

Your Own Saturday Night

By Jimmy Callaway

This guy I know once told me how experience is the greatest teacher, ten minutes before he got popped for his third DUI. Maybe he just wasn't the best student. But even given that, I dunno. I mean, I've never experienced rape or murder, y'know? Maybe they're not that bad, I dunno, but I ain't in any hurry to experience either one in order to find out for sure.

Just outside the Burger King on Second Street, Limpy and his goon stroll up to me. "Hey, Limpy," I say, "How's it hangin', chief?"

"Don't call me that, fucko," Limpy says. "You got my money?"

"What, 'chief'?" I say. "What's wrong with 'chief'? It's gotta be better than 'fucko,' but I didn't say nothin' when you called me that just now, Limpy, I mean, c'mon."

"Marcus," Limpy says to his goon.

Marcus slams his big ham hock of a fist halfway through my gut. My dinner comes back up my throat some, and I can taste that weird sweet Burger King ketchup again. Gross.

I look up at him. "Jesus, man. That really hurt." He's got a big goony smirk plastered on his fat goony face.

Limpy grabs me by my collar and slams me up against the window, rattling it. He says, "I want that grand you owe me, fucko, and I want it now."

"Now would be good, man, you're right, but I ain't got it."

"I don't give a fuck, man," he says, cigarette breath right in my face. Got these real bright blue eyes, Limpy does. Real Aryan type. And as one of the few guys around as short as Limpy, I'd noticed before how much he enjoys staring down somebody without having to stand tip-toe. Makes sense to me, y'know, being a short guy myself.

Anyways, I say, "Well, you probably should give a fuck, man, seeing as how it's your money I ain't got. I can't give you what I don't have, no?"

"No?"

"No. I mean...no, I don't think so," I say. "Hey, when'd you bleach your hair, Limpy?"

Limpy stands aside, and Marcus socks me one in the gut again.

"Jesus," I say, and this time a little bit of Whopper makes it into my mouth. I spit it on the sidewalk and say, "Your hair looks nice, all's I'm saying. Jesus."

"Listen to me, fucko," Limpy says. "I'm gonna be at the Old Dutchman tomorrow at ten. Know who else is gonna be at the Old Dutchman tomorrow at ten?"

"No," I say. "I mean, well...the bartender?"

"The grand you owe me is gonna be at the Old Dutchman tomorrow at ten, or you're gonna be in the ground tomorrow at ten-oh-one. Yeah?"

I sigh a little. "Yeah."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," I say.

They're about to leave when I say, "Hey, man."

Limpy stops. "What?"

“You still drink that Foster’s stuff?”

“What?”

“Y’know, uh, Foster’s? That what they call it, Foster’s? That Australian beer?”

Limpy frowns. “Yeah, so?”

“Well, I tell ya, man, I hate bad blood or whatever, y’know. So, I’ll see you tomorrow at the Old Dutchman at ten, with your grand, and a six-pack of that Foster’s stuff. Y’know. Like an olive branch. Yeah?”

Limpy just stares at me. Then he says, “Yeah, whatever,” and limps off, goon in tow.

Leaning forward, hands on my knees, trying to breathe so my gut won’t hurt, I watch him hard all the way to his car. Limpy’s right ankle never bends at all. His heel just kinda rolls side to side, side to side.

I let them get out of sight before I take out Limpy’s wallet. He shouldn’t keep it in his coat pocket like that. Wallet’s bare: six bucks, an expired rubber, and his license. Guess he really does need that grand. Also, turns out Limpy’s real name is Justin Dawson. I guess he does kinda look like a Justin.

I lean against the Burger King there for a while, then glance at my watch. It’s about six. Nothing better to do, y’know, so I walk down the street to the Rite Aid and boost some hair dye and some colored contacts.

I always thought this hair-dying stuff would be complicated. But minutes after I get the stuff home, I’m as blonde as you please. My hair’s a little on the long side, but whaddaya gonna do?

It takes me half an hour to take a dump. Maybe it’s ‘cause I ate at Burger King or ‘cause I ate at Burger King and then got socked in the gut twice, but it’s no fun, y’know. Not the kind of half-hour dump you enjoy taking. Your stomach keeps clenching up, and your asshole feels like somebody put out a cigarette in it. Anyways, once I’m done with that, it’s still early, so I go and put some cartoons on.

