

A group of four young men were enjoying their weekend by bowling, their lives temporarily filled with glee and amusement. The worries of the colorful outside world were unable to penetrate the alley's impregnable defenses—for now. Sherman and his three friends—Payne, James, and Regis—had finished their first game with James crowned as the winner. The four were unsuspecting as fate's plans unfolded, plans that would inevitably ruin their night for the sake of protecting their nation's security.

Sherman's vision turned grayscale—all color left the world. Things were neither red nor green nor blue nor purple; everything was a variant of gray. *Ah, another day at the office,* thought Private Investigator Sherman as he flicked his pocket lighter to ignite his cigar. Sweat appeared on his brow as the heat from his trench coat and fedora got to him. Payne released the ball, but all eyes of the friend group were on Sherman.

Regis buried his face in his hands and grumbled, "Oh, you have *got* to be kidding me. It's happening *now!*?"

*It was just another Saturday evening. Nothing special. I nonchalantly lit my cigar and puffed it a few times in deep thought, hoping the uneventfulness would stay. Fate seemed to laugh in my face as I saw him out of the corner of my eye—another red-eyed man.* Sherman ignored his friends as he side-eyed a stranger from a few lanes over.

Sighing, James turned to Regis and told him, "Hey, look on the bright side! We almost made it halfway through the second game." He then turned to Sherman and sighed again while still talking with Regis. "The last time was, what, a few months ago? I'd call that progress."

By now, Payne had realized what had happened and walked towards Sherman, his face beaming. "Is it time for another case, Sherman?" He asked excitedly.

*My scrappy intern approached me like a golden retriever with no thoughts in his head. I had picked him up off the street about half a year ago. Contrary to how he looks, he has served me well in my pursuits to execute justice. I plan on continuing the use of his services even if I*

*am paying an arm and a leg for them. Despite my mysterious and lone wolf style, I do appreciate the company. He asked me about a case—loudly. The buffoon.*

Leaping out of his seat, Sherman lunged at Payne and covered his mouth, whispering, “Don’t mention anything about our cases in public, intern.” Wide-eyed, Payne nodded. “Good, very good,” commented Sherman. “I’m still going to dock your pay, though.”

“But you don’t pay me anyth—” Payne started but was interrupted by another hand-to-the-mouth.

“I *told* you, we don’t discuss salaries out in public, either. For shame,” Sherman rebuked as he went in for another puff of his cigar whilst removing his hand from Payne’s foot-shaped mouth.

“Alright, Mr. P.I. Shermy, *what* is it *this time*?” Regis inquired, clearly agitated. “I’ve been looking forward to bowling this whole week, so it better be good!”

*One of my cohorts tried guilt tripping me for doing my job, but he should know by now that justice sleeps for no one. I locked eyes with him, then nudged my head in the direction of the red-eyed man, who was about to bowl. No doubt he’ll get a strike—the bad guys always do.*

Per Sherman’s nudge, the friend group turned to look at the person of interest. A towering man with beefy muscles was clutching an eighteen-pound bowling ball three lanes over. His body was covered in black and gray tattoos, and his dark hair went down beyond his shoulders. He wore a light-toned wife beater with dark-toned jeans. His pals sitting in the audience looked like poorly made clones of his.

“That man”—Sherman quietly yet firmly lamented, his head tilted so his fedora covered his eyes—“will commit an act worthy of capital punishment tonight.”

*Clatter!* The red-eyed man’s bowling ball hit his mark, and instantly all pins went down.

Silence lingered around the youthful group as they realized the gravity of the situation. Sherman’s friends knew better than to question his predictions. Too many times they’d come

true, and too many times tragedies and innocent deaths had occurred that could have been prevented.

*I lifted my head and scanned the eyes of my cohorts. Only from the eyes could you tell if someone was truly ready, and now, only the intern's eyes glowed. Fortunately for me since that means I won't have to deal with contractors. Taking another puff of my cigar, I eyed the intern intently to see if his eyes would back down. They didn't. I smiled.*

"I'll take the intern with me for this one. The rest of you—" Sherman was interrupted by what looked like a high schooler wearing a dark vest over an even darker shirt. On his right chest was a bright name tag.

