

State Labs

By Carl Moore

We took the bat out of the freezer on Friday night. I wrapped a plastic bag around the poor bugger while my wife got the baby ready for the car. “Sorry little fella, had no choice,” I said.

His tiny hand was sticking out, thread-like finger in the air like he was saying, *That’s all right, I was nuts from the rabies anyway...*

“That’s not funny,” I said.

“Who are you talking to?” Christa asked.

“Oh, nobody, I mean, just sucks he bit it for nothin’.”

“Aw Glen, you’re such a moosh,” she said, play-punching my tattooed triceps, smiling into her dyed blond curls.

We climbed into the old Honda, strapped Kelly into the car seat and headed out onto the avenue. The woman from the State said to take it on past the university, all the way out of town, make a left on Treacher Road and keep going until we saw the wildlife lab. I asked what the address was and she said we couldn’t miss it. “Especially if we have the address,” I said.

She said, “Hon, I don’t know the damn address. Make the left and drive. You can’t miss it.”

But the only thing I couldn’t miss was the darkness and endless trees in my headlights. A house here and there at first, then shadows on shadows on trees. Christa was already nodding off beside me. She was a trooper to come along for the ride after she’d been up with the baby all night. More than a trooper really, more like intrepid. Only two years before we’d gotten married on a lark, left Maine with nine-hundred bucks and no job prospects. We ended up in Port Macleod, New York, a government town where I got lucky, scored an editing gig for a local paper. We dealt with headache after headache when we bought the ‘starter house’, with Christa spending half her pregnancy peeling wallpaper, plugging leaks and chasing bats.

But it was nothing compared to the old days. The party days. I’d seen her get her stomach pumped from alcohol poisoning and an emergency appendectomy in one night. First thing out of her mouth when she woke up was, “Oh my God the bills. You didn’t give the hospital our real names right?” It took even more balls the night she came to meet me at the emergency room, handcuffed to the bed. She just kissed me, said everything was going to be all right. Which was true, it was only bruises, most from the steering wheel, only a couple from the cop.

“Make me chase you around eighty miles an hour?” he whispered with the first jab to the ribs. “I got kids,” he said with the second.

I wasn’t mad at him, though. He was right. And Christa wasn’t mad at me, but she did say, “We gotta do things a little different now.”

Anyway I was lucky that night, the only thing that died was my inflated ego. The next day we started making real plans, stuck out a shitty year and a half of dues paying to get where we finally were, with Christa smiling in her sleep beside me, the baby snoring lightly in the backseat. All I had to do now was keep my eyes on the road and take care of the rabies business.

We took another left onto the new pavement beside the glowing yellow sign. NEW YORK STATE WILDLIFE LABORATORIES, it read, and beneath a profile sketch of a hand pointing down the driveway. Another quarter mile through the night-shrouded pines and we came to a low cement building. The windows were mostly dark, though a few panes down I glimpsed a computer screen's smothery blue glow.

Beside me, Christa was blinking her eyes awake. "Is this it?" she asked.

"Yeah, I guess so," I said.

I rolled in a little closer, right up to the barbwire fence and made out the silhouette of a man hunched in a chair in front of a laptop. The screen was angled away from the window, and he was glued to it, so I gave a light tap on the car horn. He startled, shuffled his hands under his desk. When he came out, he was holding a flashlight, bulb-down like a cop, and shined it in the car liked he'd pulled us over.

"Something the matter?" he asked.

Funny way of saying it, I thought, then said, "Well, sorta. I...well, we had a bat incursion the other night. I called the State after we killed it and the woman said we could bring it here."

"Well, you didn't talk to me," he said.

I couldn't make out his face in the glare of the flashlight, saw only his gray creased slacks. He had a holster on his hip and another flashlight-shaped thing that had to be a taser.

"Well, I know that," I said. "I talked to somebody else, a woman from the State..."

"I am the State," he said. "This is State Property. You've reached State Property, congratulations."

"Um, thanks," I said, not quite believing myself. He shrugged and I thought for a second he was going to just go back inside and leave us there. Then he shined the flashlight in the back seat. "You got a little one in there?"

"Yeah, that's my daughter."

"So where's the bat?"

"The bat's here," I said, patting the plastic bag. "We need to get it tested for rabies."

"Well all right, then," he said. "You see that golf-cart lookin' thing on the other side of the fence there?"

I looked and saw a gray contraption with four wheels that looked like the bastard child of a Ram pickup and a bumper car. "Sure," I said.

