

The Death of Your Brother

by Jerry Ratch

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Suddenly a downpour erupted again, just like it did earlier in the morning. Clouds came out of nowhere, and it became a deluge. It felt like things including our tiny trailer were going to start floating around the nudist camp. Gina held back the little curtain, watching stupefied as it came pouring down outside. Then a plink, plink, plink noise started up in the minuscule bathroom.

That was when Quebec showed up at the trailer door with the news. She looked for all the world like a drowned rat.

"Robbie," she said, "you'd better sit down."

"What? What is it?" It scared me the way she said that. Immediately I thought something happened to my mother, and a tremendous jolt of fear shot up inside my chest.

"The Sheriff called," she said.

Quebec was trembling and soaking wet. "They found Harris shot to death. Your brother is dead."

"What? *What! No! What!*"

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It occurs to the Shooter that blood stinks, when you're trapped closed up in a car with it this way, in a down-pouring rain, without being able to open the windows and get some fresh air. A small pool of it shimmers on the good leather of the front seat of his Buick Regal, as he's driving down the freeway toward his next destination in Pasadena. From here, just outside Chino, it normally takes under an hour to get where he's going, but buckets of rain keep coming down out of the sky so hard that the windshield wipers can't keep up

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with it. It's such unusual weather for the Los Angeles Basin, even for the month of January. He fidgets with the dial on the radio, glancing over again at the blood. It's still so fresh that the surface of it shimmers with the vibrations in the roadway. The man accelerates, pulling himself closer to the windshield, while the deluge of rain keeps pouring out of the sky.

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"When?" I shouted. Gina threw both arms around me, drawing me over to the edge of the pull-out bed.

"It was just a couple of hours ago. They found him lying on his back in the driving rain, dressed for the next appointment in his business suit. Pools of rain had formed over his eyes. His wallet was found on the inside pocket of his suit. The motive was not robbery."

"Where?" I yelled. "Where?"

"In a cul-de-sac next to a grain feed storage lot outside Chino."

I listened coldly, sucking up the information like a sponge. I wanted to absorb all the facts I could. I was dry, and thirsty.

"When exactly, did this happen?"

"They think it happened early this morning, probably right after I dropped him off at the coffee shop."

"Who did it? Was it that — John Lytle? It was him, *wasn't it? It was John Lytle!*"

"Yes, that's what they think."

"Did they catch the bastard? Did they get him?"

I slammed my good hand into a piece of phony wood paneling above our heads. The shock of that brought me back down to earth.

"Oh, shit!" I yelled. "Damn! Damn!"

Quebec kept feeding me the facts the police had given her. That the Shooter apparently shot his own wife to death at their home in Rancho Cucamonga. Then he killed Harris. Then he went on to an appointment in Pasadena where he tried to kill the lawyer for

their company, but the man survived two shots and told the police who the Shooter was.

Quebec herself seemed calm, subdued. She looked quite old.

John Lytle then drove down to San Diego and was involved in a shoot-out with police there, who were alerted he might be coming down their way, but he got away in a barrage of gunfire. Now he was on the loose, and they stationed the Sheriff's patrols all around the camp just in case he showed up where we were.

"You think he might come here?" I asked. The thought had never even crossed my mind until then, that the man knew where we were. My mother and Quebec.

"He knows where we live," she said. "The police said not to worry, but none of us can leave the park until they catch him."

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Reaching into the inside pocket of his suit, the Shooter pulls out a sheet of paper and a pen, and starts to cross the first name off the top of the list, while keeping an eye on the road. The next name is the one in Pasadena. That's the lawyer for the company. He's next. Then onward to San Diego, where the financial advisor lives. That would be the longest drive, possibly the hardest. But there are two other names on his list — that worry the Shooter no end.

He has no idea whatsoever where to look for these people: the bookkeeper, Francine, married until recently to the President of Robinson Development; and her sleezebag boyfriend, Donald. They would be the toughest ones of all. There's no plan on how to find them either, because they're maybe the smartest. Though maybe they're really only the least foolish, the most wily — no need assigning any more brilliance to these people than necessary.

They must have gotten wind of what the Shooter had in mind. A slip-up he'd made about taking target practice at the shooting range above his home in Rancho Cucamonga. Francine and her boyfriend Donald had disappeared with the company books and

went into hiding, making it impossible to finalize the corporate bankruptcy. The opposing lawyers next began focusing their lawsuits on the Shooter himself personally, because he was the main investor. The man with the big bucks, they figured. Get him and his wife next. That's the way with these damn lawyers.

