

Syndrome

By Clint McInnes

I pulled the curtain aside about an inch and tried to get some idea of what the hell was going on next door. A quick glance at the clock on the stove confirmed my first thought: it was nearly twenty-two hundred. That late at night, and here was this damned fool whipping around on a riding mower, just like he had good sense. Honestly, I don't know how some people make it to adulthood. Lucky for him, his nearest neighbor didn't sleep much. But still, he couldn't have known that. You'd think one of the other people in that house would have brains enough to come out and tell him to stop, but apparently they were all just as thick as he was.

Something mashed into my leg, pushing me into the wall by the window, and I couldn't help but jerk even though I knew it was just Fred Flintstone. Fred's my dog. He's a Newfoundland-Mastiff cross, a slobber machine on one end, and a wrecking ball on the other. I know a lot of owners dock the tail, and I understand about it being a whole bull-in-a-china-shop unto itself, but Fred and I are more like partners than anything else, and I didn't think I had the right to deprive him of such a useful balance tool. He seemed to agree, and wagged it into me whenever he had the chance. And if I was braced well enough, it wouldn't even knock me down, usually.

He stuck his paws up on the sill and helped me spy on the knucklehead on the mower, his drool liberally wetting the floor under him. I didn't care. It would dry out, and if it didn't, that's what mops were for; that's also why I didn't have any carpet in the house. So the two of us spent the next few minutes trying to scope out the neighbors. New neighbors, that is. I hadn't heard anything all day, no moving van, no unpacking, no nothing. They just sort of showed up, about an hour ago. Now all of a sudden he decides to mow the lawn? Granted, it needed it. The former owners, the Hindengroots what moved all the way out to North-by-God Dakota if you can believe it, hadn't lived there for, oh, four months maybe, and what with all the rain we've had, the grass could hide a tribe of pygmies. So, yay him and bless his heart and all that ... but why do it at night? Did he work insane hours? Was he too ugly to show his face in the daylight?

They did have the lights on in the house, though. I could see movement in all of the rooms, so I reckoned that either they had some help moving in or they had a big family. Old man Hindengroot put up flood lights around the place and Mower Man had 'em flipped on, so I had a fair view of him if I squinted just right. He didn't *look* like a mutant. Kinda longish blond hair and a decent face, no beard and everything about where it ought to be, best I could tell from a hundred-odd feet away in bad light.

Fred turned that monstrous head my way and gave me his trademarked 'soulful' look. That look can mean a lot of things, but mostly it means, *You're gonna do something fun again, aren't you?* I patted him and skritch'd behind an ear. "Why don't we go on over and meet the folks? Just to be neighborly and all. I mean, they're up anyway, right?" Fred's tongue lolled out, flopping strings of frothy mucous here and there, and he turned to stare at the door. I scooped my watch out of the tray on the counter, looked at it as I snapped it around my wrist, and frowned, estimating how long we'd be gone. "Fred, I think I better take my meds with me. I had my evening cocktail half an hour ago, but you never know when a serious confab will crop up, and I don't want to have to come back over here at midnight if they haven't tossed me out before then." Fred just waited patiently. He knows when I'm being rhetorical. I got a couple of pill bottles out of a cabinet and opened the door, but then I stopped and thought about it and decided, what the hell, I might as well be the Welcome Wagon while I was at it, and I snagged a bottle of Pinot Noir off the rack. Then we trekked on over to the other house.

First impressions can be misleading. These folks weren't idiots; far from it. The guy's name was Randy. Randy Schwartz. His girlfriend's name was Maureen Something-Slavic. I don't quite recall all the other folks there with them, their names, I mean – I've *never* been any good with names, and the meds sure don't help – but there was a Clark, and I think a Victor, and the only other chick was named Buffy, if you can picture that. She didn't look much like a Buffy. She was all Gothed-out, ink, piercings, black hair and nails and lips and leather mini-dress and spiked collar. Seemed like a nice enough girl, though. Wasn't all moody like some. But by the time I got over there they'd pretty much got everything put where they wanted it, and were just hanging out. At least somebody had good taste in music: there was this really great bluesy piano jazz thing going that you could talk over without any trouble, or just sit and soak up if you felt like it. I love piano jazz. These guys, I thought, had possibilities.

