

Blood Test

By Steve Newman

Chucky wakes up when the cigarette he's holding burns down and begins to smolder between his two fingers. "Shit!" he says, jerking his hand and flinging the butt into the air. The stool under him wobbles for a few seconds and he just manages to keep from spilling onto the floor. "Shit," he mutters again as he steadies himself against the bar.

The guy a few places down chuckles and shakes his head.

Chucky checks the burn mark between his fingers, and without bothering to look at his neighbor, asks him, "Something strike you as funny?"

The guy, who looks like he's either a biker or a roadie, scratches a cheek beneath his bushy beard and says, "Pretty fucking funny, yeah."

Chucky nods and reaches for the gin and tonic in front of him, his sixth. He takes a sip and holds the glass against the burn, which helps the pain but just a little. This time he looks at the other guy. "I bet I can change your mind."

Biker Guy smiles, says "Maybe. Maybe not." Then he stands up, inviting Chucky to try.

So Chucky, being Chucky, drains the last of his drink and then accepts the invitation.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

Even through the cozy fog of sleep and booze, Chucky knows someone is knocking on his door. He thinks they have been for a few minutes now but he's not sure.

Thump. Thump.

And they don't seem to be going away. So even though it means the possibility of sunlight, and bright colors, and maybe even having to focus on moving objects, he begins to inch his eyelids up. His brain protests violently, threatening for a few moments to punch through his skull and die on the floor. But after a few seconds, things in the room begin to lose their fuzzy edges and fit into place. He's on the couch, still wearing his pants and shoes and socks. His shirt is lying on the floor over by the television. No vomit in sight; that makes him feel a little bit better.

Thumpthumpthumpthump.

He looks at the clock on the microwave and it tells him it's 9:34. In the morning. Got to be a fucking joke. There's movement in the window to the side of the door, someone on the landing is peeking in around the curtain. They must be able to see him, he thinks, and then wishes he still kept a gun around because he would sorely like to blast whoever this asshole is square in the face.

THUMP. THUMP.

He sits up. Swallows. Swallows again. Then he gets off the couch, everything in his body creaking, and goes to open the door.

When he does, Margot is standing there with some guy. Margot, who he hasn't seen or talked to in three years. Margot, who has told him on more than one occasion to

stay the hell out of her life. Margot, who once threw a steak knife at him and ran up three thousand dollars on a credit card she took out in his name. Margot, who is his daughter.

When they were both sixteen, Chucky and Tess fell in love. She worked at one of the bodegas he passed everyday on his way home from school. Her family owned the place. They would have met years before, except that her parents didn't trust the public schools with their daughter and had spent most of their income on tuition to a private one in another part of the city.

Chucky had been an unwelcome presence from the start. Not because he was rude or angry - back then he hadn't been. Not even because he came from a family with no mother and a father who spent every other weekend in the drunk tank. They weren't judgmental. They didn't like him because Tess suddenly wanted to go to arcades after school and have a curfew of eleven instead of eight-thirty. They hated Chucky for this, even though her grades never slipped and he always had her home by ten.

They tolerated him at first, trusting that their daughter was as fickle as all teenagers and would soon tire of him. After a while though, they had grown increasingly sour towards the idea of Chucky and had several screaming matches with their daughter over the matter. One of these had ended on a particularly bad note, sending Tess running from their house and straight into Chucky's bedroom. It had been tender and perfect and the first time for both of them.

Nine months later Margot was born.

Two weeks after that Tess died from an infection contracted in the hospital.

Her parents took Margot home, forbade Chucky from ever coming near her, and raised her as their own. Chucky started drinking a lot of beer, barely graduated high school, and took a job working as a busboy in a diner where a man named Theodore Leavitt was a regular customer. Leavitt liked Chucky and gave him some work running errands for his "business enterprises." Chucky showed he was smart enough to know when to keep quiet and when to make his presence known, when to speak his mind and when to play stupid. Eventually Chucky went to work full time in a bar Leavitt owned and it suited him.

Fifteen years went by until one night a scraggly, hollow eyed girl wearing too much makeup and too little clothing showed up on his doorstep.

"Hi Dad," had been the first words she spoke to him.

She had found out who he was through industrious snooping in her grandparents' closets. This was one of her finer honed natural abilities, along with shoplifting, lying, and ditching school. Almost immediately, his paternal instincts had jumped to life and he had done his best to straighten her out. After a few years though, it became apparent that she had not searched him out to fill a loving fatherly gap in her life, but rather as another resource to mine for cash, shelter, and sympathy.