"Excuse me, sir, but you can't smoke here," he uneasily informed Sherman.

*Some twink rudely interrupted my brief to my cohorts. Preposterous! He even sounded the part. Neigh, I shall put him to shame—to shame!*

Sherman was about to say something to the employee, but James beat him to the punch. "We apologize. We were just leaving." He shot a glare at Sherman, which somehow managed to shut him up. Gathering their belongings and returning their shoes, the group departed the alley and rendezvoused by their cars.

*It was an unusually bright evening as I exited the sketchy establishment with my posse. Perhaps it was good my boy James stopped me—it was certainly the wise move—but by God it would have felt great to teach that twink a lesson. Everyone knows justice and cigars go hand in hand! The fool should've known that.*

After taking a swig of whatever was in his metal flask he kept stored in one of his many trench coat pockets, Sherman restarted his brief. "Now, as I was saying, I will take the intern alone with me for this case. The rest of you can do as you please but stay sober and alert in case we require backup. No getting yourselves wasted, ya hear?!" He eyed Regis as he took another swig from his flask. Regis stared at him, figuring it wasn't worth pointing out the hypocrisy.

“You got it, P.I. Sherman,” James said sarcastically. Regis nodded, still clearly annoyed.

*As the sweat dripped down from my brow, I managed to complete my brief, and my cohorts agreed to it. Without saying another word, we separated into our respective automobiles. Theirs took off while the intern reparked his to get a better view of the bowling alley entrance. I claimed shotgun, the only seat worthy of me. This was my favorite part about the job—the stakeouts. I pulled a powdered jelly doughnut from my pocket and offered it to the intern, whose face turned unpleasant.*

“Where did you get that?!” Payne asked with a grotesque look.

“That’s not important, intern,” Sherman tried to assure him. “Doughnuts are a staple of any stakeout. To refuse would be to refuse the very ethos of a stakeout and reject P.I.-hood altogether. Now, eat.”

Reluctantly, Payne obliged. He sank his white teeth into the gray doughnut, and his face surprisingly relaxed. He wondered how it tasted so good if it was kept in a pocket for hours on end.

*Silly intern. Alas, he will learn—or die in the process. I pulled another identical doughnut from my pocket and consumed, eyes locked onto the main entrance of the alley. Fearing my energy might not last, I reached into another pocket and pulled out a disposable mug filled with coffee—black, as God intended. My eyes remained laser focused on the entrance. Even blinking felt like I was slacking.*

Payne stared in awe at the steaming hot mug but didn’t question it. Looking around, he wondered what he was supposed to do if Sherman had a sheer stare on the main entrance. Sherman seemed to have read his mind.

*The intern is fidgeting. I hate when people fidget. I’ve got to get him to STOP.*

“Your role will come later on, intern,” Sherman commented without looking away. “For now, sit still and save your energy. You’ll need it later.” That seemed to work as Payne eased his movements. Sherman was pleased. The stakeout continued.

*Seconds turned into minutes, and minutes turned into hours. I don't know how I kept awake this whole time. Well, actually, that's not true. I do know how: justice never sleeps. That, and the line of coke I did earlier probably helped too. The sun is about to touch the horizon, and our person of interest still hasn't shown his disgusting face ye... Well, fate be damned, here he comes now.*

Fifteen minutes had lapsed since the stakeout had begun when the red-eyed man and his goons exited the alley. White cigarettes were lit and in their mouths before they strayed even twenty feet from the door. Sherman smirked, knowing that his Cuban cigar was superior to their cancer sticks. Payne seemed to wait for Sherman to say or do something, but Sherman just watched like an owl, his eyes unblinking and neck turning to stay on target. The gang of punks walked over to two sports cars, talked for a bit, then split into two parties. The red-eyed man and one other buddy ducked into a gray Mustang and pulled out of the parking spot.

"And here. We. Go," Sherman stated dramatically, quoting his favorite clown. Payne shifted the car into first gear and began the tail. "Remember, intern, don't follow too closely or too far from him, else we may get suspected or lose him, respectfully."

"Uh, I think you mean 'respectively,'" Payne blurted out before realizing his egregious mistake.

