

# The Consummate Professional

By Graham Bowlin

I swallowed down another mouthful of shitty house bourbon. Clinked my ice in the glass. Quicker than Pavlov's dogs Miranda was in front of me, pouring me another double. I handed her a five. I was feeling generous.

I looked down the bar. Joey Davenport sat at the end, carrying bags under his eyes, splotches on his skin like orchids on a Hawaiian shirt. A traveler on one shit of a vacation. Everybody hates a tourist. Joey was no exception.

Junior year of college: I meet freshman Joey Davenport at a keg party. He's so fucked up that he tries to grab my then-girlfriend's tits. He's so fucked up that I let it go with a warning. His girlfriend talks quietly with a friend, turning a blind eye. Someone tells me they've been together since high school, and that this happens a lot. Besides, his family's rich and he has good hair and a strong jawline. When I ask, they tell me her name is Jenny. She has brown hair and blue eyes. She's very pretty. Joey Davenport is so fucked up he vomits on my shoes. I punch him in the stomach. Jenny takes him home.

Senior year of college: I sell sophomore Joey Davenport his second bag of coke. He comes over to my apartment. He is pushy and overbearing, and doesn't seem to notice it. He has no drug etiquette and I hate him for it. He makes a rude comment about my roommate's girlfriend and her ass. He seems to delight in making everyone in the room uncomfortable. Jenny sits on the sofa next to him. She holds his hand, and though she will make eye contact with me, it is fleeting. She smiles at me once. Without asking, Joey does a line off of our coffee table and comments on the quality of his second bag of cocaine. My other roommate leers at Jenny. Joey Davenport is too fucked up to notice.

Six months ago: After graduating with my ever-useful Business Management degree, I moved down to Florida. After a year of living in my uncle's trailer and selling brick schwag to Jacksonville rednecks, I follow the Colombian trail back up here. I bump into my old roommate who asks if I remember that rich fuck Davenport, you know, the one with the hot girlfriend, and I say yes. He tells me that he's now a rich fuck with a blow problem. Five minutes later I'm on the phone with college dropout Joey Davenport.

I sip from the bourbon, holding it under my tongue for ten seconds, then swish, swish, back and forth. I swallow it down and feel the nice warm burn, the tingling on my gums. When I was ten, my dad taught me how to do this in the kitchen of our trailer. When I was twelve, he taught me where he hid his silenced Glock in the living room (taped under the end table). When I was fourteen, I rode in the car while he made deliveries of what I used to think was baking soda and counted the money for him when he returned to the car. I learned how to savor good bourbon, to never take my own product, and to never, ever let anyone get into debt with me. Unfortunately, my father was the ugliest man in Sunny Oaks Trailer Park, so I am a very homely professional.

Despite having a complexion like a water moccasin, Joey Davenport was still

more handsome than me under a blacklight, which for guys like us was all you needed. He also owed me two hundred dollars. I was never a great pupil.

Jenny appears from the shadows and sits next to Joey. He smiles a twisted, idiot, fuckhead grin at her and staggers off of the bar stool. He wanders back toward the bathroom. She looks down the oak countertop at me. This time, our eyes lock. She looks even sadder than she did a few years ago. Before she broke it off. I finish my bourbon, slap a ten on the wood, and walk away. I step into the cold night and do not look back.

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I have tried to kill Joey Davenport several times. I've sold him too much at a time, claiming it to be a gift, hoping that he would give into his greed and overdose. I have even, on one occasion, cut a little bit of rat poison into his purchase just to test the waters. Unfortunately, his body is so pickled in a dirty drink-and-drug-filled brine that he has the constitution of a goddamn mummy. After about a week I gave up, so as not to lose my reputation as a consummate professional. No matter how badly he deserves to die, I am not willing to sacrifice my good name to do it. There has to be a better way.

Four months ago: It was four o'clock in the morning. I left the bar at midnight and brought an old bottle of good whiskey and a young blonde with okay tits home with me. Halfway through the bottle I couldn't see too well, and she quit looking better and started looking realistic. I asked her to leave by opening the front door and closing it behind her, vomited out of my second story window, and "went to sleep" on the floor.

A pounding on the door woke me up three hours later. I sat up in a stupor and yanked free the silenced 9mm taped under my coffee table. Chambering a round, I looked with bleary eyes through the peephole. A small figure stood outside the door. Non-threatening. Probably not a cop. I left the chain on and pulled the door open slightly.

"I'm sorry. Did I wake you?"

It was Jenny. I let her in and locked the door. She had her hands, face, and great figure hidden under a large crimson hoodie. Like Little Red Riding Hood come to borrow a cup of sugar.

Joey had seen me only two days before. He was getting more efficient.

"It's me," she said. Then added, "Sorry." She pulled the hoodie back to reveal her brown hair and pretty blue eyes, one of them nearly obscured by a dark purple bruise.

"Joey isn't feeling well," she said. Jenny had been to my place dozens of times, but never alone.

"What happened to your face?" I asked.

