

## Eight Pounds

Chris F. Holm

“You know, they say the average human head costs eight pounds.”

We were maybe three rounds to the good when he said it. It was apropos of nothing; just a long, contemplative pull off his pint, and out it came. I replied the way any halfway intelligent bloke with a belly full of whisky would have: I laughed so hard, I fell off my fucking stool.

“What’s so funny?” he asked, glowering at me over his lager, while I sat splay-legged on the floor of the pub and struggled not to piss myself. Eventually, my laughter subsided, and I clambered back onto my barstool, one hand braced against the copper bar rail for support.

“You’re putting me on, right? The average human head costs eight pounds. Fucking hell.” Another guffaw escaped my lips. Marcus went right on scowling, his burly frame hunching up into a defensive posture that tightened with my every chortle. If he was joking, he damn sure wasn’t letting on.

“I mean, I’m sure that it’s a metaphor – it’s not like there’s much of a market for human heads. I expect they’re talking murder.”

I bit my lip, did my damndest not to laugh. “You expect they’re talking murder.”

Marcus nodded with drunken enthusiasm, oblivious to my biting tone. “That’s right. I mean, of course you’ve got your robberies, insurance scams, and contract kills – all no doubt worth a pretty penny – but more often than not, it’s just some chap who’s pissed at his missus, or a couple of drunken hooligans bashing each other’s heads in after a match. No profit in those, is my point – and all those freebies bring down the average. Eight pounds sounds right enough to me.”

I shook my head and took a sip of my Laphroaig, its familiar peaty burn rising in my sinuses, and coating my throat with prickly warmth. “It’s weighs, you fuckwit. The average human head weighs eight pounds.”

“Oh,” he said. “Still.”

“Still what?”

“Still, I think I’ve got a point.”

“You do, do you?”

“That’s right, I do.”

“You think the average human head costs eight pounds.”

“Well, I don’t think that’s a stretch. There’s plenty of reasons to want somebody killed got nothing to do with money – more than enough to tip the balance. Infidelity, for example.”

At that, I damn near spit out my drink. Through force of will, I clamped my mouth shut and kept it from spraying across the bar, but not without a cost. Islay malt, hot as molten lava, surged upward into my nasal passages, where it burned, burned, burned like that belabored Kerouac metaphor the kids seem so fond of in their Facebook profiles. My eyes watered from the sudden sting. My breath caught in my chest. And still, that whisky resisted swallowing.

Eventually, though, I got it down, and covered my mouth to stifle the cough that it elicited. Flecks of scotch-scented spittle dotted my closed fist. I frowned at them in disgust, losing for a moment the thread of the conversation, which Marcus seemed content to carry on regardless of my involvement. Then I wiped my thumb and forefinger on the thigh of my trousers and downed the remainder of my drink, ignoring the tremor in my hand as I brought glass to lips.

“Care for another?” asked the bartender, who, by the smirk that graced his stupid face, had no doubt witnessed my little spectacle. My own face colored with embarrassment, and, not trusting my whisky-ravaged vocal cords to speak, I simply nodded. The smug bastard whisked away my glass and replaced it with another, pouring two fingers of amber liquid with that pointless upward flourish all bartenders seem to favor. “That’ll be eight quid.”

I reached for my wallet, but Marcus halted me with a hand against my forearm. “Let me get this round,” he said.

“Thanks,” I muttered. I sounded like I’d swallowed a belt sander.

“Don’t mention it,” he said. “As I was saying, if I found out my Evie was stepping out on me behind my back, you can be damn sure there would be repercussions – repercussions of the violent, bloody, best-to-have-a-shovel-in-the-trunk variety.”

This time, I maintained my composure, taking care to sip and swallow before setting my drink back down atop its coaster. But internally, I was a mess. My heart rattled like a drum line in my chest. My hands and neck went slick with sweat. And all the while, my mind raced, finding itself in one dark, unpleasant place after another.

He couldn’t know, could he?

No. He couldn’t know. It didn’t track. We’d been so careful. I’d been so careful. Even if that fucking bint slipped up, there’s no way Marcus could know it was me that she’d been seeing.

That is, unless she’d told him.

But why in the hell would she tell him? She said herself that this would forever be our little secret, and besides, it’s not like either of us were out to hurt the man – all we wanted was a little fun.

So okay, she didn’t tell him. Which means he didn’t know about me. He couldn’t. I mean, God love the boy, but he’s not the sharpest cheese in the fridge, now is he? Most likely, he suspected her of something, and this conversation was just his way of blowing off a little steam with his best mate.

