

Little Mercies

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I hadn't seen him in fifty years. But I still wanted to kill him. I didn't know when, where, or how. But the why of it seemed crystal.

Driving home from my daily visit to the downtown, I stopped at my neighborhood coffee shop for a mocha and a slice of lemon cake. He sat at a corner table and flipped through a copy of the *San Jose Mercury*. His David Niven mustache had turned white and a cane leaned against the wall. The scar along his left jawline glinted silver and his hair stood snowy and full. It was him, definitely him.

I eased onto a counter stool, pulled the brim of my hat down, and ordered. He looked up from his newspaper, stared right at me, then resumed reading. Did he recognize me? Would he remember Chet? Did he care? I'd make sure he did.

I'd known Chet all through high school. We ran track, double-dated the Paylor sisters, then attended the same California university, and roomed together in the dorms. Like born brothers, Chet and I shared everything including details about girlfriends, dictatorial parents, music and how our duo—he played guitar and I sang—would make it big. We also shared a fear of getting drafted into the Army and killed in Vietnam.

By the late 1960s, the military needed more and more draftees to fill its quota. Chet and I were safe so long as we stayed in school and maintained our student deferments. But therein lay the rub.

"I got another letter from the Dean's Office," Chet told me near the end of spring quarter.

“Ah man, what they say now?”

“Nothin’ good. If I don’t bring my GPA up, I’m out.”

“What do you mean out?”

“Gone, you know, expelled. *Hit the road, Jack and dontcha come back no more, no more.*”

“That’s fuckin’ heavy, man. So how you doin’ in your classes?”

“I’m pretty much screwed. I need to get at least a 3.2 GPA this quarter, tough with Corkass for design and practice.”

I groaned. *Corkass* was the moniker we architecture students gave a professor with a name that nobody could pronounce. He taught two required sophomore classes and considered himself the gatekeeper of the architecture profession, winnowing out any student that didn’t show the proper aptitude and drive.

“So have you talked with Corkass? Maybe he’ll cut you some slack.”

“No, but I want to do it before grades come out. Once they’re posted there’s little chance of changing them.”

“Do...do you want me to come with you?”

“Yeah, that be cool.” Chet grinned. “Two of us groveling might be better than one.”

We met the professor during his office hour, on an April afternoon. Sunlight slanted through venetian blinds above his desk, casting a convict-striped pattern on architectural models, delineations, blueprints, and two bicycles stuffed in the closet-sized room. Chet and I sat on folding chairs in front of his desk and waited for Corkass to get off the phone, a conversation that left him scowling.

“So how may I help you gentlemen? I have a division meeting in a half hour so we need to get on with it.”

Chet cleared his throat and stared at the professor for a long moment before speaking. "I guess I want to know how I'm doing in your design and practice classes."

"Grades will be out the week after final projects are due. You and everyone else will know then."

"So you can't tell me now if...if I'm in trouble?"

"What do you mean, trouble?"

"I need to pass your classes with at least B's."

Corkass removed his glasses and leaned back in his swivel chair. "That sounds like a demand, son. I don't appreciate demands. You'll get the grades you deserve, nothing more, nothing less."

"I didn't mean to pressure you," Chet said hurriedly. "It's just that I know I've had problems. But I really enjoy—"

"Problems, I'll say you've had problems." The professor pulled a ledger from a drawer, opened it flat on his desk, and stared at the column of names and rows of grades inked in next to each. "You failed your first two projects and the last one was incomplete."

"I know, I know. I never seem to have enough time and—"

"The business of architecture is all about time. If you can't complete assignments on schedule, you won't make it in the field."

"But I love design."

Corkass continued to stare at the ledger, shaking his head. "You'll be lucky to get D's this quarter. You need to apply yourself, and for God's sake, clean up your act. Who do you think would hire you, looking like some Cuban revolutionary?"

Chet bowed his head and stayed silent. My ears burned as I stared into Corkass's dark eyes that reflected nothing. I leaned forward. "You

really don't understand what's going on, do you?"

A smirk flashed across the professor's face. "Maybe not. Why don't you explain it to me?"

"If my friend doesn't get B's in your classes, he'll be expelled, drafted, sent to Vietnam and maybe killed."

"Aren't you being melodramatic, son?" The professor's thin lips twitched upward at their corners. The son-of-a-bitch was laughing at us.

"No, that's what's going on, man. While you think you're safeguarding the architecture profession, my friend, my...my brother could be killed."

Corkass pulled his chair forward. "I can't do anything about the world. Young men will always be going off to war. I did."

"But all Chet needs is more time to sort things out. If he can stay in school through fall quarter, student deferments will likely go away and be replaced by the lottery."

"The what?"

"The Selective Service is going to throw everybody's birth date in a bag and then pick out the dates one at a time. Men, even those in college, will be drafted in the order that their birth dates are picked."

Corkass smiled. "Well then, your friend could still find himself in Vietnam regardless of what I do."

"Yeah, but at least he'd have a chance of drawing a high number."

The professor turned toward Chet, his face serious. "Son, do you really think you have what it takes to become an architect?"

