

Credentials

by John Holman

Belly Man waited in the auto tag line and checked the manila envelope again for his new driver's license, plus the insurance card and title for his Lincoln he had managed to keep. He was starting fresh, starting legal. He had been standing 40 minutes and still had twelve people in front of him. Only two of the eight windows were staffed.

The line behind him curved out of the door into the hallway. This was a new building, constructed in the year Belly Man was inside. It was an open, marble place with tall leafy trees growing in the wide lobby. As the man directly behind him was saying, they had all this beautiful marble and shit and no clerks to sell the licenses. The man was talking to a buddy. They were young, and from what Belly was able to overhear, they worked in a night club as bartenders or bouncers, maybe one of each. They wore stiff, baggy, brown and black denim clothes and heavy shoes. They had high-and-tight haircuts and one wore oval lens, black-wire glasses. With their thick necks they looked like the young inmates who sweated out their time in the weight room.

Their talk was mostly about people who came into the club. Everybody had a nickname.

"Asphalt hitting on Rooster's wife."

"Yeah, but she too old."

"You see me put him out the other night? For his own good."

"Clock tried to sneak in. He still hasn't grown up."

"Clock? Pig's brother?"

"Yeah. I hadn't seen Clock since last summer on Smiley street. We were in True Boy's watching the game when we took it outside. True Boy will let Clock drink, and Clock was so happy he wanted to wrestle. We were bumping our heads against curbs under cars until the police rolled up. By then Clock had gotten mad and was trying to hurt me, and I had to wedge him up against a tire or he would have choked me. He's a nut."

“You going to Skate's cookout?”

“Don't eat meat anymore, you know that.”

“Since when?”

“Since Tuney. She won't let me. Man, she won't buy a package of bread without reading the ingredients. Like what's new in bread? That woman lives right.”

“Yeah, well, how you living? You can't eat no more ribs.”

“That's all right. Your girl likes it when my mouth ain't greasy.”

Belly Man chuckled. The men went on talking about people named Goosebump, Street Light, Chaos and Brick.

But Belly Man was patient. He had learned patience while spending a year and a half of a five year sentence. Manslaughter. An accident, really, but a violent one just the same. It had been his fault. He knew that now. Quick temper. But he had learned to count to ten, as they say, count to whatever it took. With good behavior, he hadn't had to count the full five years.

His credentials bore his real name, Byron Isaac Mason. In prison he had been either Mason or his number. Early on, he told the cons to call him Ike, but that didn't stick. Just a week before he was paroled, a guy who knew him came on the block calling him Belly Man, and in no time the rest of the crowd picked it up, even the guards. He had a big gut. So what? He was proud of being big. He liked a big car and he liked a big reputation. But changing his life might be hard. He couldn't even change his name.

Belly thought about people he knew but hadn't seen in a while. He'd been on parole for the last year, laying real low, watching cartoons, working two jobs at the mental hospital—in the kitchen by day and mopping halls by night. Thankfully, he'd come across none of his acquaintances at the hospital—he'd expected at least a couple of drug rehabs—and he could never think of anyone he really wanted to see from the old days. Safer that way, judge's orders, even. The only straight-up guy he thought about now and then was Grim Power who had dumped his moronic street rodeo act, it seemed, and who now was towing cars. He wondered what Grim's real name was.

Belly Man had seen Grim hitching up a van in the hospital parking lot, actually the drop-off lane at the front door. A kid had come barreling up one night to commit himself and plowed into the back of a car that had gotten there first. Nobody was hurt, but the police came, and then Grim on the tow truck with “Power” professionally painted on the door. Maybe, Belly Man thought, he'd check Grim out now that he was through with parole, now that he had saved some money and was ready to make a deal.

* * *

Two weeks later Belly Man had another afternoon off, and he decided to go downtown to his old barbershop for a haircut and shave. Since he'd been out, he had been cutting his hair himself using scissors and two mirrors. His head usually looked it, crooked and plucked, though he had gotten better. But he'd decided that he was coming back—Belly Man but different, gentler. He wanted his own business again; he didn't know what kind, and getting groomed seemed a good first step. People needed to know he was back; he needed to know what people were doing.

