

DESIGNATED HATER

By Leslie What

Leslie What made her first appearance in F&SF last month with her short story. “Clinging to a Thread.” Her second story is quite different.

Leslie wrote “Designated Hater” after a man driving a pickup followed her home one night. “I didn’t want him to know where I lived,” she writes, “so I pulled into a stranger’s driveway and told my kids to crouch down and hide, hoping he’d pass without seeing us. At the time, I wished these was something I could do to him. Maybe that’s the beauty of fiction.”

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GO AHEAD, ADMIT IT. NOW and then you think about getting even. Like a month ago, walking back to work after a picnic in the park, your shoes shined, your fingertips smelling of sliced oranges. You planned to ask the new production manager to dinner. Only one block to go when you stepped in warm dog droppings. You spent the rest of the day with your nose wrinkled up, trying to avoid an odor so rank it made you want to puke, unable to stop tracking the scent.

Stupid dog owners, who let their dogs shit on the sidewalk — where it melts under the sun like bubble gum — instead of on their own constipated lawns. There it could have sat like wet toadstools for them to step on, making it their problem instead of yours. You don’t have a dog, and it pisses you off that dog owners never seem to step in crap.

Remember:

The weekend when you were late to pick up the kids from your ex’s. You stopped at the grocery for a carton of milk, a loaf of bread, and a couple of cans of tuna. The express lane was closed, so you waited, telling yourself it only felt like the line was moving slower than committing suicide by slit wrists. Then a checker tapped you on the shoulder and said, “I’m open over here.” You left your place in line to follow him to another register.

That checker couldn’t figure out how to open his machine; when he did, someone sidled up to the other end of the counter, the freedom side, demanding that he count their bottles before they did their shopping. The checker pegged you as reasonable and said, “This will just take a second.”

It took five minutes because of a slight discrepancy in the bottle count. Meanwhile the checkers ballpoint pen stopped working; he asked to borrow yours to scribble some numbers on his pad. An agreement was finally reached and the checker opened his register. He took his sweet time rooting around the drawer for change. Another checker leaned over to ask for a price check on baby lima beans.

By the time your checker got back to you, you were steamed. Your ex was going to give you grief for being late again and you said, “I don’t need this shit!” You tipped over the milk carton, grabbed the ballpoint you knew wasn’t yours, and stormed from the store, swearing you’d never shop there again. You were pissed and getting more pissed by the minute because you were hopelessly late, but still out of milk, bread, and tuna.

Remember: The night that guy in the olive-colored pickup pulled behind you and blasted his horn. To teach him a lesson, you lifted your foot from the accelerator, slowed the car, just a little, but enough to make him mad. Your cheeks blushed warm and you felt a little ache that you at first assumed was only your gut acting up; before long you started worrying that the pain came from your heart.

The pickup’s brights were halogen enhanced. You switched your rearview mirror to its night setting, avoiding blindness, and gave him the bird when he roared past. He cut in front of you, as if mooning you with his truck. You leaned on your horn and switched on your brights, a little shaky but feeling brave for having fought back. Then you saw the empty gun rack through his back window.

Now, hold that thought.

And take a deep breath, then let it leak out with a growl that leaves your voice scratched like the finish on your first new car an hour after you drove it off the lot.

You’re sitting down for breakfast at your formica-top table. You chew on a mangle of dry toast, irritated beyond belief that you’re out of jam and coffee, and the only store within twenty miles is the one where you vowed you’d never shop. You’re with a guy — not just any guy, but someone you’ve heard of, maybe even respect, or at least fear — who has come to offer you the opportunity of a lifetime. The guy must read minds; he snaps his fingers and two cups of coffee appear. He slides yours across the smooth table. You’re afraid to ask for jam.

“I’ve had my scouts out watching you for a long time and they tell me that you’re finally ready to join up with the big leagues. I want you to sign on the dotted line,” he says, and thrusts a piece of paper with his “X” already scrawled in black blood. “It’s easy,” he says. “I’m giving you the chance to manage the Designated Hater and get back at every SOB who’s ever stood in your way. It works like this. . . .”

You’ll live your life, just as you’ve always done, except from now on you’ll control the power of divine retribution. You’ll pick some poor schmo to do the dirty work for you, but you’ll choose the targets.

“Keeps your hands clean. Plausible Deniability,” he says. “Tons more satisfying than doing the work yourself. Remember that guy in Toledo who went postal after losing his job? He shot up the place, killed people he’d been working

with for years. Remember how nobody understood why he did it? The guy himself couldn't tell you, but here's the secret," he says.

"He did it under orders from my last manager. That's the beauty of the system. A vicarious thrill. The Designated Hater does the work, takes the risks, eats the stress; the manager watches it go down, relaxes, thinks up more ideas. For someone like you it's a win-win situation."

You suddenly understand that random violence is not random, but is contracted out. It all makes perfect sense, now that you know how things work. You lean forward. "So why are you talking to me? What happened to the last guy?"

"Retired," he says. "Was with me forty years. Says you can call to chitchat about the job, if you want."

You can't help but be interested, but you've read your share of deal-with-the-devil stories, so you're understandably cautious. "What's the catch?" you ask.

"It's a volunteer position," he says, "and unless something happens to me, there's not much opportunity for advancement. I can't think of anything else, other than that."

You tell him, "No. It sounds rather extreme." He shrugs, and bums some numbers into the tabletop with his breath. "If you change your mind, just give me a fax," he says. He disappears in a puff of smoke, leaving the contract fluttering above the table.

You clear the dishes and shove the paper into the garbage sack. You hurry to the office, but find it impossible to keep your mind on your work. The boss notices you sitting around and gives you a little something extra to work on at home.

It takes you four hours to finish that little something. You're hungry, but all you can find for dinner is a banana that's gone black. The flesh is soft, so sweet it tastes metallic. You toss the peel into the garbage and — almost as an afterthought — pick your way through the trash to retrieve the contract. The paper is smooth, strangely cold. You read carefully, searching for loopholes, then fold the paper into fourths and slip it into the back of your bureau drawer.

You tell yourself, "I'm not interested," but you know it's pretty low when you have to lie to yourself because no one else is there to listen. You struggle to keep from opening that drawer to read the contract over one more time.

You picture yourself signing on the dotted line. Your hand goes to your pocket, where your purloined ball-point pen has just leaked and left your new shirt bruised for life.

You know that managing the Designated Hater would make life a little easier. Because sometime soon — maybe later tonight, maybe not till tomorrow morning — someone is going to do something else so stupid it pisses you off, pushes you a little further over the edge. Consider your options. Really, when you think about it, you're the most qualified applicant around.