

A Hog's Dinner

By Poor Johnny Bassoff

I had a bowl of pistachio ice cream in one hand and a Cuban cigar in the other when I saw them. They were sitting on a wooden bench outside the rendering plant. The man was big—he must have been six-foot-three at least—with bushy black hair and a square jaw. He was in full factory uniform: white coat, white pants, Wellington boots, and a white hardhat. As for the woman, she wasn't particularly pretty, not with her crooked nose and that gap between her teeth, but she was built the way I like 'em: top-heavy. If she'd taken a deep breath, she might have given herself a pair of black eyes. Anyway, this working-class stiff had a big shit-eating grin on his face, and his right hand was having a wrestling match with her right tit. She was giggling and telling him what a bad boy he was. "I'm gonna have to tell my daddy on you," she said. Then she leaned over and kissed him—lips parted for extra effect. Now normally I wouldn't have paid any mind to a couple having a good time, but this was different. You see, the man's name was Stan Miller, and he was my brother. And the woman's name was Becky Miller, and she was my wife.

I guess they never saw me. I took the last bite of my ice cream and washed it down with some overpriced smoke. I crushed out my cigar on the sidewalk and tiptoed into the office building adjacent to the plant. Choking down the laughter that was brewing in my stomach, I nodded a quick hello to the security guard, shook hands with a nameless employee, and stepped into the elevator. There were mirrors on all four walls. I studied my own appearance. Nice clothes. The best that money could buy. But the rest of me wasn't so good. Oversized gut. Acne-scarred face. Protruding forehead. Receding red hair. Truth is, I was about as far from handsome as a monkey with Down syndrome. So then came the big question. Why had busty Becky married a fellow like me in the first place? For my personality? No. I was dull and boorish. Intelligence? Not likely. I had the IQ of a stepladder. There must have been another reason. But what? I sighed and shook my head. It was a complete mystery. Reaching into my shirt pocket, I pulled out a hundred dollar bill. Then I blew my nose into it and dropped it on the floor.

My office overlooked the sprawling redbrick factory, otherwise known as Sunshine Rendering. Steam rose from the smokestacks, a modern-day sacrifice to God. There were no windows, no clues to the savagery that was taking place inside. Carcasses being crushed and cooked, cut and shredded,

packaged and shipped to feedlots. We call it animal recycling. And think about it this way. Without our services, the cities would be filled with rotting and diseased carcasses. It's a dirty job, but somebody's got to do it (illegal Mexican immigrants—five dollars an hour, no benefits).

My father started the business from the ground up, and a finer man never lived. He died before his time in a freak hunting accident (of which I was cleared of any wrong doing). A lot of people, including my brother, were shocked when they learned that my father had left me everything he owned, including full control of the Sunshine Rendering Company. Meanwhile, Stan had been given only two things: Jack and Shit. My brother was understandably bitter and suspicious, especially since he had always been my father's favorite. He actually accused me of somehow tampering, of blackmailing my father to change the will—my old man did have a weakness for child pornography—but those charges were baseless. And I more than made amends with Stan. I gave him a job on the floor of the factory.

That morning I sat in my office staring absently at financial documents, getting next to no work done. I just couldn't stop thinking about my brother and wife and their little summer romance. Now you might have expected that those thoughts would have caused me to clench my fists and curse, or hang my head and cry. Well, you're wrong. No, every time I pictured those poor creatures of God squeezing flesh and exchanging saliva, I started laughing and hiccupping and farting. Because it was funny, can't you see? A goddamn laugh riot. Cockroaches can find love too.

I left work early that day, just like I did every day. I stopped at the candy store and bought myself a couple of Hershey bars, a box of graham crackers, and a bag of marshmallows. Then I drove around town for a while, stuffing my face with S'mores, feeling a bit more self-conscious than usual as I drove through this blue-collar town in my Jaguar XJR (supercharged 90 degree V8 engine, 0-60 in 5.2 seconds). I turned on the radio to a top-forty station and sang along to a song that I had never heard before. I waved to a man in a wheelchair and thought to myself, "God has surely blessed everyone of us, yes He has, but He just happened to bless me a little more than most."