He dressed in his trademark burgundy clothes, including a short-billed straw cap, and parked around the corner from the shop. He hesitated before coming upon the shop window, and he walked away angry at himself toward the downtown park, trying to pump up his purpose.

The park was a medium pie of grass and trees for office workers and vagrants, two blocks behind town. Belly Man sat on a bench bordering one of the narrow, paved paths and looked out on the oak and magnolia trees in the short distance. He thought people sat up in the trees, but as his mind cleared of the image of his recent meekness, he saw that there were sheets and blankets stuffed in the crook of the branches, the bedding of the vagrants and homeless. He thought of The Lost Boys of the Peter Pan story, and as he scanned the park, he noticed a city maintenance man picking up trash around a stone water fountain.

The man wore drab green shirt and pants. He pulled along a trash barrel on wheels. As he got closer, he was the best looking trash

man Belly Man had seen, neat thick hair shot with gray, matching well-groomed beard, shirttail in, absorbed in his work, self-motivated. He looked like somebody famous, a singer. Belly Man could picture him working in his business, whatever it might be, attractive, hardworking, a good guy for customers to see, a money-maker.

“`Minute by Minute,’” Belly Man called out. “You look just like that Doobie Brother, man. Anybody ever tell you that?”

The man glanced up but went back to work.

In prison, a lot of guys looked like somebody else. On the yard, Belly Man whiled away a lot of time making those connections. One guy looked like a short, strung-out Abraham Lincoln—moustacheless beard, hollow cheeks, rock-edge bones—and another had the soft, scruffy face of Yassar Arafat. The con that ran the library did everything he could to look like Malcom X, except he didn't have red hair. Belly Man's barber inside was a dead ringer for Levi Stubbs of The Four Tops. For a month, Belly was afraid he *was* Levi Stubbs, until he found out the guy already had done twelve years of a life sentence for kidnaping and murder, and Belly thought he would have known if Levi had been locked down in this state for that crime. A lot of those look-alikes were in for murder, though Abraham Lincoln and Yassar Arafat claimed innocence. All the murderers and manslaughterers were known as “The Deadly Killers.” The drug dealers and counterfeiters called them that.

The park janitor got close enough. “I know you're not deaf. Look, I'm trying to get something together. You might want to get in on it,” Belly Man said.

The guy kept silent, spearing paper cups and burger wrappers. Belly Man figured, what the hell. He might recruit this guy to work for him, or he might not. He said, “It's true, I did kill somebody and I was incarcerated. But I'm a good boss. I mean,” he chuckled, “the guy I killed didn't work for me.” Belly Man watched the man struggle to spear a cigarette butt that wouldn't be impaled on the nail of the stick. Finally, the man bent to pick it up. “We got in a shoving match, a slap fight, he tripped on something, hit his head.”

The guy examined the nail on his stick, licked the tip.

"I guess," Belly Man said, "you like the job you already got. Work at your own pace, outdoors, fresh air, nobody telling you to hurry up."

The man said, "Look, *you* like this job? Let *me* sit on a bench all day. These squirrels are sneaky, and somebody out here is killing pigeons and I have to clean that up." He didn't look like anybody when he talked. His mouth went sloppy and loose. "I have a chemical imbalance, dammit, but they expect me to come to work everyday. Got the *nerve* to ask me why I'm late sometime. Hell, the medicine alone will mess you up, the son of a *bitches*. They don't understand nothing, you can't get along with them, the supervisor he don't want to listen, and he expects me to pay attention. I'm *sick*, dammit, and I have *shown* them may papers."

He stabbed the ground while he ranted. Belly Man got up, hiked up his pants, and began walking back to the barber shop. Not all handsome white guys would be good employees, he decided. He knew he should have known; his cellmate at the city jail before he was transferred to state prison was an arsonist who had eyes and a manner like Paul Newman's.

A half block up, Belly Man looked back and somehow the park guy had gotten all the way down under the blanket-crammed oaks. He must have run. Maybe his chemical imbalance gave him super speed. Belly wondered where the keepers of the bundles in the trees were, probably on street corners holding hand-scrawled signs that begged for food money. He was glad he wasn't one of them. He could have been. There came a time in prison when, if he could have gotten a gallon jug of wine to cradle against a dumpster in an alley, he would have gratefully drunk himself to death every day.

