

## **Johnny Cash is Dead** by Jordan Harper

I drove all the way across town to cut up this son of a bitch, but it's these three flights of stairs that got me worried. Usually when a man goes to see another man on business, it's the other fellow that he needs to keep his eye on. But my leg was my problem. My left knee started stinging something fierce while I was coming from old North Springfield to the southeast where they built all the malls and new apartments. Some old folks just like to complain for being left alive so long. I'm not like that, but my knee is. I smashed it thirty years ago at Marion, wrestling with a convict and taking a tumble down some stairs. Never liked long stairs since.

In the Ozarks we get about two weeks of spring before it gets hotter than a whore in church, and this was one of those fine April days after the cold and before the thunder and the heat. The whippoorwills were still singing when I got to that big apartment building on the corner of Glenstone and Cherry, and there wasn't any stirring in any of the apartments I could see. The building was cheap yellow siding with concrete decks for each apartment. Most of the decks had little black grills and a few beer bottles on them. Mostly young folks from the school lived there, and not many that age see the sun rise unless they didn't sleep at all.

There was a tiny red sports car, just liked Mandy told the police, parked across two spots. And above it sat three stories worth of concrete steps to the door of his apartment, number 309, just like it said in the arrest report I had there in the truck. There was a good chance I'd be using both hands on the railing before I made it to the top and out in the open where I could look like an old man in front of God and the world. I parked the truck next to his car, cutting off "Don't Take Your Guns to Town" off in the middle. My grandson tells me that folks his age are listening to Johnny Cash, but he's just a man in a costume to them. They can't feel the music in the aches in their bones. He's dead now besides.

I pushed the .38 in my pocket so I wouldn't have to hunt for it, made sure that the rope was in the bag, along with the knife and stone, the gauze and the papers I'd taken from the courthouse. I reckon that was stealing, taking those files, but the court already decided that they'd done all they'd cared to with them. One of the papers was paper-clipped to the photo of Mandy, her eye blood-clotted, that they'd taken at the hospital. I shut the bag.

The climb burned hellfire on my knee, and my lungs started to feel like they were coated in molasses. Lucky not to have keeled over on the landing between floors, I leaned over against the wall a spell, thinking Louise would curse me for a fool for climbing them at all. I knew damn well she'd call me a lot worse than "fool" if she learned what I had planned for the rest of the morning. So I pushed her from my mind, got up that last flight of steps and knocked on number 309.

It took a few times before I heard some rustling from the other side of the door. Heath Jackson opened it, looking all gummed up in the face and confused, wearing nothing but a pair of drawers. In court, he'd been spit-shined and in a suit, but standing there in that doorway he looked gruff and dumb just like the sorry bastard he was.

I guess he didn't get too many old men with guts hanging over their belts and faces full of sweat coming to see him. He just stared at me without a 'hello' or nothing. And he didn't see the gun until it was right there in his face.

"Son, you and I have a little business to take care of."

When I walked the turn at Marion, I fought a lot of convicts bigger and meaner than Jackson, and I'd always gone man to man. I figured that although it might feel easier to clout the man with my club, he might just figure the next day he could whup me in a fair fight. I finished that idea before he even got it. You get the best of a man because you had a piece of iron and he didn't, well, you didn't best him at all. The fellow who shot Jesse

James proved that. So it pained me to have to use this gun to get Jackson's attention. It was all bluff anyway. I had the drop on him, but the .38 wasn't cocked and there weren't but two feet between us. That young fellow could have snatched that gun from me right quick before I could have pulled the trigger and spoiled my day.

He was a big son of a bitch, too - played ball in school, and had those fancy-cut muscles the young men have these days. They look real nice, but to me they're like flowers grown in a hothouse. In my time I knew some big farm boys who bailed hay all day long, and maybe you couldn't pick out every muscle they had, but you'd sure as hell know they were there if that fellow pasted you.

But, just like I figured, he couldn't make a move. It don't look like much from the side, but a barrel can look awful deep when you look straight down it. It grabs your attention. So I pushed my way inside, brushed right past him and shut the door.

