

Confessions of a New York City Street Peddler**fiction by *Dr. Howard Karlitz***

It's February 1980, and David Gordon is standing in front of a class of delinquent kids in a South Brooklyn juvenile detention center trying to teach reading. While patiently guiding them through a short story called "Young Pablo Picasso," his eye is caught by a reproduction of the artist's flamboyant signature emblazoned across the top of the page. He puts the book down and stares at the lettering, then happens to notice a small blurb in a newspaper lying next to it on his desk announcing an exhibition of Picasso's work, a major retrospective, scheduled to soon take place at the Museum of Modern Art. It was strange, the signature and show coming together like that. His mind wanders. An idea is taking form. Suddenly it comes to him. Just in time too, because the kids are going bananas and a piece of chalk whizzes past his ear, powder shattering against the green board behind him.

That evening, in the safety of his modest suburban home, he announced his plan to his wife. "Jill," he boasts, "this is it, the big one! I'm going to sell Picasso T-shirts at the Museum of Modern Art this summer."

Quite naturally she's leery. In fact she thinks he's mad. And he really can't blame her. In the first place she's wondering why in the world anyone would want to buy a T-shirt with Picasso's signature on it. And secondly, they had just been through a nervous breakdown-inducing business bankruptcy after he invested their life savings in three waterbed stores, all of which sunk after only five months, leaving them in a blizzard of attorneys' letters, injunctions, collections notices, court fees, judgments, tax liens, law suits (both of the civil and criminal variety), and every other form of lawyer-related horror one could dream of.

But he had to give this a shot and Jill understood why. She understood that he was tired of trying to make it on a teacher's salary, tired of wheeling around suburbia in one clunker after another, tired of never even considering a vacation, tired of not being able to take his family to a decent restaurant, depressingly tired of watching the bills pile up on the kitchen table month after lousy month. They had held on to their 60's ideals as long as possible, but like the man desperately clinging to a ledge fifty stories up, it was getting hard because the villain, Mr. 80's, a/k/a "Greed and Excess," was stomping on their fingertips.

He hooked up with a character named Benny who owned a T-shirt printing shop near his

job. David showed him the Picasso signature from the school book. "Nice shot," Benny says. Everything in this business is a "shot." Said he can copy it, enlarge it, and press it onto a shirt. A "heat shot" he calls it.

"What do you think of my idea?" David asks. "Picasso, that is."

"Great" Benny lied. Thought he was nuts. "How many ya' wanna start with? A hundred dozen? Two?"

"No, forty-eight."

"Dozen?"

"No, shirts. Black ones, with white lettering."

His first day out was in April. David rushed into the city after work figuring to catch the early ticket buyers. The shirts were in a knapsack on his back. As he walked down the block, however, his confidence melted away. Suddenly he was terrified. He had no license, if there was such a thing, no permit, nothing. Here he was, a schoolteacher, with a masters degree no less, slinking around the museum entrance on 53rd Street between 5th and 6th Avenues like a criminal. He felt like a derelict or, worse yet, a pervert. He wanted to run back to the burbs, but something grabbed hold of him at this moment of truth and he slipped out a shirt and held it up in front of him at arms length. And like magic, a well dressed woman walked over and began to touch it. "Pretty," she says. Pretty my ass, David thought, she's a cop. She pulls out her wallet. Here comes the badge. "How much?" she asks, and when he tells her five dollars she hands him a ten and walks away with two. He's rocked. Other people who have been watching now come over to buy shirts too. And this is the first critical lesson he learns about peddling, to draw a crowd and let people see money changing hands. It adds credibility to you and your action. On the streets it's called disalienation.

Under half an hour he's sold out, but decides right then and there to quit because it's just too damn scary, too risky, for a schoolteacher with a masters degree that is. But that night back home, he's throwing the cash around the kitchen, and then he's on the phone with Benny ordering more shirts which he picks up the next day on his lunch hour which he's selling that afternoon at the museum after work because already he's totally addicted to the money and the action.

The Picasso Retrospective Exhibit opened to rave reviews and the crowds were enormous, with lines snaking all the way down the block and curling onto 5th Avenue. Business took off, so he hired his recently unemployed father-in-law, Sid, to help him out. One of the greatest, cast aside (not-even-a-gold-watch) garment center salesmen of all times, Sid covered the 54th Street entrance while David worked on 53rd. When the end of June rolled around and the tourists poured into town, business exploded and suddenly they were moving a couple of hundred pieces a

day. Then summer vacation kicked in, thank God, and they were working nine to nine, seven days a week.