The Shooter crosses the President's name off the top of the list, bringing some amount of satisfaction. Now on to the next. Keep focused on the road ahead, plowing through sheets and sheets of driving rain. The Shooter bringing his face to within five inches of the windshield as the rain blurs everything out in the world. His foot pressing down on the accelerator, the engine under the hood of the Buick Regal sedan straining. Suddenly his hand reaches up to his chin, feeling the rough graying stubble. He realizes what's been utterly forgotten in his rush for blood and revenge. He forgot to shave — of all things. What kind of man leaves his house like this? Everything, everything! — falling into chaos, such disarray!

He glances up at himself in the rearview mirror. Balding. Graying around the fringes, what's left of his curly hair, once glorious; so abundant he was known in Lebanon for his full head of curls. Piercing black eyes. Wearing an impeccable suit as always under his trench coat — necktie, white shirt, the usual. No one suspects you of anything when you're wearing a suit in this stupid country of America. What a joke! The way they think here. So much surface, so much appearance. No heart, no guts, no roots. No tradition in this stupid country.

The cedars of his youth come back to mind, in the mountains around Beirut. The memory of them now overwhelming him with grief, because what he's done to his bride, his wife of thirty-seven years, is unspeakable. Unspeakable! But to spare her the pain of knowing what he's doing now — it's how things are done. The only way; the code of behavior a man is born with. And now it's over and done, and that's that. Never looking back on the past. Looking forward! Forward is the way! With Allah! Swept along with God!

The Shooter has a brother who lives down in Mexico. He will go down there to Mexico to get away from all of this.

But didn't the president of the company have a brother too? This president that he left lying face up in the driving rain in a grain feed lot in a cul-de-sac outside Chino — didn't he have a brother, just like the Shooter has a brother? Yes, he remembered the president saying that once. And wasn't this brother, in fact, the best man at the president's recent wedding, at that damned nudist camp these people lived in?

It is a certainty that his own brother would take revenge for his death — if someone had taken the Shooter's life. He knows that. Anyone would. It is the way to Allah and eternity, to get revenge for your brother's blood.

That means he'd be forced to add another name to his impossible list. That is what it means. You cross off one name, immediately another adds itself to a list like this.

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"We've got to go tell your mom, Rob," said Quebec.

"She doesn't know yet?" I asked — then my heart stopped. "This is going to kill her!" I blurted out. "We can't tell her, it will kill her outright."

"We have to," Quebec stated.

Gina cradled my head in her arms, and I burst out, shaking against her chest as she held onto me tightly. "No, " I sobbed, "why do we have to? Why?" Abruptly I stopped and stood up straight in our tiny trailer. My head brushed the ceiling.

"Can't you do it?" I asked Quebec.

She shook her head back and forth.

"Why? Why not?"

"She wouldn't listen to me," Quebec said. "It has to come from you. The police are waiting for us. They want someone from the family to be there when they tell her what's happened. It's got to be you, Rob. You."

I grew weak in the legs. Gina felt my weight slipping through her arms, and she struggled to get me back over to the bed.

The police were already at my mother's trailer by the time we got there. They had her sitting down, and she looked scared, looking up at them and all around. Her brown eyes were huge.

"Robbie!" she cried. "Robbie, what is it? They won't tell me what's going on? What is it, son? What's wrong?"

"Mrs. Robinson," said Detective Gunther, "it's about your son."

"Harris?" she asked. "What is it? *Has he been hurt?*"

"We found him shot to death in a grain feed lot outside Chino," the detective said.

"Oh! Oh, my God, no. *No!*"

I ran to my mother, dropping to my knees, and held onto her. I could feel the way her back was bent with her years. A tremendous energy was vibrating inside her body. She didn't seem to be breathing at all.

But then she drew in a powerful breath and expelled one long, great moan.

"Oh, Robbie!" she sobbed. "My heart is broken!"

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"Serious" was probably the last word of my brother, before a bullet tore out his side as he sat in the car of the Shooter. I kept asking myself why he would continue doing any kind of business at all with him, after they had passed through the acrimony of it, leading up to the bankruptcy.

"Are you serious?" I can hear my brother saying, when he saw the barrel of the gun.

The man whose name was John, which may not have been his real name, would have leveled it point blank at my brother's side. My ears are still ringing with it. "John, you can't be serious," he must have said.

