

Everybody's Fool

By Kent Blackwood

This is the story of a young Marine who, after his parent's deaths at the hands of a relative, struggles to decide whether to seek revenge or use the event to break completely free of his family.

One

On April 29th, 1982 there was fresh snow on the ground at Glenview Naval Air Station. I was sweeping the snow off the top of the wings of a KC-130 before doing the preflight check when Sergeant Ardmore yelled up at me.

"Corporal Melman, come down. There's a call for you in maintenance control. I think it's long distance."

It was damned odd getting a long distance call direct to the squadron. I had made sure to tell my folks that the Marine Corps frowned on such calls since they usually meant trouble. We had ragged the hell out of Cosimo when his

mother called the C.O. to find out why her little Tony wasn't writing.

I walked gingerly across the wing and clambered down through the aft hatch, almost racking my nuts with the broom handle. I threw the broom onto the deck and hopped out of the side door.

"They say what this is about?" I asked Ardmore.

"Nope. I daresay the maintenance chief was none too pleased."

I just nodded and walked across the flightline into the hangar.

Maintenance control was incredibly small considering its purpose. This is where all gripes were assigned to the appropriate shops and parts were ordered. The place was heavy with lifers standing almost asshole to elbow. Master Sergeant Rawls looked at me like a bug as he pointed to the telephone on the counter. "Line two," he said, giving me the crook eye.

I picked up the receiver and punched the lit button.

"Hello?"

There was breathing on the other end. I heard a cat screech. "Carl?" a voice said. "Is that you?"

"Yes," I said. "Who is this?"

"It's Jimmy." My brother.

I suddenly had a heavy feeling on my chest. He had never called me. "Jimmy, what's wrong?"

He coughed, and I heard him spit. "It's Ma, that's what's wrong. She's in the hospital."

"What happened? Where's Pop? Why didn't he call me?"

There was a long silence on the other end, and then Jimmy said "Goddamnit, Carl. He's dead."

My heart plopped into my stomach. "Don't fuck around, you sick bastard." The lifers all looked at me. I was white-knuckling the phone.

"I ain't," said Jimmy. "Dawson went berserk and beat the shit outta both of them in the middle of the night. The cops have him. He was all fucked up. That's all I know."

My body felt like a high tension wire.

"Carl, you need to come home. There's no way I can handle all of this shit by myself."

I rubbed my eyes. "Yeah. I'll be there as soon as I can. But listen Jimmy. You need to call the Red Cross. They have to confirm everything with the squadron."

"Okay." He sounded rather fucking put out. "I'll do it. Just get here!" He hung up.

I stood there for a minute holding the phone. I had forgotten what to do with it. Rawls touched me on the shoulder, then took the receiver and hung it up. I looked

up at him and he was looking at me like he wanted to put me out of my misery. Maybe I was projecting.

"Trouble back home, master sergeant," I said. I turned and walked out the door into the hangar and headed for the hydraulic shop.

When I got to the door I heard a big crash against the door frame. I stepped inside and crunched some green chunks of broken glass.

"Goddamnit!" Gunny Gonzalez was giving one of the guys hell. "You people need to leave my shit alone! Winston, who gave you permission to draw mustaches on my Girls with Guns calendar?"

Winston was trying to smirk but I think he knew that Gonzalez had a cache of ashtrays ready. Gonzalez ranted for a couple of minutes, then told Winston he was on the wash rack crew until the millennium. Better him than me—I hated washing those big-assed pigs.

When he took a breath, I took the gunny aside and told him what had happened.

"Damn, Melman. If that was my mother and father I would have to fuck somebody up. You got any leave on the books?"

I just said no. It wasn't any of his business that I had sold all of it. I did tell him that the Red Cross was going to contact the squadron.

"Okay. Just let me know what's happening. Don't let me get fucking blindsided."

"Roger that, gunny."

It was about two hours later when I was paged to S-1. When I got there, the admin goobers had leave papers ready for me to sign. I took them and went to the flight shack to tell them they would have to take me off the schedule, then walked to the barracks to call the airline, change and pack.

On the way to O'Hare, I sat in the taxi and tried to remember everything about my dad, but all I could think about were his rose bushes. The old man cared for those plants more than he had ever cared for me or Jimmy. I also knew that my mother would never last long without him.

I suddenly felt like hugging the nose of an airplane. Maybe I was a little weird about it, but I did it all the time and it was easier to hug the radome of a skypig than it was to hug another human being. Airplanes are easy; you fix them when they're broken, keep them lubricated and they will not fail. People, on the other hand, will betray you at whim. Ninety-nine point nine percent of air crashes are

caused by pilot error, as are crashes of relationships. The NTSA wouldn't investigate the crash of my family, though.

