

The Trouble with Trolls

by Patricia Abbott

Heading for the driveway on a Sunday morning, Denny noticed that the eight or ten cars outside his neighbor's house the night before still lined the street. Did grown men routinely host sleepovers or should he risk embarrassment and check things out? He settled on removing Matt and Ralph's Sunday *Times* from the yew where the direct hit of the irrigation system had already saturated it. Denny liked to be regarded well as long as the cost was low. The house was preternaturally quiet for nearly noon, the stillness broken only by the sprinkler's hum.

He managed to beat Dad to the store by a full fifteen minutes and sat nervously eyeing the display of garden sculptures. More than once lately, he had stumbled over an emancipated troll idling near the rear exit or guarding the bins of screws and nuts. They had taken on the dusty, glazed look of objects that had sat too long in stockrooms. For some reason, Dad found them comical and never failed to chuckle when he came on one unexpectedly. Once or twice, Denny had smuggled one home, burying it in the backyard since he wasn't sure of its recycling requirements. Thankfully, the decline in the store's troll population had so far gone unnoticed.

His father arrived with the usual query, tossing his sweat-stained hat on the counter. "Have you heard from your brother? How's the new project going?" This was strictly a rhetorical question since, as Patrick's backer, Dad knew everything about his business. "Listen, Den," Dad continued, not even waiting for an answer, "I have a small errand for you boys."

Denny fixed his eyes on the dark computer screen. A small errand could mean anything from a trip to the bank to deposit funds to strong-arming one of Dad's recalcitrant clients for payment. Beside the hardware store, a flower shop, a small restaurant in Allen Park and the financial backing of his son's aquarium business, Dad was an attorney with a practice in a section of the city populated by Eastern-European, Latin American, and Arab émigrés. More than once, Denny and Patrick had been dispatched to collect fees from a Turk or Serbian immigrant who wanted his child support burden lowered. Or, on one rather frightening occasion, to calm a Colombian drug czar, requesting that his ex-wife be deported or disposed of ("Whatever," Quatro Velasquez told them obligingly, fingering the square-cut sapphire on his pinky). There had been other errands, too, of course - tasks Denny would prefer to forget. "All part of the show," Dad had said to his sons more than once. "Get used to adult life."

Michael Patterson had built an empire of sorts in just one generation, coming from a family of auto workers who never thought to do more than side their house in vinyl, drink a beer on Saturday night, and camp in July in the UP. Consequently, complaints from clients regarding his prices drew little sympathy. "You should see the fucking rates I pay in personal insurance," he told anyone who questioned his prices or practices. "You want me to take risks, you gotta pay for it." Despite his ever-decreasing height and the flabby girth that eating at his own restaurant had added, Dad remained formidable. He had a strong and jutting chin, a persuasive left hook, and the mental acuity to back both up.

While Denny considered the possible nature of the small errand, Dad walked over to the wall and raised the setting on the thermostat. "You don't need to cool the whole fucking place when you're in here alone, Den. Turn on a fan, for Christ's sake. Open a door." His father grabbed a stool from under the counter where the wallpaper sample books rested and sat down. "I'm talking about Tuesday night. She arrives at 6:45 p.m. Air Beirut."

"Who arrives?"

Dad cleared his throat. "Some woman, what else? From the old country."

"What old country?" Dad had been born and raised in Detroit.

"I met her at a wedding. Remember that client of mine - Mr. Shalaby - the one who bumped into his wife a couple years ago?"

Denny remembered. The bump had been with Shalaby's Caddy, and following an altercation that broke two of the woman's teeth, a cheekbone, and blackened both eyes. She was in Henry Ford Hospital for weeks. "I got him community service when he pled and he invited me to his nephew's wedding," Dad continued. "We got to talking - this lady and me - and anyway she lands at Metro Tuesday night. She could use a little help."

"Language problems?"

"Sure. Sure. Language problems. That - and other things. Just get her. You and Patrick. You know what I mean, Denny. Remember how you helped me with Olga - what's her name? This one's even more..." His father jabbed the air in front of him and Denny, involuntarily, stepped back. "What? What? You think I'd hit you, Den?" His father seemed pleased by this thought and jabbed the air a few more times. "When did I ever hit you?"