His place was painted real nice and filled with fancy furniture, so that you knew he hadn't picked none of it himself. And it smelled like an old barroom. Empty beer cans with bits of ash around the hole were piled next to the phone on the counter that separated the kitchen from the rest of the room. That's where the sink was, and a garbage disposal, and I was going to be needing that later. The bigger part of the room had a couch facing a TV four times the size of the one I have, and a small little dining room table with two chairs, which was just what I needed.

"Now you just have a seat and mind your manners and I won't paint the walls with you," I said. "Don't get smart."

He might have been half-asleep when I got there, but he sure was awake now. "What is-? Who are you?"

"Don't remember me? Well, a man sitting in the dock has other things to do besides look for old men sitting in the stands, so I don't take offense. I'm John Mashburn. Mandy Pearson is my granddaughter."

Every day he was in court, I was there. Just watching him, whispering with his lawyers. Looking all smug and serious and innocent as the judges and lawyers read motions and whispered at the bench. I sat there every day because Mandy needed representing and she wouldn't stand to be in the same room as him, and her mother was barely able to make it through the day and her father is worthless and lives in another state now besides. I was there until the very last day. Charges just thrown out the window because Mandy had to go and take a shower to wash the stink of his touch off her before she got the nerve to call the police. "He said, she said," they said, and that's all they were going to do about it. I saw Jackson's cute little mask come off when the judge rapped the gavel. I saw that smile bloom on his face like a flower growing on cow shit. And I saw that prosecutor not look me in the eyes as he walked out of the room and that's when I knew that if someone was going to stand up for Mandy then it was going to be me.

"Now, sir, I think we'd better talk about this."

"Oh, we're going to talk about it alright," I said, "but you're going to sit down now or you'll be laying down in a second. Now take that seat."

The chair looked maple but wasn't as strong, but it didn't feel like he could bust it, either. So I got him sat down and had him put his hands behind his back and got the rope out. The whole time he was still talking a blue streak, but I didn't pay no mind. I worked the rope through the slats of the chair and around his wrists. I had him lace his fingers together behind his back so his thumbs were pointing up in the air and got to work tying the knot. My fingers aren't so nimble as they were, but I got it as tight as I could. I gave my hands a shake to get the sting out, picked up the pistol and pulled another chair so I was facing Jackson from about six feet away, close enough to hear him good but far enough away to get a shot off if I had to. He was still talking.

"... and I want you to know the truth. I mean, don't you think you should hear the truth first?"

"Alright, son. Let's hear your piece."

I can't remember all of what he said, but you should have heard it. A preacher caught in his neighbor's bed couldn't have talked any faster. He said, "I don't blame you for coming up here, either. In fact, I think Amanda has every right to be proud of you for sticking up for her, but I just don't think that this is what you want to be doing with yourself right now. I don't know what you're planning to do to me, sir, but you know you won't get away with it. I don't think Amanda wants her grandfather to go to jail," and just kept going.

He was wearing that mask again, but I saw where it didn't fit him around the eyes. Those were just cold. They didn't move or change with the rest of his face. You spend enough time around convicts and criminals, you learn these things. It's the eyes every time. He thought he was going to sweet talk this hillbilly old man and he slipped on that mask like it was nothing. You might think its brave to be able to smile at a man who's got you tied up and covered cold, but it wasn't, not this time. Even though I had the drop on him, he'd taken a look at my old jeans pulled up past my belly and my work shirt older than he was and didn't see a man like him staring back. He was just saying "good dog" to a bad one.

"Look, I know you treasure your granddaughter. She's a beautiful, smart girl. But times are different now. You might think she's innocent, but she's a normal girl. And maybe we got a little rough, but she told me she liked it rough, you know. And yeah, we got a little out of control, but there was a lot of alcohol involved and it was just a misunderstanding between two consenting adults. That's all it was."

"Maybe you think that you can try and tell me things are different now than they used to be, but I lived back then and I live right now and I'm the one who knows both. So let me tell you, there's always been fellows like you who think they're slicker than owl shit. Folks always wanted to get a piece of action before they were married, and quite a few always have. There's always been whiskey and beer and girls who like to try it as much as a man does. And there's always been bastards like you who thinks that's the easy way to get in a woman's drawers." I opened up the bag at my feet and took the whetstone out, just to watch him eye it. "I saw Mandy that morning. I saw her face, goddamn you."

"Now, wait a minute!"

