obviously forced smile.

“That a bruise under her eye?”

“It’s a shadow,” he said, without looking back at the photo.

“Looks like a bruise.” I did my best to hide the contempt I was starting to feel. Hell, who was I kidding? I always had a shallowly buried contempt for him. His proximity just made it blossom.

“Hey, whose side are you on? She’s missing. I’m paying you to find her. You want my money or not?”

“I’m not on any side. I’m not paid to be on a side. You want me on yours? Drop some cash or get the hell out of my office.”

Nathan stood up and slapped an envelope on my calendar, next to the new water stain. “You find her, you call me. I’ll double it.”

I counted two grand. “I’ll call you if I get anything.”

I resisted the urge to slam the door off his ass as he exited.

Junior stood at the door of the bar, checking I.D.s, when I got downstairs. “What did Jerk-wood want?”

“He wants us to find his girlfriend.”

“*Hah!* You owe me twenty!”

“Don’t think so. She might exist, but she’s actually pretty.” I handed him the photograph.

He snatched the picture from me with the hand that had H-A-R-D tattooed across the knuckles. “I’ll be the judge of... Daaaaaamn.”

“See?”

“Man, I wish I had that dickshit’s money.” Junior squinted and looked closer.

“No kidding, huh?”

“Hey, is that a bruise under her eye?”

“Shadow.”

Junior gave me his ‘bullshitting a bullshitter’ glare. “Shadow?”

“Yeah. I’ll be back in a half-hour.”

Fenway Laundry was full of Berklee students even on Thursday afternoon. I walked in and felt a dozen pairs of eyes on me. I knew some of the kids in there from the club. I could feel a jolt at my presence, as if I might bounce them from the laundromat.

A young Chinese woman sat behind the register, scowling at a newspaper. She lifted her eyes long enough to sneer, then went back to the paper. Obviously, I represented some icon of bloated Americana to her. I would have to use all of the Malone charm.

“Excuse me-”

“Change machine over there,” she said in a way that indicated that it might be one of her few phrases in English. She pointed at the far corner with a long manicured nail.

“No, I-“

“Drop off over there.” She pointed at the other corner, filled with colorful laundry bags. Her eyes never lifted from the newspaper.

I held out Matilda’s photograph. “Has this girl been in here lately?”

The woman slammed the paper down and unleashed a torrent of angry Chinese at me. Her finger whipped back and forth in the air, inches from my face. The words were alien, but the tone was unmistakable.

“*Fine*, fine... Jesus.” I stepped back, feeling my ears redden. She was still yelling when I left. I’ve seen enough kung-fu movies to know that the word ‘*gwilo*’ didn’t indicate a fond warmth towards me. She said ‘*gwilo*’ a lot.

In my hasty retreat, I almost knocked Joe Creedy over. The little guy stumbled and dropped his laundry basket. I grabbed his frayed denim collar to keep him from toppling.

“What the...?” Joe grabbed my arm to steady himself, then saw who it was that nearly steamrolled him. “Hey Boo, you in a rush?” Like most of my acquaintances, Joe

knew me primarily from the The Cellar. Sometimes he worked the sound board for local bands.

“Yeah, escaping the Dragon Lady’s fire breath.”

Joe chuckled. “Yeah, she’s rough. You wash your clothes here? I thought you lived in Allston?”

“I do. Listen, you seen this girl in here recently?” I showed him the photo, hoping against hope.

“Matilda? Yeah. She was in here a couple of days ago.”

My heart jumped. “You know her?”

“We’ve chit-chatted over the dryers, but yeah. You know she lived with that asshole Nathan? Dude with the glass eye?”

“He asked me to look for her.”

“She’s missing?”

“Maybe. Anything weird happen when she was here?”

Joe frowned and shrugged. “Nothing that I could see.”

Dead end. Dammit.

“Well, if you hear anything – if she comes in, call me immediately at the bar.”

“Sure.”

I looked back into the laundromat. Dragon Lady was still glaring at me. It might have been a dead end, but something itched at me that there might be a hidden access road.

I took my ‘findings’ back to Junior. “I think she ran.”

“Wouldn’t you?”