Or else it was: "Get serious!"

Yes, that would have been his way.

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I heard Detective Gunther explaining to Quebec that he couldn't ever remember finding such a well-groomed, well-dressed man that way, his wallet still on him, lying on his back in the rain as though he were asleep. Not out in Chino, they couldn't. They said the rain formed pools over his eyes. They theorized my brother was shot at point blank range in the car as John Lytle was driving down the highway right outside Corona, and that the Shooter pulled off the road in the driving rain and dumped my brother's body out into the cul-de-sac next to the grain feed lot. A witness saw a man driving a Buick Regal, acting suspiciously, he said, in the downpour. He'd seen another man that looked like he was sick, slumped over in the passenger seat of the car.

My mother told us, "Your brother came to me, oh, when was it, just this morning. He said, *Mom—I have the best news! I've landed a terrific job, and I'm going to be the boss too. They're going to cut me in on the profits. It's going to be great!*" My mother looked at me, shaking her head. "He was so happy!" For some time we went silent.

"I know it, Mom, I was here. Right here, I know."

"He was such a young man," she said, and then she began to cry, and that started me going.

I heard her let out a slow, quiet breath, and she grew calm. Her head kept wobbling back and forth. I tried to think of something, the small talk that somehow kept life going.

"Mom . . . what would have happened to you here at the camp, if Harris had gone off to Florida?"

She thought for quite some time. I could see a frown, which slowly relaxed among the wrinkles, and grew plain.

"Well," she sighed finally, "maybe that wouldn't have worked out either."

Oh, God! I thought — that was when I heard in her voice the saddest moment of all — the absolute bottom. I thought that what she was expressing, after experiencing the violent end of her firstborn's life, was the recognition of the impossibility of the Great Harris ever fulfilling his wild dreams, chasing after the big buck — the hopelessness of him ever catching up with what was always somehow just over the horizon, out of his grasp around the next corner. It seemed like a salesman's life was always like that, off somewhere in the Future.

But then I was brought up short. That wasn't it, I thought. That wasn't it at all. Suddenly I realized I may have been entirely wrong about my mother.

Finally it hit me that this was the expression of a mother's undying love for a son, even when he had passed out of this life. What she was saying — I understood now in a flash — was that maybe this violent end that he'd met, really meant that he wouldn't have to suffer yet another disappointment in his life, another broken dream.

Maybe, I thought, if I could only come to comprehend just the smallest part of that kind of love — a love without contingency — that a mother had for her own son, no matter how hopeless things may have seemed for him — then might not there be some small hope for someone like me? Her terribly frightened, other son, Robbie.

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That night they caught a man with binoculars on the north ridge above the camp. They brought Gina and me down to the front gate immediately, where they were questioning him. He was unshaven, wearing muddy Levis. They had him in handcuffs behind his back, his jacket off. His elbow was bleeding.

But it turned out he was someone living in one of the nearby suburban developments, who was soused on whiskey, and trying to get a peek at some *naked womens*, as he put it.

"Just some naked womens, is all. Let me go, fellas," he said, "I didn't do nothing wrong."

"You were trespassing," said Detective Gunther. "You couldn't have picked a worse time, mister. We got something serious going on here."

"I didn't know. C'mon, fellas, I was copping a peek. Nothing wrong in copping a peek. C'mon, I got a wife and kids. Give me a break. How 'bout it? Gimme a break, guys, c'mon. I'll do anything."

They brought my mother and Quebec down to the front gate. Police cruisers were lined up in front, barring the entrance to the camp. Seven or eight officers were stationed all around near the fence. The guard with the white handlebar mustache had driven up in an electric golf cart to get my mother and Quebec. They came inside the office.

"This man look at all familiar to either of you?" Det. Gunther asked.

Both women looked him over. A balding spot showed through the man's sandy-colored hair on top.

"No," said Quebec. My mother's head nodded. They took that to mean — No.

"Course it may be hard to tell, what with his clothes on," the other detective smirked.

Gunther shot him a look.

The other detective in turn gave me a look. "What happened to your hand?" he asked.

"Henderson," said Det. Gunther, "you got no couth."

Gunther turned back to the handcuffed man. "Now you think this is funny too?"

The man let his head hang down. "No, sir," he said quietly. He shifted his weight, then stood on both feet evenly and let out a slow deep breath.

"That's right, it ain't," Gunther said. "Someone's been murdered."

