

Button Man

by J. Fallthrough

I had a hell of a time finding the M16. The last one was made in 2075 and when I asked around half the people I talked to barely even knew what a rifle was. Through some of my old military connections, I met Taddeo who called himself a “gun genealogist” and who functioned as something between an antiques dealer and an historian. Our last meeting was at least three months ago and I had pretty much dismissed him as another dead end and probably a crank. Then, this morning, just as I had stepped out of the shower the doorbell rang and I heard feet scurry away. I quickly threw on a pair of pants and when I got to the front porch found a narrow white box. I took it inside and opened it. The rifle was wrapped in tissue paper as if it were one of those fancy fruit deliveries that the higher-ups claimed well-wishers sent to us at the military base. A couple of plastic boxes of bullets sat at the of the bottom of the stock and the top of the muzzle and a scope was nestled next to the barrel. I snapped a picture and sent it to Donna with the message, “I guess it's on now.” She got back right away with “Can it be? ? Come in this afternoon?” We settled on a time and I finished getting dressed.

I was just about to pick up the rifle again when Ben called.

“Guess who's in business?” I said.

“My old military buddy, the sharpshooter?”

We both laughed. We'd only learned that word recently.

“Arrived this morning,” I said and tapped my index finger to my thumb three times to wake up the scanner implant. I ran my finger just above the gun, following the full length of it.

I caught a glimpse of Ben's face while I did and he looked like I'd never seen him—scared. Of the two of us, Ben had always been the more adventurous. In our military days he had volunteered for on-the-ground work in the colonies. Something I stayed well clear of. Yet when he was offered the rifle assignment he

turned it down. He even tried to tell Donna to turn away the client who had requested the gun—as if anyone told Donna anything.

“Dangerous thing, John, be careful.”

“We can kill more with an M-Tab in 30 seconds than this clunker can in ...” I didn't know how to finish that sentence, but we both got the point.

“I'm not talking kill rates, man.”

“Then, what?”

Ben went silent.

“It's too personal,” he said, finally. “It can ... *stir up* ... too much stuff. There's a reason we've used M-Tabs for the last century.”

“Of course. Easier. Better control. No way we'd manage the colonies we have today with these stupid things,” I said.

“It's not just that. All I'll say is when you're done get rid of it. Give it back to Taddeo. Smash it up. Melt it down. Whatever.”

“Sure. I'll make belt buckles out of it,” I said and smiled.

Ben laughed a little and then changed the subject.

After we hung up, I screwed the scope on to the rifle and took it out to the backyard. I was barefoot and the soil below me was still wet with dew. I pressed my feet into the soft ground and pointed the gun up into an elm tree. I sighted it on a robin that sat on one of the branches. Through the scope I could see its layers of feathers and the rim of white around its eye. I was accustomed to coordinates and heat measures.

If I pressed the trigger the stupid thing twitching its head from side to side would become a rain of entrails; its feathers would scatter like pollen. How many explosions, big and small, the history of the world was made up of. Why would anyone want to go back to that? That was the first thing I wanted to know about this new client. I lowered the gun, closed my eyes and imagined the closing animation I'd set on my M-Tab in my military days: a smiling ghost flying up every time a kill was finalized. I looked down at the stupid

antique in my hands. Amazing to think that so much violence was done here in the home country with them. We barely had any crime since we gotten rid of all guns at home and limited devices like the M-Tab to the military and companies with special licenses, like Terminease.

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Donna always put a vase of flowers in the middle of the table in her office. I could gauge her mood by whether or not she pushed them aside. If she left them where they were she was stressed or irritated or something that would make her short and officious. If she pushed them off to the side so they didn't impede our view as we sat across from each other, I could expect her to be sunny. Today, she shoved a bunch of yellow tulips to the rim of the table and smiled as she passed me the file for the person, who, up until now I'd only known as Client X.

I flipped open the cover and looked at the picture on the first page. Her chubby face was framed with loose dark curls. She was pretty—not really my type, but pretty still.

"Astrid Wriighthammer," I said her name, "So, this is the one who wants be shredded with an old-fashioned military rifle?"

I must have had an incredulous look on my face because Donna asked, "Not what you were expecting?"

"I wasn't sure *what* to expect. I mean how do you imagine someone who wants to die by antiquated rifle blast? Not exactly a type."

