

Around Here

By Keith Gilman

"The voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground."

Genesis IV:10

"I still can't believe you're a cop, Brian. What the hell were you thinking?"

"It's a job, man, like any other."

"Not exactly."

Brian leaned forward, his elbows on the bar, and took a long drag off the smoldering cigarette between his fingers. The Dean Street Bar was dark and empty, a little early on a Tuesday night for even the most dedicated patrons. Things didn't usually get going until well after midnight.

"I couldn't keep doing what I was doing. I had to make a choice. I got a baby on the way and I'm getting married. This opportunity came up and I took it. What did you expect me to do?" He pressed the cigarette out into a glass ashtray on the bar and raised a cloudy glass, half full of beer. "I don't see why you have a problem with it."

"I don't, but some other people might. You spent more time on the wrong side of the law than on the right and when the word gets out, you ain't gonna be such a popular guy around here. Fuck, the word is out already. You have a past, man, some bad connections; skeletons in the closet, you know. You just can't make that shit disappear."

"They'll probably transfer me to the other side of the state. I won't know a fucking soul and no one will know me."

"I hope you're right."

Brian ordered another beer and a shot of whiskey to go with it. His empty stare fell on the short two ounces of amber fluid. It reminded him of the medicine his mother gave him when he was sick, a bed made up for him on the couch in the living room, game shows playing on the television all day long. This medicine he washed down with beer instead of water.

He lit another cigarette, felt the alcohol hit his belly and burn like liquid fire.

"Would you bust me, if you had the chance?"

"Why the fuck would you ask a question like that? I'm marrying your sister, for Christ's sake."

"It's a reasonable question. You're a cop. I deal drugs. Could be a conflict of interest. Am I right?"

"How long have I known you, Vinny?"

"We've known each other our whole lives."

"That's right. So shut the fuck up. I'm not a narc."

"But people are talking, Brian. Guys you used to do business with. Guys I still do business with."

"Let them talk."

"Sure, as long as it's just talk."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Like I said, Brian. The word is out. You're a cop."

"So fucking what?"

“So, you heard about Skidz, didn’t you? He got busted the other day, at the Pallet Factory. They dragged him out of there in cuffs in front of everybody. It took four cops to beat him down before they could get him out. He thinks you had something to do with it.”

“I just got out of the academy six months ago. I don’t even have a real badge yet. They gave me this rusted old piece of metal, belonged to some cop died in the last fucking century, until I pass probation. You’re as crazy as he is if you think I set him up.”

“Stranger things have happened.”

“Fuck you.”

The place started to fill up, couples mostly, looking for a dark corner to have a drink after dinner, hiding from their spouses, from the law and the light. A couple of drunks took positions at the bar. A group of punks crashed through the front door, loud mouths, still fresh with the buzz of the street, their beer muscles bulging behind their leather jackets. One of them bumped into Vinny and spilled some of his drink.

“What the fuck.”

“Oh shit, Vinny. I’m sorry, man. If I’d known it was you...”

“You’d what? Be more careful?” he jumped off the stool and wiped his pants with a paper napkin.

“You got my money?”

“I’m a little short right now, Vinny, but you’ll get it. I pay my debts, man. You can count on it.”

“I’m counting the days, shithead, and it’s already been too long. Now, why don’t you and your crew get the fuck out of here?”

“Hey Vinny, ain’t that Brian Kelly? I heard he’s a cop. Why are you sitting here with a cop?”

“Why don’t you shut the fuck up before I cut your tongue out and feed it to the rats.”

“Just asking, Vinny. That’s all.”

He walked out of the bar. His boys followed. His eyes were on Brian. His face was a hard, cold mask of contempt.

“Why do you hang out with those bums?”

“It’s the business, man. You can’t always decide who to do business with and who not to. They’re not as bad as they look.”

“Who is he? I thought I recognized him. He certainly recognized me.”

“Charlie Lamond. He’s Skidz nephew. You probably haven’t seen him since he was selling joints to the kids up at Hilltop Park. He’s grown up some since then, just got out of SCI Waymart. He did a stretch for armed robbery, sat in there with his mouth shut for a few years. He could have rolled and saved himself a lot of time. I give the kid credit. He’s all right, just a little high strung.”

