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ORIGINAL FICTION

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IN ADDITION TO BEING A POOL HUSTLER, SHENLEY'S UNCLE WAS THE SPITTING IMAGE OF EDGAR ALLAN POE.

"YEAH, SO WHAT," I SAID.

"SO WHAT? ARE YOU KIDDING? DON'T YOU SEE THE ANGLE?"

"WHAT ANGLE?"

"WHEN ONE THING'S GOING SLOW HE ALWAYS HAS THE OTHER TO FALL BACK ON."

"YOU'RE RIDDLING AGAIN AND I'M NOT IN THE MOOD."

"NO, NO, THINK ABOUT IT," SAID SHENLEY.

"I DON'T WANT TO THINK ABOUT IT."

"SHIT... AND I USED TO THINK YOU WERE SO SMART."

"WHAT'S THAT SUPPOSED TO MEAN?"

"NOTHIN' REALLY. IT'S JUST THAT I'M BEGINNING TO SEE SOMETHING ABOUT YOU. SOMETHING I NEVER SAW BEFORE..."

"LOOK, THE POOL PART? THAT I GET. IT'S JUST THE POE PART THAT DOESN'T ADD UP."

"THAT'S WHERE YOU'RE IGNORANT," HE SAID.

"OH, YEAH?"

"YEP. I'VE SEEN HIM RAKE IN A THOUSAND AT A POP DOING IT."

"DOING WHAT?"

"IMPERSONATING EDGAR ALLAN POE. YOU MORON."

"YOU'RE SUCKIN' WIND."

"I'm telling you, some people will pay all kinds of money for it. They call them fanatics. Poe fanatics."

"I never heard of such a thing," I said.

"Just because you never heard of it don't mean it ain't true."

After a few more beers, Shenley finally talked me into going with him. Uncle Poe owed Shenley's mother six hundred dollars and although Shenley figured him good to pay, he didn't want to be walking around the city alone with that kind of cash. Shenley said he would cover all my expenses from the bus fare to drinks at the Dug Out, a bar just around the corner from Julian's pool hall where Shenley's uncle worked.

"It's one of the best bars in the city," said Shenley. "The beer is dirt cheap and they serve each and every one in an ice-cold mug."

"Sounds alright."

"It's the best. They also got bowls of free peanuts you shell yourself and then throw right on the floor."

"Yeah, but that's only to make you drink more."

"I know. But if you ask me, what the hell is wrong with that? I mean, why does a person go to a bar in the first place? To get drunk, right?"

"True..."

"And behind the bar? Behind the bar they got this giant stuffed head of a wart hog."

"Wart hog?"

"That's right. And, believe it or not, I never even knew what one was until I got shit-faced at the Dug Out."

"You can learn a lot of things in bars."

"You sure can."

We got off the bus and walked without incident from the Port Authority to a second floor pool hall located on East Fourteenth Street. The stairway leading up from the street smelled like piss and puke. "This place stinks to high heaven," I said. "Where the hell are you taking me?"

"Shut-up, you ignoramus. At the top of those stairs is a place like no other. A place you will never forget."

"Oh yeah? Well, I say we have a few beers at the Dug Out first."

"No way. Business before pleasure. C'mon."

Shenley was right. After the stench of the stairway, I was welcomed by the smell of cigar smoke and the crack of the pool balls. It was truly a wonderful place. Shenley told me that as a kid his mother would bring him there to visit his uncle. At the time, a few of the nicer guys, guys with names like Spanish Willy and Detroit Red, took a small interest in the boy, teaching him the rules of craps and eight-ball in between marks.

"You were one lucky kid," I said.

"I sure was."

With his hands on his hips, Shenley scoped the joint. "I don't see him. He should be here. He's supposed to be here."

"Maybe he's out somewhere."

Shenley walked up to the cashier's booth. A man with a veiny red nose flipped through a Penthouse while gnawing an unlit cigar.

"I'm looking for my uncle."

"That's nice," said the man.

"His name's Johnny. He's here all the time. At least he used to be. I haven't been here since I was a kid."

"You still are a kid."

"Look, have you seen him or not?"

"I don't know who the fuck you're talking about."

