

Red Pistachios

By Joe Clifford

The telephone's ringing didn't wake Tom Hazuka. He wasn't asleep. He wasn't awake either. Blackouts are like that.

Head resting on a stack of dreadful portfolios he had yet to grade, he arose slowly, half bottle of rye still gripped in his fist, and kicked through trash piling up, stumbling into the kitchen.

On the blood-colored stucco wall, the clock read just before midnight.

"It's me, Alan," a thin voice offered when the phone was finally picked up.

Too many lights. Tom swiped a hand down the fixture, sliding his body to the floor. The high desert moon shone brightly through the window.

"You there?"

"I'm here," Tom said, reaching for the overturned junk drawer on the counter and feeling for his emergency pack of smokes.

All around him was clutter and trash. Tom had been clearing out closets and dressers, the garage and cupboards for weeks – it all had to go – even though Tom wasn't going anywhere. Had this been a character he was writing, Tom might say this desire to clean house was an attempt to cleanse a muddled mind. Except Tom Hazuka wasn't writing anything these days.

"Why are you calling so late?" Tom struck a match and inhaled a stale Marlboro Red. He flicked the still-lit match in the direction of the cleaning chemicals and roof rat poison boxes spilt across the mosaic floor, tempting fate to ignite.

"What am I supposed to do?" Alan said. "You don't return calls. For all I know, you've drunk yourself into a stupor and run yourself off the road. Or killed somebody." There was a pause. "It's serious this time, Tom."

With Alan, it was always "serious."

"Pearlman's dropping you. They want the money back."

Once a month, Tom received this threat from Alan. The latest publisher in a long line was dropping him. He'd have to pay back the advance, which everyone damn well knew he'd spent long ago.

"I'll have a draft by the end of next week," Tom said before tipping back and draining the bottle.

"There is no next week. Not this time."

"This is what you get paid to do as my agent--"

"I'm not calling as your *agent*; I'm calling as your friend." Alan sighed. "You could've been great," he said, softly, as if to himself. "One of the great mystery writers of all time. When *Murder by Millions* came out, I said, 'There it is – the birth of a genius.' It's why I stuck around through the sub-par follow-ups and increasingly long droughts, the wives and drunk driving arrests, because I knew you had talent. There's no telling how far you could've gone."

"I'm fine where I am."

"Sure. Mesa Community Tech. The dream of every great writer."

"You think this is easy!?" Tom shouted. "Do you know the pressure to continually top yourself? To find more imaginative ways to murder people?"

“Tom, the truth is they’ve got some new editors up here, and they aren’t exactly fans of your brand of armchair detective fiction. They want fresh blood. You would’ve had to dazzle for them to even *consider*... But the drunkenness. The lack of production. Pearlman is looking to the next generation.”

“Next generation?” Tom had to laugh. “I work with the next generation *every day*. And let me tell you. There isn’t one. No attention to story or craft--”

“Sorry to be the bearer of bad news, old buddy. Get some sleep. And, really, think about checking yourself in somewhere. You need to--”

Tom slammed the receiver into its cradle.

Mutherfuckers. Drop him? He’d *made* Pearlman Publishing. Without him, Russell Pearlman would be running copy for some advocacy rag.

Tom’s head throbbed. He ransacked the opened cupboards until he found a bottle of holiday brandy tucked in the back, before returning to his desk to try to assign a letter grade to varying degrees of butchery.

Alan and Pearlman had it wrong. His drinking wasn’t the problem: he drank to deal *with* the problems. After all, what is a writer who doesn’t write?

Tom picked up a portfolio. Perfect.

Alexander Pincher.

How many semesters did this make? Four? Five?

If any one student was indicative of the severe downturn Tom Hazuka’s life had taken, it was Alexander Pincher.

Alexander was a thirty-one year-old undergrad when he first signed up for Tom’s intro writing course at Mesa. Cadaverous and gangly, with a mass of tangled black hair and sparse beard in patches, Alexander was forever sporting outdated T-shirts from marginal ’70’s rock bands, like Styx and REO Speedwagon. He’d come up to Tom that first day, overly enthusiastic, the sort of Chatty Cathy whose desire to please grates with each surmounting, pointless word.

