

100 CEMETERY

By Chuck Hustmyre

Evil sometimes wears a mask.

John Burke felt his tendon tear. It happened just past the DEAD END sign, an instant after his foot struck the edge of the pothole. His right ankle folded and he went down hard--real hard--on the rough asphalt road.

Mid-summer morning, just outside New Orleans. Nylon jogging shorts and a tank top were no protection against road rash. His right knee hit first, then his hands. The pebble-studded pavement devoured the skin on both then bit into his hip, but he barely felt the hip. Maybe the shorts helped, or maybe by then John was in too much pain to notice.

He lay in the street--thank God cars were rare on Cemetery Road--bleeding, clutching his leg. Everything forgotten except his pain. He could see his ankle already starting to swell, turning purple along the inside. When he tried to flex it a white hot bolt of pain shot up his leg.

This is bad. Doctor Van Dykes, surgery, months of physical therapy...

First thing--get off the street. John rolled onto his left

side and had to stop and catch his breath as a wave of nausea washed over him. As the blood ran from his hands and knee where the road had carved away hunks of meat, he watched bright crimson drops splash onto the asphalt.

Hundred-year-old oaks overhung Cemetery Road, their branches draped in gray beards of Spanish moss that shaded the street. A quarter-mile past the DEAD END sign, the road bridged over the Chinchuba River, a slow-paced tributary no more than a couple dozen yards wide. Some mornings, mist drifted off the water's surface and into the woods on both sides of the road, giving the place a surreal look.

A perfect place to jog--run--John Burke didn't like using the "J" word. Jogging was what people did on weekends as they watched their bellies grow. John was a runner. At least four times a week with half-a-dozen races a year.

The nearest house--the only house on Cemetery Road--stood at the end, half a mile away, next to the graveyard for which the road was named. Maybe, just maybe, he could limp there, borrow a phone, call Gail. John looked at his watch, just 7:15. His wife didn't leave until eight. If he could get to a telephone she could pick him up and drive him straight to Doctor Van Dykes' office.

The trip was torture. Taking short hops on his left leg, he could make it only ten or fifteen feet before he had to rest.

To rest John had to drop his right foot down and put a little weight on it and that sent waves of pain shooting up his leg. Behind him, he saw a trail of blood like red tears on the ground.

At the end of the road, the pavement gave way to a gravel driveway flanked on either side by two white stone columns. A six-foot, spiked, wrought-iron fence disappeared into the woods on either side. Hinged inside the columns gaped a pair of wrought iron gates. Mounted on the left hand column was a brass plaque with the number 100 etched in black. 100 Cemetery Road.

John paused at the top of the driveway and leaned against one of the gates to catch his breath. The drive descended at a slight grade, curved to the right, then vanished into the woods. He'd run past the driveway hundreds of times but had never actually seen the house or the cemetery. There was always something slightly unsettling about the look of it, something that made him pick up his pace as he ran past.

After a deep breath, he started hopping down the gravel drive, using trees along the way as resting points. The house was a hundred yards past the gate. A big two-story, clapboard construction, that looked run down, almost seedy. It had suffered years of wood rot and badly needed a coat of paint.

The gravel path ended at a two-car garage attached to the right side of the house. Left of the house, on the other side,

past a stand of trees, John caught a glimpse of the cemetery. He could just make out a low iron fence and a few gray tombstones.

A wooden porch with a decayed railing spanned the front of the house. The front door was solid wood, without windows.

He leaned against the frame and knocked. A minute passed. John knocked again, this time pounding with the bottom of his fist. At least another half minute went by before he heard slippers shuffling on the floor just inside. The door opened just a crack and a white haired old lady peered out. "Yes," she said, suspicion in her voice.

John held up his right leg, showing his bloody knee and black and blue ankle. Exhausted, he didn't have time to mince words. "I'm hurt. Can I use your phone?"

The old lady looked down at John's leg. A look of concern washed over her face as she threw open the door. "Come in. Oh, my goodness, come in."

John stretched his arms across the doorjamb as he hobbled inside the threshold. "If I can just use the phone, my wife will come pick me up."

"What on earth happened?" she said, leading him through the foyer.

