

The Devil's Due

Jack Sanders waited while his left eye numbed up. He'd gotten used to these monthly injections—sort of. You might think they'd get easier, but somehow the dread never quite went away. Doc Barnes came in, smiled, and snapped on his gloves. He picked up the tiny syringe, pierced the sclera with the 30-gauge needle, and had the job done in five seconds. Jack knew the routine—a little pain, some irritation for a day, then a month of gratitude for not going blind.

Things went fine this time around too, for the first twenty minutes. Jack was on Georgia State Road 137 driving himself home (against Doc's advice, but that was Jack) when everything went white. Not just hazy or cloudy, but impossibly bright, like a firecracker had exploded in his left eye. He looked into the rear view mirror, half expecting to see all the jelly oozing out of his eyeball. But it just looked a little red like it always did post-injection. He awaited some awful stab of pain. But nothing, just this eye-watering *bright*.

He pulled over and called Doc Barnes. His assistant Sharon answered. "Not to worry, just a white-out. Happens occasionally with the Vital-Eye injection. It'll get better within twenty-four hours. If not, call the doctor."

Just a white-out. Jesus, a new star was forming inside his eye, and he was supposed to relax and get over it.

The phone was still in his hand when it rang.

Sug. "Hey honey," She sounded brittle. "How'd the shot go?"

"Not great, but I'll live. On the way home now. Somethin' wrong?"

"Well...I was gonna wait 'til you got here, but I just needed..."

"What is it?"

"Gary called."

"Crap." He frowned, causing a little jab in his eye. "What did that asshole want?"

"I saw the caller ID and picked up Tea's cell, good thing. He started hollering *Put Tea on the gee-dee phone*, and when I wouldn't, he went into this ravin' fit about how he was gonna come get her. Three sheets to the wind, as usual."

Jack sighed. There were a lot of things to love about Tea, but her ex was not one of them.

“Jack, I think he’s about gone over the deep end. What are we–”

“Listen Sug, you know he’s full of shit. Maybe it was just a drunk dial.”

“I don’t know...he sounded so angry. He scared me.”

“That’s exactly what he wants. Try not to worry, hon, we’ll handle him. Does Tea know he called?”

“She heard my end of the conversation. She’s in there hugging her pillow right now.”

“Well, let me get back on the road. Sooner I get home the better, in more ways than one. This left eye’s all whited out. Can’t see a damn thing out of it.”

“*Whited out?* God.”

“It’s okay, it’s gonna go away. Or so they said.”

“Can you *drive* like that–?”

“The other eye’s fine, Sug. I’ll be home by suppertime. Go console Tea.”

Things were going too well this past year. Devil must be getting his due. Jack’s mind was wandering on the thirty-mile drive home. Since he’d done the painting of Sug and Tea back in Lakeville, the three of them had gotten a sweet little life going, and the last thing he wanted was for something to screw it up now.

He recalled back–was it two years ago?–when he had noticed some graying of his vision. He thought he might be getting cataracts. But then Doc Barnes broke the diagnosis to him: wet macular degeneration, a disease that would gradually eat at his retinas until he went blind. *Sorry Jack*, he’d said, *tough one for anyone, let alone an artist.* Jack barely heard the good news about the treatment that would slow it. Alone with his fears of impending blackness, he’d fallen into a daily habit of beer, then work. Which resulted in a predictable dwindling of the work.

Then Sug and Tea washed up, refugees from their own sea of grief. Who’d have known they would be his saviors?

Drifting through Lakeville on a road trip to who-knows-where, the twins had admired Jack’s public murals in town. By all rights, he should have turned them away when they showed

up out of the blue at his door. But something made him invite them in, and over sweet tea and beer nuts they'd ended up baring their souls.

Sugar and Tea, named by their mother after her favorite drink, couldn't come to grips with her being gone. At 46 they had to concede they'd never appreciated Mama for the rock she was. Her sudden death had opened up an unsettling new reality—one with no anchor.

Jack saw sadness in their eyes, and confusion, but also a sort of innocence. In the end it was the eyes that captured him. Sug's were a soft mossy hazel, and Tea's were yellow-green cat eyes with dancing lights that Mama had called *wisps* after will o'the wisps. Jack didn't want to stop looking at them, so he'd talked the women into staying a week or two to pose for a painting.