But those months passed, plus he still had a house, though his little sister and Dot, his ex-old lady, had sold most of the furniture and kept the money. At least he had sold his rental inventory himself, mostly to Grim Power, for legal bills. He had stocked only a couple of mini-vans, two Cadillac limos, and four Corollas he had bought from Hertz, and a back hoe.

Grim had bought the Corollas, a van and the back hoe. Belly guessed that he turned around and sold them for profit, probably how he had managed to get the big pretty tow truck. Grim had probably sold that old horse he used to ride, too. Grim was one of the few to visit him in prison, but like the others had dropped off after the first year. Belly didn't mind; he wouldn't have visited anybody either.

He pulled open the barbershop door and bells jingled with his entry. His barber, Ed, still had the first chair. Ed wore a black barber's smock, and a white mask over his mouth and nose as he worked on a customer. He was allergic to hair. But he pulled down the mask and grinned after he looked up to see Belly Man standing in the door.

"I don't believe anything, anymore," Ed said. "You're back."

"Who asked you?" Belly said.

"I'm glad," Ed said. "But, uh-ruh-huh, things are different around here. You need an appointment now."

Belly Man glanced around. The other three barbers were busy cutting hair. They were younger guys whom he didn't recognize from before. Instead of smocks, they wore linen shorts and silk print shirts. Five or six other young men waited, reading magazines or looking up at a television mounted in the corner over Belly Man's head.

"I need what?"

"You don't really need one, you know. We encourage them, that's all. Hold up." Ed switched off the clippers he was using to trim his customer's neck and consulted his appointment book. "I can sign you in now. You can be next."

"Shit," Belly Man said. "I guess *you* need some appointments."

"Appointments don't do you no good," the man in the chair said. He had a white goatee. His black shoes were highly glossed, and his black socks were ribbed and see-through, the style Belly Man wore. "I been waiting a hour for one of those boys down there, and finally had to let old Ed take over. I got to get back to work."

"Old Ed, my butt," Ed said.

"That's *Mr.* Ed," said the barber at the next chair. "Say it with respect."

"That's a talking horse, Chief," Ed said.

Belly Man sat down under a framed pencil-drawing of a teary-eyed boy having his hair cut by a kindly old man. Other pictures on the wall showed barber scenes, too—barbers tending to their customers draped in white, hair on the floor; men in suits and ties waiting their turns. Before, all Ed had up were photos of heads modeling different haircuts, which a guy was supposed to come in and point to as the one he'd like. But as far as Belly could remember, nobody ever asked for one of those prissy v-neck or pompadour styles. Ed always cut people's hair to look just like his, a little full on top and combed back, narrow on the sides, fading out in the back at the neck.

The television showed a movie about a town invaded by giant rabbits, and every few seconds Ed would glance up at it, neglecting the job he was doing. Ed said, "Uh-ruh, wonder what would happen if those big rabbits came here." The screen showed a terrified woman hiding under a coffee table while a rabbit's eye filled her window.

"I'd get my shotgun and kick some rabbit ass," said a man sitting near Belly Man.

"Them rabbits there are on drugs," one of the barbers said. That's how they got like that. To them, we'd look like a bunch wild carrots running around."

"I bet the National Guard would get rolling," said Ed. "There'd be tanks and rabbits squaring off on the highways."

"I know one thing," said one of the customers on the other side of Belly Man. "I'd steal me a Jaguar and get the hell out of here. I'd steal *two* Jags, one for me and one for Gladys Knight, who I'd save from rabbit fury and then marry."

Belly Man said, "There won't be no giant rabbits coming here. So don't worry about it."

"I know that," Ed said. "But what if?"

"Damn," Belly Man said. He picked up a magazine from a chair next to him. Every page was of a black woman in a swimsuit. He looked back at the cover but it was half torn away, the magazine's title missing.

A man came in the door wearing a red, white and gray leather cycle-racing suit and carrying a matching helmet. "I'm up next, right, Ed?" he said cheerfully, standing wide-legged, his hands on his hips under the short, zipped jacket.

