

# Ain't My Bitch

By Max Callahan

Catching a bullet in your teeth is possible - I've done it. It helps a lot if the slug in question has just passed through some other poor sap. He'll slow it down enough to lodge against the back molars after tearing through one side of your jaw muscles and a couple of teeth. Tastes nasty, too.

I had it coming, I guess. I'd been half-asleep at the counter of a greasy spoon, waiting to pay the bill, and hadn't been paying attention. In my neighborhood, you either pay attention, or pay the blood bank. What snapped me out of it was that ugly flat crack a small caliber gun makes.

I heard the crack about the same time my head was driven sideways into a half-empty display of those little packets of heartburn and headache remedies they sell at gas stations and nasty little diners like this one.

Ironic, until all the pain messages hit the switchboard at once and I knew no medicine on that shelf could help me. I dropped like a rock, stretched out by the blow, and bounced my skull off the concrete. For a second it was the fourth of July.

As I lay there thinking about how much I hated this kind of shit, the room going gray around the edges, two more shots whipped across the room. A scrawny, pale scarecrow stepped over me, emptied the cash register and ran off carrying a fine black briefcase, probably packed full of Bolivian marching powder or China White.

It was my ex-girlfriend, whittled mighty fine by a couple years of smoking biker crank, and she'd boosted the product end of a drug deal right behind me while I dozed on my feet like a geriatric.

Served me right - I should have known something was rotten when five people came in a couple of minutes apart, all wearing suits. Nobody wore a suit in this part of town, and nobody that could afford a suit ate in this kind of diner.

Thing was, the hangover I had been fighting made concentrating for more than a few seconds impossible. I'd had to drink a potential client under the table before he'd hire me - kind of like an alcoholic job interview. He was Irish, and if my family hadn't been pureblood Mick one generation back, I'd never have survived.

The hangover had miraculously disappeared the instant I got shot, but the black nausea and tremors that flooded in to replace it was not an improvement. After a minute, I gave up staying conscious - what's the point, really, when the whole world turns to shit?

The next few days are gone, poured down the drain with two teeth and a quart of blood for a chaser.

I finally woke up in the middle of the night dying for a piss and couldn't find the nurse button. The pain meds were dimmed down to a slow background mutter, a thin film of drugs barely draping a heaving, acid sea of pain. Even my crotch hurt, where I'd apparently been catheterized until earlier.

It was entirely too much work to detach all the wires and bullshit from the monitor, so I just stood up, wheeled the machine with me down the hall, and swung open the bathroom door.

The monitor wouldn't fit, and I didn't have enough slack to get to the toilet. I could reach the sink, though-didn't even get any on the handle. It took me forever to get there, and even longer to get back.

I collapsed, and just before I nodded out, I noticed the IV tube was running at maximum. Guess they were worried I'd die of dehydration. I turned the thing off, kinked the hose to make sure, and slept through 'til morning.

I woke up in a clean white room just in time for breakfast, and wished I hadn't bothered. Breakfast was a chalky protein shake, just like every meal would be until I got my shit together well enough to chew without packing food into the holes, and without water soaking into the bandages on the side of my face when I drank.

Then I got to explain to a couple of beefy, musclehead cops that I didn't know anything about the robbery, who did it or why. That I had no idea who shot me, what they looked like, where they went, or who the guy with the toe tag who'd come in behind me was.

No, no, can't remember, sorry sir-didn't see him, don't know, nope, on and on and on, gritting the teeth I had left. They finally gave up and left, telling me not to leave town and to call if I remembered anything

I hate hospitals, I hate cops, and I hate being hurt, so by noon I was getting out even if it meant dying in the gutter out front. It took signing forty different forms, my life and my right to a lawsuit away, but they finally let me out. It's harder to get out of a hospital on your own recognizance than jail.

Now to find that little bitch and ask her why the hell she'd ripped off a dealer in broad daylight, in front of witnesses, and just incidentally shot me in the process. The whole thing reflected badly on me - I'd taught her better than that when we were together. What she needed was some guidance, and some lumps - with a set of brass knuckles.

I got all the way out to the curb before I remembered I had left my car at the restaurant, with the keys in it. Along with all the

miscellaneous trash, CD's and an ounce of fine, fine hash, there had been a handgun under the seat of the car.

