

Big Load of Trouble

by Greg Bardsley

I came through the front door and found Cujo and Angel snuggled in the kiddie pool. Nude and hairy. Tattooed legs intertwined. His beard flowing over her head like a kinky black wig, her arms around him, water beading atop his body fur. The television flashing raw footage of a white toy poodle trying to mount a morbidly obese opossum.

“Hey, dude, check it out. Animal Kingdom Humpathon, Volume 8. Some little poodle's getting it on.”

I stood over them. “Cujo, you promised.”

He laughed at the screen, sighed happily and glanced up at me. “So?”

“And so you're here.”

Cujo lidded his eyes and grinned. “I am.”

“You promised.”

He cocked his head and gazed at the water, raising an eyebrow. “I did.”

I tried to be stern. “I'm really disappointed, Cujo.”

He looked at me for a moment, bit his lip and broke into prolonged cackle.

An hour later, I returned to the front room and tried again. The television was flashing shaky footage of two gerbils squeaking as they made fast and frantic love. Angel watched open-mouthed and laughed. “Duuuuu-uuuuu-uuuuude.”

I stood over them again. “I'm surprised you're not bored.”

Cujo kept his eyes on the screen. “Yeah?”

“I mean, I just figured you'd be more of a get-out-and-explore guy.”

“Nah, it's better here.” A gerbil squeaked extra loud, and Cujo giggled. “We love it here, bro.”

They did look comfortable. They lay in the pool, happily soaking in a mealy mixture of dirty water and black body hair, all of which had reduced my roommate's kiddie-pool cleaner to a thrashing, moaning tangle of plastic. Drowning insects rolled around in the floating hair as others struggled to climb back onto Cujo. Empty cans of Coors Light and Colt 45 encircled the pool.

“Cujo, this isn't home.” I paused. “You agreed.”

Eyes still glued to the screen. “Hey dude, have you heard? I'm an artist now.”

What do you do?

What do you do when you have a six-foot-five, 295-pound Raiders fan in your house? A paroled Raiders fan you barely know. A friend of a friend; an acquaintance of an acquaintance, really. A large furry mass of delinquency and physical aggression. A big load of trouble soaking in your indoor kiddie pool, groping his new lover with this triumphant look on his face, like he's saying: *Look at what I can squeeze, bro.* A guy

who doesn't like to work, a guy who'd rather get high in your kiddie pool, fuck in your kiddie pool and doze off in your kiddie pool. A guy who has the goods on you, a guy who knows you can't call the cops and make him leave, on account of the illegal activities and substances that could be found in, and around, your rental house. A guy who knows that if you're gonna call the cops on him, you're gonna have to be okay with going to prison.

What do you do?

What you do is, you go to the fridge, pull out a Pale Ale and take a long pull. And you lean against the counter and watch as he laughs and points at the television, the screen showing a couple of bush babies getting it on, their eyes extra large as they squeak and chitter and shiver.

And you stew, thinking of what he said.

Now he's an artist.

“Me and Angel got a gig tonight, dude.”

I was still leaning against the counter, still nursing my beer. I had no idea what the hell he was talking about.

“Gig?”

“Yeah, dude. Some artist chick saw me and Angel dancing around out front. Had my Black Hole clothes on.” He let his eyes cross for a second. “She says we're artists.”

Black Hole clothes. That would be the spiked dog collar, the black shoulder pads with spikes, the black cape fastened underneath, the little rubber horns attached to his frontal lobe, and the ass-kicker boots. Cujo liked to wear his Black Hole clothes when he was feeling frisky.

“Artist chick,” I said, more to myself.

“Angel and I are grinding out there, and this hippy-looking piece of ass comes walking up and starts yammering about how much she likes the way I express myself. Next thing I know, she's writing directions to some fancy coffee place where they're doing some kind of performance-art thing all night. Cafe Popana or something. I guess we got the eight-thirty slot.”

And then he broke into another prolonged cackle.

I lay on my bed in the back room and stared at the ceiling, reviewing my options one last time.

My out-of-town roommate David had a crop of cannabis skunk growing in the backyard. Big fat fuckers with huge buds. Probably worth ten-thousand, he was saying. Everything had been going okay until Cujo and Angel paid us an unexpected visit, noticed the crop out back and decided to use that knowledge to extort free lodging out of us until they had someplace better to go - which probably would be the game in Oakland this Sunday. If I called the cops, David and I could be spending the next year or two in orange jumpsuits. But if I let them hang out a few more days, the chances were they'd be gone by Saturday night, headed for the Black Hole, and that would be that. Only

problem was, someone could get hurt by then.

After all, it was only Tuesday.

David was three hours away, visiting his dad in the hospital. I didn't want to bother him, but I was starting to think it was necessary. I sat up, grabbed the phone and rolled the receiver from hand to hand, thinking about it one more time - at which point Cujo and Angel pushed through my door, dripped naked across the room and slipped out my back window.

Cujo popped his head back in. "You got a pig out front, dude. We're not here."

