

A Rage Issue

By Dave Zeltserman

The guy looked like Phil Leotardo from the Sopranos. Not exactly like him. He was thinner and had a mustache, but he had that same white helmet of hair and that same general air like he was some sort of Mafioso badass, the way he popped up and down, examining the rear bumper of his red Grand Jeep Cherokee and shooting me dirty looks - as if the accident were my fault, which was total bullshit. What happened was I had stopped behind this Phil Leotardo dipwad in traffic and he decided to back up and take a parking spot on the street - along with taking a piece of my front right bumper with him, as well as ignoring me blasting on my horn. Anyway, I tried to stay calm. It was just a fender bender, not worth anyone losing any blood over, but watching this Phil Leotardo wannabe strutting around and shooting me looks as if this were my fault started bugging the shit out of me. If my wife had been in the car with me, she would've gotten me to control myself, but she wasn't. I rolled down my window and asked Leotardo why he didn't stop backing up when he heard my horn.

The guy was fucking beside himself over that. At first he was speechless with indignation. Then he came charging towards my car, his index finger making short jabs in the air with each step he took.

"Didn't you see I was trying to park?" he bellowed, his face red and veins showing on his forehead. "Why'd you have to pull up so close to me? What the hell is wrong with you?"

Whoa.

Before I go on any further, let me give you a little background about myself so you'll understand why I ended up reacting to '*What the hell is wrong with you?*' the way I did. I have a bit of a rage issue, something that was passed on to me by my dad. It came from the way he'd wale on me over any little thing. Before he'd beat the hell out of me, he'd first have to get in my face, screaming *What the hell is wrong with you?* until I was soaked with his spittle and the world would start slipping away. It would happen a few times each week, every once in a while breaking bones, sometimes knocking me unconscious but mostly just leaving me seething. When I was fifteen he died, but yeah, it left me with a bit of a rage issue.

Some more about myself - I'm decent sized - not the biggest guy in the world, not the smallest either. About six feet, a hundred and ninety pounds. I'm also deceptively a lot stronger than I look. When I was twenty-four I started studying martial arts, first taking Kempo-Karate. I thought that kind of discipline would help me deal with my rage.

Wrong. It was probably the worst thing for it because what you're learning how to do is beat the fuck out of someone. All that training and sparring just made me want to beat the fuck out of people for real. I should've quit, but I enjoyed the classes too much, especially the subtle way it fed my rage. So I stuck with Karate for six years, earned my black belt and two additional stripes past that, then moved on to Tae Kwon Do. Tae Kwon Do is kind of a funky martial art. While Kempo-Karate is basically geared towards street fighting, Tae Kwon Do has some really bizarre and complex kicks, some of them very deadly - especially if you're going against some shmuck who doesn't know how to fight. Anyway, I did Tae Kwon Do for three years, then switched to Kung Fu, the

Tiger-Crane style. I've been doing that for the last seven years and have been getting pretty good at it, learning lots of ways to hurt someone really bad. The big difference between Kempo-Karate and Kung Fu; with Karate you're learning how to fight and spar, with Kung Fu you're learning how to kill.

Getting back to Phil Leotardo.

I didn't exactly black out when he yelled what he did at me, but it brought me to a pretty bad place; a place where, while I was aware of what I was doing, I really didn't have much control over it. So I was out of my car yelling back at Leotardo, calling him a fucking cocksucker and letting him know that he caused the accident and if he thought any differently then he had fucking shit for brains (another thing good old dad used to like to scream in my face). Leotardo was flustered. He almost took a step away. Almost. But then he had to glance back at his Jeep. There was a woman sitting in the passenger seat. She was about half his age, around thirty, either his daughter or a date; I'm not sure which but from the way she was dressed, I'd guess date. Anyway, instead of doing the smart thing, he decided to put on a show for her. He tried poking me in the chest with his index finger. I swatted it away with a tiger-claw move, really as basic a kung fu move as you can do, and without any real conscious intent, followed through with a tiger claw strike. You can think of it as kind of a slap to the face, except I hit him in the jawbone with the heel of my hand and drove with my legs, putting all my weight and power behind the blow. It happened so fast. Blink of an eye. A normal person hitting someone like that might stagger them, maybe even knock them off their feet. Someone like me, as strong as I am and with sixteen years of intensive martial arts training behind them, I'm going to minimally shatter their jawbone into dozens of tiny pieces. In other words, the person is fucked. As it turned out with Leotardo, I did more than that. I killed him. Maybe it was his head hitting the curb when he fell that did it, but it didn't matter. Looking at him with his eyes glazed and half-opened, I knew he was dead.