It was about this time that David's first competition showed up; two punk types from Hoboken. They copied his idea. What could he do? Sue? Call a cop? They hurt David's numbers because they were showing colors while he was only selling black T-shirts. So David got colors too, a whole rainbow, and now he and Sid are moving even more shirts. Then they got children's T's (for the grandma and grandpa set) and French cuts (for those long, tanned arms.) That was Jill's idea.

More competition hit the street: a couple of Israelis, a one-armed Cuban with a Ph.D. in physics, two accountants, at least one lawyer, an insurance salesman from North Carolina, a keyboard player and drummer from a defunct rock band, and a host of college students on summer vacation. The place began to look like a flea market, but it was OK because there was enough for everybody.

Meanwhile the idea was feeding on itself. Soon everyone was walking around with a Picasso signature T-shirt, whether they'd been to the show or not. It's big in the Hamptons. Fire Island also. Store owners buy them by the dozen, and David's starting to see them in some very chic Madison Avenue shop windows marked up four to five hundred percent. He was doing serious numbers, so serious that Benny put all his other business on hold to print only Picasso shirts. David was hot, and there was nothing he couldn't handle now...except...the...truck!!

One day a scruffy looking moose of a guy in worn jeans and sandals was looking down at David's T-shirts and asked for a pale pink extra large. Rather strange David thought. He bends down and rummages through his suitcases and comes up with the guy's order and suddenly he's eyeballing a police badge. "Don't cry," the plain clothes cop says, "just show me some I.D." But David's ready, and pulls out his wallet with a fifty dollar bill taped to the inside leather flap. "Don't even think about it," the cop says. "Put it away. I.D." So David hands him a valid driver's license. "You'll have to do something about this, Mr. David Gordon." David has no idea what he's talking about. The cop writes out a summons, hands David the pink portion of it, gets on his walkie-talkie, and in seconds a paddy wagon roars up. This is it, David figures, he's screwed. The cop opens the back door and David starts to climb in when the cop growls, "What the hell do you think you're doing? Get out!" and he grabs David's suitcases full of shirts and throws them into the truck. "Pick'em up at two o'clock. Got any back-up?" the cop asks. Again David doesn't know what's going on. "Shit to sell, until you come in." Our hero's drawing blanks. "You're not a virgin, David, are you?" he asks, somewhat surprised. David's too petrified to speak. "You'll learn. See you at two. Midtown North Precinct," and he was gone.

At the appointed hour, David finds himself in the bowels of a west side station house located in the heart of the city's sleaze district, the denizens of which would probably associate the name Pablo Picasso with some new, well-hung porno sensation. He's huddling against the wall of a dingy basement room crowded with an assortment of motley characters, many of whom he later learns are more plainclothes cops. An air conditioner belches and death-rattles ineffectively. Everyone's milling about until one guy, a hippie type cop, sits down behind a typewriter and yells, "OK, who's up first?" and all hell breaks loose with peddlers rushing him, waving their pink summonses in his face in order to pay a twenty dollar "ransom" for their confiscated merchandise and get back on the street where capitalism in its purest form awaits.

David hangs around to the end, nervous, scared, like any law-abiding, middle class suburbanite when Gus Reuter, the officer who took his shirts, asks for the summons and the twenty (the "administrative fee" the city figures it costs to grab his stuff and haul it to the station house). He types up a voucher, asks David to sign it, then hands back the summons and a receipt. As for the summons, David's informed that end of it is handled like a parking ticket, and has to be cleared through a different city agency, Consumer Affairs. And the fines, Reuter warns, usually \$100 a pop, can add up quickly. David was then told he could take back his suitcases, which were stacked up against a far wall.

When he got home that night he burst through the door screaming "I quit! I quit!" waving the pink summons around like a madman. But the following day, he and Sid dug up some extra suitcases, "back-up," which they stashed on the side in order to continue working between the time they got hit and the time they had to pick up their "shit." ("Shit," by the way, is the official term for the merchandise in your "joint." Your joint consists of your "shit" and your "rig," in his case, three or four suitcases lying open on the sidewalk. Shit + Rig = Joint.)