"No, intern, I meant 'respectfully,'" Sherman doubled down. "Even if they are our enemies, in all warfare we must show *respect* to everyone even if they—"

"Okay! Okay! I get it, boss. I'll do my best," Payne interrupted, lurching the car into second gear. The gray Mustang turned right onto the main road and accelerated rapidly. In his four cylinder sedan, Payne tried to emulate the red-eyed man's movements, but reality got in the way. His Honda Civic chugged as fast as it could, but the Mustang quickly began disappearing.

*By golly, the bad guys have everything! I oughta add a sports car to my shopping list. I could count it as a business expense as well! Every write-off counts.* Sherman pondered for a

moment. *Hmmm, on second thought, funds are rather tight at the moment... Guess I'll have to take out a loan in the intern's name. I'm sure he won't mind—it's for justice, after all.*

Fortunately for the pursuers, the Mustang hit a traffic light with its highest bulb lit, commanding it to a halt behind a minivan. The Civic managed to snag a spot somewhat near the Mustang. Out of boredom, Sherman took out a nail file and started filing while Payne tried his best to focus on the mission at hand. When the traffic light changed, the Mustang accelerated, although its speed was limited by the slow driver in front of him. Payne thanked his lucky stars while Sherman threw something out his window.

The pursuit only lasted a few more minutes. The Mustang turned right off the main road and into a bar's parking lot. Soon after, the Civic followed suit and parked a good distance away from the Mustang but still within eyeshot. The two evil men had already entered the bar before the P.I. and his intern exited their vehicle. Payne turned to Sherman.

"What now, boss?" he questioned. After rubbing his chin, Sherman replied by reaching into one of his trench coat pockets and handing his intern a black clicker and a near-invisible earpiece.

"Hold this in your left hand and put this in your ear," he commanded. He grabbed another pair of the equipment and installed his own earpiece into his left ear. Then, stepping closer to Payne and lowering his voice, he continued. "Alright, here's the plan. Listen up good because I've only got time to say this once, y'hear? Now, you learned Morse code like I asked you to, yeah?"

"Yes, but—"

"No buts. Listen," Sherman's coffee breath was mere inches away from Payne's face, causing the intern to slightly recoil. "I'm going to scan the perimeter for any additional exits and deal with them appropriately. That's task one. After, I will enter the bar, order a drink, and watch at a close distance while waiting for him to act. If he does, I'll signal you. While I'm inside, you'll be watching the main entrance from your vehicle. Signal me if any of his friends show up or

anything else that looks like trouble, y'hear? That's task two. And, the final task: nab the man committing the crime and hold him up while we wait for the authorities."

"Alright alright, I got it, but what is this"—Payne asked, pointing to the little device Sherman had given him—"and how do I signal you?"

Sherman stared at his intern, dumbfounded at his lack of the obvious. "What do you mean, 'what is this?', and, 'how do I signal you?'?! With these portable telegraphs, of course! Use your head for once, intern!"

"*Telegraphs?!?*" Payne spewed back. "Do you have any idea how long it would take to transmit, receive, and translate a sentence?! You know we have cell phones, right?!"

"Ha!" Sherman scoffed. "We *had* cell phones. I dealt with them on the way here."

"What do you mean you dealt with th—" Payne began to ask, but when he reached for the pocket he kept his phone in and felt it was empty, his patience ran out. "Where in the *hell* did you put my phone?!"

"They're serious operational security hazards, intern. You should know that by now."

Payne was about to cuss out his insane friend, but he decided against it due to Sherman's illogical state. Yelling at a wall would solve nothing. So, he decided to play along and asked, "Okay, why not get walkie-talkies?"

"Ha!" Sherman scoffed again. "You expect me to whisper into a walkie-talkie while in the bar? *Think*, intern, *think!*"

Payne stared at Sherman, trying his best not to lose his cool in the middle of a case. Reluctantly, he put his earpiece in. "Fine, fine. You know best, boss," he stated sarcastically. The P.I., taking his intern at his word, puffed up his chest in agreement.