"Does Patrick have to come along?"

"You're in this together. He's like an ox from carting those tanks up and down the stairs. Never can tell when muscle could come in handy."

Denny nodded. "So where do we take her?"

"The Apollo Hotel in Greektown. Make sure those nitwits give her a nice room. Order some flowers maybe - to throw her off. Put it on the store card." The old man grabbed his Tiger's cap from the counter and headed for the door. "Anyway, take care of her just like you did with Olga. You guys did great with Olga."

"You didn't give me her name?"

"Right. Her name's Nahla Khalil. She's on Lufthansa, I think." Michael Patterson turned back from the door. "Oh, and get her some orchids. Nahla likes orchids. She says they look like a tunnel of love." Stepping forward a bit, he almost whispered. "When I used that line on your mother once, she said, 'Stop talking dirty.' Does it sound dirty to you?"

Denny shrugged. "Hey, I thought you told me Air Beirut?" But his father was gone, the heavy metal door to the back alley slamming on Denny's last words. The troll by the door seemed to blink in the light.

It had been a long time since either Denny or his brother harbored any illusions about their parents' marriage, but participating in the demise of women who became inconvenient to their father was unsettling. How many women must die before the old man let his prescription for Viagra lapse? Of course, Dad didn't knock most of them off. There had just been that Olga until now. But one day soon, Michael Patterson would go too far with something and it would be time for Denny to take over - ending the pretense

that his father was still the big cheese. And he would never allow a mere sexual conquest to compromise his position.

When Denny got home, a fleet of emergency vehicles were backed clear out onto Mack Avenue. Monica was glued to the window. She wore a white dress with a halter-top that looked as skimpy as a handkerchief and was holding a festive glass of white wine in her hand.

“What’s going on?” he asked, easing in beside her. “It’s Matt and Ralph’s house, right?” He remembered the line of cars he’d ignored earlier.

“The EMS guys carted three bodies out,” she said breathlessly. “Now don’t jump on me, Denny, but I wonder if we should invite the Blakes over?”

“Why would you want to invite them over now?”

“We have the better view. And we still owe them from their Halloween party. A little wine, a little brie-”

“Oh, look,” he said interrupting her intentionally. “They’re bringing someone out through the side door.”

When it was over, two bodies and half-a-dozen, semi-asphyxiated men had been evacuated, the survivors attached to oxygen. “It must have been some sort of poisonous gas,” Denny surmised.

Monica, now on the phone with a neighbor, shouted, “Somebody turned on the air without turning off the furnace. Every time the air came on and cooled the house, the heat came on to warm it up. And vice-versa.”

“Our unit wouldn’t do that.”

“Yeah, but that house has probably never been updated. Remember Matt’s Dad?” Denny did indeed, an old policeman who lived in the house when the area was still known as Cops’ Corner. He’d been a racist and the reigning neighborhood skinflint who turned out his light on Halloween and didn’t belong to any of the neighborhood associations. When he had died three years ago, some assumed his son’s sexual preference contributed to his demise.

“Anyway,” Monica continued, “the vent outside was shut and the negative pressure caused carbon monoxide fumes to back-draft into the utility closet. The detector was disabled, who knows why, and over the course of the party, they were asphyxiated.”

“What about Ralph and Matt?”

“Oh, I forgot to ask!” She stood up, her breasts straining mightily against the fabric of her blouse.

“Dad’s got a little job for me on Tuesday night. That’s why he called this morning.” He stood right in front of her, so she would have to look at him. “Years ago, he’d have handled it himself but recently he’s begun to depend on me. I’ll be taking over in a matter of months. Oh, sure, Patrick might have to be dealt with in some fashion, but he’s got that fish business. It’ll be my empire and I’m already planning on a few changes. Those trolls in the store for instance-”

She looked at him with what seemed like great understanding then said, “There’s some cold chicken in the fridge. I promised Mother I’d be over by two.”

Patrick climbed into the car on Tuesday evening wearing the damp look Denny associated with him since he'd begun tending tropical fish. Low on IQ but high on muscle, Patrick roamed from dental to doctors' offices, from library to restaurant, maintaining both the fish and their habitat, toting unexpectedly intricate equipment in a chrome handcart, which cost more than Denny's Civic. Luckily, Patrick was a large man.