Their identity situation was deftly handled by the slick proprietor of a Broadway arcade, who decked them out with social security cards and some neat looking plastic employment badges from a bogus Brooklyn construction company. David proudly became Roger Mantle. What the hell, he figured, if you're gonna do it...

The system worked perfectly. They got hit, waited a bit, re-opened with back-up, continued peddling for a couple of hours, then went to the precinct to ransom their shit, and were back in front of the museum in no time. Their tickets, like of those of every other peddler in the city, became toilet paper. Everyone's figures were healthy. The peddler detail was vouching record numbers, while the T-shirt vendors' bottom lines were blacker than ever.

But it would be impossible to close this chapter of the story without some pain. There were two periods that summer when David thought they had him. The first was during the

Democratic National Convention, which happened to take place in New York that year. Word came thundering down from the mayor's office to sweep the midtown streets clean of vermin, especially around the museum where each conventioneer's agenda would include a trip to the Picasso exhibit. He especially didn't want them in contact with vendors. Little did he realize, however, that out-of-towners love peddlers, and consider them to be just one more vibrant element in the city's personality. The peddler detail sought to temporarily suspend peddling operations and warned every street vendor in the strongest terms not to work midtown that week. The other T-shirt people stopped immediately, but David had grown greedy, and the next day opened up, business as usual. He was hit four, five, six times a day. Gus told him he was making "enemies on the force," the ultimate threat. Sergeant Laverty, head of the detail, cornered him in the peddler room one day and said if he kept it up, he'd never work the streets again. David was scared and considered stopping, but then went back out anyway. And since the competition had dried up, he made out huge, even with the extra hassle. Towards the end of the week the detail even let him slide once or twice. In the end they earned each other's respect.

The second time David was almost put out of business happened when Picasso's greedy heirs decided that the shirt represented a copyright violation, that they owned their father's signature. An army of treasury agents, suit and tie guys in unmarked cars, hit the museum one day, confiscating shirts and handing out injunctions ordering peddlers to cease and desist until a federal judge handed down a ruling in two weeks. The press had been tipped off the previous night and the street teemed with reporters, photographers and cameramen.

As David sadly walked back to his car, he passed a bear of a guy, a grizzled street vendor pulling a monstrous rack of designer tops down the middle of 54th Street toward Fifth Avenue. He leaned into a thick rope slung over his shoulder, the other end of which was tied to his joint. Traffic backed up behind him all the way to Sixth Avenue, and each time an irate motorist was able to squeeze by, he was blasted with a car horn. His response was a calm, detached, "I-don't-give-a-shit" raised middle finger. David recognized him from the peddler room. His name was Spiro, a Greek, one of the few other vendors who had worked convention week.

"I saw what happened," he said to David, dropping the rope in the middle of the street in order to stretch out his shoulder. Horns chorused.

"Yeah, they gave me this," David answered holding up the injunction.

"The hell with it, man. Go back to work."

"And get arrested! You're crazy. I'm quitting. For good."

"Hey, they did you a favor. Cleaned up the competition. They ain't coming back. It was just a big show. For the press. The Feds got better things to do than bust T-shirt peddlers. You'll

never have this chance again." The Greek picked up the rope and began lugging his rig toward Fifth. The line of cars started inching along behind him. "Now is the time," he called back to David. "NOW!"

Within minutes David was on the phone with Benny screaming to print everything he had. And Spiro was right. For the next two weeks he was the only one out there selling the "banned" shirts. Everyone had seen them on TV and were desperate for them. Benny made two, three, sometimes four vanload deliveries a day. David and Sid dumped them on the sidewalk and watched their clientele pounce on them, grabbing ten, fifteen at a time. Spiro was right about the Feds too. They never came back. In fact, the case was lost with the court holding that Picasso's signature was clearly in the public domain. It belonged to the people.

By the time the competition came back, it was too late. They had missed the best two weeks of the season. Summer was winding down. Gus told David there would never be another two weeks like it again. And he was right.

