

## **BLACK BEAR BLEEDING**

by

Thomas M. Atkinson

"What happened to your head?"

I was in a Speedway somewhere east on Route 32, and the big girl behind the counter looked like something dead. Her hair was tar black, and she had on some kind of white make-up and a bullring through her nose.

It didn't look like her mouth moved and I said, "What?" too loud. My head was still ringing and I believe my right eardrum was burst.

She tapped her forehead with a chipped black fingernail and said, "You look like you got a third eye coming up."

I yelled, "Where's the bathroom?"

She pointed down the hall by the Speedy Freeze fountain.

After I locked the door, I checked the cracked mirror. There were small powder burns on my right cheek and an angry red circle stippled with black between my eyes. It looked like a coal tattoo and chances were good as not I'd wear it for life. I tried to wash up, but you couldn't tell. I never remember how old I look until I see a mirror. If ever a

night needed a souvenir. I guess a 9mm scar is different than one of those, "I went to Cincinnati and all I got was this lousy T-shirt" T-shirts.

When I got back out to the counter, my coffee was gone. The girl was sitting on a low stool hunched over some sewing in her lap.

I said, "Where's my coffee?"

Without looking up, the dead girl said, "That was old and cold. I just made fresh pots." She pointed to the coffee station, "But I didn't know your poison."

I watched her work, and then asked, "What're you making?"

She stretched out the long band of fabric between her hands, "A braided rug. My grandma's teaching me. The right way." She looked at the fabric and said, "She says people need to know how to make something. You need a lot of fabric scraps, and it's a bunch of needle work, but I like it. I want to start my own business."

I looked around for a clock and the ringing in my head moved with it, "What time's it getting to be?"

She said, "Three...no, going on almost four in the a.m."

When she said, "Three," I could see she had a corner knocked off of one of her front teeth. Her name tag said, "Mae."

I said, "Tonight's been the longest week of my life."

Mae sighed and covered her mouth with her hand, "Ain't that every night?"

I looked at the coffee pots, "What *is* the difference between 'Premium House Blend,' 'Dark Roast,' and '100% Colombian'?"

She shrugged her thick shoulders, "Hell if I know. They're all brown and taste like shit. That's why there's them twenty kinds of flavored syrup to put in it." She shook her

round head in disgust and said, "'Salted Cookie Fudge.' That'd gag a possum. I'd drink the House Blend...if somebody put a gun to my head."

Somebody *had* put a gun to my head, so I got a large cup of House Blend and headed back out through the cold rain to my truck.

\*

\*

\*

A black bear'd swum the river over from Kentucky, and nobody knew why. He'd been spotted half a dozen times and everybody said he was a young boar. That explained a lot. But mating season was still months off and that's when they usually start going crazy. Young males go off and do stupid stuff, just because. There's a reason the army wants them young and dumb and cocksure. I was half expecting him because I'm curing some country hams in the shed, and if a bear can't smell a hanging ham on a light breeze, it ain't a bear. He showed up last night during a thunderstorm, one of those late winter thunderstorms we get now. It used to snow a lot in southern Ohio, but not anymore. It'll be 20 degrees one day and 60 the next and it's been like that for years now. I can't remember the last time I put the nylon sacks of tubesand in the bed of my truck. They're in the shed, along the back wall, covered with years of cobwebs dusted in dirt and dead grass.

But he showed up like I knew he would, just after nine, and I was waiting for him with my .22 rifle. I didn't want to hurt him, just light up his ass enough to scare him off so I had a little CB cap loaded. At least I thought I did. Putting up hams ain't no easy thing, and I was going to be goddamned if all my hard work was going to feed a bear from the

wrong side of the river. I heard him grubbing around the big flat rock in front of the shed. It's about four feet square, and I think whoever built the shed put it there just so he didn't have to move that rock, but it makes a nice step up. I eased open the window and set the barrel on the sill, waiting for the next flash of lightning.

