

Magic Fingers

I used to see her commercials late at night and laugh at the shitty time slot. It was nearly three in the morning for chrissake. Who's going to watch this and think, *why yes I would love a massage*. Then it happened. Lying with a woman I'd been sleeping with for some time now I heard her say to me, *y'know a massage sounds pretty nice right now*. I frowned, I moaned, my belly ached and I whined at her for two weeks before she finally dumped me.

I'm an acupuncturist. I've trained in my craft for years – six, to be exact. I beat the system by a year because I was so damn good. My mother was a masseuse; she met my father when he jokingly asked her for a happy ending one day. He forced her over the table and planted me inside. I heard the horrible story from one of her angry suitors who happened to know my father. I never did. He died before I hit the ripe age of four. Alcoholism. Though it was the oncoming traffic that did him in. I always took my mother's side. She was a great woman. I say 'was' because she died a week before I graduated. She was proud of me for pursuing the craft she'd taught me her whole life and actually improving on it.

I opened my first acupuncture therapy office in the spring of a few years ago. I steadily broke even for the first two years. Taxes are low when there's not much profit. Then that witch moved in across the street. She opened her bullshit massage therapy office and charged half what I was. It made sense; a masseuse doesn't train for seven years, she doesn't study oriental medicine like I had nor does it take as much patience to perform it. I balance a beautiful union of science and art, she rubs greasy fingers over someone's back. It's hard for me to insult the woman because it meant insulting the same craft my mother had made her living on; but when someone's running you out of business you learn to forget what Mom would think and build your tower of hate.

In her first week there was a line out the door. In a month she had her commercials running. Commercials! I could barely afford to pay the grey haired drunk outside twirling (kicking) my sign around. Where did this bitch come from? In another month there was an article out about her 'expertise' in *The Daily Quaker*. I refused to read it. Though it had been posted all over town and one day I found it online in the forum I frequent. So I finally read it.

Rukiya Johnson is a woman of the highest spirits ... she's gaining fame for her new establishment in the small town of Quaker, South Carolina. News of her talents have spread ... bringing patients from all over the south east. I could hardly get a moment to talk with the popular doctor before she was called in again ... People have described their visit as a heavenly escape ... they cannot wait to go back. For the price Rukiya is charging you'd think there was some scam here. But when asked, all she had to say was that it was a family tradition ... nothing beats a mother's advice....

I couldn't believe it. A family tradition? That was my whole shtick. It's what used to bring people in. She was crushing me in more ways than one. I felt like I wanted to turn off the lights and close up that instant. It made me want to cry. And then I saw it... the thing that turned my depression to anger quicker than I can jam a needle in your spleen.

In the spring, Rukiya will be expanding her medicine to include acupuncture...

I turned off the lights. I closed and locked the door to *Bartrim Family Acupuncture* and sat in my wounded dark thinking of the ways in which I could destroy her.

I could burn her office to the ground.

I called my best friend, Paulie. We had some fun together as kids causing mayhem in our neighborhood. I thought if anyone could help me here it'd be him.

I could cut her power, water, and heat.

Paulie was a mail carrier. He hated his job but enjoyed its stability and routine. I envied him, if only in the slightest.

I could drive my truck through her front door.

We met a bar down the block. In a small town you tend to find everything on one block. I could see her office from the bar window. I could see the drunk I hired on the corner, alone with his curly grey hair. His last paycheck had been two weeks ago. No more money for him to join in the warmth of hop and barley.

I could dip her needles in poison.

Paulie arrived in full uniform. I ragged on him as we switched seats – far from the windows.

I could write a bad review on Yelp.

“How’s the business?” His first question. He actually cared about my answer. I respected him for it and instead of ignoring my problems, like normal, I confessed it all to him. After another two rounds on his tab we had come up with a viable plan.

“Burn it to the ground.”

“I’m not going to burn it down, Paulie. What are you nuts?”

“Think about it, you work across the street. You keep yourself open all day, I’ll slip in and open a gas line, you get at least one patient in there to vouch for you and no one’ll suspect a thing. You *can* get one patient in there can’t you?”

“And who would that be?” The two of us turned our heads in unison to see the stumbling silver perm by the grand window.

“Hell no. He can’t even hold a sign for ten minutes. Who’s going to believe he could sit still long enough for me to shove a few needles in his back?”

“You’re right...” Paulie put two fingers to his chin. He rubbed. His brows furrowed and I watched him think. He wasn’t good for much, but damnit if Paulie could put together a revenge scheme.

“I’ve got it.” He smiled.

The day had come. We had a pretty good plan. I liked it.

Actually, it was a terrible plan and I hated it, but there was really nothing else and with this I wouldn’t have to worry about spending the next ten Christmases in jail.

