

1998 Was a Bad Year

by Jedidiah Ayres

It was his turn with the kid this week. Beth was out of town with some new boyfriend who was taking her all manner of places she'd always whined about wanting to visit. *Good luck, bro*, thought Terry. *See if she lets you in the back door now*. Since Wendell was with him and he had to work hard to score points in the dad department, Terry'd decided to teach the boy to drive.

Wendell was thirteen and it was embarrassing how soft he was. That was his mother's fault. She was always spoiling him, always cuddling him as a baby when he cried. Maybe that shit worked with girls, but you had to be tough on boys. It's a cruel thing to not whip boys, they've gotta learn about things young so that they can handle it when the world takes off its belt.

A bonus to having the squirt around and knowing how to drive was that Terry could get stinko at the Gulch without chancing another DWI on the way home. He pinned a note to his jacket instructing the bartender, who would find him passed out or incapacitated, to get the kid out of the Monte Carlo on the corner to help him out the door.

It must have worked because when the banging in his head woke him up he was on his own bed. His jeans were wet and cold about the crotch, but the bedding looked to have been spared the worst of it. The banging started again and sent regret throbbing through his head. He heard someone talking in the other room followed by the creak of the front door. "Who was that?" he called to Wendell.

"Run, Dad! It's the police!" Came the immediate reply. Like a hungover robot, Terry's legs shot out from under him and carried him toward the bedroom door. He tipped over his dresser to block the way, then slid the window open and jumped through kicking his legs spasmodically and landed upon his head in the lumpy lawn outside his bedroom. As soon as he hit the ground, he rolled into a crouch and sprinted through the back yard into the woods, over the creek and north toward St. Louis.

After five minutes of flat out running, which had slowed to a sloth's pace, he fell to his knees and puked a puddle of yellow liquid that would surely kill the grass. Then he rolled over and passed out.

He woke again to banging in his head. It felt like someone was trying to jackhammer their way out from behind his eyeballs. When he got to his feet and began the long trek to civilization, he tried to remember why he'd slept in the woods. He'd heard Wendell say 'run' and 'police', and instinct had carried him to that spot, but he might've overreacted.

When he found that he was on autopilot, heading for the Gulch, he smiled. *Good old autopilot*. He was there before the jackhammer guy seemed close to getting out and Terry tried to tickle him to passivity with a hair of the dog.

Cal Dotson came in after a half hour and called out when he saw Terry. "Hoah, the man of the hour." He beamed like Terry'd just made him a grandfather as he crossed the dark void between them and sat on the adjoining stool. Cal clapped Terry hard on the shoulder and then smacked the bar with equal enthusiasm. "Bartender, do not accept a

dime from my friend here. Everything he wants tonight is on me. In fact-- “Cal looked around and counted the patrons up to two, “--next round is on me.”

The bartender grunted and the other two drinkers said, “Fuck you” in unison. The drinks were poured and didn’t have to wait long to be picked up. Cal smiled at each of his benefactors and ignored their sour expressions while he explained the reason they were celebrating.

“My friend here is a published author as of three days ago.” Nobody cared, but Cal continued. “And like all great authors, he confronts the establishment in his time and lives in mortal danger of its wrath, all the while sowing seeds of immortality in the hearts and minds of all those who read his words.” He drained his Bud and signaled for another before the empty glass was on the bar. “His ideas, once released, can never be called back or quieted. They sally forth and do not return void.”

The bartender poured himself a drink too, slammed it, and then said. “The fuck you going on about?”

Cal made as if he were sizing up the bartender and the clientele, then placed his hand upon Terry’s shoulder. “You look, to me, like gentlemen of the world and as such it may warm your hearts to hear that Terry here fucked the sheriff’s daughter.” Indeed, there was a mumbled appreciation of this claim.

“And furthermore, my colleagues of discriminating taste, he chronicled the event.” Terry felt his balls tingle, as Cal’s story was just now cutting through the alcoholic fog that gripped his mind. “Then he published the story in *High Society* magazine.”

The bartender raised his eyebrows.

“It’s electric out there.” Cal gestured toward the outside world. “Everybody’s talking about it. Blaylock’s is sold out and they’re disappearing from all the liquor stores in a fifty mile radius. You my friend, my hero, must take precaution. Please finish your refreshments and then go underground. Follow the drinking gourd and trust no one till they talk funny.”

Ah, thought Terry. *Now it makes sense*. He began to giggle uncontrollably. The thought of Sheriff Mondale finding the published account of his wild kid’s kinky habits in the hands of every deadbeat loser in town made him happy. Cal joined him and after an interval, even the bartender smiled and poured another round.

After a few minutes, the wisdom of Cal’s advice also crept in. The police had already been to his house. They were probably looking for him now. Mondale was going to nail his ass. He needed to create some distance between himself and Johnny law. Suddenly panicked, he turned to Cal. “You got any cash for me?”

Cal shook his head. “But such as I have I give unto thee.” He took a set of keys out of his pocket and placed them on the bar. Take care of her, amigo and bring her back soon, but go now. Be smart.”