"Twisted my ankle in a pothole."

"Oh, my word," she said, turning to look. "Is it very

bad?"

"I think so."

"Come sit down. Let me get you something."

The foyer floor was tile, but he wanted to be careful. "I don't want to get blood on anything."

She shook her head. "Don't be silly. Blood washes right out." The old lady stepped toward John and took hold of his left arm, letting him lean some of his weight on her.

In the den, John was relieved to see a wooden floor. As he dropped onto the sofa, he nodded toward a telephone on an end table. "If I can just use the phone..."

A strange look flashed across the old lady's face, but was gone in an instant as she nodded toward the telephone. "That one doesn't work." She pointed toward a door that looked like it led into the kitchen. "You stay put. I'll call somebody for you in just a second, but first let me get you some water."

John tried to protest, but she was determined. While she was gone, he eyed the room. The den was big, with six bay windows overlooking the woods behind the house. The room was filled with old-fashioned furniture and had a cavernous fireplace at one end, but it also had a worn look, and a smell. A smell John always associated with old age, with his grandfather's house in the last few years before he died. [Nice descriptions here]

Next to the dead telephone was a framed black and white photo of a pretty young woman in a riding outfit, posing at what looked like the front gate of a ranch. It was the old lady, much younger and much thinner.

When she came back carrying a tall glass of ice water in one hand, John still had both hands clutching his swelling ankle. He jabbed an elbow toward the photo, more for something to say than anything else. "Is that you?"

She nodded. "My father owned the Rocking R ranch.

The name was familiar. One of the biggest meat suppliers in the state. "Owned?" He stressed the past tense.

She nodded. "After Daddy died, we had to sell. Rising interest rates and the drop in beef prices, we got just pennies on the dollar." She sounded bitter.

For a second she stood quiet and John used the lull to introduce himself and explain how he'd hurt his ankle.

She handed him the glass. "I may have seen you jogging before. Looked like somebody was chasing you."

John thanked her and smiled at the image that popped into his head of this nice old lady lurking in the woods close enough to see the road. As he took a long sip from the glass, he noticed a slightly bitter taste that reminded him why he drank bottled. "You live here alone?"

"No. My husband and I are retired. For forty years we

owned Muller and Son funeral home."

"That's where we had the service for my father," John said.

"I'm sorry." She patted his shoulder. "When did he pass?"

He had to think for a second. Time flies. "Two years this past spring," he slurred.

She stared at him with a look of compassion. "Our son would have handled that. We sold the business to him four years ago."

John's head began to spin. The glass slipped from his fingers as he crumpled to the floor. Darkness.

* * *

John Burke cracked his eyes and saw blinding lights. Then felt thumping. Someone was thumping on his chest. He opened his eyes all the way. White light, bright white light. Flat on his back, he tried to raise his hand to shield his eyes but his arm wouldn't move--at least not far. Just a couple inches then something held it. Same thing happened when he tried to use his other hand.

John felt a cold hard floor beneath him--the rough surface of cement--as he rolled onto his side. There was something wrong with his hands. They were trapped at his waist as he tried again to shield his eyes from the blinding light.

More thumping, this time on his left shoulder. He blinked several times to clear his vision. His eyes focused on a

bearded, bare-chested, fat man, squatting on the floor next to him. A pair of steel handcuffs clamped on the big man's wrists were fastened to a belt encircling his waist.

"You okay?" the man said.

John just stared at him, realizing the man wasn't just bare-chested, he was completely naked.

"I said, are you okay?" the bearded man asked again.

"Where am I?" John's head felt like it was going to split open.

The naked fat man shrugged. "I don't know."

John looked down at himself and saw that he too was bare-assed, his own wrists handcuffed and bound to his waist by a two-inch wide leather belt. Using his elbow and good knee, John started to snake away from his new acquaintance.

"You can't get away," the man said.

Get away from where?

The pain in his ankle made him stop. He looked around, saw he was in a room maybe thirty feet by thirty feet. Besides him and the fat man, there were four other men in the room. All naked, all handcuffed and belted.

The bearded man hadn't moved. "It's not me you got to be afraid of." He pointed toward the room's only door. "It's the old man."