The show was scheduled to end after Labor Day, but the museum was doing so much business that they extended it through October. Every day for the next eight weeks David rushed into the city after work, once again leading the double life of pedagogue/peddler; two seemingly incongruous pursuits, yet manageable, even to the point of benefiting his classroom technique. As a result of an injection of street wisdom, which his streetwise kids instinctively picked up upon, class control ceased to be a problem. He and his kids seemed to understand and respect each other more than ever before.

When the show finally did close, David decided to quit peddling for good and devote himself fully to teaching. But he was addicted to the street freedom and ended up quitting teaching for good and devoting himself to peddling. The next day he was in front of Saks Fifth Avenue pumping scarves and gloves in the crisp, exciting, autumn air.

This was the mainstream of New York City street vending, Fifth Avenue, the "Diamond Mile," that stretch of intense commercial activity running from 59th to 47th Street. It was the time of giant rigs rolling up and down the block, each manned by four or five peddlers selling everything from lingerie to jackets, sweaters, pocketbooks, dresses, hats, records, jewelry, make-up, wigs, belts, toys, pants, shoes, socks, radios, TV's, telephones, over-the counter medicines, tools, tires, car batteries, flashlights, condoms, birth control pills, even eyeglasses. Crazy, but true. David once saw two entrepreneurial characters with a large box filled with prescription glasses. As one partner deftly placed a pair on a customer's nose, the other held up an eye chart twenty feet away. "Can you see the 'E' lady? No? OK, here, try these." They went for six bucks a throw, two for ten.

And as Christmas drew nearer, more peddlers appeared, store owners from the suburbs and the outer boroughs opening weekend Manhattan "annexes." The streets were wall-to-wall with peddlers until ten, eleven at night. Of course the Fifth Avenue Merchants Association screamed bloody murder, so more beat cops were assigned to the detail. They'd hit the avenue every hour on the hour, setting off a wild stampede of flying vendors and careening dollies which bowled over everything and everybody in their paths, because nobody wanted to get vouched and lose precious time in this most precious of seasons.

David always worked small, out of a suitcase or on top of a garbage pail, usually with scarves and gloves in the fall and winter, and anything from wallets to T-shirts to ties in the spring and summer. But he moved with the times and never allowed himself to get locked into any one particular item. One season he did incredibly well with dollar chain, "Bro' Gold" as it was called in the ghettos, "Phonay Monet," or "sluummmm...," the definition of which can be found in the Unabridged Riker's Island Dictionary of the English Language. We're talking cheap costume jewelry, which he always sold as cheap costume jewelry, a buck a throw, six for five, as opposed to wise guys who'd stamp it fourteen karat and sidle up to tourists looking to make a quick hundred. David became known as the "Slum Lord" during a chain snatching epidemic by advising his well-heeled clientele to "keep the real stuff in the vault and let the snatcher have this," holding up a nifty, one dollar, eighteen-inch herringbone necklace. "Laugh as the mugger hi-ho silvers it down the block."

What a great mix of people out there too, all working together in relative peace and madness: Greeks, Turks, Israelis, Palestinians, English, Irish, Poles, Italians, Indians, Pakistanis, Swiss, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Mexicans, Salvadorians, Costa Ricans, Russians, Prussians, Hessians, Saxons, Celts, Incans, Thais, Vietnamese, Lebanese, Taiwanese, Afghans, Ukrainians, Bulgarians, Rumanians, Albanians, Iraqis, Iranians, Transylvanians, Koreans... each representing a distinct immigrant wave that came to New York, the greatest city in the world, to seek refuge and a degree of economic security on its golden streets, in the same way the founders of some of the city's greatest retail establishments had done generations before.

But even though Christmas, the time for giving, was around the corner, not everyone was in the giving mode. Members of the boards of directors of the big-time organizations like Saks, Bergdorf, Bonwits, Bloomies, to name but a few, cried the loudest. "Rid the streets of this peddler trash," they chorused, "they're killing us. How dare they sell an umbrella for three dollars when we can get fifteen!"

Were they forgetting their roots? Forgetting where the seed money came from? Forgetting how their great grandparents came to this country penniless and toughed it out with nothing but a

dream and a pushcart on the cold cobblestones of Hester Street or Avenue C? And as for the greatest store of them all, the "Big M" on 34th, are they forgetting about R.H.Macy, the original "Yankee Peddler"? Evidently.