"I'm gonna get in that and open the fence behind me," he said. "You follow."

I nodded, put the car in gear, and when the barbwire slid aside, rolled after him.

"Strange guy," I said to Christa, reaching over to take her hand and putting it on the bat-bag by mistake.

"Kind of a dink," she said.

"I don't know, I think he just works nights. I used to work nights. You gotta talk, do stuff, you know, entertain yourself to stay awake."

"Yeah right," she said. "I think I saw him pulling his pants up back there. And where the fuck's he goin'?"

Christa was pointing at the cart as it spiraled in a long loop around half a dozen poorly lit brick and cinderblock buildings. I covered the brake and followed, hoping the baby didn't puke. We finally pulled up in front of a building that looked like a miniature version of The Pentagon. A low-ceilinged job just like the gatehouse, only better lights inside. The first room looked like an ATM vestibule, except instead of deposit notes it had stacks of forms, and instead of see-through glass walls it had four black doors made of one-way glass and a fifth made of stainless steel that must have led to the freezer.

"Okay, you ready to begin?" the guard asked.

In the bright light he looked older, deeper wrinkles, lighter grays. Relatively thin and not too tall - but weird how he kept his coffee-tinted shades on.

"Been ready," I said.

"Hey, come on now, I was just joshing with you, son. No need to get smart. But pay attention from here on in, because it's gonna get serious."

"Yeah, sure," I said, peeking out the window at the girls, both back into their naps, baby forcing my heart into all the angel clichés, all touched she called me 'Da' and her mother 'M-m-m-m'.

"Hey son, pay attention," said the guard, taking out one form for himself, another for me. He began reading the questions aloud and telling me what to put in the blanks, like I didn't know my own address and phone number and date of birth. When he got to type of animal he paused and I said, "Bat?"

And he said: "Right, bat," and I shook my head, suppressed a chuckle. But he went right on to the next question, said, "Cause of death?"

"Um, bludgeoned?" I said.

"Right," he said. "Bludgeoned. That's pretty good, son. Lotta guys come in here sayin', 'Oh I hit it with a tennis racket' - but that's not the cause of death, see? It was bludgeoned."

"Great," I said. "Can we go on? I gotta get home, put the baby to bed."

"Oh sure, right, the baby," he said, taking off his sunglasses, wiping them with his tie. "By the way, where you from, son?"

"Maine, originally."

"Ah, Maine. I hear there's three industries in Maine. Social Security, food stamps and welfare. You involved in any of those enterprises?"

I paused, looked at him, thought maybe I oughta demonstrate the definition of bludgeon. But those days were gone. I let him be, looked at the form.

"Hey now, I was just joshing you, son. Don't get sore. I see a lot things comin' in here at night, a lot of funny things. A horse's head outta Long Island. Conjoined lamprey from Lake Ontario. Tribe of wounded monkeys from an illegal game farm. Makes you wonder what's good in the world and what's not. You get philosophical, wonderin' if they're ever gonna separate the wheat from the chaff, the quality from the people just sucking up the economy, having kids they can't afford."

"I have a job as an editor..." I started to say, then stopped myself. I didn't need to tell this asshole my salary. I didn't need to tell him jack.

"Ah, okay, that's where we get that vocabulary. Anyway, I don't have time for any more questions. There's another component to the test, see? State requirement."

He threw open the freezer door on a dark cavity of steel and icy mist. From the light in the vestibule I could pick out a few shelves full of plastic bags, some boxes, a

glimpse of bright red meat singed with frost. “There you go, son. Now take that bat and the form and set it on the little counter on your left. Not the shelf, the counter. There, now put down the form first. That’s it, now set the bat on top. Perfect,” he said.

I managed to swivel on my heel, catch his smile before the door shut me into the freezing dark.

When the lights turned on, I was facing a wire cage with a hinged door. Inside crouched a pregnant monkey, her breasts swollen and hair patchy. Her left wrist looked curled up and shrunken, from an old injury maybe, but the roundness of her stomach was robust and she had to be damn near popping her baby.

“Greetings, Glen,” said a voice through a speaker in the ceiling. “You’ll have to excuse the funny smell in there. Lot of dead animals. Smells kinda funny. Anyway, that’s Maybelle. She’s five months pregnant. She that shit she’s eating? It’s cat food. She’s wolfing it down because I haven’t fed her in a while. In a couple minutes she’ll start choking on the ball bearings I put in there. They got grooves, see? Raised edges. Anyway, point is, when she starts choking I want you to perform a tracheotomy.”

