

Fish Stew

by Ron Earl Phillips

It made a satisfying 'pop' when Donnie's nose crushed under my knuckle-scared right. I threw another to his jaw, and then a left into his gut. It had forced the air out and Donnie crumpled to the floor gasping, half sitting, gurgling through his nose.

Wasn't Donnie Braggio a sight for sore eyes?

I lifted him up by the collar and set him up against the bar. I steadied him, and laid one into the breadbasket. Reflexively he started to double; I pushed him back with a hard palm. Pinned upright, I hammered away at Donnie's face with my right. Had he lived, I'm sure he'd be sucking through straw the rest of his life.

He never was much of a fighter. Not one on one. Donnie fought with back-up, with the odds in his favor. Bad odds tonight.

I let him drop.

A second time I asked, "Remember Fish?" No laugh this time.

A swift kick to his side, I imagined my steel-toed boot shattering Donnie's ribs and fragments tearing into his lungs and spleen.

Donnie gasped and wheezed, dying for some blood-free air. Fish hung on for ten hours. I wasn't going to let this play out. My boot slammed down on his already beaten face, again and again.

What a bloody mess.

Drained, I looked at the body. At what was left of Donnie Braggio, the little boss of Hagers Juvenile Center.

I never forgot Fish.

It was still early morning and I found myself on an upscale block lined with renovated brownstones. I climbed up a set of cobbled steps. Standing in the doorway, I wasn't sure that I was ready for this. It had to be done.

I buzzed. No answer. So I pounded on the door. After what seemed like minutes, a light flickered on. I heard the bolt and stood back.

He stood in front of me in a loose robe over his short wiry frame. Hair matted flat, bed head, and his glasses hung crooked on his long bent nose. He regarded me.

“William? It's very late.”

“Early,” I corrected him.

I pushed my way in. I didn't bother to look around; I'd been here before, though never invited.

“I need to tell you something.”

I walked down the narrow hall towards his office, the one he kept for private patients.

He followed me in. “What is this about?”

I took a seat in front of his uncluttered desk, a computer monitor sat to one side and a family photo of his wife and son to the other. Warily, he sat, facing me. His tired eyes were eager get on with it.

“I killed Donnie Braggio.”

His eyes widened. Not out of shock, but recognition. During our sessions downtown, I never mentioned Donnie, but it was a name he knew. I could see his confusion.

“Remember Fish?”

He nodded. We had talked about Fish, a friend who died when I was a kid. It was an accident I had said. He suggested my anxiety was misdirected guilt. But I was guilty.

“I haven't been honest. I was responsible. I let Donnie beat Fish until there wasn't anything left. He asked for my help and all I did was listen to his screams. Fish didn't belong at Hagers. He was a good kid who made a mistake.”

His eyes began to well.

“I promised Fish that I'd make things right. Get some redemption.”

He wasn't paying attention; instead he mooned over the family photo.

“I was there when Fish died, after Donnie had beaten him, in the infirmary watching him grab his last breaths. You know who he blamed?”

He didn't respond, but there was look of understanding. I tipped over the name plate on his desk: *Dr. Richard Salmon*.

I pulled the snubnose from my jacket. He didn't flinch. I shot once.

Good-bye, Fish.