The white-hot rage that had been driving me was gone and replaced by something very cold. It was like ice cubes being pushed into my eye sockets and hard into the back of my skull. Like I had the mother of all ice cream headaches. With a clarity of thought I turned to the woman in Phil Leotardo's car. She hadn't quite connected yet what had happened, but she knew something was seriously wrong. Her mouth had formed a small 'o', like she wanted to scream but couldn't quite remember how. I didn't give her a chance. I moved quickly to Leotardo's Jeep, broke the passenger window with my elbow and grabbed her by her hair and pulled her head out the broken window. In the brief instance where the street light caught her face like that, I knew she had been Leotardo's date - there was no physical resemblance. Just lousy luck on her part and all because of a stupid fender bender. But what the fuck else was I going to do? I don't have to go into the gory details, but she was dead pretty quickly.

I took a couple of steps away from the car and looked around. It was dusk out. The whole incident took maybe a minute, no more than that. Miraculously no one drove by, and no one left the bar we were out in front of. It was possible no one saw what happened. I scanned the surrounding buildings and didn't see anyone, didn't see any security cameras either. I started towards my car and that's when I noticed the police cruiser parked two cars up. As if on cue, the cop left the bar at that moment with a takeout coffee in hand. He gave me an odd, almost embarrassed kind of smile, then

noticed my car and the Jeep, saw that there had been an accident, and his smile faded as he realized he was going to get stuck doing paperwork. Then he saw Leotardo's dead body. He was a little slow on the uptake - to be fair to him this was a quiet white bread suburb fifteen miles from Boston, the type of place where a double-murder like this never happens, and he probably never dreamed of dealing with something like this. Still, he should've moved faster. By the time he had dropped his coffee and was fumbling with his service revolver, I had swept his feet out from under him. He didn't have a chance to put up much more of a fight than Leotardo or his date. As quickly as with those other two, he was dead and I was driving as fast as I could away from there.

At first my mind was buzzing, wondering if anyone saw me and if I was going to come home later and find cops waiting for me - or worse - have police sketches of me plastered all over the news and how Carol would react to that. I wasn't quite panicking, but I was close to it. Then I thought of my car. The broken molding, the dented bumper, Leotardo's red paint on my car. If no one saw me, then that was going to be how they caught me. Garages would be on the lookout for that type of damage, and the police would be called as soon as they saw a car like that. I turned around, took some back roads so I wouldn't have to drive by the murder site, then headed back to Boston.

It hadn't fully hit me yet that I had murdered three people until I started driving back towards my office. Maybe I could say Leotardo was an accident - that I was too caught up in my rage - but as hard as I hit him, I was minimally going to be putting him in the hospital. No, he was no accident, not if I was honest with myself. The other two, they were cold-blooded murders. I was in full control and clear-headed when I killed Leotardo's date and then that cop. Whispering in the back of my mind was the last thing Leotardo's date said to me before I struck the fatal blow which nearly decapitated her.

Please, Mister.

Jesus, what a sad final two words. Thinking about it made me feel funny inside, but I forced myself to put it out of my mind. I had other things to worry about.

Once I got back to my office, I started driving the back streets of Boston looking for a red Jeep in traffic. When I found one, I got behind it, then angled my car towards the left as if I were trying to pass it, and clipped his rear bumper, making sure the damage to my car was in the same place where Leotardo had hit me earlier. Both of us pulled over. The driver of the Jeep was a big guy and he was livid.

"What the fuck..?" he started.

"All my fault," I cut in. Smiling, pleading in a way, because I couldn't afford to let my rage loose again, not after what had already happened.

He stood staring hard at me, but his moment of fury had passed. His eyes glazed over, showing his disgust, which was okay, I could deal with that.

"Let's just exchange papers," I said. "I'll even buy you a beer if you want."

"Why don't we just exchange papers," he said stiffly.

We did that. After he left I called Carol on my cell and told her I had an accident, but that no one was hurt, just some dented fenders.

"Where are you?"

"Still in Boston."

"I thought you left work two hours ago?"

"Something came up."

There was a pause on her part. I could picture her brow furrowed in confusion. "But you told me two hours ago that you were leaving work?"

I took a deep breath. I was starting to feel a little hot under the collar, a little of my rage resurfacing. Not that I thought Carol was calling me a liar, but that's the thing with rage; once you let it out it's hard to keep contained.

"Yeah, I was leaving the office, but an idea popped into my head, and I had to work on it, you know, see it through," I explained as patiently as I could.

"Oh. Okay," then her voice taking on a tinge of excitement, maybe some fear,

"Have you been listening to the news?"

"No."

"Dave, three people were killed right in front of Maguire's."

"Really?" I felt a sickness in my gut. "What happened? Some sort of shooting?"

"No. They were beaten to death. Right in front of Maguire's! That's only three miles from our house. Can you believe that?"

"Wow."

"I know."