“I can’t believe it,” Alexander had said, beaming wide. “Tom Hazuka. *The* Tom Hazuka. How fortuitous the fates have brought us together.”

Fortuitous. The kind of ten-cent word Tom Hazuka abhorred.

“I’m going to be a great mystery writer, too,” Alexander added.

Alexander Pincher was a terrible writer. To say he didn’t understand the basic tenets of mystery writing is to stress the limits of the word “understatement.” Hell, Alexander didn’t understand how to construct a single grammatically sound sentence. Every story he wrote was the same, a dreadful blend of post-apocalyptic wastelands and sci-fi (a genre Tom despised), whose hero, some misunderstood, time-traveling detective, scours assorted galaxies and vortexes in search of a never-seen, dastardly madman bent on universal domination. Though the entire fate of human and alienkind hangs in the balance, the story somehow manages to be completely devoid of plot.

His first semester with Alexander, Tom was really trying. He’d convinced Caroline (ex-wife number three) to reconcile, his drinking was under control, and big things were expected from him at Pearlman.

So Tom tried to teach Alexander, who did have a couple things working in his favor. Alexander was older than most students, for one, and Tom soon discovered the kid had plenty of real world experience upon which to draw.

Orphaned at a young age, Alexander grew up with a New England aunt, his only family, until she died when he was eighteen, at which point he set out to explore the country. And he had, hopping freighters across America, working odd jobs, everything from gas station attendant in Duluth to stable boy in El Paso. These were exciting stories, Tom implored, grounded in reality.

Mystery, Tom said to him, doesn't have to be that mysterious. Human passions are simple but strong. Crime and murder are the result of that relationship taken to unstable heights.

At these lessons, Alexander would emphatically nod, say he got it, but the next story would be more interplanetary gobbledygook.

Tom gave him a generous C that first semester and sent him on his way.

So he was a little surprised to see Alexander next semester, once again signed up for his introduction workshop.

That was the semester when everything started falling apart. Tom's writer's block grew worse. Alan started hounding him. Caroline headed back to New York. And Tom drank. The blackouts began, days and nights blurred. Years melted off the calendar.

The one constant through it all, besides the bottle, was Alexander Pincher.

Every day. Before class. After class. Every semester. Tom once even gave him an A, hoping he'd go away. But he didn't. Whereas everyone else (including Tom himself) couldn't stand Tom's company, Alexander never seemed to tire of it. When Tom stopped keeping office hours, Alexander would track him down at Wounded Knee, the bar halfway between campus and Tom's mud-brick house.

Tom had met with him there last week, before the final class, although, as usual, Tom could only vaguely recall the details. In fact, Tom didn't remember how he even got home that night but figured he must've driven because his car was in the driveway the next morning.

Alexander hadn't attended the last class, and Tom had been relieved. In his faculty mailbox was Alexander's portfolio.

The way Tom arranged class, each student workshoped a story or two during the semester, which he or she turned in at the end, along with a new, unseen piece.

Tom begrudgingly opened Alexander's portfolio. There was a note.

*Dear Professor Hazuka,
Thank you for all your help. But I will not be taking your
class anymore. I am dropping out of college. I hope you
like my last story. It's called Red Pistachios. I couldn't
have written it without our talk.*

*Sincerely,
Alexander Pincher*

The new piece that followed, *Red Pistachios*, was a long, long story, but at least Tom had managed to teach the boy how to write a coherent sentence after five semesters (no easy task), and (thankfully) this time the action took place on planet Earth.

And it could've been the booze –dare he say it? There were almost bona fide moments of...competence.

Red Pistachios was about a serial killer, an unnamed, frustrated mystery writer who decides to put his expertise into real world practice. The serial killer genre had never been one of Tom's favorites, having been drummed to bits. But Alexander's piece was palatable, the tone almost playful, a radical departure from previous endeavors, and there was an arc. Actual plot points, from a first murder of necessity to the transition when a taste for the flesh is discovered. It flowed, at times proving almost gripping, balanced between absurdity and retrospection, depth and brevity.

The nameless hero in the piece is destined to go down in the murderous annals, surpassing Bundy, Ramirez, and Dahmer. He may never get caught. Except for one fatal flaw: he loves red pistachios. He can't stop chomping on them. And so, at every scene, he leaves behind fingerprints.

