

Party Favors

By Richard Farnsworth

With nothing to do but watch the rental car eat up the miles, Sullivan fidgeted. He checked the speedometer again, even though the cruise control was set for sixty-four. It wouldn't do to be stopped for speeding. Not that he had seen any police this far out, but it's always the ones you don't see that get you.

He'd meticulously planned this retreat for weeks. He was ready - he was more than ready. He'd brought everything Susan asked for: the special clothes, the money, even the party favors.

Sullivan checked the mileage on the digital trip meter again. He knew how many miles he had left, but pulled the Mapquest printout out from under the little novelty shop gargoyle statue and checked it anyway. Less than an hour away now, he thrummed with anticipation.

What would it really be like? He'd read everything he could on the subject. There were Susan's digital pictures. They could have been faked, but they looked so real. And would they really welcome a middle-aged guy like him, pudgy midsection and all?

Sullivan turned the radio on again. He straightened his glasses with the clip-on dark lenses. There was nothing but AM talk, so he turned the radio off and ran his fingers through his thinning mouse-brown hair.

Another road sign was coming up. Elko, Winnemucca, Reno, and even San Francisco. There had been nothing to see on the road but signs since Wendover; that ugly little town straddling the Nevada-Utah border where the Mormons went to gamble. He'd gotten the party favors there. He also saw twisted little creosote bushes, dry grass, skinny cattle and more signs. And trash. And the dry smell of dirt. But other than that, this stretch of highway was a whole lot of empty.

"Hey, what's..?"

He pulled the visor down to block the late afternoon sun and peered over the dash. He could just make out a figure ahead. As he got closer, the blurry upright form resolved into a man. Scruffy beard and olive drab jacket and a bag over his shoulder with a thumb out, walking backward now that he saw Sullivan.

Sullivan waved a mock salute, as he roared past.

No time to stop, he had somewhere to be.

He reached down to turn the radio on again when there was a loud pop from under the car, and it lurched and pulled to the right all at the same time.

Sullivan jerked upright and overcompensated the steering; first left, then right as he fishtailed, braking, skidding to the side of the highway. Loud, gravelly crunching and sliding sounds, until he lurched to a final stop on the shoulder.

"Jeez! Oh shit!" His words sounded loud to him in the quiet car after the noise of the blowout. He worked to control his breathing as he sat, the car cocooned in a thick cloud of dust.

The big V-8 engine rumbled contentedly. The car hadn't stalled, so he turned the ignition off and rummaged for his bag on the floor.

No signal on the cell phone.

"Shit, isn't this perfect?"

He popped the trunk lever and threw the door open. On his way to the back of the car he examined the tire. He'd apparently run over a twisted iron spike. The tire was a retread, and he could see that after he'd hit the spike, the rubber had peeled off like an orange skin.

Shaking his head at the bad luck, he opened the expansive trunk. He rearranged the supplies and rolled the party favors to one side and then wrestled the spare tire out. It wasn't easy, as it was a full-size and not one of those shitty little doughnuts. Then he rooted around until he found the tire iron and the jack. He wasn't handy that way, so figuring out the little latch was challenging. The anxiety and the exertion warmed him. He slipped out of his suede jacket and laid it on the trunk after he slammed it closed.

The car had come to rest near the side of the road. He kept close as he set up the jack and then tried to figure out how to attach the lever.

A voice behind him said, "You want to loosen the nuts there first."

Sullivan spasmed upright gripping the tire iron. He blinked at the figure that had materialized there on the side of the road. Then he blinked again and saw the green jacket and the bag and realized the hitchhiker had caught up with him.

"You want to loosen the wheel nuts there before you get it up on the jack, otherwise the tire, she'll just spin. You know?" Sullivan couldn't place the man's accent.

Sullivan nodded and let the tire iron hang awkwardly. He smiled self-deprecatingly and said, "Yeah. I never changed a tire before."

The man nodded like he could tell. He was young and he reminded Sullivan of someone he'd met before, but he couldn't think just who it was. Probably fifteen years or so less than Sullivan's forty-three. Dressed for the road like a traveler, not like a homeless guy.

