

Gentry Major

by Matt Rowan

“Paroxysms, well, what in the hell's a paroxysm?”

“I think the better question is what kind of name is *Gentry*, Gentry?”

“Yes, that is a better question. Do you really want to know? I was named after my grandfather, Ol' Gentry Jones Filips III. They nicknamed him 'Ol' well before he actually was. He didn't take it well. He took it quite badly, instead. I think that was largely to blame for his unending hatred for the rest of my family. He wrote all of them out of his will, even my mother, for whom he felt profound affection. At least, she claimed he did. Mother spent many, many hours talking up Grandfather's love for her, on the side of his deathbed no less. And always she made a special effort to do so when his executor was present. She'd gotten in the habit of fiercely and rigidly stabbing a pen in the air, even when she was away from my grandfather.

“To make one final and quite lasting appeal to be reinstated in his will, she named me—her third child—after him. She always hated his name, and I think she may very well hate me by association.

“In the end, though, Mother's efforts to curry favor with Grandfather proved fruitless. Grandfather died cursing her with all the vindictiveness his sallow, moribund body could summon, which was quite a lot, actually. He did, I would later find out, set aside some twenty thousand dollars for my college education, but Mother got a hold of it somehow.”

“That's a sad story, Gentry, a sad story indeed—much longer than I should have liked, too. Perhaps you can work on your pacing?”

“Oh, well, then I bet you don't want to know about my father's surname, 'Major,' do you?”

“No.”

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Charlie O'Flannigan, Gentry Major's boss, had fought in most of the wars of his generation and was proud and decorated because of

his really very stellar fighting during each of them. If you asked him about the wars he fought, he would tell you his only regret was there had not been more of them. He also boxed professionally for a time, until he grew old and tired, and the authorities shut down his illicit gambling arena — which, as a fighter, he had been accessory to and, as kingpin, the foremost benefactor.

Charlie O'Flannigan was far more subdued in his older age. He was by now a rarely ill-tempered man, distinguished these days by his even-keel and bend towards inattentiveness. Although his inattentiveness itself was seamlessly masked by his effusive congeniality. His body was engorged with fat, a product of heredity and the many banquets he attended as a star boxer, war hero and criminal. He possessed an incisive but desultory intellect and was exceedingly stingy, though this last thing in remarkably agreeable fashion.

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“You know I'm not going to be able to pay you again, Gentry,” began Charlie O'Flannigan, a cryptic preposition to begin with, which would lead to, as always, additional information that might clarify his cryptic preposition.

Gentry, idly paying attention while he worked on a packaging job, said nothing.

“That is to say, I don't want to pay you again, Gentry,” O'Flannigan said, falling into his beaten and worn leather chair with a thud. Plumes of dust and debris billowed around him. O'Flannigan coughed and clasped his hands together, grinning smugly.

Still, Gentry had nothing to add.

“It might interest you that our customers are no longer paying with 'legal tender'.”

This pricked Gentry's ears some. He finally said, “Were you bilked, then?”

“Bilked? Indeed, what a thing to suggest! I have been paid, yes, everything's here.” O'Flannigan reached under his desk and with what appeared a great deal of effort, he pulled out a misshapen tin bucket, which stood no shorter than a foot and a half from the floor

and appeared to be of considerable weight. "This is filled with vegetable cream cheese. I intend to eat it with a flask of brandy. Mind you, customers paid me with both: vegetable cream cheese and brandy."

"That sounds disgusting."

"Yes, it does a little, doesn't it? Should I eat it, do you think? I want to eat it. I think I do, yes. I certainly want the brandy. I'd like a lot more brandy really," O'Flannigan said, as he studied his uneven reflection on the flask's mirrored exterior. O'Flannigan eyed his porcine folds of neck fat as they lolled like dollops of hairy, flesh-colored ice-cream. This especially delighted him.

"I should think you'd know for certain if you wanted to eat a bucket of vegetable cream cheese. I should think so. In any case, you've convinced me without convincing me; I would like very much to help consume the vegetable cream cheese. Please, give it here. That's what I would like."

"So now it's not too good for you? Typical. A moment ago it was 'disgusting.' Ah, well I'm not going to let you trick me so easily," O'Flannigan took a long swig from his flask. "Now *that's* payment brandy. It dulls the senses, you know. I might always ask to be paid in brandy. I haven't tried the cream cheese yet, so I'm not sure that I always want to be paid in that, but maybe. I'm amenable to the idea, at least."

