

Laetrile

By Ed Lynskey

Mezey lay dying. The laetrile treatment had failed. Did he know it? I didn't have the guts to tell him. With little else on my mind, I sat smoking in our rented room. The lone window, no screen, faced the adobe wall to the bus depot. All day buses came and went, but we stayed put. No mariachis strummed guitars in the square.

Somewhere in Mexico, we waited. Above the Rio Grande in El Paso, what we were doing violated the law. Armed agents busted into your room. They jailed you on a narcotics beef. Up north, you hacked up blood and took it, dying. But Steve McQueen didn't. He'd come for the laetrile. We had, too.

"Frank," said the wasted man once known to me as Mezey. "I ache. Bad, bud."

"Where?"

"Every damn where."

"It's fourth and nine," I said, my guts twisted inside out.

Mezey made an inarticulate croak.

"Huh? Water? I'll uncork a new bottle."

"No," said Mezey after clearing away the phlegm in his throat. "Mash me up more apricot pits. Quick."

For a tense pause, I scowled. "Um, no apricot pits. They're all gone."

Sorry." I craned my head as if searching the room's sparse furnishings: a rattan bed, a cheap bureau, and a shadeless lamp.

"They were my last hope," said Mezey.

I didn't dispute him. "Tequila?"

"No. Gimme my bite-bullet." Mezey wheezed before a rib-rattling cough hit him.

Instead I gave him a grin. We hadn't lost our sense of humor even if it was just hokey lines.

My hands gripped the slat-back wood chair. I straddled it ass backwards. My chin settled on a wrist. I hated it here. I made do with a nearby cot but hadn't slept a wink in two nights.

"Frank, you there?"

"I got your back."

"God damn glad somebody does."

I nudged up a sleeve: 5:18 p.m. The quack was due back soon. Yeah, he'd show up with his hand held out. My cactus knife stuck in Mezey's headboard glinted with ideas.

Coughs, creaks, moans. Then, silence. Poor guy, I brooded.

My memory cast back to events leading us here. Mezey had liver cancer, stage 4. Better put, Mezey had some liver with his cancer. Forty-eight ounces of poison thrived under his right ribcage. We'd been through a revolving door of different doctors. Johns Hopkins was our last stand. Their specialists threw out five-dollar words: adriamycin; 5-fluorouracil; interferon; hepatic artery infusion; and chemoembolization.

Turning in his hospital bed, Mezey asked, "Translation?"

I took in, let out a breath. "They say our chances are slim to nil."

"A new liver?"

"Waiting list for a liver transplant is eighteen months," I replied.

Mezey shut his acid holes for eyes. "Might as well be an eternity."

"It's fourth and nine. Your call," I said.

"Fuck it. We go to ole Mexico," said Mezey.

Mexico. A doctor Mezey had corresponded with over the last month (actually, I'd written the letters he dictated to me) promised a radical cure. Dr. Hector Jorges could heal liver cancer. For a price. So, bring your money and drive on down. I'd my doubts. Dr. Jorges explained in a letter about Steve McQueen. He'd died from an operation, not from the successful laetrile treatments for his cancer. So, I went with Mezey. To his credit, he'd kept the faith.

I cursed the darkness falling over our room. A rattle started low in Mezey's throat. Dingy bed sheets covered him, saving the undertaker the trouble. My poker face belied what ripped out my insides.

"I can't see. Are the windows painted black?" asked Mezey.

"No. It's night," I replied.

"Frank, can we make it home?"

"You wanna leave?" I asked him.

"The sooner the better . . . can we get home?"

"You'd better sleep," I said.

"I'm gonna die here, aren't I?" Mezey's voice rang out strong.

"Yes. I'm sorry."

His voice fell to a listless monotone. "You gonna get Jorge?"

"Don't worry about Jorge. You just rest easy, bud," I said.

"Frank," he addressed me in a raspy plea. "Don't . . ."

"Don't?"

"Don't slit Jorge's throat. Let it go."

"Let me put up the window blind. A full moon is out -- "

"Promise me you won't do it," said Mezey.

I didn't respond. The reek of urine overlaying body decay overpowered my senses. Mezey's glassy eyes tried to focus on me, faltered, and then slid off. The apricot pits -- hard, black pellets -- played a big part in the plan I had in mind. Mariachis began to strum guitars in the square.

"Gimme your word," said Mezey.

"You got my word. I won't slit Jorge's throat."

"Liar! That pig-sticker, what's it for?"

I grunted. "I used it to chop up the apricot pits."

"O-o-o-o. Christ, the pain can saw me in half. Water."

Grateful to be busy again, I popped the top on the green bottle, dribbled a swallow into a shot glass. Mezey's lips parted to emit a stench that could burn the chrome off a bumper. Like a champ, he didn't spray out the water in a coughing fit.

"Hear Jorge on the stairs?" I said.

"H-m-m-m."

I shifted over to unlimber the chair braced under the broken doorknob.

"You wanna take more laetrile?" I asked him.

"No. I just wanna die in peace." Mezey's admission didn't shock me. Throughout my two-night vigil I'd seen it coming.

"All right then. So be it," I said.

A double rap sounded at the door, our prearranged cue. I went over and tucked in the sheets about Mezey's emaciated corpse.

The signal knock sounded again. After switching on the lamp, I went over, threw off the brass chain, and opened the door. A slight man in a powder blue suit entered. I thought of a vampire bat hovering to suck the life force from a dying patient. I wanted to crush that vampire bat. Except a promise was a promise.

"Hello, Senor Johnson. How is our friend?" asked Dr. Jorges.

"Very sick," I lied.

"Yes, the laetrile has yet to work its miraculous power," said Dr. Jorges. His puzzled glance took in the new brass chain I'd installed. Gazing at me, his eyebrow hiked in bemusement.

"How much longer?" I asked.

"Soon," said Dr. Jorges.

"This laetrile has helped others?" I asked.

"Like Steve McQueen, you must also keep faith," Dr. Jorges told me.

"Yeah, a fool's faith. Your cure failed. But I know things. I know apricot pits contain hydrogen cyanide. Rat poison."

Jorges' ratlike palms flipped up. "Senor Johnson, you've not given the laetrile a fair chance. After a little longer, you'll see." He sidled back an inch

closer, his shaky hands groping for the broken doorknob.

"Time has run out." Reaching, I jerked the cactus knife out of the headboard. "Your patient died, Jorges. He was my best friend."

His gray eyes enlarged. "You stay away from me."

I armbarred Jorges to pin against the door, then I lay the cactus knife's edge across his throat. Outside the window, I heard the revved engine to a bus leaving town. "Your cure failed."

His face wax pale, Jorges swallowed hard. I tossed down the bulging pouch of apricot pits.

"Get busy chopping," I said.

"Why? Senor Mezey has died. No need for more medicine."

"No, doctor." I grinned. "This is your dose."

The End

Ed Lynskey's three crime novels are THE DIRT-BROWN DERBY (Mundania Press, 2006), THE BLUE CHEER (Point Blank/Wildside, 2006), and PELHAM FELL HERE (Mundania Press, 2007).