My house was located on the edge of town on top of a hill, a sprawling 6,200 square foot Santa-Barbara style home with gourmet appliances, hardwood floors, barrel-vaulted ceilings, antique wood beams in the foyer, granite countertops, three stone fireplaces, and a large AI Fresco living area. It was what we CEO's like to call a starter home.

When I stepped inside, Becky was in the parlor reading a People magazine. Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt were talking marriage. I took off my jacket and loosened my tie because that's what hardworking men are supposed to do at the end of a long day. I sat down on the leather couch and tried stealing a kiss, but Becky quickly turned away. I was used to that. I placed my hands behind my head and rested my feet on the ottoman. "Loads of work today," I said. "These fifteen hour work-weeks are killing me." Becky didn't respond, just kept flipping through the pages of her magazine. Close friends of Lindsay Lohan were concerned about her weight.

I reached into my shirt pocket and tossed a couple of jellybeans in my mouth. Licorice and watermelon. Not a bad combination. "I saw you outside the plant," I said casually. "You were sitting with Stan."

She glanced up momentarily and shrugged. "It's not a crime to sit with your own brother-in-law."

"No. No crime at all. At least not the sitting part. Now adultery on the other hand, while not commonly prosecuted, is in fact a felony here in Oklahoma."

Becky's eyes narrowed. "What are you implying?"

"I'm not implying anything."

"I came to see you," she said. "I ran into Stan. He was on his lunch break. We sat on the bench and talked. That's all."

I swallowed some more jellybeans. Cherry and lime this time. "Well, I'll tell you something," I said slowly, "and I think you should listen closely. If I loved liars, I mean if I really loved them, I would hug you so hard your spine would shatter."

Becky's face turned as red as a used tampon. "Well..." was all she could say.

"See, I saw the two of you kissing and groping like a couple of ecstasy-drenched monkeys on their prom night."

"No," she said. "That's wrong."

"But it doesn't bother me, ma'am. Brothers are supposed to share."

Becky studied me for a few moments before a cruel grin spread across her sunlamp-tanned face. "So what are you gonna do, Bob? Divorce me? It's my word against yours. And I can always mention that little sixteen-year old slut that you porked. Or the grain alcohol that you snorkel in. I wonder how much alimony the judge will award me. Four million? Eight million? Yeah, I've been fucking your

brother. And he's got a bigger cock than you. So I'm just gonna keep on fucking and sucking, and you're not gonna do a goddamn thing about it."

Now most normal red-blooded fellows wouldn't have taken that kind of lip. Most normal fellows would have grabbed that little whore by her horse-tail and smashed her face into the coffee table a few times. Or maybe they'd have pinned her arm behind her back and shoved her head into the toilet and flushed. Or maybe they'd have pressed the side of her face against the burning stove for a few seconds. But not me. See, I'm not normal. I'm gentle. Too gentle for my own good.

"Like I said, it doesn't bother me." I patted her head lovingly then made my way down the long dark hallway, some mighty strange thoughts crawling through my brain.

One thing about Becky: if she said that she was going to do something, she sure as shit would do it. So when she boasted that she was going to keep right on fucking Stan, I never had a doubt that she would follow through. Only now she didn't try and hide the fact. On the contrary. She shoved her indiscretions in my face. I'd be sitting on the couch, munching on some Starbursts or a Milky Way, when suddenly she'd appear wearing fishnet stockings and a tight fitting shirt that made it look as though she were smuggling a pair of bowling balls. She'd smile wickedly and say something like, "Bye-bye honey, I'm off to receive my daily orgasm from Stan," or "Don't wait up for me. Stan and I are practicing pages 123-131 in the Karma Sutra tonight." It was all wrong, but what the hell could I do about it? Like I said, I'm an exceedingly gentle fellow.

