

Razor

By Derek Nikitas

After days of aimless wandering, I come across this A-frame house in the middle of nowhere - long glass windows reflecting the clouds that nudged the snow along, steam pumping up from a pipe in the roof. I been out here in these woods four months straight. I probably got just a hundred pounds of meat on my bones by now, most of it freezerburnt. The blood in my veins is getting slushy.

I ain't seen a human in who knows how many weeks. Last one was a hunter asleep in his deer stand. I snuck up on him and filched his rifle and then used it to mug him for his clothes and his boots. He ran down the public trail screaming with his doughy gut flopping over the waistband of his underpants. Them boots was too small, turns out. I shot some things with that gun but when it ran out of bullets it was garbage. The camouflage fatigues lasted a while, but now they look like a crust that has seeped out of my pores and dried there on my skin. When a swatch peels off, I don't know if it's clothes or me or what that's coming apart.

I got no clue who lives here in this house. Nobody's home when I knock, so I shoulder a window until the track bends enough that I can get my hand inside and unwind the knob that arches the window open. I'm golden. I'm through the window, down onto the hardwood floor. No alarms, no voices, nothing but the godsend buzz of hot air seeping from heat ducts.

The warm makes me so drunk I almost doze here on the floor. But soon enough I'm up, nosing through rooms - nothing much but stacked boxes and fancy prints of old-fashioned nude chicks on the walls. Some are nice and plump like I like. In the bathroom I take a piss and rifle through the drawers. I find a vintage sort of flip-out straight razor for my pocket, to keep for myself for protection. The bathroom mirror shows me a guy who's not the same jailbird asshole you see in all the mugshots all them newspapers printed after my clean break - the one where I got the forked goatee, the busted lip, droopy eyelids, missing earlobe, eyebrows shaved off cause I thought for a while I was a hardcore Satanist.

No, the mirror dude's even worse off, with hair like seaweed and a beard like moss, face all ruddy from windburn. I don't know who the fuck he is or where he comes from, except way the hell off the edge of any decent person's guide map. I twist open pill bottles, gulp five or six of each. I beg God for booze, but out in the kitchen I find nothing but milk jugs, butter sticks and grape juice chilling in the fridge.

There's three paper slips stuck with black magnets to the freezer door: postcard Penny Ads that give alerts for missing kids. Weird that all three cards are the same girl, Denise Quimby, two pictures of her face on each - one real from when she was five, the other digital age-enhanced to seventeen. She's from Rochester, near where I used to live before I didn't live anyplace. It freaks me out, thinking how that fake computerized face could be the ghost face of some girl who's been nothing but bones in a ditch for twelve years now. I been stomping out in the woods for months, could've trudged over her shallow grave for all I know.

In the cupboard's like thirty cans of Bird's Eye spinach and fifty-some boxes of Kraft macaroni, spiral and shell and elbow noodle. There's a bunch of bills on the

counter and they're all addressed to some guy called Neil Spinoza. I say the name Neil Spinoza out loud a couple times and in fact it does sound like the name of a whackjob who'd live by himself in an A-frame out in the woods God knows where eating spinach and macaroni.

My eardrums finally thaw and start hearing again, and there's this faint music, like I'm suddenly a receiver tuned to radio waves wafting in the air. My first instinct is: car radio. I duck low and peer over the kitchen windowsill, but nobody's coming down the drive. So I creep soft-footed back into the main room. There's a Mac computer, a big screen TV, a stereo system with speakers strung up on the walls - but none of this stuff is on, far as I can see. Now I'm hearing the music better. It's all high-pitched irritated voices, a kid's song. It's coming from underneath me. There's a door in the main hall I thought was some closet but instead it opens to a staircase shooting down into a basement. There's a blue TV flicker down there. I don't hear nothing but the music - and it goes *Teletubbies, Teletubbies*, over and over.

I don't know why I descend. Something in the lizard brain - the urge to hit bottom. But on my way down them stairs, I take out Neil Spinoza's straight razor and unfold it, just to be on the safe side. The steps are concrete so they don't creak. All's I'm seeing so far is this TV set on a cart, sitting out in the middle of the basement floor playing some crackpot kid's show. To my left there's this kind of homemade jail cell built out of cinderblocks and mortar and them wrought iron gates rich bastards use to keep the revolution out. Inside the cell sitting Indian-style on a cot is this teen I recognize because she's that same Denise Quimby kid from them missing persons flyers posted on the fridge upstairs.