"Uh-ruh, not unless you got an appointment."

"I have one."

"What time?"

"Well, this current time right here, Ed. Don't you know your own schedule?"

"I got somebody ahead of you," he said, pointing his clippers at Belly Man.

"Oh yeah?" He took off his leather jacket, revealing a red t-shirt. He didn't seem to need either a haircut or a shave. Belly figured he was one of those guys who couldn't let himself get that far. "Maybe we can work something out," the man said. He sat beside Belly Man in the chair where the swimsuit book had been, and hung the jacket casually over the chair back. He placed his helmet on the floor by his feet. His boots were of the same colorful leather as his pants and jacket.

"You must have a pretty good lead to have time to stop for a haircut," Belly Man said.

"Oh," the man laughed. "I wear this when I ride lately. Some other guys and I are in a club. The fact is I'm in pretty much of a hurry. How about letting me go first. Ed's always messing up this appointment business. I swear to you I called for this half-hour, too."

"I can't think you'd lie for a haircut. But we used to have a rule about first come, first served. And if that ain't good enough no more, then my name is on Ed's book where yours ain't."

"My name is Jerry, by the way. What's yours?"

Belly Man shook the man's hand and considered what name to give. "It's Byron Belly Man Mason," he said.

"Duh-uh-ruh," said Ed, "Byron?"

"Belly Man? What are you, a wrestler?" Jerry asked.

"No."

"O.K. But you're famous aren't you? I heard that name somewhere."

"You ever been at state prison?"

"I've been by there. But that's not where I know the name. You an inmate or you work there? Are you on work release?"

"We on a game show here?"

"I know something about, you know, law and crime. So I don't want to presume, but you must have done some time recently. I must have read about you. I used to work in the D.A.'s office but now I'm for the defense." Jerry reached back for his jacket and pulled a business card from the pocket.

Belly Man took it, scissored it between two fingers. "So you for the people now. Thanks, but I'm without those troubles for a while. Where were you three years ago? Probably writing up arguments to send me away."

"What are you into these days? Got anything going? It's usually rough just getting out. You on parole?"

Belly Man didn't respond. He frowned at Ed as if to say, Who is this guy? Ed finished brushing the loose hair off his customer's shoulders and let the man up. "Jerry," Ed said. "Belly Man used to have the only black-owned car rental business in town. He's a business man."

Jerry crossed one leather leg over the other leather knee. "Me too," he said to Belly Man. "I got a few investments besides my law practice. There's Thompson's Lawn Care, Cookman's Cleaners. I do a little with Power Towing—you know Grim Power?"

Belly Man nodded. He knew all of them.

"I've been thinking about the food business lately. You'd look good as a restaurant man yourself. Belly Man's Barbecue, maybe. Of course, you'd eat all the inventory wouldn't you?"

Ed laughed as he swept out the seat of the barber chair. Belly Man took a deep breath and started counting to ten. He went on to

twelve and then got up. "Too bad you ain't got no barber shop. Maybe then you could get waited on." He stepped over and sat down in the chair.

"You'd think so, wouldn't you?" Jerry looked at Ed mildly disgusted.

"Ah shit," Belly Man said. "You got a piece of this place, too. I bet this appointment stuff was your idea, wasn't it?" He climbed down and with a wave of his arm presented the chair to Jerry. "You go ahead then, boss man. I ain't in a hurry."

"Thanks," Jerry said. "I really have to get somewhere."

Ed shook out the barber's cape and floated it down around Jerry. He fastened it around Jerry's neck and busied himself at the counter behind the chair, sorting through combs and clipper guards.

"You know what I thought you were when you walked in here in that outfit?" Belly Man said. "A Power Ranger."

Everybody in the shop laughed at that. Jerry said, "O.K. That's good."

"That's right on time," said the barber down at the last chair. "I see them Power Rangers every day on TV. I knew Jerry reminded me of something."

"Yeah," Belly said, "I bet old Jerry sees them, too."

"Hey, I've been trying to get Grim to join the bike club like me and Ed," Jerry said. "We could change our name to the Rangers, and Grim really would be a Power Ranger."