The notion of the perfect killing machine undone by such a simple, foolish turn made Tom laugh out loud.

What happened next, for Tom, was fuzzy. Because of the blackouts, Tom could never be sure what he actually did and what had been filled in by the mind trying to connect the dots of time.

Tom had been drinking throughout reading Alexander's story, and though he found himself intermittently engrossed, there was no denying he *was* drunk. After reading the part about the red pistachios, Tom succumbed to uncontrollable bursts of laughter. Being that drunk, it's easy to find inane humor in the nonsensical. Although Tom seriously doubted Alexander intended the piece to be so funny, it was. A serial killer who loves red pistachios! In fact, the more Tom ran the ludicrous notion through his head, the harder he'd laugh—the idea so absurd, *his life* so absurd, his gut literally aching.

Tom would later hazily recollect grabbing a manila envelope and scribbling out the name "Russell Pearlman" on the front, and slipping *Red Pistachios* inside, along with a note scrawled in big, block letters, which read:

Dear Russell,
Here is the future of mystery writing. Go fuck yourself.
Sincerely,
Tom Hazuka

Or something to that effect. After which, Tom could've stumbled out his front door, sealed manila envelope in hand, repeating the words "red pistachios" over and over, until the very sound of those words would've deconstructed and they no longer sounded like real words.

The Arizona sky might've glowed clear and cloudless, a rosy wash of purple and crimson with the new day's rising, the Saguaros lining the block, a nip to the air.

Tom never remembered actually putting the envelope in the mailbox.

He awoke in the wet Bermuda grass of the lawn.

Tom rang the English Department the next morning, told the secretary to give everyone in his classes a B and to tell the Chair that he quit. Tom then drove to the liquor store, picked up enough alcohol to drink himself into a coma, locked the doors and pulled the blinds. He unplugged the telephone, and got started.

Tom couldn't tell how many days past. Like an eclipse, light strips blazed around the drawn shades, signifying a day's ending, before darkness returned. Nothing was real, dark dreamscapes tempered with fleeting moments of lucidity.

It could've been a week or two. It could've been more. But one day, Tom heard a relentless banging on his door. When he managed to open it, there stood Alan, hat in hand, ear-to-ear smile, frantically waving a stack of papers.

"You did it!" Alan said, breezing past. "Don't know *how* – but you did it! How can you see anything in here?" he added, flipping on the lights to reveal what looked like a refugee outpost, the floor strewn with empty bottles of bourbon, whiskey, and scotch, crushed cigarette packs and beer cans.

"What are you doing here?" Tom's head feeling as thick as overcooked oatmeal.

"Your phone's not work--" Alan stopped. "Jesus, what have you been doing, Tom? You look like you've been through chemo!"

Tom reached up to feel the face of a skeleton. He couldn't recall the last time he'd eaten solid food. Shuffling his feet, Tom found a bottle with something left and slumped into the chair, gesturing lazily with a limp arm. "If you'll be so kind, I have to get back to work."

"I don't know how you're doing it in this condition – but who am I to mess with genius? Writers, eh?" Alan chuckled. "How much longer?"

"How much longer what?" Tom tipped back his bottle.

Alan shook the sheaf. "Until you finish. Pearlman wants this padded to book length, stat."

"What are you talking about?"

Alan tossed the manuscript onto the couch. It was Alexander Pincher's typed story, *Red Pistachios*.

Alan took a seat opposite him. "I hate to admit it, but I'd given up on you. I would've been shocked to see you produce *anything*, let alone something as fresh, as irreverent – as biting satirical – as this."

Tom picked up the manuscript, held it between fore finger and thumb, as though it were a turd. "You've read *this*?"

Alan's face screwed up. "*Of course*. Everyone at the house has. Pearlman called me the moment he finished. They are ecstatic!"

"Pearlman... *likes* it?"

"Likes it? Tom, you have reinvented the genre with this story!" Alan leaned forward. "If there was one knock against even your best work, let's face it, you've never been a particularly funny writer. It takes a lot of *chutzpah* to poke fun at yourself like you have here. A washed-up mystery writer turned serial killer. Ha!"