I even confronted my brother about it a few times, but he showed no remorse. "You think I feel guilty about pounding your shit-for-brains tramp wife? After what you've done to me? Ha. This is the least I could do."

So I was in a real bind, stuck between two dead ends. Divorce my wife and risk losing my fortune, or let Becky and Stan continue to make the fool of me. Then one evening, while blowing bubbles in the bathtub, I had an epiphany. I only wish The Almighty had spoken to me earlier.

I don't believe in guns, never have, but I do own one. It's a beautiful Smith & Wesson 329 PD revolver with an alloy frame and a titanium cylinder. It was given to me as a gift from a hog farmer named Bill "Pork Chop" Johnson. Told me it could make a hog's head explode like a grape. I took his word for it. I never had much use for it, but tonight I decided it might come in handy. I retrieved the

weapon from the strong box and filled the cylinder with semi-jacketed hollow point bullets. I'm a cautious fellow.

Outside the sky was black and the moon was missing. The stink from the rendering plant hovered over the town like a fog. I loosened my silk tie, popped some Mike and Ikes in my mouth, and started walking toward my brother's house.

Stan lived nearly three miles away, so it took me a good hour to get there. His house was a little brick ranch, lost and lonely-looking behind a yard full of sunflowers and sage. It wasn't much to look at, but it did offer plenty of privacy. A fellow could scream and scream and nobody would hear him, nobody but the prairie dogs and burrowing owls.

Becky's BMW was parked in the driveway, and all the lights in the house were on. I walked slowly toward the front door, the gravel crunching beneath my newly-purchased Prada shoes. The screen door was hanging off its hinges, banging with the rhythm of the wind. I stuck my hand in my pocket, felt the cold steel against my skin. I knocked a few times, but there was no answer. I tried the doorknob. It was unlocked.

Inside, beer cans, dirty dishes, and dirty magazines were scattered across the hardwood floor. Music was playing. Lynard Skynard. I think. I tiptoed through the living room and toward his bedroom. What I saw wasn't pretty. Stan was sitting on his dirty couch wearing nothing but a cowboy hat and an a-frame t-shirt. Becky was on his lap, buck-naked, bouncing up and down, her eyes closed, shouting, "Oh, Jesus, oh Jesus." It was the first time I'd ever heard her pray. I stood in the doorway for a while, out of sight, just watching and thinking.

Five minutes later they were all done. Becky rolled off Stan's lap and wiped her ass with her panties. She was classy if nothing else. Grinning, I took a couple of steps into the room and started clapping real slow like. They both looked up at the same time, rats in headlights. Becky pulled the modesty stunt, quickly grabbing a t-shirt and covering her fleshy milk cartons. Meanwhile, Stan covered his pecker with his cowboy hat. "I didn't mean to bust in," I said, "I just misplaced my wife and was hoping to find her here."

"Go away Bob," Becky said. "You're not wanted here."

"Yeah, go away," Stan repeated. "You're a nuisance."

"Either of you folks ever read the Bible?" I said.

"I go to church every Sunday," Becky said. "Alone. So don't pull your self-righteousness on me."

"I wasn't talking about my righteousness. I was talking about the Bible. It's got some Commandments in it. Ten or so to be exact. Seems to me you just pissed on about half of them."

Stan took a couple of steps forward, a smirk glued to his face. "Since when did you find religion?"

It was a fair question that I chose not to acknowledge. "I don't have 'em memorized," I said, "but I do remember the Tenth one. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's ass. Don't believe me? Look it up. Exodus 20:17."

"Stop," Becky said. "Just stop."

"Seems to me that both of you did a heck of a lot more than covet."

Stan took his cowboy hat off of his smaller head and dropped it to the ground. The smirk on his face had disappeared and been replaced by something closely resembling fear. "What do you want, Bob?" he said, his voice gravely.

"Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's," I said.

"You're fucking crazy," Becky said.

"And unto the God, the things that are God's."