Best idea he ever had.

He knew it was a gamble to propose they all move to his old homestead in Armadillo. As it happened, Tea needed all of ten seconds to decide, and Sug, being more deliberate, took an hour. A year later, with the shots of Vital-Eye keeping at least the right eye in decent shape, and the girls insisting he still had masterpieces in him, his confidence was back.

At 52 he'd planned on being a loner for life, but here he was with not one, but two muses. He loved them both, and although Tea was more the sexual firecracker, Sug had a soft way of bringing him around. The running joke was, Tea was hotter, but Sugar was a skosh sweeter. She was also neater. She had cajoled Jack into trimming his unruly red beard, and he grudgingly admitted he did look better. He'd kept the ponytail, though.

Tea was a scattered soul, blaming her disarray on her "artistic temperament." She did have talent, undeveloped as it was. She had gone to college for a year on an art scholarship, but never finished. That was more or less her whole story—a portfolio of unfinished drawings and collages, several unfinished redecorating projects, and one unfinished divorce.

From Gary.

Jack shook his head to clear Gary's image from his brain. He stretched his neck and focused back on the road. Only ten more miles.

He had noticed ever since his eyesight started to fail, he could actually see more. It wasn't seeing per se, it was...*seeing*. Funny. People said his paintings were more vivid than ever. *Mesmerizing*, one critic had said. And he had developed this new way of interacting with

his work. He'd been doing portraits for thirty years, but lately they had been more or less painting themselves. Not that the drawings, the colors, and the brushstrokes weren't his. It was just that images would show up that weren't in his sketches, or even in his mind. Most of the time his clients never noticed, because it was subtle—an alteration of light or background detail.

Case in point, last year Bob Redson had called Jack to do a six-foot portrait of him for his new bank in Atlanta. Redson was a particularly disagreeable and uncooperative client, but the money was good. Jack had changed some birds in the pattern of the Oriental rug beneath his subject's feet. Redson never noticed the vultures, and Jack couldn't say he chose to paint the birds exactly that way.

The next month, Redson's bank went under. Seems he'd been making millions of dollars worth of bad loans. When he tried to scrounge some money for attorney's fees by returning the painting, Jack had told him to keep it—what use was it to him? He'd given Redson a 50% refund because he felt sorry for him—maybe even a tiny bit guilty, warranted or not.

Jack didn't know if his paintings were somehow causing things to happen, or just predicting them. He hadn't dwelled on it with the girls, because it seemed—well, a little *weird*. He was more or less a skeptic himself, but it had gotten hard to keep calling it coincidence.

He pulled into his clay driveway at 6:15 with a cold beer on his mind. *Hope that's prophetic*, he thought. Sug must have picked up the vibe, because she was coming out to meet him with a long-neck of Bud. She motioned for him to come sit with her on the verandah.

“Hi, babe...supper's almost ready. How's the eye?”

“Oh, the fireball's still bouncing around in there, but it's a little better.” He squinted. “Be a damn cool light show, if only I could look away from it now and then.”

“I can't even imagine. I hate that you have to go through this, Jack—being an artist, too. Like Beethoven goin' deaf.”

“Yeah, Beethoven looked pretty pissed off in most of those portraits. Guess all us geniuses have our cross to bear.” He smiled. “So how's Tea doing?”

“Better than I thought, actually. A few hysterics and cryin’ for Mama, but then she simmered down. She’s in setting the table now.”

“That’s good...I figured she’d be a basket case. But then tomorrow’s another day.”

“It is...and what with Gary’s temper...”

“Wonder what Tea ever saw in that pee-oh-ess. Then we’ve all made mistakes.”

“Yeah...but this mistake has guns, Jack.”

“Hope he doesn’t come wavin’ that Glock around again. ‘Course that redneck moron’s so stupid, he’s just as likely to shoot himself as anyone.”

Jack had encountered Gary once about eight months earlier. He’d driven all the way from South Carolina looking for Tea after she failed to respond to his multiple texts and drunken voicemails. He had come banging on the front door with the butt of a gun. Jack had called the cops, and they’d come and picked him up before he could cause a tragedy. Problem was, they let him go the next day. Tea had a restraining order against him now, for what it was worth.