The young man held out a hand and said, "Name's Barry."

Sullivan took the firm handshake and said, "Sullivan. Friends call me Sully, though."

A smile cracked across Barry's deeply tanned face and he said, "Friends call me Baz. Tell you what, Sully. You give me a lift down the highway and I'll swap that tire off for you."

Sully said, "Well, I'm only going as far as Elko, then I swing north."

"I'm going further, but a lift as far as Elko then?"

Sully couldn't think of a way to say no, so he smiled as genuinely as he could and said, "Deal."

"Right. Have you aces in a minute."

As Baz loosened the lug nuts, Sully asked his new friend, "So are you from England?"

Baz shook his head. "Australia."

"Like Mel Gibson?"

Baz gave Sully an over the shoulder patronizing smile.

"You walk all the way from Wendover?"

"Naw, got a hitch from there to Wells, so I walked from there. Seeing your country, you know? Not much on hitchers here. You're the first bloke to stop." he said that with that smile again.

Sully fidgeted as Baz set up the jack. He started to say something stopped. Then he blurted, "It's just that I'm in a hurry."

Baz stopped and looked up from his task. "Sorry?"

"The reason I didn't stop. I was in a hurry, see?"

"No harm Sully. You weren't ready." Then Baz continued jacking up the car.

Sully watched the young man's nimbleness and his practiced way with the tool and realized who Baz looked like. Kris Kristofferson - but young, like he looked in *Convoy*, not like he looked now in that vampire movie with Wesley Snipes.

"It's a fortunate thing for me you were here, it would take me forever to do that."

"I was where I was supposed to be, Sully." He pumped the lever some more and the wheel started to come off the ground. Sully guessed Baz judged it high enough when he stopped and used the tire iron to take the nuts all the way off and drop them in the hubcap. As he slid the tire off the five little bolts, Baz asked Sully if he were from Utah.

"No. Why Utah?" Sully asked.

"Utah plates on your car."

"Oh, no it's a rental. I'm from Iowa. I live in Des Moines and teach high school English."

"Seems a long way to come."

Sully nodded but didn't say anything.

Baz rested his hands on the tire and examined the spike. "Nasty, that?"

Sully nodded and clasped his hands together as if that could hold his secret in. He rocked a little on his toes, really wanting to share his secret, but not sure he could trust it with his new friend.

Baz looked up from the tire expectantly.

"A retreat. I'm going to a retreat."

Baz smiled. Then he nodded and slid the spare tire onto the bolts. "For work or pleasure?"

"Pleasure. I hope." After a pause Sully said, "Ever hear of Sheila-na-gigs?"

Baz shook his head and said, "Can't say I have. I mean, I know a few Sheila's, but not that one." Baz smiled again, then twisted the lug nuts slowly onto the bolts.

Sully looked around as if there might be something on this lonely stretch of road that would hear. Then he told Baz his story of female gargoyles that could be summoned on full moons to grant wishes and fulfill carnal desires. And the people he'd met online that invited him to a retreat they held on this very night.

"I mean...I'm skeptical, mind you, but I thought it would be fun."

"So you never met any of these people in real life? Just chatted up on the internet and now you're traipsing across the desert to meet them?" Baz straightened the hubcap and pounded it onto the wheel before he stood.

"Well, yeah. But I've spoken to Susan on the phone. She had me pick up the party favors. She runs it."

Sully turned sharply at the sound of a huge truck coming at them from over the rise, just down the highway.

Baz reached out and grabbed Sully by the shoulder and pulled him close as the huge semi-truck sped toward them. He held Sullivan until the truck was almost on them and then Baz smiled and said, "Looks like you're right where you need to be, too."

Then Baz gave Sullivan a solid shove in front of the oncoming vehicle.

Sullivan's apprehensive smile melted and the last thing he thought, in that split second before the metal grill and bumper impacted his body, was that now his party favors would all go to waste.

Sullivan made a wet cracking sound and flew a good thirty meters.

