

Bale Hearing

By Christopher Friesen

"Why don't you start at the beginning," I tell him.

"I already went through it with the guy at the field," he says.

I close my eyes then quickly reopen them hoping he didn't notice. He sits on the other side of the table, slicked in oil, both the motor and human varieties. There are curls squeezing out from underneath his hat like dogs that have dug under their kennel fences.

Staff Sergeant Mitchell enters the room just then and places a stainless steel mug of steaming coffee before him, "Here you go Howard," he says.

Howard's fingers, fissured with cracks made black by a lifetime of wallowing in filth and grease, wrap around the shiny cup and he looks at Mitchell. "Thanks," he says.

Stainless steel mugs; it's how Mitchell runs his station, fucking tree hugger.

My mind drifts to the other night, off duty, looking for some fun and finding his daughter. Does he know? He hasn't said anything if he does. Mitchell interrupts my thoughts when he says, "Yes, please start at the beginning," and he sits down at the end of the table. "You said Aaron called you this morning?" he asks.

"That's right," Howard says. "I been working fucking fifty hours a week and this guy calls me the morning of my one day off, says, 'hey, I got me a new nine and a box of shells. Why don't you come down and we'll squeeze a few off. Bring some beer, it'll be fun.' So it's early and I pick up a two-four and head out to his place."

"Where was Margaret Sorensen?" I ask, after glancing at the file in front of me.

"Maggie? She wasn't nowhere. Never seen her when I got there. Figured she was at work."

"What do you mean she wasn't there?" I start, but Mitchell holds up his hand. Old fart, been on the job twenty years and thinks he can cut of my balls when I'm interviewing a suspect.

"Go on Howard," Mitchell says.

"Well, I get there and I can tell Aaron's been into it for a while already, so I figure I'd better tie one on real quick and get caught up. Meanwhile he's petting this fucking nine like a thirteen year old boy in the girl's locker. Keeps dry firing it at me. Creepy as hell, now that I think about it. Finally he loads it and hands it to me and tells me to empty the clip into the side of his shed. Motherfucker's got a person

outlined in black paint on the side, an' he's got a bull's eye right in the center of the chest."

"We saw that," Mitchell says shifting his weight.

He removes his club from his belt and places it on the floor. I guess he forgot it was there, dumb shit. No wonder he's got such fucked up kids. I mean, there she was, standing behind the elementary school. I saw the cigarette as I drove past, glowing orange like a tiny onion. I pull over, get out and walk right up to her. She's alone and she doesn't run. I get closer and she says, "You work for my dad don't you?"

"Yeah," I say, "you Mitchell's daughter?"

"Uh huh, my name's April." she says. "You looking for some fun?"

"Always," I say looking her up and down. I've been posted to this redneck town for six months and looking at the boss's daughter in her tank top and shorts, she must be at least seventeen, I'm already scamming on ways to fuck her. "How old are you?" I ask.

"Eighteen." She says. "You wanna party?" But before I can answer she reaches down the front of her shorts and pulls out a small plastic bag. There's a little bit of weed and two joints inside. She pulls out one of the joints and lights it off the cigarette. "Here," she says handing it to me.

"Keep going," Mitchell says to Howard.

"Can I smoke?" Howard says taking a cigarette from his shirt pocket. Bits of bleach blond straw fall from his hand and create a chaotic pattern against his dark brown shirt.

"No," I say. He quickly places the cigarette back in his pocket; his hand emerges, more straw falls to the floor. "Continue."

"I unloaded the clip in the side of the shed, hand hurts like hell now." He rubs his right hand as if to prove his point. "I turn to tell Aaron how good I did and he's passed out. So I loaded up again and unloaded another clip into the shed. Then I went back to drinking."

"Approximately what time was this?" I ask.

"What? When I unloaded the second clip?" He says.

"Yes. What time did you finish unloading the second clip?"

"Must've been around noon. I sat down cracked a fresh bottle and a few minutes later Aaron comes-to, pukes his guts out all over himself, then rinses the taste out with another beer. Crazy mother-fucker."

"So what happened next?" I say.

"Aaron gets up, sees the holes in the side of his shed and says, 'shit that's some good shooting.' So I say thanks. Then he turns and

says, 'shooting that good's got to be put to use, throw the rest of the beer in the back of the truck.' So that's what I did."

"That's when you drove to the field?"

"That's right."

"Why'd you go there?"

"Aaron said there was a fox with cubs living under his old granary out there. Says we're going to take care of 'em. So I get in the truck and he gets in beside me and before we leave he runs into the house and comes back with a bottle of vodka. Tells me 'hold onto it' and 'if you want some, don't drink too much of it.' So I just hold it."

"Were there actually foxes out there?" I ask.

"Fuck if I know," he says louder than he intended. His roadmap eyes shift to the floor. "Didn't mean to raise my voice." He says.

Mitchell says, "That's ok, just keep going."

"So we get out there, I look around, yeah; there's an old granary out there. Old building beat to shit by the weather, grey as a winter sky from all those years. Field's been cut and it's dotted with straw bales. Looks like huge golden rabbit shit for a mile." He stops talking for a moment while his mouth trembles. The trembles pass and he continues, "I'm checking out the granary, my back turned to that crazy mother-fucker. When I turn around, he's got the nine in his pants and a shotgun slung over his shoulder, he's holding the bottle of vodka in one hand with a burning rag hanging from the neck. I'm like, what the fuck? And he says, 'I know you been banging Maggie.'"