I liked that gun – I'd got it from my dad when he finally quit fighting the lung cancer. He taught me to shoot with it down at the city gun club and it had saved my ass more than a couple of times. Now it was gone, along with my car.

I walked back inside, borrowed a phone off the hospital information clerk and called the impound yard. No luck there, and none of the wreckers had towed a car with that description. I was fucked.

Repo men don't make much money to start with, and now I was out of a job, missing my car and late on the rent. This is the part in most movies where the hero strides out into the city to make things right as some cheesy soundtrack cranks up in the background.

God I wish I lived in the movies. Instead I thumbed another Percocet out of the bottle and trudged sweating through the brutal heat. I thought it might be time to drop in on my dear ex for a friendly chat, to return the slug she'd forgotten at the scene. I had it in my pocket, a squashed lump of metal with two kinds of blood on it.

I knew she wouldn't be home, because if she had gone home the dealers would have killed her already. Her apartment was nothing but a box she stored her crap in anyway. She'd be at her boyfriend Lester's

His place was a nasty little dive just off the strip, one of those places set up in a cul-de-sac with only one entrance and never enough parking. On the second floor, it faced into a courtyard covered in cracked cement and illegible graffiti.

The stairs up to the place smelled like piss, and were only missing a layer of crack vials to be truly ghetto. Apparently, whatever scams he was working kept total poverty at bay, if just barely. I rang the doorbell and then stepped away from the door, not sure who'd be inside, or what they would be armed with.

"S open," a voice slurred.

Great. Amy was out, but Lester was in – in a manner of speaking. Lester was a foul-mouthed, flabby little troll whose version of awake and aware picked up where most people's blackout left off, and he didn't remember me from two years ago when I'd stopped in to let Amy know the cops had been looking for her.

It was the last favor I did her, and I shouldn't have wasted my time - neither of them had ever approached saying thanks. I was not glad to see him.

Lester was a beat-up vet, back from some little country that ends in -istan. He'd come home strapped on a board, with so much

third-world shrapnel rattling around inside his carcass he needed a special ID card to get through airport security.

Rumor had it that Lester had been a low-echelon hack, having enlisted to stay out of jail and then distinguishing his service by an ability to always find soft duty in the rear guard on the rare occasions when he was called up.

In return, our grateful nation had hooked him up with a lifetime supply of pension checks, prescription meds and paranoiac fantasies.

He cashed the checks, fenced some of his meds, and used the money to buy his preferred medication, a grotesque combination of Percodan, Southern Comfort, bad crank, and Mexican hash, all of them perpetually strewn across the battered coffee table in front of him. He was too cheap to buy proper drugs, and the shit he smoked was never done right and reeked of acetone and formaldehyde.

Of course, Lester claimed the high was better, but the side effects were cumulative and devastating. His IQ had dropped from barely functional to the point where his brain belonged in the produce aisle at Safeway, and my fuse was way too short for his brand of bullshit. Still, I tried to be nice.

"Hey Lester, what's up – you seen Amy?"

"I don' know, man. Sh' left." He was almost too far gone to speak, but I could still see the lie in his jaundiced, filmy eyes, and almost hear his memory straining to remember who I was.

"Oh, OK. Do you know where she is, or when she might be back? I'm her brother, and I need to talk to her."

"I ain' seen 'er. Ya wanna leave a mess'ge?" He tried to look right at me, but cut his eyes toward the kitchen for a second, and I could see a beer glass on the table, with her lipstick on it. There was still beer in it, and it still had a few bubbles floating on top. She'd been there last night.

I knew then that he was part of it, so I skipped the leaving a message step entirely. Better to write the message on a few squares of Charmin' and flush 'em anyway.

Instead I swept his paraphernalia off the table into a sweat-stained shirt that'd been lying there, bundled it up and trotted out to the street where his Bronco was parked. I knew he'd follow, sure as a kid will follow his favorite blanket.

It took him a minute, though. He eventually tottered out, blinking like a cave salamander and weakly brandishing a splintered old bat. I watched for a moment to see if the sun would kill him off and save me the trouble, but it didn't.

When he got within swinging distance I grabbed the bat, cracked him behind the ear and shoved his boneless carcass under a tarp in the back of his battered old Bronco. The battery was nearly flat, but it

started after a while and I took off for the hills outside town, riding on three low tires and a bad miss under the hood.