Fred wouldn't come all the way with me. We got about to the edge of the property and he stopped and his shoulders hunched up and he growled, real low down in his chest. He was looking straight at the house, and I squinted to see if I could see what he was seeing, but, honestly, it just looked like a house. I tried to get him to heel – he's ordinarily pretty good about that – but instead he turned around and trotted back home, got himself a good spot at the near corner, and flumphed down to watch. Pretty damned strange. But I didn't think it was worth going back myself. I figured he'd just smelled something he didn't like.

Anyhow, the party broke up just a few minutes after I rang the bell. Not that I blame them, it being a weeknight and all, but I got the feeling they all felt a little uncomfortable with a stranger. Kinda weird, but you never know about people, do you? Randy didn't seem uncomfortable, though. He'd followed me in, drove the mower up to the little walkway in front of the house and parked it. The night was really nice, not too humid and maybe seventy degrees, 'specially nice considering it was August. I guessed that was why he wasn't sweating at all. I would have been in his place, but that's just me. He *was* covered with little bits of grass and weed and whatnot, though, so he went to change. Everybody else was gone by the time he got back out to the living room.

We talked a long time. Maureen was a regular Chatty Cathy, real easy to confab with, and *definitely* easy on the optics. Great big green eyes, pert little nose with a dusting of freckles, long auburn hair and long legs to match. Looked like she stepped out of an ad for Irish beer. Randy had a laid-back way about him, just sort of flowed with the conversation and nodded and stuck in a little comment here and there. We opened the wine and all of us had a glass. They had some mighty fancy stemware. I'd seen some like it once before, had a family crest etched in the side and gilded, you know, hand-wash-only type stuff.

I had to excuse myself at midnight and ask for some water to take my pills with. They're big ol' horse-pills and a little hard to swallow. Randy and Maureen were curious what they were for, so I told 'em some about Rykov-Morendenski Syndrome, my condition. See, my bone marrow makes way too much blood, mostly too many red cells. I have to go to the blood center two days out of three and give a pint. If I don't, all those red cells will clog up my veins and I'll get gangrene and die, and it *won't* be pretty. Also, I have to take lots of dietary supplements so that the levels of trace elements in my system don't get too low, and on top of that I need a complex cocktail of some pretty high-dollar colloidal mineral compounds to combat the other side effects and keep infections at bay. That's one reason I don't sleep any more than I do. Two or three hours a day, in the form of short naps, is all I need.

They were fascinated. They'd never heard of this condition. Not surprising, really, it being so damn rare and all. Most people never heard of it. Not really any reason to, unless you know somebody who has it, and hardly anyone does. Anyway, they pumped me pretty good for information. I asked if one of 'em was in the medical field, being so interested as they were, but they just grinned at each other and said they weren't. Maureen said they had a home-based business, but didn't go into any detail. Maybe it's Amway and they're planning to invite me to one of their come-to-Jesus meetings. I'll have to pass if that's the score. Been there, done that, got my shit kicked.

So then Maureen asks if I like the music and I allowed as how I thought it was better than fine, and she hops up and zips down the hall. I gave Randy a look and jerked a thumb after her but he just smiled and shrugged, so I figured I'd find out soon enough. I relaxed and just listened to the awesomely mellow piano carrying on in the background.

But then the jazz stopped and Maureen plopped back down on the couch, only now she had this flute-looking thing. It was forked, and reminded me a little of that doohickey the Gelfling kid played in that movie. But gents and ladies, let me tell you, he never played it like this. Uh-uh. No sirree.

