

An Eye for an Eye by Charles Coleman Finlay

Charlie Finlay notes that although this new story is in part about an engagement gone wrong, his own life has taken a happier turn: his recent engagement to Rae Carson recently ended happily in marriage.

“An Eye for an Eye” began with the first sentence, which was written as an example during a workshop discussion of first lines. After Catherine Morrison dared him to write the rest of the story, Mr. Finlay obliged with a story that might be classified as science fiction noir.

* * * *

So we’re sitting at a table in a Starbucks, and the beefy guy in the Hawaiian shirt says to me, “Yeah, after the colostomy, I had them put an eyeball in my anus—seemed like a good idea at the time.”

I think about saying, “Why, ‘cause you wanted hindsight?”

But because I don’t know him or his sense of humor, but mostly because I really need the job, whatever the job is, what I end up doing is taking a long sip of coffee, then saying, “So how’d that work out?”

“Not so well, you know!” He’s surprisingly intense about it, so I slouch forward and rub the stubble on my chin as though I care. Here I am, wearing serious bling, a hand-crafted jewel-covered globe on a chain around my neck, best thing I own, worth a small fortune. The last client I dealt with, some lawyer, made a big deal about it, had all kinds of questions. Now it’s this guy, who’s wearing an ugly shirt and telling me about the eyeball in his ass. And *I* have to take *him* seriously.

“See,” he’s saying, “I figured I could stick my ass in my windshield and drive down the highway mooning people.”

I decide I don’t care so much whether this guy ends up being my client or not, because, hey, he’s whack. So I say, “See anything worth seeing?”

He laughs. “It didn’t work out. The optical nerve they ran up my anus to my spine was more like telegraph wire than DSL. I couldn’t see shit—I know! Don’t say it. But no depth perception, not much color, just a lot of blurry movement. I tried to drive like this, holding the steering wheel between my legs.” He leans over out of his seat, and reaches down between his legs, miming the action. “Ran off the road on the first curve. Sprained my neck, was lucky I didn’t roll the car. You ever have the mocha frappuccino?”

He’s drinking some deluxe frothy thing full of sugar and topped with whipped cream. It must take a college degree to prepare it because the girl behind the counter was telling us about her years as an English major for the three hours it took her to fix the drink. Me, I have my coffee plain. I used to joke that I liked my coffee like I liked my women—strong, hot, and black. But the truth is, I just like it cheap and

easy. Which is how I like my women these days too. But it's better if I don't think much about that.

What I answer is, "No."

He takes the lid off to slurp it, and says, "It's like slushie heaven."

"What happened to the eyeball?" I ask, 'cause I gotta know.

"I had it removed when they grew the new intestine and took off the colostomy. Like I said, not my best idea ever. So are you interested or not? In the job?"

"What job?" I say. "We haven't talked about anything except your surgeries."

He says, "Oh, I'm sorry. Guess I'm not sure how this is supposed to work. But what I mentioned in my e-mail. I was engaged to be married and it turned out badly, now I want to get my jewels back."

"Jewels?" I ask. Perking up some.

He shifts in his seat. The animated parrots on his Hawaiian shirt flutter nervously to new branches. "Yeah."

Because I'm impatient and want to know what I'm going after, I say, "Like your grandmother's diamonds? What?"

"No," he says. "They're my family jewels."

I must stare at him like I'm stupid or something, because he tilts his head back and holds up his chunky hands in open supplication, and finally I say, "What?"

With a look of exasperation, he leans forward and whispers. "My testicles. She's got my testicles."

"Dude," I say, reaching down to check my own package and make sure it's intact. "Whoa."

Tilting his chair back, with a glance at the girl who made our drinks, he says, "I gave them to her for an engagement present. She said she wanted them because she wanted kids and all that. You know, I was in love, I thought, hey, kids, cool. But after we broke it off she wouldn't give them back."

And I know if he's telling the truth, I'm in. I'm thinking, if he's telling the truth I'm crazy if I'm not in.

Of course, he's not telling the whole truth. No one ever does. But is he telling enough truth to make it worth my while to get involved? That's what I need to find out.

* * * *

You have to understand that I got into burglary the way some women get into prostitution. First I did it for fun, then I did it for some friends, now I do it for money.

That's what I tell myself anyways. It's my way up.

Maybe I should tell you about it, so you can understand why I do what I do. When I do it later.

It started out a few years ago. I had a roommate who had a drug habit. He was a Have, like the guy I was meeting here in the Starbucks, and I was—am—a Have-not. I was born a borderline Have, my mom being a corporate lawyer and all, but when she divorced my dad for her trophy husband, Corwin, about the time I started middle school, Dad and I plummeted pretty quickly into Have-not territory. I've been trying to climb my way out ever since.

So my roommate, like I said, turns out he was a gasm addict, a dryhead, hooked on moneyshots, those inhalers that make a guy have orgasms. I tried that stuff once, but let's face it, it doesn't compare to the real thing, not least because where I live you can get the real thing cheaper.

Anyway, I found out roomie had a habit when he started pawning my stuff to make his dealer rich. I gave him one day to move out, which he did. When I came home from work, he had moved out all right—and taken all my stuff with him.

