

## Massacre

By Michal Betz

H S Manley made a crucial wrong move on a large busy interstate deep in Ohio and woke up on a conveyor belt. All of this happened in 1959. Manley's desolate Dodge DeSoto was crushed and had to be towed away in two mangled pieces. He had been thrown free and had landed gracefully in a grassy area. This likely saved his life. He remembered nothing however and woke on what he believed was a large white conveyor belt. A kindly nurse assured him he was not on a conveyor but in a hospital and lying in a bed. Manley wanted to argue with her but she informed him he would have to stay quiet. She was a tall, authoritative woman with dark eyes and light hair and boney shoulders. She was saying, "You were lucky to have survived."

"Evidently I did, though," he told her in a blank empty tone.

"Yes, but just barely. You turned into a tanker truck and witnesses said your car splintered into a hundred pieces."

"I don't remember," he replied, almost dreamily.

"I do not image you did. When they brought you here it was not looking good, not looking good at all."

"So, did they put things back where they belonged?" he asked almost jokingly but with a certain tenseness circling every word.

"More or less," she answered.

"What was less?" he asked.

"You will live, that is for sure."

"But what's less? Is something wrong, is part of me missing? I don't understand." He was staring down at the sheet covering his body. He was able to wiggle toes on both feet.

"That's the surgeon's responsibility to discuss that with you."

"Can you give me a hint?"

The nurse smiled at him and left the room.

The surgeon was a small man. His body was wire straight, yet his face had a sagging, haggard expression, especially in the eyes. Manley stared at the eyes looking for something to go on. He wanted the facts; what had the accident done to him?

The surgeon cleared his voice with a slight cough. "It left you impotent."

For a moment Manley didn't know what the word meant, though of course he knew exactly its meaning. "I don't understand."

"Well, the collision has left you impotent, sexually."

"I see," he said, fading away. He was thinking of his age; twenty-seven. He was unmarried, so that really would not have to be dealt with, but he was certainly in his prime, and now he was unable to perform.

"Of course matters like this are never certain, but I feel that in this case, your case, it is a fact, for everything has been smashed and crushed down there."

Nine days later he left the hospital. He was whole again, though his right leg was still in a cast from a bad break. It would be another thirty days before that too was gone. In a full length mirror he looked whole again, but impotency was not something anyone could see. That detection would occur in the bedroom, that is, if he ever brought a woman home again. He went back to work and that part of his existence normalized things somewhat.

And so he began a febrile approach to living. He threw his body weight and his brain into each endeavor, at work and at home. He slept less and adapted to this new life style. Yet on election day as he stood in line to cast a vote for Richard Nixon for president, he noticed a pretty woman looking at him. He was embarrassed and didn't know what to do. He didn't come out in public much since the accident and now he was feeling on the spot. He didn't know what to even think. What could he possibly say to someone like her? "Hi, my name is Hugh, I am twenty eight, and I am impotent because of an accident with a gasoline truck." When it came time for him to be alone in the voting booth his mind barely saw the candidate names on the ballot; instead, he saw her face looking up at him, a faint smile on her blood red lips. A few minutes, as he was leaving, she was nowhere in sight. He breathed a sigh and was relieved but he also was disappointed. Confused, he managed his way to car and drove off immediately.

The experience rattled him, and for days after he could not stop thinking about it. He could expect incidents like this in the future. At almost six foot, he was an impressive figure and he knew he had reasonably good looks. The opposite sex would not let any of this go unnoticed. It would be a constant trial for him, and he would always know the outcome, he would always understand and be aware of the consequences. Naturally he could not go back and change things by avoiding being sliced in two parts by that truck. That, he imagined, might be easier and more realistic than trying to deal with what had been taken from him.

So, after Nixon had lost, he went to seek counseling. Actually, he went to see a psychiatrist. This was in Columbus and he had never before been to such a doctor. He hardly knew what to expect. But the doctor, a man by the name of Arnold J Smith, put him at ease by declaring that thousands of men suffered from this affliction. He would have to learn to live with it, and if not, then had he considered surgery to correct the problem?