Terry slapped the keys off the bar and clapped his friend on the back. Cal was right. He hadn’t thought this through that well. He really should take off for a spell. Wendell would be fine on his own for a few days. Probably have the time of his life, maybe even ditch his virginity.

He found Cal’s pickup outside and stepped into the cab. He was dimly aware of eyes on him – the famous outlaw who’d defiled the sheriff’s little girl. He was still woozy and decided to skip taking a bow. The engine started right up and he was shifting

into reverse when he heard the hood smashed. Startled, he looked into the cold dead eyes of justice.

Sheriff Mondale's fist left a ham-sized dent in Cal's truck. Terry looked around and saw that they, indeed, had an audience. The Gulch emptied as well as the grocery on the corner. The clerks had abandoned their posts and stood with their faces smashed against the glass storefront to see him die. Traffic stopped going both directions and the whole thing played half speed.

Cal stood there, in the doorway, guiltily nursing his beer while his best friend was about to die. The sheriff walked around the front of the truck while Terry sat still and dumb. When Mondale got to the door, Terry pushed the lock down. Mondale reached in the open window and pulled up on the mechanism. Terry slapped it back down and started rolling up the window. Mondale just pulled the glass completely out and it shattered on the pavement.

The sheriff didn't bother opening the door. He reached for Terry, who slapped ineffectually at the giant hands, and hauled his redneck ass through the window. Mondale's grasp swallowed up Terry and held him by both hands, then by both wrists.

He slid Terry's left hand under his right arm so that he could hold Terry's right hand in both of his own. Terry started screaming a hysterical, high-pitched scream. "Please, no. No, no, no, no. I didn't know, I swear." His fingers wriggled and writhed, but eventually were subdued. When his middle finger was secured, Terry took a deep breath.

The *snap* stopped time.

His finger made an unnatural 'L' with the other then dangled backward like a wet noodle. The breath leaked out of him and he sucked pathetically for more, but didn't find any. The process was repeated with far less struggling on his left side.

Everything hurt. He was helpless like a fuckin' mental cripple. Both middle fingers broken near off, were taped to the ring fingers. Everything was hard to do: eating, dressing, bathing, driving. Forget about work, he couldn't handle a riding lawn mower, let alone a CAT, which left him many idle hours. And that was even worse. He couldn't shuffle cards or tug his meat and daytime TV was for housewives. Hell.

He called Beth, which was an accomplishment in itself and asked if she wouldn't mind letting the kid stay with him more while he was incapacitated. She agreed right away, which made him feel worse. That meant she was probably still getting some from that new guy. There was no satisfaction in getting what he wanted if it didn't involve depriving someone else of theirs. But Wendell would be helpful to have around. He'd do just about anything Terry asked, then retreat to a corner to remain unnoticed until needed again. If only his mom had been that way.

Thursday night, Cal picked him up at six and Terry told Wendell not to expect him back all weekend. His son took the news stoically and Terry wondered if the kid's delicate feelings were hurt or if he was stoked to have the place to himself. Sadly, it was probably the former. He was a strange kid. When Terry was that age, he'd have given his left nut for run of the house for a weekend. Oh well.

Cal was happy. Thursday was usually the best part of the weekend, and he regularly called out sick or just didn't go in to work on Fridays. They headed for the

Gulch and hit happy hour in the face. Each of them ordered a pitcher of Bud and three shots of Tequila. Terry shared his painkillers and the weekend had begun.

Two hours later, the cocktail of motor skill assassins had rendered Terry clumsy and he spilled the last of his second pitcher and cussed. "At this rate, I'll be dry by Sunday."

"Won't let it happen, kemosabe." Cal laughed. He grabbed his own pitcher and took it over to the next table. Charlie and Toby, the men already sitting there weren't happy to see him.

"Fuck off," the older one said as soon as Cal had settled and begun to pour himself another drink. Cal ignored him and drained half the glass in a single gulp. "Hey. Did you hear me? Fuck off, like now."

"Get bent, Charlie."

"What did you say?"

"Go out back and play with each other quietly, so the rest of us can finish a drink," said Cal. Toby, the younger one, stood up and Cal kicked his knee from under the table with a steel toe. The young man fell and smacked his face on the edge of the table, sending all the drinks and glass that rested atop crashing to the floor. "Son of a bitch!" cried Cal, seeing his unfinished pitcher go to waste. He reached across the table and smashed his mug on the side of Charlie's head.

Quickly as he could, Terry made his way over and began kicking Toby in the ribs. If Toby managed to get to his feet, Terry would be useless with his mangled hands, but it didn't happen. Terry connected the heel of his cowboy boot to Toby's temple and the youngster stopped moving.

A horse kicked Terry in the kidneys and he collapsed with a whimper. The bartender stood over him with a well used baseball bat. "Get the fuck out, now!" Cal and Charlie stopped their 'rasslin and together dragged Toby's unconscious body out the back door while Terry followed, unable to contribute because of his hands.

When they'd propped Toby up against some garbage bags, Terry made his contribution by taking out the last of his painkillers which all three of them split. Charlie dry-swallowed his, then looked down at the man on the ground. "Shit. There goes my ride."

"You can ride with us." said Cal.