“What the fuck?” I said.

That’s when the gravelly sound started in her throat, like she had about ten pounds of mucous and cement mixing inside her. The door of the cage sprang open and she galloped out on three limbs, one hand clamped to her neck. She stood up for a second, looking at me with uncannily human eyes. Her hair was matted, teeth crooked and white. I could see her damn dandruff. Except there was no time, she made a few swipes at the air, like she could grab it, then scratched at my face like it was me who’d done this shit to her.

She started rasping like she was trying to scream and I dove out of her way, crouched between the counter and the shelf and tried to gather my dizzy head.

“You don’t have time for that,” said the guard. “And I don’t have time for hints. So you better just open your eyes and figure it out.”

I looked around then, saw the shelves all around me as if for the first time, the ridged spines, paws in bags, torn raccoon ears. A cat lay with a bent back, crossbow bolt, mid-meow. Beaver eyes stared down from atop a mound of beaver pieces. And in the center of the shelf, like a giant chess piece brought to life just so it could be slaughtered, I beheld the horse’s head, a stallion, its eyes cloudy, mouth sealed and grinless.

I didn’t want to play his asinine game, but there was no other way out, and the poor momma monkey was choking anyway. I forced myself into emergency mode, accident mode, the concentration that comes when death is imminent. I looked under the plastic table where I’d set the bat, saw a tray of what looked like surgical instruments, picked out a scalpel and turned back to the monkey.

But by now she had collapsed. Her face was turning blue and the choking sounds were getting quieter. I ran over to where she lay, straddled her around the shoulders so my weight wasn’t on her belly and with my left hand took hold of her chin.

When I flashed the scalpel, she widened her suffocating eyes, like she still didn’t know if I was friend or foe. My mind was buzzing, picturing Christa and Kell in the car, hoping the bastard wasn’t fucking with them, hoping she’d locked the doors and damn why’d I bring the key with me? Then it was like I could feel Chris’s hand on my back, like when she rubbed it when I was down or stressed out, like even when I was having a

hard time finding work from the DWI and she was scraping paint in the daytime and waiting tables at night. “You’ll turn it around,” she’d said, “and in the meantime, I’ll do what I gotta.”

I’ll do what I gotta, I thought, and lifted the monkey’s chin. Her body was twitching by now, something was going real wrong and I was worried I was too late. *Tracheotomy, tracheotomy*, I thought, *can it be that complicated?* Just have to open her windpipe so the air gets in, that’ll give her a chance. Then if I can get out, call 911, then maybe she’ll make it.

Beneath me I could feel her breasts getting all damp, and behind me something squirmed inside her belly. I gritted my teeth, clenched and unclenched my fingers against the numbing cold and made the incision a little to the left of her chin, midway up her neck. I drew to the right, thinking not too deep - and did it even matter? I didn’t have a tube. I heard a very faint popping sound, then suction and a gurgle. Her body lurched, I stood and looked down as she took a few clumsy breaths through the hole I’d made. I was beginning to smile, and so was she, a crooked blue-lipped monkey smile.

Then I felt it squirt against my arm, rhythmic, squirt, squirt. It shot up like a weak red water fountain. I’d cut too far to the right, hit an artery. I dropped down again, tried to put pressure on it, but who was I trying to kid? It just got my hand all bloody and then I didn’t care, I lifted her against me and held her while her life bled out all over my body.

A few minutes later she was still, and the squirming motion in her belly stopped.

“Now don’t you two make a handsome couple? Don’t worry, I won’t tell the wife.” The guard was standing in the doorway opposite the one I’d come in. He’d straightened his uniform, put his shades back on and had the laptop open and resting on his forearm.

“Jesus Christ,” I said, standing up and almost slipping on the already frozen blood and monkey piss on the floor. “You’re one sick fucker,” I said. “You got some kinda fucking God complex?”

“God complex. That’s a good one, son. A little better than the ol’ ‘are you playing God’ line. A little more...well, complex,” he said.

“Yeah, well, this shit don’t fly anymore. They lock you up for this kinda shit.”

“I think you’d be the expert on getting locked up, Glen. See, we scanned your license plate when you came through the gate. I have all your info right here.” He pointed to the laptop screen. I got a flash of what looked like a form, like a giant driver’s license with my picture to the left and a bunch of text fields to the right.