I couldn't afford the rates the contract cops charge these days. Oh, sure, I could've taken him to small claims court for nothing, but then I didn't really want to wait until we were scheduled for our TV slot to get satisfaction. That can take months. Instead I found out where he moved, broke in, and stole my stuff back. Since he'd already sold some of it, I had to visit him several more times, over six months and a couple addresses, until the checkbook balanced out.

The last time I robbed him, it was just for the thrill. The freak had gone straight, borrowed money from his folks, put up cameras and bought a guard fearit, one of those genetically engineered ferret hybrids smalltime dope dealers keep around. But sneaky low-tech beats stupid high-tech. I spraypainted the cameras and drugged the fearit with Nyquil-marinated chicken livers, broke in and took what I wanted. Then nature called at an opportune moment, so I left a king-size dump in the middle of his queen-size bed, wiped my ass on his pillowcases, and called it even.

I left off that last part when I told my friend Diane about it. Which ended up being lucky, because she'd just found out her boyfriend Joe was cheating on her. Diane was, is, a Euro-Chinese kickboxing braniac, with big dark eyes and great taste in jewelry. It wasn't like her to get all emotional, but she'd been in love with Joe and had her life planned out right down to the brood of children. That was going to be her whole life. So she took it pretty hard, especially when Joe kept a bunch of things that mattered to her, including her earpod with maybe her ten thousand favorite songs on it, her collection of Generation Mutant action figures, and the

celery-colored Fiestaware.

There we were, drinking away her sorrow, and she started telling me how Joe ruined her world, how he took something away from her she could never have replaced. She was cold-hearted that night, swearing she'd have him killed. I said she didn't need to go that far to get her stuff back. I could do it for her. Trying to impress her, be the nice guy rebound after that jerk. She took me up on it.

I got her most of her stuff back, but it wasn't enough to make her happy and I didn't get to be the rebound. Truth is, she's always been cold-hearted since that time. Joe died in a motorcycle accident a couple months later, casting a weird pall over the whole thing. She called me up to take her to the funeral, said I was the only one who could understand her true feelings about him. She finished law school after that, found a job at a big criminal firm, and crossed the border into Have-land. And that was that.

I crossed the border into Crooksville. My plan was to do a few big jobs, salt away the money, and start over. Finish college, go to law school maybe, something like that. Only the jobs were never big enough to give me that chance, even though I keep trying to move up into the big leagues.

Diane did me a favor here and there, telling some of her more discreet colleagues about my special talents. If their clients didn't have enough money for legal fees to resolve property disputes, they referred their clients to me. Over the past couple years, I've built up a steady business. It's a better gig than smash-and-grabs. I get some inside tip, a key or passcode, plus the people who are robbed are usually not eager to involve the cops. I make way more than I could on my own.

It was one of Diane's sleazier friends who contacted me about the beefy guy sitting across from me in Starbuck's. In an odd way, everything I have now I owe to Diane.

I try not to think about the fact that I don't have what I really wanted.

* * * *

What I say next to the guy in the Hawaiian shirt is, "Wow. That took some balls for her to do."

He frowns at me like he's already heard all those jokes, which probably he has, so I jump to the next question.

"Why not just take her to court?"

After another drink of frothy coffee, he leans forward and says, "Look, I depend on a trust fund and my mother administers it like a fucking food stamp program. She tolerates a lot but if she ever found out that I lost all of her future grandchildren, she'd go off like a missile."

“I’ll do it,” I tell him.

Because I’m in the moment I hear him say “trust fund.” I name a price that’s twice my usual fee and he says yes so fast I figure I’d lowballed him.

But that’s what happens when you move up into the next league. You make a few mistakes, and you learn.

I won’t sign any affidavits for accuracy, but here’s the story he told me, the way he told it to me, only with the boring stuff edited out.

Said his name was Casto Beckett, and waited for a response like that was supposed to mean something to me. Okay, so later I looked it up, and he’s one of the Becketts who own all the rental properties and retail space and the old nostalgia malls they have out by the exurbs. At the time, I had no idea who he was and just waved him on impatiently. He wandered a lot, talking about boarding school, hospitals, his controlling mother. Said he spent a lot of time and money on “business projects”—by which I gather he meant travel, clubs, and drugs—before his mother clamped down on him.

His ex-fiancée’s name is Patrina Solove. They met at a club or a party, somewhere on the scene, he can’t remember. But she was an insecure, evil, controlling bitch just like his mother, which is why he fell for her so hard according to his therapist. He’d been in a self-destructive phase then—he didn’t do anything harder than the mocha frappuccino these days, honest—and he’d made a lot of bad decisions. One of them was buying Ms. Solove an engagement ring with a five carat diamond in it.

Interjection here by me, saying I’d never seen a five carat diamond, and him impatiently saying it was big enough it could choke a dog, and maybe she’d choke on it. But he didn’t care anymore. That wasn’t the point.

Being she was from a family similar to his, only construction and data infrastructure—this time I nodded like I knew the name—the two of them got lawyers involved and drew up prenups before they even told their parents or let word leak to the gossip-web. She was set on having children, so as a condition of the engagement she got possession of his testicles.