"People sometimes call him Poe... Looks just like him."

"Like who?"

"Like Edgar Allan Poe, the spitting image, as a matter of fact."

"I don't know any Uncle Johnny or any Edgar Pope."

"Shit," said Shenley. "And we came all the way down here. Shit... Are you sure? It's really important that I find him."

Nearby, a skinny old man in a seersucker suit looked up from his racing form. He slowly folded the paper and placed it on his stool as if to prevent anybody else from taking his spot. He went up to Shenley and gave him a good looking over. "You used to come here as a little boy, didn't ya? With your Momma, right? Am I right?"

Shenley grinned. "Yes, that's right. We used to come to see my uncle. My Uncle Johnny."

"I remember."

"So you know my uncle then."

"Sure, sure. I know him alright. Hasn't been around much lately though."

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah, too bad too. He was quite a player once upon a time."

"What are you trying to say?"

"I'm not trying to say nothin'. I'm just conversating the facts."

"What facts?"

"Well, to tell you the truth, the poor bastard's been hittin' the sauce pretty damn hard... Yep... Ever since he met that Raylene of his."

"Raylene?"

"That's right. Some broad over on Stanton Street. And a real loony toons if there ever was one. Broads like that will drive anyone to drink. But a looker though. I will give her that."

"So you think that he might be with her?"

"Hell, he's been shackin' up there for over a year now. I'd say it would be a safe bet. Yeah..."

"You know the address?"

"Corner of Stanton and Ludlow, block south of Houston. A little storefront on the corner. Sign out front says, 'Raylene's Mod Relics.' You can't miss it."

"Thanks. Thanks a lot."

"Sure, kid. No problem. Hey, you still play?"

"Huh?"

"I remember you used to be pretty good. For a little kid, anyway. I was just wonderin' if you still had it in you."

"I still got it alright."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Sure," said Shenley. "It's just like riding a bike."

"Lookin' for a little action, then, are you?"

"Maybe. I don't know. I do have to find my uncle."

"Sure, sure... I understand."

"Understand? What are you trying to say?"

"Look, kid, I told you before. I don't try to say anything. I just thought that maybe you still had it in you. Maybe I was wrong. It's possible... Anyway, good luck finding your uncle." He turned and walked back to his stool.

"What was that all about?" I asked.

"He was trying to hustle me, the old bastard."

"Really?"

"Sure. Trying to play on my ego. It's completely obvious if you know the game. He must think I'm stupid."

"Well, it's a good thing you know what's what around here."

"How much money you got on you?"

"What? Why?"

"Just how much?"

"I got a ten. But--"

"Let me have it."

"For what?"

"I got a plan."

"Fuck your plan. I already don't like it."

"Just give me the ten."

"It's your plan so use your own goddamn money."

"I don't have any money, you dope. I spent it all on the bus fare."

"Oh, yeah? Then how the hell were you supposed to pay for the drinks you promised me in the Dug Out?"

"From the cash my uncle owes my mother, retard. Now will you just--"

"I'm not giving up my last ten. No way."

"You're a cheap fucking fuck. You know that, don't you?"

"You can say whatever the hell you want," I said, crossing my arms.

"Just listen to me a second, will you?"

"No!"

"Just hear me out. And then, if it still don't make sense, well then, you can keep your fucking ten, okay?"

I didn't answer.

"Okay, then... See, their whole trick is to let you win in the beginning so that you think you're actually better than you are. Then, counting on your greed, they will string you along until the bets are

high enough and that's when they beat you. That's when they clean you out. It's a real art to do it right because you don't want the mark to know he's been fucked. But now, knowing all this, we can make ourselves a quick twenty and quit. Beautiful, isn't it?"

"But how can you be so sure he'll let you win?"

"He has to. You can't sucker somebody in unless you hook 'em first. The idea is to build me up so that he can take me down later. But see, there isn't gonna be no later. We're just gonna take that first bet and run straight for the Dug Out!"

His name was Morris. He took off his seersucker jacket, hanging it on a hook above his stool. Shenley racked the balls. "Eight-ball okay?"

"Sure kid," said Morris.

"Wadda you say we start small. Say ten a game."

