

You're a Moron

By C. G. Bauer

The menu was the problem.

He motioned with an upturned hand for the waiter to lean in closer. If the kid didn't catch on soon, Bunny would relocate the menu somewhere less comfortable on his person than his hand.

"Listen, fuckhead..." He grabbed the twenty-something by his tee shirt when he didn't move fast enough, pulled him down toward Bunny's half-lidded eyes to within inches of his thick, gray-blond eyebrows. A Sunday morning breeze rustled the seaside restaurant's tablecloths. To the locals, the calm before the storm. "...I don't care if it's on the breakfast menu or not. I don't care if it's a dinner dish or an appetizer or if you only serve it on leap year Wednesdays. I don't care that your evening fry cook is sleeping one off in that fucking fleabag room he lives in across town, and that he's the only degenerate in all of Cape May who knows how to make it the way I like it. Tell your manager," his voice acquired a mocking sing-song inflection, "that Bunny Huber wants a double portion of clams casino for his breakfast. Trust me; he'll make it happen."

Bunny released the waiter's shirt and patted his cheek with the gusto of a godfather, then guided the waiter upright with a restrained shove to his chest. "Cute tee shirt, Melville - *Careful or you'll end up in my novel*. My advice to you is, careful or you'll end up in a landfill. Get me my breakfast. Now. And don't forget the eggs benedict and the pitcher of mimosas for what's-her-name here."

"Molly," what's-her-name said.

"Right."

The petite, chesty young hottie batted her bright eyes through the remnants of her Saturday night make-up. She giggled, leaned on the café table to promote her cleavage, removed a stockinged foot from one of her high heels, began probing. The other patrons could have only one impression of her: Pick me up, Mr. Big Businessman, show me a good time, fuck my brains out then buy me breakfast if I was a good lay. A return call? Sure, honey, sure. Her heat-seeking toes soon connected with his groin.

Bertram "Bunyip" Huber, president of pest removal experts Zap-A-Rat, Inc., played through the distraction from Millie or Myrtle or whatever the hell her name was while he skimmed another franchise application he knew he'd rubber stamp just to collect the start-up fees. His cell phone buzzed; he simultaneously adjusted his Bluetooth earpiece and his crotch.

"Ma? So you heard... Yeah, they dropped the racketeering charge... Because I have a good lawyer is why. And because I contributed to the judge's extensive collection of Ben Franklins." Bunny snorted through a snicker. "Never mind, Ma. It's not funny if I have to explain it. Stop...shit...wait, Ma.

"I'm your son, goddamn it. You should be happy. Look, I run a legitimate business. Philly's a city, cities got rats, and my company kills them... HEY, don't disrespect me.

"Ma. *MA!* Shut it, okay? Just vote for a different judge next time."

A coffee carafe, a tall glass of tomato juice and a pitcher of mimosas arrived, this time along with the Hawaiian-shirted restaurant manager who lingered after shooing away the waiter. Bunny winked his thanks while still answering questions from a voice a hundred miles away in northeast Philadelphia. The manager nodded and retreated.

“What, I should turn over a new leaf just because you’re not feeling well? Okay. Okay. OKAY. Correction, you’re dying. But shit, Ma, you’re like, what, eighty-six? Sorry, seventy-eight. Ma. Ma... I know. Cancer sucks. Emphysema sucks. All diseases suck. But face it, you weren’t gonna live forever...stop mumbling, Ma. Hello-o, I’m right here, goddamn it. You’re bad mouthing me and I’m right fucking here.”

Another salt-aired breeze slipped under the canopy of the restaurant’s beachside deck and whipped into Bunny’s earpiece, making him resettlement. He paused.

“What was that noise?” He put his hand over his ear then concentrated.

Pffft.

“That one. Sounded like the flick of a lighter. Was that a cigarette lighter? It’s a lighter, isn’t it? You’re smoking again. Un-fucking-believable. No wonder your family wants nothing to do with you; you’re a moron.”

His companion raised her eyebrows. Bunny glared at her until she lowered her eyes to the champagne glass. She raised it and gulped.

“Now look what you did, Ma, you upset my date... Huh? Someone I met last night...fine; someone I banged last night, happy with the clarification? Oh yeah, right, I forgot. You won’t be happy until I straighten up and fly right. Until I...what was it you said? ‘Stop ruining other people’s lives’?”

“We been over this. The key word is ‘victimless.’ People choose my services of their own free will. You like the money, the neighborhood recognition, the respect, the gifts, or at least you used to, but now you’ve changed your mind because of...what? What some newspaper columnist is blabbing? What the fuck do I care? And what’s the big deal about another dead meth cooker? They can’t connect me to--” He turned to face another patron. “What the fuck you looking at, Jabba? Eat your pound of bacon and your dozen doughnuts and mind your own goddamn business.

“No. No, Ma, not you. MA. Huh? My brother’s what? His chain saw? Yeah, I still got it. How the fuck do I know? From some spilled red paint, or stain maybe? Wait...where are you anyway?”

Two couples the same generation as Bunny’s mother retreated to the relative PG-rated safety of the restaurant’s indoor seating. Mindy or Marlo and her tits were gone too, but not before having sucked the pitcher of mimosas dry. Bunny had the seaside deck to himself.

“You’re in my house? Goddamn it, Ma, so I still have his chain saw. Who was I gonna return it to? He’s dead, damn it. Oh, excuse me. ‘Missing and presumed dead.’ Just don’t count on him showing up anytime soon... Nothing, Ma. I don’t mean nothing by it.