* * *

The old man had been in four times to bring food. Slop was more like it. He came into the room carrying the thick brown paste in a couple of five-gallon buckets. The stuff tasted like it had a lot of lard in it.

"How long have you been here?" John asked.

The bearded man--Skeeter he called himself--just shrugged. "The old man always keeps the lights on so we can't tell the difference between day and night."

Along one wall was a chest-high trough into which their keeper poured the paste. A second trough along the adjacent wall held water. Like animals, the men stood in front of the troughs, stuck their faces into them, and slurped.

Like everyone else, everything of John's had been taken from him while he was unconscious: shorts, shirt, socks, shoes, and most important, his watch. In addition to belted handcuffs, the other men wore leg irons, essentially a pair of oversized, stainless steel cuffs with a foot-and-a-half of chain between them. But John had been spared that, probably due to the size of his swollen ankle.

Skeeter didn't know why he was here, why any of them were here. "I was just hitchhiking"

"Hitchhiking?"

He nodded. "On the interstate."

"The old man was driving a van. Pulled over and gave me a

ride. After a few minutes he reaches into a cooler between the seats and hands me a beer. I'm talking about a sealed up beer. Popped the top on it myself. I took couple of sips, remember thinking it tasted kind of funny, like it got spoiled. Next thing I know I wake up here--like this." Skeeter tugged at his handcuffs, rattling the chain looped through the belt.

During the next several feedings John got pretty much the same story from three of the other four men. All hitchhikers, all picked up by the old man. The fourth guy, the one the others said had been here the longest, didn't talk. Just leaned against the wall in a stupor.

"Something in the food," Skeeter said.

"What do you mean?"

Skeeter patted his gut. "I didn't have this when I got here." He nodded toward the food trough. "And it makes you tired all the time."

* * *

Feedings. That's the only way John Burke had of marking the passage of time. Seemed like they were spaced out evenly, several hours apart, figured maybe three times a day. It was after the seventh feeding that the old man came and took away the guy who wouldn't talk--the sleepy guy.

He came in wearing a full-length plastic apron and carrying an electric cattle prod. He used the prod to shock the sleepy

guy in the ass and wake him up, then delivered a couple more jabs to drive him from the room. Just after the door closed behind them, John heard the two bolts shoved into place.

"What the hell was that about?" he asked Skeeter.

"That's the third one I've seen him take."

"Do they come back?"

Skeeter shook his head.

"Where do they go?"

"I don't know. But...I'm afraid my turn's coming."

"I want to get out of here," John said, "and that looks like the only way out."

"Bad as this place is, I got a feeling what's on the other side of that door is a lot worse."

Hungry as he was, John barely ate. A couple things he'd noticed, the other four men were flabby and they slept a lot, especially after a feeding. The food--slop they called it--had to be the reason. The thick brown paste made everyone fat and sleepy. Something in it, some type of sedative, and maybe something else, something that made you want more. John couldn't remember ever being so hungry. Still, he only took a mouthful at each feeding.

And while the others slept, John worked. The leather belt around his waist was buckled at the back and secured with a small padlock. The handcuffs ran through a stainless steel ring

in front. He'd tested the steel parts, the buckle, the lock, and the ring, but didn't think there was any hope of attacking them; the only weak spot was the leather itself.

So as soon as the others filled their bellies and nodded off, John would hobble to the drinking trough. He'd found a slightly rough edge at one corner and had begun scraping the belt against it. The belt was thick and the leather tough. The going was slow, but at least it was something. And something was better than nothing.

* * *

Just after the twenty-ninth feeding, that's when the old man came and took Skeeter away. He'd taken two more since that first one, and two new ones had come in. They came in one at a time, three feedings apart, and just like he imagined it had happened to him, the old man dragged them unconscious into the room and left them. They'd each awakened, naked, shackled, and groggy.

Then it was Skeeter's turn. He must have known because as soon as he heard the bolts slip back his face turned white. He backed himself into one of the far corners, trying to put as much distance between himself and the door as he could.