Heavy footsteps sounded up the stairs. Somebody pounded hard on the office door. I swung the door open, ready to sock whoever it was. I found the angry red face of Nathan Underwood. I debated socking him anyway. “What the hell?”

“Look at this.” He slammed a letter on the desk. On it was typewritten:

10,000 dollar or Matilda die.

Leave tomorrow

in laundry bag at Fenway

Cleaner drop-off at 9p.m.

“Awww, hell no,” said Junior. I picked up the note by the edge. “Nathan, this is more than we agreed to. You need to go to the cops with this.”

“No! No. Screw the cops and screw these guys. I want you to take this money and drop it off tomorrow.” He dropped a bright blue laundry bag on the desk. The contents thumped.

“Is there ten grand in there?” Junior looked at the bag hungrily.

“Then I want you to follow the bag and take care of whoever did this.”

I shook my head to clear out what I thought I was hearing. “Wait a minute. What do you think we’re doing here?”

“You take care of them and get Matilda. Then you keep what’s in the bag. Nobody messes with me and my money.”

I refrained from reminding him that his ‘hard-earned’ money came from a lawsuit when he was seven and lost an eye after he decided to play in an unguarded construction lot.

“Is there ten grand in there?” Junior asked again, hypnotized by the blue vinyl.

8:48 p.m. Junior and I sat in his '79 Buick that he, for one reason or another, had named Miss Kitty. We shivered in the late October chill, as Miss Kitty had decided to stop blowing heat sometime during Reagan's second term. October in Boston may not have been Minnesota bad, but it sure as hell wasn't Brazil either.

"It's Joe," he said, blowing steam off his coffee.

"What are you talking about? Joe couldn't kidnap a toddler without getting beat up. I'm telling you, Dragon Lady's involved. Chinese Mafia."

"Joe said she 'lived' with Nathan. Why would he use past tense?"

"What are you, the Grammar Police?" I rubbed my hands together for warmth.

"Hey, your best proof is bad spelling in the note."

"Her English was about as good as your Chinese."

"How do you know Joe's literate? He works with musicians."

"Good point."

"Besides, you're forgetting the Man Laws."

He had me there. It was damned good evidence. "Maybe..."

"Maybe nothing. What kinda guy has a full bag of laundry after he tells you he was at the laundromat two days earlier? What guy do you know does laundry every two days?"

"There might be some."

"When was the last time you did your laundry?"

I was silent. Junior and I often did the 'scratch and sniff' on our clothes.

"September."

"Exactly." Junior smugly lit a cigarette. I'm not sure how he pulled off the smugness, but he did.

I checked my watch. "It's almost nine. Pop the trunk." I climbed out the car and went around back. The trunk remained shut. "The trunk, Junior!"

Even from inside the car, I could hear him muttering. The trunk opened, and I pulled the bag out. Ten grand felt surprisingly light.

Junior rolled down his window. "Are we really going to beat on whoever walks out with that bag?"

"You suggested we go to the casino."

"Not the point. So we're basically going to be mugging the kidnapper?"

"That's one way to look at it. First and foremost, we're going to find Matilda."

"Then we mug the kidnapper."

"Then we take our fee. Functionally, this belongs to us now. How they want to give it to us is their business. You willing to get rough for your share?"

"For five grand, I'd step on *your* neck."

"That's comforting."

"Double or nothing says it's Joe."

"Then I got twenty on The Dragon."

We shook on it and I walked into the Dragon's Lair. She was yelling shrilly at a trembling girl holding an armful of wet clothes. "No dryer in ten minutes. We close in hour!"

I tried my best to scurry past without catching her attention. One time, Junior and I fought off an entire biker gang by ourselves. They didn't rattle me half as much as the

hundred-pound Asian woman was. Scurrying, however, is best left to those under two hundred and fifty pounds.

“Hey,” she yelled at my back.

I cringed and turned. She started yelling at me again. Why did this woman hate me so much? She used that *gwilo* word again. I pointed at the blue bag like I was returning something of hers that I’d stolen. I placed it gingerly on the drop-off pile and rushed out. I didn’t feel safe until I closed the car door.

“It done?” Junior asked.