At the last truck stop on the edge of town I turned out Lester's pockets and filled up a five-gallon gas can. I got a half-rack of Miller, a jug of pancake syrup, and two bags of ice to throw in his cooler, and then headed out. It was shaping up to be a scorcher.

Lester came to around three, just when the sun was peaking. I'd stripped him, dumped the syrup over him and staked him out on an anthill like the redskins used to do in the westerns. It was a dud from the looks of it, but he didn't know that. He was hung over, jonesing, thirsty, sun-sick and scared. I wanted him sober too, so I gave him about an hour to work it out. We were twenty miles out, ten of it on steadily worsening dirt roads, and hadn't seen another car most of the way.

When he started yelling I ambled over with a cold one in my hand. I sat down a couple feet away, popped the top and drank it down. It was the first time in my life I'd seen ol' Lester focus. His eyes bulged and strained, trying to hop out of his skull and hike across the sand to get a sip. He panted like a dog and licked lips so parched I could hear the rasp of his swollen tongue.

"Gimme...gi...dri..." The 'n' glued his mouth shut for a moment, but he kept trying.

"Gimme drik you fuck..."

I didn't. Instead, I asked him where she was again, to see if the chemistry had shifted enough to allow his few remaining brain cells to hold a conference. It hadn't, but things were improving. He was able to string together a sentence now, desiccated and cracked though it might be.

"I don' know shit"

OK, so it wasn't an improvement. Maybe he needed some time to think things over, and time was the one thing I had. I wasn't going anywhere until I found my ex and had that little chat, and neither was he.

I explained how far we were from town, how hot the weather forecast had predicted the next couple days would be, and that he was lying on an anthill covered in sugar. I explained that the heat of the day kept them inside, but that at night they would emerge to feed. Then I asked him to think real hard for the next few minutes, and when he remembered where she was, there was ice-cold beer in the truck.

That got a response.

"She left... this mornin' – took my check ... to th' bank."

Right, and probably donated ten percent to the church too. I made good on my promise – I brought the cooler full of beer over to him. I didn't let him drink any, but I had said I would bring it to him.

I also brought out some of the pills he'd had scattered around like loose change, and lined four of them up on a rock next to his head.

"Those are for you, along with as much as you can drink, when you can remember where she was going, and when she'll be back."

Then I left again, sprawled out in the shade and tried to relax. The bandages had started to itch, and I was getting pissed – here I was, interrogating a guy who didn't know anything, trying to track down a person I didn't want to see, about a matter I didn't understand.

Turns out the anthill wasn't a dud, either. I never was much for watching nature shows. When it started to cool down a bit, Lester got restless.

He'd been just lying there for a few hours, occasionally mumbling at me or thrashing around, when I heard something coherent emerge.

"Oww, fuck!"

That was more than I'd gotten all day, so I perked up. Ambling over to take a look, I noticed that there were a few of the little critters wandering around on his gamy carcass. He must've smelled dead, 'cause they were damn sure trying to haul off a chunk.

"Fuck, get em offa me!"

"Where's she going? Who's she meeting? When will she be back?" I fired the questions at him in rapid succession, hoping to get an answer without having to cut him loose.

He was too busy to reply, trying to pull loose and get away from the ants, which had multiplied from tens to hundreds to thousands as his thrashing woke the pile. By the time I decided he really did need to get loose, he was covered.

Those little bastards swarmed out of the ground in a horde that looked like the dirt had come alive, and I started to worry about poor Lester. I decided to help him out.

I grabbed the 5-gallon jerry-can off the back of the truck, doused him in gasoline to drive them off, then cut him loose and hauled him onto the road next to the gas can. I dumped some more on him, sat down in front of him with my lighter, opened it and waved it in front of his bulging eyes.

"Last chance, Lester. Tell me. Tell me right now or you're going to fry like bacon, Lester – you'll be bacon for the ants and I'll find her anyway." I gave him my best mad dog stare, and right then I was

thinking about how much getting shot had pissed me off. It must have given the look real juice.

He finally spilled - told me the whole sad story. He'd tried to move up in the drug world by talking Amy into stealing an entire suitcase full of coke, and she'd shot me and some other dude to get it.

It was a goddamn mess. She was on the supplier's hit list and so had hidden the loot and skinned out of town, leaving Lester at the house waiting for her to call. She'd arranged for him to pick up the case and deliver it to her somewhere, presumably at the airport.

When I rolled up at Lester's place, he didn't remember me and thought I was working for the dealers. So now he'd maybe missed her call, and my chance to get the suitcase back to the dealers.