“Look, dude, what do you want from me?” I asked him.

He grinned, pointed through the door into a hallway walled with black glass. “I want you to go on to part two of the examination,” he said.

“Look man, the monkey died, I just wanna go home!” Tears hung in the corners of my eyes and as I wiped them I saw a smeared image of the animal heads on the shelves, the racoon’s mask, the horse’s eyes, like they were saying, *Poor baby*.

“True, Maybelle didn’t make it, but you did pass that portion of the test,” he said.

“What do you mean? How could I have passed?”

“You knew what *tracheotomy* meant,” he said. “Now come this way...”

He stood with me at the end of the long black hallway, the dim fluorescent bulbs streaking the one-way glass like soft lightening. The guard pointed at the other end where there stood a cheap looking plywood door with a chained padlock around the knob.

In front of it stood another monkey, clearly a male by his prominent balls, made more so by the studded leather ring somebody had snapped around his scrotum.

He had a matching choker around his neck.

“That’s Barnsey,” said the guard. “I’ve tried him on a few different cycles of steroids but really just a little solbuterol and a high-protein diet got the best results.”

As he said this, the monkey took a few steps forward and twirled on his heel. What I thought at first was a sick dance, I realized was just a session of flexing for himself in the one-way glass. I noticed two of his incisors looked like fangs, like they weren’t supposed to.

“What the hell are those?” I asked.

“Oh, that’s just some cosmetic stuff,” said the guard. “State labs, you know? We have access to surgeons, and more importantly, student surgeons. Anyway, here’s the deal: Barnsey’s trained, sort of like a watch-monkey. So when I say the word, he’ll start busting through the door there. He won’t stop until he’s in the lot.”

“Please man, I don’t care, I don’t wanna...”

“But you do,” said the guard. “See he’s trained to identify and eliminate threats. You know, trespassers and such, undesirables, chaff, that sort of thing. Anyway, I imagine he could rip the door off that Honda. Your wife may or may not get away on those little chicken legs of hers, but the baby, well...”

The son of a *bitch*! I threw myself at him.

But he just stepped aside, let me hit the wall, then tased me.

When I came to, I was still covered with monkey blood, seeing stars along with the bulb-lightening in the glass. The freezer door was left open and I could see Maybelle’s corpse turning frosty. At the end of the hall Barnsey was banging on the chain padlock and making whiny hissing sounds.

“Rise and shine, Glen,” said the voice behind the one-way glass. “That’s right, it’s me, the one with the God complex. So I think you’ve lost a little time on the test. But hey, we don’t always know what’s best for ourselves. Barnsey there, the mother of his children is dead in the freezer. But he’s busy following orders. See, I say the code-word for go, and he goes. I say the word for stop, and he stops. Can you make him stop?”

But I could only think of Christa and Kelly in the car. I’d been a while, and wondered if she’d thought to call somebody, or take the baby and walk out to the road. Either way, there was still a good chance she was still in the car, and Barnsey had to be stopped.

I ran up behind him hollering his name, “Barnsey! Barnsey! Halt! Stop!” But I knew it was useless - the code word wouldn’t be something so obvious. Until now, all the guard’s bullshit had made some sort of twisted sense - the vocabulary crap. If you just knew what words meant, you had the answer.

But this shit was like trying to guess a damn password. Impossible.

I pulled on Barnsey’s shoulder, spun him around so he was facing my chest with those movie-set teeth and Goth-club collar. I grabbed the collar with my left hand, punched him in the temple with my right, kept a hold of him while I drilled him to the floor. It was like punching a bag of bricks, all muscle and bones from some fucked-up animal workout regimen.

When I was about to land what I intended to be the jaw-crusher, he managed to bend back a little and make a sweeping kick with his hyper-muscled leg, knocking my feet out from under me. But instead of following up with his own hail of punches, he went back to the door, finished pulling it off its hinges and dashed down another short hallway to another plywood door.

A window opened in the glass wall beside me. I looked up and saw the guard holding the dead bat I'd brought in. "Oh, look at him," he said, nodding the bat's head like it was a puppet, "he's the one who killed me and my mommy and sisters and brothers, he don't look so happy now, does he..."

I sprang to my feet, ignoring the bastard and flew after Barnsey. He'd gotten through the second door and was approaching what had to be the last, all black glass with the vague shapes of the cars in the parking lot beyond.

