

Cramp

By Anthony Neil Smith

I got the *e coli* really bad the morning of the heist from hot dogs earlier in the week, but I didn't see the other three sweating and cramping and squeezing back their bowels like me, suffering in the backseat of Winona's Saturn coupe. It was me, Winona driving, Lewis back with me trying to keep his distance, and Abe riding shotgun. Abe and Winona had a thing. I'd wanted her first. He'd acted first. I don't know, maybe I still had a chance. We really had good talks. I hated listening to them fuck at night.

Only two more hours south, the Indiana/Michigan state line. Our first destination, State Line Steve's Adult RelaXXXation Den.

My roommate Abe thought up the heist on the way home from his aunt's funeral in Ohio. He noticed the state line porn shops and imagined they'd be loaded with cash since pervs wouldn't want the shit on their credit cards. Not a bad idea. I'd never robbed anything before, but my options sucked after I was kicked out of school on a 'sexual assault' charge. One of Winona's friends - she said the charges were nothing personal, but the bitch got a sweet settlement from the school. All I'd done was try to show her that a back massage from me would melt her tension like butter. Instead she kneed me and called security.

Winona was still my friend, though. She trusted me, probably because touching her would result in Abe touching me badly. I didn't want that, remembered two purple fingers and a makeshift cast. One still won't bend right.

Lewis was melting into the door, telling them to turn on the air.

"No," I said. "Freezing."

"It's fucking May."

"But he's sick," Winona said. "Chills. Come on. Poor guy."

Lewis said, "If he's got food poisoning, aren't we gonna get it, too?"

"Could've been a bad frank. Just one that didn't get cooked enough. Or maybe it'll take longer for one of you to get sick. You're more muscular."

"What if it's the flu? Or worse?"

Abe turned his head. "Would you shut up? It's a fucking stomach ache, that's all."

"Actually, it's bacteria," Winona said. "Most things that make us sick are bacteria."

Lewis glanced at me like I had plague. "You sure? How do you know that?"

Her eyes rear viewed him, rolled. "*Duh*, I was taking classes, remember? To be a med lab tech?"

"You get far enough to know a cure?" I said. Every word strained, couldn't risk releasing.

She shrugged. "That would've been the next semester. It was just too hard for me."

I didn't buy it. I knew how smart she was. Her problem was, she'd rather drown herself in lemon drops and jell-o shooters than study Immunology. Her new major at Grand Rapids Community College was Social Work, her fourth in two years.

“I need a restroom,” I said.

Abe turned further, couldn't get his face around that far. “Really?”

“Urgently.”

Lately, things had been ‘make do’. I was C student from a farm family, got booted from school and had to mop floors at Taco Bell to pay rent. Abe wasn't sympathetic. He still expected me to pitch in a hundred more than him because, “Hey, I'm not here as much as you.” So I made do. I made do with a half-assed relationship with Winona when she was either waiting for Abe to show up or wake up. I liked our mornings, coffee and Pop Tarts watching music videos - her, bare-legged, wearing one of Abe's giant Gap rugby shirts. The guy was a hulk, I'll give him that. Some mornings she'd stagger towards the table and say, “Sometimes I wish he'd ease up. I don't need bruises every night.”

Oh, sweet Winnie, I'd be gentler. I'd listen to you. Just let me give you a back massage.

No, I didn't say that. I said, “Yeah, that's pretty tough.”

I made do with a crap job, couldn't dare tell my folks about the assault charges. It didn't get as far as trial. I didn't want to fight it. Figured it was easier to let everything cool out and then start over later, my record clean of anything official as long as I kept away from trying to make something of myself - although that dream of being a vet had pushed me out onto the road and just kept on without me. I supposed I could work in pet stores eventually. Wanted to give Abe's way a try first.

Made do with a nasty gas station bathroom, too. I three plied toilet paper as a seat protector because of the brown stripes that wouldn't wipe away. The light kept flicking off. It smelled like week-old stew. And then I released.

Whispered, “*Yeeeeeeeeeeesss.*”

Moaned.

Took in another breath, like week-old stew and bad pork.

Read black marker graffiti:

Had me a long dick here, 4/25/04.