When it came, I squeezed the trigger and whole lot of things happened at once. The first thing was the shot was way louder than it ought to have been, like a long rifle shell, which sobered me up right quick. Then I remembered I'd run a fool's errand using that CB cap trying to chase a flock of starlings out of the big oak out front. They should have moved on way before now, but they don't know what season it is from one day to the next either. The second thing was the bear wasn't a bear, and in that quick flash of lightning, before the thunder even rolled in, I saw it was a man with straggly hair and a thin beard in a wet down coat, on his hands and knees on that slab of rock. When the next flash of lightning came, I could see he'd fell over.

I could hear groaning before I got to him, and when I rolled him on his back, I said, "I thought you was the bear."

He was grinding his teeth in pain, but he laughed and said, "Why don't that surprise me?"

It was dark and pouring rain, but even with one of those little flashlights they give you every time you fart at Harbor Freight, you could tell he'd been living hard. A long time ago, his down coat might've been red, but it was soot stained and shining with grease. I probably had twenty years on him, but you couldn't tell.

I said, "Where'd I get you?"

He had his one hand working up under his coat, "You just creased my shoulder, I believe."

I rubbed the rain out of my eyes, "You want to lay here and drown like a turkey, or can you make it on up to the house? The ambulance might be a while."

He grabbed my wrist, "You didn't call the cops already?"

"No. I ain't had time to call Deputy Duane." Duane was probably working a high school basketball game off-duty and sweet-talking the cheerleaders and I have to climb the hill to get any service on that damn big button cell phone my kids got me anyway. They want me to have one for emergencies and this sure as hell might be one and it's setting by the TV remote. "My truck'll be rough as hell on that shoulder. But if that's the way you want to go, it's a good half hour to the hospital."

He said, "I know where the hospital is, but I ain't going to the hospital. There's things I have to do."

I said, "Mister, you ain't bleeding out on my property. Not after I'm the one what shot you."

It seemed like he was thinking about that, or he might not've heard me at all. When he opened his eyes, he said, "This used to be our land. Maybe you can help me to the house so we can see what we got."

I got under his good side and helped him stand, "What's your name?"

He said, "Rant. Everybody calls me Rant."

I said, "Rant? Is that short for something or a nickname?"

Rant said, "Both. Short for Durrant."

I didn't know if that was a first name or a last name but I didn't guess it mattered, "I'm Will. Or Willie."

He said, "Willie Pete!"

Since I'd shot him, it didn't seem worth arguing about, "Rant, you ready to try this?"

He stamped one boot on the rock and winced. When he caught his breath, he said, "Hell, yeah! Then we got to get back out here and pop this rock up."

When he opened the bathroom door, he had one of my Doris' fancy hand towels for company duct- taped around his shoulder and it was already bleeding through. While I was getting the tape, he'd found the towel and some old wintergreen rubbing alcohol that looked like mouthwash. Then he'd closed the door on me and I'm guessing the screaming and cursing was probably that green alcohol. I don't know how he got that tape around and up under his armpit by himself. When he leaned against the door frame sucking for air, I could see past him. That pink, enameled sink shaped like a seashell looked like someone'd butchered a hog, but blood's like that, a little looks like a lot, especially when water and alcohol thin it out. Doris loved that sink and I found it at the surplus store.

He said, "Willie Pete, you got anything left to drink? Pain pills?"

There were probably still some old Lortabs in Doris nightstand because I hadn't touched anything in there in two years. Not even her clothes. The kids keep telling me I

should, that I have to, that it's not healthy, that there's poorer people who could use them, but I just can't. Not yet anyway. Her closet still smells like her.

Rant chewed a couple of yellow Lortabs like breath mints and we both downed a jelly jar glass of whiskey because he was hurting and I had the cold shakes.

He shook his head and said, "Whew, I remember this cheap shit!"

I looked at the black crow on the bottle and said, "It works for me. I don't get much company."

He stood by the woodstove trying to get warm and it took him a minute to realize it was cold. He drew a quick finger across the top just in case, and then said, "Hell, I thought it was just me. You like it this damn cold in here or what?"

I shuffled my boots on the braided rug and said, "The furnace is broke and splitting wood ain't as easy as it used to be." I'm pretty much ate up with arthritis and there ain't much that's as easy as it used to be. I have to make a plan to put on clean socks.

He laid a hand on the cold stove and looked me over, "No, I guess not."

I said, "I'll get to it. Maybe tomorrow."