*This intern is infinitely lucky to be under my guidance. There's no other P.I. this side of the Mississippi that is as genius as me. He'll learn sooner or later not to question my authority.*

"Alright, I'm off," stated Sherman in a melodramatic tone. "Best of luck. If you fall asleep, may death be upon ye."

“Yeah, yeah, and plagues be upon my family,” the intern muttered as he stepped back into his car.

Sherman tilted his head slightly downwards to hide his eyes from any suspecting observers as he quickly stepped away from Payne’s car. In his attempt to look sly, he neglected to check for any oncoming cars in the parking lot. *Skrrrrrt HOOOOOONK!* A dark gray coupe skidded to a halt as its horn blared at Sherman, who nearly jumped out of his skin in surprise. Sheepishly, he put his right hand on the back of his head and waved to the driver with his left. The speeder simply shook his head and said something, although—perhaps luckily—Sherman could not hear him. He continued on towards the bar.

A moment later, his earpiece sang to him: *beep beep beep beep, beep beeeep.* Sherman didn’t have to take time to translate to know his intern was mocking him. Turning around, he shot a glare at Payne, who was too busy laughing to catch it.

*After I was almost killed in cold blood, my intern is giggling like a little school girl over my near death. Preposterous! I oughta teach him something about respect after this case is closed.*

When Sherman arrived at the front door, instead of entering, he made a robotic ninety-degree turn to his right and continued along the perimeter. His head was still tilted downwards, making it difficult to see past ten feet in front of him due to his fedora’s brim. He could feel more than one set of eyes staring at him and wondered why anyone would stare at such a nonchalant pedestrian. He considered if he was doing something wrong before quickly dismissing the ridiculous notion. When he reached one of the bar’s corners, he rounded it and entered an alley. The setting sun’s greyscale light barely reached in this dark alley, but that did not scare the brave P.I. He continued on like a soldier marching into battle. A sizable metal door greeted him on his left a few moments later. Sherman stopped and investigated.

*As I walked through the valley of the shadow of death, lo, a large door stood before me. It screamed at me as if to frighten me off, but this foolish door should know that I am the bravest P.I. that has ever graced this earth. Staring it down, I reached into one of my pockets and fished*



*around until I found what was needed. I slowly but surely freed it from its trench coat prison. It took considerable effort, but for a guy like me, it was just another walk in the park.*

It took Sherman about a minute to fully bring the grand piano out of his pocket. He hastily placed it against the door. Once set, Sherman wiped the sweat off his brow and let out a comical sigh before continuing onward down the alley. He grabbed his telegraph and clicked away. *O-n-e d-o-w-n*, he communicated in dots and dashes. Sherman rounded another corner of the bar when he received a reply. *Beep beep beeeep beeeep beep beep*. The P.I. smirked, knowing he had successfully confused his intern as any good boss should. Mystery shrouded this particular P.I. like degeneracy shrouded his local Applebee's.

Over the next fifteen minutes, Sherman identified two more bar exits—one for the employees to easily access the dumpster and the other for emergency exits—and promptly blocked them as well, one with an anvil and the other with three stacked porcelain bathtubs. Satisfied that no one would be able to use them, the P.I. and his intern now only needed to focus on one exit—the main entrance to the bar. *T-a-s-k o-n-e d-o-n-e*, Sherman signaled to his subordinate. Now, it was time for task two.

The sun had fully set behind the horizon by the time Sherman entered the bar. It was rather noisy inside—there was a live band playing country music and loud conversations being had. Scanning the room, Sherman easily identified the red-eyed man amidst the crowd of grayscale people and chose a two-person table with a clear vantage point of the target. He and his punk buddy were at the bar flirting with two women.

*I hate to be in a place of such debauchery, but if this is what it takes to be the righteous executioner of justice, then so be it. Our red-eyed pal and his goon were harassing some poor innocent dolls at the main bar. Brings a tear of anger to my eye. I wish I could smack these men right here, right now, but justice makes the rules, not me. Justice will be sweet later. For now, I will relish the future.*

An hour of unproductivity passed. Sherman and Payne sent a few messages back and forth of nothing substantive. The red-eyed man was flirting with a different woman now. The robust P.I. had been keeping track of how many women the buff guy had fumbled, but by now he had lost count. Sherman started to wonder if this dude's crime was his game with the ladies—or rather, lack thereof. The punk's goon had left a little while ago, causing the man of justice to wonder how the red-eyed man was getting home. At this point, the trusty P.I. was four beers in and impatient. He angrily tapped on his table rhythmically as he sipped his fifth.

