

## Halloween Comes to County Road Seven

By John Mantooth

By the time Doug settles back down on the couch with a fresh beer, Martin has started another porn flick. "I'll bet your wife doesn't have a set like that," Martin says, motioning at the television where a big-breasted woman with bad teeth slowly removes her top.

"And I can't afford to buy her none, neither," Doug says.

He means it as a joke, but his words come off pinched and angry. A week ago, he'd been fired from his job at the Honda plant because the shift foreman smelled alcohol on his breath one time too many. When his wife, Wanda, found out, she told him not to bother coming home unless he had another job. He'd been with Martin ever since, going on a week now.

He looks over at Martin, high as the cow jumping over the moon, grinning stupidly at the television. Martin, who Doug has known since grade school, lost his job three years ago and just look at him now. A sack of shit, true, but a happy sack of shit.

He lays around most of the day, taking hits of crank, then doing something stupid like shooting a hole in the side of his trailer or running laps around his aboveground pool. Sometimes, after a few hits, he just sits and picks at his toenails for hours, mutilating them until they look like bloody faces, leering up at him. Once he got scared and tried to cut them off, but Doug managed to talk him down. Mostly though Martin just sits on the couch, watching porn, raving about some whore he'd done or wants to do, waiting for the doorbell to ring. The doorbell rings, he gets up and answers it. Trades little homemade baggies for government issued green. Saturday nights, he might shower, go to a bar, pick-up a twenty-three year old in high heels and a miniskirt looking for some free crank.

Doug and Martin have an agreement. Doug can stay indefinitely as long as he is willing to help out when some fellow named Snakeskin shows up. Doug isn't even sure if Snakeskin is a real person or just another one of Martin's drug-induced delusions.

"Snakeskin's going to be by one of these days, and when he comes, he's coming to kill me," Martin told Doug a week ago. "That's when you'll earn your keep, Dougie. I'll know it's him by the sound of his truck. Its geared low, so low I'll hear the bastard a half a mile down the road. All you have to do is go in the lab. Take this gun," he said, opening a drawer that contained several dirty needles, a pair of women's underwear, and the biggest handgun Doug had ever laid eyes on. "Take this gun and slip into the lab. Flip the vent up so you can see. If Snakeskin makes a move, shoot him right between the fucking eyes."

Then Martin showed him the 'lab'. Really just an oversized closet with some burners and some holes cut in the wall for ventilation. The room reeked with the smell of cat piss. Doug had not returned to the room since.

Today, Doug needs some air, so he leaves Martin alone with the porn and escapes through the back door to light a cigarette on Martin's tossed-together deck. The air out here smells good. Another downside of being Martin: his trailer smells like chemicals and stale beer. Not that the happy bastard ever notices. Doug glances back over his shoulder and is grateful for Martin's darkened windows. Sheathed in black trash bags, the windows remind him of something. Today is Halloween. He thinks about his

daughter, Maci. Is she old enough to go trick or treating? Probably not, but maybe next year.

He considers sitting in a lawn chair, but remembers Martin and some chick doing it in that same chair last week. So he stands, watching the late afternoon sky. There's a good breeze, but it's cold – too cold for late October in Alabama. Winter's coming and it's going to be bitch, Doug thinks. Especially without a place to stay or a job. He tries to convince himself that he can find work again. Tries to believe he can patch things up with Wanda. Tries to imagine how next Halloween will be: Maci waiting for him to come home from work. She'll be standing in the driveway dressed as Tinkerbell or some princess. He likes this scenario. He wants to go back home.

As he starts back inside for a beer, he stops, frozen by a loud rumbling out on the road. He waits, hoping it will pass. But when it doesn't, he feels torn between going back inside or taking off for the woods where his truck is parked, hidden from the road. Now the trailer shakes as the truck roars up the gravel drive. One thought paralyzes him: What if Snakeskin is real? What if he does mean to kill Martin today?

"Doug. Hey Dougie boy," comes Martin's voice from inside. "It's showtime."