“I’ve been in and out of hospitals,” he says, stroking the patchy beard on his chin, “so I figured what the hell, no big deal, and went and had it done.”

“And then the relationship went bad?” I prompt.

“Like takeout you forget in the backseat on a hot day.”

More rambling here, but the short version is the woman’s crazy, the kind who says one thing and does another, wants control of every facet of his life, always has to know where he’s been, who he’s been with, like she hasn’t got his balls already and that isn’t enough.

“She’s totally freaked,” he says. “She had my testicles dolled up like those easter eggs.”

“The plastic kind?” I ask, thinking about my grandma putting quarters and hard candy in those pastel eggshells and hiding them in her garden.

“No, like the kind they have in museums. All gold and shit.”

“Fabergé eggs?”

“Yeah, I don’t know, something like that,” he says, and it’s another one of the injustices of the world that I know this and he doesn’t. “She keeps the pair of them on a shelf in her living room, or did when we were still talking to each other. Last time we talked, she told me I’d never get them from her, and she had her security guy, Sean, throw me out of the house. I went into rehab after that...”

More rambling here, but the way it ends up is he gives me her addresses, everything he knows about her, and transfers a few token bucks into one of my bank accounts as a deposit. I have it set up so it looks like he bought something from me on eBay, so we can explain it away if it ever gets traced.

And that’s how we become business partners.

* * * *

Truth is, I feel a little bit of sympathy for Beckett. Not that I lost my balls or anything, but I had exactly one piece of bodmod done and it was for Diane.

I figured I’d never have a real chance with her, being short as I was, a couple inches shorter than her anyway, and her going for tall guys. So I cleaned out my dad’s bank accounts, what he had left, all for his retirement, and spent it getting four inches added to my legs. Pretty tame stuff, compared to what people do these days. Hurt like hell. Hell, it still hurts sometimes, and I’ve never quite gotten used to my new height. Center of balance is all off and shit.

It was the last time I ever spoke to my dad. Once he quit calling me up and cussing me out, that is. Served him right for getting fat and screwing things up with mom.

Diane didn’t even notice. When I saw her after the surgery, she paused for a second, looking up into my face instead of down, then kept on talking and didn’t say a word about it.

There’s no way for me to get back my money or give back the pain. So I have to live without the one and with the other. But it’s no big deal anymore.

Beckett’s job looks it will be a big one, so I break it down into parts. Problem with that is the more parts there are, the more parts there are to go wrong. First part, the hardest part, is finding out where she has his balls. I can’t steal them if I can’t find them.

But the information he gave me is good. His ex lives in one of those old gated communities on the cliffs along the river, the kind where they took down the gates a long time ago and now just have these big decorative entryways. It's quaint, if twenty thousand square feet with a six-car garage can be called quaint.

I put on a shirt with a nametag—"Elizabeth," which cracks me up—and a ballcap, and carry around a meter-reader that I stole from a van that was unlocked after I busted out the window and reached in to flip the handle. That's the thing about Have neighborhoods—the Have-nots that make them run are pretty much invisible. Look like you're there doing a job that nobody who lives there would ever be caught dead doing and they never give you a second glance.

The first floor of her house is all windows and no window coverings, in order to show off her possessions to the neighbors. The security systems in these houses, with their live-in guards, make hiding stuff superfluous anyway. Walking by, I see a pair of golden somethings sitting on a shelf in the living room like a pair of fancy Hummel figurines. "Humpty," I mumble, "If that's you and Dumpty, don't fall before I get there, okay?"

I know it's not all going to be this easy. When I see somebody walking around inside, I take the next step on impulse and go knock on the door. I'm looking down at the meter, clicking buttons, when the door opens.

"Yeah?" the guy says.

Whatever I was going to say, I forget it for a second when I see his face. He's obviously one of those old ultimate-fighting guys. His nose has been made flat so it can't be broken, flaps hang down over his ears, and he's got thick leathery pads on his jaws like protective headgear. Makes him look like a bulldog. For a second, I'm ready to ask him if he wants to sniff my ass to make sure I'm okay.

Instead, what I say is, "Says here the meter's behind the garage. Didn't see it there. Maybe it's down in the basement?"

I look up and meet his eyes challengingly, but bored. Like a guy who gets paid by the hour and has seen it all before, including JoJo the dog-faced houseboy. Then I look past him, like I'm trying to find the meter on the wall, like he's not even there, that's how bored I am, how much I want to get my job done and move on.

"I dunno," he says, starting to be angry, then catching the name on my shirt and wondering if he should make something of it. "Gotta be outside, 'cause we been here three years and nobody ever knocked on the door 'bout it before."

"So show me where it is then."

We troop around the house, and he leads me toward the garage where I said it should be, but as we walk around the side of the house I spot it behind the spirea bushes, and tell him thanks for the help while I'm typing numbers into my meter,

then walk off to the next house without looking back. Because I already saw exactly what I needed to see: yes, those were the eggs sitting right there on a shelf by the windows. It's the ego thing, gets in the way. People who steal stuff, they always show off the bling and it catches up with them. Trust me, I know. Those two golden eggs gotta be the ones I'm looking for, look like Fabergé, just like Beckett described them.