"Wait," I interrupt, "you get out there and he accuses you of sleeping with his wife?"

"That's what I said, isn't it?"

"Were you?"

"Was I what?"

"Having an affair his wife."

He pauses.

"You were weren't you?" I ask.

"Only once and it was last year, I swear."

I glance at Mitchell, but he doesn't meet my eyes, there's a blank look on his face as if he's remembering all his own indiscretions and hoping no one in his church finds out. His daughter knows, we got high and she spilled all the dirt on her family. Never did fuck her though; not yet.

Mitchell snaps back and says, "Please continue."

"So he accuses me of banging Maggie, and I say what are you talking about? And he says something like 'there's no use denying it'. Then he pulls out the nine points it at me and starts coming toward me, so I start backing up. Then he says, 'there's a mile of bales between here and the house, you make it through them and maybe I'll

let you live.' Then he throws the bottle against the old granary and it doesn't take long before the whole area is on fire."

"What did you do?" I ask.

"Fucking ran, what do you think I did? But I don't make it far before I got buckshot chasing me up my ass so I duck behind a bale and wait. I can hear him reloading so I try and make it further, you know, using the bales for cover like on T.V."

"He was hunting you." I say.

"Damn right he was hunting me, like I was some kind of rodent." I smile in agreement at the last comment, then wipe the grin off my face. "Can I have a smoke now?"

Mitchell breaks in, "Yes, why don't you step outside, have a smoke and try to calm down." We all leave the room and Howard goes outside for a smoke. Mitchell heads to the fax machine and pulls some papers from it. I sit at my desk and look through some papers in my in tray. I notice his shadow is cast across me like a giant cloud. "Something I can do for you Sergeant?" I ask.

"I've got good news Corporal," he says. Then he drops the papers on my desk and says, "Your transfer went through."

"Transfer? What transfer? I didn't put in for any transfer," I tell him glancing at the papers.

"I know you didn't put in for a transfer, I did it for you." Then he leans forward and puts his hands on my desk brining his face close to mine, his tone is hushed as he says, "What you will learn, the longer you are in this business is that to run a good station, you got to stay on top of everything that happens in the community. So, for instance, when some young cock is out sniffing around my daughter you'd better be damned sure I'm going to know about it. This transfer is effective in two months. Between now and then you so much as look at her and I'll tear your balls off and shove them down your throat. Are we understood?"

My throat goes dry and all I manage is a hoarse, "Yes sir."

"Good, now go get Howard, you think you can finish this up?"

"Yes," I say again, my voice straining.

"Where was I?" he asks.

"Aaron was hunting you through the field of bales," I say.

"Oh yeah, so I'm running from bale to bale, from this way to that trying to stay one step ahead of that whack job. Then I finally make it, I'm almost back at his house and the fire's catching up, been so dry this year and all."

"Fire department managed to save the house and yard," I say.

"That's good. Least Maggie'll be all right," he says. I glance at Mitchell but again he doesn't look at me.

"Did you make it back to the yard?" I ask.

"Almost. I'm just about to the trees and he yells out, 'Howie stop'. So I stop figuring this is the end right? Then he tells me to turn around, what am I going to do, say no? So I turn and he's got that fucking nine pointed at me again and he says, 'Just tell the truth and I won't kill you, you've been sleeping with her haven't you?' No Aaron, I say to him and he yells, 'you're a fucking liar, a fucking liar, now tell the truth, she told me it was you.' I'm like, it wasn't me man, whatever she told you it wasn't me.

"Then he starts walking toward me and gets to about ten feet away and that's when he stuck that nine in his mouth and pulled the trigger." He stops as the telling of it brings back a memory, his lower jaw begins to quiver. "Blew his fucking brains out." He closes his eyes, shudders, doesn't look up.

"Can we go back to Maggie?" I say.

"What about her?" He says without looking at me.

"Be honest Howard, were you still sleeping with her?"

"No."

"It's okay to tell the truth, Aaron is dead, it was self inflicted but we need to know that you've been entirely honest with us. So again, were you still sleeping with her?"

He doesn't say anything for a few minutes, he's holding back tears. Finally "yes," he says. "I was with her last night. Oh jeez, does she know about Aaron? Has anyone told her? Can I see her? She must be freaking out."

"Let's back up for a minute," I say. "You said that when you initially got there, you unloaded two nine millimeter clips into the side of Aaron's shed, is that correct?"

"Yeah, that's right, I already told you all that," he says looking from me to Mitchell, "When can I see Maggie?"

"Well, there's a problem Howard, and I'm sorry to have to tell you this."

"What? Is Maggie ok?"

"Howard, we found Maggie bound, sexually assaulted and tied to the side of Aaron's shed, right behind the painted figure on the outside." Howard's eyes go wide, "It appears she was killed by multiple gun shot wounds."

He looks from me, to Mitchell, off to the side, then back to me. Suddenly, his mouth erupts in a lava flow of vomit that splashes across and covers the table.

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