

## Don't Mess With Paige

By Sophie Littlefield

Paige Gaines was not yet thirty but she had already absorbed a hard fact about herself: she was the sort of woman that men leave.

She wondered if it was because of her education – the small expensive liberal arts college, the cum laude honors, the master's degree. She suspected that love couldn't flourish in an intellectual climate. Cooper, the latest to leave, gave that theory some credence: his departure came on the heels of an offer to teach over at SUNY-Buffalo.

For a while, Paige held out hope Cooper would be back, since he'd left a few cardboard boxes in the spare bedroom. In late spring she gave up and moved to a cheaper apartment.

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Paige was a middle-school teacher, and she couldn't afford much. She'd been counting on Cooper to swing the summer expenses, and had lined up only a few tutoring jobs until school started again in the fall.

She could have called her parents. They'd have been more than happy to send a check. Again. Instead, Paige decided to trim her expenses, make do with a shitty apartment. If she couldn't make it on her own in Syracuse...Paige couldn't bear to take that thought to its conclusion.

She shoved Cooper's boxes in the closet on move-in day. Tried not to notice that the place looked and smelled worse than she remembered. Went through half a bottle of Soft Scrub, hung posters over the worst places on the walls.

Later - half a bottle of sangria later - she got curious and dragged the boxes into the living room. Sat cross-legged on the floor and examined their contents: just Cooper's souvenirs from the year he'd spent in Argentina, doing research for his thesis. Police uniform insignia and buttons, notebooks filled with beautiful sepia handwriting, arcane interrogation devices. And three copies of the thing, bound. *Década Infame: Innovation in the Policía Federal and the Ascent of Juan Perón*. Paige laughed bitterly: somewhere, in her own boxes of books, was the copy he'd signed for her: "to Paige, who understands me best, mind and heart."

Even the rest of the sangria couldn't wash that away.

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Most of her neighbors were what you'd expect for the rent. Bent, slow-moving old people. Mean-eyed laborers with sloppy guts and steel-toed boots.

Women whose men had left.

Paige went out to sweep the tiny concrete patio and saw, through the rickety trellis separating her from her neighbor, an old lady in a cheap plastic chair watching a tiny television. Maybe seventy-five, the woman had a floury complexion and a wrinkled

floral housedress, one eye that opened wider than the other, silver hair that needed a wash and set. On her lap a wooden bowl of potato chip crumbs.

Paige introduced herself. Ida hailed from downstate. Widowed twenty years. Counted her blessings that her grand-nephew had moved in with her – nowadays, it didn't hurt to have someone looking out for you.

The next morning Paige met Thad. He came out of the door as she was headed out for a paper and milk. Complicated facial hair, a few silver rings in the cartilage of each ear, teeth that could use some attention. Tight t-shirt, narrow dirty jeans. Maybe a few years younger than Paige. He let his eyes take their time making a trip up and down her body.

“My lucky day,” he said, voice oily and itchy at the same time. “Come over tonight, let's get to know each other.”

“I met Ida,” Paige said, coolly. Teaching just one year of Syracuse public middle school had given her a rudimentary knowledge of the local varieties of trouble, and she was familiar with the kind spread thick on Thad. “She says she's glad you're here. Protecting her.”

Thad laughed. “Yeah. That's right. We got a...what do you call it? Mutually beneficial thing here. Don't worry, she goes to bed early.”

“Too bad I'm so busy these days,” Paige said, stepping around Thad on the cracked asphalt walk.

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Meeting her friends for drinks, Paige downplayed the SAT prep tutoring, told her best stories from the classroom: kids with weapons, kids with knife wounds, kids with unfocused eyes. Pretended indifference to hear that Cooper was already seeing a woman in the music department. Tenured – she played viola in the string quartet.

When Paige wasn't working, she sometimes brought Ida a glass of lemonade. The old woman watched her little television outside all day, every day.

