

Forget The World

By Matthew Stern

“Stu, will you get that fuck out of here sometime this year?” my boss said, his face shaking so much you’d think his ass was glued to a washing machine.

I didn’t answer him as I was already approaching the fuck in question. He was big, with arms the size of twin Mini Coopers. His ferret face, complete with a ratty brown mustache that might have crawled from a dumpster, was pinched and mean. Two would-be heroes already littered the floor and he was now groping the object of his desire, a tall blonde in heels with legs so long you could land a 747 on them.

I tapped the gorilla on the shoulder. I’m big myself, with enough muscle that I don’t struggle with the pickle jar, but I still had to reach up. “Fun’s over, Chongo,” I said.

He turned, sized me, and opened his mouth for a wiseass remark. I punched him in the stomach, putting my full weight behind it. My fist fit in the upside-down V made by his ribs and air rushed out into my face smelling of fetid taco. He turned a nice shade of magenta and sunk to his knees.

He was a tough mother, though, and grabbed my arm as soon as he was down and started to lever back up. I pinned his fingers to my arm and rolled my hand over his wrist. There was an audible snap as a bone in his wrist gave. The crowd around us gave a collective, “Ooooooh!” and winced like they just saw a quarterback get decapitated on the playing field.

The gorilla gave a kitten-like mewl and the fight went out of him. I grabbed him by the collar and dragged him outside, deposited him in one of the cabs that lined the street and gave the cabbie, an overweight Russian in a Mariners cap, ten bucks to take him to the hospital.

If you just send a troublemaker home with a black eye and a bruised ego, you might see them again later that night with a shotgun. It’s sometimes better to break something so they have to spend some time in the hospital. By the time they are done, they have usually cooled off enough not to do something stupid. Unless Chongo was a stone-cold psycho, I wouldn’t see him again.

I stood outside for a moment. There were low clouds, but they were puffy without the threat of rain. They were white with the reflection of the city’s light, and the head of the Space Needle disappeared into them. The air was cleaner than it had been for a while and the waterfront, only a few blocks away, smelled like a waterfront instead of Hoboken at low tide.

I turned to go back into the bar and heard crying. I followed the sound into the alleyway to the left of the bar where someone was sitting on an overturned milk crate with their head in their hands.

She looked up as I approached and I recognized her. Janey, one of the waitresses. She pushed her long brown hair back past her ears and wiped her eyes which were red and puffy.

“You okay, Janey?” I asked.

She nodded. “I’m okay, Stu.”

“You sure? If a customer’s giving you trouble...”

She shook her head. “No, no. It’s just...it’s been a bad day.”

I leaned against the wall.

She lifted a corner of her mouth with effort. “You ever realize that what you had planned for your life is not what you ended up with?”

I gave her my own lopsided smile. “You think I grew up wanting to break heads every night?”

“I guess not,” she said and lifted the other corner of her mouth and gave a little laugh that caught in her throat and dissolved into sobs.

The tears flowed and I waited, resisting the urge to place an arm around her or pat her shoulder. We didn’t know each other that well. She was attractive, with a nice body that she tried to hide with loose shirts and skirts, but we were not friends.

She sniffed and wiped her nose with a paper napkin she took from her short black apron.

“Do you have anybody you can talk to?” I asked. “Any family here? Any friends?”

She shook her head and tore pieces off the napkin, dropping them into a pile in her lap.

“You can borrow my ear if you want.”

She looked at me, surprised at the offer. I was surprised I made it. She weighed my offer. Before she could decide, the back door opened and Kyle, one of the cooks, popped his shaved head out. “Stu, where the fuck have you been? Gibson is screaming for you. Two guys are going at it and smashing all sorts of shit.”

I looked at Janey. “Find me before you leave,” I said, and went in to do my job.

The night passed, but I didn’t see Janey again. You can only help if they want you to.

As we were closing up, I let a busty redhead convince me that spectacular sex was what I needed that night. She delivered with flying colors but afterwards I only thought of used tissues ripped to shreds and a girl crying in an alley with no one to look to for comfort.

The next night at work I waited for Janey to arrive. At the very least, I could check on her and see if she was doing better. When the night was in full swing and I had still not seen her, I pulled Rachel - one of the other waitresses - aside and asked her if Janey had come in.

She said no and was unhappy about it. “She just didn’t show. No call or anything. We are a girl short now.” She said it so petulantly I thought she was going to stamp her foot and hold her breath. I let her get back to work before a tantrum hit.