“Well, we can worry about it tomorrow,” said Sug. “Come on, let’s go in and eat.”

Jack went inside and gave Tea a long hug. She didn’t say much at supper, unusual for her, and the will o’the wisps had gone out for now.

Jack went to bed exhausted. It was hard to fall asleep, but the blaze in his eye finally calmed, and he started to see what he needed to do.

Sug was cursing at the computer. “Come on...*damn*, this thing is slow! Jack, I can’t seem to find the email from Lou Ann Colbert. I wanted you to see it—you could use some good news.

“Oh, what’d she say? Did the family like the piece?”

“Loved it. And here’s the interesting thing. Lou Ann said she was admiring the painting last night and saw what looked like a third child peekin’ out behind the four of them on the sofa. And guess what, just this morning she found out she’s pregnant. Is that not a hoot?”

“Well, that *is* a hoot,” said Jack.

He poured himself some coffee. “Here, pour you some too. Is Tea up yet?”

All at once there was a loud *thunk* from the kitchen doorway.

“Tea! Oh my God,” Sug knocked over her coffee cup as she leaped out of her chair.

Tea was pale but conscious. She was gripping her cell phone.

“Tea, hon...just stay on the floor a minute, don’t try to get up yet. Jack, get a pillow.”

“Sorry...all of a sudden I felt hot and sick to my stomach...”

“Poor thing, stress is gettin’ to you. Here, here’s a nice cool cloth for your face. What’s on that phone?” Sug took the phone and looked at it.

“You’re turning almost as white as she did,” said Jack.

She showed him the phone. A series of texts from Gary:

Tea, dont think this is over.

U get all the court orders u want

U still belong to me

Sanders & Sug are turning u aganst me. I cant let that happen.

No more :- (

C U ALL SOON!!!

“He’s just doing this to intimidate,” said Jack.

“Well, it’s working,” said Tea.

“Listen girls, I thought of an idea. Later, when Tea’s up to it, how about y’all both dress up, maybe in blue? I want to start a new painting.”

“Painting?” Sug frowned. “Now? But—”

“Sug,” said Tea, “Let’s do it, okay? I’m fine. Jack has his reasons.”

“I guess it worked out last time,” laughed Sug.

Jack started on the painting. One sitting and he had the sketch done. He liked to work alone, disappearing for hours to his garage studio out back.

In two days it was ready for viewing. Jack put the big stretched canvas in the living room with a sheet over it, and made a big deal of unveiling it. He pulled off the sheet in one swoop.

“Jack Sanders, this is amazing!” Tea said. “It’s almost as magnificent as that one of us back in Lakeville.”

The portrait showed Sug and Tea in blue sundresses, sitting on a garden bench, greenery surrounding them. Sug held a bunch of daisies and was handing one to her sister.

“Jack...it’s—” started Sug, “But wait, what’s that funny grayish area over there? Did your bum eye miss that corner?”

They all looked at the lower left side of the painting, where there was an oblong shadow thrown across the grass.

“No,” said Jack. “I took a cue from...uh, the old Flemish Masters there.”

Tea tried to recall something from her college Art History class, but could bring up nothing about the Flemish Masters.

“Sometimes they hid a message in their paintings. Now let’s skip the talk and sip our champagne, shall we?”

Which was actually Bud Light, but it worked okay as a toast.

Later that day Tea was looking at the painting. Jack had made her look pretty nice, maybe a little plump. Her eye fell across the odd shadow again. She tilted her head at an angle, and suddenly it popped out at her.

“Hey, I think I see! Sug, come look...no, from over here. In the shadow—is that a face?”

Sug squinted and craned to see the shadow from the side. There *was* a face. It was so elongated on the front view, you didn’t see it, but there it was, clear as day. The eyes were wide and staring, and the mouth gaped. The broken nose was unmistakable.

Gary.

“Holy shit...wow, not the most flattering, either.”

“Sug, this is why Jack wanted to paint us. Why else did he skip eating and sleeping for nearly three days to get it done?”

