

The Lead Rosary

By Ed Lynskey

Fingering the rosary, its beads crafted from lead, stained my latex gloves. It was the first clue we had a real nut case here. Grunting, I wiped my hands off on my handkerchief. A veteran cop had once laughed over how I'd last twelve months on the natural death squad. That'd been twelve long years ago.

"Sully, gimme another cigar." Big Gil, half my age at 25, wore all black and a Fu Manchu. His flat eyes regarded me. His spiky, red hair reminded me of a thorny crown. We smoked flavored cigars to mask the stench of putrefied human flesh. It did little good.

Grunting again, I waded through the knee-deep debris and gave Big Gil a Cherry Swisher and my brass Zippo. He set fire to the cigar end and gave two careful puffs.

"Why all the grunts, Sully? You constipated?" asked Big Gil.

"Shit on you," I said.

I let my eyes crawl over the empty bottles of Thunderbird, Wild Irish Rose, MD 20/20, and end up fixed on the elderly man. He lay sprawled on the floor, dead for a good while. Short and squat, he had a few long, gray hairs trailing over his scabby scalp. I saw maggots...

"Lovely sight, eh, Sully?"

I grunted. "Just process the scene."

This upstairs rented room was maybe twice the size of inside our squad cruiser. I sweated. A radio buried somewhere in the debris twanged a country song, music I despised more than hip-hop. A ceiling fan chopping overhead stirred the air. The remote was also hidden in places I didn't want to touch, even wearing gloves. Or even with a ten-foot pole.

My thumb jerked over my shoulder at an apple crate upended by the grungy mattress on the floor. "I count five bibles in the stack."

Big Gil, aiming his digital camera above his cigar, shrugged. "Maybe Ralph had a religious streak. Say cheese, Ralph." The camera's flash blinked. I saw spots. Our male victims were all 'Ralph' to Big Gil.

"Shit, too." I toed a pint bottle to clink into another one. "Then explain all this evidence of booze?"

"Like all of us, Ralph was a frequent backslider."

"I'm farting chalk dust. Let's kick and go grab a cold Bud," I said.

Big Gil shook his head. "Not yet."

"Obviously the geezer died from natural causes," I said. "We can't I.D. him on the spot. We've found no next of kin. I'd say our gig is finished."

Big Gil flipped over Ralph and tugged his pants pockets inside out. "No wallet or car keys."

"The morgue boys can bag and tag him," I said, still pressing my case.

"I'm pulling rank on you. This one gets star treatment."

I shrugged. "The pay is the same."

I'd taught Big Gil everything he knew and then the department had promoted him over me. Go figure. He was my boss. That chapped my ass. But my twenty and out

hovered three months away. I was more than psyched for retirement. Meantime I'd have a little fun.

"Same bet?" I said taking a sly tone.

Big Gil grinned over at me. "You're on. Come to papa, easy money."

I toed aside a pile of old magazines to unearth the damn radio. One yank of its electrical cord and no more twang. "That fan blows up a powerful stink."

Big Gil's paws jacked up to the ceiling, snagged the fan blades, and he ripped the fan down from its mount. "Better?" he asked me.

"Yeah. Did you snap a picture before demolishing it?" I asked.

"Sure did. Now, let the Easter egg hunt begin."

Our bet was whether we could identify Ralph by the end of our shift. My side said we'd come up empty-handed. Big Gil said yes. Somehow the bloodhound in him had won all of our wagers.

"Raise the windows before I keel over," I said.

Big Gil lumbered behind the apple crate and tried to heft the nearest windowpane. He exhaled a lungful of cigar smoke and strained harder. The windowpane didn't budge. "Ralph glued the sashes shut."

"Probably to keep out the other voices." I poked a gloved finger in the glass ashtray swiped from a Hooters. Several dirty earplugs sat amid the cigarette butts and ashes. "Ralph screwed in the plugs extra deep, too."

Big Gil took out his cigar and blew smoke rings in the air. "Ralph had it extra bad. I've always wondered what the other voices say. Any idea?"

"They say 'get the fuck out before it's too late'," I replied.

"Too bad Ralph didn't heed their advice."

"Maybe he had a good reason to stick around here." I pointed to the corner. "Any mailing address labels pasted on those magazines?"

Big Gil stooped down and scooped up a bundle to examine. "Nope. He probably boosted them from a barbershop or the methadone clinic."

"Probably." I cocked my head and squinted at Big Gil. "You want to make it interesting?" I checked my wristwatch. "Double or nothing says you can't I.D. Ralph in less than a half hour."

"Deal." Scraping his hands together, Big Gil gave a gleeful chuckle. "You're a putz, Sully."

"Uh-huh. Twenty-nine minutes are left. The clock is ticking," I said.