"Oh, Jesus!" said the man, still looking at his feet. His shoulders began shaking. Pretty soon we realized the guy was crying. Then it really started getting a hold on him. "Jesus, Mary, Joseph," he sobbed. "I didn't do nothing. I didn't do nothing."

"The police in San Diego think John Lytle might be heading this way," Gunther told my mother and Quebec. "Or else down to Mexico. They've got the border staked out. Lytle's got a brother down somewhere in Mexico."

"Oh, dear!" cried my mother. Both Gina and I hugged her, holding her close. I could feel her whole body trembling.

"I'm afraid that's not all," said Detective Gunther. "He's obviously got a list. Anyone else that you can think of who might be on that list, Mrs. Robinson. We've got to warn anyone who might be in trouble now."

"I wish he'd get that darned old Francine!" my mother spit out.

"Bess!" said Quebec. "How can you say that?"

"If anyone deserves it, it's her! That's who."

"Okay, now, who is this Francine?" asked Det. Gunther.

"That was one of the names that the lawyer fellow mentioned, wasn't it?" asked the other detective. "The one who got shot up in Pasadena?"

"Yeah, that's right," said Gunther. "Who is this Francine woman? Where can we find her?"

Quebec laughed dryly. It was more like a cough. "If we knew that, or if John Lytle did, maybe none of this would have happened."

"Why is that?" asked Gunther.

"Because she ran off with the company books and went into hiding, that's why. That's what set this guy off, John Lytle. He's got a real temper. Oh, shit," Quebec moaned, "I knew it. I just knew it." She turned on me. "Why did you have to let him go, Robbie, why? *Couldn't you stop him from going! I just knew something was going to happen!*"

"Okay," said the other detective, "and this other guy that's supposed to be with her, what's his name?"

"Donald," I said.

"Yeah, he with her?"

"Probably. He's like a dog on a leash."

"Well, where the hell would they be, do you suppose? They got an address?"

"They've been trying to get in here to live," said Quebec.

"Zat so?" Detective Henderson started looking around the inside of the office. Pretty soon he was staring real hard at a nudist flyer with a shot of naked people playing volleyball.

"Get a load of this, Gunther," he said.

"We got a case going here, Henderson. You can come out here next weekend if you want, okay?"

"Me? Sheesh! No way. See my mother in the nude? Nope, no way."

"Say, is there any way you can take off these cuffs, chief?" asked the man in custody.

"I'm in no particular rush," said Gunther.

"Maybe he gets himself high, spying on these nudists," said Henderson. "Huh?"

"Today's high is tomorrow's addiction," said Det. Gunther. "Okay, now, we've got things under control here, so you can go back to your trailers. But I wouldn't go anywhere tonight until we find this John Lytle suspect. He could be out there anywhere. You're safe while you're in here, so I want everybody staying put. We'll let you know if there's anything new."

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No one could sleep. We huddled against one another in Quebec's trailer. At one point Quebec switched on the huge TV in the long narrow family room, where my mother used to sleep at one end. Then a news flash came on. It was a recorded voice with the face of the local news anchor lit up in green, holding something in his ear. It

was the voice of the Shooter, calling in to the news center from a phone booth somewhere.

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"My name is John Lytle. I'm the one the police are looking for in the shootings. I want to state for the record why I am doing the shootings. I am not a bad man. I came to this country with my wife of thirty-seven years. We come from Lebanon. I had a dream like all Americans to get rich and have a good life. My country used to be beautiful when I was young, but was uprooted and torn apart by violence. Now violence is the way that we live. But I am not a violence man, but was driven to losing my mind over everything.

"Here is what happened.

"This man, Harris Robinson, deserved to be killed because he took everything we have builded for our retirement, every penny, now we have nothing, so what the use is in living? I figure he must pay with his life. He and the others. I have a list of names.

"I hear what they are saying about me on the news, that is why I am calling, to set the record straight, and for my brother to hear. I am not a bad man. They have it wrong. Those people, they knew the company was going bankrupt, but they did not tell me. Now they must pay the price. That woman, Francine, stole my money. She keep the books so the company cannot to complete bankruptcy. Then the lawsuits start being filed against me and my wife. They put liens on my house, they ruin our credit. They are taking everything we have. We have nothing. This is America. Not supposed to be like this in America. The land of our dreams became our nightmare.

"That is why I do this, shootings. I am not a bad man.

"Good-bye."

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"That's him," said Quebec. "That's him. I'd know that voice anywhere."mso-spacerun:

