

Lamentation

By Clint McInnes

It's a wet night. You know the kind I mean? Drippy. There's a really heavy mist just sort of moving aimlessly around town, leaving part of itself behind where it passes, but never getting any smaller. All the trees, the signs, the edges of the billboards, the parked cars ... anything not moving, anything just sitting there, trying to rest, the water builds up and beads and runs off, builds up and beads and runs off. The constant drips plink off the pavement, or fall silently into the brown grass, or give up their brief existences in the small effort of making a puddle a little bigger. Fall down the back of your neck. You could call it a rain, if you happen to be one of those who *really* doesn't like to be damp. But it isn't quite enthusiastic enough for me to call it rain. Cold, though, or at least getting that way. Heard earlier, this morning it was, the weather people were calling for it to dip below freezing tonight. It's early yet, though, not even eight o'clock, and still somewhere between five and ten degrees out. Closer to ten, I'd say. If it wants to get below freezing, it'll have to work at it pretty hard. Good weather for staying indoors. Good weather for some creative cuddling.

Like I've got a choice.

Eh. Hell with it. Been a long, long time since I could give a rat's ass for the cold. Any more, bring it on. The colder, the better. Keeps people bundled up and thinking about getting to where they're headed. Keeps them from wondering too much about the homeless guy in the long coat who looks like his last meal is a dim memory.

There are only two cars in front of the convenience store. It's a ratty little place. If you drive there, you get to play dodge-the-pothole in the parking lot. You walk, you can share the street with the motorized locals who don't look where they're going and don't bother to signal turns *ever* and have a real big blind spot when it comes to speed limit signs. Both ends of this little stretch of pavement have signs that say '25' and 'NO THRU TRUCKS'. Yeah, right. I've been here a couple of months now; I know what I'm talking about. Nights like this, when headlights seem to fade into the misty dark, just soak into the gloom and vanish, you walk along the road toggled up in a dark brown coat, you're playing the two-tons-of-metal version of Russian roulette.

I try not to care. Honestly. Bring it on, I want to say. Dodge-the-redneck, at least, would keep me from getting bored. But I have to be careful instead. Got to look out for myself, got to stay in one piece. Hell, I can't even afford a paper cut. That's why I wear gloves all the time.

There's an abandoned building up the street. It used to be one of those big-box hardware store places. You know. Home Depot or Lowe's or some such. As I understand it, they pulled up stakes and moved across town to a brand new store twice this size, and nobody has had any use for this place for several years. There's a decent spread of grass and weeds in the front lot, and a monstrous pile of broken pallets rotting behind the loading dock. No maintenance, right? The rusty, sagging chain link fence 'protecting' the place offered nothing that felt like a challenge. So I just moved in. A little patch of woods borders the west side of the property and is only maybe ten yards from the side of the

building. Damn near perfect setup. I come and go as I please, and nobody ever sees me. Really, though, I don't think anybody would care if I *did* get spotted.

Eh. You never know, right?

But the cold doesn't bother me. The rain, such as it is, doesn't bother me. To tell the truth, weather of any kind doesn't rate as more than an inconvenience, and hasn't for many, many years. It's just no big deal, know what I mean? So I pick my way through the mud and puddles and push open the door. There used to be a bell over that door. Now there's just a string. Somebody bought the place about a month ago and sort of tried to give it a facelift. Rearranged the shelves inside, put up a new awning out front, painted the gas island a different color. They aren't fooling anyone. A warthog in a tutu is still a warthog. But they sell cigs here and I smoked my last one around noon, so I gotta see if they have my brand today.

My brand. Yeah. I spot 'em on the wall behind the counter. Camel wides. Unfiltered. Coffin nails, everybody says. I should be so lucky. Time was, my 'brand' was hand-rolled Cuban Delectos. Forty-five bucks a pop, and that was when a decent pair of shoes cost twenty. Damn good smoke. But that was a long time ago.

There's a line in front of the clerk, which surprises me. Four black guys, one of 'em really tall, and a couple chicks. Latinas. Damn hot, too. Big guy in front is arguing with the emaciated I-think-it's-a-female behind the counter. I squint and get a better look through the thick lexan. Yeah, female. Ostensibly. She's got 'meth-head' plastered all over her. Cautiously I flare my nostrils and draw a deep breath.

Yes. There it is. The unmistakable aroma of impending death. Of course, in her case it wouldn't take a nose as keen as mine to spot the signs. But that sort of thing comes naturally to me. Heh. Or, you might say, it comes *un*-naturally. Heh-heh. Yeah. I gotta write that one down.

Not my problem, though. I just need her to live long enough to sell me a couple packs of cigs. I pull out my small wad of bills and count out six bucks, shove the rest back into a pocket, and queue up behind the guy at the end.

The man in front – he's really big, and I tag him with the moniker of 'Chewbacca' – finally gets the clerk to understand which one of the lottery tickets he wants. He paid her and then went over and stood beside the door. The two chicks put their energy drinks on the counter. One Amp and one Monster, the big 700 milliliter cans. I notice little things like that, stuff like every last piece of jewelry they had on, the details of the tattoo the shorter one had in the small of her back (she's either brave or stupid to keep her midriff bare in this weather), the exact wording on the many different lottery tickets they had stocked in the case ... that sort of thing. It's kind of a hobby, you know? Another way to pass the time, and the gods know I've got plenty of that.

One of the Latinas handed the clerk a twenty, and the other copped the drinks. Got it: the one who's so proud of her abs is 'Thelma', and the other one is 'Louise'. The walking skeleton was giving the girl her change when the door slammed open and something hit Chewbacca. He gave a grunt and slumped into a pile on the floor.

"Nobody move!"

The newcomer was average height, maybe a bit chunky. Didn't look like fat, though, not with the way he moved and held himself. More like a weight lifter. What I could see of his hair was blond and cut really short, but most of it was hidden by a red scarf he had tied on. He had several tattoos, especially on his arms, which weren't covered, and some of them had military themes. Yeah, ex-Marine, I'd say ... aw, crap. Special forces. Just what I need. Looks like the grunts forgot to deprogram this one. I scoped out the rest of his get-up. A small rucksack-duffle thing hung off one shoulder, and looked pretty full. He wore a t-shirt or tank top thing under a padded vest, jeans that looked new, and some black boots that were obviously army surplus. And he carried a dead-short sawed-off twelve gauge side-by-side in his left hand and a Ruger .40 semi-auto in his right.

Now let me tell you, I have a *great* deal of respect for that pistol. There are a whole lot of very good reasons that the DoD and the FBI settled on that caliber, not the least of which is that the rounds were designed specifically to unload all their kinetic energy in the target. If I absolutely *had* to take somebody down with one shot, and I could pick any standard production model semi-automatic handgun on the market, I'd pick the one that was being pointed in my direction at that moment.

The instant he ordered us all to be still, Miss Zombie Clerk dropped down behind the counter, and he opened fire. Three of his slugs lodged in the lexan before a significant crack appeared. The fourth shot opened a pretty decent little hole and showered the clerk with bits of plastic. It must have been old. Or maybe it was just Plexiglas. True polycarbonate shouldn't have failed like that. She screamed – a lot louder than I thought she'd be able to – and told him not to shoot.

“Get up!”

“Don't shoot! Please!”

“Get ya useless ass out here!”

She peeked over the edge of the counter, shivering violently. The robber motioned with his gun. She meekly tottered out from behind the shield and stood next to the other two girls.

“I want everything you got. All the cash, all the checks, all your bling.” He looked pointedly at the girls, and then at one of the guys, all of whom hurriedly removed their rings, necklaces, and bracelets and made an untidy pile of them on the counter. He glanced my way. I opened the coat carefully and held it out to my sides to show that I didn't have anything. “Ya wallet!” he demanded.

“I am very sorry, sir, but I don't have a wallet.” I pulled out the few crumpled notes I had on me and laid them on the pile. “That's all I got.”