A couple of weeks after Paige moved in, she found Ida outside with her television in the rain. Her housedress was soaked. Ida looked at Paige uncertainly and said:

“Nancy? Did you put Blaze away?”

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Ida's confusion waxed and waned with the weather. On the hottest, clear days she was sharp, asking Paige about her students, her parents, whether she was meeting any nice young men. On cloudy and rainy days she fretted about the horses and thought Paige was her sister Nancy.

“I realize we didn't get off to a good start,” Paige told Thad. She had waited for him to come home late in the day before knocking on his door. “But I'm worried about Ida.”

“She's fine. See?” Thad opened the door wide and gestured: Ida was watching television, sitting on a plaid couch, fingers working the fringe of a crocheted afghan. The apartment smelled stale, and dishes were piled on the coffee table. “She won't mind if you want to come in. Listen to music. Or you want to watch TV, she can go to bed.”

“Isn’t this *her* place?” Paige put the chill in her voice, like she did for the seventh-graders. “Shouldn’t she get to decide when she wants to go to bed?”

Thad’s eyes narrowed slightly, and his gaze drifted down Paige’s tank top. “I don’t think she much cares.”

“Thad.” For Ida’s sake, Paige forced patience. “Haven’t you noticed how confused she gets? I think she has dementia. She needs to be evaluated.”

“*She needs to be evaluated,*” Thad repeated, his voice soft and mocking. “Maybe that’s the way you do it up in Bryn fucking Mawr. Around here we’re just all trying to stay a little happy one day to the next.”

He leaned out across the threshold, and Paige could smell smoke and whiskey and pizza on his breath. “How ‘bout you, neighbor? Anything I can do to make you happy tonight?”

Paige beat a hasty retreat. Back in her own apartment, she noticed that her hands were shaking.

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She met a man through some friends, a lawyer with one of the big firms downtown. Thought it over carefully and turned him down the first time he asked her out. When he called again, Paige thought she might finally have figured out the game. Took it slow, invented conflicts, feigned indifference. Put some work into looking like she wasn’t wearing much makeup. The campaign took concentration and effort, and Paige neglected Ida, feeling guilty when she waved at the old lady through the trellis.

Came home from the grocery one day and found Ida standing outside the open front door of her apartment with her housedress unbuttoned to the waist, a slack breast visible. Ida was rubbing the skin of her underarm with the fingers of the other hand, and her expression was perplexed.

“I don’t know where Blaze and Nobby got to,” she said when she saw Paige. “I can’t find them.”

Paige led Ida into her own apartment and put the TV on for her; she calmed down when Paige switched it to Montel.

She looked up the number for social services. They said they’d be out as soon as they could – but it might not be until next week. And Nathan was picking her up in an hour. Paige felt terrible about it, but she turned off the TV and took Ida back next door so she could shower and get ready. Thought about leaving a note and decided Thad should hear it in person.

But that night she stayed at Nathan’s for the first time. His condo had a two-car garage, wireless everything, granite countertops. His sheets were Italian.

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Paige didn’t have to go looking for Thad - he came to her door the next afternoon when she finally got home.

The rap on the door was sharp and hard and she figured it was him. The dizzy warm feeling she’d had since waking up in those fine sheets evaporated. She opened the

door and stepped back from the spectacle of his fury, and it occurred to her that maybe she ought to be scared.

Paige knew Thad was selling - she'd grown accustomed to hearing visitors through the thin walls next door late into the night. She knew something about the drug trade; could probably write a field guide based on what she'd seen in the classroom last year, everything from crank and skag to prescription. But at least it seemed like a sideline business for Thad. He had a job; on one of her lucid days, Ida said he was on part-time at the ink factory.

"You called fucking DSS?" Thad said with obvious incredulity. "What about talking to me first?"

Paige could feel her heartbeat ratcheting up, heat rising in her face. "I tried to talk to you. Ida isn't *safe* when you're gone," she said. "She needs evaluation, maybe placement somewhere where they can take care of her."

