

Twice the Pain, Half the Joy

By Steven Wellington

I work for myself. I work by myself. It's just easier.

The house I'm working on, and living in, is located in Hamilton Landing. Realtors call it a commuter town to Harts Bay, or New York City if you really like commuting.

A month and a half into this restoration project, and there are times when it feels like it will never end. But it will, because everything ends.

This house sat empty for years so there are plenty of drips, squeaks and cracks to repair. That means tearing down old plaster walls. A sledgehammer and a crowbar made it quick work, but dusty. I almost didn't see the markings on one wall in the kitchen. Pencil lines with a name and date carefully written next to each line. The lines recorded the heights of three children, two boys and a girl. A mark at every birthday it seemed, because the dates for each child were always one year apart.

The writing had faded, but the earliest dates are close to sixty years ago. Somewhere between presents and cake, each kid stood as straight as possible against the wall while Mom or Dad made a mark. The dates at the top stretched apart, with more than a few years going by between measurements. So the tradition became more of a hassle for the kids and just something the parents did because they were parents.

That section of plaster had to come down. It meant the difference between two hours of work and two days of work. The people to those names were long gone, living lives far from here. Plenty of other families had moved in and out since that time. One good swing with the sledge would send the markings to the rest of the broken bits on the kitchen floor. But I didn't pick up the sledge.

The shrill ring of my cellular phone brought me back to myself. It took a minute to find the damn thing in the pocket of my coat. The phone was a surprise early Christmas gift from Rosey Rosenstein, my lawyer and self-appointed keeper.

"What?" I said gruffly, which is fine since Rosey is the only person who calls me.

"James! How about that phone? I'm talking on one just like it and we might as well be in the same room. Now you can reach me anytime."

"And vice-versa."

"So much the better! What are you doing for lunch?"

"Just warming up the soufflé pan right now."

"Forget whatever leftover pizza is growing old and meet me at Anton's. Now *that's* a fancy place so wash your hands."

"Yes, mother. Why are you springing for lunch?"

"Who's springing? We'll chat. You'll ask me how business is going. I'll say fine, then write the whole thing off. It's good to be me."

The offer of a free lunch was enough to get me to make the commute into Harts Bay. But with Rosey, there is no such thing as a free lunch.

"The shiny objects are called silverware," Rosey said.

"Thanks. I'll try to remember to chew with my mouth closed."

"That would be a nice change."

“So why am I here?” I asked.

“Well, the reason is...” He looked at the front door of the restaurant, “The reason has arrived.”

The manager was escorting a lady over to our table. The lady was about five and a half feet tall and looked to be in her mid-thirties. She was wearing some sort of casual suit jacket and pants combination that fit her perfectly. As she got closer, I saw the wedding ring and the gold bracelet, both large and shiny but tasteful. She looked like a person with time to work on how she looked. She said hello to Rosey and gave him a little hug before sitting down.

Rosey introduced me as James Greyson, instead of Jimmy, and introduced her as Alice Pierson. He went on about how her father was one of his first clients and told a quick story about their good old days. Mrs. Pierson listened to him and nodded at appropriate times. She stared at me long enough to make sure she wouldn't forget my face in case we met again.

The waiter came over with menus and we kept silent while looking at the lunches. After ordering, there was the uncomfortable feeling of everyone wanting to talk about something and not knowing where to start.

Rosey finally broke the silence. “Why don't I explain the situation?”

She patted his arm. “No, I suppose I should learn to tell my own story.” She turned to me. “You can't be forced to repeat anything said here because you're employed by Mr. Rosenstein, right?”

“Employed is not the right word. More like indentured servitude,” I replied.

She looked at Rosey, “I wouldn't want people to know about this.”

Rosey shot me a look and then turned to her, “Go on, Alice. Nothing goes beyond this table.”

She spoke quietly, “Something terrible has happened to my husband, but I have no idea what.”

“Why do you say that?” I asked.