So, at the urging of these the yuppie captains of commerce, the rules of the game began to change. Under pressure from the Association, the city raised the ransom on any joint that rolled to sixty-five dollars. David didn't care. His garbage pail didn't have wheels. The rollers didn't care either, particularly the bootleg Izod and Polo boys. A couple of sixty-fives a day would hardly put a dent in their pre-Christmas action.

So the next move on the city's part was to raise everybody's confiscation fee to sixty-five. When that plan flopped, they decided to "impound" wheeled rigs under the guise that these "rolling platforms posed a hazard to pedestrian traffic." No big deal. The big operators switched to blankets. "Forty in the store. Ten on the floor!" Meanwhile David is still working his garbage pail with a piece of cardboard on it. He's selling leather gloves, showing only three or four pairs at a time. The rest are stashed in a bag behind him and are not subject to confiscation because they aren't on display. If Roger Mantle gets popped, he only loses ten or fifteen dollars worth of merchandise, and does not go directly to jail, but passes Go and avoids the ransom by letting the city keep the goods. It's fiscally sound.

The politicians finally get to the big joints with Article B23-507.0 of the Administrative Code. They call it "forfeiture of seized property." David calls it highway robbery. No more ransoms, they're keeping it all now. The heavy hitting Izod and Polo peddlers scream bloody murder, threaten to form an organization to hire a lawyer to fight this latest outrage. They circulate petitions (which everyone signs with a phony name) and ask for contributions (cash...what else?), but soon the whole thing collapses because they're really a pack of unorganizable nomads and suddenly everyone's working small and garbage pails are at a premium.

So it's a whole new board game, the rules of which peddlers are learning to live with when a fresh group of players suddenly sits down at the table. A wave of Africans came ashore one day, Senegalese for the most part, but with Liberians and Ethiopians sprinkled in for good measure. They hit the streets just like every previous immigrant wave has done since Peter, the 'bead vendor,' Minuet worked his joint on Manhattan's south forty three hundred and fifty years ago. And just like their predecessors, they were tired, poor, scared, humble, but determined. There was only one difference. Quite evident too. It was right there in black and white.

There was a story going around that a big mucky-muck walked out of Bergdorf Goodman one day and was "shocked" by the bazaar that had seemingly sprung up overnight in front of the store, making it look like "Istanbul on Sunday." His hallowed sidewalk was speckled with dashiki

clad vendors hawking African flavored bracelets, necklaces, earrings and statuary, not to mention sunglasses and umbrellas (pronounced "sugahs" and "umbahs" by the new arrivals.) The Bergdorf guy cranked up the Merchants Association, which revved up City Hall, which shook up the Police Commissioner's Office, which gave birth to the "Alpha Squad," a new, heavily manned detail of plainclothes peddler-busters, so named because in the beginning they rode around in vans and light trucks rented from an outfit called Alpha Rent-A-Car. Between these new kids on the block and the regular detail, the pressure was enormous as they incessantly swept the midtown commercial districts, confiscating displayed merchandise as well as back-up if they could find it. A lot of the old time peddlers packed it in. But the Africans stayed.

The next move was to crack down on identification. Pakistani plastic became unacceptable. They wanted valid paper: drivers licenses, rent receipts, telephone bills, green cards. And if you couldn't produce it, you were hauled into the precinct and hassled for a couple of hours. For a while David kept working, taking tickets under his real name, but finally quit for good when he started getting harassing phone calls and threatening letters from a collection agency the city hired. But the Africans hung in there. And why not? Like Bob Dylan sang, "When you ain't got nothing, you got nothing to lose."

The crusher came with the strict enforcement of penalties under Section B32-510, which states that unlicensed general vending is "a misdemeanor punishable by a fine of not more than \$1000, or by imprisonment for not more than three months or both." This all but eliminated the few non-African vendors from the city's midtown commercial areas. A lot of guys David knew became "moles," working the subways where the rules were different, or "book" peddlers (protected by the First Amendment). Some worked the side streets, off the avenues, or all the way downtown in lower Manhattan where there was less of a chance of getting arrested. Some, however, still chanced Fifth Avenue, usually at odd hours looking for a quick morning or night rush. And every now and then you might even catch one doing a lunch hour, particularly toward the end of the month when the rent came due.

As for the Africans, they hung tough in midtown because "three hots and a cot" in the "Tombs" (AKA, the Manhattan House of Detention) or on the "Rock" (Rykens Island Prison) was not that far removed from ten in a room at a dilapidated flophouse.