All right, so maybe you can say that you don’t have to experience rape or murder to learn they’re no fun. That can be, y’know...instinctual. But I dunno, man, I’d still say you don’t necessarily have to experience a thing first-hand in order to learn from it. You just...I mean, I think you gotta just pay attention. Y’know? Keep your mouth shut and your ears open. Even if you’re experiencing something first-hand, it ain’t gonna matter if you don’t know what’s going on.

Take my man Daffy Duck here. I love the guy, but, y’know, he’s smarter than this. If he’d just fuckin’ listen to what Bugs is saying, pay attention when Bugs says, “Rabbit season,” instead of “Duck season,” then Daffy’d know better than to point the rifle at himself and yell, “Duck season, FIRE!” Hell, experience ain’t much of a teacher there ‘cause he does it three times in a row. I mean, sure, it’s funny and all. But it’ll still get your beak shot off your face.

I nod off just as Daffy shows up in a rabbit disguise.

My loudmouth neighbor wakes me up. I’ve lived in a lot of apartment complexes over the years, and this one has the thickest walls of all of ‘em. And even though I can never hear what he’s saying, I can hear his booming voice as he yells at his wife about something. I’ve tried to be friendly with him, y’know, then maybe I can bring it up. But he barely grunts at me when I pass him on the stairs or whatever. Whaddaya gonna do? It’s not that big of a deal, I guess. Still, I feel bad for his daughter. She’s a nice kid.

Anyways, I turn up the TV some. It's the one with Bugs Bunny and the Three Bears. After Bugs eats the carrot soup they left out for him as bait, he goes upstairs to take a nap and he's singing in this goofy voice: "*I'm a Kiiiiiiiiing forrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr a daaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaay-ah!*" I dunno why, but that part always kills me.

After that one's over, I get up and put the contacts in. I really don't like putting things in my eyes, it's gross. But on the other hand, whatever, y'know? I put them in and they kinda sting, but I blink a few times and presto change-o. I got blue eyes. They're not real bright blue, but again. Whatever.

I got this old patio chair out on my porch, and Rinthy's sitting in it, reading by the light of her cell phone. I reach back inside and flick the porch light on. "Go blind doin' that," I say.

Rinthy doesn't look up, just closes her phone and says, "Thanks."

I put my hands in my pockets. "Folks're at it again, huh?"

"Yep," she says, still not looking up. I lean over to see what she's reading. It's one of my old Choose Your Own Adventure books, *Treasure Diver*. I'd forgotten all about those. You start at the beginning, and then a couple pages in, it says, "Turn to page 98 or page 47" or whatever, and then it goes from there for a bit, and then the same deal, page 33 or page 155. So there's like a buncha different ways the story'll go. Some of the endings are good, some of 'em not so much, but you get to choose which ever one you want.

I musta had a ton of these when I was a kid, read 'em all the time. Then a while back, I found a box of 'em in my mom's garage and couldn't remember the plot of a single one. So I gave 'em to Rinthy. I figured she'd like 'em.

"So how's 8th grade going?" I say.

"I wouldn't know," she says, "I'm in 7th."

I glance at my watch. "Jesus, it's three in the morning. Shouldn't you be in bed?"

She finally looks up at me. She's a nice kid, like I say, but she's always got this real bored look on her face. I guess I can't blame her. "Tomorrow's Sunday," she says.

"Oh, right," I say. She goes back to her book. "Well, I gotta go to work, so do me a favor and turn out the light and lock up when you're done, yeah?"

She gives me a little salute and turns a few pages.

"I'll see you later," I say.

As I head down the stairs, Rinthy says, "Nice hair."

I drive over to the 7-11 on Washington and Second, right up from the Burger King. I park behind the place, get out, kinda stretch. It's quiet out, no lights on in any of the houses around. The night is cool, but not so I need a jacket or nothing. I close my eyes and put my head back, listen to the birds.

I dunno if they're nightingales or whatever, but I've noticed more than once, after last call, walking home, I'll hear at least two or three of 'em, singing in the dark. I dunno what it is about this town, but it seems like the birds sing all night in El Cajon. Maybe not, maybe they do that all over San Diego, all over California, all over wherever. I ain't lived nowhere else, so what do I know?

But I do like to listen to 'em.

I snap out of it and go kick the back wall of the Sev. With my right foot, once, twice. Really hard and my foot's sore, y'know, but not quite where it needs to be. I take

a deep breath, hold it, and kick the wall again, bang, bang, and now I can't bend my ankle at all. Like, it hurts, but not really. More like my foot's kinda frozen in place.