“I just have a feeling.”

“Like you're not sure if you left the iron plugged in, that type of feeling?”

Mrs. Pierson shifted in her seat, every piece of her was focused on keeping a good front. She was trying to maintain composure and my attitude wasn't helping. She brushed a strand of hair back behind her ear and I caught the scent of her perfume. Superman has kryptonite and I have expensive perfume.

“Sorry. I'm used to dealing with people with more calluses. Tell me about this feeling.”

She smiled. I would chew glass to see that smile again. But it could be the same smile she gave the dry cleaner to get her shirts back on time.

“Leonard works for Vinstar Industries. He is a very hard worker. Most would agree he is a good man. He left on a hunting trip to West Virginia and I haven't heard from him in two days.”

“Your husband is in the habit of taking a vacation without you?”

She spoke to the table, “Leonard does several things that I find uncomfortable. Hunting is the least of them.” She finished her drink. “No one is going to come to me for marriage advice.”

“Not too many cell towers in the woods of West Virginia.”

She understood my meaning. “Something is wrong. There are some dogs he is going to use for some sort of hunting competition, of all things. He likes to get updates from the trainer. He hasn’t called in two days.”

“How about Vinstar? Anybody there you can talk to about this?”

“My husband felt I wouldn’t understand or appreciate his work. His words exactly. So I don’t really know anyone at Vinstar.”

The waiter came with our food and I had to hurry to ask Rosey a question before he started on his lunch. “What is Vinstar Industries?”

He was torn between pontificating and eating. The chance to lecture me won out. “So glad you asked. Vinstar Industries is headquartered here in the city. They are a solid company that made its mark in the defense industry. As that industry changes, it is looking to establish more international contracts as well as re-structure its base in the states.” He triumphantly took a forkful of something in a white cream sauce. Rosey was adept at manipulating moods and he tried to lift Alice’s spirits by talking about mutual friends while I ate my lunch. Good for him.

I found Vinstar Industries that afternoon, after borrowing a briefcase from Rosey and changing into a refined suit, shirt, and tie that I keep at his office. I looked like a fine upstanding businessman as long as no one noticed the plaster dust under my fingernails. Polite smiles mixed with a dash of sucking up got me as far as Pierson’s secretary.

“Hello, I’m Jim Thorn, from personnel. I have a three o’clock with Mr. Pierson.”

She looked through me. “Mr. Pierson is on vacation.”

I let out a slow breath, “God forbid anybody should tell me about it.”

She shrugged her shoulders. We were just two little cogs in the great Vinstar machine.

“Here’s my problem - I’m supposed to be writing this profile about Mr. Pierson for the company newsletter. The article has to be done by Thursday so the newsletter can be in everyone’s wastebasket by Friday.”

She perked up, “Is this about the promotion? Len, I mean...Mr. Pierson, has been talking about it for weeks.”

“Yes, it is. How about you give me some background on the promotion and I’ll write something from that? I’m sure you and Mr. Pierson work closely together.”

“Oh, yes. I’m really more than just his secretary. Mr. Pierson is going to head up west coast operations. He’s taking a few days off before moving to California. I’m meeting him there next week to set up the office.”

“You’re going with him?”

“Oh sure, he can name his own staff and we did put in some long hours together.”

She was pretty, and knew just how to work those long hours. Apparently she and ‘Len’ had made a couple trips to the coast, strictly to inspect company properties, of course.

“I still need a tidbit to close with. What is Mr. Pierson doing on his vacation?”

“Oh, Len always goes hunting. He said something about trying a new place in West Virginia. Bane? No, it was Kane. It all sounded so exciting. Wish I was there with him.”

“Maybe next time.”

We talked some more before I told her how incredibly helpful she was, and made my way to the door. My hand was on the doorknob when she called to me.

“Hey, Jim. Since you’re in personnel and everything, how much can the executive assistant to a senior vice-president expect to make?”

