

Cut

By John Kenyon

James used to love his job, but Hollywood had fucked up everything.

What's not to like? Somebody with the crew calls you in, gives you a name and a location, maybe hands you a photo. They slip you a wedge of cash with the promise of more later. You find the guy, clip him and report back for another wad of bills.

Then came that cocksucker Quentin Tarantino. Now, *Pulp Fiction* was a great movie, but it set loose a pack of guys with twice the budget and half the talent. Unable to compete story-wise, they compensated with blood. Pretty soon there was no such thing as a classy hit; the red stuff had to spill. It wasn't long before there were buckets of it being flung at the camera, and every hit had to be a performance.

If you think whitebread America eats up that escapist shit, you should see the way criminals react. It's like their deluded self-image projected 20 feet high on the screen. Soon, instead of the movies reflecting society, society was working hard to keep up with the movies. Now it's not enough to simply end a guy. The bosses want *proof*, they want you to *make a statement*.

That's why James was sitting on the El with a human heart on ice in a Playmate cooler on his lap.

"Did your ambulance break down?"

James looked up to see a young guy in a shirt and tie holding on to the rail. The guy gestured to the cooler.

"I did see a heart or something in there, didn't I?" he asked. "I know it's none of my business, but I couldn't help but notice."

Jesus. James was usually pretty cool about things, but he freaked a bit, thinking he was going to have to follow this guy and whack him, or else explain to the cops about why he was carrying a heart around in a cooler. He wanted to kick himself for continually opening the lid to check the contents.

Then he remembered the guy's original question about his ambulance. The guy thinks he's what, a doctor? Then James realized the guy assumed he was one of those transplant dudes who rush organs to the hospital.

"Budget cutbacks," he said. The guy nodded.

"That sucks. So what happened? Car wreck or something?"

James still had eight or nine stops to go, and didn't really want to get into a long thing with this guy.

"I can't talk about it. Patient confidentiality, you know?"

The guy nodded again. "Oh, sure. Right. Well, keep up the good work."

The train pulled into the station a moment later and the guy moved toward the door and exited. James set the cooler on the floor between his feet and hoped everyone else either minded their own business or assumed it was his lunch.

An hour later he sat outside the boss's door, the cooler back in his lap. The office was in the back of a dry cleaner, and the fumes always nauseated him. It didn't help that he kept thinking about what was in the cooler, or how he'd gotten it.

This one had been a typical job, a guy who owed the boss a ton of money and gave no indication that he intended to pay it back. James was never sure what the cutoff was, but six figures seemed to be enough to put out a hit. The boss started asking for a souvenir from each job a few years back, content at first with the odd finger or ear. But the more of those fuckin' movies he watched, the more depraved he got. It escalated to eyeballs, then nuts and now finally the topper: a heart.

This was the first one. Everything else James just stuck in a plastic bag and carried with him, but this little sucker was like carrying a decent-sized cut of meat. He didn't want it to start stinking on him, so he iced it.

Jacko stuck his head out of the door of the boss's office and waved him in. The boss, a short guy with a completely bald head, an ill-fitting suit and short, stubby fingers, reached out for the cooler.

"Whatta ya got for me Jimmy, my boy?" James hated the artifice in the boss's talk, but the money was good enough to help him ignore it. If the little butterball wanted to play mobster, let him.

James handed over the cooler and watched as the boss slid back the lid.

"Jacko, get over here and pull this thing outta the ice. What are you, one of those transplant guys?" the boss said to James, laughing, as Jacko pulled the plastic bag from the cooler. Water from the melted ice dripped from the outside of the bag and onto the boss's desk.

"What the fuck, Jacko! Get something to clean that up! I don't want heart shit all over my desk you idiot!"

Heart shit, James thought. Never heard blood described quite so colorfully. He jumped in to rescue Jacko.

"It's just water from the ice, chief," he said, knowing the boss liked it when James called him that. "So, are we good?"

The boss held the bag up to eye level and gazed at the heart, seemingly wary, as if worried it would suddenly start beating.

"Yeah," he said, smiling. "Did that son-of-a-bitch suffer?"

