

The Fergus Incident

by Michael Healy

The room smelled like Oreos and stale nostalgia. Fergus sat on the floor leaned up against the wall. At his right was a stack of yellowing Time magazines, he had a bottle of Jack nestled between his legs. The room was lit in a dirty brown from a single bare bulb in a desk lamp set on the floor in the corner. It was turned upwards and cast long angular shadows across the room. Fergus opened up a small red notebook, folded back the cover and stared at a single creased page. The phone rang. Fergus took a pull off of the bottle and reached over towards the phone. He knocked the receiver off of the phone and it skittered away across the floor.

"Damn assed stupid phone," Fergus muttered.

"Hello, Fergus?" a voice came through the receiver lying on the floor.

"Yeah, I just dropped this damn thing" Fergus yelled as he picked himself up off of the floor, walked over to the phone, and picked up the receiver.

"Yeah, what's up? No, no, no. I don't even know where my keys are. Just call a cab."

Fergus tried to put the receiver back onto the phone but missed. He grunted, closed one eye and put the receiver back onto the base of the phone. He crawled over to a bare mattress on the floor, reached up and turned off the light.

Fergus had been living in Gilbert Grove for the last three years. He rented a small apartment in the basement of a house on Second street. The town had been slowly dying since the grain elevator shut down last year. He had ended up here after inheriting a farm from his aunt. He sold it and used the money on booze and getting a place where he could stumble home from the bar. He just never left after coming here, something just held him in place, and he had no desire to head back out to New York, at least not yet. He didn't do much around town other than get drunk and work the odd job here or

there. He was the only one left in his family, after his father had died five years ago. There was nothing to keep him here, but nothing to leave for either.

Fergus stepped out of his rusting Crown Vic outside of the Jerry's General Store. It was a place that sold a bit of everything; tools, machinery, bulk foods and anything else Jerry could order in for you. Fergus looked at his watch as he walked through the door.

"Hey Fergie."

"Shit Jerry, don't call me that."

"You know I just do it to get a rise out of you."

"Yeah, so what have you got for me today?"

"You know that widow, Miss Smith? Lives outside of town? Well she ordered another stack of notebooks and pencils that she wants delivered. You think you can run them out there?"

Fergus shrugged his shoulders, took the box from Jerry and headed out the door.

"Hey Fergus," Jerry called after him.

"Yeah?"

"You used to be an accountant right?"

"Yeah, I haven't been certified in years though."

"I have something else I may want your help with. Come back here after you're done with that delivery."

Fergus raced up the gravel road leaving a grey dust cloud that hung over and slowly drifted into the windbreak pines. The day was still, tight. Tight enough that you could bounce a quarter off of it. Fergus leaned the car into a corner, flexed it like a bow to its breaking point, and flew out of the corner. A cloud of birds rose above the trees, startled by the roar of the engine. Fergus brought the car around in front of a small green farm-house.

The house was a green that matched the pine trees around it. There was a deck that had once wrapped around the house. The right side the deck had rotted off into the yard. It had taken a section of the overhanging roof. The entire mess stood in a pile of

other debris on the right side of the house. Sticks, leaves, a rusted lawn mower, all slowly returning to the earth. Red paint flakes stuck to the mailbox.

Fergus reached into the backseat of the car and grabbed the box out. He walked up the steps of the porch which groaned and threatened to break under his heavy footsteps. A black cat clawed at the screen door, screeched and disappeared into the dark that enveloped the entryway.

"Who's there?" a female voice called out from the dark.

"I have the stuff you ordered from Jerry's"

"Who?"

"I have the paper and pencils you ordered from Jerry's."

"Oh yes, oh yes. Do come in."

"That's ok. I just need you to sign and I'll be on my way."

An older woman emerged from the darkness beyond the doorway. She was wearing a white floral patterned nightgown with a green stain running down the left side. She was holding a mangy silver tabby, its coat matched the color of her hair. Her eyes darted nervously around the doorway. She scanned Fergus as if sizing him up for a meal.

"Damn CIA is trying to kill me again," she said, "I don't trust you."

"Ma'am, I don't know what you are talking about. Jerry just sent me out here with this order for you. If you could just sign here," he said and motioned towards the invoice on the top of the box.

"While you're here, do you think you can look at something for me?"

Fergus sighed and handed the invoice to the woman. She signed it and handed it back to him. He pulled the yellow copy off the bottom and handed it to her. She motioned for him to come inside.