"Sure kid, whatever you want."

I perched on a stool, watching the balls cracking across the felt. Shenley was good. I had seen him play many times in the bars back home, usually winning unless he was too drunk to see. But here, things were different. To begin with, the tables were gigantic, at least twice the size as any one I ever saw. And the old guy, Morris? He was as smooth as a rat's tail. With him, everything was serious. A

smile was not a smile and fun was not a word.

The game went right down to the eight ball. Morris was up with a fairly difficult bank extending the length of the table. He got low and stroked. The cue ball cracked the eight and as the eight rolled steadily for the downtown pocket, Shenley winced and I held my breath and Morris stood back a step with a fake look of concern and anticipation. The eight rolled for what seemed like forever before miraculously stopping an eyeball away from the edge of the pocket.

"Yes!" shouted Shenley.

"Oh, darn," muttered Morris.

Grinning, Shenley chalked up and gave me a wink that said, "The Dug Out, here we come!" He then strutted about the table a bit, winked at me once more and got down to business. The cue ball and the eight were perfectly lined up. It was a sure thing. Shenley stroked hard. The cue slammed the eight right down the hole. It was all over except for the fact that Shenley forgot to put some english on the cue ball, causing it to follow the eight down the same pocket. The game was over alright, with Shenley scratching

on the eight.

"Too bad, kid," said Morris, pocketing my money. "But then again, you must have been rusty. You were doin' just fine until that eight. Don't worry though, I got all day. Go ahead, rack 'em up."

"We gotta go," I said.

"Go? What are you talking about? Your Buddy here just lost a tenner. You gotta give him a chance to win it back. Hell, he just about won that one, you seen it yourself."

"Thanks, but no thanks," I said. "C'mon, Shenley, let's get the fuck outta here."

When we got downstairs, I wanted to strangle him but I held myself back because I was now broke and needed him to get me home. What's more, I was still counting on those ice-cold beers at the Dug Out and the only way to do that now was to get on with our mission and collect the money from his uncle.

We marched straight downtown without a word. There was a pink neon sign outside, "Raylene's Mod Relics," just like Morris said. We walked in and a bell jingled above our heads. Like a tiny Salvation Army outlet, the place was filled with junk.

"What a dump," I said.

"Shut-up," said Shenley. "Stop being so negative."

"You can go fuck yourself. Let's just get the money and get the hell out of here. Hey, are you listening to me?"

"Will you get a load of this..." Shenley stood before what seemed to be a small shrine. Underlit by a half dozen candles, was a portrait of Edgar Allan Poe. Beneath the portrait, on a marble altar

among the candles, was a framed snapshot of Shenley's uncle. It was true. He was a dead-ringer with the same huge forehead, the same beady eyes, the same black mustache. Beside the snapshot was a cassette player. Shenley pushed the button.

"Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered weak and weary..."

"Hey! Hey, there! Who told you to touch that?"

Shenley clicked it off and we spun around. Coming through the velvet curtain at the back of the store was Raylene. She had a giant head of high red hair, big tits and a caboose made for rockin' and rollin'. Although she had a good deal of mileage on her, she still looked well worth the ride. In her mouth was a long cigarette. She sucked and let the smoke puff out through her nose. "No one told you to touch that!"

"Sorry," said Shenley. "Are you Raylene?"

"Who wants to know?"

"I'm Johnny's nephew. Maybe he mentioned I was coming to see him."

"Johnny don't tell me nothin' no more. We're on a purely physical relationship nowadays."

"Oh, well," mumbled Shenley. "Then maybe you know where he is 'cause---"

"Stop muttering, boy," she said, but smiling now. "Spit it out."

"I gotta see my uncle. My mother sent me and I'd really appreciate it if you---"

"Okay, okay, just wait a minute. I'll be right back." Raylene went back behind the curtain returning with a bottle of gin and three coffee cups. "Sit down, sit down," she said. "Just push all the stuff on the floor. Go ahead now."

I carefully took a pair of coats and some army boots off a small bench. Shenley and me sat and Raylene pulled up a stool from behind the counter. She lit another cigarette and poured the gin. "Salute," she said.