Jesus Saves

He sure does--saves the best weed for himself.

Galatians 1:20

Lewis pounded on the door. “You can't set up house in there!”

I reached for toilet paper, pulled. The last five squares fell off. I tried for the back-up roll. There wasn't one.

“Son of a bitch.”

No paper towels for your hands. Just an air dryer.

Lewis shouted, “We can't risk being seen, asshole. Come on.” Then to Abe, “I'm trying. He won't fucking answer!”

“Five minutes, all right? Can you wait five more fucking minutes?”

I tried my best. I made do with five squares to deal with my slimy ass, the bacteria turning everything to a syrupy pond scum. I worked it off, sometimes getting a

little on my fingers and palm. Shit, shit, shit. The aches were coming back and I had to start clenching. My friends were bound to take off without me if I stayed any longer. The best I did with five squares was about eighty percent clean. Fuck it. I had a long day ahead.

A bigger surprise when I tried to wipe the shit smears off my hands. The water didn't work. Tried cold. Tried hot. Tried spinning them as far as I could. Nothing.

Fine, then. Okay. Just make do. Maybe the air dryer would evaporate them, kill the little microbes, anything. So I hit the button and held open palms beneath. No air, no heat, no nothing.

I wanted to cry.

Twenty miles later, the nausea moved in.

I'd asked Winona the night before why she wanted to come along. I was surprised to learn Abe had told her. She said, "Don't know."

"You could get hurt. You could go to jail."

"It's not like we're killing someone. People rob all the time."

"But they go to jail for it."

"A little." An index finger and thumb almost touching.

I'd figured her out then. She didn't like Abe because she saw the gentleman underneath the scars. She just liked the scars. Same with anything else in life.

We waited until the parking lot was nearly empty at State Line Steve's. I was nearly paralyzed by then, any motion set to make me spew. I had another growing cramp bubbling inside, too. Abe and Lewis would have to handle the whole thing themselves. I planned on heading for the men's room.

The plan: walk to the shop, do the job, then walk out. Winona would only come to get us when we were on our way to the road. I didn't know if I could even walk.

Abe took a look at me. "Why don't we let him drive? Winona can come in."

"That wasn't the plan." She sounded pissed, but also a little scared. She was in this for vicarious thrills - a part of the gang, but just driving. "I'm not going in."

"Fuck." Abe stared at her a moment too long before turning to me. "You gonna make it, champ?"

"No." I meant it. "I'd tell you if I could."

Abe snorted. He choked. He recovered and said, "If you don't...I'll kill you."

I think Lewis and Winona stood up for me, came to my rescue and all. Told him we should call it off, go home, get some pizza. It was a stupid idea. Come on, man, let's bail.

I knew what it meant to him, though. He'd told me internet poker had him out five grand. He'd stolen it from his dad, bit by bit, but the old man finally caught on. Abe was sure he'd win. Just one fucking flush. One fucking full house. Even when he hit them, they weren't enough to make him stop. One more fucking straight. One more fucking four of a kind. Without a few scores, Abe was sunk. His dad had already threatened to take the tuition, take the car, take the AmEx card.

Abe looked back at me again. He'd never cry, but the look was close enough to it for anyone's money. "Champ?"

What sort of friend was he to me, then? That didn't matter. We could settle that later. The bigger question was what sort of friend was I?

I told him, "I'll power through for you."

There was no Steve at State Line Steve's that night. We got a skinny wild-haired guy named Damien, who looked as if he just worked here to support himself until 'the band hit it big'.

Abe and Lewis handled shaking him down - their guns cheap pawnshop thirty-eights that were still frightening enough shoved up against your face. I didn't have a gun, just pretended. My job was to control the patrons. But there weren't any. Perfect timing. So I fingered over the magazines on the mismatched racks that looked like they'd been collected over the last forty years, some plastic, some wood, some wire. The teens and model-hot chicks were all closest to the register. I was still trying to rub off shit, even though I'd wiped most off on my jeans. Still felt dirty. Kept sniffing at my fingertips. Down the row. Hairy girls. Mature women. Lesbians. Got a little hard off a Mature Woman/Younger Chick cover, but that didn't help my condition.

Quickly back up front as Damien shoved money into the bag Abe held for him.

