

Chickens

By Matthew Quinn Martin

“Who are you?” the man asked.

I opened my mouth to answer, but the words that usually flowed so easy were dammed. So I let my gun do the talking. Get inside, it said. The barrel pointed the way, back into the darkened foyer of this five-bedroom McMansion, and he followed it like the born follower he appeared to be.

Three steps into the alcove, after the big oak door had shut firmly behind us, I noticed he was shaking. I watched as his corpulent gut quivered in the shadows. What a chicken. It made me sick. After a moment he pulled it together enough to spit out words. “Who—” he began.

Before he could finish the repeated question I shoved the business end of my 9mm hand cannon into his open pie-hole. I shoved it in deep, watching the barrel disappear up to the trigger guard, feeling the steel click against his teeth. As I pushed him down to his knees, his eyes peered up at me with glazed bewilderment.

Why? they asked.

Where to begin? I thought about the lump of flesh kneeling in terror before me, about the man I’d spent half of my life believing to be dead—the other half wishing that were true. I took him in at a glance. Early-sixties. Fleshy gut hanging over a woven leather belt holding up crisp chinos. A graying beard barely hid the neck waddle that touched both peaks of his sweat-stained arrow collar, and a set of murky blue eyes, not unlike my own, stared out from behind gold-rimmed antique bifocals. Well-fed, respected, and content, that’s what this man was. On the outside, poles apart from my hardscrabble, prison tatted and jail-scarred, drug-sculpted sinew. No one would have mistaken us for father and son.

And that was his fault.

Still that look in his eyes. Who are you?

Again, my mouth failed to form the words. It was as if fear had its own gun barrel rammed against the back of my gullet. Why? Lord knows I’d waited long enough for this day, rehearsed the speech in my mind a million and a half times. I’d known about him, about my father, for sixteen years. A full two years longer than I’d spent believing him killed in Vietnam.

Or in a car accident.

Or in a house fire. Or falling off of the roof while working a construction site. Or any one of the million little lies Ma’d fed me during the spotty patchwork time we had together. I’d found the truth tucked away in a waxy cardboard box deep in the back of her closet. That was an accident, much like I was. I wasn’t looking for a damn birth certificate. I was looking for cash. It was right after my mother’s last fake suicide attempt turned out to be not so fake after all. Whether she’d really meant it, or if things just got out of hand, no one was ever going to know.

Or, quite honestly, care.

I think she meant to time it out with when I usually got home, but that day I’d spent a couple of hours tucked away in a grimy corner of the local pharmacy trying to catch up on the X-Men comics I could never afford to buy. Hiding from life in their

splashy four-color panels like I always did back then. Running hand in hand away from it all, just like I'd do later with the drugs—nothing like believing you can fly when you've got the boot on your neck.

I heard the man choke on the barrel, felt the handle jerk away as his gag reflex kicked in. I pushed it in harder, felt my finger stroke the trigger. I could start there, I thought. I could tell him about what he'd left behind. About Ma. About how I came home at dusk that night, about how I'd had time to fix myself a peanut butter sandwich and a cup of coffee before I found her.

I could tell him how I didn't call the hospital. How I didn't need to—I knew a dead body when I saw one. Especially one as cold as a slab of beef, lying naked in a bathtub in its slowly congealing blood. I could tell him how I threw up. That's a detail I'd have left out for anyone else. But there was no one else. Never going to be. I'd saved this tear-jerker for him, and now I couldn't tell it. All I could do was stand there, my lips gawping like a gut fish.

I grit my teeth, thinking I could fill him in on how when I finally pulled my sweaty forehead from the porcelain rim—after I'd wiped my trembling mouth—I'd forced myself to take a solid look at my mother's body. I could tell him what she looked like. How her hazel eyes had gone dull and blank, pitching forward like she could see something I wouldn't be able to, at least not for a while. How her mouth hung open, a sweet invitation to the flies that would be arriving soon enough.

That was the night. The night that brought me here. I remember noting that the cuts on her wrists were horizontal, the mark of an amateur suicide, or a professional faker. I sat down on the toilet seat, and picked up her half finished pack of light 100's, left there on the sink like she'd be lighting one soon. I shook out a stick and fired it up, puffing nervously for a few moments as I looked down at the cold naked thing that used to be Ma.