See, I mean, I'm okay at faking stuff, but just okay, y'know? I mean, hair, eye color, any moron can pull that off. But with something like a limp, it's easier if I just go ahead and hurt myself, so I don't gotta fake it. The less you gotta fake it, the easier faking the rest of it is. That's been my experience, anyways.

I take out my bandana, fold it corner to corner, and tie it around the back of my head so my face is covered from the nose down. It smells sweaty. I remind myself to do laundry tomorrow.

I take out my gun. "Okay?" I say. "Okay."

I limp in there, heel rolling from side to side, side to side, and it all goes off without a hitch. Show the guy the gun and he coughs the bread right up. That's what they're trained to do, whether they like it or not.

And this particular guy does not. Big tall dude, muscles and everything. He tries to stare me down the whole time he's forking it over. Like he's telling me if I didn't have this gun, y'know. Whatever, it works for me. I didn't get these baby blues tonight so they wouldn't be noticed.

I park a few blocks away and check the take real quick. Two hundred bucks. That'll probably be the best single score all night. Clerks ain't supposed to keep more than a few bucks in the register at night, but there's usually \$80 or \$100 in there, y'know. These guys gotta change a lotta twenties all night, especially on the weekend.

The lady at the Arco on Mollison kinda freaks out on me. She whimpers and crouches down behind the counter, like I won't be able to see her or somethin'. I reach out and raise her chin up. Man, does she have a lotta crow's feet. "Lady," I say, "lookit me, all right? I'm not gonna hurt you. All right?"

She actually seems to calm down some, nodding yes, okay. She even grins a little when I wink at her.

The guy at the next Sev down the street hands it right over. As he's putting the cash in a bag, I say, "Lookit me." He looks up, and he looks so bored that he almost makes me yawn. A true veteran, this guy.

I give him my best glare. "Don't call the cops for ten minutes," I say, "or I'm coming after you in eleven." He nods, even though me and him both know that what I just said makes no fuckin' sense at all. Hey, whatever. I limp out.

Now, here it is almost four o'clock and I'm only up about four and a half bills. I knew going into this that I might have to come up with some of my own bread, but I still gotta pay rent this month, and the cupboard's already pretty bare. Thing of it is, three jobs is all I've ever pulled in one night. So now I gotta hope I'm smart enough to see dawn as a free man.

I made it this far though, right?

I park around the side of the Sev on Madison. I've always avoided this one 'cause a buddy of mine used to live across the street, so I used to hang out around here a lot. But that was a long time ago. And I didn't have this goofy hair.

It's been ages since I've seen good ol' Big John. He looks exactly the same, and I'm actually kinda glad to see him. He sees me coming and reaches under the counter for his trusty bat.

One time, me and Paul—that’s my buddy used to live across the street—were in here getting Slurpees, and Big John chatted us up some, y’know, how lonely clerks will do sometimes. He told us about some guy who held him up with a switchblade. Big John coughed the bread right up, but this guy was all tweaked out or something. He said Big John was a witness and had to be dealt with.

Big John tried to reason with the guy, told him he had the money and he should just go. But the guy kept coming. Big John warned him he had a baseball bat and if the guy came around the counter, Big John would defend himself. But the guy kept coming. So, the second the guy set foot past the little gate that leads back behind the counter, Big John swung the bat down with both hands and cracked the guy’s kneecap in half. Big John told us it sounded like a gunshot, like it was that loud. The guy dropped, screaming. Big John swooped up the guy’s knife, jammed its point into the counter, and snapped the blade off at the hilt.

So, Big John’s telling us all this, and me and Paul are like leaning on the counter, like we don’t want a single word to get away from us. And Big John says, “Few weeks later, I get a letter from some lawyer. I’m like, ‘Huh?’ and I open it up, read it. Fucker is suing me. Me!”

“You gotta be kidding me, man,” Paul says.

“That’s exactly what the judge said,” Big John says, “He literally laughed the guy out of court. ‘Sir, you have got to be kidding!’ he said and laughed and laughed. Man, it was great.”

And it was, it was a great story. I’ve never forgotten it.

I prop the door open with my foot. The buzzer above the door goes *BING!-bing*. A good six feet from the counter, arm straight, I point the gun at Big John. He holds the bat low, tensed, ready to rock and roll.