“Done,” I sighed.

“Why are you sweating?”

We waited and watched the laundromat with all of the focus that two A.D.D.-addled morons could muster. At ten, the Dragon Lady locked the door and shut the lights.

No Joe.

Nobody left with the blue bag.

Junior was jittery. “Man, it’s freaking me out that there’s ten grand sitting on that floor.”

“Dragon Lady hasn’t left yet.” As I said it, she opened the door again and looked up and down the street. We huddled low in our seats. Even in the big Buick, we were uncomfortably on top of each other.

“You smell nice,” I said.

“Touch me and die.”

We watched her lock the door, then stroll down the street carrying the blue bag.

“Ah-ha! You owe me forty now.”

“If she brings that bag to Joe, it’s a draw.”

Junior pulled out of the parking space and crept down the street at a respectable distance. We traveled ten feet before she stopped in front of a multi-dwelling brownstone.

“Junior! Follow her.”

“What? Why me?”

“She knows me. She knows I’m looking for Matilda.”

“Dammit.”

He parked again and trotted to the door as I crouched low. When she struggled with the door, Junior politely held it for her. I saw him twitch as she undoubtedly hit him with some of her venom. I swear I heard *gwilo* again. She went in and Junior watched her through the door. Then he hopped back to the car on one foot.

“Why are you..? Where’s your shoe?”

“Holding the door open. Move your ass.”

We ran back to the building. Well, I ran. Junior bounded quickly. “Which apartment?”

“First floor. Last door on the left.”

I knocked and covered the peephole with my palm.

“Who is it?” came the angry accented voice.

“U.P.S.,” I said.

“No U.P.S. Go away.”

“Dammit. On three?”

Junior shook his head sadly. “Why is it always the hard way?”

“One-Two-Three!” We slammed our shoulders against the wood and broke through a little easier than we expected to. We tumbled through the shattered door into a thin hallway and landed in a heap on top of a very surprised Chinese woman.

If I thought I’d heard her curse before...

I grabbed an arm.

It was Junior’s. “*Aggh!* She got me!”

“I got you, Junior.”

“No,” he shrieked. “*She stabbed me in the fuckin’ leg!*”

I turned my head far enough to see her pull a butterfly knife out of Junior’s thigh. He screamed again and we managed to untangle ourselves in record time. We both had our backs to the door.

She held the bloody knife at me menacingly. “You think you’re tough, Underwood?”

What the..?

She thought I was Nathan. “Want to try beating up on this girl?”

I held my hands up in a defensive pose. “Waitamminute! I’m not-”

Then Joe came around behind her. “Boo? What’s going on?”

“Boo? Who the hell is Boo?” asked the Dragon.

“Draw!” Junior yelled, excited that he didn’t owe me another twenty.

Dragon Lady raised the knife threateningly, misunderstanding Junior’s declaration. “You move your hands and I’ll fillet you like a chicken.”

Then it dawned on me that her last two phrases were spoken in perfect English. “What happened to your accent?”

“Hey,” Junior yelled. “I just got freakin’ stabbed.”

Matilda came up behind Joe. Clearly, she’d taken a recent beating. Her lip was pooched out and swollen. A nice shiner rested on her left eye.

“That’s *it!*” I hollered. “What the fuck is going on here?” I heard something heavy hit the floor behind me. I turned to see Junior lying crumpled on the floor.

I barely had time to react to my fallen buddy when the baseball bat came down onto my skull.

I woke up to chaos. I couldn’t have been out too long, since the battle was still raging. Nathan was standing in the middle of the room. Matilda hung onto the arm wielding the bat. Dragon Lady was on his back. I didn’t know where the knife was. Joe was throwing pathetic kicks into Nathan’s shins as he clutched his awkwardly bent arm. Everybody was screaming.

Groggily, I stood. Blood was in my eyes. Nathan must have only glanced the shot off my head, since I was still breathing. Thank God for the legendary thickness of the Malone skull.

Junior was still unconscious on the floor.

Rage boiled in me as I looked at Underwood. The man who tried to knock my brains in. The man who might have just killed my best friend.

The room went red. Redder than the blood in my eyes.