I pulled out the gun. Becky shrieked and farted at the same time. Stan said something clever like, "What the fuck?" I cocked the gun and pointed it in Becky's direction, just to give her a little scare you know, maybe make her crap on the hardwood floor. She didn't defecate, but a little urine did escape from her urethra, and she started trembling like a leaf with Parkinson's. "Don't worry honey," I said. "I'm not gonna shoot you. It's not part of the plan." With a grin and a quick jerk I changed the direction of the weapon so that it was perpendicular to Stan's burly chest. I closed my left eye and aimed. Instinctively he shielded his face with his arms as if he were being attacked by an old lady with a purse. My finger tensed and the trigger gave, a loud explosion shattering the sacred night, a piece of lead burying itself just below his collarbone. Stan's eyes widened, and he just stood there for a moment—the way a cartoon character remains suspended after walking off a cliff—then his knees gave way, and he collapsed to the floor, face first.

He was hurting, but not dead. He was breathing heavily and moaning, the blood spilling out of him and spreading onto the shag carpet. A vague sense of regret oozed through my veins. He was my only brother. It was a shame, a crying shame. I walked over to the struggling man and pressed the barrel of the gun to the back of his head. He whispered something about Dad that I couldn't quite make out. Then I fired again and he didn't say anything else.

Like a cornered animal, Becky climbed onto the bed and curled into the fetus position, naked except for a pair of white socks. Me, I sat down on a wooden chair, feeling suddenly tired. I hadn't been sleeping well. No more than twelve hours a night. I shook my head and sighed. "We had our differences," I said. "I guess all brothers do. But he was a good man. I'll miss the hell out of him." That's when Becky started crying, sounding like a dying hog sucking for air. It wasn't easy watching her suffer. I got out of the chair, stepped over the bloody mess that was my brother, and moved next to my wife on the bed. I tried stroking her dark hair, but she flinched. Our marriage was on the rocks, no question about it.

I didn't allow her to get dressed. Having a few easily traced articles of clothing left behind at the scene might help the proper authorities get to the bottom of this heinous crime. See, I had it all worked out in my mind, how things were supposed to look. She had come over to Stan's house for a little lovin', just like she'd been doing for God-only-knows how long. They'd gotten into an argument. Perhaps there was another woman. Perhaps he'd threatened to end the affair. It doesn't really matter. In a fit of rage, Becky had grabbed her purse, pulled out the revolver, and fired. He hadn't died though, not right away. She panicked and shot him again, this time in the back of the head. Their affair was officially over. She got into her car and started driving, the realization of what she'd done gnawing at her intestines. Soon they'd be looking for her. They knew what model car she was driving. She needed to ditch it somewhere. She needed to disappear.

We got into Becky's BMW, her in the driver's seat, me in the backseat pressing the gun against her soft neck. We drove north on 12th Street, then east on Main Street past rotting bungalows, boarded-up windows, and dying dreams. We crossed over the railroad tracks and merged onto Route 169, a lonely two-lane highway surrounded by tangles of blackjack and mesquite. The rendering plant appeared in the distance, shining like a beacon. "Welcome home," I said, and Becky shivered.

When my old man ran things, the factory stayed open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. "Meat is money," he used to say. Nobody messed with my dad. He owned this town. But after I took over, things changed. Certain unnamed individuals sensed an opportunity with a new sheriff in town. They started filing endless complaints about the usual things: air quality, waste disposal, and workers' rights.

The city bit. They forced my company to make some concessions. One of those concessions involved hours of operations. The plant was now only able to run its five boilers for 20 hours a day. Thus the plant closed at eleven, at which point the cleaning crew would work for two additional hours. From one o'clock to three o'clock the plant was shut down, and nobody was on the premises. When I first learned about these punitive measures, I was understandably hurt and angry. They were preventing me, an honest businessman, from earning decent wages. But tonight, I felt mighty thankful for those bloodsucking city councilmen. I could do my dirty work in private.

We parked in the empty parking light, hidden by the long shadows of the smokestacks. I told Becky to turn off the engine. "What are you gonna do, Bob?" she said in a plaintive voice.

