

## NOT BAD

I and my three best buddies sat around considering what could possibly break us out of the hottest, boring summer on record. Ron, Bob, Miles, and me, Juan Corona, cretins all, sat in the 106-degree stifling Spanish heat, wondering if we would expire from acute lassitude before the summer ended. Miles had taken to reading the same comic book over and over. Archie and Reggie fought over Betty while Veronica seductively tried to lure Moose away from Midge. He told us with a vapid stare it was the only way he could keep his eyes open—liar.

We were lounging on the back steps of Bob's place, all contemplating suicide with little success. "Hey, why don't we spend the night at the old haunted place at the end of Estrada Court?" Ron threw out in a listless voice. "It might put off the feeling that I want to kill myself from inactivity for a few hours."

"Bring it!" said Bob, his sarcasm thick. "I'm sure that will pump us all up for like two seconds."

"Better than dying of endless monotony." I retorted.

Miles opened his eyes long enough to say, "It sounds random and stupid, so let's go for it." Thus, our fate was sealed.

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We lay comatose until near midnight and then roused ourselves enough to collect sleeping bags, cokes, and enough red ropes to see us through till morning.

The old road to Estrada's Villa lay rutted and bound on either side by rusting barbed wire left over from WWII. Ravens that had died of thirst lay twisted in the fence and a partially decomposed cow carcass hung against the wire and a rotting post. The road looked as though no

one had traveled it in months. Howling jackals in the distance made a nice counterpoint to the wind hissing through the dried thorn bushes forming tumbleweeds caught along the wire. A thunderstorm in the distance lit up old military bunkers dotting the plains in this part of Spain. We stumbled along barely able to keep our eyes open. At one point, I had to kick Bob awake—he collapsed onto his back with his eyes wide open—staring sightlessly into the inky darkness of the too-warm night sky.

The wrought iron gate of the entrance to the old Estrada Estate hung on rusted hinges and promised more than acute indifference to breathing. After stifling our yawns and prodding Miles enough to actually wake him up, we used his bolt cutters and pry bars to open the gate, allowing our prepubescent frames through the opening.

A dense thicket of spiked bushes greeted us once through the now dilapidated gate. Unlooked for, a narrow ragged passageway, recently hacked through the brush, led to the steps at the front door. Archaic medieval runes carved on the heavy wood and steel door surrounded a five-pointed star hastily drawn in some sort of sticky red fluid. Bob stared at the runes long enough for us to be concerned that an acute spell of lassitude had overwrought him. The truth pointed to something less nefarious but with greater lethargic import than we expected. He had fallen asleep standing up with his eyes wide open, again—loser.

After slapping him awake, we noticed the front door was ajar, but it took the four of us, straining hard, to push it fully open. The ancient hinges made a rusty screeching sound like sharpened velociraptor claws on thin aluminum sheeting. A rancid smell wafted out the door suggesting blood awaited inside—a lot of blood. The sharp metallic-tasting odor permeated the air, and Ron mentioned that there should be plenty of protein inside if we needed it.

I said, “Yeah, ya dork.” Because that’s how I usually replied when Ron spoke the truth—it’s part of the reason we’re best friends.

Only pitch-black darkness greeted us as we entered the structure, so we took a few seconds to pull out flashlights. Miles couldn’t get his working, but was awake enough to notice candles and matches heaped on a nearby table. He pushed aside the bloody stumps of arms sporting fingers without fingernails to make room on the table to light the candles. Being a fastidious sort, he commented about the place being a dump. The cloud of flies that arose when he cleared the table put truth to his words. Fortunately, after a brief disruption, they dove for the hastily chopped body parts on the blood-soaked floor and resumed their ghastly feast.

A quick look around showed someone had recently used this space for a ritualistic black mass. Lumps of rotting human flesh sat atop spikes arranged in a circular pattern and satanic pentagrams drawn in blood adorned the walls on all sides of the dead naked female obviously used for the unholy altar. Maggots had come and everything looked like it was moving—their small white bodies writhing and eating as they slithered. Bob, who had reached the end of his ability to care yawned hugely. “Are we going to do something here, or what?” His indifference to the display was palpable.

A long spiral staircase beckoned nearby and, without saying a word, we all moved toward it like a group of mindless zombies. A bloody trail of footprints was visible on the decrepit wooden steps and individual stairs looked rotted, requiring attention to where you placed your feet when ascending. Miles, now less awake than the rest of us, wasn’t paying attention when climbing and ripped through the staircase falling onto a four-foot metal spike that penetrated through his torso, leaving his bloody organs draped down the sides. His body convulsed for a slow count to ten and then relaxed, leaving a smile on his face.