It was the sweetest thing I'd ever heard. It was Mom calling me to come down to Christmas dinner. It was Jennifer gasping my name while she climaxed. It was every song of every bird that ever lived, singing for the sheer joy in life and not knowing any other way to do it. I sank down into the big, overstuffed chair, my eyes unfocused, jaw hanging open, and if a grizzly had shown up and knocked the door in I wouldn't have moved a finger.

Turns out that was the idea. I don't know how long she played, but either it was a long time or I blacked out or something. I didn't know what was going on. I remember them helping me to stand up at one point. I think I remember walking somewhere, downstairs maybe. Then, next thing I know, I'm holding my arm out over this glass pitcher thingy and Randy takes this little knife and he nicks my wrist with it. My blood starts to drip really fast into the pitcher and that's when things sort of cleared up. Don't get me wrong, I still couldn't move, not while she was playing, but it was like I was watching a play. Only I was in the play. And I was starting to think that maybe I didn't like the plot so much.

Randy spoke then, and his voice was different. Smooth. Old. No, not 'old' old, more like ... more like aged. Like he was weighted down with years. Like he'd seen it all, done it all, and was maybe really tired of it, but didn't know what else to do with himself. "You're quite the windfall, Mr. Simmons."

I couldn't answer him. I couldn't move, not even my eyes.

He squatted down in front of me, watching as the pitcher filled with my blood. "A pint, two days out of three? That's more than enough for the two of us. We won't have to hunt, won't have to hide the bodies, won't have to screw around with the damn police. Hell, we won't even have to leave the house unless we feel like it. You can stay here, we'll feed you, and you'll feed us. It will be perfect." The pitcher was nearly full. He took a little flat stick out of a pocket and held it against the cut, and it stung like a sumbitch, but the bleeding stopped.

Maureen put the flute thing down, but she kept looking at me, her eyes huge and round and incredibly green. "You will not move. Say it."

Suddenly I could speak. "I will not move." It seemed like a very reasonable request. I was happy to oblige.

Randy poured half of my blood into a glass and handed it to her. She smiled then, uncovering a set of fangs that would have sent me running for the door if I hadn't been feeling so relaxed. They clinked their glasses, Randy said something in a language I didn't know, and they tossed back their drinks.

Randy was the first one to get a funny look on his face. He ran his tongue around his lips a couple of times and said, "Did that have a ... an odd sort of whang to it?"

Maureen frowned and nodded. She blinked a few times, put a hand to her forehead and said, "I don't ... feel so good."

The weird haze I'd been living in for the past however long was beginning to lift. The realization that I'd been sharing the evening with a couple of vampires hit me like a slug to the gut, and I staggered to my feet. Randy pointed at me and said, "Mo! Stop him!"

But she started coughing instead. The coughing quickly got so bad that she doubled up on the floor. By the time I had stumbled over to the door, Randy was on his knees, groaning like he had a knife in his back. He looked up at me, his face the very picture of torture, and managed to grunt, "What did you do to us?"

"I didn't ... do nothin'." It was getting easier to breathe, and my panic was subsiding somewhat, now that I knew what was going on. "You did it to yourselves."

"What? ... *What?*"

"I told you." I had to lean on the doorframe while a dizzy spell stomped its way through my head. "I take colloidal minerals. I take a *lot* of them. Mostly colloidal silver. It's for my immune system."

"Silver?!" he gasped, his face turning a very interesting shade of puce. "We ... drank *silver*?"

"'fraid so. Too bad you didn't do a little more research, asshole." Damn. Vampires. No wonder Fred got his back up. I looked around their basement, spotting a group of old kitchen chairs in the corner. I pulled one out, set it on the floor sideways, and stomped on it a few times until the back and legs broke and splintered. I got a couple of very serviceable stakes out of the mess, and walked back over to where the two monsters were coughing their lungs out on the floor. "Now, just you hold still. This won't take a minute."