I tackled him from behind, clawed at his mutated abs and pecs and drew him back with all my strength. I got him halfway down the hall, tried throwing him a left while I had him in a headlock, but he blocked the punch then flipped me over and onto the floor, Judo-smooth. A second later he was running free again, free for the door and everything that mattered to me in the world.

That's when something came to me, something Christa had once said. "Of course I don't feel bad about the bat. Anything that ever tried to hurt you guys, on purpose or not, it makes me crazy. I'd kill it and kill it again. I'd stop everything until it was dead meat."

That's when I crawled back into the freezer, hands and knees across Maybelle's iced fluids. Slipping my shoulders underneath her I stood, hefted her into the hallway. I turned to where Barnsey was about to open the final door and yelled, "Hey Barnsey-boy, check it out, looks like the old lady fell on some hard times."

He stopped, shrieked, shot out a short stream of piss, then ran at me like a hairball of a comet. Just before he hit, I used the same move on him that the guard used on me. I stepped aside and jabbed him in the ribs. Only instead of a taser, I used a scalpel.

Fifteen minutes later I walked out to the car and found Christa and the baby dozing. "Glen? Where were you? I was starting to worry..."

"I was in the lab," I said, starting the engine.

"You gave them the bat?" she said.

"Yeah, I gave them the bat."

She was looking at my clothes now, an oversized Port Macleod Fire Department t-shirt, some blue sweats. Beside me, in the same place the bat had been, sat the plastic bag full of my bloody clothes.

Before she could speak I put my hand over hers, said, "Chris, we got a decision to make."

"What do you mean? What happened?" she said. It might have been the first time I'd ever seen her really look afraid.

I drove on a few minutes, studied the lights on the trees, the sheen on the green branches, the dust of silver on the impenetrable black.

It hadn't taken long for me to finish Barnsey off, numb to the cutting by then as I was. After, I stood holding the scalpel, facing the guard. "I'm gonna walk out of here

and call the fucking cops,” I said. “I’m gonna report this. I’ll testify to this... this... *Jesus, you crazy fuck!*”

But the guard only nodded, said, “That’s good, Glen. We’re glad to hear it. Because, after all, that’s the final portion of your test.”

I stopped. He seemed too calm, his mouth too straight, almost like he’d descended, become a little weary. “See Glen, we’re a laboratory. We’re a working laboratory, 24 hours a day, 168 hours a week, 8,736 hours a year...well, you get the picture. Anyway, a guy like you, well, after a scan, he gets randomly selected, you know, bottled for testing.”

“I don’t know...” I said. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Here, put these on,” he said, handing me the dry t-shirt, the sweats. “See, a guy of ambiguous morality like you, well, the State wants to know how you might react to things. Witnessing a violent crime say, or given a tough choice between two less than ideal eventualities.”

“Yeah right, tell it to your lawyer,” I said, grabbing my bag of clothes taking a step toward the door.

But the guard took hold of my elbow. “Glen, it’s imperative you do the right thing now. Imperative you report me, for the horrible things that happened to these animals. You can’t let me get away with it, Glen. More importantly, you can’t let it happen to anyone else. Be hard to live with yourself knowing you let me get away with these things, and besides, if you don’t report me, if you fail the test, there may be legal repercussions.”

“Yeah right, whatever you say,” I said.

“Exactly, whatever I say,” he said, his mouth turning down, his hand resting on his pistol. “Because there’s also a risk that there really is no test, and I’m just a nutcase, headjob, a loon. If that’s the case, then maybe I’d have friends I could call if you fucked with me. Or maybe I’d be able to post bail and do it myself. Burn down your house, that is. Or pay a visit to your wife and baby. She’s not bad looking, Glen. Has it in all the right places. Of course I’d have to shut the kid up first, close the ol’ pie-hole for good, save the State some money...”

I felt a sudden shudder in my shoulders and heaviness in my bones, but the guard helped me forward, started walking me toward the door. “See, it’s funny how things work, isn’t it? You say I got a God complex. Well, it’s true. Because I’m the State, sure, but I’m also the state of things, like reality. And no matter what you desire, I think it’s gonna be a little funny, and no matter what you do, it’s gonna come out a little funny. Maybe not to you, maybe to you it’s all about survival. But to me it always comes out a little funny.”

Carl Moore lives in upstate New York with his wife Sarah and daughter Maddy Dee. He enjoys trips down to Brooklyn, up to Vermont, and general observation of the wildlife.