He looked at the plaid flannel lining of my sleeping bag on the couch and said, "I'd split you some but damn if somebody didn't just shoot me." Then he laughed and shook his empty jelly jar, "Give me another shot of antifreeze 'fore we hump that rock."

The rain had dropped off to a steady drizzle, but prying up a three hundred pound rock with just some log wedges and a spud bar was a lot harder with everything being

wet. One edge finally popped loose with a sucking sound, like a barn boot stuck in deep mud.

He was leaning on the spud bar with his good arm and he said, "Can you hold it yourself? I got to get under there."

I yelled, "Get under there? Are you out of your goddamn mind?"

But I could tell he was going no matter the sense of it, so I sat on the far end of the bar with the tamper head right against my tailbone and my legs set wide.

I pointed the little flashlight in his face, "Rant, at least let me get a jackstand."

He had Doris' old hand spade she used for planting flowers, "Toss me the flashlight. We ain't got time to do this right."

Seeing as how it was dark and wet, and we were using a log and a spud bar and weren't quite sober, whatever the hell we were doing, doing it right didn't seem to be in the cards.

He held the little spade handle and flashlight together in his good hand and laid in the mud, "You got it, Willie Pete? Damn if you ain't one tough old bird." Then everything but his legs disappeared under the rock.

I tried to hold everything still, because if that wet spud bar slipped out from under the edge of that muddy rock, I didn't know how I'd get him out from under there. I could hear him mucking around and the wood handle of the spade tap-tapping through the rock. The flashlight came and went like a torch in a far off cave.

I said, "What are you looking for? Don't tell me I've been setting on a gold bar for twenty years and I can't get the furnace fixed."



He threw out the garden spade, and rolled on his back, "You can drop it now." I eased the rock down while he worked the flashlight into his bad hand so he could see the small muddy box he was holding. "It's not treasure, Mister Pete." He shook it gently by his ear and blood dripped off the edge of his hand steady as a clock, "Not to you anyways."

We headed west for Cincinnati. I didn't have nothing better to do and he needed a ride and I figured it wasn't much to ask since I'd shot him and he was in a hurry. The Old Crow was on the seat between us and he'd thrown Doris' garden spade on the rubber floor mat at his feet. After he wiped the mud off the box and unwound the threads of rotting duct tape, I saw it was one of those old red, white, and blue metal Band-Aid boxes, rusting out along the seams.

He held it between his hands and said, "Wake me up when we get to Burnt Cabin Road. It's just past Tater Ridge." It looked like he was praying when he nodded off.

Route 32 was dead like it always is, especially on a weeknight, and when I woke him up a little over an hour later, it took him a minute to figure out who I was and where we were headed. He held the Band-Aid box between his legs and rubbed his hands together to get some of the dried mud off, then he took a long pull on the bottle.

Rant pointed and said, "You'll want to be up here in the right lane 'fore too long, once we get past this mall here, and take 275 South. I know it don't make sense, but the quickest way downtown is to cut through Kentucky." He made a little hump in the air with his hand and winced in pain, "It's a bend in the river, so Ohio, Kentucky, Ohio,"

We were in a town called Newport, on an empty one-way street just a few blocks south of the river, right across from the lights of downtown Cincinnati.

Rant said, "Slow down, slow down. Park behind this car on the left but keep it running." He pointed to a man up the street and smiled, "I got your ass now, cat fish."

I said, "His name's Cat Fish?"

Rant shrugged his shoulders, "I don't know what the fuck his name is...just another shit-eating bottom feeder."

We watched Cat Fish on the sidewalk, and he never stopped moving but never wandered far from the old two story rowhouse built right on the street. He was a white guy dressed like a black guy with baggy nylon pants, untied work boots that hadn't never seen work, a parka with fake fur and a flat-billed ballcap worn down over his ears. He smoked a cigarette like it was the hardest goddamn thing in the world, like maybe he was siphoning gas, twirling a drumstick, and trying to do brain surgery for the first time. Cat Fish had one of those silly beards they used to call a Van Dyke and when he stepped under the streetlight, you could see a tattoo worming its way up his neck like a spreading cancer. A beard like that always makes me suspicious because it seems like a lot of mirror work for a man. My dad always said, "Don't cultivate on your face what grows wild around your ass."