The rest of the night passed slowly, with Janey still on my mind. She probably just quit. Not unusual here. We were not friends. We were barely acquaintances. There was no reason for her to come back and talk to me.

Still, it seemed unusual for someone like her. Someone like her would give two week’s notice. Someone like her sent thank you notes on flowery scented stationary.

As the night slowed, I started asking if anyone knew where she lived. No one seemed to know. The bartender, Kip, said, “You gonna get some? She’s a stone fox, I

bet she could suck your dick inside out.” He was cutting fruit with a large chef’s knife. He brought it to his mouth and licked it.

I wanted to beat his ass into oblivion, but he was the Gibson’s asshole son, so ignoring him was the best I could do.

Coming up trumps on her address, I waited until Gibson left, then slipped the lock on his office door and rifled the employee files until I found it. An apartment in Wallingford. Fuck it, it couldn’t hurt to check on her.

The next day, I was up with the normal people and drove to Wallingford and parked outside a small two-story apartment that fronted on a green park where parents watched kids jump, slide, and swing with a dangerous abandon that would put a stuntman to shame.

I walked to Janey’s front door on the second floor. A few doors were ajar and country music and rap battled for dominance. Janey’s door was open as well; no music though. Maybe she was baking muffins. I knocked and called out.

No answer.

I opened the door more and poked my head in. I called again.

Nothing.

I was looking at a small living room with a corner kitchen that contained a small two burner stove and a refrigerator that might fit a loaf of bread. The brick walls were bare and the furniture was crappy, but she had done what she could to make it home. Blankets, flowers and pillows softened the hard edges.

I walked in, calling again. I hoped she was just taking a shower, but I didn’t hear any water. Maybe she was running something to the trash, but a tickle in my stomach said otherwise. A door straight ahead must have led to the bedroom and a bathroom. I knocked on it and called once more and once more got no answer.

I pushed the door open.

Janey lay on her bed. Her unseeing eyes blank and starting to cloud. I felt for the pulse I knew would not be there with my hand inside my sleeve. I watched enough TV to know not to screw up evidence for the crime scene guys.

The room bore the telltale signs of sudden violence: overturned nightstand, smashed lamp, askew picture frame.

She was half-naked, shirt torn and sweatpants down by her knees. I could see red marks around her neck. I stood over her for awhile, looking at her face which looked peaceful, contrasting the violent state of the room. I used my fingers and closed her eyes, then found a sheet in a closet, and covered her. Fuck the crime scene guys.

I used her phone and called the cops.

One police car came, then another and then more. Slow crime day.

I was brought downtown and questioned by a fat detective with jowls so floppy he would blow away in high wind. He kept popping Tic-Tacs into his mouth and peppermint filled the air.

The questions ranged from the predictable to the ludicrous, but he asked them all with the same droning monotone.

Who was I?

“A friend.”

What was I doing there?

“She missed work and I was worried.”

“Did you kill her?” the detective asked, and popped another tic-tac.

“Don’t be fucking retarded.”

He asked me if I had an alibi for that night and I supplied him with the redhead’s name and number.

“Were you the one that covered her up?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because I wanted her to have some fucking dignity.”

The questions got less friendly for a while, but they started repeating and eventually they decided I was just the guy who found the body.

“Does she have any family?” the detective asked me before I left.

I shook my head. “She was all alone.”

I drove home and sat in my sparsely decorated hovel. There were two beers in the otherwise empty fridge. I brought them both to my couch along with a half a bottle of Black Label that I had lifted from the bar a few weeks ago.

I snapped open the first beer, drank half of it and stared at the TV. My reflection stared back at me from the blank picture tube. I drank the rest of the first beer and started on the second. I thought about Janey. All alone in the crap-littered alley crying her eyes out.

All alone. No family. No friends.

I started in on the Black Label. I knew all about alone; maybe that’s why this was bothering me. Maybe if I had persisted with Janey, she wouldn’t have been so alone. With no close friends, no family to speak of, it’s easy to feel yourself drifting through the world one step removed. Without other people to keep you on track, it’s easy to get lost and find yourself in places you don’t want to be or remember how you got there. Maybe with me as her friend I could have kept Janey from whatever track led her to her death in that room.

The Black Label was gone and what followed was a hazy conversation with my distorted reflection in the convex tube of the TV, where we both agreed that it would be a good idea to keep an eye on the investigation.