"Could you put that on the table for me?"

She pointed to the right, Fergus walked in and placed the box on the table. The house smelled like cat urine and the walls of the room were plastered with pages and clippings from magazines, books and newspapers. Most everything had something written on it, and many of the pieces were linked together with scrawls and bits of string.

"What did you want me to take a look at?"

She set down the cat and stumbled out through the doorway. Vodka oozed out of her pores and hung stale in the air. She led him around the side of the house, past the collapsed deck and refuse pile. The backyard was overgrown and strewn with rusting plows and other green chunks of metal. Grass shot up between the equipment. They walked passed a rusted John Deere to a small clearing between the house and some apple trees. In the middle of the clearing was an old blue metal gas can.

"They're trying to firebomb me, see."

"What? You want me to look at that old gas can?"

"It's no can, it's a bomb!"

Fergus grunted a small chuckle and walked over to the can. No grass had been flattened around the can. The top had started to rust and there wasn't any signs of movement around it. He approached the can and tipped it over with his boot. The lady screamed as a clear liquid spilled out into the grass. Fergus ignored her and leaned over to inspect the toppled can. There was no gas smell. He dipped his finger into the pool and brought it up to his nose, there was no smell. He put his hand into the pool and rubbed it between his hands.

"Ma'am. It's water, rainwater I believe. I'll be going now."

Fergus turned and walked back around the house and got into the cruiser.

"That's not it! What do I do when they come for me again? What about the can?" She shrieked.

"It's nothing ma'am, don't worry, you'll be fine."

"What the hell is so funny?" Jerry asked as Fergus walked back into the store.

"Miss Smith thought the CIA was out for her again."

"She really should get out of that house more."

"I think she needs to lay off the vodka."

"I think you need to lay off the whiskey."

"Ouch, fair enough. So, what is this other thing you wanted to talk to me about?"

"Come back to my office and we'll talk."

Fergus followed Jerry around to the office in the back of the store. The place was mostly warehouse, with the small store out front. The store served more as a venue for conversation, coffee and perusing catalogues for orders. Jerry opened the door to his office, sat down behind a metal desk. Jerry sat down in a chair in the room.

"So, I've been getting into a little business on the side. There's good money in it."

"What sort of business?"

"So, I've been helping move stuff for some guys. I don't know what it is and I don't want to know. They just use the space and I help coordinate getting stuff shipped around."

"So is it drugs? Stolen shit?"

"I have no idea, and I want to keep it that way."

"So, where do I come in? You seem to have this pretty well figured out."

"Well, there's a lot of money, and I need someone to keep track of it, so that it isn't there, you know what I mean?"

"So, you want me to cook your books and launder the money?"

"No, I just want you to keep track of it. I've got people that can handle the other stuff. I just need to know what is coming in, and for what packages. So it stays off the books. Can you do that for me?"

"What do I get out of it?"

"Couple hundred bucks a week?"

"Make it five and you've got a deal."

"You've got to be shitting me," Jerry said. He sucked air in between his teeth and leaned back into his chair and stared up at the ceiling.

"You want me doing something under the table."

"How about this, 350 a week, and if things go well you can get your 500?"

Fergus stood up and extended his hand to Jerry, "So when do I start?"

Jerry opened up a file cabinet and pulled out a shoebox.

"This is everything about what I've done so far."

"How long have you been doing this?"

"About a year now, after the grain elevator shut down."

Jerry opened the shoebox and pulled out a stack of invoices and notes written on legal pads. Each stack was clipped together. He unclipped a stack of invoices and added the one he just received to the top. He made a note on a legal pad. He then opened the envelope and pulled out a stack of cash, counted it and made another note on the legal pad. He put the money back into the bag, clipped everything back together, shut the box and handed it to Fergus.

"It's been picking up lately, and as you saw, I've been having a hard time keeping track of everything."

"What exactly do you want me to do?"

"Do you want some coffee?"

"Just get on with it."

"Alright, here's the deal. I'm working with these guys and they ship stuff through me. Anyway, they've been using me a lot more lately. I don't know why, but it's been a lot, and a lot of cash. I want you to help me keep track of it, see when stuff is coming in and out, keep track of the money so I can move it along. That sort of thing."

"So is everything in this box?"

"This is everything that has been completed. I keep the notes on what I currently have here." Jerry reached into his desk and pulled out a folder. He handed it to Fergus who looked it over.