Knowing where they are doesn't make me any happier, even though finding them was easy. First off, she's got JoJo the security guy living in the house. Maybe she lets him out in the yard to shit, but I'm betting he doesn't go much farther than that. Second, the windows are all shatterproof glass and hooked up to an alarm system. So, even if I dodge her guard dog, I can't do a smash-and-grab, because the windows won't smash and if they did the cops'd be on me even before I could grab. The extra bonuses they pay cops in these neighborhoods are quaint too—private industry at its best.

I sit on that for a couple weeks, making plans and discarding them, watching the neighborhood. In the end, because I'm dead broke and need the payday fast, I decide to try the invisibility trick again. I see work vans bringing Have-nots from the suburb apartment complexes into the neighborhood to work—landscapers, maids, carpet-cleaners. A regular one-stop shop, every Wednesday, contracted out by the homeowners association. There's one supervisor who walks around between several houses all subscribed to the same service.

Dressed up in drab colors, a little dirty, and carrying a keypad, I wait until the supervisor has hit Beckett's ex's house already and is down at the other end of the block in the cul-de-sac. The door to the ex's house is open while the vacuum guys—all bonded and carrying headcams—shoot through the rooms. JoJo the dog-faced bodyguard is out back in his doghouse with his head under his food bowl hiding from the sound. I walk in studying my keypad and when I notice nobody noticing me, I scoop the eggs into a pocket I've got hidden in the front of my work shirt. Usually I look around and filch a little something for myself on jobs like this one, but there's really no time and I don't want to end up on any of the headcams. I notice, however, some blown-glass unicorn sitting on the shelf beneath the eggs—I pick it up, snap its neck, and lay it down. Then I waltz out.

I stop on the front steps, tapping furiously into my keypad. One of the lawncare guys looks up from where he's raking mulch into the bushes and I say, "We're behind schedule. Pick it up or you won't be home in time for dinner."

Guy mutters a curse word or two, but makes a big show of putting his back into the mulch-spreading. I hardly even see it because I'm walking down the street, shedding my hat, tearing the nametag off my shirt. Then I'm in the car, and out through the gates.

The two eggs weigh more than I expected. I don't know how much sperm weighs, but I don't worry about it. I figure Beckett will plug them back in, they'll go

back to work, and that's that.

In the end, it's one of the easiest jobs I've ever done.

* * * *

At home, I spend the whole evening studying these eggs. They're gorgeous—heavy, gold-enameled spheres, one decorated with dancing cabana boys or whatever they're called, the other with naked nymphs, look like porn stars, all in silver filigree and ornamented with tiny gems. I figure even if it's all fake, it's still worth a bundle.

It reminds me of the gold globe I was wearing when I went to meet Beckett. I go back to my bedroom and pull it out of my sock drawer and hold it up to the light. It's a tiny world on a gold chain, a present from Diane to Joe. It had been on the list of things she wanted back from him. Had been on the top of the list, actually. But since it had been a gift, I figured she didn't really have a right to it and I kept it for myself. A little something for ignoring the surgery I went through to be taller for her. Maybe I even planned to return it once she dated me, only then she never did.

The world twirls at the end of the chain, throwing reflections off the silver surface between the porcelain-enamel continents. It's elegant and looks like it should screw in half to hide something inside, but I've never been able to take it apart and after Diane moved on, I lost interest in trying. It sat in a drawer for a couple years until I needed to impress people with money.

I lay it on the table, coiling the chain around it like a nest, and go back to the eggs. The read-sockets are hidden underneath. I try plugging in my computers but it's security locked, and all I get are tiny flashing red lights that go away when I unplug. I figure if there's any kind of tracer in them that I've activated, it's best to turn them over to Beckett. So I call him and tell him we need to meet right away.

Beckett is grinning and chuckling when I hand the eggs to him at an Opie's Family Restaurant. We're in the booth at the end of the counter that's lined by barber chairs—they look great but they're not so comfortable to sit in, so they stay empty most of the time.

"You're amazing," he says, drinking a big malted shake. "How'd you do it?"

I tell him it's a professional secret and ask him to show me the cash. I like cash because it's harder to trace. He hands over a duffle. I drop it beside me on the seat and count the money out under the table. When I'm satisfied it's all there, I say, "It's been a pleasure doing business with you. Keep me in mind for any future needs you may have."

He chuckles again, like this is the greatest thing ever, and I'm thinking that Haves are different than the rest of us, because they have more money. But now I've got a piece of that for myself. "How you gonna spend that?" he says, grinning.

Since it's none of his business, I smile and say, "Dunno. I'll come up with something."

He laughs and tells me not to spend it all in one place, then we shake hands, promise to keep in touch, part friends.

I hate that downhome Opie crap, so I go through a drive-through Thai King to get some tom ka gai on the way back to my place. I pay them with one of the small bills Beckett gave me.