Taking a deep breath, Doug again contemplates making a break for it. He could run up through the woods and be at his house in no time. He could convince his wife to take him back. He could help Maci make a costume and together they could go trick-or-treating.

Where would they go? he wonders.

He laughs at the prospect of coming to Martin's door. What would he put in Maci's bag? A joint? It's not funny, but he has to laugh anyway.

And just before Martin swings the door open, Doug feels it. A burning inside of him to get the hell away from Martin. Back in school, Doug always managed to get wrapped up in Martin's stupid schemes. But it's too late. The door is open. Martin stands at the threshold.

"Shake your thang, man. It's time."

Doug steps back inside.

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"Get the gun, and be ready to use it," Martin says, his usually smiling face turning suddenly serious.

Doug doesn't move. He never expected this. He wishes he had stayed outside, run off into the woods, or maybe even just stopped drinking four years ago when Maci was born. Hell, if he'd just done that...

"You think I'm fucking with you, Doug?" Martin shoves him hard in the chest. "You think I've just been letting you lay on my couch and drink my beer for free, you piece of shit? Get the gun. Now."

Doug hears someone outside fiddling with the gate. Of course, it's Snakeskin. A coldness grips him, and all of the beer he drank today feels like it's in his bladder, wanting out very badly. He walks over to the dresser and opens the drawer.

Doug doesn't know guns, but the one in his hand is so heavy, the barrel so thick, that he is sure it can destroy a man, obliterate him, change his face from flesh to pulp, from something that's recognizable to something that isn't.

The 'lab' seems even smaller than before. Doug finds the vent and opens it enough to see out into the den where Martin is taking a final hit before facing Snakeskin.

He doesn't want to shoot anyone, but the second Martin opens the door and Snakeskin walks in, he knows that he may not have a choice.

Choice. He wonders sometimes if he has ever really had a choice. Can he help it that Martin had been his friend in school? That Martin reminds him of better times, and better times is all he's got? He wishes he could forget Martin completely, but he feels powerless to do so. His life seems like a series of inevitabilities, like he is rolling down a hill, continually picking up speed. One of these days, he knows that the bottom will come and when it does, all those inevitabilities will crush him.

From the open vent in the closet, Doug watches Snakeskin come in. He is a small man, but muscular. His complexion is dark, as if he has spent many days in the sun. His dress is minimal, a white tee, blue jeans that fit tight around a washboard waist, a pair of shit kickers that look at least a size too big. All the better for kicking the shit out of you, Doug thinks and unconsciously raises the gun to the open slat.

Wait, he tells himself. Not yet.

There are hundreds of men just like Snakeskin all over the county. He looks not unlike Doug himself, perhaps a little more muscular, his clothes a little more tight-fitting. But the real difference is in the eyes. His eyes look wild. They look reckless. Doug knows those eyes. They belong to men who have stopped caring a long, long time ago.

Snakeskin exudes a confidence that sets Doug on edge, and he grips the big gun a little more tightly, lifting it closer to the open slat.

Behind Snakeskin comes a tall razor blade of a man. He's younger than Snakeskin, but only his flesh shows it. His eyes look tired, so lazy that they are intense, so unconcerned that they are hard.

Snakeskin asks Martin how he's been doing.

Martin, nervous, jumpy Martin, manages to say, "Life's good, man. Who's your friend?"

Snakeskin frowns at the floor. Then thrusts a thumb at the tall man. "This is Rodney. Rodney this is Martin." He looks at Martin eye to eye and adds, "The one I told you about."

Rodney barely glances at Martin and says, "The one that sells good shit or the other one you were telling me about?"

Snakeskin says, "The other one, man. The other one."

"What I thought," Rodney says.

Martin glances quickly at the closet door and says, "Fellas, I'm just trying to run a lab here. If it ain't about crank, you probably got the wrong guy."

"Oh, I think we got the right guy." Snakeskin pulls a switchblade from his back pocket. He nods at Rodney. "Go get her."

Rodney bobs his head as if to some unheard music and says, "Hell yeah."

An awkward moment passes as Snakeskin keeps his eyes trained on Martin, and Martin shakes and fidgets like he needs a hit of something bad.