“Drop it,” I say.

The door’s still in the way of the electric eye—*BING!-bing*.

Big John stands there, breathing hard into his moustache.

I cock the hammer back. “C’mon, man,” I say, “Drop it.”

BING!-bing.

He drops it.

“Money in a paper bag,” I say.

He opens the register, empties it into a brown bag.

BING!-bing.

“Toss it here,” I say.

He tosses it here.

I limp out.

“You gotta be fuckin’ kidding me,” I hear Big John say over my shoulder.

I figure El Cajon’s gotta be pretty hot now, so I go west into La Mesa. At the Shell on Spring Street, it looks like my luck’s holding—close to \$150 in the register. But then this group of bros shows up.

There’s these guys I kinda know, I see ‘em out at the bar a lot. One of these guys, his buddies all call him “Taz.” At first, I figured the guy was from New Zealand or something. But no, one night, we were all hanging out at The Landing, and one of his buddies told me:

“Naw, man, fuckin’ Taz is a mad man. Him and our buddy Todd there were up at Cheers and Beers once, right? And after the bar closed, him and Todd get into a shouting match with a buncha bros. Big pack of fuckin’ meatheads, you know the type. Now, him and Todd are little guys, but the mouth on these guys when they’re drinkin’, man. ‘Hey, bro, nice pick-up. Your daddy buy it for you?’ ‘Hey, bro, your chick’s got a nice tramp-stamp. Mind if I use it for target practice?’ Shit like that. Now, here’s these two little guys talking shit on a group of like five or six big jock motherfuckers, East County’s own, right? Any one of these guys coulda fuckin’ creamed Taz and Todd by himself.”

“They’re big boys,” Todd affirmed.

“So now, Taz has sobered up just enough to realize he’s about to get beaten back to the Stone Age, right? So, just as these meatheads are closing in, Taz rips his fuckin’ shirt off and starts running around: ‘Blageearghaboogabooga!’ Fuckin’ tongue hangin’ out and arms flailing and fuckin’ crazy. Like the Tasmanian Devil, man.”

“Dude,” Taz added, “Those bros just stood there. Frozen. I heard one’a their girlfriends go, ‘Jason, let’s just get outta here.’ By the time I had my pants around my ankles and was waving my dick around, those meatheads were halfway back to Lakeside, man.”

“Well, I’ll be damned, Taz,” I said, “that’s a good enough story, I got the next round.”

I limp right into the thick of these six dudes in my stupid get-up, for all I know, the same six bros. They all got at least six inches on me and arms like pylons. They all look vaguely drunk and vaguely pissed off. The fact that they got no chicks with ‘em is probably reason for one or the other. Hoo, boy.

“Who’re you supposed to be, Billy the Kid?” one of ‘em says. He’s got a red face and his ball cap on backwards.

“Dude,” one of his buddies says, “guy’s got a gun.”

“So what?” the first one says, still looking down at me. “What, you some kinda crazy man, man? You wanna get crazy, crazy man?”

I smile under my bandana.

Two minutes later, they’d all piled back in their F-150 and hit the 8 East. I didn’t even have to whip my dick out. But I think I fucked my foot up some more, bouncing around like that. Man, I hope I ain’t stuck with this limp.

At the Sev over on the other end of Spring, the clerk’s in the cooler, stocking the beer. These guys are supposed to lock the register when doing stuff like that, but I just lean over the counter and hit No Sale, clean that thing out.

But then the clerk comes out, this little black guy, shorter than me even, and real dark-skinned. He says, “What you doing?” I figure he’s from Africa or something with that accent, and I breathe a little easier. I’ve handled these foreign guys before, and not to sound racist or nothing, but, y’know. They’re pretty easily handled.

I back him into the cooler with my gun and close the door. “Foster’s,” I say.

He kinda stammers a little and whispers, “Don’t, don’t.” His breath fogs out in short puffs. It’s pretty chilly back here.

“Foster’s, man,” I say, “That Australian beer.”

I’m looking him right in the eye, and he doesn’t know whether to be confused or really, really confused. He says, “I—I—what?”

“Never mind,” I say, spotting the blue cans on the shelf behind him. I grab one and say, “This all you got, these big cans? You don’t got just six-packs?”

“I—I—”

“Ah, shut up.” I crack the can open and lift my bandana up to take a big swig. I dunno. Stuff tastes like cream soda to me. I mean, it’s all right, but I don’t see what the big deal is. But I swill some more back and say, “Goddamn, that’s good. I’m gonna take this, okay? It’s been a long night.”