"Well, if this catches on we'll see if she's a type any more than the sad sacks who want to be fried by remote control."

"That has the benefit of painlessness."

"I've never been convinced of that. How can we know? But, then I've never

been a button man—or a Terminease client."

"Compared to what an M16 can do, believe me it's painless. I've seen whole families expire with barely a whimper."

"Painless. Clean. Final," Donna said repeating the Terminease tagline, "Even if we only got two out of three it's still a bargain."

Donna's face turned serious in a way that made her look older. She was in her fifties and whether she looked old or young was now largely a matter of expression and lighting. With a smile on her face she could pass for ten years younger. "You know, John, the Board is watching this case closely. They think it may be the beginning of a trend. One of the shrinks says he's seeing this need for *the visceral*.

"A hunger for blood and guts?"

"Okay. I guess. Anyway he says he's seeing it even in his non-suicidal patients."

I wasn't sure what to say to this. Why go through unnecessary pain? The whole point of Terminease was that if you wanted to pull your plug but didn't have the guts and wanted it to be ... well ... painless, clean, and final you called us.

"Is this the eminent Dr. B? Record holder for most referrals to Terminease." I said.

Donna leaned back in her chair and smiled. "Need you ask?"

I looked down at the picture of Astrid again. I imagined her curls scattered over a sidewalk. In my mind somehow they were bloodless and in a delicate swirls.

Donna stood up and walked to her desk. "Well, study up. The deadline's next week."

When I got home I poured another cup of coffee so I could skip my afternoon nap. I wanted to dig into Astrid's file immediately. I spread out the reports, the client narrative, the clinician statement, and all the other papers on my kitchen table. Unlike other client narratives, Astrid's was written longhand in pen, something the Terminease intake specialist commented on in his report. "She demanded a written (the old kind) statement. Part of her nostalgia—for lack of a better term" he had noted. Her loopy handwriting was in blue ink and she had included a sketch of the M16 midway down the first page. Around it she laid out her reasoning for wanting to be killed with this particular weapon.

When I was a kid I used to blindfold myself and bang around the house until I was bruised. I started doing this just after I learned

about the M-Tab killings from one of the books I wasn't supposed to read. I discovered pain then and everything else fell into place. They call the colonies the cemetery lands, but no one's as dead as we are here. I hate those M-tabs and their clean, silent killing. I want to crash into my death. And I admit it—it's not just the death; it's the few seconds of explosive life that I'll feel when the bullet from the rifle rips through me that I want as much as death.

The deadline was next Thursday. Sometime between now and then I would kill Astrid with the rifle. I poured over the details for the next hour. Astrid worked at an implant firm from 8 AM until 4 PM. She walked to and from work. Her apartment had windows facing East. She was 5 foot 4 and weighted 130 pounds. She had studied botany before dropping out of college. On her back left calf she had a tattoo of a purple iris. The assistants for the day would all wear a necklace with three interlocking gold hearts.

I put together my report for Donna. I named Tuesday the kill date for two reasons: 1. I liked my three-day weekends (my time in the military had me soft) and 2. I wanted to build in some time so if anything went wrong I could still make my deadline. It was, after all, my first gun kill. I would position myself on the roof of the building a few blocks from the plant and when she was walking home I'd take her out. Terminease would take care of all of the unseen details, like making sure no one stopped me.

I drank another cup of coffee and then I took up the rifle again. It didn't feel as awkward this time. My shoulder curved more easily around its stock and I lifted and lowered its barrel with greater ease. I took it outside again and stood at the porch railing. I peered through the scope and panned around the yard until I found a squirrel sitting on a ceramic base that once held a water fountain. I eased the gun down until the animal was squarely within the sight range and pulled the trigger. An explosion of red flashed before me. The blast jerked me back a little and I could feel my muscles jolting out of place. Neither felt particularly bad. For the first time I had a sense of what drew the guys of old to the military. Unlike the M-Tab,

the rifle was no mere tool, no quiet electronic slave. It was an equal. When I lowered the gun I had that feeling you get when you bite into something pleasantly hot, except it was all throughout my body.

I got a garden trowel and a garbage bag and cleaned up the mess in the yard. I wouldn't have thought you could feel both exhilaration and satisfaction at one time, but that's just the sense I had—as if I were starting and finishing something perfectly. When I got back to the house, I saw that Ben had called again. I didn't call him back, and then I decided to switch off the phone altogether. Talking to him or anyone else could only bring me down.