Alarms go off as soon as it hits the cash drawer. The money is fake. Counterfeit. The lady in the food window is old as my grandmother, and she's staring at me with that old lady mixture of disappointment and contempt while the tire spikes pop up in front and back of my car.

I lean my head forward against the steering wheel to wait for the private cops to show up. I'm hoping they take a while so I can figure out how to get even with Beckett.

* * * *

Turns out, I get out of the drive-through situation by pretending to be stupid. Way I feel right then, there's not a lot of pretending involved. The money isn't marked or tied to any other crime. When I hear that, I feed them some bull about getting it for change at a Chopstick Charlie's cross-town. While they badmouth their competitors, I dig up enough clean cash from my pocket to pay Thai King again for the meal. I also talk to the manager and pay upfront for the drop-in call from the coptractors. Of course, they keep the counterfeit bill. We all know one of them is going to spend it somewhere else, which is how the stuff stays in circulation. Everybody's happy. Even the grandma in the pickup window favors me with a complimentary smile and everything is forgiven.

By the time it's over, I'm not as mad at Beckett either. Thing is, I realize how lucky I am to get caught spending the counterfeit for small change. If I dropped a roll of it at a dealer for a new car or something, they'd have to cart me off to jail. So the big question is, is it all fake, or was that just one bad bill? Is it an accident, or have I been set up?

I'm hoping it's the former, because once I've calmed down I still want to like Beckett. It's hardly the first time I've been bagged with a bad bill. Everyone gets one now and then.

When I get home, I check out the rest of the finder's fee in the bag.

It's all fake.

Every bill.

I know, because after a few random ones turn out fake, I get methodical, like a freaking bank teller, and check every bill.

Which means Beckett is fake too. He's fooled me better than I thought.

I'm sitting here, on my futon, planning ways to get even with him, trying to figure out how I'm going to pay my bills, when the phone rings. I don't even bother to see who it is before I answer.

"Yeah, what?" is what I say.

"Still the charmer, I see," says a voice on the other end that I don't quite recognize anymore and also can never forget. When I'm completely silent, she says, "Hey, this is Diane. You still in your old line of work?"

"No," I say. "I retired recently. Apparently I'm too stupid to do it anymore." But what I'm thinking is, Diane? What the hell? I can't really concentrate on anything else.

"Well, get back into it. I need a serious favor and I can't turn to anyone but you to do it."

And I'm thinking, I can't possibly rip my heart out and leave it on your doorstep again because I've already done that once, and it was one time too many. "What is it?"

"A friend of mine had something incredibly valuable stolen. She needs somebody she can trust completely to get it back again."

"Look, Diane, I don't really do that anymore."

"This is a special situation," she says. "Some asshole stole her ovaries."

I shut up. I already know the next line before she says it.

"She had them stored for safekeeping in a couple of jeweled eggs, like Fabergé—"

"And her name's Patrina Solove."

That shuts her up. And gives me time to think.

Of course they were eggs. Beckett lied to me about the whole thing. If they'd been his testicles, they'd have been a couple golden nuts. He played me twice.

"How'd you know that?" she asks finally.

"Word gets around."

"It gets around fast then! I knew you were the right person to call. You know who has them?"

"Maybe," I say, thinking I don't really know much about Beckett at all, and whether he even is who he said he was. I'm thinking this whole thing is seriously

screwed up and I'm better off if I don't have anything to do with it. What I want to say to her is, hey, listen, there's not enough money in the world to pay me to be part of this mess. But she gets tired of waiting for me to speak.

"That's fantastic," she says. "Look, if you do this as a favor for me, I'd be very grateful."

"I don't know, Diane. I'm out of that line of work. I'm back in school, trying to finish my degree."

"That's great. God, you've got so much determination."

"I've got my mom's role model to follow," I say. "She worked really hard all her life. I'm just trying to, you know, do something I can be proud of." I don't even think of it as a lie, when I'm saying it to her. I believe it. It's the chance I should have had, the chance I still deserve to have.

"That's really great," she says. "Look, if you've changed and you don't do that stuff anymore, I understand that completely."

"I didn't say that, exactly."

"It's just that it would mean a lot to me. For my friend's sake. That's something this guy took from her that can't ever be replaced. It's like taking her whole world away. Do you have any idea how that feels?"

"Why would she do something like that anyway?" I ask, trying to change the subject away from me and Diane, because I don't want to think about us, and about all the stuff I deserve that I don't have.

"I know," she says. "It's a terrible idea because something just like this can happen. I told her it was a bad idea, but she wouldn't listen. She's completely devastated. Are you sure you can't do anything to help her?"

"I don't know. Maybe I could talk to her." I don't know what makes me say that, but as soon as I do, Diane's all over it.

"Oh, I knew I could count on you. Maybe after you talk to her, we could get together for dinner or something. Catch up on old times."

"What old times are those," I mumble, frowning at the bitterness I hear in my own voice.

But she says, "No, I should've done it a long time ago. I owe you payback. More than you know."

"No problem, Diane," I hear myself blurting out loud enough for her to hear. "Anything you ever need from me, you know all you have to do is ask."

After that we trade a couple pleasantries and she sets up a meeting with her

friend Patrina right there while I'm waiting on the phone, and then we promise to talk to each other soon, and that's that.