Big Gil surveyed the four corners to the rented room. He pivoted, his nose tilted as if to sniff the air like a bloodhound hot on the scent. "Come to papa," he said.

"Tell you what - I'll give you a sporting chance. Here's your first clue."

Chuckling, I thrust out my hand, the lead rosary dangling from my fingers.

Big Gil gave the rosary a quick glance and flinched. "Where did you find this?" His voice fell to a hoarse whisper. "Where?"

"It was draped over the bibles," I replied, skeptical at his antics. "Why?"

A patch of sweat beaded up over his wide eyes. "Because it's used in devil worship."

"Quit your bullshitting me," I said. "It's just a poor man's rosary."

"I'm serious, Sully." Big Gil cut for the doorway. "You were right. Let's split."

I grabbed his meaty forearm and restrained him. “Get a grip, you superstitious fool. A bet is a bet, and I want a fair chance to win mine.”

Big Gil quivered in my tightening grasp. I’d never seen him in such a state. “Don’t you get it? Ralph consorted with Satan. That’s the other voices he heard.”

“He’s dead,” I said, my anger also turning me stubborn. “We made a bet, and I don’t care what other voices he heard.”

“Fine. But put that rosary back.” Big Gil rolled his eyes and swallowed. “I hope you haven’t riled the devils.”

“The only devils are the little, green ones inside your head,” I said.

Big Gil straddled the threshold. He gave me a hard look. “No call for insults, Sully. Or else you can handle this case alone. That’s the boss’s orders, too.”

“All right, just don’t freak on me.” My hand gestured. “Apologies. Come back, now.”

“First you return that lead rosary to the bibles.”

I complied and Big Gil vented smoke in a sigh of relief. “If we can also find Ralph’s real name, maybe we can calm your jitters.”

This time Big Gil turned sly. “I’ll also collect my money.”

I nodded. “Yeah, right. You’ll win our bet. Again.”

We began our search, yanking up stacks of newspapers and moving aside shabby furniture crumbling apart on us. The unholy raunch left me reeling and nauseous. Big Gil retreated into the hallway to retch. I felt sorry for him until the power of suggestion drove me out to repeat his action. I failed to spit out the rancid taste.

Our brows knitted, we smoked all of the Cherry Swishers. Big Gil tramped down to the squad cruiser and retrieved a pack of menthol Salems. We lit up again. We were dogged investigators set to I.D. the short, squat elderly man, a wiry grin frozen on his rictus. Sweat ran from my latex gloves, and I breathed harder. Finally I pitched an armload of newspapers and arched my back. My hand kneaded my burning muscles.

“Ralph was a pack rat,” I said. “But I haven’t run across a clue to suggest he went to black masses or chanted praises to Lucifer.”

Big Gil stopped riffling through the bible’s pages. “So, why did Ralph keep a lead rosary?”

“Like I said, he most likely bought it for a few dollars,” I replied. “Where did you hear it’s used in devil worship?”

“My aunt in Georgia told me Satanic cults put lead rosaries in their ceremonies. It made a big impression on a kid. I never forgot it.”

“She was yanking your chain,” I said. “Look, Ralph read his bible and said the rosary in his final days. He sought spiritual comfort from hearing the other voices.”

Big Gil folded his arms over his burly chest. “How long have you done this gig, Sully?”

“Twelve years,” I replied. “You know that.”

“Then you’re out of here?”

“Damn straight. Three months and counting,” I replied.

“I gotta tell you, I’ll miss having you as a partner.”

“Right back at you.”

I paused a moment to let the next insight clarify. I saw an apartment not much larger or better furnished than this one in my near future. The window was cracked. The damn fridge rattled. Something scratched behind the sheetrock. Stay cooped up for too long, and you hear things. Four walls take on voices. Soon you began answering the other voices. Retirement was so great.

“Who knows? A lot can happen over the next three months. We’ll see how it goes.”

“Right on.” Big Gil smiled. “Meantime see how this plays, Sully. We’ve completed our investigation. No I.D. was possible and we turn this over to the morgue boys.”

“That plays as smooth as Coltrane,” I said.

“You also win our bet. Do you want your money now or later?” asked Big Gil.

“Never. The lead rosary nullified our bet,” I said.

Big Gil was out the doorway. “Cold beer will take off the edge,” he said.

After a parting shot at the stack of bibles and lead rosary, I followed Big Gil downstairs to our squad cruiser, saying a hasty prayer to never hear the other voices in such a room.

I’d never bet on a lead rosary to work.

Ed Lynskey's three crime novels are THE DIRT-BROWN DERBY (Mundania Press, 2006), THE BLUE CHEER (Point Blank/Wildside, 2006), and PELHAM FELL HERE (Mundania Press, 2007).