Rant took another pull of Old Crow and screwed the top back down. He said, "He's waiting on a customer and damned if he didn't just find one. This won't take but a minute, but you need to haul ass up there and pick me up right quick. You'll know when,

just keep watching." He stretched his neck to either side and clinched his dirty fists open and closed. He handed me the Band-Aid box and held on when I took a hold of it, "Don't open this." When he let go, he pulled the door handle and said, "Time to cull the herd."

And in the time it took him to cross behind the truck, he was suddenly a drunken bum, weaving down the street, talking to himself and working his hands like he had the palsy. Cat Fish watched him coming. Rant knelt down like he was tying his boot and when he stood back up, Cat Fish said something. The box felt empty, but when I turned it gently back and forth, something moved inside, something small and light, like a damp twig. Then Rant rabbit punched Cat Fish in the gut fast as a Golden Gloves flyweight, at least a half a dozen times but too fast to count. When Cat Fish went to ground, Rant drug him partway into the narrow passage between two row houses, then he popped back out and waved me down. When I pulled over to the curb, he was shoving a baggie in Cat Fish's mouth and working his jaw to make him chew. Rant was yelling, "Chew 'em up, you fuck! It's quality control time!" Then he pinched Cat Fish's nose closed and gave him mouth-to-mouth and I don't know why.

Rant jumped in the truck and said, "Around the block. Get around the block. We got to get across the Big Mac Bridge and back into Ohio." Before we turned the corner, he looked over his shoulder at Cat Fish's unscuffed work boots just edging into the circle of the streetlight. He smiled at me and said, "Ain't much in the world feels as good as you think it will."

We wove through the west side of downtown, and wound up on Spring Grove Avenue in an industrial part of town gone-to-seed, threading under overpasses.

We swung back east and Rant said, "Turn in! Turn in here."

I turned in and stopped in front of twin iron gates to Spring Grove Cemetery, and they were closed and locked.

Rant beat the dashboard and yelled, "What the hell? WHAT THE HELL? Closed? A goddamn cemetery can't be closed." He turned to me and said, "When did they start closing cemeteries? That ain't right. It's like closing church." He thought for a second, then said, "Go back the way we come in and turn right on Crawford."

The right side of Crawford was barbed wire-topped chain link surrounding the cemetery and the left side was warehouses. It seemed like about half were abandoned and the other half had gravel lots filled with semi-trailers.

Rant pointed, "Here. Right here. Jump the curb and park behind them trailers there." He looked out through the raindrops on the back window, "I'm going to need some help with that fence, Willie Pete. I need a boost. "

I thought about it and said, "I don't know how much help I'll be."

"You made that big rock your bitch, Willie. You could probably throw me over that fence if you had half a mind to." He tucked the Band-Aid box inside his coat and put the flashlight and garden spade in his pockets, "We need an old blanket or something for that barb wire."

We each took a drink then ran across the empty two lane road with the old rubber floor mats out of the truck. I tossed them up easy on the barbed wire so they didn't go over, and once they looked right, I knit my fingers to give him a step up.

He said, "I guess this'd be easier if it wasn't raining."

And I said, "And you weren't shot."

When he stepped in my hands, I wished I'd chewed some Lortab breath mints too. He pulled himself up with his good arm, taking those short sharp breaths like you do when you're in serious pain. When he got to the top, he threw one leg over and reached down for me.

I looked at the chain link and said, "I don't know, Rant. I got arthritis bad in both shoulders and you might just pull my arms out."

He smiled, "C'mon, old man. I might need some help."

It hurt like hell and my shoulders ground like bags of gravel, but when we made it up and over, I felt like I'd done something I hadn't in a long time. We ran slowly on wet sod thick and close cropped as the fake plastic grass my brother-in-law has around his trailer in Florida. We ran over gently rolling hills for what seemed like forever.

I said, "Jesus Christ, this is one big cemetery."

And Rant said, "One of the biggest in the country. And it's a treeboretum too."

"What's a treeboretum?"

He said, "Like a museum for trees. Living trees. They got a lot of rare trees."

