

Requiem for a Bodyguard

by Larry Strattner

Unpleasant e-mail comes out of the ether like a summer storm crashing about you. It's not like the pony express who alert you of impending news with a dust cloud on the horizon, or a cocktail party where you see the smirk of excitement on the face of some busybody with a smarmy story.

Lola, Ian's wife, sent her e-mail in early evening. It zipped through wet fog and still dark, over dead leaves on the brown grass where they lay waiting for winter.

Noncommittal, the e-mail merely said, "Ian is home from the hospital. He is in a bit of pain. They have given him some oxygen to use, which helps."

Bit of pain? Oxygen? What the hell was this? Ian had Colon cancer a few years ago. They took out a few feet of his tubing and gave him chemo and he was all right.

I called his number and the phone rang three times before Ian picked up. He must be sitting next to it, I thought. Usually it rings eight times because he would be screwing around at his tool bench out in the garage.

"Half a Stick," his greeting a whisper. The whisper startled me but not enough to make me forget I hate it when he uses his nickname for me. I can't help I'm a foot short of average. It gives me a better power-to-weight-ratio. Power-to-weight is not Ian's concern. His function has always been my self-appointed body guard. My Half-a-Stick reality gets me tensed up in bars and I'm reckless after a few drinks. I think I met Ian in a bar somewhere. I don't remember. One day he was there. Big, tall, black hair, mustache, gravelly voice. He watched my back for reasons I have never understood. Lucky for me, a terminal smartass, always close to injury by someone I had disrespected.

Ian had other big friends who bartended, bounced, poured concrete and kept guys like me out of better establishments. They all thought I was cute and acted like they were going to rest their

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drinks on the top of my head while they went to the men's room. All their arms were long enough to hold me at bay while I swung at them underneath. They brought literal definition to the saying, "your arms aren't long enough to box with me."

Ian continued whispering and explained, "The radiation screwed up my voice box."

"What fucking radiation?" I replied; a tad too loud to match Ian's whisper.

"Don't get your shorts in a bunch. It's just bullshit. My blood markers are up and I had some swelling in my neck. They gave me a little radiation to calm it down. It's nothing. I've been here before."

True. his colon cancer a few years ago; probably a result of his half-assed diet of steak, potatoes and Canadian Club had been cured. He had come out OK. I calmed down.

"My voice will be better tomorrow," he whispered. "Call me then and I'll fill you in."

"OK," I breathed softly into the handset, mimicking his whisper.

"Don't be a smartass," he whispered in reply and hung up.

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My call the next day connected to an Ian more distinct. The whispery speech was receding. I could hear the crunch of his verbal gravel.

"What's the prognosis?" I asked.

"Shit, I'll be fine. I've battled this thing eye-to-eye before. It takes a month or so but I'll run it down and stomp it." Spoken like the badass I know and love.

"Does Big Bobby know?" Big Bobby rides a Harley, mans the guard tower over the clientele of a nasty bar and carries a Smith and Wesson revolver. Big Bobby is not a guy one fools with. Next to my sorry ass Big Bobby is Ian's closest friend in the world. I think Ian has been with Big Bobby when Bobby's fired his pistol in anger. I never have. Most people in Big Bobby's nasty bar know the S&W is under his un-tucked silk bowling shirt and don't give Big Bobby the slightest reason to show it to them.

"I haven't said anything to Big Bobby," Ian informed me testily. "It's like the flu for Christ's sake. What does Big Bobby give a shit? I'm supposed to call him every time my nose runs?"

I sensed empty air on the phone for a moment. A hissing crackle, a connection to the netherworld; no one on the line but ghosts. Then, "hello, Pete?" Ian's wife, Lola.

"Yeah. Hi, Lola." TV background noise on the line behind her grew distant. She was walking into another room.

"This doesn't need to be a long conversation, Pete. You and Ian have been good friends. One thing holding you together is you love to lie to each other. What makes you even closer is you believe each other's lies. Ian is lying Pete. He's not going to get better this time. The disease is all over him. He'll be lucky to last another two months. Big Bobby doesn't know. No one knows. Only you know, Pete. Tell his friends. He won't. He can't believe it yet. He may never believe it."

"OK Lola. I will. I..."

"Yo, Pete." Ian's voice came on again; she had handed the phone back to him. Still soft. "When you going to be in town again?"

