

Word Count -2,085

## My Friend, Bobby

The eleven o'clock news had just come to end when the knocking started. Whoever it was, they were pounding so hard, they were liable to break the door right off its hinges.

I got up off the couch, put on a pair of sweatpants and went to the kitchen for my cast iron skillet. I wasn't expecting trouble. But, you never know.

I swung the door open and moved to the side, the skillet held over my shoulder, in striking position.

"Put that thing down," Bobby said, walking past me. "You look ridiculous."

"Please, make yourself at home." I watched as he opened my fridge and helped himself to one of my last two beers. He was wearing his work boots. They were caked in mud and he was doing a fine job at spreading it around the apartment. I put the skillet down and filled a bucket with soap and water.

"All the noise you're making, you're liable to wake up my landlady." I was on my hands and knees, scrubbing the floor.

"That cranky old bag hasn't dropped dead yet?" he yelled from the other room.

I emptied the dirty water into the sink, got the last beer and joined Bobby in the living room. He was spread out on the couch, his boots on the coffee table, one of my cigarettes dangling from his lips.

“Got a light?” he asked.

I turned around and headed right back to the kitchen. From under the sink, I got a plastic garbage bag. I ordered Bobby to take his boots off and put them in the bag. Then I sat down next to him.

He was having a hard time getting comfortable. He kept readjusting the throw pillows behind his head and he had a twitch in his right eye.

He grabbed the remote and changed the channel to *The Late Show*. Letterman was in the middle of his monologue, cracking jokes about a story that made headlines that day.

“Did you hear about this?” I said. The paper was in pieces on the coffee table. I found the story, folded it over, and tossed it on Bobby’s lap. “This guy had a lion in his apartment. He thought he could tame it, like a house cat.”

I leaned in to light his cigarette and saw he was all scrapped up under his shirt collar. “How are things with Katie?” I gestured towards his neck.

He stood up, walked over to the liquor cabinet and got a bottle of whiskey and two glasses. He set them on the coffee table and filled each with an equal amount.

“You want ice?” He handed one to me.

“It’s fine like this.” When I took the glass our hands touched and I noticed his knuckles were swollen. “Have you see Katie tonight?” I spoke with my mouth hidden in my glass.

“Why are you so interested in Katie?” He was pacing around the apartment. “Have you actually read all these books?” He began taking books off my shelf and tossing them to the floor. “Or do you buy them so people will think you’re smart?”

I reached for the remote and turned the volume up. They were running a commercial for laundry detergent. There were a group of guys playing football. One got a grass stain on his khaki pants. He was scared to show his wife. But, according to her, it was no problem. This new detergent attacked even the most stubborn stains.

Bobby poured himself another drink and held the bottle out to me.

“Still working on this one.” I showed him my glass.

He sat down on my easy chair. I hit the mute button and turned my attention over to him. His legs were shaking so bad he was setting my apartment into motion. The twitch in his eye had spread to his whole face as he obsessively checked his phone.

My phone was on the end table next to him. It started to ring. I got up to answer it but, before I could get to it, Bobby picked it up.

I’ve known Bobby most of my life. He may be wound tight. But I’ve never known him to be violent. I suppose that’s why he was able to catch me off guard. I was walking across the room and, the next thing I knew, I was on my back and Bobby was on top of me, pinning my arms with his knees.

“Why is my girlfriend calling you in the middle of the night?” As he spoke he sprinkled me with spit.

“She’s probably looking for you.” I tried to roll out from under him but he had a hold on me.

In the scuffle, my phone was knocked out of his hands and thrown to the other side of the room. It started ringing again.

“You stay right here.” He held his finger in my face. Then he got up and went for the phone. I jumped to my feet and made my way to the kitchen. The skillet was on the table, where I’d left it. I never would’ve hit Bobby, not with a cast iron skillet. But, I figured, it sure looked intimidating in my hands.

He was walking in a circle around my living room, the phone to his ear. He was calling Katie some of the most horrible names you could call a woman.

Had he known my wall was made of cinderblock, I don’t think he would’ve tried putting his fist through it. His hand made a popping sound when it broke. The pain further enraged him. He spiked my phone against the hardwood floor, shattering it into pieces. Then he turned his attention to my sofa.

He grabbed it by one end and flipped it upside down. The thing about that sofa, it folded out into a bed, so it had a lot of hardware inside. When I first got it, it took three deliverymen to carry it into my apartment. The way Bobby flipped it, you would’ve thought it was made of feathers.