"Well, I'll see you soon."

I cut off the call. I had to.

That night I was distracted. My thoughts kept drifting on me. Carol thought it was because I was worried about the accident, and she kept trying to console me, telling me that accidents happen, that I'll get the car fixed, and yeah, my insurance rates would probably go up, but we'd be able to deal with it. She was good about it. Coming over to me, rubbing my neck and shoulder, trying to ease my worrying. I'd smile up at her, but then just as quickly lose my train of thought again.

The three murders were the lead story on the eleven o'clock news. It turned out Phil Leotardo's real name was George Conly and the woman with him was Elaine Halprin, described as a female companion. The cop was Joe Sullivan, a six year veteran on the force and was leaving behind a wife and three kids. I felt bad about that. Carol noticed the way I reacted to that part of the story and rubbed my back and gave me an understanding smile. Kind of like: *isn't that sweet that you feel so much for other people*. I didn't bother correcting her.

It didn't sound like the police had anything, but that didn't really help me much. Maybe they were holding back information. Maybe any minute now cops were going to be breaking down my front door. That was what I kept thinking. But at least they didn't plaster any police sketches of me over the airways.

That was a hard night. I didn't sleep for a second, just kept tossing and turning while I waited for the cops to show up. Again, Carol thought it was because of my worrying about my fender bender. She knew I hated car accidents. The next morning the newspapers had more about the killings - at least about the victims. It turned out George Conly had mob ties and the police suspected that that might have had something do with the killings. In any case, no sketches of suspects showed up and nothing about any witnesses.

It was also a hard day at work, the way everyone gossiped about the murders, and it made me feel like crap hearing all of it. I survived the day though, and over the next week things got better.

It was a week after the incident that I took my car to a body shop to get the bumper fixed. The town cops where the murder happened called me at work to ask if I could come down to the station to answer some questions. I was prepared for it, so it didn't phase me. I brought my insurance paperwork with me, and after they spoke with the guy in Boston who I hit (and probably also had someone check his car) they were satisfied. The lead detective apologized for any inconvenience they caused me, and I told him I understood given the circumstances. I was just glad they didn't call me at home. I couldn't help feeling that Carol would've suspected something, maybe even guessed that I purposely got into the second accident to cover the first one.

It was over three weeks after the murders when I had my big scare. Saturday morning, the doorbell rang and two cops were standing on my doorstep, both looking like they could spit nails. One was a square-looking guy with a big bushy mustache that hid his upper lip, the other was a young guy, his face pinched and angry. I was sure they were there to arrest me, and was silently sizing them up and trying to figure out if I could take them if I had to. It turned out they were there to collect money for a fund set up for Joe Sullivan's family. I dug deeply, not too deeply so they'd suspect anything, but deep enough to make a difference. The cop with the bushy mustache thanked me.

"It's hard having to do this," he told me. "Joe was a good kid. Jesus, what a world we live in."

I nodded and watched them leave.

Over the next six months, things started to get back to normal. I'd still find myself jolted awake at times, thinking the cops were on to me, but for the most part I was able to put those murders behind. I also knew I had to do something about my rage. I thought about seeing a therapist, but the problem was I was afraid I might let something slip - and not just about these last murders, but about some of the others that had happened over the years. Yeah, these weren't the first. You see, I just have this rage issue. It was still hard to believe I had gotten away with as many as I had, but somehow there were never any witnesses, at least none that ever slipped past me. I don't think about them much; just sometimes late at night - and that would usually be nothing more than a flash of worry that somehow the cops were going to discover me. Anyway, I had all that buzzing through my mind and was trying to figure out how safe it would be to see a therapist. I just wasn't paying enough attention to the road and ended up hitting a BMW as it was backing out of a parking space. Maybe it was my fault, maybe it was the other driver's. I wasn't sure. The other driver was a woman, in her seventies. Shit, old enough to be my mother. I didn't say a word to her, but maybe I had an angry look on my face. I don't know. Whatever, something set her off and her little prune face became rigid with anger.

"Didn't you see me backing up?" she complained, her voice sour. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

Whoa...

By Dave Zeltserman's dark short crime fiction has been published in many venues, including Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, New Mystery, Hardboiled and Hot Blood. His first novel, Fast Lane, debuted in 2004 and was listed by Poisoned Pen Bookstore as one of the top hardboiled books of the year. He has two additional dark crime noir novels scheduled for publication in 2007 - Small Crimes (Serpent's Tail) and Bad Thoughts (Five Star), along with an anthology of western noir stories, On Dangerous Ground, that he is co-editing with Ed Gorman. He lives in the Boston area with

his wife, Judy, and when he's not writing crime fiction, he spends his time working on his black belt in Kung Fu and running his noir fiction webzine, www.hardluckstories.com.