Over the next decade he had bailed her out of jail once, beaten the hell out of two different boyfriends, put her up for several months here and there, and spent more than ten-thousand dollars to help her out of one kind of jam or another. In gratitude for all this, she had called him every few months and remembered his birthday sometimes.

Everyone who knew Chucky had liked him too much to say it, but they all considered her to be at best a leech, and at worst a whore and a thief. He spent a long time blaming himself for the kind of person she was. People had told him he couldn't take all the credit, she was big girl. He pretended to accept that they were right and then went home and drank.

Three years ago they had become officially estranged. A year ago he heard she had decided to leave town for what she was calling "opportunities" in another state. He'd not heard a thing about her since. He keeps a picture of Tess at the back of one his drawers and sometimes when he's drunker than usual he takes it out and apologizes to her for everything that went wrong.

And here she is now, a few pounds heavier, with some bad blonde streaks in her hair and a few more miles on her face.

"Hi," she says to him like he's expecting her for Sunday brunch.

"Margot," Chucky says, surprised and blinking against the daylight. He looks at her for a few very quiet seconds. "What are you doing here?" he asks and then realizes it sounded mean. He corrects himself. "I mean, hi. Come in."

He stands aside and they walk in. They look around his place and Chucky is immediately, deeply embarrassed. There are about an equal number of empty pizza boxes, old newspapers, and fist-sized holes throughout the apartment. The garbage can should have been emptied two days ago. He shuts the door and then goes and grabs his shirt off the floor. As he tries to get it buttoned up, he also tries to think of something to say. Margot spares him the effort when she introduces the guy with her.

"This is Pickle," she tells him.

Pickle is a very Margot type of guy: at least ten years older than her, dressed in shabby jeans and a t-shirt, and with a look on his face that tells Chucky his IQ met its match in the third grade. Pickle is very skinny but has a potbelly that makes Chucky think of a flagpole that just swallowed a volleyball.

"We're in town for Grandpa's birthday. Thought we'd stop by and say hello."

"Oh," he says, and it's as far as he can take the thought. Because in addition to the shock of Margot being here, he suddenly realizes he has a hell of a hangover. It's a big, buffalo-sized thing which tastes like B.O. and ashtrays on the back of his tongue. He tries to make himself come back to the moment even though he's standing in his dump of an apartment with his long lost daughter and her boyfriend who he just met but already hates if for no other reason than he lets people call him Pickle.

She looks at him seriously and asks "What happened to your face?"

It's then that Chucky remembers last night and Biker Guy and decides he's going to need painkillers and coffee and maybe a shrink to make it through this morning.

Chucky takes them to a diner around the corner for breakfast. Even though the food looks like monkeys are allowed to play with it before it gets served, he knows that at the register they sell things like gum and lottery tickets and little packets of aspirin. He buys one of the packets and then joins Margot and...Pickle at a booth. She fills him in on what she's been up to for the last few years. Kansas City for a little while, then Houston, and finally Denver for the last year and a half. She tells him she's worked as a waitress, a

cashier, and a dog walker. He doesn't know if any of it is true, but if it's not, he figures he'd rather not know. At least she's alive. Pickle doesn't say much beyond giving his order to the waitress, which is fine because even that little bit of dialogue makes Chucky want to force feed him the salt and pepper shakers.

After a while, the coffee and aspirin begin to sand down the rougher edges of his hangover and it's his turn to share.

"How are things at The Palace?" Margot asks.

The Palace is the bar where Chucky had worked for Leavitt for close to twenty years. It's a nice place really, twenty beers on tap, a dining room with a better than average cook in the back, and a bathroom where the ladies aren't afraid to sit down. It's meant to be the clean face of a slightly smudged set of businesses that Leavitt runs around the city, a place where money and information can pass through and cause a minimum of fuss. On paper, Chucky had never been more than a bartender. While pouring drinks had been part of his job, mostly he had been responsible for keeping a secure lid on who and what came in and out of the door, and when the cops came around, to be so polite it annoyed them. A few times, he carried a box or an envelope from point A to point B - and once, about five years ago, he came in to work one morning to discover a puddle of blood on the floor by the pool table. He cleaned it up and then stocked the beer fridge. When Leavitt came hurrying in about two hours later, he looked at where the blood had been, then looked at Chucky. He just said "Thanks," and then went to make some phone calls. For all this, Chucky had probably been one of the best paid bartenders in the world and was always invited to the house for holidays.