It hadn't dawned on Tom that Alexander was taking a poke at him. The little prick.

Tom pushed himself up and headed for the kitchen and some water. Tom could feel his bloated liver pushing aside lesser organs. He couldn't process what was happening.

"Would it kill you to show a little joy?" Alan mockingly pleaded. At the sink, Alan snapped the blinds, which caused Tom to shield his eyes.

"It's been a rough time," Tom said, bringing a glass of water to chapped lips.

"Maybe this will help." Alan slid an envelope along the counter.

Tom picked it up and peered inside. There was a check from Pearlman. It was a large check. “What is this for?”

“*That* is how excited Pearlman is. He wants to renew your contract. Pearlman believes – and I agree – this is the one that puts you back on the map.”

“*Red Pistachios?*” Tom couldn’t believe he was saying those words aloud in conjunction with restarting his career. A story written by the worst writer in North America. He half expected someone to pop out of the dishwasher with a hidden camera.

Alan firmly clasped a hand on Tom’s shoulder. “Who says you can’t teach an old dog new tricks?”

That afternoon, Tom flew up to New York with Alan. Pearlman insisted on seeing him in person. After a shower and shave, a hot meal, some color returned to Tom’s cheeks and he almost felt human again.

Tom brought *Red Pistachios* with him on the plane and re-read it, sober. He had to admit, it was genuinely funny. In parts. Tom couldn’t quite see the literary value in it that Pearlman and Alan had, but he had to hand it to Alexander; it wasn’t half bad. Somehow in suffering through all those semesters and myriad private lessons, Tom had taught the kid how to write after all. He could work with this.

Entering Pearlman Publishing was a hero’s welcome. Everyone stopped to shake his hand and congratulate him. There was a spread of fresh cold cuts and tiny breads. Tom didn’t get it. It wasn’t *that* good of a story, and it certainly wasn’t finished – but Tom would be lying if he said all the attention didn’t touch a part of him that desperately needed some touching.

The meeting with Pearlman went well. Initially, it wasn’t so much a meeting as it was a long apology “for ever having doubted a man of Tom Hazuka’s remarkable skill.”

Eventually, Tom assured him all was forgiven.

The only hitch came when Tom tried to pitch his new ideas for the book, the ones he had begun brainstorming, ways in which to soften the more ludicrous elements. At each of these suggestions, Pearlman and Alan would grow uneasy, saying that of course it was *his* book, before gently persuading the author to stick closer to the original premise.

A lack of the drink caused Tom’s hands to tremble, and a headache soon returned, so Tom readily agreed, just to get out of there and back to his hotel room and its fully stocked mini-bar.

But a funny thing happened once Tom got back to that room. After a couple shots, his mind suddenly cleared, and he knew what had to be done. Tom began rewriting on the spot. Months and months of writer’s block vanished. And as he hastily scribbled onto the manuscript and added pages, Tom got the strangest sensation. He anticipated the turns, the twists, instinctively knew the dialogue that would naturally flow out of these characters’ mouths before he even wrote it.

It was as though the story *were* his.

A year and a half later, the book came out. It was reviewed by the *Times*, among others. Very favorable reviews. Alan booked Tom to appear on talk shows, after which the author was slated to do a full tour. Tom was flying back and forth to New York so often that he put his Arizona house up for sale. Tom Hazuka was going home.

Now, Tom Hazuka was not a stupid man. Following that first meeting in New York, he made several inquiries to locate Alexander Pincher. But, true to his word, Alexander had dropped out of Mesa. Tom knew the boy didn't have any family, and that he certainly didn't have any friends, and given his history of travel, Alexander could've gone anywhere. The guy was probably working on some farm in Minnesota by now, writing more woeful tales of Captain Planet. And who was Alexander Pincher, really? Let's face it, the guy got lucky. Alexander had simply proven an old adage: he was the monkey left alone in a room with the typewriter long enough.

Tom knew that one day Alexander may well stumble upon the book. In fact, he was certain to. But what could he do about it? It would be Alexander's word against his. Tom was the writer, the one with the pedigree and name. All Alexander had done was supply a premise, an outline. Tom had done the real work. Sometimes Tom Hazuka even found himself thinking that, after all the drinking he'd been doing, Alexander Pincher had been but a figment of a beleaguered imagination, that the idea for the book actually was his. It is the lies we tell ourselves that keep us living, after all.