"Abe."

He glared at me. "*Names!*"

"I need a break."

"No fucking break. We don't have time."

Acid bubbling. I burped. Felt bile rise. "Can't...can't wait."

He grit his teeth. Damien had stopped filling the sack.

"Wait, that's it?"

The clerk nodded. "The rest is credit card slips."

"You can't have more credit card slips than cash."

"Oh yeah. It just rings up as a gas store purchase, you know. We're discrete."

Even though he was scared of the guns, you could tell he'd probably said the same thing to ten other robbers before.

I said, "Abe, I need the bathroom."

He put his finger to his lips, pained look on his face. I didn't mean to ruin the job. I couldn't help it. Desperate. My body doing its own thing now.

I looked at Damien. "Bathroom."

He said, "It's in the back. You'll need the key. Let me get it."

The clerk reached under the counter, none of us really having time to think that

wasn't such a great idea. I just wanted the key. A key, a bowl, a sink.

Damien's hand popped up with an automatic pistol. His face was already twisting, at the ready, when Abe caught Damien's wrist, slammed it hard on the counter. Kept gripping, struggling. Abe forced the clerk's wrist to the side, the gun pointing at none of us. Like arm wrestling, the strain showing in both their necks. Lewis pointed his revolver at Damien yelling things like, "I'm not joking! Let it go! You wanna die?" Damien ignored him, deep into his battle of wills with Abe. Jaws clenched now. Heavy breaths through their noses.

Then I threw up on them. Heaved hot dog and cola and acid all over the counter, slicking up Abe and Damien's arm battle. Damien tried to pull away harder, a high-pitched wail coming out of him. He started gagging. The wetness gained him some wiggle room.

"Get the gun!" Abe said.

He said it to me. I leaned over them, still not able to get any air past the thickness in my throat. Heaving, trying to control it. But then there was another round of the hot reddish mess spewing from me. Abe's grip on Damien slipped even more.

"The gun!"

Lewis kept his distance, still shouting. He wasn't going to shoot anybody. Couldn't depend on him.

I grabbed the top of the pistol, tugged. It wasn't going to be so hard. Tugged some more. Definitely slipping. Damien's finger was still in the trigger guard. Abe and I both caught that. Abe growled, louder and louder, then jumped up, slammed his forehead into Damien's. The clerk was dropping, all muscles slacking. His hand released the gun and it went flying down an aisle of dildos and vibrators. I followed, scrabbling for it, tripping, falling, landing hard. Then it was mine, and I felt a little bit better than before I had puked.

Abe leaned over me, the wet bag of cash dripping myself back on me. "We've got to go."

Only Lewis talked in the car. Pissed at first, then laughing, then satisfied when the fear dissipated the further we drove.

"Fucking *pukes* on the guy, can you believe that? Makes it too slippery for him to hold the fucking gun. Righteous, man. Let me see that gun."

He reached for the piece sticking out of my waistband. I grabbed his wrist, twisted. "It's mine."

"I just want to see. Let go."

My fingernails bit into his skin. He tried to kick me, couldn't get his foot free from between the seat. "Hey, cut that out! I'll kick your ass."

I released and he pulled back, his arm now dirtied up. Winona was the only one still clean. I wondered how long before Abe and Lewis came down with what I had. Winona had said it wasn't contagious by air, but by contact with fecal matter and vomit. No one was saying it, though. Everyone pretended we each had our own force fields.

Lewis finally said, "Jesus, the *smell*."

We found a cheap hotel that night out in the cornfields of southern Illinois, used Winona's ID info since we were pretty sure she'd kept out of sight during the job. The desk crew didn't see the condition we were in, stained and broken. I poured sweat. More bubbles expanded in my guts, my ass clenched as tight as humanly possible until we pulled up in front of the room. I wanted to beeline for the toilet, but by then I was too weak. I released as soon as I climbed from the car, the liquid shit trailing down my leg, dripping on the pavement. A trail of splats followed me inside. I didn't get past the first bed in the room. Fell across it and shivered.

"Oh my God." Abe. Maybe an ounce of feeling. If I hadn't been cramped, chilled, and covered in my own filth, I would've been touched. "Is he going to make it?"