"So, you have three shipments here right now?"

"No, that's not right, there should be, let me see that."

Jerry took the folder from Fergus and looked over it. He added a note and handed it back to Fergus.

"Just two now. Anyway. Could you sort this out for me?"

"Yeah. It will take a day or two, this is a mess."

Jerry laughed and leaned back into his chair.

"I'm used to using the computer, but I want to keep this shit separate you know? I haven't worked on paper in ages."

"Could I get a ledger?"

"Yeah, I'll track one down for you."

Jerry grabbed his keys off of the desk. "You can stay here and work through this stuff if you'd like."

"I actually need to go and grab a few things real quick. See you back here in an hour or two?"

"I'm gonna lock the stuff up back here. See you in a bit."

Jerry took the box and folder from Fergus, put them both into the filing cabinet and locked it. He then locked the office and the two went to the front of the store.

Fergus woke up in the police station and he had stitches in his forehead. He had a prescription for pain killers and a note that asked for a follow up appointment. He wanted the drugs, didn't care for the doctor. A guard came by and opened up the cell. He got his things back from the front counter and walked outside. The morning was overcast but warm. It was a morning that proceeds a spring storm. Fergus looked down at his watch and noticed that the face was cracked.

He leaned against a streetlight and stared down the street. A few cars meandered through the streets on the hill below him. In the distance he could see the train tracks, the interstate and then the river. The background faded into churning clouds and tilled fields. The fields looked mossy green from the crops that had just started to reach up from the soil. The street had angular parking on either side and was lined with small storefronts, many of them abandoned. The town had been slowly dying over the last twenty years. There were a few places left, a pharmacy, The Greasy Spoon, Jerry's store and the two bars.

Fergus walked down the street and into The Greasy Spoon. He needed coffee, two eggs, and bacon to quiet his head. By the time he was done he hoped that he could get the meds and then meet with Jerry. Fergus sat on a stool at the counter and stared at a row of coffee cups stacked upside down on a ledge behind the counter.

"What'll you have?" asked Jane.

Jane was the owner of The Greasy Spoon. Fergus guessed that she was in her forties. She was short and had that same worn look that everyone in this town seemed to have.

"The usual."

Jane marked the order and put it up into the kitchen window.

"We ain't got no rye bread," a voice yelled from the kitchen.

"They say they're out of rye, what do you want instead?" Jane asked as she grabbed a cup from the stack behind the counter and poured Fergus a cup of coffee.

"Give me an English muffin then I guess."

Thunder rolled outside as Fergus ate his breakfast. He reached into the breast pocket of his coat for his flask. He took his coffee cup under counter and turned the flask upside down, but nothing came out. He sighed and put the flask back into his pocket. He finished off the food and paid Jane. He looked up at the clock above the door, 8:45am.

It was pouring rain outside. Fergus sprinted from awning to alcove until he reached the end of the block where Jerry's store was. The front door was locked. Jerry's should be open by now. Fergus went around to the back of the store where a trailer was pulled up to the dock. The dock door was open so he went inside.

"Are you trying to fuck me?" a yell echoed around the warehouse.
"Are you trying to fuck me?"

Fergus stood in the doorway and shook the rain off. The door to the office was open and a man was taking up most of the opening. His left arm was propped up on the doorframe, he was bald, and was wearing a tight black shirt that showed off his ripped torso.

"No, no. The packages have to be here somewhere, we got them in last week. Let me see, yeah, from Tulsa. I was told that you'd be picking them up. I put them up in.... Let me see, row 6, top shelf."

The man turned out of the doorway and followed Jerry off towards the back of the warehouse. Fergus stepped back out of the dock door to avoid being seen. He waited a few minutes and then went back inside.

"Hey Jerry. You back here? The front door was locked."

Fergus didn't get a response. A forklift beeped as it backed up somewhere in the warehouse. Fergus felt hand on his shoulder that spun him around. The man that had stood in the office doorway stood in front of him. The man had to be about 6'4" and was built like a truck. He had a dark goatee and wore a pair of reading glasses that had been taped at the bridge. In his left hand was a clipboard.

"Who the hell are you?" the man asked.

"Fergus, I um. I am a friend of Jerry's. He asked me to come by this morning."

"Just stay here."

Fergus leaned against that wall and tapped on the empty flask in his pocket. Jerry drove a pallet on a forklift and stopped at the door to the loading dock.

"This the right one?"

The man looked down at his clipboard and checked something off.