That was to be the first of many cigarettes. I was a late bloomer I guess, but I'd make up for it. Soon there'd be plenty of cigs. Cigs, weed, booze, ludes, GHB, coke, dust, perks, X, meth, horse, some shit they don't even make any more, but it started there. It started with that first smoke. Which tasted like shit, and burned my throat, but they always seemed to calm her down, and I needed to be calm. I needed to figure out where I was going next.

A call to the hospital would mean visit from child services and I was not about to spend one fucking minute in foster care. So I kissed Ma on her clammy stiffening forehead, then tore through our shabby apartment, taking anything of value—anything I could sell—and headed out the door, never saying goodbye. As cold as that sounds, as mercenary, it's what Ma would have wanted for me. What she'd raised me to be. You had to know her to understand that.

I reckoned I could tell him all that. Could tell him how, at fourteen, I walked up the onramp of I-95 and rode my thumb out into a new America, carrying only cash, a change of clothes, the half carton of light 100's my mother left as an inheritance—and my birth certificate, with his fucking name on it next to the word *father*. I could fill him in on what it took to survive those next sixteen years.

But I didn't. I kept my big mouth shut.

None of that seemed right. I didn't come here to tell him about Ma. I didn't spend six months tracking down this well-fed fuck for that. I didn't case his house for

two solid weeks, didn't park my beat-up wood-paneled shitbox station wagon a mile away so no one would make it, didn't stand outside in the ball-strangling cold for three hours this morning waiting for his fucking trophy wife to take the kids to karate class, or piano lessons, or Montessori school, or wherever the fuck they were going in her Volvo--didn't do any of that, just so that the first words out of my goddamn mouth would be about the sometimes mother that left me as cold as this cowering piece of shit sucking on my gun barrel had done three decades ago.

This wasn't going to be about her.

This was between him and me.

So then I wondered if maybe I should tell this quivering mass of blubber how I used to dream about him. How I'd sit up in the dark and pray. Pray to Father, Son, Holy Ghost, to the Blessed Mother, to St. Joe, to anybody I figured might listen that's he'd come back. That at the moment when things looked blackest my father would appear—just pop up out of nowhere—and lift me into his benign embrace. How he'd whisk me away, showering me with love and gifts. Wrap me in a blanket and give me a lollipop.

The bullshit dream of every abandoned child.

I gazed around me at the nice, expensive, and totally soulless house that stood like a three-story middle finger on the end of this man's quiet cul-de-sac. I peered at the photos of his family hanging on the Tuscan orange plaster walls. Staring out from one gilt-edged frame, I saw him happy. A black-haired traffic-stopper, twenty years his junior, hung from his liver-spotted arm and a couple of adorable moppets tottered in the foreground. They all smiled, just as he smiled. And that woman—that girl—she looked younger than me. Her milky translucent skin didn't betray a single wrinkle, not one goddamn worry-line, and a three-carat headlamp winked from her ring-finger.

I thought about the kids, trying to shoehorn those adored tykes into my childhood. I'd give an eyetooth to be able to stuff the smaller one into the time we moved into public housing. To somehow make him take my place; be a proxy for the scrapes and bruises delivered by the older boys who ran that block, the one's who could never resist a good kick party. Those kids in the portrait wouldn't have lasted the afternoon. I know. I didn't.

There were a lot of toughs in that project, but there were two that really had it in for me. Robbie and Marc were their names, Marc with a 'C'. Brothers. "Hey faggot," they'd said sometime that first week. They couldn't have been more than few years older than me, but the right few years can mean a lot in terms of muscle and bone. It started with shoving and taunting, then when I was dumb enough to go to the pavement the fists came, followed by the odd glass pop bottle or loose chunk of asphalt.

From the corner of my swollen eye, I caught a glimpse of their old man sitting on the cinderblock stoop, smoldering Newport in one hand, foamy half-finished O.E. 800 in the other. I wonder if he was proud of his boys.

"Be more careful when you're out playing," Ma said when she saw the bruises. "You think I got money for doctor bills? Now wash those cuts before your arm gets infected and they have to chop it off."