I'm totally over Diane, okay. But like she said, she owes me and maybe finally I'll get to collect. If I can get even at the same time with Beckett for cheating me, even better.

* * * *

Get this: Beckett wanted to meet at Starbuck's; his ex takes me out to lunch at Eleni's. Eleni's is the best restaurant in town, a place where you have to book reservations a month in advance. I meet Patrina there the *next* day.

When I arrive, the maître d' looks me over like I'm a bum off the street, until I tell him who I'm having lunch with, and then the whole staff suddenly treats me like I'm the guest of royalty, which tells me Patrina's a big spender, because in this part of the city, money is king.

They take me over to the table where she's already sitting and I can see why Beckett was willing to give up his testicles.

Not that she's my type. But she's the kind of almost-anorexic brunette that a lot of guys go for, looks like she lives on a diet of coffee, cigarettes, and pills. And that's fine, because she's built like a Jaguar convertible, all muscle and lean curves, everything waxed to a high gloss. She's wearing rainforest-green lip gloss, leaf-pattern eyeshadow, and a dark dress with a sheen on it like dew. Her mouth is a bit too wide for her face, which makes it just wide enough.

"Please sit down, I'm so glad to see you," she says, waving me into the seat and launching into a nervous account of the restaurant's specials, more like she waited tables than sat at them. We get interrupted once by a call to her cell phone and a second time when she remembers she needs to make a quick call. When we finally get waited on, I order the tofu curry, just because I think meat will upset her, and I smile a lot while she sips her wine and gives the preternaturally androgynous waitperson three sets of conflicting instructions.

When she finally settles down, I say, "So you're a friend of Diane's?"

She shrugs it off and then shoots right into a story about how they met at this party on one of the riverboats, and it turns out her best friend knew Diane's boss, and they started talking and became best friends, after which she adds a couple anecdotes about seeing Diane at a wedding and calling her another time for help with the police—a complete misunderstanding, but Diane knows how to talk to people so they do *stuff*, plus she's discreet, and anyway, that was all water burning the bridge, and then she laughs and says or whatever that phrase is, that's what I mean, and don't you and Diane go way back too?

"We've known each other a few years," I admit. "So what's your problem, exactly?"

“Didn’t she tell you?” At this point I notice that her makeup is covering some possibly bad surgery around her mouth. She’s playing with it the same way Beckett played with his chin, only there’s a tiny bump of a scar in the divot under her nose. Maybe it’s a mole. Either way, she flicks her finger over and over it when she gets nervous.

“Yes, she did,” I say. “But professionally, I figure it’s better to hear the whole story from you so I have all the facts straight.”

“Well, there’s not too much to say,” she says, leaning forward across the table to whisper to me, giving me a good look at the cylinders in her engine when she does it. “I had my ovaries removed, you know, for safekeeping, so they wouldn’t be exposed to anything that might damage them. It’s really the best birth control there is, you know. I had them stored in some replica Fabergé eggs, the kind made by Seibert’s—have you ever seen any of them?”

I have, in fact, just recently. But I give a shake of my head for a no, and she goes into a long description that doesn’t really do them justice, adding that I ought to see her friend Christiana’s, gorgeous, a real work of art, ought to be in a museum, although Jazmin has hers in a Betty Boop doll, which is kind of cute too, and Sigourney keeps hers in a golf ball—they can store them in something that small but it costs a lot more—even though they kicked her off the LPGA for cheating. She tells me a lot about how the storage process works, and how they can be ruined without regular maintenance, but I don’t care much, so I don’t listen.

She’s as impatient as she is talkative, and she stops the waitperson several times to check on the status of our meal.

During one of these interruptions, I get impatient too and ask her what happened to her eggs.

“Cas stole them—he told me he would.”

“Who’s Cas?” I ask, even though I can safely guess that Cas is Casto Beckett, my previous employer. She tells me his full name and I feel glad to have gotten one thing right.

“It’s kind of embarrassing,” she goes on saying and there’s a flinch in her eyes, and at that point I can see her more as my type. For all her polished exterior, she’s vulnerable. “I did some crazy things,” she says. “I got engaged to him, even drew up the prenups. That’s when I promised him my eggs—before I knew what he wanted to do with them! This was back when I was still running with the oddbod addicts.”

She says the last with a bit of a blush, and while I want to know what he wanted her eggs for, I don’t know anything about oddbod addicts and I say so.

“It’s a subculture thing, mostly about sex. You go into a spa at the beginning

of the week and they give you any mod you want. End of the week, they turn you back to normal, whatever normal is for you. Anyway, the one we met at was just outside Naples—”

“Italy?” I ask, getting a quick vision of tracking this down across the ocean like a real jewel thief. I ought to be eating in restaurants like this every day, traveling to places like Italy too.

But she says, “No—Naples, Florida. There’s a scene there—it’s too many drugs for me, all supposedly painkillers ‘for the surgery.’” She makes the little quote-marks gesture with her fingers, and I wait for a jab of her nail to signal the period but it’s not coming.