Thad shook his head like she was some new kind of stupid. "And who's gonna pay for that?"

"Medicare," Paige said, surprised. "She's over sixty-five, right?"

"Yeah? And what, they'll just let me keep this place for free?"

Paige blinked. Oh. She'd just assumed he was paying rent to the old lady - how stupid could she be?

Thad left, muttering. Paige sank to a kitchen chair, rested her arms on the dinette table. She hadn't been thinking things through. And it wasn't just Ida, either. She'd given in to the momentum with Nathan - it had been so much work to stay one step ahead. Bad sign: Paige knew from experience that when she stopped paying attention, things slipped out of her grasp.

That night when Nathan called, she watched the caller ID field on the ringing phone and dug her fingers into her palm to keep from answering.

Tried to think what to do about Ida. Kept thinking about Nathan instead.

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Nathan sent flowers and asked Paige on a weekend trip to New York. A show, a nice hotel room - tiny but elegant. Window shopping on Madison Avenue, holding hands. When Nathan dropped her off late Sunday night, she took the theater ticket stubs from her purse and tucked them into her mirror.

But Monday, when Paige drove home in a drizzle from an especially dispiriting tutoring session - apathetic twin boys whose mother hoped for hundred-point gains in their SAT's - she spotted Ida across the parking lot, trying to open the door to a little blue Mazda.

Paige walked over with a sinking heart. "Ida, what are you doing?"

Ida turned cloudy eyes her way. Snot trailed from one nostril - and she had a livid bruise along one side of her jaw.

"I have to go, Nancy," she whispered fiercely. "Before he comes back. I have to tell Pa."

Paige placed a hand gently on Ida's arm, but Ida snatched it away and rubbed at herself where Paige's fingers had been. "There isn't time," she said, starting to cry. "He'll do it again!"

Back in her apartment, Paige tried to wipe Ida's nose, but Ida pushed at her hands impatiently. "Go get Pa," she kept saying.

Half an hour on the phone with social services led nowhere. Finally, someone came back on and said there were two different names on the records, two different case workers assigned. It was possible one of them had visited – or both – or neither.

"Well, can't you just call both of them and ask?"

No, the problem would have to be worked out in the morning. Yes, someone would call back. Yes, it sounded like another visit was in order.

"What if I just drive her to the hospital myself?" Paige asked, exasperated.

She meant it, too. She'd take Ida to the psych department – they'd have to evaluate her, at least. But there would be the endless intake process - and she had been planning to cook for Nathan.

As she was trying to decide what to do, her front door jerked open and banged against the wall. Thad was on them in two long strides. Ida cowered, hands tucked under her chin like a little girl, a mewling sound in her throat. But it was Paige's shoulder Thad seized with a powerful grip.

He pushed her back until she was up against the living room wall. She could smell his breath, the rank combination of smoke and organic decay, and felt her bladder threaten to let go. "Take your hands off me," she said, but she could manage little more than a hoarse whisper.

"Guess who just called?" he demanded. "Come on, guess!"

"Social services," Paige stammered.

"You're going to call them back and tell them you made a mistake," Thad said.

Paige shook her head. "I can't--"

Fast like a dropped weight, Thad slammed against her. He jammed a knee between her legs and seized her breast, squeezing it hard with his free hand. "How much convincing is it gonna take?"

Paige shoved against him, but Thad just leaned harder. His knee ground into her crotch painfully.

"Or you could move out," he said into her ear, breath and spittle hot against her. "How about that? Get your fancy fucking friends over here with their SUV's, get you out of here tonight. What do you think?"

"Okay," Paige said. "Okay, I'll go, just get off me."

Thad pushed himself off her slowly, letting his hand slide down her rib cage, catching his fingers on the waistband of her shorts and yanking sharply before he stepped away.

"See you do that, bitch," he said. He grabbed Ida roughly by the hand and led her, tripping and stumbling, out the door.