In the days leading up to Astrid's killing I practiced more with the rifle. I shot a feral cat, a rabbit, and three more squirrels. My technique got progressively better. With the M-Tab I was just an order follower equipped with a machine that could remotely dispatch the troublesome with ease. All it took was one finger. Unlike the gun, which required the whole body. Precision. Concentration. I was never really even sure how the M-Tab worked. Something about interrupting electrical impulses that kept the heart banging away. What did I know? They could have told me the M-Tab killed by marshaling an army of invisible fairies and I would have believed them. With the gun lies like that were impossible. I had always been a meek man—the kind the military preferred. Malleable. Able to follow direction with a minimum of curiosity, much less resistance. No real conviction. But that had all been an illusion—one that the gun blasted away

What really pulled me in, though, were the stories. I told myself that the cat was the girl who laughed at me in front of my unit when we toured an Eastern colony. I didn't even really like her, but she sat alone in a military café—a dumpy young woman who I didn't think would do anything but melt when a soldier gave her some attention. The squirrels were the cousins who locked me in the basement one Halloween and only let me out the next morning when everyone else had dumped their costumes and I showed up to breakfast dressed like a peanut. I'd never thought of killing any of these people before, but the rifle made it seem like the most natural thing in the world.

The gun was the ultimate storyteller. Its only weakness just made me love it more: It needed me to tell its story.

On the night before Astrid's killing, I secured the safety on the rifle and placed it next to me in bed. In the past, I had lay next to women like this—my ex-wife for five years, for one—but they were hairy and lumpy and the stories they told never added up. The gun was a sleek perfect line.

I didn't eat anything the next morning. I shaved, brushed my teeth, ran a comb through my hair. Then I disassembled the rifle and put it in the case I'd made for it. As I was locking my door Ben called again and I hit "decline," sending him on his way to leave another voicemail. It was only 6:30 in the morning, but it was already hot and when I got in my car I had to let the air conditioning run for a little while before I could comfortably touch the steering wheel.

An hour later I arrived at the building across from Astrid's work, a security guard with the necklace buzzed me in. She led me up to the roof without saying a word. I assembled the gun, everything clicking together beautifully, and crouched down. I followed a number of people walking down the street through the scope, telling myself all sorts of things to explain why I wouldn't kill them. When I sighted Astrid a couple of blocks away I kept the gun level and followed her in a perfect line. Her hair was tied up in a knot on the top of her head and she bounced slightly as she walked. When she was about ten yards from the entrance, I sighted just below the knot of hair.

The screaming from passersby startled me for a minute. A woman in a yellow coat bent down next to Astrid and then others followed until a small crowd was around her. They looked at each other and then started waving their hands wildly. Someone pulled his car to the curb and ran toward the crowd. A spray of blood stained the wall of the implant factory's wall behind them. I waited until the ambulance came and took the body away.

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I warned John—or tried to in my own way—about the dangers of a weapon like that, how it was too alive, how you could never control it the way you could an M-Tab. I said all this in the voicemails, which I kept sending even after the killing spree started. After Astrid there was a handyman leaving a building supply company with a bag of quick-drying cement that exploded with the shot and hardened some of the blood splatter. The second was a mother of six who, we later learned, believed that Astrid's killing heralded the end of the world and had pulled the kids out of school. Then there was the guy who ran an aquarium who was carrying a tank of angelfish into his store when John blasted him from across the street. Dead fish and glass shards lay in the pool of blood alongside his unusually small body. Unlike them, John got an easy death. It could have been planned by Terminease. It took me a little while to figure out how to hack an M-Tab for unauthorized use, but when I did the killing stopped.

One of the guards here has a voice like John's and sometimes when I'm screaming in my sleep he wakes me, saying my name. "Ben. Ben. *Ben Kelly.*" At first, I think I'm being woken up by the man I killed. It's spooky. For a long time, I slept soundly. I had put an end to the carnage, after all. The letters helped too. So many people wrote to me to tell me I was a hero who shouldn't be rotting in prison. I didn't even know that people wrote letters until I was locked up and that was the only way to communicate with the outside world. To be imprisoned is to be sent back to the time of the gun. It wasn't all bad. I was let out regularly to wander the yards that encircle the prison. I grew a garden that supplied the kitchen with produce and had started growing flowers. The other inmates and I created a game using a hollowed-out pumpkin as a ball. Most of the inmates and staff treated me if not with kindness, a sort of deference that made day-to-day life bearable. We lived at a slower pace and I learned to think more precisely, to notice my environment in better detail. I could have gone on like that in peace with myself and my surroundings, but then I got that one letter.