“I am not turning myself in! Get out. You don’t live there anymore so get the fuck out of my house. You found evidence? Of what? You’re crazy, Ma. I’m gonna change the locks. You’re trespassing, damn it. And how the fuck did you drag that oxygen tank up all those cement steps to the front door? A few what? Right. A few Jacksons to the cabbie... Fine. Got it. Ha-ha. ‘Like mother, like son.’ You’re a regular riot, Ma.”

Then wham, all of a sudden, there it was for him, a stark realization in black and white, his disapproving mother in mid-sentence talking about how she'd believed him all these years, about how she'd believed he wasn't into all this other criminal activity the cops had accused him of but now, today, she felt different, knew different, the emphasis hers. For him, the here and now of her words had produced a revelation of absolute clarity. A moment where, dark as the conclusion was, everything suddenly came into focus.

Bunny apologized for his tirade, told her he'd be home as quick as the Atlantic City Expressway would let him, also told her she needed to stay right where she was, in his house. "Don't move. We'll take care of all this when I get there. Promise."

Bunny dropped two fifties on the table. The restaurant and its fucknut waiter deserved squat, but Bunny had a reputation to maintain. He jammed the Jag's accelerator soon as he pulled out of the parking lot. He cruised west, his destination just another rat-infested domicile in need of his services.

Philadelphia, 38 miles. He was making good time. At this speed he'd be home in under half an hour.

She'd become a liability. She'd grown a backbone, had suddenly found her conscience and God knows what else inside his house. All because for her, the end was coming sooner rather than later, and - surprise! - dying from a disease could in fact be very painful. She'd also rediscovered her faith, so in addition to squaring herself with God, Bunny was shit-sure she was confessing more sins than her own on Saturdays.

"Turn yourself in." He'd nearly wet himself laughing when she'd demanded it.

This would be easy for him, physically and emotionally. She was almost dead already; he'd be doing her a favor.

The Jaguar slipped into Bunny's personal parking space, the one marked 'Handicapped' directly in front of his two-story row house. A perk from his mother's declining health, and a gift that kept on giving long after he'd moved her into assisted living.

Narcissists - the Philly crime reporter used the label in an opinion column describing the city's multiple alleged crime family bosses, Bunny Huber in particular. Well, duh. They just didn't get it. And neither did his mother, who thought being a narcissist meant he liked to fuck dead people. Moron.

"All it means is, I'm practical, Ma," he told her when she'd quoted it from the column. Recent disagreements, some deals gone bad, violent confrontations - they'd all resolved themselves the same way: The winner got the spoils, the loser got popped. Kill or be killed. "Him or me, Ma. It's always going to be him or me."

The dead gambler from South Philly. The castrated pimp in Upper Darby. The overdosed meth lab entrepreneur who for some retarded reason had decided to compete with him in Philly's greater northeast.

And Bunny's greedy older brother, recently reported missing. Bunny grunted through a sneer. Rest in pieces, bro.

In a few minutes she'd understand entirely.

"Him or me," he whispered and climbed the steps to his house.

His nine millimeter drawn, he didn't smell the gas fumes until he opened the swinging door to the kitchen.

She was seated on the linoleum floor, her backrest an oak cabinet, her cell phone camera held up, pointed at him. She'd already taken the picture, was keeping her shaky hand raised to make sure he knew what it would show: him pointing a gun at her. He almost didn't recognize her with her lopsided gray wig. That, and the large mask snugged onto her emaciated face and covering her nose and mouth, her oxygen tank by her side.

He lowered the handgun, returned it to his waistband. Using the piece with gas fumes present would not be cool.

"Damn it, Ma, what is it (*cough*) with you?" The sweet smell worked its way up his nostrils; he put his hand over his face. "Did you (*cough*)..?"

"Didn't send it yet," she said, her voice muffled by the plastic mask. "A picture of you and your gun pointing at me, then me dead from a gunshot wound...or gas." Her raspy smoker's voice worked hard for each breath. "It won't look good for you. You're hurting (*cough*)...too many people. You're a bad person, Bertram. Stay where you are...and tell me you'll turn yourself in. Make me believe you. Or I send it." She labored through another inhalation. "Don't move...and say it...like you mean it. Say it. Now."

He replayed his entrance in his head, visualized where her crippled fingers were on the phone when she'd held it up. He was sure she was telling the truth, that she hadn't hit 'send' yet.

Without the oxygen mask she'd die in here. Excellent. Better than him having to croak her. He'd hold his breath, rush her, rip her mask off her face then bolt outside. How fucking lucky was this?

"Ma, remember what I said (*cough*) about how a narcissist is simply someone who's practical?" He took a non-threatening, deceptive step to the right, would soon make his move, but not before he played along by mustering up some fake sincerity. "Ah hell, never mind, Ma. You got me. I'll turn myself in. Promise."

She studied him. A sigh, unencumbered and resigned, left her diseased lungs. She lowered the cell phone to the floor then shocked him by pulling the mask off her face. Her hand retreated into a pleat in her skirt. She blinked a tear; it streamed down her cheek.

"Yes, I remember," she said through another cough. "Him...or me, you said. For you it's always 'him or me'."

She rotated her wrist, her palm now facing up, exposing what she'd retrieved from the skirt pleat, her thumb poised.

"This time, it's both."

Pfff.

C. G. (Chris) Bauer wouldn't trade his Northeast Philly upbringing of street sports played on blacktop and concrete, fist fights, brick and stone row houses and twelve years of well-intentioned Catholic school discipline for a Philadelphia minute (think New York but more fickle and less forgiving). His debut novel Scars on the Face of God: The Devil's Bible will be available from Drollerie Press late 2008.