“All right, yes,” he says. He lets out a shaky, foggy breath.

“Okay, you have a good one,” I say. “Finish your stocking before you call the cops, yeah?”

“Uh, yes, yes, all right,” he says. But I still find a monkey wrench in the hall and slide it through the handle of the cooler door. He’ll be fine. He could use a drink, anyways.

Getting near onto half-past four now. I don’t like going much later than that normally, but it is Sunday morning now, and there ain’t gonna be much of a coffee crowd, not like on a weekday.

So, I drive a little further west to Spring Valley and hit the Sev on Jamacha and Elkerton. Show the guy the gun and he coughs it right up. But instead of having him put the money in a bag, I just stuff the bills into my pockets. “C’mon, c’mon, c’mon,” I say, all in a rush. I mean, I am kinda in a rush, but I’m laying it on a little thick here.

And man, the way this guy lights up when I let Limpy’s wallet fall out of my pocket. He keeps forking over the bread, but he can barely keep the smile off his face. To be honest, I’d have a hard time, too, I think.

You wanna know the best part of doing this, really? Well, to me, anyways. It’s like this: you tell someone you work graveyard at some convenience store, I guarantee you the first question they’re gonna ask is, “Have you ever been robbed?” And most of the time, you’re gonna go, “No, not really,” and then you’ll tell ‘em about some kids pulling a beer run or something like that, and it’s all so boring.

It’s all so fucking boring.

But sometimes you get to be Big John, y’know? Your adventure chooses you. Like, that lady at the Arco on Mollison? She’s gonna be the hit of the bingo parlor with her armed robbery yarn. Years from now, that little African guy’s gonna tell his grandkids about the crazy, beer-swilling bandit he dealt with and watch their eyes bug out of their heads.

And then take this guy here: yellow teeth, spare tire, bald as the day he was born. He looks like a nice enough guy, y’know, but probably about as interesting as a new pair of socks. But now, see, now he’s got this story: “...and then the dumb-ass dropped his wallet!” I dunno, I gotta smile when I think of him telling his friends and then they all buy him drinks. Fuckin’ king for a day. Y’know?

I get home a little before five, and first thing I do is get these damn contacts outta my eyes. They don’t hurt or nothing, but just the thought of ‘em on my eyeballs all night, yeesh. Then, a cup of coffee while I count the night’s take. Not bad at all, the bread or the java. Then, I get out my scissors and clippers and get rid of this hair-do.

My newly-shaved head hits the pillow as the sun comes up, and I fall asleep \$1,033 richer. Looks like I’m ahead for the week.

As I'm getting ready the next night to go to the Old Dutchman, I can hear my loudmouth neighbor at it again. I go flick on the porch light without bothering to see if Rinthy's out there, and then I jump in the shower.

As I'm leaving, Rinthy's on the porch, reading *You Are a Shark*. My foot's still pretty stiff as I go down the stairs, but it doesn't take much to walk normal.

"Nice hair," Rinthy says.

I get to the bar a few minutes before ten, Limpy's grand in a BevMo! bag with a six-pack of Foster's. Y'know, a deal's a deal.

"Hey, Marcus, right?" I say to Limpy's goon. He looks up at me and grunts. "Where's the big man?" I say.

"He ain't here," Marcus says, "He sent me instead."

"Huh. Really? He's not still mad at me or anything, is he?"

Marcus looks at me a long time. I just smile and run a hand over my bald head. Finally, he says, "Justin got picked up this morning."

"What? By the cops?"

"Yeah, by the cops, the fuck you think?"

"All right, don't get excited," I say, "I know he's your friend and all. I 'member once I got picked up, but—"

"Hey, I don't wanna hear your fuckin' war stories, asshole," he says. "Is that the money?"

I hold up the bag. "And the beer. Foster's." I try and do an Australian accent. "'Fostuh's—Ostralian for bee-uh! Right?"

Marcus snatches the bag away from me. "Get outta my sight, fucko," he says.

I smile. "You got it, chief," I say. "You got it."

Jimmy Callaway lives and works in San Diego, CA. Please visit attentionchildren.blogspot.com for more shenanigans. Big ups to Cameron Ashley, Josh Converse, Ray Nessly and Anthony Neil Smith for their help with this ditty.