O'Flannigan tipped the flask high above his mouth and greedily downed what was left of his brandy that way. Then he wiped his mouth in the manner you might imagine a lower primate would, the limp dangle of a hairy hand pressed bluntly across pursed wet lips.

While O'Flannigan drank, Gentry stared longingly at the coppery-brown liquid—brandy. It was a spirit he had never before enjoyed, could not be sure was even worth having, and still, though.

Gentry changed tack. "But so how on earth do you intend to settle our debts with our suppliers, the box men and the Styrofoam people? With a pile of vegetable cream cheese? Well?"

"HA! You're just trying to dull my senses like, like—oh, the words escape me—asking question after question of me whilst I'm a titter

from drink, ha ha! You won't get anywhere, though. This cream cheese is mine, vegetables and all. No one likes you, and besides the handsome get everything in this life. They get it handed to them on some kind of platter."

There was O'Flannigan, as he always was, wedging himself between Gentry and the objects of his desire: bucket contents and brandy.

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Gentry grew listless and frail. His cheekbones, in particular, jutted out visibly, making his skin appear as though it were plastic wrap made taut and very near tearing. His skull seemed to want freedom from its flesh.

O'Flannigan, who remained happily unaware of Gentry's weakening condition, had himself recently put up a poster on his storefront's plate-glass window, which advertised he allowed payment only in the form of brandy and whatever food item one could fit in a modestly-sized tin bucket, though one variety or another of cream cheese was preferred. On the poster he also drew a picture of a bucket, along with some approximated measurements of its size and the relative amount of vegetable cream cheese therein.

"I finished packaging those toothpaste bottles for the guy who likes to send huge boxes filled with toothpaste bottles to himself," Gentry said.

"Fantastic, he always pays with the top shelf stuff. Very good, Gentry, very good I must say. See now, doesn't it feel better to communicate?"

"Yes."

"Oh come now, Gentry. Is there anything I could do to make you feel better? What is it, please? This has gone on far too long."

Sensing in O'Flannigan's words some modicum of earnestness, Gentry Major relaxed his posture.

"I was thinking O'Flannigan. That's all. I've just been thinking. I think about the world, you see? Get it? I remember that there are people. They aren't different from you or me, not so much. I think

about them and I think about myself and I know that I have it better. I'm better off than them."

O'Flannigan bunched up his lower lip and raised an eyebrow. His eyes lit up.

"Ha, I know what you want, Gentry! You want some of the vegetable cream cheese and brandy, don't you? And why not? What, twenty, thirty percent of all profits should be enough?"

"Yes."

By the end of the day, Gentry Major was restored to his normal, buoyant self.

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"You're really moving up in the world, aren't you Gentry? First, I gave you a good deal of the contents of my buckets, that's something. And then I gave you your own—smaller—flask from which to drink brandy and like distillations. How's it taste, by the way?"

"Very awful."

"The smell of success is sweet. Let that comfort you."

"I've been thinking again, O'Flannigan. I think a lot. And I worry."

"I don't worry about anything. Don't believe me? Here then, hit me with a hammer or a similarly blunt-ended object at a random hour today. I will not worry or fret my impending pain one moment before the deed is done, and then I will merely seek medical treatment enough to properly heal the wound, if I'm not killed. Do it, Gentry, but do not give me any prior warning."

Gentry paid no attention to the hammer O'Flannigan was waving frenziedly at him.

"Have you ever felt you've been nothing but a great disappointment to everyone you know," Gentry said, plaintively.

"Are you talking about me or you, Gentry? Because even I'm disappointed in you, Gentry. Think of it, I had to give you a little brandy when you could have taken it. I had to give you a middling percentage of my vegetable cream cheese when you could have had it all! You could have whacked me over the head with any of the

improvised weapons available to a shrewd young man like yourself. My head, though fat, isn't as thick as it was when it was young and new. You could have knocked me senseless and absconded from the scene with your prize: a bucket. And maybe then I would have been able to respect you."

"I'd have most assuredly gone to jail, or suffered any number of possible ludicrous consequences."

"Perhaps, maybe, you might have gone to jail or like consequences, but you would have gone to jail a victor! Now, how about for a moment it's a jungle in here, Gentry. Eh, Gentry? That's what it be. All right, it's high time we wrestle."