Three more dreadful hours passed. Sherman was about ready to call it quits and give this future felon a free pass when the red-eyed man suddenly checked his watch and rapidly made way for one of the side exits. The sudden change of pace caught Sherman off guard, but he quickly recollected his focus. He confidently kept sipping as he heard the punk try and jiggle the door open to no avail. Pianos don't just sprout legs and walk off, after all. Defeated, the red-eyed man returned to the main bar area and immediately made way for the main exit in lieu of his original plan. A few seconds after he exited, Sherman followed and half-heartedly signaled Payne. The P.I. figured that the intern had fallen asleep a while ago despite all instruction to do the contrary. The cloud-covered night sky greeted Sherman after he opened the door, and he hurriedly scanned to see where the target had gone. Out of his peripheral, he saw him disappear into the alleyway right of the bar, which was no doubt pitch black by now. Sherman cursed under his breath, not wanting to go back to that scary, foreboding place. But justice was calling him now, and he couldn't leave her unanswered (his voicemail box was full).

Uneasily, he crept along the side of the bar until he reached the corner. Voices emitted from farther down the alley. He strained his ears to listen.

"...here in the envelope," he heard the red-eyed man say. "You got the cash?"

Another voice belonging to a male who sounded like a brand new adult answered with extreme nervousness, "Y-Yeah, it's i-in this b-b-bag."

*The pale moonlight breached through a crack in the clouds and cast itself over the bar, enveloping me as I listened to two fugitives of the law discussing their evil plans. Down this alley, something illegal was taking place, something worthy of capital punishment, but luckily, an angel of justice was here to stop them. I stroked the brim of my fedora and smirked, knowing full well this was their last night to experience freedom before they reaped what they had sown.*

Stealthily sneaking into the alley, Sherman crept about twenty feet away from them before he withdrew his .38 snub nose revolver from his trench coat. He loudly pulled the hammer back, aimed the firearm at them, and commanded with an artificially deep voice, "No one move."

Sherman could see the red-eyed man and the other unknown figure turn their heads towards him, but the lack of light precluded further analysis of who this other person was or what they were holding. The P.I. prayed neither of them were armed.

"Well well well," the red-eyed man said, straightening his posture to look even taller than he already was. "Is that the loser in the trench coat who's been stalkin' me? Didn't think ya'd have the balls to follow me 'ere."

"You thought wrong," Sherman said as confidently as he could, but his voice still cracked a little. He racked his brain wondering how his stealthy sleuthing was discovered. "Now, drop what you're holding and put your hands behind your back."

The man laughed. When the other person started to comply, the man stopped laughing and smacked him. "You gonna do what this lil loser says?!" he shouted.

"U-Um, y-y-yeah..." he replied weakly.

"Ha! He's not actual law enforcement, y'know. And there's no way that's a real gun."

"It is, and please don't make me use it. The authorities are already on their way," Sherman lied. "Sit tight until they arrive." Desperately, he signaled his intern with his freehand: 9-1-1.

To Sherman's horror, the red-eyed man responded by whipping out a switchblade. The blade's polished silver gleaned off the little moonlight the alley had. He strutted closer. "I've had enough of you, loser."

*Thump, thump, thump.* The man's footsteps seemed to grow louder tenfold as he approached. Time slowed. Pulse quickened. Sherman's trigger finger shook uncontrollably, flirting dangerously with the amount of pressure required to set off the gun. Despite being only a few inches shorter, Sherman felt like an ant compared to this monolithic, red-eyed, evil giant.

But Sherman remembered what he was here for. He remembered who he was: an arm of justice, a force to be reckoned with. Evil and injustice could not touch him, for justice was on his side. He cannot lose, for he *was* justice, and justice must necessarily prevail. No matter what the cost, Sherman *must* enact justice, even if that means executing the evil himself instead of pawning off that duty to the governing authorities.