Epilogue: A Play in Three Acts

Act I:

It's a week after David quit for good. He's on the corner Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street talking to a hot dog guy about then Mayor Koch backing down on his attempt to eliminate food vendors. "Too much Greek clout," the vendor says, "especially with Dukakis on the way up." Suddenly a police van pulls up and three cops jump out and arrest a peddler for selling her photographs of New York in front of the library. She's cuffed, Miranderized, and led into the back of the truck. Meanwhile, across the street, a three card monte game goes on undisturbed, with a large group of French tourists being bilked out of hundreds of dollars as pickpockets work the periphery of the crowd. Next to them some dope dealer is selling crack, another Quaaludes, another loose joints. It's not the cops' fault. Evidently they're being told what to concentrate on. It's the city's doing, the result of the "crackdown of the month club." It's all part of what they consider to be the "effective utilization of law enforcement personnel."

Act II:

David didn't quit. You knew it all along. He's on Fifth Avenue selling wallets, feeling safe, surrounded by African Rolex guys, when suddenly someone breaks down and runs shouting "Alpha, Alpha!" He runs too, and from around the corner nervously watches a van cruise down the block on a "click-click" patrol. ("Click-click," by the way, means arrest in African lingo, the sound of handcuffs snapping shut.) He hangs out, and a little while later Officer Gus Reuter comes up to him. "Be careful," he says, "the Africans got a lawyer. ACLU. He claims they're being discriminated against. That 99% of the collars are black." "He's right," David answers. "That's because there are no other peddlers left. Alpha chased them away. It's like Catch-22." Gus continues, "They'll be looking for the few old timers still out here.. To kind of even things up." "Forget it, Gus," David laughs. "They'll never catch me. I'm too quick. Besides, I'm protected, an endangered species. The great white fucking hope."

Act III:

The next day, David got click-clicked for the first time on the corner of 40th Street and Fifth

Avenue selling scarves off a garbage pail. They grabbed him and an African to his right. The cops came up on foot behind them. David and the African never had a chance.

An hour later the two of them sit alone behind bars in a downtown holding tank and get to talking. Surprisingly the African speaks pretty good English. He's from Ethiopia and the conversation soon turns to home, and the stories David's hearing regarding violently repressive conditions are unbelievable. David quickly realizes that to him, this is all child's play.

Twelve hours later a guard comes over to the cell and tells David that his I.D. checked out and since he has no priors, he's being released under his own recognizance. He does, however, have a court date next month. When the guard opens the door and David gets up to leave, the African instinctively rises too. "Where are YOU going?" the guard growls. "Sit your black ass back down."

"Sorry boss," the peddler responds step-n-fetchitly.

The metal door clangs shut behind David, leaving the Ethiopian alone in the cell. David starts walking away when suddenly he stops and turns back to the jailed peddler. "Why do you stay here, man?" He asks him.. "Really?"

"Because I'm free."

The End

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A Moonlight Hunt

fiction by *Steve Ramirez*

The skeeters were buzzin' that night but Jimmy and me didn't care a bit on account of us being used to such things on a moonlight hunt. We was crossin' an open wet area tryin' to get to a line of trees that looked all purple and black on account of the moonlight. The water was black, too, but at least it was warm when we was sloshin' through it. Jimmy and me was tryin' to keep it real quiet so as not to let them know we was comin'. Jimmy was always my best partner for a moonlight hunt.

While we was walkin' I was thinkin' of the times that Jimmy and me had been huntin' before, like the time on Fish-eatin' Creek on the north side of the everglades when we was huntin' coons. I could hear the dogs yelpin' in the moonlight and I could smell the sour rotten smell of the Glades. The skeeters were buzzin' that night, too.

Then there was the other time when we was huntin' for turkey in the slash pines and palmettos. I was walkin' in Jimmy's footsteps on account of it bein' dark and we was bein' careful not to step on a snake. There was cottonmouths in the glades and diamondbacks in the palmettos. I'd be just as dead from one snake as the other so I trusted Jimmy to go first.

We slipped into the piney woods under a new moon. The stars was still out and the woods was so dark that I had to put my hand out in front of me so I could feel the trees as I went. Jimmy knew where we was headed cause he'd seen the gobbler roostin' in the big slash pine the night before. We slipped in real quiet, just like now, except there was no water round our feet and no skeeters buzzin'.