"You are a white man," said Charlie, "and I know a place."

"Oh yeah? Like a reasonable place? How much?"

Charlie reached into his back pocket and took out his Saturday Night Special.

"We can make a stop first."

"Okey-doke."

The Mexican population was a small, but growing minority in town, a fact that alarmed most of the citizens. They were a cluster that were rarely spotted outside the borders of Beantown, but were large enough to have their own grocery store that stocked mini tortillas and a rainbow coalition of salsa and beans. They also had their own video store with Mex titles starring big-titted, big-hipped Mex starlets, and that were big on guns and mustache wax. They also had their own liquor store.

The volume wouldn't be large enough to make a worthwhile score of the cash register, but there was a neighborhood Mex lottery held on Friday nights and Charlie

figured they could hit that stash tonight for enough to make a good weekend for the three of them at a brothel he knew in West Memphis.

One advantage, Charlie figured, was that it probably wouldn't even be reported to the police, seeing as how the lottery was unregulated. "Rock on," agreed Cal and Terry opened the window so that the breeze would brace him enough to be a getaway driver.

They parked across the street and Cal put the car in neutral and pulled the parking brake. Terry slid beneath the wheel and rested one palm on top and one on the stick. "I got this bitch," he said, confident on adrenaline and racial superiority.

Cal popped the glove box and grabbed a mask, and he and Charlie strode across the pavement like it was the streets of Laredo. Charlie kicked open the door unnecessarily and the cowboys charged in brandishing weapons. With the windows rolled down, Terry could hear the muffled shouts and make out the flailing of arms between the window posters for exotic Mex liquors and Budweiser, the king in any language. He wished that he were in there too. The testosterone surge had produced instant facial stubble and he thought about what kind of whore he'd select for the weekend.

It was taking longer than usual for one of these jobs, but that was to be expected, he figured, since there would be a separate safe for the lottery money. Maybe the greasers were giving them trouble about it, denying and playing dumb. *Fucking beaner trash*, he thought. *Give it up.*

A small contingent of civilians was beginning to collect on the sidewalk, somehow aware that something was going down. Spooky how the ethnics were connected like that. A couple of them even turned and looked at Terry who extended his bandaged middle finger to them out the window. He revved the motor as the front door burst open and a masked Charlie emerged pistol in one hand, grocery bag in the other. The door shut again behind him and was instantly painted red in a single blast.

Charlie didn't even turn around. He sprinted across the street and began fumbling with the door handle. Terry stared at the door as the red paint began to slide down, effluvia separating and streaking the glass. The door was flung open again and a stout Mexican woman with a shotgun stepped over the headless corpse of Cal and took aim at the car.

"*Go, go, go!*" urged Charlie.

"*Shit, shit, shit!*" countered Terry. The car lurched and died at the same moment Charlie was flung across the seat and into Terry's lap. He was missing the right side of his face. "Shit, motherfuck!" The car started again and Terry pushed Charlie to the other side of the cab. He clipped a parked car and had to use the back of his right hand to clear the blood and hair from the windshield. He succeeded only in smearing it before he had to shift again.

The car lurched a second time, but didn't die and he picked up speed while the back window exploded. A sharp pain in his neck turned warm instantly and he gunned the car. Reaching the windshield again, he scrubbed harder and cleared a window just large enough that he was able to register the streetlight before he struck it.

He woke up in a hospital room. Nurses came in every half hour, police too, but he wasn't speaking yet. He barely registered anyone's presence. Someone snapped their

fingers and he followed the sound to a deputy who spoke his name. “Hickerson. Terry Hickerson. You hear me?”

He must have nodded his head because the next thing he knew they were wheeling him out of the hospital and taking him to the police station. At the station, Terry was seated at a folding table in the break room that doubled for an interrogation space. His head cleared disturbingly quickly as he eyed the Doritos in the vending machine and his stomach bubbled. The deputy came back in the room ten minutes later with two styrofoam cups of weak government coffee. In the light, Terry read his name - Musil.

“What the fuck time is it, Deputy Musil?”

“Two-thirty.”

“What time you feature I might get to bed?”

“Just depends on your willingness to cooperate.”

“Shit, then I am never going to sleep tonight.”

“I just want you to answer a few questions.”

“See and I don’t want to.”

Musil took a sip of coffee and swished it around his mouth. He smiled a sad smile at Terry like he pitied him. It pissed Terry off. Musil leaned back and turned his attention toward the snack machine. He said, “These damn apple pies are making me fat. See, the problem is that coffee is a necessity and what’s available here is shit.” Musil indicated the coffee in front of Terry which did look poor. “The only thing that makes it drinkable are these sugar bomb ‘pastries’ and the only thing that makes them tolerable is the bitter-ass coffee.”

Musil punched a button and the machine shat out a green paper wrapped apple pie. The policeman peeled it lengthwise, like a banana, and tore off a corner causing white cracks to shoot through the sugar coating. “I bet I could leave one of these in a bowl of milk overnight and it wouldn’t be soggy in the morning.” He popped the piece into his mouth, took another swig of the coffee and swallowed. “Terry. This has got to be your shit year.”

Terry had no objections to that statement.

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