"What?"

O'Flannigan tore his sweat-soaked dress shirt away, with surprising alacrity, and was suddenly deeply invested in the process of stretching out his bloated waist, unnaturally oscillating at his hips as he flexed the muscle of his arms and loosened his neck. During which time Gentry began pleading with O'Flannigan to stop "all of this" immediately.

"Mr. O'Flannigan, I will not wrestle with you. I refuse. I've got what I want. I don't need more," Gentry said, and, "You might consider seeing a doctor about those cysts."

"Then you're a boxing man! Fine, I have more than a few left hooks in me, I suspect. You might have noticed that there are no boxing gloves here in the shop. That's a pity, but no matter; we'll go bare-knuckle!" O'Flannigan bounced around from foot to foot and began punching at air with inscrutable vigor. His face beamed red, dank with sweat. As he stepped with increasingly labored movement, his breathing became alarmingly erratic, reminding one of the unhappy snorts of a harried and overheated sow.

Gentry was sure O'Flannigan would definitely faint or worse. But O'Flannigan didn't faint or worse. Instead, finding no bell with which to commence the match, he culled every bit of his enormous strength and shot-put his leather chair through the storefront's plate-glass window. The advertisement poster he'd taped to the window was torn to ribbons.

“Mr. O’Flannigan, I will not box you!”

“Fine, we’ll do what you want. We’ll burn the building down! Let’s take to the streets, Gentry! People take to the streets and burn down the establishment. All the time! Let’s burn it to the ground!”

O’Flannigan went grasping for the gas can he stowed for such occasions, to inundate with flame every cardboard box, bit of tape, random scrap of packaging material and bucket of whatever else he could find.

But Gentry sprung between crazed Charlie O’Flannigan and his gas can. Without thinking he knocked O’Flannigan across the face with a fearsome left hook. O’Flannigan, stupefied by Gentry’s assault, stutter stepped backwards. Blindly, he followed the path his leather chair had flown seconds earlier, past the service desk and into the front room. He halted there and wavered. Gentry leapt nimbly over the service desk, and again he swung his recoiled arm forward, cracking a blunt-ended object across O’Flannigan’s face, breaking a bone or something in there. The force of this propelled O’Flannigan off his feet and through the shattered window. He landed with a resounding thud on the glass-littered pavement outside. O’Flannigan would later be glad he hadn’t seen any of it coming.

Gentry set to work. He soaked the store in gasoline. He never put so much effort into any task he’d ever performed before. He lit a match he had kept for just such an occasion, though he didn’t know why, and he flicked it into the mess of gasoline-soaked packaging material.

In no time the fire swallowed up the store.

Eventually, Gentry made his way from the burning building to the battered and still shirtless Charlie O’Flannigan. O’Flannigan had regained consciousness and was in the process of slowly crawling from the fiery orgy of destruction which had claimed his store—the fiery orgy itself just then winding down.

“Excellent work, Gentry, really and truly. I was not sure you’d pull it off, but you did pull it off, and you pulled it off quite well,”

O'Flannigan recoiled a bit at the image of Gentry, who was caked in ash and unbothered by his being caked.

"Bricks, I *need* bricks."

"Bricks is it? Some of those bricks aren't so charred," O'Flannigan said, pointing to a less ruined part of his store. "You can use those bricks today, and then tomorrow I'll bring you some more. They'll be real nice bricks. You've earned them."

With the fire having by now almost completely ended, Gentry began his work. Scorched cinderblocks needed a certain kind of cinderblock layer.

"Atta boy, Gentry. That's how you get things done!" O'Flannigan was yelling his words because Gentry had very visibly stopped paying attention to him, and never before had Gentry been so focused at ignoring his employer.

Gentry was rebuilding the packaging store exactly as it had once been—and with stronger, unblemished masonry that had been delivered from a place or places unknown, maybe out of simple thin air.

"Gentry," O'Flannigan cried, cupping his hands around his mouth, "Gentry, you see? You're not a disappointment anymore! Do you hear me, my boy? Not one!"

"I *need* bricks," Gentry grunted.

"He *needs* bricks," O'Flannigan said to himself, smiling a little, if you were looking at him from the best smile-viewing angle. Everywhere else there were simple shadows dancing in ways they oughtn't.