“As much as she deserves.”

The Pierson mansion came complete with the wraparound driveway and the maid who opened the front door before I had a chance to knock. She parked me in an expansive sitting room that was typical old English country. Rustic hunting paraphernalia and lots of pictures of dogs running here and there. Everything fit together, like every piece was bought from the same catalogue. I was looking at a huge painting of a man on horseback with his faithful canine by his side when Alice entered into the room.

“I wish I could tell you who that is, but I have absolutely no idea.”

“That’s not important. It’s a nice painting.”

Alice looked at it. “It frightens me a little.” She walked over to a well stocked bar. “My parents held to the tradition of the cocktail hour come hell or high water, and I’m a traditional lady. Would you care for a drink?”

“Since it’s tradition.”

“A little gin with your tonic, or the other way around?”

“Mostly tonic. This is supposed to be work.”

She made the drinks and sat on the other end of the couch. Alice was wearing a deep blue sweater and a long skirt that showed a gentle curve when she crossed her legs. She waited for me to start talking.

“You said your husband was in West Virginia on vacation?”

“Yes. A week’s hunting and then back to the grind.”

“And he takes business trips to California?”

“Oh yes, more and more each month. Some last for over a week.”

“You don’t ever go with him? These seem like long trips.”

She let out a chuckle, “I went once and hated every minute. Growing up in this house kind of ruins the thrill of staying in corporate suites.”

“How long have you lived here?”

“This house has been in my family for generations. We made our money in bootlegging, if the rumors are true. This room used to be the library until Leonard needed a place for his hobbies.” She reached to put her glass on the table and I saw four little bruises on her arm. The matching fifth bruise would be on the other side. That’s what happens when a person seizes your arm.

“How often is your husband violent, Mrs. Pierson?”

Her eyes widened, but not in shock; it was surprise at being confronted. She tried to hide it. “That’s not a nice question for you to ask.”

“It’s not a nice question for anyone to ask.”

“We’ve had our disagreements. Show me a couple that doesn’t? Leonard works so hard. I have to take care of the house, run the errands. If something goes wrong, he erupts. It’s not his fault. He’s very busy.”

“He’s so busy that he forgot to tell you he’s taking a promotion in California.”

“Actually move there? Impossible. We may not see eye to eye all the time, but he would never hold back something like that.”

“Sure. Your husband isn’t coming back. He’s going to California to be the new Vinstar corporate tool.”

“Impossible.”

“Okay. Tell me: did he send a lot of his clothing to the cleaners right before he left on this vacation?”

“Well, yes.”

“And even though you do all the errands, he didn’t mention when you should pick them up, did he?”

She was a thousand miles away as her little demons finally got the chance to laugh and shout, *I told you so*. The tears started in tiny drops and she very quietly sobbed and fell into my arms. I held her close and rubbed her back and desperately tried to think of a magic word that would make this stop. But nothing ever comes to mind.

She finished crying after a moment and dried her eyes with a white lace handkerchief that miraculously appeared from a pocket. Her back became Catholic schoolgirl-straight and she was all lady before she spoke again.

“Sorry you had to see that. Mother told me to always go to the bathroom and run the faucet when you cry.” She laid her hand gently on top of mine. “Please find him,” she said in the smallest of voices. “He is all that I have.”

In a diner near the edge of the city, I looked over my maps to find Kane, West Virginia and the best way to get there. Alice Pierson reminded me of the dreams of a life I almost found but lost. The life with the partner, lover, friend. The life with half the pain and twice the joy. I wanted to see the man who would piss that all away.

Kane was a small town on the banks of the Ohio River. A banner hanging over Main Street invited me to the Raisin’ Kane Festival in two weeks. Cute. A day’s road dust helped my truck blend right in with the rest of the traffic. A day’s whiskers, my blue jeans and a wrinkled work shirt helped me blend right in with the citizens. I parked outside a sports shop that proclaimed itself the hunter’s paradise. There were a dozen old ads for hunting guides in the front window. Next door, Fred’s Diner advertised *World Famous Home-Made Buckeye Pie*. Instinct and hunger told me to try the local eating establishment first.