“I’m kissing this whole town good-bye, Vince. This whole fucking life, and not a minute too soon.”

“I guess you’re lucky, Brian. That was you, once upon a time, that kid with piss in his veins and a bad attitude. You’re lucky you never got caught, lucky you’re still able

to walk away. I got a rap sheet that'll follow me the rest of my life. I don't know nothing else anyway."

They tapped their glasses together. It made a dull, hollow sound, a muffled ring that died before the glass touched their lips. They finished what was left of the warm beer and replaced the glasses on the bar.

"Let's get the fuck out of here."

"Brian, take good care of Angela. She deserves better than this, better than a stinking rotten apartment on Sixty-Fourth Street and an addict for a brother. She's a good girl, Brian."

"Don't you think I know that? I'm not going to let anything happen to her. That baby's going to grow up miles away from the streets we were raised on."

"You're smart, Brian. You always were smart."

They both dropped a dollar on the bar. Brian put out his hand and Vinny took it in his. They shook hands and clapped each other on the shoulder. A thin blond watched them from the end of the bar, looked them up and down. Her eyes shifted inside a sunken pair of dark sockets, her protruding cheekbones powdered with red to hide the purplish bruises and the slow decay.

They moved to the door and stepped outside onto the empty sidewalk, into the coolness of night. They shook hands again. Vinny held on a second too long, an awkward smile spreading over his face.

Across the street, a figure emerged from the shadows, a man in a black leather jacket, short spiked hair, dark stubble across his chin. He came toward them, sliding between two parked cars. The streetlight shone in his eyes. It was Charlie Lamond with a gun in his hand.

"What are you doing, Charlie? I thought I told you to split."

"Get out of my way, Vinny."

"You're making a mistake, Charlie. You don't know what the hell you're doing."

"I know damn well what I'm doing. This bastard set up my uncle, betrayed people he's known all his life, people who been like family. It stinks Vinny. I ain't going to let him get away with it."

Charlie raised the gun and pointed it at Brian. The thirty-eight revolver looked small in his hand, his arm straight, his finger on the trigger. The night seemed to hold its breath. He squeezed and the hammer slowly crept back.

Vinny reached for the gun, stepping in front of Brian, pushing him out of the way. The shot caught him in the gut and drove him to the ground. He curled up in a ball, his knees pulled in against his chest.

Brian's gun was out, a forty caliber Glock, big and black in his hand. Before Charlie could get off another shot, Brian fired. He fired again and Charlie went down.

Vinny groaned, a low guttural sound that brought Brian to his side. Brian kneeled alongside him and cradled his head. Blood dripped from the corners of his mouth.

"I'm sorry, Brian. Tell Angela I'm sorry. I didn't want this to happen."

"I know, Vinny. I'll call an ambulance."

"I ain't gonna make it. Take care of that kid, Brian. Get as far away from here as you can."

His lips began to tremble. A shudder went through him, like he'd suddenly grown very cold. The moaning stopped. Vinny's eyes closed and he was dead.

The police were there in minutes and the ambulance right behind. The cops pried themselves out of their patrol cars and sauntered over to the two corpses bleeding all over their nice, clean street. They looked down at Vinny and Charlie like they were bags of rotting garbage, torn open by the neighborhood strays, dog food.

“What do you got going here, Kelly?” one of the uniforms said, recognizing Brian. “This don’t have anything to do with that deal at the Pallet Factory?”

“No.”

“That was a good job, a nice pinch.”

“Sure.”

“What do we label this? A drug deal gone bad.”

“I guess so.”

“Homicide boys are on their way. So is the M.E.”

Brian nodded. The other cop came over, broke open a fresh pack of cigarettes and offered one to Brian. The three of them smoked and watched the blood run off the sidewalk, into the gutter.

“You used to live around here, Kelly. Didn’t you?”

“Used to. Not anymore.”

Gilman is a cop that writes crime fiction. Catch him the ill-lustrious Thuglit. His stories have also been featured in Demolition and Orchard Press Mysteries. His flash fiction has appeared in Muzzle Flash and is coming soon to MFOB.