Skeeter had told John he used to be a wrestler, high school and college, back before the drugs and the booze, back before he'd hit the road. Since then he'd ridden his thumb,

crisscrossing the country in search of a good time. Skeeter put up the best fight John had seen from any of them, but the belt, the handcuffs, the leg irons, and the cattle prod were just too much. One two-minute round was all the former wrestler had in him. After that, he was lying on the floor in a puddle of his own urine, a blubbering pile of flabby flesh covered in scarlet welts.

The old man grabbed the chain between Skeeter's ankles and dragged him through the door. Helpless, John just watched. The most terrifying thing was the old man's lack of emotion. No spark of evil in those eyes, just the look of a tired man trying to get through another day.

By the thirty-fifth feeding--John figured eleven or twelve days since he arrived--he had managed to saw through almost the entire two-inch leather belt, just an eighth of an inch remained.

Only one other of the original five who were in the room when John woke up was left. The old man came in, wearing his black plastic apron, and carrying the prod. In a minute it was over. He'd prodded the man through the door on hands and knees, the poor bastard doing everything he could to keep from getting shocked. This time only one bolt clicked into place.

For what seemed like an hour John sat in the middle of the room and watched the door, his stomach twisted with fear. Just

as exhaustion overtook him and his head started to nod, the bolt shot open and the old man swept back into the room, wielding the cattle prod like a sword. John slid backward against the far wall as the old man's eyes fixed on him. But there was no hatred in them, nor malice as he strode toward John, waving the tip of the prod in a "come here" motion. As the cool wall pressed against John's back, he felt his bladder let go, felt the warm liquid spill down his thighs.

I'm going to die.

100 CEMETERY

PART II

When the old man got within range, John kicked at him with his good leg, but the old timer was quick, much quicker than he looked. He ducked to his right, side stepping John's lashing foot, then darted in and touched the tip of the prod to John's leg. Fire--that's what it felt like. White hot fire. A jolt went through John's body that made his eyeballs hurt. And just like that, the old man slipped in again and jabbed him in the stomach. Then, as John rolled onto his belly, the tip touched his back.

John curled into a ball and hugged his knees to his chest.

"Get through that door, boy," the old man said. "Move it,

now!" Like herding an ornery animal.

And like an animal, John Burke responded, lifting himself onto all fours and crawling toward the exit. Halfway across the floor, the old man jammed the cattle prod against John's ass. He cried out and scampered through the door.

As soon they were out of the room, the old man clicked his cheek a couple of times like he was calling a dog. "Get on your feet, like a good boy." John struggled to his feet as the door closed behind him and the bolts slammed into place. He stood at one end of a narrow passage, dark, except for a single bulb hanging from the ceiling at the far end. Again, John felt the prod touch his back.

"Get!" the old man said.

John limped toward the light.

The passage emptied into a windowless room, low ceilinged and big. The old man forced him into a chute--a cattle chute. Horizontal steel poles on each side formed a walkway barely wide enough for a man's shoulders. The poles were stacked four high, the top pole about five feet off the ground. Every six or eight feet stood a vertical brace.

The old man closed and locked a sliding wooden door behind them, then bent and slipped between two of the horizontal poles. Outside the chute, he prodded John to keep him moving. As John walked toward the end, the old man thumped him two or three

times with the prod but didn't shock him.

Suddenly, an overpowering stench hit John and his feet stopped moving. He looked to the right, toward the source of the smell, and saw a stainless steel table, on top of which lay a man's lifeless body. He was on his belly with his head turned and John could see the face of the man who'd been goaded out of the room just before him. The white-haired old lady stood beside the table gripping an electric carving knife in one latexed hand, while with her other gloved hand she pressed the man's leg firmly against the table. Bile gurgled up into John's throat as the old lady thumbed the switch on the carving knife and sliced a hunk of meat from the back of the dead man's thigh.

John spewed vomit and dropped to his knees. "Get up, boy," he heard from behind him as the prod juiced his lower back. John screamed in pain as he staggered to his feet. "Move it," the old man said. With legs like jelly, John stumbled forward.

The cut he'd worked into the leather belt was just to the right of the steel loop through which the handcuffs ran. Only an eighth of an inch of leather remained. Using his body, John shielded his hands from the old man's view while he tugged on the handcuffs and hobbled along.