Three days later, my calls to the detectives running the case not being returned, I walked into the morgue. I lied and said I was Janey’s brother and asked to see her body. The pear-shaped orderly with thinning hair and pockmarked face asked for ID. I gave it to him - and if he noticed out last names were different, he didn’t turn an eyebrow. God bless America’s fractured families.

He slid her out in a wide metal drawer from a bank of them that I assumed held other corpses. A sheet covered her up to her collarbone. I could see the start of the autopsy incision sewn shut with thick black string. Her long hair was splayed out on the metal tray. Her eyes were closed and her face looked calm.

“How did she die?” I asked the orderly.

He flipped through a chart and said, “She was strangled.”
 I remembered the state of her clothing. “Was she raped?”
 Another look at the chart, then an uncomfortable look at me. I was supposed to be her brother after all. “Yes. Also...” he stopped
 I looked at him. “What is it?” I asked.
 “There’s something else.”
 “What is it?”
 “She was pregnant.”
 “What?”

He flipped a page on the chart. “Apparently, she was ten weeks pregnant.”
 I thought about that. It was an easy guess that the pregnancy was what was on Janey’s mind the night I saw her crying in the alley.

I looked once more at the Janey’s body on the cold metal tray. I looked at her neck where someone had strangled her until both her and the growing baby inside her had died. The red marks that I had seen on her neck when I had found her had darkened until they were as black and discolored as a rotting banana.

There was symmetry to the marks and I looked closer. One large black oval followed by two small ones, then a large oval again. The same pattern repeating all around her neck.

“What was she strangled with?” I asked the orderly.
 “They don’t know. Not somebody’s hands. There’s that pattern, but they don’t know what it’s from.” He started talking about release forms and transferring the body for burial. I ignored him and walked out.

I had seen that pattern before.

I sleepwalked through that night at work. The boss threatened to fire me for letting in two girls with blatantly fake ID’s and for ignoring a fistfight that started over a spilled mojito. My eyes were not on the crowd, where they should have been. They were on something else.

Eventually the night ended and the bar closed. Everyone had left except for Kip the bartender who had finished counting out the register and was slicing fruit for the next day. He always locked up for his Dad, who had to go see his mistress before getting home to his wife.

I sat down at the bar with a weary sigh. “You still here?” Kip said. He was slicing limes with the big chef’s knife. The smell of citrus was strong in the air but did not fully mask the ever-prevalent alcohol smell that permeated everything.

The rest of the bar was dark. There were two lights above the counter where Kip worked that threw down twin ovals of light.

“Can I get a beer?” I asked.

He put the knife down and reached into a cooler and came back with a tall amber bottle. He expertly snapped off the cap and placed in front of me. “On the house, just don’t tell my dad.” He went back to slicing limes.

I took a swig of the beer and looked at him. More specifically, I looked at his belt. It was a plain brown strip of leather. Nothing special or remarkable about it. The only remarkable thing was this was the first time I had seen him wearing it.

Normally he wore a belt that he got on a trip to Arizona. It was studded with turquoise stones. One large stone followed by two small ones in a repeating pattern.

Just like the pattern around Janey's neck.

"What do you want, Stu?" He kept slicing but was looking at me.

I shrugged my shoulders then placed both my hands flat on the bar. "I just wanted a beer."

He nodded. His eyes flickered behind me and he said, "We're closed."

I turned my head, but saw no one there. As I turned back there was a flash of steel and a piercing jolt of pain as he brought his chef's knife down and stabbed my hand. The razor sharp steel went through my hand like it wasn't there and buried itself deep in the bar top, pinning my hand to the bar.

"You think I'm fucking stupid, Stu?" Kip said and smashed a full bottle of Stolli against my head. The bottle didn't break, but it felt like my head did as my vision dissolved into facets of multicolored glass. I would have fallen but my hand was stuck by the knife.

Kip slapped me in the face. "Pay attention, Stu," he said. He grabbed the knife handle and twisted a little bit. I felt bones grate and tendons go. Arcs of pain shot from my hand all the way to my toes and my breath caught in my throat. "You've been staring at me all night like you either want to kill me or fuck me..." He gave one last twist. "...and I know you don't swing that way."

Another knife appeared in his hand, and in a flash it was at my throat. A flick of the wrist was all it would take to open my neck wider than the Panama Canal.

"You obviously know I killed Janey. How'd a dumb shit like you figure it out?"

Through the pain and gritted teeth I said, "Belt."

He shook his head. "The belt's gone, man. Cut into pieces and dropped in Lake Union."

I tried to get hold of the pain.

