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THE DUKE OF DEMOLITION GOES TO HELL

by John Gregory Betancourt

So this is hell, Big Jim Carnack, the self-proclaimed Duke of Demolition, thought to himself.

He remembered dying. He remembered the sterile smell of the hospital, with so many doctors and nurses looming over him, so many fruit bowls and flower baskets and potted plants oh-so-tastefully arranged around the room.

Reality had gotten a little weird at the end. He'd drifted through a painkiller haze as endless streams of relatives and business associates trooped through for one last look. They had no hope -- he saw it in their eyes. They knew he was terminal. *He* knew he was terminal. Cancer was like that; it was just a matter of time.

Don Esmond -- his junior partner in the construction and demolition business for the last eight years, the kid he'd brought in straight from business school to handle the financial side when the company got too big -- shoved his young, tanned, sickeningly *healthy* face close to Big Jim's. "So this is it," Esmond whispered with a rictus grin. "I get it all, old man. Hurry up and die, will you? My wife and kids are waiting in the car."

I don't deserve this, Big Jim thought, but all the arguments had long ago leached out of him. He merely closed his eyes. When he opened them again, Esmond was gone.

That was the last thing he remembered.

The next thing he knew, he was walking along a twilight street. Victorian mansions with huge front lawns and wrought-iron fences faced him from both sides, looking not run down, but new, like they must've been at their prime. The soft yellow glow of oil lamps spilled from their windows.

"So this is hell," Big Jim said again, this time aloud. He gave a low chuckle.

His fate had a certain ironic quality. These were the houses he'd torn down his whole life, decaying relics of bygone days when coal had been cheap and ten-room houses the middle class standard -- huge, drafty, inefficient monoliths to a lifestyle which no longer existed.

He'd enjoyed destroying them. Was that his sin? He'd made a career in buying Victorian mansions. Abandoned by their owners, too run-down to renovate, they went cheaply at public auctions. His men moved in like a swarm of army ants, stripping everything salvageable. Big Jim had an eye for art: stained glass was a prize plum. Lead-glass fixtures, old tile, old brick, oak floorboards . . . it all ended up recycled into the new houses ("a touch of old-time class") his company built on the foundations of the old. He squeezed every penny out of a mansion's corpse before laying it in its grave.

In the old days, before he started his construction company, it had been just demolition and salvage. He'd worked fifteen-hour days with non-union kids he hired at minimum wage. He'd operated the wrecking ball himself, and he'd *enjoyed* the work, *enjoyed* the slow, ponderous motion of the ball as it swung back, gathered speed, then slammed into a building with killer force. He'd raised demolition to an art form. Shattering walls without caving in roofs, loosening mortar without pulverizing bricks, knocking out windows one by one: it brought an almost sexual fulfillment, a sense of satisfaction like no other. Was that so terrible?

He thought back to his wife, to his son and twin daughters. They'd seemed happy. He'd given them everything they wanted or needed . . . a nice home, a swimming pool, Catholic schools, two dogs and a cat, a car for each of them. Sure, they'd had fights and arguments, but what family didn't? And when his son came to the hospital that last day, Big Jim could've sworn there were tears in his eyes. All past sins had been washed away, forgiven. They'd been friends.

And his wife . . . Big Jim knew it had broken her heart to see him in the hospital, slipping farther away each day. But that hadn't been his fault, had it? And his daughters, sobbing in the corner as he made lame jokes . . . If there'd been any other way . . . if suicide hadn't been a sin . . .

Perhaps it had been his business dealings that brought him to hell, Big Jim thought uneasily. He'd tried to run an honest company, but he'd paid his share of graft. The construction and demolition business floated on under-the-table cash. Even so, he'd never stabbed any partners in the back (literally or figuratively), never stolen, never cheated on his taxes -- never done anything *overtly* illegal. All he'd done was tear down old houses and put up nice new ones. What had he done to end up in hell?

What if it's not hell? he wondered suddenly. *What if it's all been a dream -- my dying, everything?* He stopped and held up his hands. They'd been yellow-gray and liverspotted with age in the hospital. He'd been sixty-three, after all, not young anymore. But *these* hands . . . he turned them over and over in the dim light. These hands looked young, healthy, like the hands he'd had in school.