James knew the drill, and laid it on thick.

"Pulled it out of him while he was still breathing," he said. "The guy saw his own fuckin' heart beating in my hand for a second before he died."

In truth, James had strangled the guy in a motel room, put him in the tub, suited up in plastic coveralls and then carefully opened the guy's chest and taken the heart out. He stuck it in a Ziploc, dropped that in the cooler he'd pulled from the back of his closet and then filled the cooler with ice from the machine at the end of the hall. His car was broken down again so he had to take the El. It was a hot day, so he stopped at a convenience store on the way to top off the ice. He felt strange standing behind the place, gently emptying the ice from the bag around and over the heart, but figured people would think he was icing down a sixer.

"Excellent. Once word of this one gets out, people will think twice about stiffing me," the boss said. "OK. Get this thing out of here."

"You don't want to keep it?" James asked.

"What, like a souvenir? This ain't Navy Pier. It's evidence in a murder you dumbfuck. Get rid of it."

Great, James thought. How do you get rid of a heart? He'd been tempted to just kill the guy, dispose of the body and go buy a cow heart or something at the butcher. How would they know? But he didn't want to fuck it up the first time, so he'd gone through with it to a T. Now he had a cooler with an iced heart in it and no idea where to go from there.

He got back on the Red Line and took it all the way north to Howard, then exited and went down to the street level. It was late by that time and there were few people around, so he walked behind a store down the block, pulled the bag out of the cooler, wiped it down and tossed it into a dumpster. He thought about pitching it, cooler and all, but then he wouldn't have his cooler any more - and besides, the thing had to be covered with his fingerprints. He dumped the ice behind the dumpster and headed back to the train and home.

The next day, reading through the paper while waiting for someone with his crew to call with more work, he skimmed the want ads. He liked imagining another life, one in which he didn't kill people for a living. One ad caught his eye: Transport worker for a transplant program. They wanted someone who could drive organs from one hospital to another within the city for transplants. How perfect was that? He certainly knew the drill, he figured.

That afternoon he was back on the El with a cooler in his lap, but this time there was no heart inside. He'd gotten the job, surprised at the lax background check and cursory interview. There must not be many people eager to cart organs around in a cooler, he guessed.

They gave him a polo shirt with a logo on it, a special cooler that didn't look a lot different from his Playmate, and a pager. When he got a page, he was to call in, go wherever they told him to go and then take the organ to the right hospital. It wasn't much different from his other job save for the fact that the person in question was already dead when he got there.

A couple of days later he was back at his kitchen table with the paper open in front of him when his cell buzzed. He pulled it out and found Jacko on the line.

"We've got a job for you," he said. "Come in."

James shut the phone and headed to the door. He then remembered that he was on-call for the transplant office, so he grabbed the cooler, stuffed his polo shirt inside and then went out.

The boss was impressed with the cooler.

"You're really getting into this, huh?" he said. "Nice cover. You'll be using it today, kid. This is an important one, and I want it taken care of immediately."

He gave James a name, told him where to find the guy and then waved him out. Jacko handed him some cash as he exited. James stuffed it into his pocket and went out to do the job.

Hits didn't usually bother James, but he worried about this one as he climbed the stairs to the El platform and waited for the train. In his line of work, he occasionally came up against people he knew - it's a small world on the wrong side of the law - but this one was close to home...literally. Davey had lived in the apartment below his when they were growing up, and had dinner a lot of nights with James' family while his single

mom held down two jobs. It wouldn't be like capping his brother, but jobs like this really made James rethink his career choices.

Then again, knowing Davey would help, because he could just ring the bell and walk right in, no sneaking or strong-arming needed. He did just that when he got there, and Davey let him inside.

"What's up?" Davey said, heading across the room to sit down in a chair in front of a TV showing some reality show, leaving James to shut the door behind him.

"The boss sent me," James said, catching his attention. "You owe him money or something?"

"You kidding me?" Davey got up and moved toward the apartment's kitchen.

"Stop," James said. He pulled a pistol from his waistband. "I asked you a question."