Winona said, "Should pass in a few days. But we need to worry about you guys."

Like he hadn't heard, "A few *days*? We don't have a few days. Hell, staying here one night is dangerous enough. We need to hit again before the cops get a bead on us."

"In a couple of days, we'll all be like him anyway, so maybe we should cut our losses and go home."

Nobody answered. All three standing there staring at me. Winona finally sighed, came over to the bed and carefully removed my shoes. She said, "One of you get me a wash cloth. Soak it in warm water."

Lewis nodded, went to take care of it.

To Abe, she said, "Help me get his pants off."

"Oh, I don't think so."

She glanced up at him, withered him. She worked my zipper, and I let her. Felt a little throb in my cock in spite of the embarrassment. Sometimes you're so sick embarrassment can't reach you. I wasn't quite there yet, but close. Winona and Abe slid my jeans off. I held tight to the gun I'd taken at the store, the only thing propping up my strength - you always feel bigger with a gun.

Then Winona peeled away my soiled jockeys, sat by my side, and gently wiped my ass clean with the warm cloth. Such a peaceful look on her face, too. Maybe she liked living on the edge, but I sensed an angel in there who would help me until the end.

"Thank you," I said.

A Mona Lisa grin. "Feels good?"

Actually, it hurt. My ass was raw and the cloth was rough. "Like heaven."

While she took care of me, wheels spun in Abe's mind. Pacing, pacing. Lewis brushed by him on his way to the sink, set his gun down and then tore open the soap wrapper.

"It's too late. Washing might've helped a few hours ago, but not now."

Lewis kept on. "It can't hurt. I'd rather be clean and sick than not clean and sick."

Pretty soon you won't have a choice, I thought. It made me laugh. The gun I had taken was pressed against my stomach, cold and cutting. Hurt when I laughed. I pulled it away from my skin. Soon as it was free, another convulsion. Up my throat, out my ass, at the same time. Every muscle tightened. Including the finger around the trigger.

The mirror over the sink shattered. The bullet had gone right over Winona's shoulder, right through Lewis.

"Ohgodohgodohgod, no no no." He held soapy hands over the giant hole in his chest while Abe and Winona went apeshit grabbing towels, pressing it against the wound. Lewis growing quieter, his wild eyes drifting like he was high, man. I tried to watch but was puking all over the bed, using all my leftover willpower to hold myself up.

The blood saturated the towels. Winona kept pressing. Her arms were bloody to her elbows. Lewis sank to the bed, then onto his back, a low whine his only sound. Then it stopped.

Abe shoved the gun at me. "*What. The. Fuck?*"

I couldn't speak well. Too much heaving. "Accident...sorry...accident!"

He leaned closer with the gun, looked determined, then fell away and paced, ran his hand through his hair. Then came back at me with the gun. "He's gone, man. Oh, we're so screwed. So fucking screwed. Fuck. Ing...sssss. *Damn it!*"

Winona was sitting on Lewis' feet at bedside, bloody towels in her lap as she stared into space. Nothing there.

Abe said, "Come on, Winona, we've got to go."

"What?"

"Let's get out of here. No way no one heard that shot. Hurry."

She lifted her chin at me. "What about him?"

"Same as before, just a little sooner is all. We don't have time."

I saw where this was going. He'd wanted it this way the whole time. I wondered if Lewis and I would have even gotten a cut. When I finally glimpsed his eyes, I knew the next shot was for me. He shook his head.

I rolled onto my back, double-gripped the pistol and trained it on him. Wavering, little circles. Three feet away and I doubted I could hit him. But I would damn sure try.

"Take me," I said.

"Fuck, buddy, *look* at you."

"We weren't a part of your plan anyway, were we? Just some warm bodies to help pull off the jobs, and then you and Winona would sneak out in the middle of the night, leaving us stranded or dead."

The guy took it hard, looked hurt. "Aw, dude. I wouldn't have killed you. If you had tried to turn me in, you'd have been in about as much trouble. How about you take it like a man, see? At least you'll get a free trip to the hospital tonight. You'll feel better."