Rodney returns with a young girl, maybe seventeen. She walks in front of Rodney, and he stares at her ass, barely covered by a pair of tight cut-offs. Prime jailbait, the type of girl who's been living a life unfit for any age, much less seventeen, the type of

girl who wears her sadness underneath hard looks and snarled lips. She doesn't meet Martin's eyes, and at last Doug knows why Snakeskin is here.

"Martin, you know Emily?"

Martin shrugs. "I think I've seen her around."

Snakeskin nods slowly. "Seen her around. Seen her around."

He makes like he is about to stroke his chin in a thoughtful manner with the hand that does not hold the switchblade. The blade is still unexposed, and he is twirling it between his fingers as if this might just be a nervous habit, nothing more. Then suddenly and with great force he thrusts the palm of his free hand out, catching Martin hard in the nose. Martin's head snaps back. He shakes it once and thick streams of blood pour from his nostrils.

The switchblade is open and at his throat. "You seen her around, huh? If by seeing her around you mean sticking your dick in her, then yeah, I suppose you've seen her around."

"No," Martin says. He's crying. "No, I ain't never fucked her, Snakeskin."

"Oh, I must be mistaken. Let me check my source." He turns to Emily. "You and this fella ever do anything?"

Emily looks at Martin then. "Yeah," she says coolly. "A couple of times. It was a trade. He gave me what I wanted. I done told you all this before, Snake."

"Yeah, but I needed to hear it again, baby." He looks at Martin. "You knew me and Emily had a thing going right?"

Martin doesn't respond.

"Answer me!"

Martin shrugs. "I didn't know nothing about that, man. She offered."

"You should have said no," Snakeskin says and grins a surprisingly boyish grin. It makes him look younger, maybe less dangerous, but Doug decides this is only an illusion, a trick. "I'm not into sharing her. You think I get off on her being with another man?"

"I'm telling you, it was a fair trade. I didn't make the offer. She did. I didn't know you two had a thing. How could I have known that, man?"

Snakeskin turns to Rodney. "You believe this shit? First he didn't fuck her. Now he fucked her but it was just a fair trade. What's next? He going to ask me for a refund?"

While Snakeskin's eyes are on Rodney, Martin looks in Doug's direction, wide-eyed. He nods his head quickly as if to say, now or never.

Doug already knows this, yet he feels no real obligation to Martin. He doesn't even like him. But he did once. A long time ago, the two men were friends. They were young. The world was a different place. And somehow, Martin reminds Doug of that place, that youth, that happier time. Yet, he still considers briefly just letting Martin get what is coming to him. If he could get away with it, he might, but he realizes that the situation is more complicated than that. Snakeskin will likely cut Martin. In which case, Martin will scream for Doug to shoot them. In which case, they will come for Doug too.

So, it really is now or never. Martin glances nervously over at Doug again, his lip trembling.

Snakeskin says to Martin, "Rodney, we got us a little weasel here. A lying, weasel. Know what that means?"

Rodney shrugs and scratches his ass.

“Means I’m going to have to cut his dick—“

The sound is deafening, the recoil sudden and harsh and for an instant Doug thinks that the gun has misfired and he has been the one shot instead of Snakeskin. But he sees Snakeskin’s body jerk back, sees the blossom of blood as it soaks through his white t-shirt, and Doug knows that the bullet has hit its target. And then it’s like somebody presses a slow motion button. Snakeskin grimaces and lurches and tries to find where the shot came from. Doug feels like vomiting, but grips the gun tighter and squeezes off two more shots. One sails over Rodney’s head. The next one collides with his mouth. For a second Rodney twists his face up as if he has only swallowed a bitter pill instead of a bullet. But the second ends, and his mouth begins to leak blood. He falls down hard. Doug drops the gun, doubles over, and pukes on the floor.

Emily is screaming.

The next thing Doug knows, Martin is standing over him, ordering him to get up and “shoot the bitch.” Doug shakes his head and throws up again between his knees.