I sat in my quiet, dark office with my assistant asking why I had been staring out the window all day. I wanted to give her the day off, but Paulie advised me not to do anything different today. Nothing suspicious. I offered her an excuse with a side of pity saying I’d been waiting for new patients to walk in. Suddenly the curls of our forgotten Santa slammed against my front door. I opened it to let him in and together we walked into the privacy of my office.

“Have to dig a hole.... an empty bottle and... and a hole” He mumbled to himself.

Paulie burst through the back door. I hadn’t expected him. I jumped at his entrance. He laughed and began unrolling poster-sized sheets of paper. They were blank on one side.

“What is this?” I asked.

“Got it from work. Don’t worry about it. Some kid’s not gonna get his Transformers poster today. Big fuckin’ deal.” Paulie grabbed at some markers, pens and for some reason there’d been crayons in his pockets. He handed them to our debauchee.

“What are you doing with this?” I asked, but no one seemed to be listening.

“Numbers and lines and names and an empty bottle. Where I live...I need a hole...”

Somehow the man had found stability in himself and began drawing what looked like a layout of

the building across the street – complete with power and bathroom and sink. Something was different about the inebriate. It didn't seem as difficult for him to stabilize nor was it hard for him to stay that way. I was dying to know how the massage had gone. Had this woman cured him of his alcoholism in one day?

“That's great, Bill. That's real great.” Paulie was excited to see him using the different colors. He looked at me and began to explain. “You know Bill used to be a contractor? He's always getting bullshit newsletters from old buildings... real crap mail but you read enough and you put together that the guy was good... a real professional.”

“HOW WAS THE MASSAGE?” I yelled.

Bill stopped drawing. He picked himself up, one vertebra at a time. Hollow eyes rested below white curls of regret and he said to me, “I have to dig a hole...”

Then he walked out through the front door. He didn't even bother asking me to pay him.

“What the hell was that?” I asked.

“Who cares? We got what we want, right?”

“I'm not entirely sure what you're planning over here but it's your turn to go in.” I said.

Paulie looked up from his map. He smiled and stood straight; put his hand on my shoulder and walked out saying, “Give me about an hour.”

An hour had gone by. It was my turn. I walked across the street and waited in line. The line moved fast. Either she was damn fucking quick or she'd trained others. Within ten minutes I was filling out the proper forms. My name, my medical history, any allergies, had I ever been here before, had I ever gone through any plastic surgery and what was my religious history. The last

two I found odd. But it really didn't matter, seeing as I had filled everything out with false information.

A nurse ushered me into an empty room with the massage table in front of me. She asked me to remove my favorite purple shirt, my striped black pants and to wrap this towel around my waist. I laid down with my face squeezed into the small hole.

I waited there for ten minutes before the door opened and in walked Rukiya. I couldn't see her. She didn't say anything to me or reassure me of what was to come. What kind of doctor leaves their patient in the dark like that?

It didn't matter. Soon she was touching me and I'd forgotten everything I sought out to do.

She had her fingers in me. My ears, down my neck. They dug in me like some tentacled creature trained to please. My shoulders, my spine. Heaven was burning and its ashes were on my back. My hips, between my thighs. An army of baby tanks rolling, a fleet of tiny soldiers dancing, a ballet of finger and thumb and earth's mightiest knots undone. I forgot about my dying business, the small town blues and my mother's buried corpse. I was at peace for that hour. I'd forgiven all and finally I cried.

I met Paulie at the bar. He was still in his mailman uniform. I asked if he'd ever taken it off and he laughed in all seriousness telling me it was easier not to.

"Give it about two hours and then we'll go back in." He said.

I was still thinking about my afternoon massage.

"You have to go through with this you know." He continued.

I nodded just to please him.

“I never want another massage anywhere else by *anyone* else. That witch has got magic fingers, y’know? You’ll be out of a job, out of town and out of your life if you don’t take her down tonight.”

“It’s not going to work.” I said.

“Of course it’s not. That plan was bullshit. Why do you think I had Bill draw out floor-plans for us? He found her gas line, her power, and after my own visit I’m ready to go back in finish this thing!”

“What?”

He took a sip of his ale. He was excited. I hadn’t seen him so happy in years.

“We can’t, Paulie. We just can’t.”

“We can and we will.” One more sip. This one more of a chug. “You called me, remember? You know what you wanted and you should realize now how much you need it. That witch’ll burn by midnight.” Another sip. “Say it with me, *that Witch will burn by midnight.*” He smiled. He laughed. He was crazy and I knew it the day I met him.

Out the window I could see Bill and his shining locks. He walked straight – tall. He waked in proudly and sat at a booth alone. He ordered himself a chicken sandwich and a water. I wasn’t sure where he’d gotten his money but I was more concerned with where he’d gotten his sobriety. This witch would burn by midnight.

Our original plan had us all going in, experiencing the famous massage and then complaining that our backs had been terribly hurt and we’d both sue her and create controversy about her ‘secret’ methods. It would never have worked. Paulie knew that and he used the first step of our plan as his own recon mission. He had the place literally mapped out. He knew where

the backdoor was, what type of lock he'd need to pick, if there were any cameras and where the gas line would be for him to cut it.