"Next week," I said in knee-jerk reaction. I wasn't planning to even be in the State next week but I felt the enormity of Ian taking care of me when I needed him. When I didn't deserve his care. When I was a screaming asshole and thought it was everyone else.

"I've got some stuff to do. People to see. I'll give you a call." If he wasn't telling me I wasn't telling him. I couldn't say, I'm coming directly, specifically to see you while you still know me. Before they shoot you up with morphine for the pain and you slip onto that hazy River Styx we've seen some of our friends sail. The river on which you only talk to yourself. "I'll give you a call," I said instead.

"Good," Ian whispered. "Do that."

I hung up the phone and looked out the window. The sun blinked on and off. Sporadically a cloud would blow overhead and the sky would darken. Bare tree limbs moved in the wind. Berries on my Chinese crabapple tree bobbed, waiting for February when the Finches and Grosbeaks would need them to stay alive. Woven into

the warp and weft of things are death, salvation and renewal. I didn't want to think about these and stood up; walked into the kitchen and got some vodka.

It's not uncommon we wonder why we remain while others depart. So I'm like everybody in these thoughts. Otherwise I'm mostly a loner, I never had friends. Not the kind with who you shared anything. People hung around me because I was good for a laugh or some trouble. They were always ready for either. They grabbed their share and took; didn't wait for you to give.

Within a few days I was in a filling station up the street from Ian's house. His voice on the phone was more distinct but still whispery. "Half a Stick."

"Do me a favor and quit calling me that." I whined.

"Oops. Sorry. It's with affection I call you that; as I look down upon you, you scrawny little shit." Ian laughed. Laughed again. Coughed. Seemed like he couldn't catch his breath. Made a phlegmy sound. Turned away from the phone and spit. "Guess I can't handle the brilliance of my own humor," he came back.

"I'll be over in half an hour," I said.

"Good. I'm not going anywhere." You sure sound like that's true, I thought and disconnected.

Fall is not a good time to visit the sick. Not good for them. Not good for the visitor. Spring, summer or even winter may bring some beauty to a given day. Fall, except for its beginning when colored leaves are blazing on the trees, is mostly depressing. I drove through the spare, sparse trees and bushes, brown crinkled leaves swirling behind me, resettling themselves in frigid gutters, bleakness in front of me, decay behind.

Careful not to knock too hard and hurt my knuckles on the cold wood I struck Ian's door, turned the knob and pushed it open. He would be alone in midmorning. "It's Pete," I called and walked back through the house to the great room where I knew he'd be sitting.

Nothing prepares you for the shock of seeing a friend wasted by disease. "Skin and bones," my grandmother would have described him. It's worse if you haven't seen the person recently. Change

occurring out of sight is more shocking when it jumps at you far into its progress. I may have caught my breath but Ian was looking at a picture in his lap when I walked in and didn't notice, far as I could tell.

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"This is you, me and Big Bobby," he said, picking up the picture and extending it to me. "Back when we were young and the sheep were nervous." I laughed. That one's old but always funny if you don't overdo it. In the picture we three stood together outside a bar with Happy Hour and Twofer signs in the window. Ian was big and strong. Big Bobby was bigger and perhaps stronger. I was taken by my abundance of hair. I was neither big nor probably strong. Who cared? I had Ian and Big Bobby.

"You need to copy these pictures to a jump drive," Ian said.

"They're from around. Back when we were who we really were."

"Yeah. OK." I turned my head so the wet in my eyes wouldn't reflect back to Ian. He may never want to know. He may never know; but we both know. He's fighting and I love him for it, but we know. It's a loser.

He picks up a thick stack of pictures from beside him in the chair. He's been sorting them to illustrate our lives. He has another life with Lola. He must have sorted it into a separate pile. I've been gone so far and so long I don't really know about his life with Lola and the kids. I only remember our life. Our life saved me when I was wandering, wondering, unsure, unhappy and alone.

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The front door of La Rana opens directly onto the end corner of the bar. This end of the bar curls to your left across the window to the street. The longer section of polished bar runs straight away, a wooden highway bordered by its spill rail, about twenty stools long. It stops a pool cue-and-a-half length before a coin-operated pool table. A white line painted on the floor beside the green felted table marks regulation shooting distance for a dart board hung on the wall.