The diner was small and it only had two other customers. A fat man with ‘Fred’ stenciled on his shirt came over with an order pad when I sat at the counter. He looked as if my dining pleasure was the last thing on his mind.

I smiled, “You’re Fred.”

He looked at the name on his shirt, “My name is Sam.”

“Where’s Fred?”

“He’s dead. I’m Sam, Fred’s brother.”

“You kept the diner in his name. Touching.”

Sam shrugged, “Like I’m gonna buy all new menus and another sign? It’s was Fred’s Diner for twenty-three years, it can stand to be Fred’s Diner a little longer.” He motioned at the menu. “You want to eat or ask questions?”

“Describe buckeye pie.”

“Imagine pecan pie swimming in chocolate syrup. People say it’s an acquired taste.”

I closed the menu, “Give me a burger, fries, and some coffee. Save the pie for another time.”

“Good choice.” Sam wandered to the kitchen.

He brought back my burger when he was good and ready. My hunger made up for the taste. He threw down my check and started to walk away until I threw down a fifty on top of the check

“Will there be anything else, sir?”

“I’m on vacation and heard this was a good place for hunting. Any guides available?”

Sam slowly shook his head, “You missed hunting season by a month. Shame really, still plenty of game and you might as well hunt it as hit it with your car.”

“A friend of mine told me about a hunting trip he took around here last week.”

“He musta found a guide who doesn’t own a calendar. I don’t personally know any like that myself, of course.” He stopped talking but he didn’t walk away. Another fifty from my wallet appeared on the table. “But Harry Calhoun’s about the only guide here that can be convinced to forget what month it is.”

Sam gave me directions towards Calhoun’s cabin. “You can’t miss the house, it’s the only one up in that part of the county.”

“Think he’d mind a visitor?”

“Never known anyone that wanted to visit the old cuss.”

I parked my truck and looked down the dirt road that led to the Calhoun house. The road was sprinkled with the early leaves of fall. The leaves were covered with morning dew that was just starting to burn off. Muddy puddles appeared here and there along the road. The leaves next to each puddle were clear of mud, which meant no traffic through here today. Hard to tell if Calhoun was even home.

But Calhoun was my only lead. Maybe Leonard Pierson hired him as a guide and maybe not. I needed to ask Calhoun a few questions and everything about the area indicated he was the type of person that hated to answer questions.

I slipped my revolver in a belt holster and secured my knife to my belt as an afterthought. Thanks to the Army, I’m trained to use both. My brown leather coat hid both of them nicely and was the closest thing to camouflage I owned.

When I closed the door of the truck, I saw my faded reflection in the window. My face stared at me, but there were black holes for eyes. I thought about the beast inside me that lived for these games. Normally the beast would rest and I would re-build my houses and live my outcast life. But when the beast smelled a hunt, it would awaken and growl and talk to me in whispers and get my blood screaming until I gave over to it again. I wasn’t here for Rosey or even for Alice. I was here, with gun and blade, only for me.

Pierson wasn’t going to be found by me staring at myself, so I walked into the woods and paralleled the road as silently as possible. After a crooked mile, the house came into view and I moved around it to the back. The structure was really more of a cabin. It started as a few rooms but had additions built on it throughout the years. Part of a camper was attached to the house.

The skeletons of several cars and great piles of junk blanketed the area. I rested behind a tree and listened for an hour. The area was so still, it was possible to hear the

cars rusting. Only one truck was made in this decade. It didn't have Ohio plates, but it did have a Vinstar parking permit hanging from the rear view mirror. With my hand on my automatic, I walked toward the house.