I didn't think that was the right word, but since I couldn't think what the right word might be, there didn't seem much point arguing about it. We ran a little while longer, and just when I thought I was blown out, he pulled up short.

He stared at a freshly filled grave with no headstone. His mouth pulled tight and he said, "Well, I missed everything else too."

We walked slowly up to the mounded dirt and I hung back a few steps.

He knelt down at the head of the grave and handed me the flashlight, "Hold that for me, will you, Will?"

I kept the small beam on him while he fished the Band-Aid box out of his coat. He popped open the lid and turned it out into his hand. It looked like a small twig, just like it sounded, and he let it lay there in his palm.

I said, "That's what was buried under my rock?"

"Yep." He looked sad and years away and he said, "It's his finger." It was a small finger, like off a child, shrunk away to nothing. And like he read my mind, he said, "I was off traveling on a job and he found the shingle hatchet in the shed. He weren't but five." He held up his palm for me to see it, "See? It's shorter than my lifeline."

And I thought about that shingle hatchet with the oxblood handle that'd been hanging high in the shed when we bought the place, and how many times I'd used it to split kindling for the woodstove, never knowing why someone'd left a perfectly good hatchet behind.

Rant said, "He was just little. Once he drew a picture of some happy stick people outside a candy store, and he wrote, 'WE OWN IT!'"

He smiled at the memory then touched a bloody fingertip to the shriveled fingertip and held his face up to the rain, "What do you do with such little, big things?"

I didn't know, but I didn't say so because he didn't know either.

He said, "Hold the light. Down here." He started digging with Doris' hand spade, digging a tiny grave in the loose, wet soil of the big grave, "He's going to need it, right? Where he's going? Don't they say in the next life you'll be whole again? Somebody said

that, that in the afterlife you are reunited and made whole. And I'm figuring you need to take everything to make you whole."

I hoped he was wrong, because I didn't know where all of the parts and pieces they took out of Doris ended up as the cancer mined its way down through her. I said, "What happened?"

He clutched the small finger in his fist and said, "O.D."

I asked, "The meth? Or the oxy?"

He laughed, but not like it was funny, "They still doing that out in the sticks, Willie? No, first it was the heroin, then the China White. Now it's just straight Fentanyl."

He put the small finger in the slot in the dirt and covered it with his hands. He patted it down gently and said, "That's what the cat fish just had for supper. If it ain't leaking out all the holes." He reached into his boot and pulled out what looked like an arrowhead on a T-handle still sticky with dark blood, "You ever seen a push dagger?" He put the handle in his palm and closed his hand around it so the short black blade stuck out between the knuckles of his fist, "It's a nasty piece of work. Hard to see coming, but just the thing for getting up close and personal."

I thought about that flurry of rabbit punches, and how often what you think you're seeing ain't what you're seeing at all.

He opened his hand and shoved the push dagger down into the dirt until it disappeared. He laughed, "All the Narcan in the world ain't going to save that fucker's ass."

I said, "Maybe we should hit the road."

And like he hadn't heard me, he said, "You ever kilt a man, Will?" I shook my head and he smiled, "Don't be so sure. It might be too early to say." He reached his hand under his coat and it came out wet with fresh blood.

I said, "Rant, you got to let me get you to a hospital. You can't weigh on me too."

He felt around, "I believe it went in under my arm and come out up through my collarbone. It must've caught a rib and ricocheted." He stared off up into the trees, then he patted the wet grass beside him, "Kneel with me, Will."

And I did.

He handed me a blue envelope, like a birthday card, and it was bent and worn like he'd been carrying it a long time. He dug in his pockets and said, "Hold on. I got to give you change for a stamp. What's a stamp go for these days?"

I said, "Don't worry about it. I got you covered."

He kept digging and said, "If you pay, it won't be from me. Can you mail it in April?" He poured some coins in my hand, "Can you remember that? She'll get it if you mail it in April."

I tucked it inside my jacket and said, "I'll mail it in April."

Rant slumped down a little more, "Are you a religious man, Will? I'm not, but I was hoping you might pray with me."

"I'd be honored to, Rant. I surely would." Then I folded my hands and closed my eyes.