There's room for only one person to walk down the bar behind the twenty stools. The wall of the building is half-an-arm's length to your right. A mirror on the wall behind shelves of call-brand liquor fools you into thinking the narrow building is wider. Halfway down the mirror, above the cash register, hangs a wooden sign. It says, "An important thing to remember, friend, is not everyone wishes you well." Good advice for anywhere Big Bobby works. He works at La Rana on Thursday and Friday as a favor to his friend the owner. Saturdays he works at Pussy Galore, named for the James Bond character, but not really. PG is a shit-hole with hookers and their shit-bird clientele. Of course La Rana is also a shithole. The difference is at PG the shit-birds are mostly armed and dangerous while at La Rana they're unarmed and only occasionally dangerous.

An exterior picture of La Rana is included in Ian's stack of photos; its namesake purple and black poison dart frog is painted menacingly across the front window by some Mexican who owed the owner money. The frog and its surrounding rain forest greenery blocks any view in or out. La Rana is not in an attractive neighborhood nor are its drunken patrons attractive. The frog painting enhances both views with opacity.

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One night in La Rana a commotion erupted at the white line for darts. Before Big Bobby could react one of the four arguers broke from the group with his hand full of currency and ran up behind Ian and me seated at the bar, headed for the front door. Before the runner reached stool twelve an opponent from the group of three behind him decorated his back and ass cheeks with four darts, firmly imbedded. The fugitive exited the front door, a shouting bird of paradise in flight.

Big Bobby squinted down the bar at the three men on the white line. "Nice darts," he said. "That's gonna be forty dollars before anyone else leaves."

"Those fucking darts are a tournament-balanced set; tungsten points," he said aside to Ian.

Big Bobby shared arbitration philosophies and skills with Ian. Don't get too excited. Keep things fair as possible. Everyone pays his price. No deed goes unpunished. It seemed to work. If the forty dollars did not appear the situation might escalate. An unlikely scenario. I was a pool player and didn't give two shits about tungsten points.

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Ian had been whispering to himself over the pictures and began coughing again. Hard to listen to the coughing. It obviously hurt. Ian hung his head and bent forward, maybe taking pressure off his chest. He spit into a tissue.

Getting sick is a bitch. Someone cleans your face. Wipes your ass. You don't want it, it's demeaning, but there's no choice. We shouldn't wonder about people in bad health who want to kill themselves. They're no different than the ancient Romans who ran upon their swords. They only want to save themselves a bit of embarrassment.

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We spent the remains of the day sorting pictures; laughing and whispering about their significance. We noted things we knew were on the periphery, things not quite showing in the frame. Frequently, faces in the photos were dead people. We spoke of them as if alive. They all were legendary in our lives. If not Ian would not have their pictures.

I've always believed we live on in those who remember us. It helps us hang around and enjoy the world we leave behind while we get acclimated to the new one to which we're headed. I've always tried to do nice things for young kids to give myself a long smooth transition. How clever is that? Is it any use to tell my belief to Ian? He will always be alive for me. I hope it helps. I've always thought he'll be going a different place than I anyway. He's a kind of guardian angel. Good hearted with hard knuckles. Someone will no doubt be glad to see him come home. "Take a look at this one," Ian whispers.

It takes me a full minute before the image in the picture clicks. Another soft, smiley, good hearted guy who went too soon. He looks

a little chubby and red cheeked; a lot better looking than you'd look if you crossed him. I remember his positive take on things. Infectious. Made you feel good. Like you were getting somewhere.

I'm down in the stack of pictures, scanning our days and times into bits and bytes. I've got a copy going into the jump drive and another into my computer photo library. Will they be like other old pictures I never look at? Who knows? Maybe a kid of mine will look at them and realize, like most of us, too late, they really never knew their father. In many ways, what does it matter? We all manufacture our own stories, hopes and dreams. We make our worlds and hope we get to spend some happy time in them. Qué sera, sera. A friend of mine is fond of saying. "Most of this really doesn't matter."

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"I'm getting fucking carpal tunnel syndrome from scanning pictures;" I announced, slowing down. "I have to give it a rest for a while."

"No problem," says Ian.

"I'll be back tomorrow and do some more."

"That'd be good."

"We had a hell of a time."

"We did, didn't we?" Ian whispers.

Yes we did. This is just another part of it. I'm shoving my electronics into my back pack to take them over to where I'm staying. I'll use the empty night to write about these times. These days. I don't know how I'll be able. I doubt words can draw any picture making sense, but I'll take a shot. In any case, I have the photographs.

"See you tomorrow," I said to Ian, heading for the door. As I turn away my eyes have grown damp again. Neither love nor gratitude offer consolation.