Being behind a bar for so long had given Chucky all the chances he needed to become a first rate drinker and he took advantage of them all. As time went on, he also learned that anger management was not his specialty. He starting solving more and more disagreements with threats of violence and eventually, actual violence. One night, a tourist in a loud Hawaiian shirt didn't stop complaining about weak drinks until two busboys pulled Chucky off of him and what was by then his very bloody Hawaiian shirt. Leavitt couldn't afford such a loose temper so he gave Chucky a twenty-thousand in cash severance package and then begged him to dry out. Chucky isn't angry about it. He'd have fired himself long before Leavitt did. .

"I'm not there anymore," he tells Margot.

She's surprised. "Really?"

"Yeah," he says and takes a bite of toast.

"He was there for like a million years," Margot is telling Pickle. "Mr. Leavitt was always a nice man. I like him."

"So do I," Chucky says.

"How's he doing?"

"Fine, I guess. I haven't talked to him much since I left."

"Is everyone else still there?"

"Far as I know."

She seems surprised. "You don't talk to any of them?"

"Not a lot," he admits and realizes he wished he did.

"That's too bad. Was there a problem or something?" she wants to know.

"No, just, y'know, felt like a change," he says and wonder if she can tell he's lying.

Margot fills Pickle in on some of the various personalities that frequent the bar, talking about them like they were a lovable, fun-loving group of puppets on a slightly risqué television show. The way she talks and asks Chucky to fill in the names she can't remember is almost sentimental. It's odd coming from her and he wonders if her time away has had a weird softening effect or if maybe she just needs a favor and is looking for an in.

"So where are you working now?" she finally asks him.

He's not ready for this question. The thought of answering it truthfully makes him feel like he can't justify his own existence. He takes another bite of toast and shrugs. "Nowhere. Taking a little vacation for myself."

"Oh. Good for you," she says a little too happy for him.

By then Pickle is done and wiping his plate with a piece of toast, so Margot asks him to run across the street and grab her a pack of smokes. After he shambles away, she begins to tear nervously at her napkin.

"I wasn't sure you wouldn't shut the door in my face," she says.

Chucky sips from his coffee. It's cold now and there are loose grounds swirling around the bottom of the cup. "I wasn't sure you'd ever knock on it again," he replies.

She smiles and he immediately sees Tess sitting across from him. It puts a spike right through his chest. "I wasn't sure I would either," she admits. "But I couldn't even remember what it is we fought about."

He doesn't remind her they fought over the Father's Day gift. It was a coffee mug, \$12.99, plus tax, and she stole it rather than pay for it.

"How long you going to be in town?" he asks her.

"Just a few days. We have to get back to Denver."

"Will we be able to get together again?"

"I hope so. Other than Grandpa's birthday, we don't have anything to do. Might try to look up some friends from high school, but that's it. I'd invite you to the party, but..."

"Your grandparents hate me," he finishes for her.

They both laugh at this a little. He thought he was still mad about everything, but now he knows he's not, knows he still wants to love his daughter. A few minutes later, Pickle comes back and they pay the check. In the parking lot, Margot gives him the name of their motel and her cell phone number. They don't hug, but she also doesn't ask him for any favors.

That night Chucky only has four or five drinks before he goes to bed.

Chucky sleeps late the next morning, but wakes up remembering a night twenty-eight years ago. He and Tess had been dating eight or nine months and at that point he was still being tolerated by her parents, so they had invited him to a family event. Her father's birthday. He remembers how even though they had invited him, Tess' parents had spent the whole evening deliberately not speaking to him and it was the first time he really sensed that they didn't like him. He remembers walking home being angry. And hot. Hot because it had been a sweltering night. It had been sweltering because it had been the middle of August.

It's the end of January right now.

He sits on his couch for an hour. He considers calling Margot and asking why she lied to him about why she was in town but that idea gives him cramps. He tries to remember everything they had talked about at breakfast and wonders what else was a lie. He feels bad about wondering this but does it anyway. They'd talked about where she'd been living. Where she'd been working. How she met Pickle. Why he had left the Palace. What he wanted to do now. Who he had...

The Palace.

That was where the conversation had felt weird.

Damn.

It feels like there's a rat twitching in Chucky's chest and he remembers the sensation well. Remembers all the times he had regretted not paying attention to it. Maybe it was intuition, or maybe just experience, but either way he's in his car on the way to the motel where Margot had said they were staying.