She's seventeen, but she's wearing pig tails and pink two-piece pajamas and slippers with big Scooby Doo heads popping out of them. She's just sitting there watching the TV, which is outside the cell she's in. She's got the remote control on the bed near her knees. She looks pretty much like that computer picture said she'd look. To think some computer program could predict her like that, when I couldn't even tell my own son apart from strangers after he went through puberty.

So I clear my throat and I says to her: "What's up?"

She ain't seen me yet, so my voice makes her flinch. She blinks at me and squeezes a stuffed animal dog against her chest. Inside there she's got her own toilet and shower stall, and a dresser, and some bookshelves loaded with books. She's got a stationary bike in there. She's even got her own vanity with a mirror in there. There's some Polaroids taped to the mirror, but they're all pictures of some fortyish dude with a bald dome and a constipated pucker on his mouth. Just the one guy in every picture, but with different backgrounds and different clothes on him.

"So tell me who you are," I says to her.

She goes: "Who?" She's pretty but her eyes are dark and sunk. Her mouth sags.

"Your name," I says. I hide the razor behind my back so she don't get spooked.

"Neil," she tells me.

"All right, Neil," I says, "I'm Barry Plank."

She turns back to the TV like I'm boring her with my asinine chit-chat.

I ask her: "So what the hell you doing in this cage, anyways?"

She says: "I'm in here."

“That’s what I’m saying,” I tell her. “You want me to get you out?” I got one hand wrapped around a rail and I’m tugging to test its strength. I’d need a sledgehammer to do what I’m offering, but this girl inside only sighs at me, like it’s a stupid question I asked.

So I says: “You’re trapped in this cell. This guy Neil’s keeping you here.”

Her eyes rove along the borders of the cell like this is the first time she’s noticed.

“You’re trapped,” she says to me.

I says, “What’s he do to you? He kidnap you? He tortures you or something?”

She picks up the remote control from her blanket and aims it straight at me, thumbs the power button a few times. From this angle the TV ain’t catching the signal, so nothing happens.

“Holy shit, kiddo,” I says.

She goes: “Quit playing, Neil. It’s not funny.”

I keep telling her: “Let me get you the hell out of here.”

“I don’t have to,” she tells me. She’s not even looking at me when she talks.

Instead she’s zoning on the TV where them little colored aliens with the antenna on their heads are picking up signals from earth. A little video shows up on a screen that the purple one’s got installed inside its fat belly - just a clip of some real-life kids playing in the park. These Teletubbies, they giggle like lunatics. They can’t get enough. They want to watch it again and again.

The girl mutters it, too. “Again...” and she’s smirking a bit.

“Look, you want out of here or what?” I says. I don’t know how the fuck else to put it. I ain’t no shrink or crisis management counselor or whatever. So I go: “Look, I’m here to tell you - you’re some kidnapped girl named Denise Something. Maybe you don’t know, but it’s true. The guy who’s keeping you--”

But she’s gone and put her hands over her ears so she can’t hear me no more. Shut her eyes so she can’t see me no more. Seems to be waiting on me to get off her case.

“All right, fine,” I tell her. Besides, I got my eyes on the rest of this basement, all the shadowy corners where somebody else could be hiding and listening. This guy Neil Spinoza could be back any time, and he’s frankly nobody I got any desire to meet.

“At least...here,” I says. I lean down and put the folded straight razor on the concrete floor between the bars where she can reach it if she wants. She cracks her eyes open and squints at the razor where I put it, but she keeps her hands on her ears and her ass planted on the bed. I tell her, “You can hide it. If he comes in there with you, you can use it against him if you want. You just think on it.”

After that I just kind of head upstairs and let myself out, shaking my head the whole time because there wasn’t nothing else I could think of to do for her. I think about hiding behind some trees till the sick fuck comes back, maybe see how things play out with the razor. I picture Spinoza maybe tumbling out his front door ten minutes after going inside, both hands on his throat, gargling, blood gushing from where she cut a wide red smile in his neck. But then I wonder what good it’d do me or Denise or frankly anybody if I was to watch something like that go down.

Derek Nikitas’ short stories have appeared in Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine, The Ontario Review, Chelsea, the St. Martin’s Minotaur anthology Stories to Die For (edited by Lee Child) and elsewhere. His

first novel, Pyres, was released by St. Martin's Minotaur in October 07, and it was nominated for an Edgar Award for Best First Novel.