Martin reaches into the puke to retrieve the gun. He takes it and sprints away. Doug can hear the front door bang shut behind him. This is followed by another blast from the gun.

Doug pulls himself up, wiping off his knees and hands.

Martin comes back in and tosses the gun on the couch. He pumps his fist in the air a few times and fumbles inside a chest of drawers for his stash of coke. He does a line, inhaling hard and shadowboxes the air, shuffling his feet, bobbing and weaving like some hick parody of Cassius Clay.

“We got to clean up this mess and hide the bodies!” he shouts, and does a little two-step around the den. “But hell yeah, Martin lives on!”

Doug watches Martin doing his little jig. He is flailing around like a man who has just won the lottery. His face is flushed, splashed with tiny beads of blood and sweat; his nose is crooked from where Snakeskin hit him, and it’s still bleeding, staining his smile red. Doug sees the gun lying on the couch. It’s got blood and vomit around the trigger, and he doesn’t want to touch it. But it’s time to act.

He has it before Martin even stops dancing. He aims it at Martin’s head and waits.

It didn’t have to end like this, he realizes. There were places, bumps along the journey where he could have jumped off the Martin train, but simply chose not to because the ground looked too hard and rocky and the ride was just too much damn fun. So he had held on for this.

The gun is warm in his hand, his pulse like thunder.

This could work, he thinks. The bodies, the drugs. He could put the gun in Martin’s hand, wrapping it up in his stiff fingers. He could be home in fifteen minutes, maybe less, leaving this part of his life forever. He could start over.

Martin still has not noticed Doug or the gun. He is jiving to some soundtrack in his head, oblivious to everything except Martin.

“Hey, Martin,” Doug says.

The soundtrack ends. Martin shimmies to a stop. He turns, sees Doug, sees the gun, makes a face like he can’t believe that Doug is pointing a gun at his head. Then he

scoffs, making some half-assed noise in his throat, making it sound like he thinks it's some funny shit that Doug is pointing a gun at him.

“Stop playing, Dougie. We got some work to do.”

“You shouldn't have gotten me mixed up in this, Martin. This wasn't any of my business.”

“You got your ownself mixed up, Dougie. I didn't pull the trigger. You did that, man.”

It's true, what Martin says, and somewhere below all of Doug's anger and his shock, he realizes that the best thing to do would be to put the gun down and leave. But Doug's best is already behind him. He has reached survival mode. Here there can be no black and white, no right or wrong, just shades of gray, melting together to form something that can barely be recognized at all.

There is only one way out now.

Doug pulls the trigger. The bullet hits Martin in the chest and he woofs loudly. Martin staggers and then collapses. Doug goes over to him, stands over his body, watches him gurgle and spit blood. Martin wants to say something, but there will be no more words from Martin. Doug aims the gun again, this time at Martin's forehead. He fires once and then twice, ripping chunks of flesh from bone, obliterating his friend's face.

He drops to one knee and carefully pries Martin's fingers open. He almost puts the gun in Martin's hand before realizing there is a better solution. Wiping it clean of blood and puke, he slips it inside the waistband of his blue jeans. On the way home, he will toss it into the river.

As he leaves Martin's trailer, Doug notices the wind has picked up. It is howling through the bare trees and banging against the back door of Martin's trailer. He steps over Emily, feeling sorry for her, but he does not dwell on this. She's just one more piece of debris caught in the windstorm he's been plunging headfirst into his whole life.

Out by the road, someone has thrown a pumpkin from their car, and Doug starts toward it, thinking Maci might like to have a Jack-O-Lantern to put on their doorstep. But as he gets closer, Doug sees that the pumpkin's been smashed, and the orange pulp lay in glistening strings against the blacktop. It's gone rotten and stinks. Doug turns away and circles the trailer, beginning the walk into the woods where he has parked his truck, hidden away from a world where things far too often go to ruin.

*John Mantoath's short stories have appeared or are due to appear in Shroud, Feral Fiction, Fantasy Magazine and Shimmer. Currently, he's finishing up his Master's thesis: a collection of Southern noir about hard men, dead babies, and vehicular collisions*