"Uh-huh," Belly said, less loud. "That would be stupid, too."

Ed pumped up the chair. "I can do you in an hour, Belly. For real. There's a guy due in right after Jerry but after that I just got you." He went to work combing and cutting Jerry's hair.

Jerry said, "You give me a call if you get any ideas."

Belly returned to looking at the magazine full of swimsuit models. He had some ideas. One thing he'd noticed since he got out was the opening of black stripper clubs. He'd been to one, all the girls plain naked. He was thinking about getting into that, getting some young good-looking girls like in that book. He was also thinking about a

janitorial service. He'd planned to talk with Grim about it, but maybe this Jerry guy would be his man.

The back barber, in a shirt with large green flowers, began talking about the death of Dinah Shore. He was shocked, just shocked and saddened, he said, because he'd just seen her on A&E the week before. She was so talented, and so courageous. And it was strange how so many musicians were blind, and he wanted to know if everybody knew she was black.

"She sounded black," one of the barbers said.

"I didn't know she was blind," another said.

"I didn't know she was dead," the second barber said.

"That woman's not dead," one of the guys waiting said. "She'll be in concert at the civic center next week."

"She is, too, dead," said the back barber. "It was on the news."

Belly Man stood up. "Good damn gracious," he said. "Ya'll have got everything all mixed up. The one that's dead is dead. The one that's blind is not. Neither one of them is black." He headed for the door. "I been in prison and I know more than you busters."

As he went out, he heard Ed explaining things to the other barbers: Dinah Shore was dead; Dianne Shurr was not. "Good," Belly Man thought. "Somebody's got some sense, even if it's Ed."

He strolled past shops on the street and tried out names for his new business. He had called the car rental venture Belly Man's Rentals. But now, for the strip joint, he considered Mason's Minxes, and Belly's Browns. For the maintenance service he thought of using his full name: Byron Mason's Maintenance. Or B.M.'s Janitorial Service. His initials were as bad as they could be. He'd always hated his name, and he didn't much like his nickname. But he'd have to use Belly Man because he wanted no mistakes. He wanted people to know who he was, to know he was back, even if he had to cozy up to these young money guys to get there.

There was a time when the youngsters were afraid of him. There had been some of that in prison, but only because of his size. Most people in prison seemed afraid of nothing, especially the ones who had been there awhile. Belly had been afraid the whole time,

though. Afraid he'd never get out, afraid he'd forget something. During the year of parole he realized that he had forgotten something, all right, and at night mopping halls he often wished he had forgotten more. He sometimes thought he should have stayed in longer, to be as thoroughly stripped as the others. They had gotten new hardcore selves inside—the Muslims, orthodox and otherwise; Jews; white-supremacists; rapists; Christians; Buddhists; lawyers; revolutionaries; angels; devils. They had gone past the fear of losing themselves and latched firmly onto deep faith in themselves, rotten or not. But Belly Man regretted not getting to go that far. He wondered if he was anything like those people in the mental hospital where he worked, at least the ones who knew where they were; he didn't expect to get back the person he had been, but he hadn't lost enough to be someone wholly new.

As for his new business, one thing, he wouldn't let that Jerry name it. Anybody who rode around town in a Power Ranger suit was used to getting his way, but Belly was used to getting his way, too. And he wasn't about to put on a tight leather suit and ride around with a bunch of pretty boys on motorcycles just to get this guy's investment. He imagined it, though, cruising along over bridges. He saw himself thinner, hunched over the handlebars and whisking into the wind. Still, he saw himself alone, leaving the pack behind. He couldn't hook onto to some group, no matter who he turned out to be, not like those prisoners who identified with some ready-made mass entity. Hell, he chuckled, he was a mass entity unto himself.

He had a notion to drive around now, maybe swing by Grim's and a few of the other old places. Maybe make some appointments. He liked the idea of having his own scheduled time to get his haircut. That was a progressive improvement, suitable to the convenience he would prefer for his next lifestyle. But, no, he wouldn't be caught thrumming through the streets with a bunch of leather boys. Besides, he thought as he rounded the corner toward his big burgundy car, he was a Lincoln man, built for comfort—rest assured—and always would be.