He sized me up: dirty toque; lank, greasy, black hair; ancient and threadbare trench coat that had been a medium brown once; slacks with frayed cuffs.

“Lemme see ya shoe.”

I gave him a puzzled look and held one foot out.

“Th' bottom. Lemme see th' sole.”

Ah. I understood. Carefully avoiding any sudden movements, I removed the loafer and showed him the sole, complete with the hole and the worn-down heel.

He made a rude noise. “Bum.” Pointing at the freezer bank along the back wall, he said, “Go sit over there and keep quiet.” As I did so, he turned back to the others. “All ya wallets, all ya purses, cellphones, ever’thing. Put it on th’ counter.” He aimed his pistol at the clerk, who looked ready to collapse. “Empty th’ cash drawer. If ya try cheatin’ me, I’ll plug ya. Try pushin’ a alarm, I’ll plug ya. Make any more noise, I’ll plug ya. Got me, bitch?”

She choked back a sob and tried to walk back around to her post, but her legs weren’t up to the job. She stumbled and fell. The crook growled and drew a bead on her.

I couldn’t take the chance that he might actually shoot her. The *last* thing I needed was blood spattered everywhere. “Sir?”

His head whipped around to zero in on me.

“I know how to operate a cash register. I can get the money for you.”

After a couple of seconds of hard stare, he jerked his head. “Do it.”

Over the last handful of seconds I had decided this guy’s name was ‘Rambo’ until something better came along. I got up, my movements smooth and deliberate, and walked around behind the counter. The machine was an older model, but it needed a passcode or a physical key to get in. I asked the cashier what the code was.

“Ah ... it’s, uh ... 3347.”

Twenty seconds later I handed him something like four hundred dollars in a plastic bag I’d found. “Would you like for me to put the rest of the goods in here?”

He eyed me suspiciously, but gave a curt nod. I swept all the wallets and jewelry and whatnot into the bag, whipped the top into a quick knot, and handed it to him. “Here you are, sir. Is there anything else you’d like?”

He continued to regard me with a wary eye but shook his head. “Why you bein’ so ... helpful?”

I shrugged. “Not *my* money. Most of it anyhow. Few hundred bucks ain’t worth getting shot over. And just in case they do catch you, armed robbery has a *whole* lot shorter sentence than felony murder.”

That obviously surprised him. But I simply stood there. After a few heartbeats I put my hands in my coat pockets. He shot me the finger, said, “Like I care,” and backed toward the door.

That’s when Rambo noticed the flashing blue lights reflecting off the back wall. His head whipped around to glare at the two sheriff’s units pulling into the parking lot. Eyes narrowed in disgust, he turned back to Zombie and spat, “You! You called ‘em!”

“Nooooo! No! Not me! It musta been him!” She pointed at me. So did the Ruger.

“Actually,” I answered quickly, “if you think about it, there’s no way the cops could have gotten a signal and had the chance to send someone in the very short time between when I went back there and when they got here.”

The gun wavered and re-centered on her.

She sobbed, “I didn’ do nothin’! I ain’t stupid!”

I realized that voicing my personal opinion on the truth of *that* statement wouldn’t help the situation. “She probably didn’t either. I know it ain’t been much over two minutes since you walked in. Maybe somebody saw you earlier? Or maybe the cops just happened by. I mean, you *are* standing right in front of the door, and you’re obviously armed.”

He sidestepped over a couple meters so the drink machine was between him and the parking lot. “All o’ you! Back over there against th’ freezers! Wait!” He looked at the guy he’d clocked and pointed at two of the other guys. “You! Drag him back there with you.” They quickly grabbed their very unconscious friend and pulled him away from the door. While we complied with his orders, he aimed the shotgun at the front door and waited.

Nor was he disappointed. The doors were fixed so that the one on the right opened away from you, regardless of whether you were coming or going. One of the deputies pulled the *left*-hand door open and called, “Everything all right in there?”

We knew better than to make a sound.

