

HUTCH HOLTZ

Tim Reed sits in the driver's seat of his ancient and rust-punched Datsun hatchback, balancing a screwdriver on the tip of his finger. Hutch and Tim are killing time, waiting for some poor guy to come home so they can terrify him and, if necessary, perform grievous harm to the fragile architecture of the man's body. It's the usual deal: reluctance to pay a debt owed. When this happens, when their boss encounters someone offering resistance, there are phone calls. Verbal requests. Polite reminders. A process old as time. And finally, after all that, Tim and Hutch come by. It's just work. The screwdriver handle, pitted red plastic, wavers only slightly as they sit in the gloom, Tim's features lit pale green by the ghostly glow of the dashboard. The rain's coming down so hard it sounds like someone's flinging pennies onto the roof.

Hutch runs an arm across the fogged window but there's nothing out there to see. Sweet and gentle homes locked in slumber. Windows glowing, cars snug in their driveways. A nice neighborhood. It still surprises him sometimes, the vastness of people they get sent to talk to. All different sorts. Often, they're the furthest things from

hard men. Just regular folks. Regular people with their big ideas vanished, people suddenly stuck behind one too many bad moves.

Hutch finally tells Tim to put the screwdriver away.

“Why?”

“Because it’s gonna look fucked up if a cop drives by and glasses us, is why.”

They had a thing go south last week, *marginally* south, Hutch and Tim and a lazy-eyed meth addict named Dolph, and Hutch’s knuckles are still scabbed-up from it. Tim’s cheek laddered with scratches from Dolph’s dirty fingernails. That sort of thing rarely happens, but they already look sketchy as hell.

“Just do it,” Hutch says.

Tim sighs and drops the screwdriver to the floorboard.

They wait. The rain tapers off a little. Tim smokes, cracks the window. They’ve parked across the street from the guy’s house. Hutch gets a little nervous every time headlights roll across the windshield. Tim’s car—its rear passenger window a milky cataract of plastic and duct tape, the seats so shredded it looks like a family of four has died of a knife attack inside—doesn’t fit the street. The guy most certainly has enough money to upgrade to something nicer. Something that doesn’t look like shit, at least. Feels like a big screw-you to the world, this car. They’re both felons, and Tim, he knows, has a .38 tucked behind a panel in the driver’s-side door. Guy’s still on parole too. They’re both a wrong look away from going back to prison.

They wait. Listen to Tim’s tapes. When Peach Serrano sends you to retrieve a debt, you retrieve it.

“What my concern is,” Tim says after a while, lighting another smoke off the previous one, “is which king died and made you, like, second in command. That’s my question.”

“You’re being serious with this?”

Tim shrugs, pushes a lock of dark hair behind his ear. “Have they, like, sewn a tapestry with your face on it, my lord? Your fucking countenance or whatever? You sitting on your throne, looking all majestic?”

“Look around you,” Hutch says. “Now look at us. Look at your car.”

“I don’t get what that has to do with me dicking around with a screwdriver—”

“Because,” Hutch says, actually getting kind of mad now, “the last thing we need is some cop driving by this piece-of-shit ride of yours, thinking you’re in here playing with a knife or something. ‘Oh, no, it’s *actually* just a screwdriver, officer. We’re just two fucking leg-breakers hanging out in the dark, sir. Felons, with an unregistered piece. No problem at all, sir, how are you?’”

Tim sniffs. “This still doesn’t explain why it is that *you*—”

They’re saved when a car pulls into the driveway of the house. Tim nods, immediately all business, and Hutch starts the stopwatch feature on his watch. They step out quickly—Tim long since having smashed out the dome light—and walk fast and quiet across the street.

“Excuse me,” Hutch says. The guy’s leaning over, getting groceries out of the backseat, in a hurry to get out of the rain. He’s just some guy. White, doughy. Khakis and a North Face jacket. Where do they come from, these people? How does a guy like this get in deep with Peach? He looks as dangerous as a painting in a motel room. The fear walks large across his face.