It had to be. It had to be.

So, then, the most prudent course of action was to play my role. Talk him down a bit. After all, what are best mates for?

“Oh, come off it, Marcus. You’re not the killing kind.”

He snorted, took a drink. “We’re all of us the killing kind,” he said. “With the proper motivation, any one of us is capable of just about anything. Murder. Theft. Betrayal. But then you of all people should know that.”

I gulped like a cop-show villain under an interrogation light, my Adam’s apple bobbing madly up and down. “What do you mean, me of all people?”

He squinted at me a moment like I was daft, and then jiggled his key ring in my face. “The dope fiend down the street who found your hide-a-key and made off with

your telly? Or had you forgotten why you gave your spare to me rather than persisting with that silly little plastic rock?"

I flashed Marcus a wan smile, though I confess, these sudden jolts of his had left me feeling a little queasy. "My flatscreen," I said. "Of course. I had forgotten, actually."

"You all right? You seem a little jumpy tonight. Out of sorts." His words were thoughtful, but his eyes were alert, intent. I felt as though those eyes were boring into me – probing, scrutinizing, judging. Or was that simply the drink making me paranoid?

"I'm fine," I replied. "Not been sleeping well, is all."

"No," he said, his voice turning cold, "I'll bet you haven't, at that."

The fuck was that about? The bastard knew already, didn't he? Which meant all this was just his way of taking the piss out of me. Okay, fine, he'd had his fun, but I wasn't about to take another second of being toyed with – of being raked across the coals for his amusement.

I had to tell him.

Fucking hell. I had to tell him everything. "Look, Marcus..."

But he was having none of it.

"Tell me, Graham – how long have we known each other?"

His question caught me off guard, stopped me in my tracks. I thought about it a moment, did a little drunken math. "Sixteen – no, seventeen years."

"Seventeen years. And in that time, have I ever done anything to hurt you?"

"No, of course not!"

"Damn right, of course not. You know why?"

I stared into his eyes, so sharp and clear despite the face around them being slack from drink, and tried in vain to wish away my ill-conceived misdeeds. Meanwhile, the whisky in my gut was gnawing its way through my stomach wall. All at once I noticed just how warm and close the air inside the pub was, and the reek of yeast and meat and cooking grease made my vision swim. I thought I might be sick.

"No," I answered, dreading his response. "Why?"

"Because I love you like a brother, that's why!" He clapped me on the shoulder, and in so doing, nearly toppled from his stool. Tears welled in the corners of his eyes. Marcus always was a maudlin drunk.

"Another round?" The bartender again. Fucking tosser, he was – though I'll admit, I was grateful for the interruption.

"We're fine," I said. "Thanks." And then to Marcus, as I gathered my coat up off the stool beside me: "I think I'd best be getting home."

"Hold on a mo," he said, hoisting his pint in an effort to finish it off, "I'll walk with you."

"But your flat's the other way."

"I could use a stroll."

He blinked at me, my oldest friend, from behind a veil of drunken good cheer. But that good cheer never touched his eyes. No, those eyes were sad and cold and dead. And in that moment, I realized this feeling in my gut was more than the guilt of bedding my best friend's wife.

That feeling in my gut was fear.

Fear of Marcus.

Fear of what he had in store for me. But there was little I could do to dissuade him, so together, we stepped into the cold night air, our breath sending great plumes of condensation up into the moonless sky. We walked shoulder to shoulder through the empty, darkened street, neither of us speaking. I tried to tell myself the silence was companionable, but I didn't really believe it. Instead, I found myself obsessing over Marcus' imposing form beside me, and wondering when precisely he would make his move. Perhaps between the streetlamps, where the light dwindled down to nothing, those meaty, rough-hewn hands – butcher's hands, my father always used to call them, as though Marcus were forever branded by his father's chosen vocation – would withdraw from the pockets of his jacket and close around my tender neck, choking the life from me.

Would I be quick enough to evade him when the time came? I admit, it wasn't likely. Ever since childhood, Marcus had been my better in physical competition, whether on the rugby pitch, where he was nimble and capable while I was gawky and afraid, or during one of our many altercations, which invariably resulted in him sitting upon my chest and slapping me until one of our mothers took pity on me and broke us up. But perhaps, if I were lucky, I'd have a chance to call for help.