After the sofa, he went for the television. He didn’t bother to unplug it. He lifted it above his head and sent it flying. When it hit the ground it sparked a mini fireworks display. That’s when I decided to step outside.

My landlady lived in the unit above mine. I looked up and, sure enough, every light in her apartment was on.

I heard the sirens in the distance. They got louder and louder until they were right on top of us.

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I tried to get some sleep. But it was useless. I sat, propped up against my headboard, smoking cigarettes in the dark. There was my landlady to worry about. She'd inherited the property from her folks, been living on it since she was a little girl. It was all she had and she took great pride in it.

If she threw me out, I'd have a real hard time putting together enough cash for a new place.

Then there was Bobby. When he saw the cops, he ran right out into the highway, nearly got plowed over by a pick-up truck.

When they caught him, it was like he had superhero powers, the way he fought. You should've seen the look on my landlady's face when the back-up squad cars arrived. Then came the ambulance and, after that, a fire truck.

It took five guys to pin him down. They used two pairs of cuffs, one on his wrists and one on his ankles. He looked like a fish out of water, the way he flopped around as they dragged him over to the ambulance.

Then the firemen stepped in. They sat on top of Bobby and held him still so the paramedic could stick him with the sedative.

When the sun started coming up, I got out of bed and put the coffee on. I was sitting at the kitchen table when I heard a knock at the back door. I figure it was my landlady, coming to drop off my eviction papers.

When I opened the door, Katie was standing there with my newspaper in her hand.

“Come on in.” I stepped aside. “I just made a fresh pot of coffee.”

She sat down at the kitchen table. I poured her a cup, then went to the cupboard and found half an Entenmann’s crumb cake. I cut two pieces and brought them to the table.

She took a cigarette from my pack. When I held the lighter out for her, she steadied my wrist. Her hands were cold. I took them in mine and rubbed them warm.

“I could turn the air conditioner off,” I said, touching my finger to her red nail polish.

“No, I’m fine.” Out of the corner of her mouth, she let out a cloud of smoke. Even with the black eye and the swollen lip, she was beautiful.

“Bobby listed me as his emergency contact,” she said as she stubbed her cigarette out in the ashtray. “The doctor said he had a psychotic break, brought on by sleep deprivation. He also said, all the drinking Bobby’s been doing, that didn’t help.” She tore off a bit of the cake and mashed it between her thumb and index finger. “The police came to the house this morning. They wanted to know if I was going to press charges.”

I went into the bathroom and got some antibiotic cream. I pulled my chair closer to her, so our knees were touching. I put a good amount of the cream on my finger. Then, gently, I blotted it on her wounds. That’s when she started crying.

I pulled her in and wrapped my arms around her. She rested her head on my shoulder, her warm tears running down my shirt.

After awhile, she started shaking. At first, I thought it was from crying. But, after a while, I realized it was from laughing. A great big belly laugh, like she was half crazy. I

pulled away and, seeing her like that, I couldn't stop myself. I laughed so hard tears began to come out of my eyes.

The newspaper was spread out in front of us. The lead story was that guy and his lion. They had a picture, which took up half the front page. The lion was standing on his hind legs, his teeth on display.

After we finished our cake I offered to drive Katie back home. "I should go down to the hospital," I said. "Bobby doesn't have any family here. Plus, he left his boots. I should drop them off."

"I don't want to go back home. I'm not ready to return to the scene of the crime." She let out a nervous laugh.

"You're welcome to stay here." I took the coffee mugs to the sink and rinsed them. Then I went into the bathroom and took a cold shower.

When I came out, Katie was laying in my bed, her eyes closed. I touched the back of my hand to her cheek. She was still cold. I pulled the comforter up over her shoulders.

I was halfway out the door when I thought she might wake up hungry. I had some good Cuban bread I'd picked up at the Latin market. I fixed her a sandwich, wrapped it in foil and set it on the kitchen table.

I was in my car, driving away, when my apartment door swung open and Katie came running out. She ran right in front of the car, waving her hands in the air. I nearly drove right over her.

She walked around to the passenger's side. I leaned over and unlocked the door.

"You sure you want to do this?" I asked as she got in. She didn't answer.

My apartment was off the main highway. We had caught the morning rush hour. I waited patiently for an opening and then pulled out into traffic. The hospital was only a few miles away. We'd be there in no time.

As I was driving I looked over and noticed Katie hadn't bothered with her seatbelt.

"You should wear your seatbelt," I told her. "People around here, the way they drive, it just isn't safe."