Jimmy had me set up next to a big pine. I rested my shotgun on my knees and waited to hear 'em gobble. Soon enough it started to get first light. The birds started makin' noise and then Jimmy let out a hoot like he was an ole owl and the big gobbler answered back like it was lightin'. Jimmy started callin' to him real soft with little yelps and purrs and that ole tom kept thunderin' back at us as he came closer each time.

It seemed to take forever and I was just startin' to think about the pain in my arms from holdin' that shotgun when the gobbler came struttin' round a palmetto bush. That turned out to be a good moonlight hunt cause I squeezed the trigger and aimed for his head just like Jimmy learned me to do. That's why I'm a good shot now cause Jimmy's the best teacher. Well that ole tom fell at the shot and Jimmy ran over and stepped on his neck so he wouldn't get back up. Jimmy said he was real proud of me.

Jimmy was always my best friend. We swore a blood oath one time just like the Indians in the western movies. I was about 10 years old then, and we swore a blood oath that we'd never part as fiends, never ever no matter what. Now here we was all grown up as men and we was still sloshin' cross a wet field along the river on a moonlight hunt.

I was thinkin' how good it felt bein' out there with Jimmy just about the time it all happened. I heard the poppin' sound in the palm trees that was all purple and black and then I saw the bullet hit Jimmy's head and a piece of his insides came out and hit me in the face and all over my flack jacket. Then I saw Jimmy fall into the water like he was doin' a belly flop in a pool. I ran to Jimmy and rolled him over in the mud, and I was screamin' for him to get up. I was gettin' real scared cause I'd never been on a moonlight hunt without Jimmy, and I kept on yellin' at him to come back, but he didn't have the same face as before, and I knew he wasn't comin' back.

That was about the time that the bullets hit me, and I could see the place in the purple and black palm trees where the insurgents were shootin' from. The bullets felt like someone punched me real hard, and I felt all sick inside, and I could feel myself layin' down on top of Jimmy. I was still yellin' for Jimmy to come back, and I could hear the gunfire all around me and feel the cold of the water on my legs and arms. Then I stopped yellin' for Jimmy cause I couldn't anymore. The moonlight was getting further away, and it kept getting colder, and I couldn't hear the gunfire as much as it seemed far away now, too. Then I heard Jimmy calling to me, and I could see him in the moonlight again. He was telling me that everything was O.K. Jimmy kept calling for me, and I was going toward him when I started to feel warm again. It was like before except that the mosquitoes were not buzzing anymore, and Jimmy was there, and I was not afraid anymore. Jimmy was always my best friend.

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The Slings and Errors of Outrageous Fortune

fiction by *Tom Fillion*

"This evening we have a guest," Shiszu said. "Jonathon is a practitioner of Structural Reintegration. He's opening a clinic for those of you who are interested."

Jonathon stood in front of the class. He had blonde hair, sun-tanned, and looked like a cabana boy plucked off a beach somewhere.

I sat on the floor, my knees drawn to my chest, and my arms crossed over them. Most of the class members sat lotus style, but I couldn't do it very easily with size fourteen dogs.

"Thank you, Shiszu. Like a lot of people, I went to college," Jonathon began. "I have a Master's degree and planned on getting my doctorate, but I wasn't satisfied with my life." Everyone nodded. No one was satisfied with their lives either. Especially the two women who came in the Oldsmobile '98. They always looked like they were in a bad mood even when they shotgunned a reefer before class. That was why everyone was there at the Sunlight Yoga Society, myself included. We weren't satisfied with something in our lives. I was there trying to hit it off with Shiszu but not having much luck. I think the size fourteen dogs were a turnoff.

"I didn't feel I helped my patients," Jonathon continued. "Then I heard about Structural Reintegration. It's a method to realign the body to its original suppleness and center of gravity."

I glanced at Shiszu sitting with great poise in her lotus position. She was the embodiment of suppleness and liquidity. She was totally integrated. Her mind and body seemed intertwined into one. Truth be told, she was the only reason I was there. I wasn't that interested in Yoga or whatever Jonathon was peddling. Structural Reintegration?