The cop looked like a rookie - soft skin, rosy cheeks, a full head of blond hair. Even so, the sight of him there on my porch - in uniform, his radio buzzing every few seconds, the badge almost glowing - rushed blood to my face and shot convulsions to my stomach.

Harboring a parole violator. Growing pot. Fuck, I don't want to go to jail.

His eyes locked onto mine. "We have a problem in the neighborhood."

I stared back, feeling like a fucking idiot, my heart pounding, my eyelids fluttering, saliva welling up, my lower lip feeling like it was drooping past my chin.

"Have you seen a large bald man, long black beard, approximately six-foot-five, three-hundred pounds, heavily tattooed?"

I feigned confusion. "What's happened?"

The cop smirked. "Well, let's see." He flipped open a tiny notebook. "I've got home invasion, theft, robbery, vandalism, assault."

"Home invasion?" I blurted.

"Got a house a few doors down saying they were watching TV when a bald bearded suspect entered their house, unplugged the television and walked out with it."

I crinkled my brow and looked away. "No resistance?"

"No resistance." The cop referred to his notes. "Got another house where this guy walks through the front door, makes a beeline for the fridge, removes a twelve-pack and a pizza box, turns around and exits the premises."

I mumbled to myself, "Raiding fridges."

The cop was staring at me now. "And he's cleaned out the entire block of car batteries."

My heart was pounding so hard I could feel it in my arms, but I knew what I had to do. I had to lie. "Wish I could help you."

The cop looked at the kiddie pool, then at my walls. "Who did this?"

"What do you mean?"

He laughed. "Are you kidding? The holes in your walls, the giant erection drawn over the sofa there."

"Oh, that." I looked down and scratched my head. "We just had a party that got too big, too rowdy..." I glanced up at him, "...too quickly."

Studying my face. "Right."

I found them in my backyard shed, still naked, and sweating heavily. The odor in there was atrocious - a mix of warm rotting milk and body cavities - but Cujo didn't seem to mind. He was sitting on the unfinished plywood floor with Angel spread out beside him, belly up, snoring loudly. Stacked neatly to their left were the car batteries and the stolen TV set.

"You know what I do to Willards that don't knock?"

"We need to talk," I said.

"What I do is, I take their little heads and stick them between these two hairy beasts..." Cujo nodded to his tree-trunk legs, "...and I give them the scissors."

"We need to establish some ground rules here."

He laughed. "The pig scare you?"

"Cujo, I don't want you stealing from my neighbors."

He gave me the serious eyes. "This ain't stealing. It's just a matter of survival of the fittest, and no one gets that." He nodded to his loot and puffed out his chest. "I take what I want because I'm the fittest."

"I don't care who's the fittest. It's not yours."

"No." His eyebrows turned in, and he pointed at me. "In the beginning, it wasn't mine. Now it's mine. It's right there."

I pulled my hair back and closed my eyes. "You're going to get me arrested."

"Chill, dude. We'll be gone soon enough. We got a gig tonight. Remember?"

And then that cackle.

When I reached the front doors of Cafe Popona that night, the show had already begun. Angel had just hog-tied a young man and was now dragging him behind the counter, drawing a loud round of applause from an audience of espresso-sipping patrons.

Fuck.

"Pardon." An older man slid past me and proceeded to the counter, at which point, Angel came from behind and whacked him on the head with a coffee-house thermos. He crumpled to the ground, and a collective gasp came from the audience, followed by murmuring. A woman whispered, "Was that real? That looked real."

Angel sat on the ground, lodged the ball of her foot into his armpit and yanked on his wedding band, gritting as she worked on the ring.

I came up and kicked Angel lightly in the boots. "Okay, fun's over."

Angel looked up and squinted. "You?" She stood up, grabbed a spool of twine off the counter and began to hog-tie her victim. "This is art, dickwad. Take a look. You see anyone freaking out?" She finished with the twine, and the audience applauded.

I pointed at her. "You *will* give everything back."

"Like hell." Angel fingered through the man's wallet, stuffed three twenties down her front pocket and threw the billfold at the audience, nailing a frail, goateed man in the face. "They love me."

A pretty woman with long brown hair and a purple peasant skirt glided toward me, her hands out like she was trying to prevent a stampede. "Stop right there," she snapped. "We don't need you."

"Believe me," I said, "you don't want this."

She still had her hands up. “If you can't comprehend what we're doing, don't intervene.

I was flabbergasted. “You really don't want Angel here,” I said. “Seriously.” Her eyes narrowed. “Either you stop it with the censorship bullshit, or get out.” “No,” I pleaded, “you don't understa--”

“No, *you* don't understand. This woman here is an arrrr-tist.” She leaned in for emphasis. “That's a person who creates with style and expression.” She motioned to a lean, well-kept man exchanging observations with a young couple at a nearby table. “Ever since Tom and I moved up here from the city, this cafe has become an important venue for developing artists.” Then she glanced at my old hightops. “You people need to have your little rural-suburban worlds shaken up.”

