

FATMAN'S INFERNO

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“Pimplipper? Is that...”

“More. Or less.”

“But you’re...”

“So everyone says.”

“I was at the funeral.”

“I know, I know. An outpouring, if I say so myself. Touching. The mayor, the governor, a lot of guys like you.”

Little people, in Pimplipper’s world. Truth be told most of us had mixed feelings, or were happy to see him go. Nonetheless. If you were guilty, you called Pimplipper. Not a legal scholar, but definitely wired up. He knew how to get things done.

“You’re looking, hmm, considering the circumstances... Not so bad.”

Which wasn’t true either. He looked like you could hook an air hose to a compressor and blow him to dust. A couple million bits of Pimplipper, floating in space. God only knows what would happen if you breathed it in.

“If you’re... What’s the word...”

“Dead?” Pimplipper jacked an eyebrow at this. He had an actor’s repertoire of facial moves, honed before juries over the decades.

“Sorry. But how many choices do I get? You’re living?”

“Not exactly.”

Pimplipper gave me a poke in the chest. This was like a meeting between two under-inflated balloons. “You given any thought to what you’re doing here?”

“I’m not feeling myself right now” I said.

“A little light-headed, maybe?”

“Now that you mention it.”

“Aches and pains?”

“Jesus, no. First time in years. My hip. My back. They were killing me.”

“That wasn’t what was killing you. Take my word.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Check your suit.”

I take some pride in keeping myself up. I am not what you would call slender, but like other men of substance, I’ve learned that a well-cut garment can make up for a questionable diet and a lack of exercise.

“What’s this, this, this.... *Goo?*”

I scraped my lapel and came up with sticky pink and green blobs. Plus a scattering of seeds, with what appeared to be a gang of dead flies.

“Watermelon? Why am I covered in watermelon? Certainly I did not... Who would...”

“Excellent question! One of many! Who would? Why? What was — *is* — the outcome thereof?”

I’d seen that look on Pimplipper before. He knew what you didn’t, which was a principal source of pleasure for him. He put on a smirk that cost you five hundred dollars an hour at his friend-of-the-family rate, plus you got a view of his significant dental work — white! bright! — while his blue eyes lit up behind his rimless specs.

“Let me clue you in. Something I learned. What, fifty years of seeking justice for my clients. Most of them guilty, but what the hell. You get a view.”

“What are you saying?”

“Who would? A kid. Or, maybe a knucklehead but not a kid. Or a knucklehead kid. Which is to say, the worst. Why? He felt like it at the moment. Able to see two seconds down the road? Highly unlikely. All now, no then. Ten minutes from now? You might as well be talking about taking a ride around Jupiter.”

“What’s that got to do with this mess? Anyway, you got a wet towel or something? Christ. This is embarrassing. Like I’ve been sleeping in a dumpster.”

“Forget about it for now, okay? You want the particulars?”

“I’m not so sure.”

“The truth. It will set you free.” At that Pimplipper let loose a nasty chortle. It caught in his throat and he seemed, briefly, to be choking. “Well, that’s a load of bullshit. But anyway... What’s the last thing you remember?”

“The last thing? Jesus, Pimplipper. It’s like my head’s an empty closet.”

“I get that a lot. Relax. Don’t think about it. Thinking doesn’t do you any good.”

“I’m in my car, okay? Doris. Doris in the passenger seat.”

“Good. Good.”

“Paint chips. Time to freshen up the kitchen she says. She’s pulling paint chips out of her purse. Can’t look at them now, baby, I tell her. I’m driving.”

“Then what?” Pimplipper’s got that Cheshire Cat grin. If he didn’t know the answer he wouldn’t ask the question.

“Bang! An explosion. The windshield. We’re upside down. We’re sideways. Doris screaming. Off the road. Mud. Grass.” I’m shaking.

“And...?”

“Quiet. Quiet at first. Then bugs in the ditch. Chirping. Scratching. Birds. Maybe birds. Doris breathing. Gaspings. Then... Nothing. Not until...”

“Until this,” Pimplipper says. He sweeps out his arms, as if he’s welcoming me to his kingdom. It’s not much to look at. A tunnel in limestone. Water oozing from the walls. A thick black pipe slightly raised from the floor. Candles stuck in alcoves cut into the walls. “Our little catacomb.”

“Just you and me?”

“We’ll get to that. One thing we’ve got?”

“Not world class accommodations. From what I’m seeing.”

“Could be worse. Trust me. Anyway, time. We’ve got plenty of time.”

Pimplipper reached into his breast pocket and pulled out a dog-eared notebook. “Let me see. Fadiman, Fadiman, Fadiman. Here, Thomas Fadiman. Ha. It’s been so long since I heard your actual name.”

“I know, I know.” I got hung with the nickname, Fatman, in grade school. Tom, Tommy, Thomas, I only got that from my mother, the nuns at school, and Doris. Even the old man called me his little Fatman.

“Fadiman or Fatman? Your choice.”

“The way you say it, it sounds the same.”

“Okay. Fatman it is. Just to make sure, twelve eight fifty-three?”

“What?”

“Birthdate. Things get messed up.”

“Pimplipper. How long have we known each other?”

“I know, I know. You think there isn’t bureaucracy everywhere?”

“Are we shuffling paper? Or are you going to clue me in?”

“Take it easy. Maybe you don’t want to know. I mean, it’s ridiculous.”