“Help me out a little more, paint a picture for me,” I say, licking my lips, and leaning forward on my elbows just as the waitthing arrives with our plates. There’s a bit of a delay while the three of us talk about the food and the waitperson grates a dusting of parmesan over Patrina’s dry greens.

“Cas liked to have an extra”—she lifts her eyebrows, glances around, and mimes a penis with her hands: modesty incarnate, that’s this girl—”attached to his chin.”

I try not to spit out my mouthful of tofu. I suddenly have a whole different memory of that patchy spot on his chin and him rubbing it. And I’m automatically thinking about the little bump on her upper lip too.

“It was kind of fun,” she says. “You can imagine what he did with it. You know, not all the stuff the mod addicts do is *wrong*. It can be okay if you’re not obsessed with it. So, yeah, I wanted to experiment with that kind of thing, but then I got sucked into the scene for a while. Cas is a total addict though! He blew through his whole fortune for weekend after weekend of it. I saw pictures,” she says, and then she describes graphically some of the modifications he had and I lose most of my appetite. Meanwhile I’m wondering what kinds of oddmod she had done at the spas. I must be staring at her too intently because she stops talking suddenly and starts rubbing that little bump above her lip until she relaxes again.

“We all make mistakes,” I say, trying not to make one here myself. “So let’s assume Beckett has your eggs now. Why not go after them with cops and lawyers?”

“It’ll take too long,” she says. “He was totally in love with me, obsessed. He always said one of me would never be enough. I think he has a plan to clone a whole bunch of me to be like his sex slaves. He kept talking about having a harem of love, a harem of Solove, crap like that.” She shudders, her wide mouth pressed into a tight green line. “He wanted to have, like, massive oddbod done and then have a harem of me please all of him at once. It creeps me out just thinking about it.”

I mumble something sympathetic. I think about telling her that she can’t be cloned with just her eggs, but if she doesn’t know that, why should I correct her?

She's still talking. "Plus the whole thing's too embarrassing. You can imagine the effect on my grandmother if this got out in public. She'd have another heart attack. Diane told me you'd solved a problem for her once, not the same, but close enough. She said you'd take care of it quietly."

That's my cue to give her the sales pitch, with the price list, which I do. To her credit, she doesn't flinch at all, and she opens her wallet right there at the table and does a transfer to my account for the deposit. Normally, I prefer cash because it can't be traced to clients, but after my recent experience, I'm happy to take the transfer and let's face it, I need any cash I can get. And, money aside, the best part of this job will be getting back at Beckett for ripping me off.

"I'll need some help," I say, and I describe what I need—addresses, keycards, passcodes—the sort of work that makes my job easy. She says no problem and then gets distracted and sends off a text message on her phone, and we talk to the waitthing about the dessert menu and she can't possibly have a dessert but do I get to Eleni's often, and I don't, so she insists I try the raspberry custard, which is not really my thing at all, but I let her talk me into it.

Eventually she gets back on topic. "Cas called me to gloat, so I know he has the eggs, and I know where he has them. But we need to act fast before he flies out of town to one of the spas. There's dozens of them, and since I dropped out of the scene, I don't know them all anymore and I have no idea which one he's going to now." While I'm trying to find out more details about the spas, she stands and, smoothing her dress over her impossibly tight tummy, says, "Can you excuse me for a moment?"

Before I can give her an answer, she walks off toward the restrooms in back, pausing a moment to chat with one of the head servers, and I'm watching her, daydreaming about my good luck, about all the stuff I'm going to take from his apartment besides the eggs, when I feel a hand on my shoulder.

I look up and it's JoJo the dogfaced houseboy. He's a bit flushed, has got a faint smell of fight-sweat on him, like he's just been in one, or more like he's ready to start one.

"Hey, I recognize you," he says.

I admit my heart stops for a moment. The last guy I wanted to run into here is JoJo.

But then JoJo says, "So you're not doing the meter thing anymore? Good. That seems like a hell of a job."

I'm thinking can he be that stupid? But then I look at his face, and with the evidence of how stupid he really is staring back at me, I decide to play it straight. "Yeah, I do this other stuff on the side, for an old friend, happens to be a friend of Patrina too. Weird how that works out, huh?"

He says, “No kidding.”

I notice his sweat again, and figure maybe it’s heavy exercise for him to put two thoughts together, and he must be just about worn out by now. “So is there something—?”

“Patrina asked me to bring you these,” he says, and he starts shoving things into my jacket pocket. “Here’s the address for her ex-fiancé’s place, a keycard to his building that she didn’t give back when they broke up, and here’s the passcode to his place.”

I’m jumpy because I didn’t expect to see JoJo here and also because I don’t like doing certain kinds of business in public. But JoJo knows his stuff, because he’s using his body to block the view from nearby tables, and I tell myself the rules are different when you move up to the big leagues. When I don’t get this kind of stuff from my clients, the jobs are so much harder. This one is going to be easy and I can concentrate on ripping off Beckett for everything he’s worth.

I make some small talk with JoJo, but it ends with me telling him thanks, and he says no problem. While I’m looking around, wondering where Patrina’s gone, he excuses himself and leaves. About that same moment, our androgynous waitperson brings the bill and asks how I’d like to pay it.