Surprisingly, the business *was* taking off, though an emerging decline in the fish population in metropolitan Detroit threatened its success. Arriving at his appointments hung over or high, Patrick routinely sucked priceless fish into his hose. Or forgot to remove valuable specimens before applying lethal chemicals. Or spent too much time flirting with the receptionist. Or got into ridiculous disputes. Or failed to show up at all. Patrick had inadvertently hit upon an unmet need in the community but lacked the disposition to exploit it.

His face looked bloated and blotchy, his eyes red-rimmed. Was it too many showers, too many drugs, or did he dive into some of the larger tanks to do his work? A trace of white powder dotted his upper lip.

"Jeez, Patrick! Couldn't you wait?"

His brother rubbed a finger across his upper lip and put it to his mouth. "You wouldn't believe how physically demanding fish can be sitting in front of the computer screen all day like you do." He sighed, opened his mouth, and threw a Rolo in. "Lately, I've had to drag that damned cart with me everywhere. I can't leave it in the car because I let the policy lapse. Dad'll skin me if someone takes off with it." He laughed lightly, and then harder as he looked at his finger. "You know what this shit is, Denny? It's goddamned tank cleaner. I hope it wasn't what I put up my nose half an hour ago." He unpeeled another Rolo then offered the roll to Denny.

"Probably no worse than a dozen other things you've ingested." They drove along in a companionable silence, munching their candy.

"So why can't this lathy take a tathi into town?" The caramel was affecting his speech.

"He gave me a lot of crap about making sure her room's okay. Getting her flowers." Denny nodded at the slim bouquet of carnations in the back seat. "I ordered the orchids for her hotel room from Dad's shop, of course."

"Who the hell is this chick anyway?" Patrick interrupted. "I don't remember the old man doing anything like this before. Flying his girlfriend in, putting her up in a fancy, smancey hotel. Wooing her."

"Wooing?" Denny repeated, immediately attracted to the word. "Does Dad woo?"

"We all woo. I've never been convinced that screwing is that wonderful for women. Wooing makes it seem better. Puts a spiffy gloss on a messy business."

"Anyway, he's not wooing Nahla. He's giving her the Olga treatment."

Patrick blinked twice. "So that's how it is. When were you planning to tell me?"

Denny shrugged. "I thought it might not pan out."

"Oh, how thoughtful. Are you sparing me or cutting me out, Den?"

Denny pulled into a short-term parking lot, and the brothers hurried over the bridge to the terminal. "Dad's probably a pretty fair wooer - growing up like he did after the war. Was there anything too corny for them?"

"That's what they should call them. The corniest generation."

“Even the word corny is corny,” Denny offered.

“Exactly.”

Trying to keep pace with his taller brother, Denny quickly grew winded. “Dad should have taught us his wooing techniques instead of how to field ground balls.”

“No one bothered to tell us we’d grow up to prefer women to line drives.”

“I have a theory,” Denny said. “Actually it’s Monica’s. She claims Dad didn’t teach us anything useful on purpose. That way, he can keep us under his thumb. Don’t you find it odd that he never let us change a tire, mow the grass, or balance a checkbook when we were kids?”

Patrick had lost interest. “What’s her name?”

“Who? Oh, Nahla.” At that moment, Denny caught sight of a woman in a wheelchair being pushed in their direction. If this was Nahla, she’d already run into some trouble. One of her legs was missing.

“Oh, Christ,” Patrick said, watching the wheelchair approach them. “Did Dad mention that little detail?”

Denny shook his head. “Not a word.” Both men grinned simultaneously as the chair approached them, the uniformed airline attendant smiling with relief as the handoff was made. “Miss Khalil?” Denny said, half-kneeling in front of her. “Nahla? Do you speak English?”

She looked around and removed her shades. “Where’s Michael? He promised he’d meet my plane.” Her tone had the familiar mix of petulance and imperiousness used by all Patterson-related women. Clearly, she spoke English.

Denny didn’t answer immediately. He was wondering why Nahla didn’t wear an artificial leg. If it was a matter of money, why hadn’t Dad stepped in? He glanced over at Patrick, who was apparently struck dumb. “Dad’s stuck in Dearborn with a client,” Denny finally said.