His daughter may be selfish and dishonest but she isn't stupid. Even though he had kept her away from his work as much as possible, he guesses that what had never been said could have told her volumes.

The Palace is actually between his apartment and the motel, so he decides to swing by to see if... Well, he doesn't know, maybe just to see. When he pulls into the parking lot, he can see that there are half a dozen cars there. That's too many for this early in the morning. He recognizes most of them; they belong to some of the guys who work for Leavitt, guys who would probably be asleep right now if everything was okay.

He knocks on the door, and a few seconds later it's opened by 190 pounds of charm and muscle named Bobby Ninz. "Chucky?" he says, very, very surprised to see him.

"Hey Bobby." Bobby is Leavitt's body man, a nice guy with a smart-ass sense of humor, always quick with a good-natured insult and a smile. One look at Bobby's face tells Chucky that he isn't going to receive either. He fights the urge to gulp like a cartoon character, says, "He here?"

Bobby looks him over a second and then steps aside, making just enough room for Chucky to squeeze inside. The place looks pretty much the same, and Chucky misses it instantly. There are eight people standing around and they all look at him when walks in. They all know him, used to be friends. Nobody says hello.

Leavitt is behind the bar talking to someone on the phone. His back is to the room, but he must notice a change in the atmosphere because he turns around to see what's going on. He sees Chucky and Chucky starts to smile at him, but right away it feels wrong, so he presses his lips straight again.

Leavitt says good-bye to whoever he's talking to and walks right up to Chucky. He looks pretty much the same, too. Chucky worked with this man every day for nearly two decades, so he knows how to read him pretty good, and he's relieved that Leavitt seems more surprised to see Chucky than anything else. At first. After a few seconds though, there's a shift and he can see his old boss connecting dots in his head, putting together a picture that a minute ago had no clear lines.

“Mr. Leavitt,” Chucky says.

“How are you?” Leavitt asks, maintaining the pleasantries for the moment.

“I’m okay.”

Leavitt points to the bruises on Chucky’s face. “You don’t really look it.”

Chucky looks at the floor, says, “Not as bad as it seems.”

And that’s it for the pleasantries, because the next thing out of Leavitt’s mouth is, “We got hit last night. Someone tagged Louis on his way with this week’s drop.”

Even though he’s not really surprised when he hears this, Chucky can feel his heart looking for the nearest exit.

Leavitt continues, “Should I think that, and you showing up here out of the blue are just coincidences?”

Chucky sighs. “Probably not.”

It’s a part of town where every neon sign either blinks erratically or is burnt out altogether, and the sidewalks are a patchwork of stains and blotches spilled from who knows how many good dreams that got scraped across the concrete like a little kid’s knee. Chucky wonders if he’ll live around here someday.

He’s sitting in his car across the street from the motel and watching their room. He’s also procrastinating. He knows they’re still in there because a few minutes ago Pickle came out to put some bags in the trunk of their car.

It had taken a while for Leavitt to put any faith in Chucky. He wanted to. His instinct was to trust Chucky, but it was his daughter they were talking about. And Chucky had always had a father’s blind spot when it came to Margot. But Chucky had gone to the Palace on his own, on a hunch, just in case he could do the right thing.

Leavitt understood loyalty, respected it, rewarded it. Their deal was that Chucky could try to get the money back. He had until the end of the day. After that, Margot and Pickle were up for grabs. He might temper his treatment of Margot because he loved Chucky. If Pickle is ever seen alive again it will be without any legs.

Chucky wastes a couple of seconds wishing he had time for a drink and then climbs out of the car. The sun has begun dipping below the rooftops and the shadows along the street are stretching. Parked in one of these shadows is Bobby Ninz; that had been part of the deal too. He nods at Bobby and then makes his way across the street.

He’s a few feet from their room when the door opens and Pickle comes out carrying more luggage. He pulls up short when he sees Chucky approaching. He opens his mouth to say something but Chucky walks right passed him into the motel room, pushing the door closed behind him, shutting Pickle out on the sidewalk.

Margot is shoving clothes into another bag and doesn’t realize it’s Chucky who has come back in the room. “This is the last one,” she says over her shoulder.

“The money stays,” he says quietly.

Margot whips around at the sound of his voice. Her eyes are wild with fear for several seconds, and then she realizes it’s Chucky. “What are you doing here?” she finally says through a weak smile.

Chucky says nothing and her eyes dart to a gym bag sitting between the beds. When she looks up at him again, she sees that his shoulders are set and his face is without

any expression. He can see her mind work for a few seconds and then she says, “Daddy, we have to--“

“No,” he stops her, shaking his head. Daddy. It’s a desperate play on her part. They both know that there is no Daddy in this room. No Daddy’s little girl either.