The driver must have been startled by the noise because the truck slowed down. He couldn't have seen Sullivan, as Baz had timed the push just right so that the driver's line of sight was obscured by the hood. So Baz gave the truck a reassuring wave and it picked up speed again. Probably saw him the rearview.

When Baz was sure the truck wouldn't stop, he bent down and levered the spike out of the tire. It was actually two spikes, bent to a ninety-degree angle and welded at the center so that it looked like a large pointy-ended jack. In the olden days it would have been called a clatrop, but Baz called it his ride-guarantee. He didn't know when he'd need it again, so he tucked it into his bedroll. Then he rolled the limp, torn tire down the embankment. He wiped his prints from the tire iron and jack and then tossed them off the road after. He should have put it all back in the boot, but he was in a hurry.

Then Baz pulled Sullivan's expensive suede coat from off the top of the boot and slipped it on. It was a good coat. A good fit. He grabbed up his smelly old Army surplus jacket and checked the ignition to see the keys were there, then he tossed his bedroll in through the window.

Baz climbed down the gravel embankment and found Sullivan, a broken bloody mess among the creosote bushes. Dead eyes staring at nothing, poor Sully was just more trash along the side of the road, Baz thought.

Then Baz fished the wallet from the twisted remains and draped the olive drab coat over the body. When he moved the body, Sullivan exhaled a bloody, gurgling foam. Baz wasn't sure if that was Sullivan last breath, but close to the end either way.

"Thanks for the ride Mate, you see I'm in a bit of a hurry too."

Baz counted the bills and checked the credit cards as he scrambled back up the gravelly embankment and got into the car. On the seat rested one of those fake stone gargoyles you see in yard and garden shops. He laughed and then tossed it in the back, then he went through the papers on the passenger seat as he drove. A map. Some emails printed out. A grainy picture of nude women, horned and with wings that all looked like dress-up to Baz.

Baz thought it might be fun making the naughty with these Sheilas. He decided he might like being Sullivan Brown, and debated making the odd man's engagement for him. What kind of crowd would it be that Sullivan could fit into though? But Baz had an appointment in San Francisco he needed to make.

After a short bit he caught sight of the truck in the distance over a rise.

"I guess you were right where you were supposed to be too," he said as he closed in on the truck.

All of a sudden he felt the red and blue lights behind him. Baz checked the rear view mirror as he slowed. He pulled to the side and saw two cars with flashing lights. He sat alone on the dusty road watching as the sun began to set.

The officers waited a good time before they came over to him.

Baz tried to decide how to play it. He was sure they couldn't prove Baz had done anything to Sullivan on purpose. Maybe theft, or leaving the scene of an accident, but they'd never get him on murder.

One of the officers finally came up while two others stayed back.

"Problem officer?" Baz asked.

The officer didn't answer. He just told Baz to get out of the car. When the door cracked open, the officer half-dragged Baz out and back to the first police cruiser, all the while keeping one hand on his pistol.

The officer bent Baz over and slammed his face on the hot, smooth steel of the cruiser's hood. Then the cop kicked his feet apart and clicked cuffs onto one wrist and then the other.

The other two officers went to Sullivan's car while the one holding him pulled the wallet out of Baz's pocket.

"You Sullivan Brown?"

Baz didn't respond. He needed an attorney before he would say anything.

"Sweet Jesus! Ray, they're in here. One's still alive."

Laying over the hood of the car, Baz watched as the cops pulled out the party favors that Sullivan Brown was bringing to the retreat. Bound in twisted red and black nylon cords, like the kind used by mountain climbers. Baz watched the two naked little bodies being pulled from the trunk.

Then he heard a metallic snick. It felt like an exclamation point.

The police officer holding him leaned over and said, "Kidnapping is bad enough, but you do that to a cop's kin and it's worse."

When he felt the smooth hard muzzle of the pistol press into the back of his head he realized two things. The snick had been the gun's safety and he wasn't going to need an attorney.

Richard Farnsworth lives in central Virginia where he works as a research scientist during the week and a soldier on weekends. When writing up his experimental results, colleagues often commented how much like fiction they read, but this story is the real thing.