The gin was perfect, the best thing that happened to me all day. But as I sat there enjoying its fire, a black cat suddenly rubbed up against my leg. Instinctively, I kicked it across the room. The cat screeched and darted into Raylene's lap. She put out her cigarette and stroked it's arching back. "There, there, now, it's alright baby," she said to the cat.

"You didn't have to kick him," said Shenley.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"It's alright," said Raylene. "He's used to it."

"That's one fat cat," said Shenley.

"Believe it or not, he used to be even fatter before the cancer."

"Your cat's got cancer?" I said.

"That's right," said Raylene. "Johnny says it's from my second hand smoke. Blaming everything on me as usual."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yes. And, naturally, it can make a person feel quite guilty..."

"Ahh, I wouldn't worry about it too much," I said. "They've got nine lives, don't they?"

"Why don't you try showing some respect?" said Shenley.

"What? I'm just trying to look on the bright side."

"This is a real nice place you got here," said Shenley.

"Thank you," she said, pushing the cat to the floor and lighting another cigarette. "Would you like to see my relics?"

"Relics?" asked Shenley.

Raylene moved her stool to the side. She pulled off a black satin cover to reveal a glass display case. "Go ahead, take a look," she said.

Me and Shenley peered into the case.

"On the top? That there is a piece of wood from Old Sparky," she said.

"You mean, the electric chair?" I asked.

"That's right," she said. "Not many people know it by name anymore. That's pretty good."

"I know a lot of things," I said.

"Young man, I bet you do," she said, pouring us another shot of gin. "An old friend of mine is a guard up at Greenhaven. When they moved Old Sparky from Sing Sing, he chipped off that piece you see there. Something, isn't it?"

"Sure is," said Shenley.

"How much something like that go for?" I said.

"Make me an offer."

"Well, what are you doing later?"

Shenley elbowed me in the gut. "What's wrong with you?" he hissed.

"What's wrong with you?"

“She’s my uncle’s girlfriend, you mook!”
 “I was only kidding. I’m sorry if I insulted you, Raylene.”
 “Young man, these days, that’s just the kind of insult I need. Here, have another, both of you...”
 As we continued to drink Raylene’s gin, she pointed out a tuft of hair from Telly Savalas, Raquel Welch’s toe nail clippings and a pair of odor-eaters once worn inside Frank Sinatra’s shoes. There was also some assorted stuff from people I had never heard of before. “You see that feather?”
 “Yeah.”
 “That was the very same feather operated by the Canadian Tickler. It’s one of my favorite pieces.”
 “Who was the Canadian Tickler?”
 “You don’t know anything, do you,” said Shenley. “Go ahead, tell him Raylene.”
 “Why don’t you tell me?”
 “You better stop being so disrespectful or---”
 “Now how is that disrespectful? Raylene, am I being disrespectful?”
 “No, of course not. But if you really want to know, the Canadian Tickler was a kind of a cat burglar up in Canada. Only he didn’t ever burgle anything.”
 “Oh no?”
 “No. What he did was to break into people’s homes and then tickle their feet while they slept. It sounds funny now, I know, but for his victims it could be a very scary affair.”
 “Yeah, I’ll bet.”
 “Sure,” said Shenley.
 “But, if you don’t mind me asking, how can you tell if all this stuff is real or not? I mean, aren’t all nail clippings kind of the same?”
 Raylene finished her cigarette. “No. No, they are not.”
 “You gotta big mouth,” said Shenley.
 “I was only asking a question.”
 “Don’t mind him, Raylene. He’s got shit for brains. I believe in your relics.”
 “So do I. I just was wondering---”
 “Shut-up now, will you?”
 “It’s okay,” said Raylene. “It’s not the first time someone has doubted them.”
 “I don’t doubt them. I just wanted to know how you could tell the difference between what’s real and what’s fake.”
 “My relics are all real. And they are real because they’re mine and they’re all true to life.”
 “That makes perfect sense,” said Shenley with a snort.
 “You’re full of shit,” I muttered.
 Raylene lit a cigarette and smoked a moment in silence. “When I was a little girl I came upon the decapitated head of an old man. It was lying there in the weeds by the side of the road. I was on my bike, riding home late as usual. From a distance I clearly saw the head as a head but I immediately imagined it to be something else because there was no reason for a head to be on the side of the road like that. It was something completely out of the realm of possibilities in my little girl life. So the head became a deflated basketball thrown from some car or left by some other child all in the moment it took from seeing it that first instant until I was right upon it, at which point it became the scariest thing in the world precisely because my first impression was so horribly real, so horribly true...”
 “Boy, those are some deep thoughts,” said Shenley.
 “Yeah,” I said. “Must have been tough on you, being a little kid and all.”
 “No, not really,” she said. “After all, it’s only something I made up.”
 “Huh?”
 “I made it all up. Just now.”
 “But what for?” I said.
 “To make a point.”
 “Now I’m really confused,” said Shenley.
 “Exactly,” said Raylene. “Especially after I told you it was a fake. And now, if I turned around and said that, yes, it really did happen, that, yes, there was a head on the side of the road and, yes, I was only lying when I told you I was lying--well, then--where would that leave you?”
 “I don’t know.”
 “Me neither,” confessed Shenley.
 Raylene emptied the rest of the gin into our three cups. “Drink up,” she said. “Drink up and remember: what seems to be can actually be what it really is, especially when you think it really isn’t...”
 By the time we left Raylene’s I was drunk and confused and in no mood to go on. But Shenley had a scrap of paper now, a paper with an address left by his uncle where he would be doing his Poe routine later that day. Being broke and without any sense of direction, I had no choice but to follow him