Manley shook his head that he hadn't.

"Well, from what you have said of yourself and have plainly described a phobia of running into members of the opposite sex, as you described them, then I certainly think it would be worth a look at.

At your age that would, I believe, certainly be a plausible option.”

“I see,” he said softly.

“Did not the surgeon or your personal physician discuss this with you?”

“As a matter of fact, they did. But it would be costly, and it might leave me worse off than I am now.”

“Yes, well, certainly that is a possibility. But, as I have listened to you I sense that you may not have any other course to take. After all, you cannot go around avoiding girls when you know that they are everywhere. That will make your life a miserable one, don't you think?”

“Yes, I have little doubt about that.”

A time later – and time really doesn't matter much – he was scheduled to go under the knife at a clinic in Cleveland and it was hoped this would repair his problem. “Hope” was what he was hearing from these professionals. Later he was handed a pamphlet explaining that any surgery should be considered as having a risk to it. It was added that this risk was very small, however.

“And how small is that?” he inquired.

Practically non-existent, he was told. He was feeling better after that. They knew what they were doing. They knew all the odds and those odds were on his side.

“As to the success of this operation overall, that would depend, Mr. Manley.”

He began feeling uneasy all over again. It was a slipshod feeling and made him queasy.

“Well, you must understand that we cannot for certain know or predict how these things will go. It could solve the problem of course, or it could leave you as you presently are.”

“Sexually dead,” he said.

“Yes, certainly. I wished I could give you better odds, but I cannot.”

“So what are my odds, sir?”

The doctor shrugged. “Impossible to know, Mr. Manley, impossible to know.”

And so on the twelfth of the month he checked in at the clinic, signed consent forms and other necessary documents, was given another thorough exam, and told to wait. He sat there in a rigid chair listening to the human murmuring coming through the walls all around him. It was as if he were in a giant hive of some sort, that he was one of the workers who had been harmed by something, and now he awaited his fate. His younger, shorter brother Alec was with him, but he didn't hear the murmuring or anything else. He acted edgy, uncertain of his surroundings. Finally he just said it: “I hate fucking doctors.”

Manley nodded and smiled. "They scare you?"

"No, they don't scare me." He lighted a cigarette and snapped the metal lighter shut. "I just don't trust them. They could tell you anything. They could say you have this, or that, and how would you ever know the truth?"

"You wouldn't. You would have to merely trust them."

"Well, don't ask of that me, please. If I were you, I would high tail it out of this place, and do it now."

"I would like nothing better, believe me. Then what would I do? I'd still have this awful problem."

"Well, pretty tail and getting it ain't everything you know."

Manley slumped down and stared at his feet on the floor. The room was antiseptic, purified beyond belief. He considered his answer to his brother's absurd observation but was unable to make it because a nurse appeared suddenly and seeing the cigarette dangling from Alec's mouth told him he could only smoke in the front public area of the building.

"Is that where the big entrance is?" he asked.

"Yes. Now, put that thing out, please."

Manley watched Alec as he left. He suddenly thought of his parents. His father had been reputed to be a mobster for one of the big gangs in Cincinnati. If true, he didn't work for the Italian mob, that much he was sure of, for his father wasn't Italian. He could have been because he did look Italian, but he wasn't. He could have been anything, but what he was was what he was. His family roots spread back to Ireland. He was born on a small farm in the south of Illinois. That's how life started for him. Hard and cold.

He was just about to think of his mother when they came for him, and suddenly, seeing them all, he felt like the condemned must feel when they know the electric chair awaits. He was wearing a smock and they helped him into bed. Then they rolled the bed as he watched the ceiling passing over his eyes. Lying on his back he lost all sense of direction. But almost immediately he was wheeled into a room and he was put to sleep. The sleep lasted about a second, and then he was awakened.

"Mr. Manley, can you hear me? Mr. Manley?"

He blinked and saw a young nurse looking down at him.

"What . . . what happened.?"

"The surgery is over with."

"That fast?" he said. He could feel an echo in his skull.