"Were you screwing Janey too?" he asked me.

I didn't want to shake my head for fear of the blade pressed to it. I dry swallowed. "No."

He pressed the knife in harder. "Don't bullshit me."

"I was just trying to be a friend."

"I bet you wanted to."

I didn't say anything.

"You should have tried. She was something, man. She looked all prim and demure. All proper." He was smiling now. "But she could let her freak flag fly high and proud let me tell you."

"You got her pregnant."

"Yeah, I did. Not on purpose. But you know, these things happen."

"Like killing her, did that just happen?" I said. Kip's twisting on the knife had loosed it from the bar a little. I rocked my hand a bit, and felt it give. I bit my tongue, drawing blood to bury the pain.

“She was going to keep it. Wanted me to be a part its life. Help support her. She obviously had the wrong idea about me. I’m not much of a kid person as you can see.”

I rocked my hand a little more. The knife was loosening. “Why’d you kill her?” I said. “Couldn’t you have just left her? Break her heart? Hell, devastate her emotionally, who gives a fuck, but why kill her?”

He leaned forward, almost like he was going to kiss me, and said softly. “Stu, you think she’s the only one?”

There was blinding pain as I lifted my hand off the bar. The top of my hand hit the hilt before the blade released. I grabbed the hand holding the knife to my throat with my other hand and pulled it away. The blade of the chef’s knife was all the way through my palm. I jammed it down, aiming for Kip’s neck. It buried in his shoulder with a spurt of blood and a feral growl from Kip.

He pushed me back and the knife withdrew. He wrenched the other hand holding the knife out of my grip.

Ignoring the pain I pulled the knife from my hand, but dropped it when I was tackled as Kip threw himself over the bar at me. I felt his knife slide across my side, scraping my ribs.

I grabbed his wrist, threw my other arm into the back of his elbow, heard and felt a pop as his elbow dislocated and he dropped the knife.

I picked him up and with a grunt threw him back across the bar into the bottles of liquor sitting on shelves lining the wall. Bottles and shelves shattered and a rain of glass and liquid flowed down onto his body.

I picked up both knives and hopped over the bar. Kip was struggling to dig himself out from the mound of glass that was heaped on him. The air was thick and powerful with the smell of booze.

Before he could right himself, I stepped on his arm and stabbed his hand with one of the knives. It stuck satisfyingly into the old wood floor. He let out a scream that turned into a maniacal laugh. The other knife found his other hand. I found two more knives behind me stuck on a magnetic strip. I pinioned his legs one at a time and drove them through his feet.

Only then, when he was spread eagled behind the bar, did I look at his face.

He was smiling. The madness in his eyes was rampant, rutting like a horny goat. He opened his mouth to say something, and I shoved in a wadded-up bar towel. No wiseass remark. No last words.

He struggled to free his hands and feet but could find no leverage. The knives shook but held.

My feet crunched on the multitude of broken bottles and I made my way to the end of the bar. I fished a book of matches from the large snifter overflowing with them.

I lit a match. It flared bright then settled down to a pearl of flame. I touched the match to the rest of the book and it burst orange.

I looked at him as he struggled with his limbs and mumbled unintelligibly into the rag. No wiseass remark. No last words. I dropped the flaming matchbook into the wet remains of a bottle of Sambuca on the floor.

It went blue with flame and an arc of fire spread out into several contrails as it traveled the wet paths of spilled liquor. Heat blasted my face and I stayed long enough to

watch Kip's face as the ever growing wall of flame drew closer and closer and then engulfed his thrashing body.

I stood across the street and watched the bar burn. It was taking a while for the fire trucks to come and that was fine by me. Let it burn to the fucking ground.

There was no moon in the sky and the orange glow of the fire was a vortex that seemed to suck up all other light in the area. All I could see was the ball of fire in front of me. The rest of the buildings, the whole city, seemed to disappear when you looked at the blaze. Looking at that, it was easy to forget the world existed. Easy to forget that there were people out there that the world just chewed up and spit out like pork gristle. I wanted to stay there a long time.

But as much as you might want to forget the world, the world doesn't forget you. Eventually, a whisper of sirens arose and grew louder. Engines started pulling up and firefighters in heavy jackets and hats spilled out to douse the pyre. Police soon followed, then the required gawkers. The world was still there. I started up the sidewalk and didn't look back.

Matthew Stern lives in Seattle, Washington. He divides his time un-equally between his family, writing, and teaching and training Traditional Chinese Martial Arts.