down the yellow brick road to a lonesome building located on the edge of Watts Street, not far from the Hudson River. Shenley buzzed the buzzer with his thumb. He did this three times.
 “Yes? Who is it?” crackled a voice from the intercom.
 “Hi. I’m looking for my uncle. He’s supposed to be doing a poetry show for you today?”
 The front door clicked and we rode the elevator to an artist’s loft owned by an old widow named Pippa Kozloff. Shenley knocked and there was another electronic click. He pushed the heavy door open and I closed it behind us with a thunk. Scattered across the otherwise empty room was a bunch of black, cast iron sculptures of people who, by the expressions on their faces and the twisting of their limbs, looked like they were being burned alive.
 “Reminds me of a nightmare,” I said.
 “Relax,” said Shenley. “It’s only art kind of stuff.”
 An old lady whirred into view upon a high-tech electronic wheelchair. She was a tiny woman wearing a hooded, purple sweat suit. The drawstrings on the hood were pulled tight about her skull and the little bit of face she showed was as white as mozzarella.
 “Where’s Poe?” she said.
 “He’s not here yet?” asked Shenley.
 “No. No, he is not. And I’ve been waiting for him. Waiting a long time.”
 “Hmm,” said Shenley.
 “And at my age, waiting is not something I am particularly fond of.”
 “I understand completely,” said Shenley.
 “Oh, do you?”
 “Yes.”
 “My husband’s dead. Died on me two years now.”
 “I’m sorry.”
 “Now there’s a line of others waiting for me to die.”
 “Well, that’s just terrible.”
 “They say that I’m supposed to be filthy rich but I’ve yet to see a goddamn red penny.”
 “A shame.”
 “Goddamn lawyers!”
 “The worst.”
 “But I’ve gotten used to my reality...”
 “Yeah, well... That’s a good thing, I guess,” said Shenley, scratching the side of his neck.
 “You look like nice boys.”
 “Thank you,” said Shenley.
 “Did you know Jack?”
 “Jack?”
 “My husband. Jack Kozloff, the artist. The world famous artist.”
 “No,” said Shenley. “I’m afraid not.”
 “I think I heard of him,” I said.
 Shenley gave me a pinch.
 “OW!”
 “Are those his sculptures?” asked Shenley.
 Pippa looked in disgust at the one curled in a fetus position just off the starboard side of her wheelchair. “Disgraceful, isn’t it?” she said.
 “Huh?”
 “I hate them. I hate them, I hate them, I hate them!”
 “Me too,” said Shenley.
 “Simply disgusting! Pompeii, my ass,” sneered Pippa.
 “Excuse me?”
 “All of this. But you should have seen his old work. Now, that was art. Beautiful, simply

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beautiful. Not like these--these horrible things. Oh, how I hate them.”