The sides of the chute closed in on him as he reached the end. Near panic, John tried to turn around, but before he could the old man slid a gate closed behind him that penned him in.

Trapped.

From the corner of his eye, John watched the old man. Saw him step towards a workbench against the wall, fifteen feet away, and toss the cattle prod onto it. He pulled a ballpeen hammer down from a wall above the bench. It had a big stainless steel head with a foot long wooden handle. The old man turned and walked toward John with a casual, bored look on his face, just another day in the slaughterhouse.

Bent as far forward as he could, John thrust his hips back and jerked his cuffed hands forward, but the leather belt held. Behind him he heard the old man's shoes scrape the cement floor. Desperate, John twisted his hands to the right. The leather still held. Just an eighth of an inch between a chance for escape and a hammer to the back of the head.

A shoe scuff on the floor. Afraid to look, John stared at his hands. He groaned as he thrust his hips to the right and jerked his hands to the left. The leather tore and the belt pulled free from his waist.

"Where you think you're going?" the old man said.

John ducked and heard the top pole ring as the ballpeen hammer glanced off of it. With the belt still dangling from his handcuffs, John doubled over and stepped between the two middle poles on his left side. To his right the old man cursed him and swung the hammer between the bars. The hammer thumped into

John's right hip but he didn't stop. Once through the bars he ran--hobbled on his painful ankle--toward the wall, trying to put as much distance between him and the old man as possible.

"Momma, momma, he got loose!"

"Catch him quick 'fore he gets away," the old lady screamed.

John Burke was lost. He didn't know where he was or how to get out. He turned, saw the old man race around the end of the chute, hammer cocked over his shoulder. John's back was to the wall. Wildly, he glanced around for something he could use. There was nothing.

To his left, twenty feet away was the corner of the room and a closed door.

The old man saw John looking. "You'll never get out." But he slowed down, approaching cautiously, angling toward the door to cut off John's only escape route.

The old man looked nervous about the door. John broke and ran. Waves of pain shot up his leg from his swollen ankle but he ignored it. The old man lunged toward the door to intercept. John tried to stop and start, throw a fake at the old man, but his ankle folded and he hit the floor.

The old man dropped to one knee beside him and raised the hammer over his head. "Got you!"

But as the killer blow came down, John shifted slightly to

the side and the hammer struck the cement beside his head, sending tiny chips flying into his face. He lashed out with his good foot, missed the old man's head but caught him in the ribs. As the old man grunted and toppled over, John got to his feet and struggled to the door.

Locked.

John twisted the knob and screamed in rage. The old man stood up. Mounted on the wall next to the door was a gray metal circuit box, the handle protruding from its side angled up in the on position. An electrical shut off.

"Get him, poppy," the old woman screamed from the other side of the room. A nice old couple who called each other momma and poppy.

John grabbed the handle with both hands, shot a glance at the old man, saw him bearing down, and pulled.

Lights out. Total darkness.

Just in time John ducked. He heard the old man grunt as the hammer dug into the drywall. With his manacled hands, John shoved the old man, then ran along the wall to his left. Moving through the dark it felt like a mile. The old lady screamed.

Cuffed hands out in front with the torn leather belt dangling from them, John ran into the wall and turned right. He had no idea where to go or what to do. Just knew he had to put as much distance as he could between him and the old man. At

the next corner he turned right again. Just up ahead he heard the old lady. "Poppy, I can't see."

He slowed down, tried to catch his breath. Then the lights came on. Poppy must have gotten to the switch. John found himself next to the stainless steel butchering table, and face-to-face with the old lady. With the power on, her electric carving knife started buzzing.

"I got him, poppy!" she said and chopped at him with the knife.

John jerked his head back as the humming blade passed less than an inch from his eyes.

"Momma!" the old man screamed.

John looked across the big room at the old man by the door. Hammer swinging from his hand, he started to run towards them but had to go around the cattle chute. The old lady again cut at John but this time he managed to catch her wrist in his hands. As he kicked her in the shin he heard one of his bare toes crack, but she loosened her grip on the knife and he was able to jerk it out of her hand.

