

Living Alone in the Jungle

Algis Budrys

Illustration by Kandis Elliot

A man was brought up from Kansas City, whom I would not know to look at. But a certain person pointed him out to me by chance. The Kansas City man was coming out of the pool hall on Paulina that is right on the north edge of Chicago. This other person of my acquaintance gave me the nod, saying: "There is a man I used to work with in Kansas City. What do you suppose he is doing up here around Juneway Terrace, Tierney?"

We were in the submarine sandwich place, eating with our food in front of our faces and looking out through the window. I saw that the Kansas City man was in the habit of touching the back of his neck. He was wearing a blue suit and gray hat. "I don't know," I said, and left the submarine sandwich place by myself.

I saw that the man was walking north, toward the red and yellow brick buildings that they call the Juneway Jungle. He half-turned once, and I stepped into the entrance of the shot-and-beer place across from the school playground, but I had no other trouble following him, and he didn't see me.

I followed him to my street and saw he was going in my building. I went around back in the alley and came up the back steps. Mrs. Macaluso was putting out her garbage into the can on her back landing, and her eyes got big. "Why, hello, Tierney!" she said, "I thought I was hearing you home upstairs," so I put my finger to her lip and went "Shh!" real gentle. So she gave me a nod and went inside behind her closed door, and I went up to the back landing of my place.

When I went in my back door, I could hear there was something going on in the front room. When I looked in around the corner from the dining room, I could see the Kansas City man was holding my brother with one arm circled around his neck and the hand over my brother's mouth, and was also jamming his legs in between my brother's to keep him from getting his weight set. The Kansas City man's other hand had a thing in it with a long thin blade made by grinding on the end of a long electrician's screwdriver. He was putting it in my brother's body low down all along the back, and twisting around in there until he finally found an artery. Then he held my brother for a while until he was beginning to tire and stumble from the weight of him, and he laid him down. On the TV was the first inning of the Chicago Cubs ball game. My brother would get interested in things and not be distracted away from them, especially lately. It was like there were fewer and fewer switches working along the tracks in his mind, and you could start him on a ball game and he would not so much as swat a mosquito until the last man was out.

The Kansas City man wiped a hand across the back of his mouth and straightened his clothes. He left the knife in my brother's body and got out a Cricket lighter, which he turned up high and used to set fire to the fingerprints on the yellow plastic handle, which made a stink and a lot of soot. Then he went back out through the front door which he had opened I guess with a piece of plastic, which you can do.

This would be a different world if there was no plastic.

I used a corner of the throw rug to smother the knife handle and pull the thing from my brother, and then I went out through my front door, which the Kansas City man had closed and wiped the knobs of. I waited back on the landing, and when I heard him go out the street door, I went down well behind him. I noticed in the entry that he had taken the card off my mailbox where I had printed my name, Tierney Debrecenskoy, and I thought that was a bad joke of him.

The Kansas City man got very confident as soon as he thought he was off my turf. He was no longer touching the back of his neck or taking off his gray hat to wipe his forehead. I followed him toward Roland Armagia's place down below Howard Street, in Rogers Park. His house, not the store off Clark Street that looks like a household electrical fixtures place.

There is a turn you take there, walking, when there is almost no chance you are not going to Roland Armagia's brick bungalow with the Cyclone fencing. So once he took that turn I stepped out from behind some hedging and pulled him in there with me. I did not ask him anything, because going to where he was going was all the answers a reasonable person could expect, so I did him in right away.

I got my mailbox card back from his pocket, and wrote HA HA on his forehead with a ballpoint pen. I put him around to Roland Armagia's alley garage with the \$39.95 repaint blue Ford in it that has heavy duty rear springs and a lot of false panels over odd-shaped little cubbyholes. A man saw me, but I had on the Kansas City man's gray hat shading my face, and all the Rogers Park cops know I never wear a hat. So I just shook my finger at the man, and he ducked back fast inside his garage. Still and all, I walked back out of the alley in the opposite direction, and then went over for a while to the saloon on Western Avenue where Tommy Darling will say you were there all afternoon. They will believe him because all the Foster Avenue station cops eat and do other things there, and he also knows what to do with a gray hat you hand to him and say you found it outside his door.

I had three Hamms Beer and watched the middle of the ball game, then went home and got my brother up. "How did I do?" he said, mopping his face from the heat you get when you have the results of the process.

"How did you do? You did fine, you big cabbage, and the Cubs are ahead only because the Cincinnati third baseman was watching some girl in the stands, and let a ground ball go through his legs while you were asleep. Stop rolling down your sleeve, Asshole," I said, putting the hypodermic and the empty medicine jar away in the wall. "Your shirt is burned and has holes in it; you have to get out a new one."

He took it off and stood there fingering the holes. "How come I don't bleed, Tierney?" he said.

What can you explain to people without switches? "You bleed." I said. "You bled like a spring pig that time in East St. Louis when they threw the pipe thing full of roofing nails that took the whole front out of my store besides tearing up the walls. I had to go out in the alley and put my lunch in the weeds." I got stores now built like currency exchanges; you would have to get bazookas. "What they did to you this time, you bleed inside and it collects. You have to go to the john?"

"Huh? Yeah... yeah, come to think of it. But I already went that way this morning, you know?"

"The other thing you're gonna do, you're gonna get hungry as hell. Go in the john and then put

on another shirt, and I'll call the pizza meanwhile."

"All right." My brother stopped and looked at me. "How come you always know what to do and I can't even remember what I did? Ain't we the same person?"

I went over and kissed him on the cheek before I had to look in his eyes any longer. "It's OK, Tierney," I said. "It's how it has to be. You're happy, ain't you?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I guess so. Yeah. Listen, can we have sausage and anchovies?"

"Sure," I said. "And I'll get it from Laurie's. They'll bring it in one of those little Jeeps with the heater in the back," and he grinned and went off to do what I'd told him.

I don't know. When Sanford first gives him to me and I give Sanford back his markers, I was told the process undoes whatever happens to your brain as well as your body while your metabolism is not working. But I have read in many places that brain cells do funny things if they don't get a lot of attention from the body, and I think Tierney gets a little dumber each time, and I don't mean me.

I called Laurie's, and then I called the University medical center and asked for Doctor Sanford in Research, who got on it right away when he heard who it was calling.

"I need another three cc's of Processor, Doc," I said. "You want the two thousand made out to the Equipment Fund again?"

That would be fine with him; they had seen this new centrifuge or something in a catalog, and it had counter-rotatable eccentric cam capability in stainless steel with Teflon inserts and a Vinyl landau top or something; they always have something they need it for right away.

Story copyright © 1991 Algis Budrys

Art copyright © 1998 Kandis Elliot