“So, ah, anyway,” said Shenley. “Exactly what time was my uncle supposed to drop by?”

“What? What’s that?”

“My uncle. Edgar Allan Poe?”

“Oh. Yes. I love him. I simply adore his poems, his voice, his eyes...”

I gave Shenley a look that said, “This bitch must be crazy.”

“Look, ah, Mrs. Kozloff?”

“You can call me, Pippa.”

“Okay, Pippa. Me and my friend here, we was just looking for my uncle but if he’s---”

“Why?”

“Huh? Excuse me?”

“Why were you looking for him?”

“Oh, a family matter. Just---”

“Money?”

“Excuse me?”

“Family matters always mean money.”

“Well, yes. I guess you could say so.”

“So you’re looking for some money?”

“For my uncle to give me some to give to my mother. Yes.”

“How much?”

“Six-hundred dollars, but---”

“Ha!”

“Maybe we better get going,” I said.

“Yeah,” said Shenley. “Look, Pippa, if my

uncle comes by, do you think you could tell him that---”

“How would you boys like to make some real money?”

“Real money?” said Shenley. “What kind of real money?”

“Thousands,” said Pippa.

“Sounds good to me,” I said.

“I’m too old. Too weak,” said Pippa. “But for two strong young men like yourselves, it should be easy.”

“What do we have to do?”

“You see these horrible things?”

“The sculptures?” said Shenley.

“Call them what you like.”

“Okay. So?”

“There’s a package hidden inside one of them. A brown bag holding twenty thousand dollars.”

“What? Which one?” asked Shenley.

“That’s the problem. I’m not sure. Jack never told me exactly which one it was in. But he did say it was somewhere inside one of these he left behind here.”

“Like cracker-jacks,” I said.

“What are you talking about?” said Shenley.

“The prize hidden inside the box.”

“I’ll give you two-thousand each as soon as you get it out. Cash on the spot. Are you interested?”

“You bet we are,” said Shenley.

“Very well. Follow me.” We trotted behind Pippa’s wheelchair to another room with a large workbench and a wall full of tools. Everything was highly organized and proper, very unlike any workroom I ever saw. “Will you look at that?” I said. “He’s got every last thing labeled.”

“Jack loved his tools,” said Pippa. “But it was me who did the labeling.”

“A labor of love,” said Shenley.

“Yeah,” I said. “It’s always good to know that a hammer is a hammer and a chisel is a chisel.”

Shenley picked us out a pair of sledgehammers and a crowbar. “This oughtta do the trick,” he said.

We went back inside to smash open the sculptures. I stood before a woman who seemed to be screaming at the sky while sheltering her two children, each clinging to each of her legs. “This looks like a good place to start,” I said.

“Why the hell not?” said Shenley.

I spit into my palms. I grabbed the sledgehammer and swung it into the screaming lady’s iron shoulder. The sculpture clanged and my arms vibrated up and down from my fingers to my elbows. I dropped the sledgehammer. I shook out my arms. “Shit!” I shouted.

“Watch your language,” said Shenley.

Pippa advanced her wheelchair to my side. “Are you sure you’re up for this, Sonny?”

“Don’t you worry, Lady. I’m just a bit rusty, that’s all.”

“Stand aside,” said Shenley. “And I’ll show you how it’s done.” He took aim at the top of one of the kid’s skulls. He swung the sledge down and, this time, the iron cracked and fissured through the length of the child’s body. Shenley swung again and again and the heavy metal cracked and chipped into a heap of mangled arms and legs and terrible expressions. “Nothin’ in this one,” he said.

“Nicely done,” I said.

“Yeah... The whole trick is in finding the weak spot. If you hit it there first then the rest will follow.”

We moved on to the next sculpture---a man covering his head and running to God knows where. “Let me try,” I said. I took aim at his bent kneecap. I swung and a crack shot up his leg all the way to his belly button. Shenley stepped in and whacked him across the gut. The iron man split right down the middle, breaking in two before our eyes.

“Bravo!” shouted Pippa.

“No money here,” I announced.