Tom stopped drinking. Just like that. He was amazed at how effortless it was, given the amount of alcohol he'd consumed those last few years, to do so without being hospitalized. Men can die from alcohol withdrawal if not properly supervised and medicated. Doctors will tell you it isn't possible. Alcoholics Anonymous will say that that Tom must've been sneaking sips from a secret stash or that he was in denial.

But they would be wrong.

Red Pistachios had freed Tom Hazuka, in more ways than one.

Friday night and Tom was packing up boxes. He'd found a place in Manhattan and had even restarted an amiable correspondence with Caroline, which he hoped would blossom into something more once they were in the same city again. The moving truck would be here tomorrow.

Outside, the desert night was hot and dry, but with the air conditioner on full blast, the air inside was arctic chilled. Tom noshed on a bag of red pistachios. Ever since the release of the book, he couldn't get enough of the goddamn things.

It was about 10:00 p.m. when Tom heard the knock and crossed the floor, kicking aside unpacked cardboard boxes and tape guns.

And there was Alexander Pincher. In his right hand, a copy of the *Red Pistachios*, his face betraying an expression of severe distress.

Tom Hazuka remained a cool customer, however, and cordially invited the boy in.

Alexander didn't say anything as he plunked himself in a chair, book clutched tightly to his bony chest. It looked as if he'd been crying.

Setting his bag of nuts on the end table, Tom asked if he wanted a drink and, before Alexander could answer, headed for the kitchen.

"How did you know where I lived?" Tom asked casually.

"The bar. That last night," Alexander replied, detachedly. "Drove you home."

Sweat droplets started to bead on the back of Tom's neck. He reassured himself that he had nothing to fear. Alexander Pincher was a thirty-something ne'er-do-well. He didn't matter.

Tom slowly turned over his shoulder. "I figured you'd be hiking the Appalachians by now." Tom forced a laugh.

“The book,” Alexander said, still without looking Tom’s way. “I need to talk to you about the book.”

“Sure, Alexander. We can talk about the book,” Tom said, now in the kitchen and walking to the refrigerator, having to talk louder. “Just wanted to catch up a bit first.” Tom opened the fridge, casting aside the leafy greens and rare roasted meats, and retrieved a bottle of grape soda pop. “Where have you been these past few months?”

“Alaska. On a fishing boat.”

“When did you get back into town?”

“Tonight.”

“Seen anybody else yet?”

“Don’t know nobody else,” Alexander said. “Came straight from the Greyhound station.”

“I didn’t hear a cab...”

“Walked,” Alexander said.

Including his latest effort, Tom Hazuka had written over fifteen mystery novels, and in every one there had been a murder. Usually several. He’d had his characters shot, stabbed, drowned, strangled, butchered, poisoned, decapitated, and dropped in a vat of acid. Tom’s killers were rarely the cold, unfeeling types. Often, they agonized over their decisions (except for the husband who drops his wife in the acid in *Murder by Mince Meat*). These killings were crimes of passion, lust gone wrong, passions soured, desperation heightened, the purest forms of the basest instincts. No one takes killing lightly. It had always seemed to Tom that a killer, even the most psychotic, on some level understands the magnitude of such action, thus acknowledging the value of human life.

It comes down to a choice. They simply value their own life more.

So when Tom poured Alexander a glass of pop with his one hand, and reached beneath the sink for the roof rat poison with the other, all the while carrying on a genial conversation, Tom both knew what he was doing, understood the gravity of the situation, *while at the same time*, was far removed from the situation, like a specter floating high above the body of Tom Hazuka.

It was a choice. An artistic choice a writer makes.

Tom entered the living room and brought Alexander his soda. “You must be thirsty, walking all that way.”

Alexander took the tall glass and downed a hearty gulp.

Tom sat across from him, on the sofa.

Alexander took another swallow, and every muscle in Tom’s body relaxed.

“I see you’ve read the book,” Tom said, swiping his big bag of red, salty nuts.

Alexander gazed at Tom now, the pink rims of his eyes welling. He held up the copy. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Tom sighed with bored bemusement, popping a pistachio, shell and all.