Then I asked her about my dad—about the man I would one day have kneeling before me with a gun down his throat—and of course the waterworks burst. I went to hug her but—

“Wash yourself off first,” she said. “I don’t want you getting blood on my couch.”

On her fucking filthy, ash-stained, cigarette burned, fucking couch. I could tell him about that. I could start there so he’d think I was a giant goddamn pussy.

No.

Not there. So I thought maybe I could start with what I did the next day. Maybe. About how I went armed. I’d heard that bullies were just scared, and that if you stood up to them they’d respect you. So I looked Marc with a ‘C’, the older one, square in the eye, about to speak my piece when he shot out, “You like to suck dick fag?”

“No,” I answered.

“So you tried it then?”

“No.”

“But you want to?”

“Yeah, you want to,” Robbie chimed in.

I just clenched my scraped up but still soft fists and waited for the inevitable.

“Know what I don’t get, Faggy?” Marc with a ‘C’ said, taking a break from punching me. “How’d your faggot daddy manage to knock up your slut mommy, suckin’ dick all day like he does?”

“Must of missed the hole,” Robbie cackled. “Yeah, must of got shit faced, thought your Ma was a dude and missed the hole when he tried to buttfuck her. Or maybe,” they were laughing now. Laughing hard. “Maybe he did stick it in her ass and that’s where you came from. Shitbaby.”

“Yeah, Shitbaby.”

Shitbaby. That was going to be my name for a while. Starting there, then migrating to the bus, then school like a bad cold. Even the geeks and the losers used it. Somebody had to be at the bottom.

Well I sure as hell wasn’t going to tell my father about that—about how the gun-wielding bruiser, all muscle, tats, and scars, about to splatter the Tuscan orange plaster and family portraits with his blood, brains, and skull fragments used to be known on the block as Shitbaby.

“Shitbaby fag,” Marc with a ‘C’ had said that day. “Should’ve flushed ya.”

And fuck if I was going to tell him how the fists started up again. How I curled up like a little chicken and let them hail down. Or how Marc with a ‘C’ went on, saying “Hey fag? Sure you don’t like sucking dick?”

“Show him. Show him,” Robbie added.

“Look at me when I’m talking to you, fag!” The exclamation point came as another kick to the midsection, and I scraped my pounding head across the black tar roadway in the direction of the voice, opening one black and swollen eye just in time to see, for a single clear instant, Marc with a ‘C’'s flaccid penis, right before a stinging stream of piss hit me clear in the face. Robbie joined in from the other side.

That night I snuck back into the house, carefully so Ma wouldn’t notice. Then went upstairs, took a bath, and threw my bloody, piss-stained clothes in the trash, and cried as quietly as I could. Cried until my eyes dried out, determined it would be the last time I’d be such a pussy.

It wasn't. I cried like a bitch every time. Every time they'd jump me. It was like that for a while. Sometimes they brought their bros with them, or their skanky girlfriends who would flick Marlboro Lights at my face, or stomp my fingers with their grimy discount work boots if I was still dumb enough to reach out for help. After about half a year, I finally stopped crying. And haven't since. They must have beat it out of me.

I looked down at the man. I saw his tears streaming down both cheeks. Maybe those were enough for both of us. Maybe not. And then I thought, maybe I should tell Dad that story. Maybe he'd feel sorry for me then.

It would make killing him easier.

I hate it when people feel sorry for me. Fuck sorry. Sorry is for losers.

No.

Then I figured it out. I should tell him how I learned. How I let the pain become my tutor. How I never got used to it. Never grew to accept it. Never. How the boots and fists that rained down from Robbie and Marc, and all the others, became the hammers and anvil I needed. How they pounded me into something more, something less. How after six months I felt strong enough to fight back. And was wrong. And wrong again after another year.

But my day did come. It was winter, and I'd lured Robbie over to a patch of ice by letting him get in an easy punch to the gut. I doubled over, and when he lunged, I swept his feet out from underneath him. He went down face-first, chipping a tooth on the granite curb. He was up soon enough, with a solid punch to wipe the smirking triumph off of my face. "Fuck you Shitbaby!"

But Marc with a 'C' stopped him before he could land another. "Fuck it bro, let's go. Clean you up." I thought I might have caught a glimmer of respect in his eye as he turned. I still got my share of beat-downs, but it was the last day anyone called me Shitbaby.