“What’s ridiculous?”

Pimplipper set a hand on my shoulder. Again, a meeting of the balloons. “You want to know what everybody figures? They’re in their own bed. Window open. Sun shining, birds jabbering. The wife, the kids, they’re all there. Passing the tissue box. They think you can’t hear them blubbering but you can. *Oh, he looks like he’s at peace. Finally he can lay his burden down. After all he did for us. Always the family first. Do you remember the time he... And that other time, when... And, ha, ha, ha, the way he always...* You float up there next to the light fixture, busting loose. The tunnel of light. What the hell, an angel or two. The full ring of bologna.

“Then on the other hand, you got the way it generally goes down. Your case, for instance. You heard the phrase, death with dignity?”

“I used to get mailings from this cremation joint. Prepay, save a bundle. They were big on dignity.”

“Basically another type of barbecue joint, but okay, let’s walk this back. You’re in your car. Driving down the freeway. Speeding. Seventy five in a fifty five. You got nowhere to go, not really, no rush, nonetheless, breaking the law if I may observe. The point being, nobody is fully innocent. In my considerable experience. What is life but degrees of guilt?”

“Jesus, Pimplipper. That’s a little bleak, even for you.”

“No extra charge for wisdom. Anyway, you got Doris groping in her purse. Those paint chips. All the shades of blue known to man. You glance at the road, you glance at the chips, you take a look at Doris. Who, you don’t mind the observation, was quite a package. What she was doing with you, I...”

“You think I’ve never heard that before? I have my own charms. Maybe not all of them so apparent.”

“I’m talking about the totality, Fatman, the gestalt. The looks, the brains. A real schemer.”

“We’re getting off the subject.”

“One more thing. Why that stupid little convertible? How did you even get into it? A guy like you, why not a Suburban? A Navigator? A Hummer? Gravititas. Elbow room. Instead of that Shriner clown car. You’d still be alive. Which is another point I got to make. What I hear over and over. If only I had not done this one thing, well, then. But it’s never one thing. It’s a hundred things, a million things. You take this turn in the road and that turn, going back to the first decision

you ever made. Do I suck on the right tit or the left tit? All of it leading to the moment we're enjoying here. You covered in watermelon and dead flies."

"I think it's starting to ferment. You sure you don't have a wet towel?"

"Once it dries you can brush it off."

"I didn't really care for the blue. For the record."

"Doesn't matter much now, does it? You even notice that pair of kids up on the overpass? Little Buddy Horton and his pal, Balto. I forget that kid's last name. But both of them, trouble. You could put the pair of them in a cell tomorrow and spare the world a lot of misery.

"These lovely delinquents start the day by stealing some kid's red wagon. From there they make their way to the community garden, where they had previously noted that the watermelons are ripe. Buddy, being the brains of the operation, observes that since there are too many to eat on the spot, they should load up the wagon and make a getaway.

"It either one of the fools could hold thought for a minute and see it through to its conclusion, well, we wouldn't be talking now. But no, life's a video game to the little cretins. They get to the freeway. They get on the walk bridge. They see all the cars below. Wouldn't it be funny — hilarious! — to drop a watermelon on a passing vehicle! Of course it's not so simple. There's a hurricane fence that's six, seven feet tall. These young felons don't crack five feet. So Buddy tells Balto to scale the fence and he'll pass the melons. Figuring if it comes down to it, it's Balto who's going to Boys Town.

"Balto drops two or three before he figures out you got to lead a vehicle coming at you at sixty miles an hour. Seventy five in your case. You'd been going a reasonable speed, he would have missed you by a mile. He's not a fast learner. More a lucky numbskull. But there you have it. Bulls-eye. Smacko. Next thing you know, that's you, tires up, sparks flying. Too bad you never got the roll bar. Would have left you with a little more hair."

"I didn't have that much to start with."

"True. But now instead of hair you got road rash."

"I don't feel anything."

"Of course you don't. It's more an aesthetic thing."

"What about Doris?"

“I thought you’d never ask. To be honest, it speaks poorly of you, Fatman. All sorts of worries about your suit. But this woman, who for reasons nobody can understand, is devoted to you?”

“It’s a lot to take in, okay?”

“Tell her that.” With that another of Pimplipper’s facial flourishes, this time a well-practiced roll of the eye.

“Sad to say, she was breathing longer than you. Consequently, the whole scene. Fire trucks. Cops, ambulances. Traffic backed up for miles. Jaws of life because the thing has folded up like a house of cards around the two of you. Then the fire in that little shit-heap. Out come the hoses, the extinguishers, the foam. They’re doing everything but pissing on it. They pull poor Doris out first, it being clear you needed no further treatment. Maybe just a hose down to keep your precious suit from bursting into flames. Her shoes are smoking from the heat. Not that she’ll be needing them. But still. Alive, sort of. They toss her into the ambulance, get her to the hospital. Pointless, but they got to put on the show. Off the gurney, onto the steel table. Lines, fluids, pumping, thumping. You got the better end of this deal, my friend. One, two, you were down for the count. In comparison, peaceful. Inasmuch as violent death is peaceful.”

“She have final words? Do you know?”

“Fatman’s a careless asshole.”

“No. She wouldn’t.”

“Okay, she didn’t. Ha ha. Just fooling with you. Go ahead. You can ask her yourself.”