"Yeah, that's the one. Just load it up."

Jerry drove the forklift into the truck and backed out a few moments later with a new pallet. He parked the forklift, got off and walked over to the man. The man took off his reading glasses and handed Jerry a manilla envelope and an invoice sheet. He shut and locked the doors to the truck and walked out the door. The truck started up and pulled away. Fergus helped Jerry to close and lock the dock door.

"What the hell was that all about?" Fergus asked.

"He wasn't supposed to be here until tomorrow, at least that is what I thought. Oh well, I'll have you to help now."

Jerry patted Fergus on the shoulder and handed him the envelope and the invoice. He then hopped back into the forklift and drove back into the stacks of shelves.

"I put that one in row five, section 6, top shelf," Jerry yelled.

Fergus marked it on the invoice and then headed back into the office. He sat down and Jerry walked in, opened up the filing cabinet and pulled out the bankers box. He handed the box to Fergus and

sat down at his desk. He opened up a drawer and handed Fergus a ledger.

"Is there anything else you need?" Jerry asked.

"No, this should do," Fergus said.

"You can use my desk if you'd like," Jerry said as he left the office.

"Thanks," said Fergus.

Fergus opened the box and sorted through the papers. Jerry had been kind enough to at least clip things together that should be. Fergus organized the invoices chronologically and marked each one down into the register. Shit, this is a lot of money he thought. He kept at it for a few hours, only stopping occasionally for coffee or to get up and stretch his legs.

"How's it coming?" Jerry asked as he walked into the office.

"Pretty good, it's a mess but I've got it sorted out I think."

"Good, I'm gonna lock up. Want to get a drink?"

"Sure."

Fergus packed up the material into a bankers box which he had found collapsed between two of the filing cabinets. Inside there were file folders marked with the months. He put the ledger on the top.

Fergus had been working for about three weeks. Business had picked up, they were now doing about one shipment a day rather than two or three a week. He was making the \$500 per week, plus a bonus for every new shipment that they picked up.

Fergus arrive that morning at about 6:30. This was early for him, but he had a difficult time sleeping the night before. He decided to go around back and let himself in. The backdoor was unlocked, which was odd, as he remembered locking it the night before. He slowly let himself in and walked the stacks. In the last row of the warehouse Jerry had lowered one of the pallets from the top shelf. It was sitting still on the forklift. He had his back turned towards Fergus and was rummaging through one of the boxes. Fergus quickly left hid himself around behind another one of the rows. Quietly walked back to the door and let himself out. He decided to

go get some breakfast and then look into what Jerry had been doing.

Fergus returned to the store around 8 and again went around the back. The door was locked so he opened it with the set of keys that Jerry had given him earlier that week. Something about it just being easier if Fergus can just let himself in and out of the back. He walked around the warehouse looking for Jerry, but he was not in the back. Fergus went through the door to the front of the store. Jerry was helping an older man in blue overalls, plaid shirt and faded green cap order a lawn mower. On the end of the counter at the front of the store was a coffee machine, it was on but the carafe was empty.

"Where is the coffee?" Fergus asked.

"There should be some more in the cabinet below," Jerry said as he looked over and saw that the carafe was empty. He went back to helping the man pick a lawnmower out of the catalogue. They were looking at John Deere riding lawnmowers at the moment.

Fergus opened the door to the cabinet. There was a stack of white styrofoam cups, a plastic container of Folgers and a bag with coffee filters. While the new pot of coffee brews he leans against the counter and listens to the conversation between Jerry and the older man. They were discussing something about the value of a mower that can both bag and mulch. The coffee maker sputtered and gurgled as it finished the pot. Fergus poured himself a cup.

He headed to the back and into the office. He grabbed the ledger and folder for the week and went to check on what it was the Jerry had been looking at earlier. He went to the last row and saw that all of the pallets were back on the top. He rolled over a ladder and climbed up. There was an opened a box from the first pallet and he looked through it. Inside there was shredded paper and in the middle was a small ziplock bag containing what looked like uncut diamonds. He took a deep breath and looked around the warehouse, it was empty. He wrote a small note counting the number of boxes in the ledger.

Fergus then proceeded to move along and do the same thing with every pallet on the shelf. He looked through any opened boxes that

he found, making a small note about the contents each time he found an open one. Some had drugs, some money, some had copper or other raw materials. It didn't matter what it was, if it was opened Fergus looked and took a note.