“Yeah, but god, it’s creepy. I can’t *unsee* that thing now.”

Welcome to Georgia. Gary chuckled as he read the sign aloud. The words were printed across two ripe peaches that reminded him of a pair of breasts. *Tea always had nice ones,* he thought. He was driving a borrowed pickup on the road to Armadillo. He'd borrowed it without asking, but his buddy Jim was off in Greenville, and hell, he'd never miss the truck for a day or two. He looked at the dashboard clock. 8:07 PM. In an hour he would be paying a visit to the girls and their protector Sanders. He fingered the Glock under the seat and relished the moment he'd see that chicken-shit artist on his knees. A little persuasion, and Tea would be begging to come back. He would allow Sug to stay with Sanders, and if they all cooperated, nothing bad had to happen.

He glanced up at the photo he had stuck on the visor. It was his favorite one of himself and Tea. Twenty-years faded and dog-eared, it showed them in better times. Her hair was pale blond, full and curly then. He'd get her to bleach and perm it back the way he liked it.

He slapped at an ant crawling on his left arm. Then he felt it scurry up his cheek, and almost swerved off the road swiping at his face. *Little on edge,* he thought, but he could shake that off. He was tempted to stop and grab a six-pack or small bottle of bourbon, but he wanted to stay sober today until he had finished his business. Plenty of time to celebrate later.

He pulled up to the clay driveway at exactly 9:00, just as a light rain was beginning to fall. He parked close to the road. *No sense givin' em too much warning.* He pulled out the gun and stuck it in his belt. Getting out of the truck, he slipped on the damp clay, falling to his knees. Shit, his legs felt like rubber. Just as he got to his feet a wave of nausea hit, and he almost fell over again with dry heaves. He staggered up the driveway toward the house. The path was longer and curvier than he remembered, almost writhing like a snake under his feet.

He could barely see for the salty rain dripping into his eyes. He spotted a figure heading toward him in the dark. He pulled the gun. Jesus, why was his hand shaking so much?

Whoever it was was closer, almost on him. Then Gary was looking at—what the hell was he looking at? It was wearing a shroud, and on the front was—a letter *D*. The *D* had horns. He blinked, bleary-eyed. Then it struck him. It was Death, and it was coming for him. He couldn't see the face under the hood, if there even *was* one.

“*Devil—stop, I’ll shoot!*” His footing gave way on the slick clay just as he pulled the trigger. The bullet, flying straight into the air, reached its apex and started speeding down. He scrambled to his hands and knees, and felt a searing burn on his right butt cheek. *Hellfire!* He’d dropped the gun...where was it? *There, by the driveway.* He lunged, but Death grabbed it first. He tried to get to his feet, but his legs wouldn’t hold, and his ass felt like someone had taken a branding iron to it. He started to cry.

“*Please...please...don’t take me, I...I don’t wanna die...*”

But the figure only growled “get in”, brandishing the gun and pointing it toward the bed of the truck.

Gary didn’t know how he mustered the strength, but he crawled back to the pickup, pulled himself up to the tailgate and climbed in. He hung on for dear life as Death took the wheel and drove off like a madman.

Sug and Tea heard a loud *pop* from the house, and looked out the front window just in time to see red taillights disappearing in rain and kicked-up dust.

“Sug!...What d’you think—”

“We gotta go make sure Jack’s okay,” said Sug, running for the back door. Jack was out in the studio working late on a commissioned piece.

“Wait! What if somebody’s still out there?”

Jack saved them the trouble, showing up in the kitchen spattered with water and paint.

“Thank the lord,” breathed Tea.

“Why, what’s going on?”

“Jack,” said Sug, “geez, do you know you’ve got black paint smeared all over your face?”

“God bless, Sug, who cares about paint right now?” Tea was hyperventilating. “That sounded like a gun shot. What if it was Gary?”

“Take it easy, Tea,” said Sug. “We’re okay. Whoever it was drove off. Jack, did you hear that commotion? And a backfire, or—something?”

“No, didn’t hear anything back in the studio.”

They told him about the noise and the taillights.

Jack looked out the window. “I’ll go out there and check it out. Stay in here.” He took a flashlight out of the drawer and walked out to the street.