The back door was open; no need to lock up a house this far from everything. It led to the kitchen. Garbage was everywhere. Piles of trash as high as my shoulder. One pile had a TV Guide with Jack Webb on the cover. There were signs of jury-rigged repairs to counter tops and appliances. I stood absolutely still and listened. No sound. I entered the main room of the cabin, having to lift my arms and turn sideways to make it past two trash piles. A small hallway led to two rooms with beds and piles of clothes. It only took minutes to search the rooms, but I learned that moving certain piles caused new smells to invade the air. There wasn't any clothing that would belong to a corporate vice-president.

The last room was used for storage, and there was an old bulk freezer with the door on top. On an impulse, I lifted the door. Leonard Pierson stared right at me.

Like the Mounties, I got my man. Except mine was quite dead. He was dressed in hunting gear and had two bullet holes in him. One in the shoulder and one in the chest. I was forced to hold my breath while taking a closer look, because the freezer wasn't doing its job. The chest wound was large with burn marks around it, but the shoulder wound was smaller and covered in frosty blood. Pierson looked at me like he wanted to know what took me so long to get there. Sorry, fella.

Calhoun must have been a hell of a hunter, because I didn't hear him until he pulled back the hammer on his pistol.

"I'll thank you to move away from there."

Calhoun was old. It was a hard old that a man gets from scratching and digging for every little piece. He was tall and skinny, muscle wrapped tight around the bone.

"Mr. Calhoun, do you know you have a dead man in your freezer?"

"I reckon I'm about to have two."

"Let me guess - hunting accident."

Calhoun nodded, "Damned fool, I told him to stay in the blind. The boy and I would send game his way. But he couldn't wait. Thought he knew more 'bout hunting than I did."

He motioned me to the back door. "You and I are going to be walking outside now. I see that pistol on your belt. Reach for it and I'll put you down."

He stayed far back as we walked outside. I talked to him over my shoulder. "Pierson was wandering around the woods, right? What was he wearing? A brown jacket, maybe a brown hat? Did you want to get one more buck for the season?"

"It sure as shit wasn't me that shot him."

We turned the corner and there was Calhoun's son, just shy of seven feet tall and about as wide. The boy must have been twenty or so. He had a look on his face like he wet his bed and didn't want anyone to find out.

"I did it, Da. Just like you asked. I stayed right here...and didn't move...and didn't make a peep. I stayed right here." The boy had a twenty-two rifle slung over his shoulder.

Calhoun was on one side and his boy was on the other. The boy made little nervous whiny noises. He saw his dad pointing the rifle at me and he unslung his own rifle and started to do the same.

“Dammit Hank, can’t you remember nothing? I told you to get rid of the gun.” Hank lowered the rifle and muttered, “It’s not loaded or nothing.”

I looked at Hank and his rifle and then at the old man.

“The boy shot Pierson,” I said.

“Just throw that pistol over here. Now.”

I did as I was told. “But Pierson has two holes in him, and that’s a single action rifle.”

The old man scowled, “Pierson howled like a damn baby over a simple wound. When he stopped crying he started yelling. Lawsuits...cops...jail for the boy. Suing me for everything I had, which wouldn’t take too damn long.”

“That’s when you shot him in the chest.”

Calhoun knew what he did and it bothered him. He wanted to explain why.

“The boy wouldn’t last two minutes in jail. He’s a child. He will always be a child. Hank was aiming at a squirrel and Pierson caught a ricochet.”

“Sure.”

My knife is a straight blade kept in a sheath. Sometimes I keep the sheath pointed up so the knife can slide into my hand when I need it. It was on my right hand side, facing the boy. The old man didn’t see the knife slide into my hand and the boy couldn’t stop dancing around long enough to notice anything.

“Why kill him? Why not just tell the truth?” I asked.

“Nobody’s gonna believe a man like me. I got a real shortage of friends in this town. And who’ll hire a guide with a history like this?”

“You should’ve buried him right there. I came here on a long shot and would’ve kept on going.”