"Be quiet now. I know that Mandy's telling the truth and you ain't. But even if I wasn't sure, it wouldn't matter to me. She's my blood and under my care, and you're not. So you're the one who's answering to me." With that I pulled out the knife, long with an elk horn handle and hard iron blade. That got him sitting up.

"What are you doing?"

I liked to hear the fear that he couldn't keep under control anymore. I scraped the knife against the grain of the whetstone, real slow, just for show. The blade was already sharp enough to split a hair, but I liked watching the scraping sound run up and down his spine with each pass.

"Well, now, I thought a long time about what to do with you. First thought, of course, was just to blow your goddamn head off, and its not much more than you deserve. Not much more, but more just the same. So, like I told you, you just sit still and take what's coming to you and you'll wake up tomorrow. So I thought about cutting your pecker off to make sure you can't ever to again what you did to my Mandy. And I like the sound of that." I let him stew on that for a second. "But it wasn't your meat alone that did what you did. It was your hands that held her down and let you get your way. So that's how I decided I'd make sure you'd never hold another woman by the throat again. I'm going to take off your thumbs."

The chair proved itself right then; it didn't break. Jackson was breathing hard and high now, and his mask was gone and he looked cold and crazy at the same time.

"You must know you can't get away with this."

"Did I say how I used to be a prison guard?"

A second full of nothing passed, so I went on.

"Well, back in 1959, I was still pretty green, I drew the short straw for some serious overtime, driving a convict to Kansas so that he could be hanged. That's a long road, taking a man to die. Jimmy Carson and I drove Convict Rodriguez for six hours and he never said a word to either of us but 'please' and 'thank you.' He'd killed his wife and the man she was in bed with, so many shotgun shells that neither of them had a head left on their necks when he was done. And they were going to hang him for it. He knew he had to answer for what he did, so he didn't hold it against us for doing what we had to do. And my whole life I've thought more of that hanged son of a bitch than a lot of people who never did wrong, but never did right either."

While he chewed on that I turned my back to him and cocked the pistol. I didn't want him to see I needed two hands to do it. Then I went to the phone on the counter and dialed three numbers.

"911 emergency services. What's the nature of your emergency?"

"Miss, my name is John Mashburn. You need to send an ambulance and a squad car over to 1526 Glenstone, apartment number 302."

"Sir, what is the emergency?"

"Well, there's going to be one bleeding man here in a few minutes. I'll try to sop it up, but you better send that ambulance quick. The squad car will be for me. Tell 'em I won't kick when they come."

"Sir ..."

"I'm John Mashburn."

I heard the noise behind me and just got the gun in my hand before Jackson hit me from behind. My knee gave out with a pop I could feel inside my head and we were down on the ground, me on my stomach and Jackson on my back. My arm was trapped under my chest, the pistol in my face and gun oil in my nose.

Damn old fingers too rotten and sore to tie a goddamn knot the right way, that's what did me in. Jackson had gotten himself untied while I was talking, and now he was breathing in my ear as loud as a lover. His left arm wrapped around my windpipe and squeezed. The world turned white at the edges. And I didn't see my whole life like they say you do. No, all I saw was what Louise was doing right at that moment, sitting on the porch with a cup of coffee wondering where I'd gotten myself off to. Right then I wished hard that I could be pulling on to the driveway with a bit of breakfast for her. But there wasn't any time left to feel sorry for myself.

I got my head lifted up the floor until the back of my head touched Jackson's cheek. That just made it easier for him to choke me and he squeezed and whooped. But it gave me enough room to lift the pistol off the ground. I had to twist my wrist as hard as I could and my fingers were shaking with the strain but I got the end of the .38 in my mouth. One hard push and the barrel scraped the roof of my mouth until the angle felt right. I pulled the trigger.

The bullet blew out the back of my head and smacked right into Jackson's face. He stopped the choking and fell on top of me and we both bled out and died there on his living room floor. Which is good enough, I guess.

Jordan Harper is a Missouri native who currently works in Brooklyn as a movie and music critic. He also maintains the true crime/false crime site The Crime Spree (<http://crime-spree.blogspot.com/>) under the name The Bookhouse Boy. He would like to dedicate this

story to the late Kenneth Crosswhite.