Just light rain. No one there.

Sug and Tea were having coffee the next morning when Jack came in with the Armadillo Gazette. He handed it to Sug. “Check out page two, down about halfway.”

Sug read the story aloud. “***Police Beat: Do You Know This Man?*** *An unidentified man, mid-forties, was found semi-conscious in the bed of a black pickup parked outside the Armadillo police station. Subject had a minor flesh wound, and was shaking uncontrollably. When questioned, he repeated only unintelligible phrases containing the words ‘Angel of Death’. Police transported him to Mercy Hospital, where he was admitted in fair condition. The only item in his possession was this photograph.*”

The photo was printed below the story.

“Oh...my...God,” said Tea. “I had no idea that picture was still around.”

“Whoa Tea, remember that hairdo?” said Sug. “Talk about the ’80’s.”

“That was, like 1996,” said Tea.

“Like I said, ’80’s...” Sug stifled a giggle.

“Shut up, Sug. I was very *with-it* at the time.”

The three of them went to Mercy Hospital the next day to identify Gary. By the time they arrived, the nurse told them he was stable and recovering some of his memory. He was still suffering from DT’s, but was out of immediate danger. She asked if they wanted to go in. “Only two at a time.”

“I want to see him,” whispered Tea. “I just know that was him, coming to threaten me. He needs to know never to show his face in Armadillo—no, the state of *Georgia*, again.”

“That’s the spirit, sis,” said Sug.

The two of them went in to see the patient. Jack stayed outside the door.

Gary was propped at an angle, with the head of the bed cranked up. There was an IV line in his left arm, and a monitor overhead showed his heart rate. He opened his eyes. Tea saw a look of stark fear. *The face in the painting.*

“Tea! No...go away! I will not come near your place, never again, I swear it. Just leave me alone. The fuckin’ *Devil* lives there.”

“What on God’s earth are you talkin’ about, Gary?”

“I confess, dear heavenly Father. In Jesus’s name, amen, bless my soul—”

“Gary, that was you driving away the other night, wasn’t it. From our driveway? And did you shoot off a gun?”

“No! I mean, it was me...but it was *Death*—the Grim Reaper himself—he nearly took me, I was good as dead...Lord Almighty, have mercy on this servant o’ yours—”

Gary turned his eyes to the doorway and screamed. The heart monitor beeped ominously.

“God help me...it’s come back for me! *D*...Demon, Death, Devil, it followed you here! Mother Mary, where are you?” He thrashed in the bed, yanking at the IV line so hard it pulled out of his arm, opening up a rivulet of blood that flowed down his wrist and dripped onto the floor.

“Tea, go get the nurse, quick!” Sug glanced at the doorway. “That’s *Jack* at the door, for Lord’s sake.”

The nurse, hearing the beeping monitor, was already there. “What’s going on in here? You can’t get him excited like this. Y’all gonna have to leave, *now*.”

“Sorry. We’re leaving,” said Jack. “Come on, girls, he’s obviously not in a state to visit.”

On the way home the three of them stopped at a Burger Barn for lunch. Jack was taking a bite of his cheeseburger when Sug saw a blob of ketchup drip onto his sweatshirt.

“Oh Jack, honey,” she said, “you got—”

Sudden stop.

“What?” He scooped up a fistful of fries.

“...ketchup on you. Jack...that sweatshirt. Weren’t you wearing it the other night?”

“Might’ve been. Here, I’ll clean it off.” He swiped the fries through the spilled ketchup before stuffing them into his mouth.

“Ugh,” said Sug. She nudged her sister. “Hey Tea...take a look at Jack’s shirt.”

Tea glanced at Jack. “That old paint-daubed *Georgia Devils* hoodie? A little ketchup isn’t gonna—”

“Forget that, check the *logo*, Tea.”

Tea looked again. “Oh my God, no wonder Gary went apeshit when he saw you in the doorway!” Her eyes went phosphorescent with wisps.

“Hold on,” said Sug. “Jack...you were back in the house with us that night after the truck took off. How could you—”

Jack just smiled.

He couldn’t have answered anyway, with a mouthful of fries.