“Alexander, you’re still young. There are things that might be hard for you to understand.”

“I know I’m not much of a writer,” Alexander said, “but what you think means a great deal to me. I look up to you, Professor Hazuka.”

“I’m not your professor anymore.” Tom grabbed a fistful of nuts.

Alexander hung his head low, cast a sheepish sideways glance. “You know I’d never intentionally steal anything from you.”

“*Steal* is such a harsh word, Alex, don’t you think..?” Tom almost choked on a pistachio. “Steal from...*me*?”

“Never. You’re like a hero to me.”

“Sorry,” Tom said, replaying the exchange, “but what do you mean, ‘steal from me’?”

“*Red Pistachios*. I didn’t know you were *writing* it when we talked. I thought it was just an idea.”

Tom’s brow furrowed. “When we talked, when?”

“At the bar. Wounded Knee. The night I drove you home.”

“We talked about...” Tom pointed at the book, “...*Red Pistachios*?”

“Yes. But I didn’t know you were going *to write it*. I thought it was such a funny idea, you know, a serial killer who loves red pistachios, and I know how sick of my stories you were getting. I thought it was something that came to you that night, you know, ’cause of what we were talking about. At the bar. The bowl on the table.”

“We talked about...writing this book?”

“Yeah, remember, I followed you after class? I wanted to talk to you about my final story, and you said; fine, but we’d have to talk at the bar.”

“What did I say again?” Tom asked.

“You know, how I needed to simplify my ideas, start with the basics, that if I wanted to write murder mysteries, I had to understand the crime of murder first. The passion behind it. And the mistake that ultimately gets the killer caught.”

“The truth is I don’t remember that conversation. At all.”

Tom asked Alexander to tell him everything that was said that night.

And so Alexander did. How Alexander had been complaining about not understanding where to start, that the idea of murder seemed so fantastic to him. How Tom said that anyone can be a killer. And when Alexander asked like who, Tom blurted to make the killer a washed up mystery writer who murders the student who won’t leave him alone. How Alexander knew he was joking. How in this particular story, Tom said, the first killing is incidental. Then the killer discovers the power of creation through destruction. The killer develops a taste.

Tom had plotted it all.

Alexander took out a wadded up napkin from his back pocket and unraveled it.

“Don’t you remember writing this?”

Tom took the napkin. He recognized the handwriting, the familiar script outlining the arc and resolution, the entire story, start to finish, except the part that trips up our hero.

“And how did you – I mean, *I* – come up with the twist, what gets the killer caught?” Tom asked.

“There was that bowl of red pistachios on the table?” Alexander replied.

“Remember? I asked, ‘But what gets him caught?’ And you said, ‘The simplest mistake; it can be anything.’ And then you held up the bowl. ‘Red pistachios,’ you said. ‘Red pistachios get him caught.’” Alexander’s ashen face twisted up, as though he were in pain.

The crime is murder. Anyone can kill. The first killing is incidental.

Tom looked down at the napkin, now smudged, smeared with deep red stains from his hands.

Alexander leaned over. “I wasn’t trying to plagiarize or anything. When I saw the book in that drugstore in Alaska, I came straight here.” The boy doubled over with a grimace. His face turned deathly white. “I don’t feel so good. I think I’m actually getting sick over this whole thing, Professor Hazuka.”

“Tom,” the writer said. “Call me Tom. And no worries, Alexander.” He pointed to the half-finished soda. “You’re probably dehydrated from the trip. Drink up. Then I’ll show you what I am working on next.”

Joe Clifford earned his MFA degree from Florida International University in 2008. His work has appeared in Bathhouse, Big Bridge, Bryant Literary Review, the Connecticut Review, Dark Sky, decomp, Dos Passos Review, Fringe, Gloom Cupboard, Hobart, Opium, and Thuglit, among others. The 2004 recipient of the Connecticut Review’s Leslie Leeds Poetry Prize, Joe was also that year’s representative on the CT Poetry Circuit. Most recently, Joe served as editor-in-chief of Gulf Stream magazine, and as co-producer of Lip Service, a spoken word event in Miami, which was featured on NPR. Joe has been to jail but never prison.