I thought I should tell him that. Or tell him how two months later Ma was dead and I was on the road.

Ma was dead. My father alive.

I'd been grinding my teeth so hard my jaw felt like it was about to crack. I had to say something. Anything. But what was there? What was there to impress him with? Boosting stereos at fifteen? Running short-cons in Vegas before my eighteenth birthday? Hauling big bags of generic Mexican Vikes over to border and getting pinched for it? Pulling a two year bid in Tent-City, wearing pink underwear, shackled to a old-school Chicano gangbanger and a scabby no-tooth meth-head, digging ditches in the 120-degree Arizona sunshine so the screws could bury a pile of other meth-heads and gangbangers?

I never thought it would go down like this. I wanted to make something of myself first and show him. Show this fuck what a pathetic, useless relic he was. How I didn't need him. How I never needed him. But here I was, sixteen years later, and even my rap sheet was an embarrassment. Nothing but bullshit petty crime, the kind of crap that barely gets a mention on the local rag's police blotter. Sixteen years and I was even a failure at being a low-life. What a joke.

I looked at him again, trying to see something past the fear. What did I really know of this man? What had his life been like? I saw his reddened eyes gazing up at me. Was it sorrow? Were we really so different? Did he deserve this? What had his father

been like? His father's father? Was all this just a cycle, an unbroken circle? And the big question—what would it be like to forgive him?

I eased the barrel out of his mouth and stepped back. I could see the spit glisten off the gunmetal as he coughed, rising to one knee.

And I shot him in the chest.

Twice.

So I'd be able to watch the look in his eyes. Watch that questioning look fizzling out as his neuroconnectors went haywire—as he slipped towards the fabled black tunnel and its far far away light.

He sank in a pathetic slump, one hand still feebly gripping the white wooden banister, as if maybe he held on tight enough to something of this world it would spare him his deportation to the next.

It wouldn't.

And I don't regret not telling him. It was for the best—to send my father to the black with that question still lingering, as a gift. It was fitting. It was cruel. It was what he deserved. I looked down at the cordite rising from the barrel. See, that wasn't so hard, I thought. I should have done it years ago. I knew we were far enough from the other houses that no one had heard the shots. I stepped over my father's twitching body and went to the fridge for a beer. He didn't have any, just some bullshit Chardonnay, so I made myself a glass of chocolate milk instead. Then went to the living room and sat in his overstuffed armchair.

I hefted the gun. It was still warm. Plenty of bullets left, even if I only needed one. I thought about it, but I knew I'd never be able to pull that trigger with the barrel in my mouth. Let's face it, at heart I'd always be a chicken. A chicken just like my dad.

A chicken come home to roost.

I looked back up at the wall. At the picture. At the black-haired beauty hanging on his arm. She looked like she'd be fun. Feisty. A real scream. A gun barrel would be the last thing she'd be sucking on tonight.

The last, but not the first.

I'd have to bat clean-up later, but like I said, I had plenty of bullets left, and I knew the kids wouldn't be a problem.

They'd be coming with me.

Matthew Quinn Martin is a New York based writer. His original screenplay Slingshot was made into a feature film starring Juliana Margulies, David Arquette, Thora Birch, Balthazar Getty and Joely Fisher. Slingshot had its premiere at the TriBeCa Film Festival, 2005, has been featured on Access Hollywood, and is currently on DVD, distributed by the Weinstein Co.

His screenplay A Very Good Year, featuring Dan Lauria (The Wonder Years) and Gaius Charles (Friday Night Lights) was presented at FilmFest New Haven. Other works of his have been produced by NYC Collective and The New Haven Theatre Co. In addition he has acted as a consultant or ghostwriter on numerous projects for film and television.

Matthew's prose fiction has been published (or is forthcoming) in Transition Magazine, The Crossing Chaos Anthology: Quantum Genre on the Planet of Arts (co-written with Libby Cudmore), MFA/MFYou Literary Journal, A Twist of Noir, Eastern Standard Crime, The Oddville Press and The Flash Fiction Offensive.

He can also be seen flitting around the margins of your TV set...most notably in a recurring co-starring role on the first season of the JJ Abrams created Fringe.

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