“There are men in Denver--“

“No,” he repeats.

“They’ll kill us.”

“Mr. Leavitt knows it was you. You’re not any safer from him.”

“What?” she says, showing just a hint of panic. “How does he know?”

It’s not really a question that needs answering so he doesn’t. Margot sits down on the bed and her shoulders sag around her. She lights a cigarette and blows smoke in his direction.

They are quiet again. She takes a long drag from the cigarette and then stabs it out anxiously. As she exhales, she says, “You could tell him we were gone by the time you got here. Tell him we went to someplace else, not Denver. We’re going to pay off the guys and then split with what’s left. Mexico maybe. In three days we’ll be long gone”

Chucky looks at her. She looks lost, but she’s looked like this before and those times had always ended the same. She got what she wanted and everyone else got nothing.

“I can’t do that.”

“Why not?” she whispers.

Tears are forming in her eyes but he doesn’t look away. “Because Mr. Leavitt has always been good to me. I can fix some of this, but the money has got to go back.”

“I don’t need you to fix it. I just need that money.”

Chucky still speaks quietly. “Was this your plan all along? Is that why you came to town?”

She shakes her head. “We came just to see what we could borrow. When you said you weren’t working there anymore it just seemed like a better idea.”

“How’d you even know the money would be moving?” he asks her.

She shrugs, says “I remember the hours you used to work. Remembered things you’d said over the years.”

“I never thought you were paying that much attention.”

“Yeah? Well I thought that you would protect your daughter.” She takes out another cigarette and lights it. She throws the lighter on the bed and looks at him. He thinks that if she could spit venom right now she would.

“How much do you need?”

“Fourteen thousand,” she says as she wipes a tear with her thumb.

Chucky doesn’t even have close to that. “I’ll help you figure something else out.” Margot stands up, takes a step towards him. In a low voice she says, “Give them Pickle.”

Chucky just looks at her.

“Let me keep the money and you take Pickle to Mr. Leavitt. Tell him that I was already gone. I’ll just disappear and he’ll be happy that he got one of us.”

“Margot...”

“I know Pickle. He’ll tell Leavitt whatever he wants and then Leavitt won’t hurt him. Not bad. He’ll tell him I went back to Denver, but I’ll just disappear. I won’t go to

Denver, I'll go somewhere else and it'll be our secret. You can come with me, there's a lot of money there for two people." She's serious, and it makes him actually feel sorry for Pickle.

"No," he says softly and reaches for the bag.

"Just like that?" she barks. "You're just going to fuck me over and then leave?"

He lifts the money off the floor, says "I need to get going."

She reaches out, grabs his wrist. "I'll tell Leavitt you were in on it too! I'll tell him you planned the whole thing."

Chucky straightens up, looks at her, hates what he sees. Not a trace of Tess, not really. He nods at the phone on the nightstand. "Hand it to me."

Margot is confused. "What?"

"Hand me the phone. I'll dial him for you."

And that's the end of that because even Margot knows it wouldn't work. She steps to him and grabs his wrist again.

"I need this," she pleads.

"Let go of my arm," he tells her. She opens her mouth but whatever she's going to say is met in her throat by Chucky's stare and stopped there. She lets go of his wrist and steps back.

"You're really going to do this to me?"

"I'll smooth over as much as I can," he says and then turns and opens the door. Pickle is standing by the car playing with the room key and looking confused. He sees Chucky with the bag. "What, uh... Hey, what's happening?" he sputters.

"He's taking the money," Margot hisses. "Stop him!"

Chucky steps right into Pickle's face. "Look fuck-o, you can give it a shot, but what's gonna happen here is I'm going to take that key and stick it through your eye. We both know that."

A few moments pass where Pickle doesn't say or do anything. Then Chucky brushes by him and out of the parking lot. Behind him Margot is yelling. "You're the worst father ever. A fucking stupid, drunk old man! My mom was lucky to have died!"

He crosses the street and hands Bobby the gym bag through the car window.

"Tell him if any of it is missing I'll replace it."

As Chucky pulls his car away Margot is still standing in the parking lot watching him. Hating him.

Chucky's plan for the evening is to go to a bar and quietly get as drunk as possible. He finds a place, but fairly early on he winds up breaking a beer bottle across the face of some opinionated yuppie. Then he goes home and cries himself to sleep.

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