I kept aiming. I had to admit that his friendship wasn't a complete disaster. He *did* keep us in pizza and video games, beer and cable TV. He was always there to urge me on, tell me I should try harder than I did. Even said he'd have been a character witness at my hearing on the sexual assault, as long as it wasn't before ten in the morning. But to bring me in on something like this, something I never would've *imagined* committing in my wildest dreams unless it was on an X-Box, then double-cross me? Fuck that noise.

My body answered for me in the end. Arms throbbed, chest ached, and the bubbles were growing faster. More sickness on its way up.

"You son of a bitch," I said as the gun fell beside me on the bed. Winona got to her knees and reached for it, cradled it, before climbing to her feet.

Then Abe was aiming again, not so confused this time. Determined. Drawing down on me. What could I do anymore? Lying in a puddle of my own mess, exhausted, a newly-initiated killer. Abe said, "If it were only the money, I'd trust you could keep your mouth shut. But with all this, well...that changes the deal. I can't risk it."

"You said so yourself. You can trust me." Fighting to stay up on my elbows.

"I don't know what to think anymore, man. I've never been in so deep before. For fuck's sake, why'd you have to go and get sick?"

"You can't blame me for getting sick."

"It doesn't matter." Steel nerves. Brass balls. He had what it took to shoot me.

When it came, it was Winona doing the shooting. Right into Abe's neck. A gusher. He strangled on a *K* as he fell, cupping his palms around his throat, trying to hold in the life that was leaking out too fast and warm and slippery to control. I looked at Winona, gun loose in her fingers, one bloody hand over her mouth. When she pulled it away, she looked like a horror movie zombie, a red print across her mouth and cheek.

She peered down at Abe until he stopped croaking. Then she cleared her throat, turned her face to me. I reached for her hand.

"It's okay," I said. "You did the right thing."

"I know," she said. Weak, though. As if it hadn't mattered either way. "I couldn't let him kill you."

It warmed me to hear her say it. A reason to fight, a reason to live. She *did* care after all. All those late evenings, early mornings, confessions, 'true friend' talk, had been building to this.

"You made the right choice, sweetie. Please, hand me my jeans and let's go."

She snapped to attention, started looking around. "What?"

"I can wash up at the next stop. I'm feeling better."

She kept looking around, grew frantic, then found what she was looking for. She knelt at the foot of the bed so I couldn't see her. I sat up, the stomach growing restless again, to find her yanking the bag of money from beneath Abe's body. He'd died with his eyes shocked open.

"Baby? Winona?" I scooted towards her. "We're going to be all right."

Winona must've sensed me moving. She leapt up with a sharp intake of breath and bug-eyed me, holding the pistol and the money to her chest. We were like that a good minute or two. I reached for her again. This time she reeled backwards towards the door. Soon as she was flush against it, someone started banging on the outside. Freaked her out, looked like a scared ferret.

"Everything all right in there? Were those gunshots? Are you okay?"

"Winona? We can do this," I said.

She shook her head. Not a word. Not even the courtesy of one word. She reached for the doorknob, opened the door, and pushed past the manager who had been banging.

He said something to her but she kept going. Then he looked in the room - Abe, me, then Lewis, then the cracked mirror, then me again. I grinned at him.

Two dead guys and some loon naked from the waist down, covered in shit and vomit. I said, "A little food poisoning, that's all."

I heard a car engine turn over, then the room was bathed in headlight glare. The

manager turned to the parking lot. I didn't have to see for myself to know it was Winona's car.

"Hey! Get back here! Hey!" The manager took off after her, leaving me alone. It was a safe bet. Even my sense of survival was sick at that point. I fell back into my puddle with a loud *plop*, thinking that maybe after they let me out of prison, I could be a massage therapist. I'm telling you, if the girls would just let me rub their backs, they'd never want anyone else.

Anthony Neil Smith is the author of PSYCHOSOMATIC and THE DRUMMER, and the former editor of the online journal PLOTS WITH GUNS. His work has been published all over, including in MURDALAND, EXQUISITE CORPSE, BULLET, JUKED, DOGMATIKA, many others, and is forthcoming in BUST DOWN THE DOOR AND EAT ALL THE CHICKENS. He's currently exiled in Minnesota, far far away from the shrimp poboys and gumbo he very much craves.