One by one we worked our way around the room. It was hard going with some of them giving us much more resistance than the others. When there were just two left (the woman cowering down in a fetus position and a bald guy screaming and clawing at his own face) we stopped a moment to catch our breath.

“I’m eighty-eight years old,” declared Pippa.

“You don’t look a day over sixty,” I said.

“That’s because I’ve never smoked a cigarette, never had a drink, and never kissed a man except for my husband.”

“There you go,” I said.

“Well, let’s finish this up,” said Shenley.

“You better roll back a little, Mam,” I said. “Sometimes the chunks tend to fly off a bit.”

Pippa put her chair in reverse. When she reached the back wall, she gave a petite little wave.

“This one’s gonna be tough,” said Shenley. “It’s low to the ground and probably thicker than the rest.”

“So let’s get the other one first. I bet the money’s probably in that one.”

“Always looking for the easy way out.”

“No I’m not,” I said.

“Well, I have a feeling the cash is in this one.”

“Alright then, let’s just get going and get this over with.”

We flanked the sculpture, going blow for blow across her neck and, like Shenley said, she was one tough cookie.

“Barely a dent,” I said.

“We just gotta go ape on this thing. Just keep on swinging ‘till it gives. You ready?”

“Yep.”

“Okay, go!”

We started smashing down on the neck, one blow right after the other until suddenly, I felt my sledgehammer being snatched from behind me, right out of my hands. Shenley looked up and I turned around. A bald guy in a business suit was holding my sledgehammer and screaming, “What, are you crazy? I’m going to have you arrested! What have you done?”

“Shut-up, you bastard,” screeched Pippa. “Get out of my house! Get out! Get out!”

“I’m not going anywhere, you crazy bitch!”

“That’s not a way to talk to an old lady,” said Shenley.

“Fuck you,” said the man. “I’m gonna have you arrested.”

“Oh, yeah?” I said, snatching back my sledgehammer.

“That’s right. Both you and him. Look what you’ve done! Oh, my God! Oh, my God, I can’t believe this!”

“Maybe we better get out of here,” I suggested.

“Fuck that,” said Shenley. “Who is this clown anyway?”

“He’s a bastard,” said Pippa. “Don’t listen to a word he says. He’s a lying, stealing conniving bastard!”

“Shut-up, you crazy bitch,” said the bastard. “You’ve really done it now.”

“Done what?” I asked.

“Are you that stupid?” he said. “These works you’ve just destroyed were done by my father, Jack Kozloff. Don’t you know who he is?”

“Yeah, her dead husband,” I said.

“That’s right,” said Shenley. “So who the hell are you coming in here and calling people names?”

“I’m Jack Kozloff’s only son.”

“So that’s your mother?” said Shenley. “You should be ashamed of yourself, talking to her like that.”

“She’s not my mother, you fool.”

“He’s a bastard. An evil bastard!” With her face bulging a fire engine red, Pippa put her wheelchair in fast-forward in an attempt to run him down. But he was a crafty one, that bastard, first side-stepping her attack before disconnecting her battery from behind. Pippa was out of commission, dead in the water. But Shenley was crafty too and he used the commotion as an opportunity to swing his sledge once again across the sculpture’s neck.

“No, no! Please, I beg of you!” shouted the bastard.

Shenley came down once again only this time it cracked wide open.

“See, I told you,” I said.

“I guess you were right,” said Shenley. “Nothin’ in this one.”

The bastard was beside himself with grief. He stamped his feet and gnashed his teeth.

“Hey, wait a minute. Hey, Shenley, check it out.”

“What?”

“This poor bastard looks exactly like the statue.”

“Hey, what do you know! He does!”

“That’s because it is me, you fools. I was the model for that piece.”

“Well, isn’t that something,” said Shenley.

“Yeah. Too bad though, we gotta bust it open.”

“No, no, you can’t. You mustn’t!”

“But we must, we must, we must,” sang Shenley, sizing up the final sculpture.

“Wait, please, just listen to me for a second,” pleaded the bastard. “Why are you doing this?

You are destroying something that can never, ever, be replaced. Why? Just tell me why?”

“Why?” said Shenley. “Because Pippa says there’s a bag of cash in there.”