Since we were lined up in front of the cooler along the back wall, there were two rows of merchandise between us and our ‘host’. Yeah, they were short, but so were we. Sitting on the floor, we were invisible from the entrance area. The officer stuck his head in the door, and happened to be looking directly at Rambo. He got his face back out of the way roughly five milliseconds ahead of the blast from the shotgun. Probably singed his eyelashes off. I knew the noise was going to be unbelievably loud, and had covered my ears already. But everyone else jumped, and Thelma and Louise screamed.

Rambo leaned over our way, blew the glass out of one of the cooler doors, and yelled, “Shut up!”

Little bits of safety glass covered the girls and one of the guys. They cowered, hanging onto each other’s shoulders, and tried to keep their sniffles as quiet as possible. Looking at the guys, I decided the short one was ‘Moe’, the bald one was ‘Curly’, and the other guy, by default, was ‘Larry’.

Nothing else happened for most of a minute. Rambo was sweating, but not as bad as the rest of us. Well, yours truly excepted. I gave up sweat for ... uh ... Hanukkah.

One of the cops outside found himself a bullhorn and cranked up the sweet-talk. You know, ‘give yourself up’ and ‘let’s work a deal’ and ‘don’t make this hard on yourself’. Rambo tucked the shotgun under one arm and pulled a big, multi-frequency radio out of his rucksack. He fiddled with the dial and spoke into it. Shortly he was having a real chummy conversation – as in, consisting mainly of profanity – with one of the cops. That impressed me, sort of. Did he always carry a GMRS, or had he been *planning* to get caught? I started getting the idea that maybe he wasn’t wrapped too tight.

He talked with them for a minute or so, his attention gradually transferring away from us, which suited me. Time to act.

I leaned over to Curly and whispered, “We need to get out. There’s a rear door. But we can’t move fast or he’ll notice.”

“Move, hell! My ass ain’t budgin’!”

“Look, I already know how this is gonna fall out. He’ll talk with the cops for five or ten or, if they’re really good, maybe fifteen minutes. Then he’ll get tired of their lies or he’ll snap, and he’ll use us as shields or start poppin’ some of us as a ‘demonstration’ of how serious he is. I don’t know about you, but I want no part of that. And I wouldn’t feel good about leaving anyone behind, either, ‘cause he’d just take out his frustrations on whoever’s left.”

He mulled that over for a bit. Keeping an ear tuned to Rambo, I eased over to talk to the girls. They were a lot more eager to get some gone, and shortly talked the guys into it.

The layout of the place was going to help a little, at least until we had to cut a sharp right to get to the rear storage room. For about a meter and a half we’d be right in front of the door, and possibly in his peripheral vision. But I didn’t feel like we had much choice. It was plain that Rambo was willing to spill blood, and that ... well, that would be bad.

I got our group scooted over so that each of us could whip around the corner to the back room in one smooth move. I checked Rambo’s location, and set myself there at the front, about eighty centimeters in front of the cooler door. The others could go behind me that way, and create that much less obvious motion. I congratulated myself on that little tactic.

The girls went first. I told everyone where the back door was, and insisted that they put as much space as possible between them and the store as soon as they were in the clear. There is a little neighborhood behind the store, and I was dead sure the cops would have somebody – likely several somebodies – placed back there to keep the robber bottled up. If we got out, we’d have backup.

I hoped.

I worried about Chewbacca, but couldn’t really see any way to save him. If we all got away, I’d tell the police about him. Then I’d get as far away as I could in case Rambo busted him up.

As the others cautiously and quietly made their sequential escapes, I reflected ruefully that one of the reasons I’d decided to settle here was the area’s low crime rate. There were twenty-five thousand people in the town proper, and another thirty thousand in the rest of the county, and only three murders the previous year. Even domestic violence incidents were rare. And now this. Rambo must be from out of town. And now the barest whisper of chance separated me from absolute disaster. If I made it out of this unscathed, I vowed to move to the middle of a national forest, dig myself a hole, crawl in and pull it in after me.

Of course that was a lie. I couldn’t really stand my own company for very long. Occupational hazard.