She smiled again. "Well, it wasn't really so fast."

"Where's my brother?"

"He'll be told, then he can see you. Okay?"

She was cleaning up something. Her body, especially each hand, jerked with the task she was doing. Then she left, and the room, which had been quiet, grew even more so, and lying there he could feel a slight pain just below his gut. He moved his arm to see if life was really still there. It was. He was not in a dream, or under the influence of something. Lying there, he began to feel uncomfortable. He wanted to get up and walk about but understood how bad that might make things. Being alone and isolated, he began to find humor in the situation and softly laughed. He laughed harder and a slight irritating pain began to spring up from between his legs. "Jesus," he swore, and took in a long, deep breath. The pain drifted away, and looking about he took note of how white and clean the room was. Too clean, he thought. Nothing could live in here, and I hope they don't leave me too long, he was thinking.

At that, the door opened. He didn't see the door's movement, but did hear the sound coming inside. It was a small vibrating echo. "Hey," a voice was saying. It was Alec. He was standing in a very tentative way; almost shyly. He whispered, "Are you awake, fully awake?"

"Of course. Can't you see?"

Alec laughed softly. "Well, I can see you are indeed a damned fool."

"Why do you think that?"

"You went through with it, and now you're still barely kicking even though they massacred you."

"And that makes me a fool?"

"Well, maybe. So, how are you feeling?"

"Oh," he mumbled, "I feel okay." He looked Alec in the eye. "Fine, I feel damn fine."

"Well, you look fine."

"I wonder what now?"

"Like they said, once you're feeling strong enough, homeward you go."

Five days later they left Cleveland. It was a blue sky with wide drifts of snow and clouds. He couldn't drive, so Alec was at the wheel. Before checking out of the clinic he had a patient/doctor discussion. Dr. Isso had a fairly long jaw and a frock of hanging hair the color of washed gray. He was amicable but very to the point, telling Manley that though the surgery had gone very well there could still be a problem. "It might fix your impotency," he had said, "but I doubt if you will have children of your own."

He had never considered this before, having children. He had thought of having sex, of course, but children? An hour later, in the car, this would hit him like a load of bricks, but now his own thoughts swam through the words Dr. Izzo had given him.

“I'm possibly sterile?”

Dr. Izzo nodded. “In all likelihood, I would have to say yes.”

In the car he turned to Alec. “They say I'm probably sterile.”

“What?”

“I can't have kids, I can't knock a woman up.”

Alec glanced his way. “Well, shit, what can I say.”

“I don't know how I feel about this just yet.”

Alec sighed. “Are they sure?”

“Pretty sure, I would imagine.”

“I don't know how that would make me feel. Sort of down, but elated also.”

“Elated?”

“Well, crap, you know, you don't have to be careful anymore, except when it comes to getting the clap or VD or something ugly like that.”

Talking to Alec about it, or anyone else for that matter, wasn't helping. They couldn't know how something like that felt. It was impossible, purely impossible for them to comprehend the problem. And aside from that, it was socially taboo. People just don't discuss things like that. He glanced at the passing terrain and thought, “I will never be a daddy? Really? Now, doesn't that just screw.”

Manley looked down at the approaching road and for whatever reason, call it stress, he recalled something. He was remembering the day when his parents sold the house that they had lived in for fifteen years and in which he grew up in to move to another, less demanding house. That had been the problem. All of the stuff from the old house couldn't fit into the new house, which was much smaller, and so they had stood around in the cold dreary weather pondering the many boxes filled with silverware, heirlooms, and junk. At last their mother decided that it would have to go into storage, and so they had hefted everything back on the van and after finding an old warehouse converted into security units and paying the first two months lease they unloaded it all again.

He brought this up with Alec and together they had a good laugh. “Jesus,” Alec said, wiping a tear from his face from having laughed too much and too hard, “how could any fifteen year old forget something like that?”

“Never,” Manley replied. He was feeling better, but not by much. When he got back home he would have to resume life as if he had never been operated on. He would go on keeping it a secret, if he could, if that was even possible. Naturally, he might by accident let it slip out and blurt the news that he was incapable of making a baby under any circumstances. If he understood women, they expected that of a man if they were to become a part of their lives. They desired a man who was virile and fertile.