"Hey, whatcha doing?" Jerry asked as he walked into the warehouse and saw Fergus wheeling the ladder into another row.

"There were a few shipments that I didn't the numbers of written down. I'm going through to see which ones they are," Fergus said.

"Well, I'm heading out to get some lunch. Do you want anything?"

"I'll come along in a few, just let me get this pallet marked."

"Alright. I'll be out front when you're done."

Fergus was sweating and breathing heavily. He leaned against the wheeling stairs as he heard Jerry walk out and the door to the front slam shut. He gathered his things, put them in the office and locked it up.

Fergus was determined to figure out just what it was that Jerry was doing, just in case the shit ever hit the fan. Every shipment that came in now he made a note on how many packages there were per pallet, and if any boxes were opened, he was sure to note it and the contents. The Ramone truck often had drugs. The rental driven by the Mexican was also often drugs. The Jones truck almost always had electronics. The rest were a mix of all of the above. The truck driven by the large man with the goatee was the one that had the diamonds.

Fergus found that there were a few things that Jerry always opened, the diamonds and the Ramone truck.

The door to the office suddenly smashed open. Fergus closed the ledger and sat in the chair behind the desk. The man that Fergus had met that rainy day stood in the doorway. He held a revolver and pointed it towards Fergus.

"Give me the ledger."

Fergus stood up out of the chair and handed the man the ledger.

"Kneel down," the man said waving the gun towards the carpet.

Fergus knelt down making a noise somewhere between choking and sobbing.

"What's going on?"

"Just shut the fuck up. Jerry says you've been skimming."

"There must be some, some mistake."

"I don't give a shit. You don't fuck with me."

"No, there is some mistake. I just keep track as it comes in and out. Look at it."

The man looked through the ledger and saw the notes that Fergus had left. The number of boxes and the contents, if there were any.

"That son of a bitch," the man said as he handed the ledger back to Fergus.

Fergus got up off of the floor and sat back down behind the desk. The man with the revolver paced around the office.

"You haven't been taking shit?"

"No, I just take the money that Jerry pays me. The only reason I started doing this is that I saw him go through a box once. I thought it would be best to cover my ass."

"Damn right. Hey, could you get Jerry here? We need to have a talk."

"He left about an hour ago. I was just finishing up and was going to head out."

"Call him."

Fergus flipped through a rolodex that was on the desk. He picked up the phone and dialed Jerry's cell phone.

"Yeah, the goatee just showed up."

"You tell him that we got a shipment," the goatee said as he pointed the gun back at Fergus.

"He's got an express shipment, promised to pay double the normal rate."

Fergus shook his head and took a deep breath.

"No I can't do it. You know that I can't run the forklift. Yeah, he's here now."

"He'll be here in ten," Fergus said as he hung up the phone and looked back up at the goatee. He opened the ledger back up and

started to write something down based on the invoice sitting in front of him.

"You finish this and then you leave," the goatee said as he sat down in a chair.

Fergus nodded and continued his work. He then closed the ledger up, put the invoice in a folder, back into the box and put all of them into the filing cabinet.

"Keep the ledger out," the goatee said, getting up out of the chair.

Fergus pulled the ledger out of the box and handed it to the goatee. He then pulled out a manilla envelope of cash out of the box, put the lid on and locked the rest inside of the cabinet. He then grabbed his coat and headed out of the office with the goatee following him. Fergus unlocked and opened the dock doors while the goatee did the same for the truck.

"What are you going to do to him?" Fergus asked.

"I dunno yet, but you're gonna have to leave here," said the goatee. "You called me the goatee, why?"

"Cause you're the only one who has one."

The goatee laughs and pats Fergus on the shoulder.

"We may need someone like you," the goatee said as he pulled out a business card. He wrote something on the back and handed it to Fergus. He muttered a low thanks.

The backdoor screeched open and the goatee tucked the revolver into his waistband. Jerry stumbled towards the goatee and Fergus.

"Just what the hell do you think you're doing bringing in a shipment on a Friday night?" Jerry slurred.

"We need to talk about something first. Fergus, could you leave us alone?"

The goatee pointed towards the office and followed Jerry in. Fergus left through the backdoor. As he was nearing the street he heard a muffled gunshot from within the warehouse. He pulled a bag of cut diamonds out of his pocket and looked at them and then put them back into his pocket. He unlocks the door to his Crown Vic, puts the manilla envelope onto the passenger seat, and drives off.