"The world beats up our bodies, and we build up stresses. Our bodies take shape around these stresses and become statues of our pain. The body reflects our mental image of ourselves. Our breathing and blood circulation are affected too."

That made me think. My body probably reflected living with a mynah bird in an apartment with low ceilings and door thresholds that bumped me in the head when I wasn't paying attention. It was just right for Sam, the mynah bird I inherited, but not for me, which made me think Sam wasn't a candidate for Structural Reintegration. But maybe I was. Not with Jonathon though. He gave me the creeps. The word I'm looking for is unctuous.

"What we do in Structural Reintegration is rework the connective tissue between the

muscles and body organs. The fascia bears all the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune inflicted upon our bodies."

Being a useless English major, I perked up when he quoted Shakespeare. Maybe, he wasn't all that creepy. Maybe he was a modern day Pygmalion, a re-sculptor of the bumps, bruises and bad turns in the road of life that transform us into diminutive lawn jockeys or Blessed Virgin Marys with outstretched arms.

Jonathon surveyed the audience in the room, looking, I presume, for an Eliza Doolittle, a Galatea, to reshape and put up on a pedestal. He quickly turned from my direction when he saw me straddling my pair of pups in low-top Chuck Taylor's.

"Can I have a volunteer? So I can demonstrate what we do at the clinic? And how about you?" he asked.

He pointed to a lithe young woman in a black leotard. She stood up without a qualm, spryly, and walked to the front of the class.

"I'm going to ask you to take off your top for the group. Will that be a problem?" he asked.

"Not at all," she said.

It wasn't a problem for anyone else in the room either. The two women, one with a blonde ponytail and dark roots, the other with shoulder length brown hair, who came to class in the Oldsmobile '98 looked at each other. The blonde frowned. The other one shrugged her shoulders and smiled.

"This process takes twelve office visits and costs approximately one thousand dollars and isn't covered by insurance. I'll leave my cards with Shiszu. What's your name?" he continued.

"Kathy," she answered with a winsome glance.

She raised her arms up so that Jonathon could slide her sheer, black top off and it sort of reminded me of the strippers at The Tigers' Den. Everyone waited anxiously to see what would be revealed. The woman with the blonde ponytail elbowed her friend.

"As you can see, Kathy has rounded shoulders and a sunken, flat chest," Jonathon said, before unmasking what was underneath.

That was true, but we still wanted to see it. We stared at Jonathon like he was a magician on stage, and Kathy was his trusted assistant. Her initial enthusiasm subsided with his critique, and she focused on the floor. Jonathon proceeded despite her reaction and removed her black top. There was no bra, just two small breasts, each about the size of an oyster shell like from the oysters Rockefeller served at the seafood tavern next door. Her nipples were the size of freckles.

"You can see, the rounded shoulders, the bad posture and the sunken chest are the result of Kathy having small breasts," he pointed out.

Kathy's life with small tatas became all of our lives with small tatas. I glanced over at Shiszu. She had nice tatas. So did the blonde in the ponytail and her friend. The Oldsmobile '98 had pretty good headlights too. I felt sorry for Kathy. Even Shiszu's shadow had bigger tatas than her. She kept her gaze on the floor until Jonathon grabbed her left tata, what there was of it, half a tata off the children's menu, and began, he called it, restructuring it. He massaged it and massaged it until she was swaying back and forth on her legs like she was a porch swing reading a book of poetry. He restructured the connective tissue in her tata and around her tata for about five minutes. It seemed a lot longer than that, but maybe it wasn't. When he finished, her tata did look a lot better, fuller and because of all the rubbing, flushed like a hibiscus with a pink hue. Her shoulder relaxed, and her back straightened. The class clapped at how well Henry Higgins had rehabilitated her tata.

"What about Kathy's other titty?" the woman with the blonde ponytail asked.

"Yeah," her friend joined in.

She was right. Something was off kilter. Kathy's left side looked reintegrated. It had been remolded from, let's say, a lower East side tata to an Upper West side tata, but her right side had the same sunken shape. Her right tata was still below the left. Her left shoulder was higher than her right. It was a mess, a half-assed titty job. Her life was going to be as screwed up with slings and errors as ever, maybe worse, because Jonathon put her black top back on, he was tired of feeling her up in front of all of us, and handed her his business card.

"Call me," he said.

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