He began, "Dear Lord Jesus."

Then my head exploded and my face burned.



I was still seeing stars, and when I turned to look at him, he put the burning hot end of a pistol barrel right between my eyes. He'd shot a gun off right by my face, and it looked like a .45 shrunk down to half size. He yelled, "Tell them I made you do it. All of it. Drive me here. That guy in Kentucky. Everything." He took the gun away and said, "They'll believe you now."

He held it up for me to look at. Even in the dark with my head ringing, I could see the shell casing jammed and the slide caught halfway back. He said, ".380 Kurtz Back Up. These are bad to jam. And if you don't grip them low, the slide'll bite that web of skin between your thumb and trigger finger. Six rounds but only one shot. Piece of junk with a barrel so short you won't hit anything further than the end of your arm. Figures a little cat fish piece of shit like that would carry one – a purse pistol in a goddamn wallet holster."

I was pretty sure my eardrum was burst because every word was like getting stabbed in the ear with a gutter spike, but at least I didn't have a hole through my head.

He pointed back the way we'd come and said, "You better hit the road, Willie Pete." He patted the grave one last time, then struggled to his feet, "I'm heading up that a-ways."

He loped into the trees, weaving in and out of the shadows, and once he disappeared into the darkness, I turned to find my way back to my truck.

\*

\*

\*

I'd been sitting in my truck sipping on cold coffee trying to get warm and watching Mae mop inside the store, wishing I'd remembered to grab Doris' garden spade.

The ringing in my ear had faded some, like maybe it was coming from next door instead of inside my head. A thought come to me, and I went back inside the Speedway.

Mae looked up and said, "Don't tell me you want another cup of that shit. There's lots easier ways to kill yourself, I tell you what. We got bleach and antifreeze or you could just try eating a whole bag of those red hot pork rinds."

I stared at my boots and said, "No. No, I was thinking you might want to come by my house one day."

She sighed and shook her head, "So you got a thing for the big girls, do you? First off, you're old enough to be my dad. Second off, I don't like boys." She opened her eyes wide and nodded slowly, "You get it? The only wieners I touch go on the hotdog roller and I don't even like touching those."

I said, "Hell, I might *be* your dad, and no, I don't have a thing for big girls, and I don't care if you're a..." I couldn't think of the word I was looking for that wouldn't hurt her feelings, and when I said, "softball player," she laughed out loud.

I told her I had two closets and a dresser full of clothes she could have for her rugs, and nice clothes too because Doris didn't buy cheap. I told her where I lived, about an hour further east, and it turns out we used to be neighbors.

She told me about her girlfriend and her girlfriend's daughter she used to live with in a trailer on the other side of the ridge, and while she didn't miss her girlfriend that much anymore because she was on the meth, she missed the daughter, which seemed to surprise her.

Then I told her I might've killed a man on accident, because I mistook him for a bear. And I told her I damn sure saw another get killed. I said I didn't care one way or the

other about the second, but was sorry for the first. I told her about the cemetery and the trees and that grass thick like carpet. I told her I wished Rant would've give me that little .380 that jammed after one shot when you didn't need to hit anything further than the end of your arm, because some nights, life didn't seem right anymore.

She thought about all of that for a minute, then she said, "He cored out a dealer? I'd pay-for-view the shit out of that."

I got caught by the Speedy Freeze machine, and those little round windows of blue and red, churning Blue Raspberry and Wild Cherry frozen sugar water. I said, "I found a brick wall, lower than the chain link." Those moving swirls of bright slush were always different and always exactly the same. "I heard sirens, lots of them, and they were getting close. I eased down low in the seat, and before long, cop cars were speeding past right behind me, headed north up Crawford."

She waited for me to say more, but I couldn't think what it was.

I hustled around in my pocket for Rant's change, "You sell stamps?"

She looked at the coins in my open palm and said, "No, but I'll give you one. And you can keep the lint."

I took the little American flag "Forever" stamp she was holding and stuck it to my fingertip. I stopped at the threshold and looked at the wet glass doors, each drop holding a crescent of cold, white light. Those cop lights had flashed blue and red, but when they caught in the raindrops on my windshield, it was like a thousand fireflies celebrating Independence Day.