The old man rounded the end of the chute and howled in rage as he saw them struggling. Momma clawed at John's eyes with both hands, but he managed to close them just as her nails raked his face. Carving knife in hand, he slashed at the old lady. The vibrating blade ripped into the side of her neck and cut

across her throat. She gurgled up a foul smelling blast of air from her open trachea that made John gag. With her eyes wide open, the old lady looked stunned as her knees folded and she collapsed to the ground.

John Burke turned and the old man was right on top of him, screaming, swinging the hammer at his head. As John raised the carving knife, the hammer snapped the blade off and knocked it from his hand. The old man lunged closer, grabbed him by the throat with his left hand and raised the hammer again.

John threw an awkward jab with his shackled hands and hit the old man in the face with just enough force to stun him into losing his grip on John's neck. Then with a two-handed uppercut to the gut, this one with a little more behind it, he doubled the old man over, then ran for the door.

Standing in front of the door, he jerked down the power switch and again shrouded the room in darkness. He raised his good leg and kicked the wooden door as hard as he could. It gave just a little. Behind him he heard the old man crying, and something else--things being knocked over, things hitting the floor, the sounds of searching.

As John kicked again, his bad ankle screamed in pain, yet still the door held. He caught his breath, raised his good leg and managed one more kick. This time the knob splintered off and the door flew open. Stairs led up.

Behind him, a two-count metallic click echoed through the room. The unmistakable sound of a shell being chambered. A shotgun.

Fighting back the pain, John loped up the stairs as the shotgun blasted behind him. Upstairs he found himself in an empty kitchen. He moved down a short hallway that opened into a room he recognized, the den of the old lady's house. It was dark outside and only a few lights were on inside the house.

Footsteps on the cellar stairs.

Frantically, John looked around, seeing the big bay windows, but no door to the outside. He knocked the dead telephone to the ground, snatched up the end table, and heaved it through one of the windows.

Outside the air was warm and muggy, the ground soft like after a rain. Naked, except for the handcuffs and leather belt hanging from them, John staggered toward the woods just beyond the house. As he reached the first trees he heard another shotgun blast behind him, heard glass shatter, heard pellets tearing through the trees to his right.

Into the trees, getting some of them between him and the house in case the old man ripped off another shot.

"Murderer! I'll kill you," the old timer yelled through the trees. Almost funny, a minute ago the old man trying to bash his brains in with a hammer but still had the nerve to call

him a murderer. Not to mention the sweet old lady carving a man like a Christmas turkey.

John turned forty-five degrees to the right. Choosing a zig-zag over a straight line. A minute later he heard another shot, then the pellets ripped into the branches off to his left. A frustration shot. The old man had guessed he'd turn but he'd guessed the wrong way.

He'd gotten out of shape. Just a few minutes into the woods he was puffing like a steam train, a stitch like a knife twisting into his side. John could feel his ankle starting to swell. Time for the zag so he turned left, crossed through what he guessed was fifty or sixty yards of woods, then suddenly burst into a clearing--the cemetery. The high three-quarter moon cast short, dark shadows from the tombstones. Blackness in a sea of night.

Something crashed through the brush behind him in the distance, followed by bark of a big dog. John had trouble as he stepped over the low spiked fence that surrounded the graveyard. For a second he had to put all of his weight on his bad leg and came close to impaling himself.

John remembered another fence, a six-foot iron one that spanned the front of the property, the half-inch thick bars thrust at the sky like black spears. If it circled the whole property, how the hell was he going to get out?

The barking grew louder.

As he limped between the gravestones, John heard the old man cursing in the distance, farther away than the dog, but getting closer. Terror's icy hand gripped John Burke's heart. His feet stopped moving and he dropped down onto a soft, moist patch of earth and leaned his back against a marble slab that marked someone's final resting place, someone whose troubles were over for good. John put his head into his hands as despair washed over him.

He wasn't going to get away. Not on a bad ankle. Not with his hands cuffed. Not from a madman with a dog and shotgun. A madman who kept humans like cattle, who beat men to death with a hammer, whose wife ran a human butcher shop. They were close, the old man and his dog. John could hear the dog tearing through the underbrush just inside the woods, just beyond the cemetery fence. In a minute it would all be over. He wondered if Gail would ever find out what happened to him? To die like this, in a bone yard, victim to a crazy old man and his even crazier wife.