She opened her mouth as if to say something, and then began to quietly cry. I put the safety back on and stuck the gun into my belt. I pulled her to me and held her as the cries grew louder, her mascara staining my puke encrusted t-shirt.

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Over the next two months, we met at my apartment whenever we could.

Being self-employed, my hours are flexible and I'm usually working out of my home office. For her, it was harder. We got together whenever she could steal hours away from her shitty job at a crafts store and caring for Joey like a retarded infant.

I enjoyed being with her. It was simple. She was always sober. Never wanting anything from me. She still bought for Joey sometimes, but never used. The best times were when she and that fucking clown would come over together so that he could pick up. He would sit on the sofa, babbling about Persian aqueducts, Argentinean politics, or whatever other bullshit he had managed to dig up on late night Wikipedia binges. Jenny and I would look across the table at each other, grinning like assholes while Joey watched TV and blew through his newest investment. A few times, Joey would claim to have no money, bitching and moaning about how hard things are. To keep things easier for Jenny at home, I broke my cardinal rule: I fronted him blow. Sorry, Dad.

Mostly though, as he sat there in the glow of my brand new flat-screen television set, I would think about that first night, about seeing what he'd done to Jenny's eye, and it was all that I could do to not grab the Nine hidden under the table and blow his coke addled brains out.

Sometimes, she spent the night. We lay in my bed, talking. I had never done this before, and was surprised to find that I enjoyed it. For the first time, I loved someone. And she loved me. I think they call that being in love.

When she was very young, her mother had taught her to play the piano and, though I never heard her, she assured me that she was still very good. She learned Spanish in high school and read romantic books to keep her skill going. I didn't play a damn thing and had no desire to try. I learned Spanish in the trailer park when I was a kid and new a lot more slang terms than she did.

We only talked about Joey one time. One night in bed she told me that Joey, in his increased paranoia, had started funneling money out of his bank account, hiding it in safe deposit boxes across town. He had thousands of dollars. And we had a new plan. I was going to sell everything out, close up shop. She was going to quit her job. She would get Joey fucked up and talk him into telling her where the money was. We would take every last penny and go to Spain.

"I'm serious," I said. "I'm not talking bullshit."

This quieted her. She bit her lip.

"Come with me," I said.

"Okay, I'll talk to him tomorrow. I'll get it out of him," she said. Then, "He'll die without me."

"Good," I said. "He'll probably die without me, too."

"Or with you."

In the morning, I woke up alone. In the kitchen there was a note. "*He needs me. I'm sorry.*" was all that it said. Just like that, it was over. The only pure thing I'd ever had was stolen away by that junkie fuck.

I saw them in bars around town and intentionally stared from across the bar, remembering how it felt to hold her, to be inside her. I drove by their house at night, trying to look through the windows, wondering how they sleep together. Wondering if he's hurting her.

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I wake up at five in the afternoon today. My head pounds and my stomach does flips like a little Russian gymnast. The bottles on my bedside table stare back at me, laughing. I'm not sure when I started drinking and I don't remember going to bed.

I've missed eight phone calls. All customers. Piss stains. I turn my phone off and throw it in a drawer. Business is booming.

I sit on the sofa until seven o'clock, drinking beer and looking at the carpet. I hear footsteps walk down the hallway and hope that it might be her, coming to my door, apologizing, confessing everything, fucking me, staying. For good.

At eight o'clock, Stacey Kirschner shows up. An hour late. I'm supposed to take to her to a show and fuck her tonight, but she's out of her mind drunk. She mumbles something about Jagermeister, apologizes, and then stumbles to the bathroom to vomit.

She blacks out on the floor, reeking of puke. I spray some air freshener on her and close the door.

I open another beer and sit back down on the sofa. I spill it all over my pants after some asshole pounds on my door with what sounds like a claw hammer. It's eight thirty. I put down the beer and straighten my shirt. I don't grab the Nine. If it's the cops, they can bash my fucking head in.

Without looking through the peephole I open the door to find Joey Davenport, worthless monster, standing on the other side. He snuffles a little bit. His eyes are red-rimmed, making it look like he's capable of crying.

Without being asked, he walks in. He begins to pace back and forth.

"You owe me two hundred dollars," I say.

He sits down on the sofa, my sofa, and puts his feet up on my table. He sighs, grunts.

"I need something, man," he says.

"I'm out," I say.

"Don't joke around, man, come on," he says, a hint of a whine creeping into his voice.

I ignore him. I walk five feet over in my spacious apartment and enter the kitchen. I make a screwdriver, fulfilling my Vitamin C content for the day.

"Come on..."

This time he whimpers, and I smile to myself. *Come on, man, come on...* The eternal hymn of the junkie, the wino, the loser. The pleading prayer to the drug god. Me. Me, the Drug God. I have the only thing he needs. He has everything I've ever wanted.

I sit down across from him and idly sip my drink. I notice that his hand is bleeding from a nasty wound on his knuckle. It's small but deep, jagged.

"What happened to you?"