Pisses me off. Typical Have attitude, probably how they get to be Haves. But since I’ve got Patrina’s money in my account and I’ve got Beckett’s counterfeit cash at home and I’ve got Diane waiting to see me when all this is done, I’m in a good mood overall, so I pay it. Although I leave a shitty tip.

* * * *

Beckett lives in an older apartment complex downtown, with minimal security. I’ve got nowhere else to go after lunch, so I sit outside for a while watching people come and go from the building until I decide to do a quick reconnoiter. His cardkey gets me in, and I go up to his landing and knock on his door, saying “Pizza! Hey, your pizza’s here!” I stand away from the peephole and figure I can duck down the stairwell before he gets out the door if I hear it open.

When there’s no answer, I try his passcode, just to see if it works. I slip on some latex gloves first, because I’m working, and it’s just in case.

The door swings open and I see his dead body face down on the floor. He’s naked like he just got out of the shower, and there’s blood all around his head, and the back of his skull is smashed in like JoJo was hiding there waiting for him. The main thing I notice, and it freezes me in fascination for a moment, are all the faint scars on his body, odd shapes in odd places, for who knows what.

There’s more to it though. I’m looking at the abuse his body has taken, self-inflicted and otherwise, and I realize that the rich aren’t like the rest of us at all. They do whatever they want and get away with it.

The chime of the elevator out in the hallway scares me and I shut the door. While I hear the voices out in the hall, I do a quick look-around for the eggs, just out of habit. They're not here. Neither is anything else of value. He's got a third-rate home theater and fourth-rate furniture. It looks like anything he could pawn has already been pawned. Stepping over to his desk, I don't even see a laptop, just a stack of unopened bills, none more than a couple months old.

I know Patrina's played me too, but most lies contain a peppering of truth. I find myself standing next to Beckett's dead body, thinking that since there were two eggs, maybe the one with the dancing boys was his testicles and the one with the nymphs was her ovaries. Like it matters.

I'm shaking like I've had nothing but coffee for three days. Then a door shuts somewhere out in the hall, and the voices are gone, and I'm in a hurry to leave. Might be the first job I don't take anything with me on the way out. I'd wanted to get even with Beckett, but that seems kind of pointless now.

* * * *

I should be getting rid of his counterfeit money first thing when I get home, but I find the funds that Patrina transferred to my account have been frozen. I haven't made any real cash in over a month and I've got bills of my own to pay so I hold onto the bad cash because I'm going to need to pass it.

Then I take a drink to calm my shakes, and a second drink when that doesn't work, and pretty soon I'm getting blind drunk so I can forget the sight of Beckett's body. I try to pack, because I know I need to go away for a while. There comes a point where I can barely stand up and I go hunting for the globe, the one that looks like Beckett's eggs. There's a thought in my head, that maybe it's the same kind of thing after all. I can't find it, but then I'm so gone I can't find my ass with both hands either and I pass out drunk soon after.

The cops come to pick me up around ten the next day.

I'm still sleeping when they start banging on the door and knock it open 'cause I'm too slow to answer. One of them has a nose like a Collie, makes me think of JoJo, and he starts sniffing around while I try to shake off the hangover fog and get them the hell out of my place.

They're polite about everything, but it's clear they've got warrants and probable cause and somebody who paid them enough money to make searching my place a priority. I'm hoping it's about some simple burglary, but when they start asking questions about Beckett and how long I've known him and what my business with him was, I know I'm screwed.

They turn up the counterfeit money. And blood on my shoe.

About that time they put the handcuffs on me and read me my rights. We all know it's a joke. The truth is we only have a right to the justice we can afford. And

I'm bust.

* * * *

I call Diane from jail, ask her for her help, and, thinking it will give her a reason to get involved, blurt out that I still have the world pendant she gave Joe.

She says, "It's too late for that."

That's when I realize, for the first time, what she kept in that necklace. I mean, no wonder she was angry, right. But I didn't know, and before I can say anything to her, tell her I'm sorry, I didn't know what it was, she hangs up.

Like I said, cold-hearted.

* * * *

That's how I ended up here in this cell on death row. You know the story the prosecutor told in court. They said I'm a petty thief who went into partnership with Casto Beckett, who got himself in financial trouble and wanted to move some counterfeit money to get out. I killed him and took the money. Then I used his stolen credit card to make a huge transfer to my own account from the restaurant, where I was trying to blackmail Patrina Solove before her bodyguard rescued her.

I'm telling you the real story, the whole thing, even the stuff I did wrong, because you're here to help me. Right? They talk about taking an eye for an eye, that's justice. Well, I know I did some wrong things, and I'm sorry for them. But I didn't do the murder they're going to kill me for.

Listen, talk to Diane for me—she's got to be behind all this. There was just no way to know her ovaries were in that globe. Tell her how sorry I am, tell her I didn't mean to ruin them. She can't blame me for that, you have to tell her.

Dude! Don't laugh—I could end up dying!

Yeah, what do you mean I didn't need an eyeball in my ass to see that coming?