Fear, despair, hopelessness--these feelings surged through John as a sob racked his body so hard it bounced his back off the marble tombstone and shot a bolt of pain down his spine. Then, as if cleansed by fire, those feelings melted like snow, replaced by something new, by something better, by something

that fueled him--Rage.

Perched in front of the grave next to him was a thick marble urn, holding a bouquet of long dead flowers. John rolled to it, grabbed the urn in both hands, and dumped out the withered flora. He felt the comforting weight of the urn, heavy enough to crush a dog's skull, or a man's.

He wasn't going to make it easy. If they were going to kill him, they'd have to work for it. The headstones were too small to hide behind unless he crouched down and John didn't want to crouch down and hide. He was through hiding, besides, his ankle couldn't take much crouching. Better to let the dog see him, try to get rid of the mutt before the old man made it out of the woods.

The underbrush got quiet. The dog was out of the woods. No more barking. The moonlight and the shadows played tricks on John's eyes. A glimpse of movement at the fence then nothing. He strained his eyes, willing them to see through the darkness but it was his ears that responded, picking up the quick thumping of padded feet on the wet grass. The sound coming from his left. John raised the urn and turned, then heard it behind him, much closer. A throaty growl. He tried to spin around but the furry beast hit him in the back.

Claws raked his bare shoulder blades as he slammed face first into the ground and the marble urn flew from his hands,

useless. Sharp teeth gripped the back of his head and shook it like the stuffed head of a doll. His scalp tore--he actually felt it--as the dog growled and bit harder.

"Get him, boy!" the old man shouted from somewhere near the edge of the woods.

John used his good left leg to push into the ground and roll. The dog tightened its grip on John's head and tried to roll with him but John used his arms to topple the German Shepherd off of him. As the brute tried to regain his feet, John kept rolling until he was on top with the dog pinned under him. The canine's jaws sprung open, looking for something to bite as John grabbed the animal's big head, one hand on each side, and forced the handcuff chain and part of the leather belt into the back of its mouth.

With his naked body pressing down on the dog, John forced the Shepherd's head back. The handcuff chain cut into the roof of the dog's mouth as John pushed back harder and harder. The beast's nails ripped at John's chest and thighs, but still he forced the big head back until the dog's agonized yelping was cut short by a loud crack, like the dry snap of a rotten branch, as its neck broke and body went limp.

John rolled off of the dead dog and struggled to his feet. The old man yelled, "Did you get him, Butch? Did you get him?" John turned toward the sound of the man's voice and saw him

stumble out of the woods, just on the other side of the fence, shotgun held across his chest. The old man's eyes locked on the animal lying on the ground. "Butch!" he cried, voice cracked with emotion. Then he raised his shotgun.

John dropped behind a headstone just as a blast ripped through the air. Pellets smacked into the other side of the stone. Then, as the double click of a new shell being racked into the chamber echoed across the graveyard, John scrambled away on all fours, keeping his head below the top of the tombstones.

By the time he reached the cemetery fence, John could barely move. His breath came in ragged gasps; his chest, shoulders, and thighs were on fire; and the back of his neck felt wet and sticky. He lifted his cuffed hands over his head and wiped at his neck. His palms came away covered with blood, blood that looked almost black in the moonlight.

One foot got tangled going over the fence and John fell, landing with a thud on the other side. Behind him, fifty yards at most, he could hear the old man's quick shuffle coming across the cemetery. The old man mumbling and cursing to himself. Once John got into the tree line he felt a little safer, something between him and muzzle of that shotgun. But the going was slow. Much tougher than before. He started to feel dizzy. The dog had torn him up and he knew he was bleeding badly.

He'd made it this far but knew there was no way he could make it all the way back home, at least not tonight. Too tired and too hurt. But with the dog dead, all he had to do was shake the old man off his trail, then hole up somewhere until daylight. In the morning he would parallel the road just inside the trees to keep out of sight. His house was only two miles away. He would make it even if he had to crawl on his hands and knees the whole way.