Bob said with deep regret and a shake of his head, “That might have hurt, but I bet he’s not as bored now—lucky bastard.” Then he broke into tears when he realized Miles had our only comic book on his back and the slow passage of time would now be ten times worse. “The useless wanker should have passed me the comic book. Geez, what is there to live for anymore?” He looked longingly at the spike adjacent to Miles.’ I could tell he wanted to plummet and end it all but lacked the energy to lean forward.

Ron chose that moment to slump back into me on the stairs. He turned sideways and nearly broke through the handrail. The cruel spikes waited invitingly below. I slapped him sharply across the face three times finally waking him. “Thanks,” He said, “I must have dropped off for a moment. So, where are we, anyway? Weren’t we going upstairs or something?” His torpidity was pissing me off. Why did he get to take a nap? What about me? I pushed him forward on his knees and kicked him up the stairs—stupid git.

The staircase opened to a long upper-level hallway with closed doors on either side. After counting our number, we couldn’t figure out why there were only three of us, but we decided it didn’t matter. We were all tired and agreed to find an empty room to spend the night. The bloody footsteps led to the second door on the right, the one I entered first. I found three dismembered corpses nailed up against the far wall. Their torsos ripped open and the offal tossed around and fed to them before they expired. I recognized part of a liver spilling out from the first of the men’s mouths. A ghastly look on his face marred by both of his eyes cut from the sockets and force-fed to the man next to him. Victim number two’s intestines dangled gruesomely from the third male’s mouth.

While I found the smell at least somewhat interesting, I didn’t think the guys would go for it, the pussys that they were, so I discarded the idea of staying the night there. I pushed back a

yawn as I exited the room and went next door where Bob was supposedly checking for a reasonably clean place to sleep. I knew I couldn't trust him; he had probably fallen asleep or languished in some sort of tranced coma brought on by the tedium of breathing.

Bob was indeed still there and when I entered the room, he actually looked more awake than I had seen him in the last three weeks. That lasted until his head toppled from his shoulders onto the hardwood floor. The head bounced, but his body initially refused to slump and a gout of blood spurted three feet into the air. Another mess—Ron would likely display his ennui if I tried to explain the situation. Better to just give it a pass. I probably didn't have the energy, anyway. On the plus side, we wouldn't have to deal with Bob's annoyingly unrelenting snoring for once. I'm not sure why I hadn't strangled him myself a few weeks ago. Probably would have taken more effort than I was willing to expend. Besides, I imagined the smug smile of death on his pimply face would be beyond my tolerance. No, the decapitation worked out all to the good everything considered. A wave of relief washed over me.

I stumbled into the room that Ron had entered and found him passed out on the floor. His hebetude finally overcame him. A family of mice with bright red eyes and visible sores on their furless torsos gnawed on one of his arms. He looked happily asleep so I left him there. Far be it for me to interrupt his *taedium vitae*.

Moving to the next room, which was empty, I threw down my bag and melted into a dreamless sleep. The only thing I heard was a long agonized scream in the early morning hours. It woke me briefly but was easy enough to ignore, and I fell back into a gentle repose.

Later that morning, I awoke refreshed and wondered if Ron had any of the red ropes left in his bag. I went next door and was disappointed to find his backpack empty and old Ronnie nailed to the wall of the bedroom. The word 'DIE' was cruelly branded into his chest and a long

jagged cut had opened his abdominal cavity. It sagged alarmingly, revealing his intestines and other lower-tract organs. I noticed they had sawed his stomach open, probably before he died, and the remains of our red ropes slowly dripped onto the floor. Now I was pissed and damn hungry—damn pig. Did he have to eat them all!? I realized the combination of anger and hunger made me less bored for almost a full 20 seconds. I'd have to remember that feeling when I returned home. I thought about that and the fine-knotted penance rope I had concealed from my parents. My mind wavered into a beautiful dark fantasy of the small metal bits at the end of the rope ripping through my skin and sinew. I felt a moment of bliss when the lethargy receded. The moment passed and my normal apathy and languor replaced the momentary spark of something unlikely to come to fruition.

I couldn't think of anything important to hang around for, so I made my way back down the stairs intending to go on home to more drudgery and listlessness. The massive front door had been closed and required all my strength to open enough for me to squeeze through. As I pulled, I felt the door slip off its freshly oiled hinges and the ton of steel and wooden weight toppled directly on top of me, crushing the ribs of my chest cavity and mashing all my internal organs. With the last vestiges of my consciousness, I heard a deep sonorous voice echo through the house.

“FOUR IN ONE NIGHT, NOT BAD.”