Reincarnation? he wondered. *Amnesia?*

Shadows flickered in the windows of the Victorian opposite him. Had a person moved inside, or was it a trick of the light? Big Jim hesitated. He knew he couldn't spend the rest of eternity wandering aimlessly. Better to check out the house than stand in the street and guess.

Having a plan made him feel better. He opened the Victorian's gate, strode up the brick walkway, then climbed the porch steps one by one. Stumbling on the top step, he almost fell -- a loose board had caught his foot, he realized.

Be careful, he chided himself. He was used to Victorians; he knew how treacherous they became when they were old and decaying. Several of his workmen had fallen through rotted-out floors, or had walls unexpectedly cave in on them.

He knocked, paused a minute, knocked again. No answer came. When he tested the knob, though, it turned easily.

He pushed the door open with his fingertips. A needlelike pain jabbed his index finger, and he jerked his hand back with a startled cry. "Ahhh..." he muttered. *Damn splinter.* He pulled it out with his teeth, spat it away, then stumped in.

The place was deserted: not a stick of furniture anywhere. Varnished oak floorboards creaked underfoot. A cold draft touched his cheek. The place felt like nobody had been inside in years, even though a flame flickered in the old-fashioned oil lamp hanging from the ceiling.

Big Jim shivered. It was cold in here.

Crossing to the huge, cast-iron radiator, he reached out cautiously. He didn't feel any radiating heat. When he bent to check the valve, though, it burned his hand. He leaped back, cursing out loud this time, nursing burned fingers.

Another draft touched him. The house seemed to exhale, like it was alive. *Alive?*

Big Jim backed toward the door as dust began to sift down from the ceiling. The place seemed to exude hatred, he thought, as though it wanted to collapse on top of him, as though it wanted to *kill* him.

He ran for the door, made it through, didn't stop for the porch steps but leaped over them. On the brick walkway he came to a sudden stop.

A wrecking machine now sat directly in front of him. It hadn't been there when he entered the house, nor had he heard it drive up. *It must be a trick of some kind,* he thought

He circled the machine cautiously. Its huge stabilizing feet had been lowered and locked into place, spread out in a huge X to brace against movements of the wrecking ball. The ball itself, a five-hundred-pound steel slug at the end of a chain, hung from a forty-foot-tall steel tower.

The door to the operator's cab had "Carnack Demolition" stencilled across it. Big Jim climbed onto the tractor tread, then the stepping rung. The cab door opened easily. He slid into the padded bucket seat, the smells of plastic and new rubber surrounding him.

A manila folder lay across the controls. He flicked on the cab's light, opened the folder, and began to read.

* * *

JAMES HOUSE (1884-1973)

December 8, 1884. Leaking roof ruined 473-book library.

January 14, 1885. Child broke leg on steps.

January 19, 1885. Clogged flue filled house with smoke.

February 2, 1885. Ceiling fixture fell, injuring woman.

March 17, 1885. Maid slipped on wet kitchen floor.

March 24, 1885 --

* * *

It was a list of the house's sins, Big Jim Carnack realized. He leafed through page after page of petty annoyances. Broken pipes, leaking gas valves, rotting wood, lots of burns and splinters and minor injuries for the people who lived there. The house had even killed: an old woman fell down the second-floor

steps and broke her neck in 1904. It killed again in 1951, a teenage girl who slipped in the bathtub and hit her head on the sink.

As Big Jim skimmed the entries, he got a sense of the house's true nature. It wanted to hurt people, he realized, to make their lives as miserable as it could. He thought of the stumble he'd taken on the front steps, of the splinter the door had given him, of the burn he'd received from the radiator -- even when it wasn't radiating heat.

The pettiness irked him. The house needed to be punished, he thought, and he was just the man to do it.

He turned the key in the wrecking machine's ignition. The engine purred to life. He changed gears; the steel ball began to swing back.

Big Jim knew then why he'd ended up in hell. It wasn't a punishment. He'd come to render justice. Throughout his life he'd specialized in destroying Victorians. *They must fear me*, he thought. *I must be their worst nightmare.*

He revved the motor.

The house began to scream even before the wrecking ball struck.

THE END

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