He ran into the fence. Six feet tall, made of pointed wrought iron bars, no more than ten inches apart. Impossible to slip between them. The bars braced by two thin rectangular, iron beams that ran the length of the fence. One, a foot from the ground; the other, a foot from the top.

John hadn't gained any distance on the old man. He could hear his thrashing back in the trees, his slow, steady pace, his mumbling punctuated by curses.

There was only one way to get out and that was over the fence. John set his feet on the bottom support and grabbed the top crossbar with both hands, but with his wrists cuffed he couldn't spread his hands out. He couldn't climb.

He managed to pull himself up so his chin was over the top of the fence and then swung his good leg up. It didn't go high enough. Arms straining, he swung it up harder and managed to hook his heel on the top support, between two of the bars.

That's when he lost his grip.

John fell but his foot stayed. He heard his ankle crack and he screamed. Caught between the two vertical bars and the horizontal support, his bare foot was wedged in tight and he hung upside down, naked, like a stuck pig being bled in a slaughterhouse.

The old man stepped out from the trees, shotgun held across his chest like a soldier. Fifteen feet from John, he raised it to his shoulder and grinned as he pulled the trigger. CLICK.

"Goddamit!" He racked the pump, took aim, and pulled the trigger again. Another empty click. This time he slammed the pump back and stared into the open chamber. "Son of a bitch," he mumbled, then grabbed the barrel in a two handed grip.

He swung it like a baseball bat at John's head and all John Burke could do was close his eyes. Just before the wooden stock crashed into his skull, he heard himself say, "Gail."

* * *

Gail Burke was on the toilet, in the middle of peeing, when the doorbell rang. "John," she heard herself say. "God, please let it be John." She pulled on her jeans and ran to the door, didn't even flush.

But it wasn't John. It was a man, old but distinguished looking in a dark suit with a pale blue tie draped in front of a starched white shirt. She glanced behind him and saw a van

parked in her driveway. Not a minivan, but a full-sized, white work van, windowless except for the driver and passenger doors. No name on the side.

"Can I help you?" she asked, losing hope her caller had anything to do with John.

He raised his hands slightly and she noticed they held a round plastic container. Rubbermaid, or Tupperware, with a lid on it. "Yes," she said.

"Mrs. Burke?"

Gail nodded.

My name is Muller, Frank Muller. He nodded to the right. "I live on Cemetery Road."

She gave him a brief smile.

"I've read about your...your husband's disappearance in the paper."

At first she'd had a lot of visitors like this. Well-wishers, sympathizers, but it had been two weeks and people had stopped coming by. Mostly, she guessed they thought John's disappearance maybe wasn't so mysterious after all. Middle-aged man, married for a dozen years, suddenly takes off. Maybe found a young girl. No mystery there. But she knew that wasn't what he'd done. Something terrible had happened. She could feel it.

"Thank you," was all she could think of to say.

He raised his hands again. "I've brought you something.

Chili, my wife's secret recipe."

She looked at the container. The two-gallon size. That's a lot of chili, she thought. She caught a whiff of it as he slipped one hand under the container and lifted part of the lid with the other. He said, "Chock full of beef and beans. Put some meat on your bones."

Gail felt her face flush. Her jeans hung loosely on her hips. She'd lost ten pounds since John disappeared and hadn't had it to spare to begin with. "Thank you. Thank you very much, Mr..." She couldn't even remember the gentleman's name.

"Muller," he said.

"Of course," she said quickly. "Thank you again, Mr. Muller." Gail reached for the container. "To be honest I haven't felt much like cooking and that smells delicious. Please tell Mrs. Muller that I said--"

Mr. Muller shook his head. "Buried her recently."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that."

As she took the chili from him, he forced a smile. "I made it but it's her recipe so if it's good she gets the credit." He laughed a more genuine laugh. "And if it's bad, I'll take the blame."

She felt the heat through the plastic. They said goodbye and Gail Burke went inside to eat a bowl of Mrs. Muller's secret recipe. She felt her stomach growl with hunger. If it tasted

as good as it smelled, maybe she'd have two bowls.

THE END