I didn't answer. "Get out of the car."

"You don't have to hurt me," she said. "I'll never tell them what you did. We could live happily together, Bob, I know we could. I know I haven't been the best wife, but I...I could change. You'll see. It'll be just like you once imagined it to be. I'll be who you wanted me to be. I'll cook dinner. I'll clean the floors. I'll—"

"Get out of the car," I said again.

This time she did.

On the face of things, the inside of the rendering plant isn't all that shocking. Filled with steel catwalks, crisscrossing conveyer belts and white pipes, it has an Eisenhower-era utilitarian feel to it. Until you breathe in the odor. Decaying flesh. All kinds. Cattle, hogs, sheep, raccoons, possums, snakes, cats, dogs. You name it, we render it.

We walked slowly through the plant, zigzagging through the machinery and carcasses, Becky a few steps ahead, a condemned woman. Eventually we came to what the workers affectionately liked to call "The Blood Hole," a ten-foot deep stainless steel pit loaded with a giant auger-grinder. I told Becky to stop.

"Know what we use this for?" I asked. "We use it to chop and grind the flesh, prepare it for cooking."

Becky shook her head. "Bob..."

I touched her shoulder gently, the way a doctor might comfort a cancer patient. "It's not your fault," I said. "None of it. God made you this way. He made you spiteful, cold, and mean. And there wasn't a thing you could do about it."

Becky looked at me with resignation in her eyes, and I slapped her. She bowed her head in shame. I placed my hand under her chin, lifted up her head. Then I reached back and swung as hard as I could, a roundhouse right that connected with her cheekbone. She crumpled to the floor like a dress falling from a hanger. I bent down and grabbed her legs. Then I started pulling. She screamed and kicked as her naked body was dragged across the concrete floor. I got her feet to the edge of the pit, while she flailed like a goldfish on the bathroom floor. Trying to calm her down, I gave her a hard kick in the neck. She gasped, and the flailing stopped momentarily. With my last iota of energy, I managed to shove her over the edge. She tried desperately to keep from falling, her fingernails scratching against the sides, but it was no use. My former bride came crashing to the bottom of the Blood Hole.

I ran my hand through my hair. Then I walked over to the far wall and opened up a plastic cover. I hit the switch. The auger started with a low roar. I sat down on a bench and opened up a package of Twizzlers. I stuffed one in my mouth, closed my eyes, and listened to the screams—horrible screams—echoing against the steel walls.

Eventually the screams stopped. I waited a while, finished another Twizzler. Then I peered inside. Becky was gone. There were only chunks of her flesh. The workers wouldn't think twice. Like I said, you name it, we render it.

I left the plant and hopped into Becky's car. I drove down the highway a ways until I came to a little dirt pull-off next to a refinery tower. That's where I—that's where she—ditched the car, with her murder weapon locked safely in the glove-compartment box. I figured that they'd probably search for her for a while, but I was pretty confident they wouldn't find her. Of course, the person they were bound to feel most sorry for was poor ol' me. Losing his father, brother, and wife in such a short span of time. The only thing I'd have left was my money, and there's some saying about money not buying happiness.

Anyway, I left behind the car and started walking down the highway, back toward my castle. The night was so quiet and peaceful. I closed my eyes and suddenly felt His presence. Tears started flowing down my cheeks. I dropped to my knees. To think that He had sent His only son to bleed and die on that cross for a wretched soul like me. I was overcome with awe and gratitude. All of my sins forever forgiven

because of His never-ending love. So what did it all mean? It meant that I was going to keep right on eating and boozing and whoring and killing without a care in the world. And there wasn't a goddamn thing He could do about it. Buyer beware.

Johnny Bassoff has been writing about the criminal mind since he could hold a pencil, which has caused much concern among friends and family members. One of his short stories, "The Last Time I Die," is due to appear this summer in Crime Spree Magazine. Contact him at bassoffj@netzero.net.