Renewed by this conviction, Sherman's pulse eased, and his trigger finger steadied—and slowly pulled back.

A deafening bang rang through the night, its effects compounded by the echoing from the alley walls. The round found its new home in the red-eyed man's right thigh, who was just about five feet from the P.I. Instinctively, the man dropped his knife and what looked like a gray sheet of paper, clutching his wound and screaming his head off. The other person instantly dropped whatever he was holding and put his hands on his head.

"P-P-Please don't shoot me!" he pleaded, his cry almost drowned out by intense shrieks of pain.

The red-eyed man began cursing at Sherman. "Why, you... you little... you LITTLE SON OF A—"

*Rain began to hit my fedora and the sleeve of my outstretched arm. My ringing ears prevented any intelligible audio from being heard. Smoke rose from my snub nose. This is, by far, the worst part of being an arm of justice. I didn't choose this life. I didn't want this life. But*

*what choice did I have? Ignore righteousness and let evil trample over her, or to take on evil with its own weapons of war? Verily, I had no choice. And now, as the rain hits harder and harder, another act lies before me—one that I have no choice but to do, for fate has already pronounced her judgment. May God have mercy on your tarnished soul.*

Another shot rang out, this one finding its mark right between those damned red eyes. He fell over and hit the wet ground with a noticeable *thud*, his voice absent for the rest of eternity. The unknown person looked at the corpse in shock as Sherman walked over to the corpse. Gingerly, he picked up the envelope the man had dropped.

“What is this?” Sherman asked calmly, gesturing to the envelope. The person opened his mouth to answer, but nothing came out no matter how hard he tried. Not waiting for an answer, Sherman swapped his snub nose revolver with a flashlight he kept in one of his pockets and opened it. After a quick glance, he knew what they were.

“What in the *hell* were you wanting classified military documents for?!” the P.I. demanded to know, clearly less patient this time. This time, the spy was able to answer.

“I-I wanted t-t-to prove someone wrong o-o-on-on a War Thunder forum,” he admitted.

Sherman was dumbfounded. Angrily, he smacked the butt end of his flashlight against the spy’s face. Blood ejected from his mouth and landed among the wet concrete. “Stop playing games with me. What were these for?!”

Without recollecting himself, the criminal answered, “I s-swear! That’s the t-t-truth!”

*I looked up towards the night sky, desperately seeking the willpower to do what I must. I don’t know what adversary nation hired this impressionable kid to steal my government’s secrets, but no matter. This one must get his payment in full, so his payment must come from me and me alone. No one else would dish out his due justice in the right proportions. Say hello to Judas for me, you traitor.*

“N-n-n-no, wait, please!” cried the man as Sherman brought out his revolver and aimed it at the spy’s head. He looked away and pulled the trigger, silencing a desperate plea to live. *I’m*

*sorry...* he thought, wishing it didn't have to be him pulling the trigger. Tears began crawling down the P.I.'s face as he forced himself to search the bodies to make sure all classified documents were retrieved. When he had collected them all, he left.

The rain was pouring down hard now. Sherman's fedora and trench coat were soaked in water while his face was soaked in tears. His glossy shoes were splattered with gray blood. He approached Payne's car with a heavy heart, praying someone else could take up his burden of justice.

Sherman's opening of the car door jolted Payne awake. The P.I. didn't have the brainpower to wonder how Payne had slept through three gunshots. Trying to play it off nonchalantly, Payne rapidly sat up straight; then, he saw the state of his boss' face and quickly asked if he was okay.

After a moment, Sherman answered in between snuffles, "...No. Not tonight, Payne." The intern went wide-eyed at the sound of his own name, knowing whatever had happened must've been *really* bad to get Sherman to use it. "Heavy is the head that dishes out the wrath of justice. Let's just... Let's just go home. Tonight, justice will have to sleep, for its executioner has surpassed his limit." Payne simply nodded, started the car, and began the trek back to Sherman's house. The P.I. drowsily pressed his head against the window pane, his eyelids futilely trying to stay open. Before they came to a complete close, color flooded Sherma's vision, and he wished his world would never lose its color ever again.