“Unavoidably detained,” Patrick added, coming out of his trance.

“Then let’s shake a leg,” she said, without a glimmer of a smile. Patrick looked at Denny from under his thick eyebrows; Denny tightened his mouth. Was she a kook? Both men looked at her missing leg without meaning to. Or at where the leg would be if it hadn’t been missing.

“Yes, I’m here for a new *leg*,” she said easily. “Odd as it seems, Detroit is where I had it made originally, so they have the precise measurements.” Looking at their glassy stares, she added, “I lost it at sea.”

The original or the artificial one, Denny wondered? Images of a black-stockinged wooden leg floating like jetsam filled his head. He wondered if she dressed it separately before strapping it on. “Christ, how did *that* happen?” he finally managed to get out.

“The porter carried it off with my cases and by the time I realized his error, it had disappeared. I find it easier going through security without it,” she explained. “So I always remove it. You’d think Homeland Security would make allowances, but a one-legged woman only seems to increase their interest. I get stripped searched all the time.” The brothers tried not to look at each other or her missing leg.

“Who would have taken it?” Denny asked aghast.

“You’d be surprised,” she said without elaboration.

“Do you insure something like that?” Patrick asked.

“Certainly you insure it! It’s the most valuable thing I own. Every inch has to conform to the rest of me.” She held out the other leg for their inspection. If the missing one had been a perfect match, she had lost something pretty spectacular, Denny thought. Twice.

“Well, the car’s just across the bridge,” he said weakly, moving her chair in that direction.

After a few fumbling moments loading the chair into the trunk, they were back on the freeway. “Nothing ever changes,” she said tiredly, looking around. “Fists, tires, potholes, rust, gunshots, cacophony.” She directed them to the hotel, obviously familiar with the route. The check-in went smoothly although she changed her penthouse suite to a room on the first floor. “You get worried about fire,” she told the clerk.

The corridor to Nahla’s room was mirrored, the carpet plush enough to give Denny’s arms a good workout. This was where Patrick might have come in handy, but instead he cavorted ahead of them, chattering in that desperate way he had at the end of a hit of coke. He fit the key in the lock with some difficulty and finally stepped aside, allowing the chair to pass. Inside, they found a young man wearing only patent leather shoes and black socks held up by garters making love to panty-less woman in a violet, bridesmaid’s dress in a king-sized bed. With the frilly, hooped skirt framing them, the couple looked like a mid-picture sequence from an old Busby Berkeley movie.

“How entertaining!” Nahla said and proceeded to address the pair in a series of languages until she hit on the correct one. “Spanish!” she finally announced. “They’re friends of one of one of the maids. Apparently, Conchita told them they could use this room for an hour.” Nahla looked at both Pattersons. “Could you see about getting my room switched again, Dennis? I’ve lost my appetite for sleeping here.” She nodded toward the jumble of bedclothes, the tangle of limbs, and the distinctive tang of fresh sex.

Denny tramped back to the reception desk where a clerk informed him there were no vacancies, and, in fact, the room Nahla had rejected minutes earlier had been given to a new arrival. “Not even the wedding suite?” Denny asked, certain his father would spring for it. The clerk shook his head.

Denny opened and closed his mouth several times, trying uselessly to come up with the proper threat or bit of reasoning to bring it home. But if the hotel had no more rooms, what could be done? Glumly, Denny returned to the room and told Nahla the news, wondering how Monica would feel about an overnight guest. Between them, they could carry Nahla up to the second floor using that fireman’s hold they’d learned in middle school. They could settle her in and if he heard her rise in the night on her one good leg, he could rush in and... But he doubted Monica would approve of bringing her with them. Or condone, for that matter, the execution of a one-legged woman in her own home.

“Call Michael,” Nahla demanded immediately. “He’ll deal with it.”

“No need for that. I’m sure I can...” Denny started to say before realizing he had no idea at all about how to handle it. Money, threats, tears. Why hadn’t Dad taught them such things? It was their business too, wasn’t it? “Your turn,” he said weakly, passing Patrick the cell phone.

“I thought I was only here to provide muscle,” Patrick complained as he dialed the number.