“Some animal would’ve dug him up or the rains would wash him out.”

I nodded, “Nothing stays buried forever.”

“But you can be sure a bonfire will take both of you.”

I wanted to say a snappy comeback but couldn’t think of one. So I threw the knife at Calhoun and ducked.

There are knives made for throwing and then there are knives made to do everything else. Mine is an everything-else knife. It spun around and would probably bounce off his jacket. But Calhoun reflexively scrambled to avoid it. My only chance was to take the rifle from him before he recovered. When I put my hands on it, he butted me in the head with the stock. I lurched back and hit him in the stomach with a quick one-two punch before dropping him with a sweeping kick to his knees. Then I turned toward the son.

Hank yelled - right before he picked me up and threw me across the yard. Hank stormed over and picked me up by the throat. I managed to break his grip and tried to get enough room to hit him. Hank was giggling like we were playing slap tag. He hit me several times in the chest and stomach and slapped my head hard enough for my vision to sparkle.

All this punishment took less than a minute. Calhoun was getting up and limping to his rifle. I rabbit-punched the boy twice and brought his head down onto my knee. He fell over and I hurried to find my gun. Hank was already up on all fours trying to clear his head.

Calhoun took aim as I dove for my pistol. Hank saw me dive and, with a roar, jumped on top of me just as Calhoun fired the rifle. Hank landed on top of me, but he was only a heavy sack of dead flesh by then. The bullet hole in his back was in the middle of a growing red pool. I rolled him to one side.

Calhoun cried out and ran to the boy.

Hank looked at his father, “Da... Da... I’m cold.” Then he died.

I got to my feet and picked up my gun. The old man didn’t say anything. Silent tears rolled down his cheeks. Calhoun sat up and pulled his rifle to him, sliding another round into the chamber. Instinct made me aim my gun at him but we both knew the fight was over.

Calhoun was on auto-pilot. He leaned the rifle on his shoulder, the barrel resting close to his head. A final thought made him look at me and whisper, “Leave me be.”

I walked halfway to my truck before a single shot broke the silence around me.

I made two phone calls on my drive back. An anonymous one to the Kane police station and another to the Pierson house. It was time to tell Alice that I failed.

The maid showed me back into the hunting room. Alice was sitting on the couch staring out the large window with a view of the bay. She wasn’t crying.

I stood before her and she rose and gave me a delicate hug and gently brushed her fingers near the bruises and cuts on my face.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“I should ask you that question.”

“I...will be fine. I’m not so much sad as relieved. Should I feel guilty because I have no sorrow?”

“You were treated like yesterday’s garbage.”

“It was my life,” she said, “and there were good things about it no one else would understand.”

We both looked at each other, ready to say I’m sorry. But the looks were enough and we didn’t say a word. For a few minutes we watched the world go by outside the window. Alice shook her head to break the trance and gently patted my arm.

“I want to thank you for your help,” she said.

“I didn’t bring him back to you.”

“You brought back an explanation. I needed that, Mr. Greyson. Jim.”

I looked at her face, trying to memorize every detail in case I would ever see her again. “If you ever need to talk, or another explanation...”

She smiled faintly, “You’re a dear man but right know I need to be alone. I need to find out what else there is to me besides Mrs. Leonard Pierson.”

There was nothing else to do but leave and start the long drive back to my house.

Sitting in the kitchen, I let scotch and aspirin numb the bruises and cuts. The wall with the markings still stood and it would stay there a while longer. I’ll work around it. A reminder about families that had been, and the families that would never be.

Steven Wellington lives in Cincinnati with his wife and three kids, but grew up in the Maryland suburbs of D.C. – and is the product of caring parents. All of this made for a happy childhood but was terrible

background for a hard boiled writer. So he's a sucker for every hard luck story. Reading is a passion and writing is his calling. He's working on novels and other shorts between paying the bills and playing with the kids. Priorities. Priorities.