Chet cleared his throat. "I...I don't know. But I want the chance to find out, to maybe choose something else to study, and not get killed because of bad grades."

"I'm sorry, but many qualified students want to enroll in our school. If I keep you on, someone else will not get the chance they deserve."

"Please, professor, just give me this one break. I'll be out of your hair soon enough, one way or another." Chet's voice cracked with emotion.

I laid an arm on his shoulder. He sucked in stuttering breaths.

"Now, unless there's something else, gentlemen..." The professor grabbed a stack of papers from an inbox and began to sort through them.

I stood, laid a hand on top of the papers. Corkass looked up. "Take a good look at me, professor. If anything happens to my friend, you will also feel his pain."

He stood. "Is that a threat?"

I glared at him, wanting to smash him right then, to destroy that smarmy little smile. Instead I flashed him the peace sign, spun, and left his office with Chet hurrying to catch up.

A month after grades were posted, Chet received his dismissal letter. We talked about what he could do: disappear to Canada or Central America and wait out the war, apply for a Conscientious Objector classification. But he hated all these so-called options.

In July, the Selective Service reclassified him as 1-A and sent Chet his draft notice. By September, the Army had him. The following winter, Chet landed in Vietnam and a month later was killed in the A Sầu Valley west of Huế. The NVA ambushed his platoon and he died painfully in a hospital in Japan of sepsis from his wounds.

When I learned of Chet's death from his parents, I went looking for Corkass. But he'd left his teaching post for parts unknown.

My face burned as I stared at Corkass, who sat there smugly reading his newspaper. He'd had fifty years to age gracefully. Chet never had that chance. Corkass looked dapper, dressed in tan Dockers, a pressed sport shirt and jacket, and New Balance shoes. Only a dark bruise on the side of his neck showed that something might be amiss.

I returned to my car and retrieved my father's old .45 that I kept in the trunk, mostly to shoot rattlers I found on remote building sites. I folded a newspaper around the pistol, reentered the coffee shop, and approached Corkass's table.

He looked up at me, his face deadpan. "Can I help you?"

"Got a minute to talk, professor?"

He gave me the once over but didn't seem to recognize me.

"Nobody's called me professor for a long time. Yes, please sit."

"Thank you." I laid the newspaper hiding the pistol on the table and draped my jacket across the back of a chair.

"It's been almost fifty years since I taught college courses. You must be one of my students."

"No, I never had you for a class. But I was in the program and had friends who did."

"Yes, yes, that was so long ago, such a turbulent time. I didn't much like the politics and ended up leaving the University and working in Saudi Arabia and India, for decades."

"Huh."

"So what years did you study architecture?"

"'68 to '73. I graduated and got a job in LA. Spent most of my career designing residences for the rich and famous."

"Lucky you."

“Yes, I was lucky. But my closest and dearest friend wasn’t lucky at all. His name was Chet MacPherson.”

The color drained from Corkass’s face. He leaned back in his chair and studied me again.

I said, “Yeah, take a good look, professor. I told you back then that if anything happened to Chet, I’d settle the score.”

“Sir, I...I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You know who I am. You should have never returned to the scene of your crime.”

He let out a deep breath. “There...there was a lot of stress and pain back then. I hoped that time would have healed those wounds.”

“So you remember me?”

“Yes, yes of course. And I remember your friend. I was too full of myself and it needlessly hurt others. Tell me. What happened to him?”

“He was killed in Vietnam, ten months after we pleaded with you. His death was painful. Died of sepsis from multiple bullet wounds.”

“I’m so sorry—”

“Sorry doesn’t cut it.” I squeezed my eyes shut and felt tears of pain and rage slide down my cheeks. “You know, when the lottery came out in the papers, Chet would have pulled number 352. He would never have been drafted, never been killed, if you’d shown him just a little mercy.”

The professor bowed his head and remained silent. I leaned forward and unfolded the newspaper, exposing the dull gray .45. He looked up, his eyes wide, mouth open. A spasm shook his body. His face reddened. He reached inside his coat and withdrew a medicine bottle and set it on the table. With trembling hands he removed three capsules and downed them with the dregs of his coffee. His breathing came in hoarse bursts.

But gradually it slowed.

“I’ve been popping these things like Tic-Tacs for the past two months. They’re the only things that keeps the pain at bay. But they’re starting to fail.”

I snatched up the bottle and read its label, Duramorph. Morphine. “Maybe I should just take them and let you suffer like Chet did.”

Another spasm struck the professor. He gritted his teeth and stared at me. “I would rather have you just shoot me...please. The doctors won’t give me anything stronger, said I’d become addicted. Who gives a crap? The cancer is going to kill me soon enough.”

I stared across the table at the pitiful old man, all of his dapperness gone. I wanted to wallow in the sweet pool of vengeance that could be mine. But two cruelties, for whatever reason, didn’t add up to justice. I folded the newspaper over the pistol and slid it across the table to Corkass.

“Here, use it when the time comes.”

He reached forward and clasped my arm. “Thank you. You are too kind.”