She wasn't giving it back willingly, I knew that much. She probably had a buyer lined up, and was hoping to make a run to Key West ahead of the hit squad. Stupid. By now, they knew everything there was to know about her, down to the size bra she wore.

That meant I'd showed up on their list of people who knew how to find her, and had probably only missed getting iced because she'd shot me at the restaurant while boosting the case. So not all shit luck is shit luck, if you know what I mean.

This made Lester and me partners - sort of. He was the only one she'd tell how to find the suitcase, and I had to get that suitcase back to the dealers to clear my name. Lester had to get the suitcase, take it to my ex, and flee the country with the loot.

It was a match made in hell. If Lester knew I was planning to give the coke back, he'd warn Amy off the moment she called.

If Amy dearest found out about my intentions, she'd find somebody else to go recover the coke and I'd be a hunted man forever.

If the dealers found out where we were, they'd torture us both 'til the found out where she was, then kill us all and fence the coke as originally planned.

And of course, if the cops found out about any of this we'd all be up shit creek. My ex for shooting up the diner, me for lying about her and kidnapping Lester, and Lester for accessory to the coke theft and god knew what kinds of petty crimes he was wanted for.

Goddammit. My head hurt and my stomach had gone sour from not eating, and I was just getting started.

I wanted a steak done rare, a margarita on a beach, a spliff of fine reefer and the phone number I'd lost from the stripper I'd met before I got shot. I wanted to strangle Lester, hunt down and kick the shit out of my ex, haul her in to the cops, call the FBI in on the dealers and then sleep for a couple weeks.

Instead I apologized, untied his hands, and gave him a beer and his pills. He drank it too fast, coughed and cussed, wrenched another open and slugged it down too, then tipped his head back and started in on me. He was indignant, embarrassed, and wanted to get some respect back, sitting there wobbly as a colt. Doing his best to be dignified, he fixed me with a look that was meant to be intimidating, but fell far short, and started a chain of complaint that wouldn't stop for the next ten minutes.

"Jesus, man - you were really gonna torch me! You're fuckin' sick, man. Tying me up on an anthill like that. Jesus Christ, man, that ain't right. This is America, goddammit. I oughta kick your ass for ya. Man goes to war for his country, tries to make an honest living, and you fuckers..." He broke off, leaned over and puked up the beer and the pills.

"You fuckers wanna take it all away!" He kept talking between bouts of retching, and as soon as he was done spat in the dirt and yanked another beer out of the cooler, all the while muttering and cussing and bragging about how much ass he was going to kick before this was all over.

I just let him get it out of his system, knowing that he was about as stable as sweaty old dynamite - a man that's just gone into withdrawal and is nursing a hangover, head trauma, and a bruised ego is no one to fuck with. That's enough to turn Mr. Rogers into Ted Bundy.

By the time he was done, I'd developed a kind of grudging respect for the guy. It's not everybody that can puke, drink, fight withdrawals and try to bully you all at once, all while sitting there soaked in gasoline - ol' Lester was tougher than he looked.

Once he'd settled down a little, I ambled off into the weeds to take a piss and think about how to untangle this mess. I guess I shouldn't have left the lighter behind.

Just as I zipped up, a sudden *WHOOMPF* and blast of heat from behind me told me all I needed to know before I even turned around. Lester had been a smoker, not a very bright one, and he was going to do me no good at all now.

He tried, though. A stunted mannequin of flame, his face already melting, Lester stood up to run with the cigarette still clamped in his teeth, but tripped on the ropes, bleating out a choked cry of dismay like a slaughtered pig. He fell on his face right over the gas can, spilling it everywhere and landing in the spreading pool of destruction.

The holocaust leapt into the air with a roar, pumping out dense clouds of smoke that smelled like barbecue, gas and burning hair. He

quit screaming instantly, but twitched on for at least another thirty seconds, his brain slowly frying in its pressure cooker of bone.

By the time I could get close enough to spray him down with a couple cans of beer, it was way too late. My only link to the briefcase was gone, burnt to greasy charcoal.

There was nothing left for me in town, either. My house was being watched, the money in my safe stolen, and even my car gone. Only thing left for it was to get out of town before the dealers found me.

It was time to make tracks, time to make that beat old Bronco walk and talk – Mexico was a long way off and the sun was getting low.

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