I launched myself across the room and swung a straight right to his jaw with all my might. Considering the melee, I was lucky to connect at all. I cracked Nathan with sufficient force to pop out his glass eye. Three bodies flew off the floor and painfully landed on the hardwood. The eye bounced off the wall and rolled to a stop between Dragon Lady's legs. Nathan was out.

"Jesus," said Dragon Lady. "You knocked his eye out."

We got this much sorted out before Nathan woke up.

Junior was fine. Well, as fine as a stabbed and bludgeoned man could be. Some cold water on his face brought him back. He barely had a lump on his thick head.

My head, however, was busted open over the ear. I held a compress on it until I could get some stitches.

Dragon Lady's name was Cecilia. She and Matilda had forged a friendship in recent months over a shared history of pain.

Cecilia sat on an ottoman, holding a cup of hot tea. She stared at the swirling steam as she spoke, like they were the rising ghosts of her past. "In Canton, my husband beat me daily. I saw Matilda coming in with her bruises and I had to ask."

"Is that why you're in the States?"

"That. And... other things."

"Like what?" Junior asked suspiciously as he held a bloody rag to his thigh. The wound wasn't terribly deep, but he'd probably need stitches too.

"You don't want to know," she said with a wink.

Junior glared at her nervously.

"Why the fake accent?"

She shrugged. "Fewer people screw with you if they think you don't know the language."

I couldn't argue with that. "Where did you learn English?"

"*Charlie's Angels* reruns"

Joe had been a regular customer at the laundromat for years. A few months back, he'd asked Cecilia about Matilda. Cecilia could see his attraction and did her best to facilitate their romance. Their problem was two-fold (no pun intended). Nathan rarely let Matilda out of his sight for more than the time it took to run errands.

"I couldn't get away from him," Matilda said softly. "He's crazy jealous. We couldn't go anywhere. I couldn't go anywhere with him. He'd always get into fights. He'd accuse me of one thing or another, then..." She bit her lower lip. "I knew he'd find me - that he'd send people to find me."

My ears went red. Junior and I had allowed ourselves to become Nathan Underwood's 'people'. The thought made me nauseous.

Their second problem was money.

"We couldn't run without any." Joe's color was sickly pale as he hung on the arm that Nathan had broken with the bat. He'd have to visit the hospital too. Maybe we could carpool. "So we came up with the kidnapping. We figured Nathan wouldn't miss ten grand."

He wouldn't, but he did miss his house slave. Enough to try and kill us all. Luckily, he was as much a failure as a murderer as he was as a human being. "Where were you going to go?"

Matilda answered. "I have a brother in Detroit. We needed the money to get there." Water started welling in her eyes. The tear glistened on her shiner. "We were... I was desperate.

"Did you bring him here?" Cecilia pointed at the unconscious Nathan.

"No. He must have followed us."

"And you didn't notice?"

"Hey," said Junior. "You didn't notice us following you."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "I can find my knife, you know."

"Try it."

"I have others."

"Cut it out." I said.

"Muuuhhhhhh..." interjected Nathan. He tried to stand, but found it more than difficult, him being all tied up on the floor and all. With clothesline rope, of course.

Somebody knocked at the door.

Casually, Cecilia stuffed a sock (dirty, I hoped) into Nathan's mouth and slapped a strip of duck tape over his lips. He groaned a muffled protest.

Cecilia walked to the hallway. "Who is it?" She screamed, the Dragon Lady back for the moment.

"It's the Police, ma'am." We all froze and looked at one another. How the hell were going to explain this scene? "We've received a noise complaint." Cecilia was still cool.

I heard her swing the door violently open. "I watcha movie," she yelled in a tone that could shatter brick. "Why donchoo leave me alone?"

"I'm sorry, we-" I could hear the cop suddenly shift into the defensive.

"Why don't you catch burglar?"

"I..."

"If I get rape, you gonna show up this fast?"

"No, ma'am... I mean yes, ma'am. Just please turn the volume-"

Then I heard the door slam shut. Cecilia walked back in the room and dusted off her hands. "See?"

"What are we going to do with him?" asked Joe.