"Jesus. You're serious," Davey said, visibly shaking now. "Come on, James. How long we known each other? You wouldn't really kill me, would you?"

James raised his eyebrows as if thinking about the question.

"Why shouldn't I? Job's a job, right?"

"But I'm not just some guy, James. I'm me. That's gotta mean something."

"'I'm me?' Real profound. I'm gonna need more than that, Davey," James said. "You into him for a big gambling debt or something? I mean, this has gotta be big. We're skipping right over ass-kicking and leg-breaking to the big lights out here. Why does he want you dead?"

Davey leaned back against the wall and slid down it until he was sitting on the floor.

"It's Tracey," he said. "That's gotta be it."

"His daughter?" James said. "Little Tracey?"

"*Little* Tracey is 19 now, man, and she's smokin' hot. She came on to me at a party a few weeks ago, and I've been bangin' her ever since. I didn't think he'd find out. I guess he did. Guy's so protective of her. If he only knew."

"Makes sense. He did seem unusually worked up about this one," James said. "He told me he wanted this done today."

Just then the pager on James' belt started beeping. He unclipped it so he could see the number, then pulled out his cell phone and made the call. He was told to go to Evanston Memorial to pick up a kidney and take it to a hospital on the south side.

"You still got that Cutlass?" he asked. Davey nodded. "Pack a couple of things, nothing too obvious, then get the hell out of here. I get the wheels, you get your life."

"How am I gonna get out of here?"

"If you don't shut the fuck up and do as I say, it'll be in a body bag, OK? Now look, the boss wants me to cap you, cut out your fuckin' heart and bring it to him. I got an idea about how to appease him, but if you show up somewhere with your ticker still thumping away in your chest, we're both gonna get topped, you got it?"

Davey nodded again, silently, then went to his closet and started pulling things out to throw in a suitcase.

Jacko was waiting for James when he pulled up at the back door of the dry cleaners. It was after five, so Jacko was there to let him in.

"Nice ride. When'd you get that?"

“Today. Consider it a fringe benefit of a job well done. Don’t worry, I don’t think anyone’s gonna report it stolen.”

Jacko laughed knowingly and followed James into the back of the store. Even though the machines weren’t running, the place still reeked.

The boss was sitting behind his desk. James waited to be waved in, then set the transport cooler down.

“How’d it go?” the boss asked.

“He wasn’t happy, but as you can see, there wasn’t much he could do about it,” James said, gesturing to the cooler.

The boss opened the lid and looked in. This time he didn’t wait for Jacko, but instead pulled the bag out himself. He held it up for inspection.

“This one I’m gonna keep,” he said, his eyes narrowing to slits as his mouth clasped into a tight grin.

James was startled. “What about it being evidence?” he said. “Don’t you want me to get rid of it?”

“No, not this one,” the boss said. “This one I’m tempted to cook up and eat. I want to devour this shitheel, you understand?”

As he continued looking at the bag, his eyes widened. He turned it from side to side and poked at the organ inside with a finger.

“What the fuck’s going on, Jimmy?” he said.

“What, chief?”

“Don’t you ‘chief’ me. This doesn’t look like a heart,” he said. He set the bag on the desk and pulled it open.

“Do you believe this guy, Jacko? He brought me a fuckin’ liver or something. Thinks I’m an idiot.” The boss reached inside his jacket and Jacko did the same. James was quicker. He pulled his pistol out of the back of his waistband and put two bullets in each man before either could unholster their gun. As the boss fell, he grabbed at the edge of the desk. He pulled the bag down with him and the kidney slid out and skittered across the dusty floor.

James had just lost one job and knew he couldn’t afford to lose the other. Remembering what the transplant people had said about keeping things clean and cold, he figured the kidney was no longer any good.

He went to the desk, pulled open drawers until he found what he needed, then went over to the boss. James flipped him onto his stomach, cut away his jacket and shirt, and prepared to do a little surgery. For once he was glad for the dry cleaning fumes, hoping they’d cover the smell of what he was about to do.

“Bet that fuck Tarantino never thought of this,” he said, making the first cut.

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