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I had a few Jack and Cokes during the flight, so when the 737 landed at Birmingham I was bit smashed. I didn't care if anybody noticed. I was also nearly broke. I had twenty dollars and some change after buying the ticket and those drinks, but it was enough for a cab. Jimmy hadn't bothered to tell me which hospital Ma was in, so I gave the address to their house. Her house, now.

The weather was oppressively muggy and the cab's air conditioner was evidently broken, so I was sweat-soaked by the time we reached the house. It was a three bedroom, asbestos shingled, wood frame piece of shit, but it was home. In fact, the other houses in Ensley were pieces of shit too, so growing up I never really noticed.

I paid the driver and grabbed my bag. Jimmy's ratty '77 Pinto Country Squire station wagon was parked at the curb. I walked to up the cracked walk, pulled open the ragged screen door and knocked. I heard a big thump, then

Jimmy opened the door. A big puff of sauerkraut smell whacked me in the face. Jimmy was wearing a Chevron gas station shirt and filthy blue trousers. His hair was a squirrel's nest and he had a scraggly mustache complete with soul patch. His eyes looked like two piss holes in the snow.

"Come on in Carl," he said.

I followed him into the dimly lit living room. There was trash everywhere.

"Jesus, Jimmy. Why's the place so trashed?"

He fell onto the sofa, crushing a pizza box. "I ain't had time to clean."

I put my bag down. "It got like this in a day? I know Ma would never let it stay like this. The old man would have a fucking fit."

"I have a little more to worry about than housecleaning. You weren't here to help and Margaret ain't exactly Florence Nightingale." Margaret was my mother's sister, Dawson's mother. My sweet as pie, ex-con, drug addict cousin.

"I'm real sorry for you, Jimmy. Tell me what happened."

"Like I told you, Dawson went on some kind of maniac freakout show. He broke into the house through the basement and beat hell outta both of them like they was piñatas.

Fuck." He started sobbing. I wanted to punch him. "Pop was DOA and he gave Ma a cerebral hemo or some shit. He's over in the Southside jail."

Goddamn Dawson. He had only been out of the Atlanta pen for three months. He was the most inept bank robber in the Southeast.

"Are you going to drive me to the hospital? Which one is she at?" I asked him.

He looked up at me with those incredibly red eyes and said, "My car's broke. It's got a bad water pump. She's at Carraway."

"The car or Ma? Never mind. How long has this shitbox been broken down? Aren't you still working at Ray's?" Ray Massey's Chevron was a greasepit shop that specialized in fleecing the unwary.

"I got let go."

I didn't want to now why. The longest Jimmy ever kept a job was three months, maybe four. What a walking waste.

I was starting to get the bug crawlies from the filthy living room and he had killed my whiskey buzz. "I guess that means you don't have any money", I said. With that he started blubbering again, so I went into the kitchen to call a cab. Twenty dollars weren't going to last long. I

planned on getting really drunk really soon, but first things first.

It took the taxi about an hour to arrive so I killed time by going back to my old room. There was still a Dukes of Hazard poster on the wall next to my Confederate flag. Somebody had ripped off my Farrah Fawcett poster. There was a good coating of dust on everything, so I guess no one had been using the room. I hated to think what Jimmy's looked like or what he had been doing with that Farrah poster. I admit I was starting to get a little misty thinking about what had happened to my folks. Not to say that I was a quivering wreck, but I was bothered more than I thought I would be. Although my parents and I were never incredibly close, I still had some good memories. Some.

I heard the cab's horn honk and went back into the living room. I was going to ask Jimmy if he wanted to come along but he was snoring.

The drive to Carraway Methodist was about fifteen minutes.

After checking with information, I made my way to neurosurgical intensive care. I remembered that Pop always used to say that a hospital was no place to be sick. I'm sure he was right. As I got closer to NICU I could smell a heavy odor of antiseptic and shit. In fact, it smelled much

like a nursing home. I talked to the nurse who pointed at my mother's room. It was directly across from the nursing station. I went in.

The room was cold, not helping my incipient headache—one of the dangers of midday drinking. Ma was lying on the bed. An ECG machine was beeping in the background. There was a sickly floral arrangement on the windowsill. I went closer to the bed and bent down. Her already sparse hair was brushed straight back, giving her a mini-Eraserhead look. "Ma? Mama, it's Carl."

She stirred a little and opened her eyes. A huge mass of kerlex was wrapped around her head, intensifying the Eraserhead effect. "Oh hey, Carl", she said, reaching for my hand. "Have you seen my glasses?"