Moe slipped around the corner and vanished. That left Curly and me. He hadn’t been in favor of this. He wanted to stay put. But I tried not to think of that as I motioned for him

to go. His hands trembled so badly he kept them clenched so he wouldn't hit something. He wiped the sweat from his face with his coat sleeve and started crawling.

Rambo saw him. His eyes met Curly's. Curly jumped up and tried to run. Rambo put one in his upper chest.

Let me ask you something. Do you watch movies? Of course you do. And I'll just bet that you've seen lots of shows where somebody gets shot. Mr. John Q. Victim takes one for the team, and grabs his chest, and falls over, and sometimes he gives a little soliloquy before he croaks. Or sometimes he doesn't croak. The point is that when somebody gets shot on the big screen, you don't usually see much blood.

Do you know what it really looks like when somebody takes a .40 caliber hollow-point in the chest cavity? Probably not. So I'll tell you. It's really, really gory. Gory like you wouldn't believe gory. Curly's chest just kind of ... exploded. Blood sprayed everywhere. They'll be cleaning that store for days, and still, months down the road, somebody will move a display case or open a door and there will be some more blood. It's insane how many places it will fly. And I was right there. He was less than a meter away from me. There was no way I could dodge or shield myself, even with my reflexes. I got showered.

Curly ricocheted off the wall and splatted out flat. I don't think he felt anything.

But I did. Almighty gods of fire and darkness ... I DID!

Where the drops hit my skin, each separate impact sent a glorious thrill through me, a hundred tiny lightning bolts of ecstasy. Flesh opened to receive it, the droplets thinning and drying and, in a few seconds, vanishing in a light smoke. Cogent thought became very difficult.

Rambo stomped over, saw that the others were gone, and gave a maddened bellow. I didn't pay him any attention. I couldn't. Instead, I scooted over to Curly's body and laid my hand on his chest ...

Ahhhhhhhhh! The pleasure! So long! It had been ... so ... very ... long!

Rambo was saying something to me but I couldn't hear. My othersight kicked in, and the mundane surroundings faded out. The slaughtered man in front of me captured my whole being as I traced down the ley lines, gathered up the spirit energy and pulled it into me. His soul had fled, but that didn't matter. The blood was there, its salty, metallic tang a hymn of praise wreathing my head. It called to me, sang in my mind, promised rapture and refreshing and healing and joy and ...

And I lowered my lips to the gaping wound ...

Rambo shot me in the throat.

Suddenly, the real world slammed back into focus as I realized that, in my moment of distraction, I'd just been screwed. Well and truly buggered.

Damn. Damn it to hell.

I looked up at Rambo, wiped my mouth, and stood. His jaw hanging open like a mailbox, he watched in fascinated horror as the skin closed up over the wound. He drew

down and shot again, this time directly through my heart. I guess he must not have hit bone, because it went on through, and blood sprayed the wall behind me. I drew a frustrated breath and said, "Shoot all you want. Too freaking late now."

He emptied his clip and then stood there, slack-jawed, just staring at me.

I walked up to him, and I could tell by his expression that my eyes were already glowing. I've been told they're a sort of sickly green shade all over, no pupils, no iris, but of course there's no way I can test that theory myself. I said, "I can't even stop it, you know. It'll all just heal up. I've been under the radar for a hundred and twenty years. Nobody knew where I was or if I even still walked the earth. But now, thanks to you, the Master knows something's up, and he'll come after me again." The poor fool tried to ask something, but his mouth was too dry to work. The gun dropped from his hand.

"It's like a beacon, you know. It takes a hell of a lot of magic to heal a wound, and that much mana flow lights up the landscape on the ethereal plane. Any other vampire within fifty miles will be able to feel it. They're on their way now. And it's your fault."

I took a couple of steps until I was right in front of him, grabbed his right shoulder and his head, bending it away to expose his neck. He didn't resist. They never do. "I'm going to need a good meal if I have to spend the next few years running. It's a pity you chose this store to rob. Just your bad luck, I guess. Wish I could say I felt sorry for you. But I don't. Some people, as they say where I come from, just need killing."