Angel stuffed a wad of napkins into her victim's mouth, sparking applause.

“Cujo and Angel aren't artists,” I said. “They're--.”

“Listen, John Boy.” Her eyes popped and her face reddened. “If you can't handle art that is out of the box, if you think art is the Kmart oil painting in your daddy's farmhouse, this isn't the place for you. Just go back to your 'basic cable' and let the rest of us enjoy the performance.”

Basic cable? I stared down at her for a long second. *Suit yourself, honey.*

Leaning against the side brick wall of the cafe, I started to rethink everything.

Shit, maybe it was possible. Maybe it was possible that Cujo and Angel had been expressing their artistic sides all their lives. Maybe, instead embracing clay or watercolors or scrap metal, they'd simply chosen the timeless media of aggravated assault, armed robbery, forced-entry and so forth. Maybe they liked to make crime beautiful, or ugly, or something beyond mundane, something *not* banal. What the fuck did I know?

A large athletic guy walked through the doors, approached the counter and was blindsided by Angel. Elbow hitting the jaw, making an awful noise. Audience clapping. Guy looking completely dumbfounded as he lost balance and crashed backwards into a tangle of chairs. People booing and hissing as he fought her off, made a run for the doors and darted into the dark. A man fingering a cappuccino, snarling, “White trash.”

A patron in a goatee and black-rimmed glasses looked up at me, his blue eyes giant behind the lenses. “This is marvelous.” He looked away and threw a hand into the air. “It's aggressive, it's delinquent, it's full of mischief.” He turned back to me. “I think what we're witnessing here is the birth of something so primal, so base, and yet so graceful and compelling that the only term coming to mind right now is Criminal Performance Art.”

Someone in the audience yelled, “A second artist, a second artist,” and all eyes turned to a large, dark figure dance-walking at the back of the cafe, near the milk steamers. Decked out in his Black Hole clothes, Cujo stretched a furry arm over the granite countertop and bulldozed the poppy-seed-cake wedges, lemon bars, glass platters and tea packets - all of it crashing to the cement floor in a deafening spectacle.

The crowd gasped. The cafe owners winced.

Most of the patrons suddenly got it and began to scatter. Some made a mad dash for the front door as Cujo tripped a horrified man, bent over and relieved him of his wallet. “All right, ladies,” he roared. “It's time to quit your bitching. You pencil necks wanted performance art, you got it. Who's first?”

Someone shrieked.

I took a step forward and scratched my head.

Angel began to empty the cash register.

Purple Peasant Skirt squeaked from under a table, "I trust this is art."

Cujo turned, squatted and peeked under the table. "You call something art, I call it making money." He took her hand, yanked hard and rolled her into a headlock right there on the floor, making it look effortless. She squirmed and clawed at his arms as Tom stood ten feet away, in shock, frozen. "I can take a dump on you right now, and if some pinner says it's art, that's what it is. If no one's moaning about art, it's just a matter of me pinching a loaf on your back. The word 'art' don't mean shit, do it?"

Finally, the distant echo of sirens.

Cujo tightened his lock on Peasant Skirt. "When the pigs ask, what are you gonna tell 'em?"

She gurgled and gasped.

The hairy arms tightened. "You're gonna tell 'em this was art."

She gasped. Tom touched his chin and took a step closer.

Sirens getting louder.

"Aren't ya?"

She moaned yes.

"Because that's what it is, sweetie - crazy-ass art. Art that fucks you up."

She tugged at his arms.

"And when they ask about tonight, you're gonna say it was all a big misunderstanding. You're gonna say some people just didn't 'get it,' just didn't understand what we were doing here, what kind of performance art we were creating here tonight."

Sirens closer.

Angel threw a Glad bag of loot over her shoulder. "It's getting late, honey." She tugged at Cujo. "We should thank our hosts and say goodnight."

Cujo released Peasant Skirt, who scampered on all fours to the front of the cafe.

Tom chased after her with an open mouth and outstretched hands.

Sirens approaching.

Cujo looked around the ravaged cafe. "The party poopers are almost here," he said, and followed Angel to the back door, "which means it's time to make haste."

I stood there a moment, then ran after them. There was no way I was going to be the one answering all the cops' questions tonight. I just wanted to go home and forget the whole thing. I just wanted to sit on the couch, nurse a beer and enjoy the silence with the comfortable knowledge that Cujo and Angel were speeding out of town, away from here, away from the cops, away from my home, away from me.

Cujo was waiting in the alley.

He looked down and smiled, his lids heavy. "Go fetch old Cujo a bucket of KFC and bring it back to your place." He glanced at Angel with a hungry moan, and she leered back. "We'll take it in the kiddie pool."

Greg Bardsley is a former newspaper reporter who covered homicide, gangs and night crime in cities overrun with Oakland Raiders fans. His fiction has appeared in DEMOLITION and is forthcoming in PULP PUSHER. These days, he is making final changes to his first crime novel. Visit him at <http://gregbardsley.wordpress.com/>