He pulls his hand into the sleeve of his denim jacket. "Come on, dude, I gotta go soon."

"Where do you need to be?" I ask, calling his bluff.

"I just, you know, I gotta go," says Joey Davenport, looking at his watch.

I nod my head and gulp from the screwdriver. Next I'll make a bloody mary and climb the whole food pyramid.

Without asking he pulls out a cigarette and lights it up. I take one from his pack

and do the same. For a moment we sit in silence. It feels almost natural, two men filling a room with smoke and comfortable quiet. I wonder if he considers me a friend.

He ashes in a beer can and smiles to himself.

“She bit me,” he said.

I start to ask why, but don’t. I know why.

“Jenny left,” he said.

I don’t say anything.

“It’s bad, man. She told me a bunch of shit.”

“What did she tell you?”

“She... She told me there’d been another guy. She’d like, banged him and stuff. She said she wanted to be honest, tell me the truth or whatever.”

Stupid, stupid girl. She wanted to be honest? She may have left, but she’d be back again. Back to letting this cretin, this scum sucking mutant, smack her around and make her his drug mule. The most beautiful woman I had ever seen, the only woman who ever made me happy or meant a goddamn thing in the whole world, would be back to sucking the smegma-encrusted dick of this floor-shitting mongoloid.

“What did you do?”

I know what he did. My fists clench. My jaw tightens.

“I freaked out. I totally freaked out, man.”

My entire body contracts. In and out. In and out.

“I uh, I fuckin’ punched her. Cheating bitch, man. We been together like, seven years. I loved her. Women are shit. You gotta police them twenty four hours a day.”

I nod, slowly.

“So yeah, I punched her in the mouth. And the tits.” His thin lips tighten into a strange half smile. “I smacked her a few times too, then let her get away. I let her run out. She can stay the fuck out, too.”

And just like that, destiny opens up the door and invites, no, *insists* that I step inside. How can one man take everything from another? How can he steal from somebody everything they ever wanted and not deserve to have it taken from him in return?

“So come on, man, I gotta get outta here, really. What do you got for me?”

Stacey won’t remember shit in the morning. I’ll tell her I nursed her lovingly through the night and that we should go to dinner sometime and she can do some coke here anytime she wants, and she’ll tell the cops the same thing. *What visitor?* she’ll say. *We were alone together all night...* And I’ll rent a Wet-Vac and get the whole thing mopped up by morning.

“Lemme check.”

I open up the drawer of the coffee table, and am surprised to find that there’s actually some blow in there. I make a mental note to get more organized.

I set it out on the table and Joey immediately begins snuffling around it like a pig, distracted. His attention turns back to me just before I bring the Nine down on his head.

The metal connects with his forehead. His skin slices open and blood flings onto the floor. He instantly curls up on the sofa like an infant, disoriented, his hands batting wildly around his head.

He does not scream.

For a second, I consider just blowing his goddamn skull open right there. No. I

want to feel this.

I hit him again. This time I hear a little pop, and feel a give under the butt of the gun.

He rolls down onto the floor. Now his hands just twitch everywhere. Blood pours out of his head like a faucet. I have never felt more satisfied with anything in my life.

I kneel down on his chest and feel the air squeak out of him like helium in a balloon.

He's bitten through his tongue and when he speaks it's muddled and nearly incoherent.

"What--, What--, Did I...," blood pours from his mouth and he chokes and gurgles. "...do?"

"More than you know," I say.

Our eyes meet. I expect fear, panic, remorse. But I get only a blank stare. He looks up at me with the empty, unassuming eyes of a dog, panting away, waiting for a treat.

I bring the butt of the gun down again, and again. I break his nose, his eye sockets. I feel the bone give way and hear the crunches. With each hit I take back her voice, her eyes, her hair, the first time I saw her, the first time we spoke, our plans for Spain, everything I could never have again. I beat his face until it is nothing but pulp.

I check on Stacey. She's still out. I strip off the dirty clothes. Wrap the gun in a towel. I put on pajamas and pour the last of that aged, good whiskey over some ice.

There's a knock on my door. It's nine thirty. It took me exactly an hour to kill Joey Davenport. I make sure there's no blood in my hair and go to the door, a smile on my face.

Jenny stands in the hallway. She has nothing with her, just the old crimson hoodie. Tears streak long, black lines down her face. Her mouth is swollen and bleeding.

I close the door and step out into the hall with her.

"I'm so sorry," she whispers. "I want you. I need you. We'll go away. We'll go to Spain."

I don't say anything at all. I can't.

"Can I stay here tonight?"

Without thinking, I nod.

"Please believe me. We'll do it this time. I just need to find him. I'll talk to him. I'll get him to tell me where he keeps the money and we'll leave. Forever. We'll leave."

I pull her to me and wrap my arms around her.

I have finally killed Joey Davenport.

*Graham Bowlin has written several things, none of which have been published. His favorite things, in ascending order, are: reuben sandwiches, rock n' roll music, and free liquor. He lives in a small town in North Carolina where he is forced to start his own trouble.*