Paige picked up the phone before she could change her mind and left a message for Nathan: something had come up, dinner would have to wait for another night.

"Bitch" was ringing in her ears.

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Thad called her worse things that night before Paige shut him up.

Maybe it was a stroke of luck that she hadn't met Nathan until July. During those long sticky June nights when she was still drinking Cooper away, Page had gone through his boxes again. She'd read the damn thesis, most of it anyway, taking sour pleasure in highlighting grammar errors and typos.

Even drunk, Paige managed to learn a thing or two.

For instance, after she'd immobilized Thad with one fast thrust of Cooper's antiquated electric prod, she used soft cotton strips torn from an old towel to tie him to a chair, so she wouldn't damage the skin. The latex gloves barely got in the way at all as she worked.

The prod was risky; it could leave burn marks. She didn't want to take any chances using it after the initial strike.

That was why she brought Cooper's most-prized relic. The *picana electrica* didn't look like much – a large transformer for a model train, perhaps. Paige wouldn't have been surprised if it dated all the way back to the thirties, when the Buenos Aires police first introduced it into their interrogation practices, a way to get answers without leaving any evidence on the body.

Sponging Thad down with water really made a difference. The second time she asked him where to look, touching the bronze-tipped control to the soles of his bare feet, he told her. The plastic bottles were stashed in an old crock pot behind a pile of baking pans in a kitchen cabinet.

Paige lined them up on the counter, able to identify most of them – 7-Up, roofies, X, Oxy. She hesitated, then shook out an assortment into a soup bowl, trying to ignore Thad's whimpering from the living room as she did so. She filled a tall glass with water and came back to sit in the kitchen chair she'd pulled up in front of the one she'd tied him to.

"I'll hold this glass for you," she said gently, "but if you don't swallow when I tell you to, there's other places I can use this. Same thing if you get too loud."

Thad bucked against his restraints, moaning. Paige had turned the television up loud in Ida's bedroom. Law and Order – Ida seemed to like that show.

Thad swallowed the first few pills but then he clamped his lips shut and jerked his head back and forth, eyes rolling wildly.

Paige wasn't worried: there were the ears, the temples, the nipples. The genitals, if it came to that.

It didn't, luckily. Paige had lost count of the pills when Thad started to hyperventilate and a thin white bubbling foam formed on his lips. His jerking around became more rhythmic and Paige set the wand down on top of the old black box and waited.

When the twitching finally stopped, Paige gave it an extra five minutes or so. She felt oddly calm. She packed the *picana* and the prod into a Bloomingdales bag. She cut the restraints off Thad with her sewing scissors, and put the towel strips and scissors into the bag.

Thad had slipped off the chair onto the floor, and it took a little muscle to get him onto the couch. He'd urinated on the chair, and Paige cleaned it carefully with Windex before replacing the chairs around the table.

She left the plastic bottles in plain view on the kitchen counter, the extra pills in the bowl on the coffee table. She looked in on Ida before she left. The little porcelain

lamp on the nightstand cast a soft rosy glow, and Ida looked almost pretty propped up against the pillows. Paige bent down and kissed her papery cheek.

“Help’s going to be here in the morning,” she said. “Now, you just get some sleep.”

“All right, Nancy,” Ida said dreamily, letting her eyes flutter closed.

Paige decided she’d wait until summer’s end to take Cooper’s boxes to Buffalo. Maybe ask Nathan to come along with her. That would be nice, wouldn’t it – let Cooper see that she’d done pretty well for herself. That he’d picked the wrong woman to leave.

*Sophie's work has appeared in ThugLit, PulpPusher, and other 'zines. She placed in the Crime Writers' Association 2007 short story contest and the 2008 CrimeSpace Short Story Competition. Her first novel, A BAD DAY FOR SORRY, will be released by Thomas Dunne/St. Martins in August, 2009. Visit Sophie at <http://www.sophielittlefield.com>*