"No mama, sorry. How are you feeling?"

"My mouth's as dry as a chip," she said.

I got the water from the tray and aimed the straw for her. She took a small sip and let her head back down.

"I swear, my head's a little achy. Sometimes I think I was born to have the headache." She suddenly looked alert. "Where's daddy?"

Please God don't tell me she doesn't know. I was torn between profound sorrow for her and agony that I would have to tell her. Thankfully a nurse entered and saved me. I

know I can be a selfish asshole, but the thought of having to be the one to tell her was just too much. Fucking Dawson. My grief turned to rage as I imagined several unique ways to torture that idiot.

I heard a small tapping on the glass door. Margaret was peering around the doorframe. She was wearing tight jeans and a green tank top that was battling her breasts. The top was losing.

"Who is it?" Ma asked, as if she was lying on the couch at home.

Margaret sidled into the room. "Hey Francine. Hey Carl."

I just gave her a look.

She went to the side of the bed, almost tripping over a cord, and took my mother's hand. "How are you, darlin'? Can I get you anything? I know Dawson feels real bad about what happened. That just isn't like him."

I wanted to smack her, Dawson, Jimmy, the nurse and Susan Hanks from tenth grade.

I think the nurse was beginning to catch on to the vibe here and said, "I think we need to let her rest now."

I didn't need another hint, but Margaret looked like she wanted to abscond with the flowers. She had a commode

planter in her front yard that probably needed refreshing, and somehow that made me think of Pop and his roses.

I wanted to be brave. I wanted to let the Jarhead in me show and lash out at Margaret, but my stomach was in a twist and my headache was reaching typhoon status. I grit my teeth and went into a Frodo "I don't want this fucking ring but you made me carry it so I'll do it" mode.

I kissed my mother on her forehead, glared at Margaret and pushed past the nurse. As I was leaving I heard my mother say, "I wish somebody would find my dern TV Guide."

There was a doctor standing at the nurse's station. I walked up to him asked, "Excuse me, are you Mrs. Melman's doctor?"

He closed a chart and turned to me. "Yes. Are you family?"

"I'm her son."

He got a pensive look on his face. "I'm Doctor Arzt. How much do you know about her condition?"

"A little." I didn't want him to know think that I didn't know anything. Like my family was lost in a vortex of stupidity.

"Well, she suffered a blow to the skull that caused a cerebral hematoma, that is, bleeding in her brain, which

caused swelling. The neurosurgeon operated last night and relieved the pressure."

So," I asked, "What's going to happen now? Is she going to be ok?"

He looked straight at me with his serious doctor eyes. "It's like she had a stroke. She may have some weakness, confusion, memory loss. We have implanted a device to keep an eye on the pressure inside her skull, and we're watching her blood pressure. Really, a lot of what we can do now is wait." He hesitated just a second. "She may well recover but to be honest Mr. Melman, the chances are not good. The bleed was in a particularly touchy location. She could be talking one minute and her breathing may stop the next. I'm sorry I can't be more reassuring."

"I understand. Thanks, doctor."

He shook my hand and turned away. I stood there for a moment, feeling a little lost. Margaret finally left the room and skulked past me without speaking. At least she didn't have those flowers.

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It was almost dark when I got back to the house Jimmy was fumbling around beneath the hood of the Pinto with a flashlight. I startled him when I touched his shoulder.

"Goddamnit you made me cut my hand."

"You'll live. What funeral home is Pop in?"

He wrapped a greasy rag around his hand. "He's over at Willis Chapel on Avenue E."

Willis Chapel? "Why is he there?" I asked him.

Jimmy got a superior look on his face. "So what? Because it's a Black funeral home?"

That just pissed me off. I've had to take a lot of shit from every Yankee in the Marine Corps about being a cracker from Alabama and here is this fool trying to make me feel like a bigot.

"We're all just different shades of green, Jimmy. Is there any chance in the next century you'll get this beast fixed?"

He shrugged. "Tomorrow maybe. I can get Brian Baker to run me to the junkyard at get another pump."

"Well please fucking do, Jimmy. I have no money left and my check won't hit the bank until tomorrow." Too bad it's against the law to abort a thirty three year-old fetus.

I left him there and went into the house to shower and get some aspirin. My skivvies were clinging to me like Filipino B-girl.

After the shower I put on shorts and a t-shirt and cranked the air conditioning down to sixty. I made a ham sandwich and looked at the homey little signs Ma had hung all over the kitchen walls. I was tired as hell and they didn't have cable so after I finished the sandwich I went to bed. I'd figure out what to do next in the morning.