"Let's find out." I pulled the tape off roughly. I was happy to see a few hairs from his hipster scruff stuck on the glue. "Morning, Nathan," I said sunnily. "I wanted to thank you for popping me on the head with your bat. Now tell me why I shouldn't just dump you in the Charles River?"

Nathan gave a one-eyed glare to the room, defiant. "I paid you, Malone. You were going to screw me."

"I actually wasn't at that point, but I sure am now."

"I want my money back."

"You said we could keep it if we found Matilda. There she is." I pointed at the timid girl. She flinched at my point. Christ, the poor thing was damaged.

Nathan sneered at her. She shrunk into herself under his glower. "You're part of this. I'm calling the police. Then we're going home. You're all going to jail," he said to the room at large.

Junior laughed.

Cecilia laughed.

I laughed.

Even Joe laughed.

Matilda just sat there.

Cecilia placed her hand on her shoulder. "Say it to him."

She mumbled something.

"What? You got something to say?" Nathan's arrogance was remarkable, considering his position at the moment.

She held her head up defiantly. "I am not going home with you. Ever. Again."

This time, Nathan shrunk.

"Thatta girl," said Cecilia, sounding more than a little like Jaclyn Smith.

"Boo. Junior. Fifty thousand. Right now if you untie me and take care of these assholes."

Junior and I didn't move. If anything, Junior looked insulted, which impressed me. We had a price, but only under the right circumstances. This was way beyond our circumstances. I knelt in front of Nathan. "Y'know, buddy? My mother got abused by a couple of her boyfriends. It's taking every fiber of my being not to stomp your head into tartar right now."

He started sweating when he saw in my eyes that I wasn't kidding.

I wasn't.

"Fine," he said and swallowed hard. "Jail it is, then." He was rapidly losing his bravado.

"Ho-kay," said Cecilia, exasperated. "It's time we finished this, Canton-style."

She walked into her kitchen. I heard silverware rattling.

The remaining color drained from Nathan's face. "Wh-what's Canton style?"

Cecilia re-entered with a mean looking butcher's knife. "You want to know why I had to leave China?"

Nathan started inhaling for what I could only assume was a great scream when I stuffed the sock back in.

"My husband used to beat me a lot, buddy. He broke my ribs twice." Cecilia undid Nathan's belt.

She couldn't be serious.

Could she?

She opened the button on his jeans. Nathan's eye bulged. "He knocked out all my front teeth. See?" She removed her upper and lower plates and wiggled them in front of Nathan's face. She put them back in her mouth and unzipped him. "I wanted kids. I really did. He beat me so hard I had three miscarriages." She pulled his pants and underwear down roughly. "I can't have kids now." She grabbed his genitals and squeezed hard. "So I made sure he couldn't have any either." She raised the knife.

Nathan made a lot of noise under the sock. I yanked it out. "*Take the money! Take the money!*"

"And Matilda?" I asked.

"Go! Go! God in heaven, *please*. I never want to see any of you again. Please just let me go." He was sobbing uncontrollably.

"Too late." Cecilia touched the blade to his thigh.

Nathan fainted dead away. His head made a pleasant thump as it hit the floor.

Cecilia stood. "Well, that was more fun than it deserved to be."

We split the money. Five grand each way was hopefully enough to cover our medical expenses and should have been enough for Joe and Matilda to get to Michigan.

Junior and I dropped the unconscious Nathan by Fenway Park's C Gate minutes before the Sox game ended. We kept his eye. And his pants

Junior and I waited side by side in the emergency room. It wasn't the first time.

"You think he'll leave them be?" Junior asked as he flipped through an *Us Weekly*.

"I'll be shocked if he stays in Boston."

"Yeah. Wouldn't want Cecilia coming after me."

"Me either." Admiration for her was clear in our voices. Cecilia declined any money. Making Nathan cry was payment enough.

I looked at the lump on the back of Junior's head. "Doesn't look like he got you too hard."

"Nah. The puss swings a bat like a Yankee." In Boston, there's no greater insult.

I smiled. "Hard enough to knock you out a few minutes, though, didn't it?"

He didn't look at me. "I wonder if twenty-five hundred would be enough to hire the Dragon Lady."

I shut it.