It had started out so much like all the others that I almost stopped reading a few sentences in. "Thank you for your service," it began. "You freed us from a madman." The writer went on:

I write to you not only to express my gratitude for rescuing us from John the Annihilator and the terror he unleashed in a populace with no memory of the gun, but to ask for your help. I don't flatter you or tell you something you don't know by saying you've become something of a folk hero. I've signed the petitions to get you out of your current hellhole and participated in as many of the demonstrations as I can. But I'm writing now to ask for your help, which I believe can be invaluable in an effort I and growing number of others are hoping to find success with. You see, Mr. Kelly, now that a calm has settled over us (thanks to you) we have come to realize that the gun, if employed by the right people in the right situations, offers a mode of control that, in our era of dangerous quietude, has been sadly forgotten.

Your killing of John the Annihilator was effective, appreciated, and absolutely necessary, but—and please don't take this a criticism—it was also unsatisfying, and it gave many of us to cause to consider that this wan, sterile way of death via M-Tab may be part of the problem we now see in the colonies. (Incidentally, I met some of the "many" I refer to here at a demonstration to secure your freedom).

The time has come for an unshrinking look at the uprisings, rebellions, and non-compliance that are sweeping the colonies. How can a population be controlled if all they have to fear is some sort of Terminease-style death that puts them to sleep? We may as well pelt them with cotton balls and expect compliance. The deaths at the hands of John the Annihilator were horrific—even the first one, which, yes, some kook actually wanted—but they will not be in vain if we acknowledge the reckoning he imposed on us, if only unintentionally. As one of my collaborators says, "that lunatic blasted a window into our consciousness." So is the often the way of progress.

Do you have much word from the outside, Mr. Kelly? I'll proceed here as if you don't. In the last year alone we saw one of our military installations torched by a horde of shrieking savages in Lower East Colony 8; the wife of a General serving in the southernmost colony was killed in the most grotesque way, which I will only say involved a heated homemade sabre; and a delegation of business leaders was blown to bits by a malcontent who strapped herself with explosives. Clearly, these people understand the power of the explosion and do we not make fools of ourselves daily by not using that to our advantage, but instead remain only its hapless victims?

How long can we expect to maintain control in these circumstances?

Our technology is no longer our tool, but our captor. It no longer frightens our enemy, but gives him the comfort of knowing a death—a painless, clean, final one—awaits him as if he were some home-country sad sack.

As is often the case, our movement—and I think it's fair to call it that at this point—was received with amusement, contempt, and dismissal at first. On a good day we were called retrograde and nostalgic. Of course, some of the mushy-hearted damned us for wanted to return to the savage killing of past eras, but when pressed for their plan about what to do about the increasing unrest quickly fell as silent as the M-Tab they so fervently wish to keep in operation.

You've given so much that it may seem presumptuous or arrogant to ask you to give more by leveraging the trust and love you've accrued in our populace to a cause that is anything but your own, but a statement from you would mean so much especially at this critical time. We, who see both the rising danger and the solution, are at a turning point. Did you know that a Major you once served under has called us “patriots with dedicated hearts and innovative minds?” Our ranks are growing daily and the media, who once scorned us, now nearly begs us to talk to them. More people are learning how to make the kind of rifle John used and some

businesses have even sprung up. Recently, when word of an M-tab killing of a cell in the Northwest hit the news there was outrage and even some of the more pacific in our government had to acknowledge that they should have been blown to bits.

I wonder if I may even be so bold as to suggest that our causes might harmonize. Perhaps speaking out in the way that only you can could bring more attention to your unjust imprisonment and overly harsh sentence? Nothing would make myself and my collaborators happier than if it did.

I am enclosing a sample statement for your consideration. Of course, this is merely suggested text and our only aim in offering it is to enhance the ease with which you might lend your invaluable support. What is safety at home but an illusion if safety in the colonies can't be assured?

You have already done much, but now the time has come to do more. Will you muster the same courage you did to stop your one-time friend to say, boldly and with conviction, that the time of the gun has returned?