I couldn't believe what I was doing.

I couldn't believe what magic she worked on me. It was just that – magic. I'd never felt so good before. She would ruin me in no time. She'd run me out of town and I wouldn't be able to work anywhere this side of the mountains. This crime, right now was the only thing I could do. I used Paulie to convince me of that.

“The line's through here. You go find a good bulb to bust and when the lights go on... BOOM!”

“What about the people inside?”

He pointed to the switch on the wall. It was a timer switch. He'd thought of everything. It was almost too easy.

I walked into Rukiya's office. I finally found a photo of the girl. She was beautiful. Tall, thin, black and sexy. I never had an affinity for dark girls but knowing her talents I wouldn't think twice. Then again, sleeping with the enemy isn't part of my M.O. Paulie yelled at me that we needed to leave. I found a box marked *private* and took it, hoping I'd find some secrets about her ways. On the way out I shattered a bulb. By the back door I noticed a small doll watching me. It was plain, small, faceless and cheap but it reminded me of someone. It had these silver curls hanging over its face and damnit if it didn't look just like old drunk Bill. I grabbed it and we ran out.

“In about three hours we should be far away from here.”

“How bad will it be?”

“You want to watch?”

I didn't. We had only one beer together before I retreated home.

There was nothing inside the *private* box. Old books in languages I couldn't comprehend. Small colorful needles that looked as if it were a child's guide to acupuncture. And a doll-making-kit.

It was quite odd actually. There were buttons for eyes, potato sack skins, stuffing and small clothes. *Great*, I thought. I had managed to grab the one box that had nothing to do with her trade. I shuffled through and found scraps of clothing. One of them was purple – the same as my favorite shirt. A few locks of hair fell out with them. There were different shades and different textures. It was all very odd.

I checked my watch. In a few minutes I'd hear the boom from down the road. My conscience took over and I ran out my front door without my jacket. Of course, I lived less than a block away and in a moment I was down the road watching. Two minutes now and I saw Paulie pulling up his truck across the street. He smiled at me and waived. How had I gotten mixed up with him? He was crazy. A real psychopath and I was his easy-to-influence best bud.

Thirty seconds and I was sweating. The cold had me shivering and I worried that I might grow ill from the weather.

Ten seconds and BOOM!!

It was done.

Flames blew out of each window; glass shot far across the street. Black smoke followed. The sound echoed down the block and in a moment lights were switching on all over.

It was done.

My rival had been defeated. Destroyed. But why did I feel so terrible?

I was still sweating. My skin was burning up. I thought maybe I'd been too close to the flames but I was just so far. Why had I been burning up?

I tried walking closer but a dizziness had come over me and I fell to my knees. Sweat poured out from all over. The heat had somehow engulfed me and I couldn't breathe. I coughed on the smoke and my skin boiled from the flames – both of which were hundreds of feet away.

I looked over at Paulie in his truck. He was screaming. Steam blew out of his windows. Down the block more lights were turning on, and screams echoed. People began running out of their homes to see the fire. They screamed and grabbed at themselves and soon I had realized that it wasn't the explosion that brought them out. It was the heat. They were burning up, like me. All of them. Boiling.

I looked down at my skin. It was pulsing and leaking and bubbling. My hair was falling out and black smoke billowed out from my lungs. I couldn't breathe, I couldn't see, I couldn't move anymore and my skin had melted so far off that my bones were poking through. I thought of the *private* box.

An Excerpt from the Daily Quaker:

Emergency crews, authorities and government officials are baffled at the events that took place at 12:57 this morning. The recently famous office of Rukiya Johnson's massage therapy erupted in flames. Official cause has been given to a leaking gas line. However, what's puzzling small town authorities is the reaction to what seemed to be a simple fire. Within minutes of the explosion nearly three hundred citizens were admitted to hospitals with severe, and sometimes fatal burns. When questioned where the burns had originated from, there was no answer. One

could only deduce that it had something to do with the fire at Rukiya Johnson's offices, though there isn't any evidence of anyone being inside at the time.

Investigations are still pending, but the facts now reveal that approximately 268 people were admitted to emergency room with burns and another fifty seven were pronounced dead in their homes from the same ailment. Doctors have described black smoke found in patients' lungs and suffocation has been found as another cause of death. There is no case against Rukiya or her establishment. Any connection, beyond timing, with the two events is out of reach.

One witness, a Bill Freeman had this to say, "All I know is, Miss Rukiya saved my life. She told me to sprinkle some salt around my porch and place an empty bottle of water underneath and I tell ya, that night I was cured a'my alcohol. I'll never touch another drink again. The woman's magic!" The man, known as the town drunk, told reporters there had been no foul play and that he couldn't think of anyone who would want to harm Miss Rukiya. He was one of very few that evening not to suffer detrimental burns.