Of course, shouts and yelps were common enough around the time the pubs closed down, so the chances anyone would heed my call were nil. But still, I told myself, a slim chance is better than no chance at all.

I don't know why I hadn't seen this coming all along – the folly of getting involved with Evie, of what it could cost me.

My closest friend.

My very life.

Block after block, the silence festered. And block after block, Marcus failed to make his move. Far from comforting me, that fact only served to ratchet up my anxiety, as I grew more sure with every step that tonight I would meet my fate. If not here beneath the streetlights like some common criminal, then perhaps at home, where, in the privacy of my own flat, Marcus could afford to take his time. I found myself obsessing over the implements of torture contained inside my kitchen drawers, and the inventive ways that they could be put to use on human flesh. Knives, of course, but also reamers and skewers and peelers and the like, each more horrid in the hands of my imagination than the next.

When we reached my stoop, I was trembling so badly, I felt I might shake apart. At least that would've put me out of my misery, I suppose. It's funny – I began this walk praying that I'd somehow make it home, but now that I was here, all I wanted was to be back at the pub, safely ensconced among its many lights and ample witnesses.

But those lights and witnesses were a world away. Instead, I shuffled awkwardly from foot to foot outside my door, waiting for the violence I was certain was to come.

It was Marcus who finally broke the silence. "So," he said, "I think we both know what comes next."

"We do?"

"Yes, we do."

"And what, exactly, is that?"

He smiled then, and clapped me on the cheek with the meat of his hand, a gesture of drunken good cheer. “One king fuck of a hangover! I dunno about you, but I’m completely rat-arsed.”

I was hit by such a surge of relief, it felt as though all the bones had gone out of me. I could’ve collapsed into a puddle at his feet. “A hangover! Right!”

I suppose my relief was palpable, because Marcus cocked his head and smiled. “Wait – you didn’t think... I mean, all that business at the pub... I never meant to imply I thought that you...”

“No, of course not.”

“Good, good. Because if a man can’t vent to his best mate, then what’s left for him, right?”

“What, indeed?”

“All right – I’m off, then. Sleep well, Graham.”

“And you as well.”

I stood a moment and watched him stroll back up the street the way we came – one hand thrust deep into the pocket of his coat to ward off the cold, while the other held his mobile to his ear. No doubt he was ringing up Evie to tell her he’d be on his way. I shook my head at all my whisky-addled foolishness and let myself inside.

As the door swung shut behind me, though, I froze, my hand resting motionless atop the light switch. I couldn’t bring myself to flick it on, so certain was I of what I’d find.

The darkened flat smelled like an abattoir, its metallic reek catching in my throat and doing little to mask the earthy stench of piss and shit that accompanied it. By the pale glow of the streetlights through the curtains, I could just make out the vaguest outline of a woman’s sprawled and naked form – a gruesome X atop my bed, pale white streaked with black.

And amidst the awful stench that engulfed me, and seemed to invade my every pore, there was another scent, softer and more delicate: a cloying hint of lavender and vanilla.

Perfume. Evie’s perfume.

As realization dawned, I stumbled toward the toilet, bile rising in my throat. But something in the darkness caught my toe, and I tripped, tumbling to the floor and skidding to a halt in a congealing pool of blood.

The object that had toppled me bounced along beside me like a football and came to rest just inches from my face: Evie’s bruised and bloodied severed head. Her blank eyes stared up at me. Her once delicate features were contorted into a rictus of pain.

My stomach clenched, and the bitter tang of whisky and sick wove their way into the bouquet of the room. Something snapped inside me, and I began to weep. I gathered Evie’s head into my hands, rocking back and forth and muttering I’m sorry, over and over again – to her or Marcus or myself, I didn’t know.

In the years since, I’ve had a lot of time to ruminate upon that horrid, horrid night. The stench. The guilt. And the awful weight of her bloodied, severed head as I held it in my hands. Thinking back, I suppose eight pounds is about right. Though at the time, it seemed much heavier.

I couldn’t say how long I sat like that, cradling Evie’s severed head, but I recall as clear as day what roused me.

Sirens – distant, but drawing closer.  
Only then did I realize who Marcus really called.

*Chris F. Holm's fiction has appeared in a number of publications, including Demolition, The Back Alley, EQMM, Spinetingler, and Beat to a Pulp. He's been a Derringer Award finalist and a Spinetingler Award winner, and he's also written two novels: DEAD HARVEST and THE ANGELS' SHARE. You can visit his website at [www.chrisholm.com](http://www.chrisholm.com).*