“What? That’s insane! She’s insane. She’ll do anything just to hurt me. You can’t listen to what she says.”

“He’s a homosexual,” said Pippa. “A bastard homosexual.”

“Don’t listen to her. I’m telling you, she’s completely out of her mind. She’s been that way for years now. There’s no money in there. The very idea of it is totally absurd. You can’t believe anything she says!”

“Look, I don’t have anything against any homos,” said Shenley. “But money’s money. So you better step back before you get yourself hurt.”

“Yeah, stop all your whining and take it like a man,” I said.

“Just listen to me!” screamed the bastard.

“Just hear me out. Please, I beg you.”

“Okay,” said Shenley. “You got thirty seconds to talk. Go.”

“You have to stop this madness. You have no idea what you are doing. You will be arrested and put in jail for this. Do you want to go to jail?”

Leaning on his sledgehammer, Shenley pondered the consequences.

“Don’t listen to him, Shenley. We’ve gone this far already and now there’s just one stinking statue left. And even if this guy is right, well, another one’s not gonna make much of a difference anyway. I mean, if we’re fucked we’re fucked. But if this bastard’s wrong, and

we stop now, then all of our work’s for nothing ‘cause the money’s still gonna be left trapped inside.”

“Excellent thinking,” said Shenley “I always knew you were smart.”

“No!” shouted the bastard, picking up the crowbar. “I won’t let you do it!” He took a swing at Shenley but Shenley blocked the blow with his sledge. I jumped him from behind, taking away the crowbar and getting him into a headlock. But the bastard was a lot tougher than he looked, putting up a hell of a fight before we were finally able to punch him into submission.

“Look, we don’t want to hurt you anymore than we have to,” said Shenley. “So just stay put and don’t give us anymore trouble.”

“That’s telling him! Good for you, you fucking bastard,” said Pippa.

“And you can pipe down,” said Shenley. I’m starting to get sick of you now too.”

“Yeah, let’s finish this and get going.”

“Just keep on eye on that bastard,” said Shenley.

“Don’t worry, I got him covered,” I said, but as soon as Shenley started swinging (wouldn’t you know it) the bastard was on the move again. I jabbed him in the gut with the sledge. He staggered back but he wasn’t giving up. I swung the sledge to keep him at bay and shouted for Shenley to hurry up and finish. Seeing Shenley swing on his likeness, the bastard picked up a hunk of neck from the floor. He threw the heavy metal, just missing Shenley. I rushed him with my sledge but he sent me for cover, throwing an arm and a leg. Shenley swung again on the statue as the bastard grabbed a fallen head. Holding it with both hands high above his own noggin, he raced halfway across the room, hurling it at Shenley. Shenley ducked but the flying head kept right on going, cracking poor Pippa in the skull and tipping the wheelchair over on its side.

Shenley dropped his sledgehammer. The room went silent and still except for the tire on Pippa’s wheelchair slowly spinning like a pointless roulette wheel. I stared at the blood seeping fast from beneath her purple sweat-hood. I shifted my eyes to the last surviving statue and then to the bastard who suddenly commanded us to run. “Run,” he whispered. “Run away and never come back. Hurry now. Run!”

I looked at Shenley and he looked at me and we did exactly like he said. ■

STEVE ROMAGNOLI’S “NEVERMORE” IS PART OF A RECENTLY COMPLETED STORY COLLECTION, *IDIOT MISSIONS*. OTHER STORIES BY STEVE HAVE APPEARED IN *THE MID-AMERICAN REVIEW*, *THE CAROLINA QUARTERLY*, *GARGOYLE MAGAZINE*, *BOOTH MAGAZINE*, *THE RUSTY NAIL*, AND *REAL FICTION*. HE’S HAD FOUR PLAYS PRODUCED IN NEW YORK CITY, INCLUDING *STEALING HEAVEN*, RUNNING OFF-BROADWAY AT THE SAMUEL BECKETT THEATER. STEVE IS CURRENTLY WORKING ON A NOVEL THAT TAKES PLACE IN THE EAST VILLAGE AND MOSCOW DURING THE TIME OF THE TOMPKINS SQUARE RIOT OF 1988.