It took Dad less than five minutes to sort things out, although they never learned what means he used. If he was annoyed at the interruption in his evening, he didn't say so. If he was angry with his sons, he kept it to himself. Patrick slipped the phone into his pocket and they waited in silence for the inevitable call from the front desk.

Nahla's room was a newly available suite on the first floor. She offered them a drink, which they both declined, recognizing the lack of enthusiasm in her invitation. Denny stopped at the desk on the way out to see about redirecting the flower delivery.

"I wish I had ordered more than two dozen," he told his brother in the car. "She deserves the entire shop after that debacle. The cart's refrigerated so they won't lose their freshness."

"Yes, I well remember that cart. You know, Denny, you hardly notice her missing leg after a minute."

"In some ways, it makes her even more attractive," Denny agreed as he swung onto 1-94. "I wonder how..." His voice trailed off.

"You mean how did Dad find a girl like that?" Patrick asked. "Or how she lost her leg?"

"I mean- I wonder what it would be like to make love to her." *Someone who couldn't get away*, Denny was thinking.

Patrick nodded. "The delivery guys shouldn't have much trouble with Nahla. She has a certain amount of spunk but how far will that get her with a couple of gorillas?"

"Handy she's not wearing the artificial leg. I wonder if Dad had something to do with that." The brothers paused to contemplate this. "Remember the trouble they had with Olga? Dad goes for the big girls, doesn't he? He likes the big bottoms."

"Did we ever find out why Dad got rid of Olga? What did she do?"

Denny shook his head. "Dad's not very forthcoming."

"I wonder how Mom's survived all these years." Patrick said, popping another Rollo into his mouth.

"She's long past fitting into a florist's cart," Denny finally said. "And he must know we'd draw the line there." He said it firmly, hoping to convince himself.

Monica was curled up in the farthest corner of the king-sized bed when Denny crept into their room. She might as well have worn a 'Do Not Disturb' sign across her chest. The phone rang just as he was headed for the bathroom. He picked it up and took it with him. "Denny?" an unfamiliar voice said.

"Yes?"

"Denny, this is Ralph. You know, from across the street?"

He looked out the bathroom window and saw lights. "Ralph! I didn't recognize... Home again? Great! Anything I can do? I've thought about..."

"Actually - there is. I was wondering if your father was taking on new clients. We have some legal problems. Well, not problems exactly. Questions. We have some questions."

"You want my father?" Had he even mentioned Dad to Ralph?

"I-or, that is, we-we heard he was a...a crackerjack attorney. Good for a special sort of..." He cleared his throat. "Anyway, the name sounded familiar and then Matt put it together." He cleared his throat again. "He's not retired, is he?"

"Not completely. You know I'm an attorney myself, Matt."

“No kidding. Do you have a practice?”

“Well, no, but the majority of attorneys don’t actually have practices.”

“Would he have a problem with my calling him this late? Your father, that is,”

Ralph interrupted, adding softly. “We need someone experienced in litigation.” He sighed quietly. “Funny how your closest friends can turn on you. Just because we both got out alive is no reason...”

“No, he’s used to late calls.” He hung up a minute later and his thoughts returned to Nahla. The missing leg was certainly a lucky break. He tried to picture her as she looked earlier at the airport, but the image of how she must look stuffed into the florist’s cart kept pushing it away.

Denny slunk into an almost empty theater showing the movie *Girls Girls Girls XXX* the next day. It was the only spot in town cognizant of the fact that a small but select group of patrons couldn’t watch certain types of DVDs at home. As he made his way down the dark, center aisle, he managed to trip over some obstruction in his path, breaking his fall in the last seconds by grabbing a nearby seatback. What the hell? Had the usher left a trashcan? Was it a patron’s wheelchair or oxygen? Someone’s bike or shopping cart? A passed-out moviegoer?

Running his hands up and down the impediment, he discovered it was a hose of some sort. Some kind of mammoth vacuum cleaner perhaps? On his knees, the smells of popcorn, rug cleaner, vomit, and licorice nearly overwhelming him, he followed the hose it to its source - a tank, then a carrier, and finally, Patrick, gawking at the screen. Denny wasn’t sure whether Patrick could see him, but that afternoon both boys pretended the dark was absolute, impenetrable. There was not another soul in the theater so Denny had his choice of seats.

Across the city, as always, Michael Patterson conducted business.

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