He brought his head around slowly to where Alec was smoking a cigarette and checking out a small herd of horses to his left. He asked him what he thought about it.

“Women, who knows,” he muttered.

Manley blew out some air and said, “I just thought you might have a viewpoint.”

“Well, my dear brother, you can always adopt. There are plenty of brats needing that.”

“Yes, I know, and I had thought about that. Yet, don't women, as a general rule, want children of their own?”

“Biologically, yes. It's instinct. It's natural. But when things aren't natural, and she really loves you, I don't think it will make much difference.”

“Yes,” Manley said, “but how will I know? I meet someone. What do I say, or what do I not say?”

“Listen, I'm not a goddamn shrink, so on that subject you are on your own. Besides, you're no damn virgin. All I will say is, stop worrying about it. Hey, people work things out. It's life. It's no mystery. I wouldn't bring it up on the first date, unless you think its appropriate, and I don't know how you could possibly think that it would be.”

“What if she asks if I like kids.”

“That's simple. Tell her you do. You do, don't you?”

“Yes.”

“Fucking problem solved.”

Manley looked down at his lap, his feet.

“I wouldn't worry about it. Certainly, I wouldn't start now. Hell, you'll figure things out. You're what people call a problem solver.”

“I am?”

“Damn right you are. And I'm not just speaking for myself. I've heard others say the same thing.”

Manley smiled. After a few minutes, Alec asked, "Exactly what did they do to you down there where they cut you, if you don't mind me asking?"

Manley moaned. "They tied things back together, only it wasn't able to make things whole again, like they were before I hit that truck." Alec nodded, and lighted another cigarette, his fifth. Though cold, the vents along the metal dash and the heater below provided a lot of warmth. Occasionally, Alec inquired if Manley thought it was becoming too warm in the car.

"No, feels good. The surgery makes me feel the cold too much, so I'm doing fine."

The car glided over the frozen blacktop highway with barely a jolt or vibrating sensation to disturb his healing flesh and arrived home two hours later. The winter sky had begun a rosy gleam as the sun slipped below the barren tree branches. The house was a modest ranch style; Alec lived here with his wife Alexandra. She was a pretty girl and when they were inside he often caught her staring in his direction. He wondered how much she knew. And if she knew, what did she think? Manley's house was on the other side of town but they decided he would stay here with them tonight. It was a practical solution. He didn't really want to take the car and drive the three miles it would take him to his own driveway. And he didn't want to be alone, at least not tonight.

He would have the small bedroom in the back. The long drive had stiffened him up, and the pain had also returned. He took a pill to kill that, groaned, and sat on the bed. It took him a while to undress, and when he was ready he killed the light and cautiously slid one leg and then the other under the heavy blankets. The pain slowly subsided and he shut his eyes. A full moon filled the window next to the bed, and the dark became silvery and floated about the room. His mind wouldn't stop thinking because he wasn't really tired. He fidgeted, thinking it would be another two weeks at the least before he could go back to work.

He was forced to lie on his back. He would have preferred rolling on his side, but he knew better. He heard voices then. They were talking in low tones. He could hear the voices but the words escaped any detection. Manley thought they were probably talking about him, about the surgery, about how he acted. Like a child, his brother might be saying. "He was hard on everyone. You should have been there." He was sure he had heard that just now. He hadn't thought he had acted that badly. But Alec couldn't comprehend what he had gone through. He couldn't comprehend because he didn't care. He could make children, if he wanted them, but evidently he didn't want them right now for they had been married three years and no kids. Now, lying here alone, he alone was sterile, unable to impregnate, unable to have a family.

After a while he couldn't hear anything. The moon's glow was overwhelming. He placed a hand over his eyes. Then he heard them in bed. They were doing it. He listened, wishing something that was now impossible as tears welled up and flowed down his cheeks.

The End

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Things are moving faster than we realize.

People die and God makes a lot of people lonely.