It makes sense: It’s raining, dark. There’s two guys standing in his driveway. One of them a huge smokestack of a man with half his head dented in. The other one grinning with yellow smoker’s teeth and a scuffed leather jacket and a—is that a *screwdriver* he’s holding in his hand? It is. Hutch swears under his breath.

“Get your ass inside,” Tim hisses. He presses the tip of the screwdriver against the man’s belly.

No kids, they’d been told. No family.

Just this guy and his debt.

They sit him down in his living room. He weeps on his couch, holding a pillow in his lap.

They don't touch him.

He pays in full, has the cash right there in the house.

"That was under five," Hutch says when they get back in Tim's car. He's feeling good.

"The hell it was."

Hutch shows him his watch. It's still going. He presses *stop*. Four minutes and thirteen seconds have passed from the time they got out of the car to the time they got back in it.

"A bet's a bet," says Hutch.

Tim mutters and hikes his hips up, fishes out his wallet from his back pocket. Passes Hutch a twenty.

They stop for burritos and eat them in the car. Tim texts his wife to say he'll be out late and they toss their garbage and head across town to the next job. It's a Friday night and traffic sucks. Hutch is tired. Dolph's scabs itch. When they make it to the second address on the piece of paper Peach has given them—no way they do any of this using GPS or over text or anything—they see that the apartment building is a two-story L-shaped affair with a parking lot maybe half full of cars, most of them only slightly less ruinous than Tim's. Far from downtown, this is the land of check-cashing kiosks, grated windows, open-air dope deals. Chinese food places next to tire repair joints with misspelled words on the marquees. There's a pair of dumpsters against the far wall of the building, tagged and overflowing with trash.

Tim reaches into the door panel and puts the revolver in his pocket.

"You sure you want to bring that?"

He snuffs his cigarette in the ashtray, and says through a mouthful of smoke, "Sure I'm sure. I don't like apartments, man. You get jammed-up in an apartment, you're fucked. I feel like we've had this conversation before."

Hutch looks at the building. It's started raining again. He believes

in intuition, has survived on it at times, and something in him agrees. Something's off. This one will give them trouble somehow. "What's this guy's name again?"

Tim fishes the piece of paper out of a cassette case in the console and squints at Peach's terrible handwriting. They'll burn the paper at the end of the night. It's a system that has worked with few logistical hang-ups for twelve years, ever since he and Tim started working for Peach Serrano.

"Wesley."

"Wesley?"

"That's what it says. Dude is in *deep* too. Shit."

He passes Hutch the paper.

Hutch squints in the weak streetlight. "Does that say twelve thousand?"

"It does," Tim says. He lights another smoke.

That bad feeling. Just right there, right in front. "I'm gonna get the bat," Hutch says, and Tim pops the trunk. A guy twelve thousand in the hole is willing to do a lot of things. Twelve's absolutely worth trying to pop a couple guys that come to the door. He roots through the trash and bungee cords and empty bottles of motor oil in Tim's trunk until he finds the little wooden fish bat, all scarred and dark with oil. Tim steps out, gets the pizza box from the backseat. Puts the baseball hat on. Eighty-second is a few blocks over, a white-noise machine cut through by the occasional throb of bass from a passing car.

"Ten minutes on this one?"

"I don't want to play this time."

Hutch is surprised. Tim sees the look on his face.

"I don't feel good about this one, dude." He's got the revolver there against his leg. "Alright?"

Hutch says, "We could just tell Peach we tried and no one was home."

"He'll just make us wait, man. Hang out in the parking lot all

night. You know how he is.” Tim’s right. Peach demands results. If no one’s home, he’ll just make them spend the night in the car, watching the place.

They step quietly up the cement stairs to the second floor. The guy has a corner apartment and the blinds over the window are drawn shut. Little shards of light shine between the slats. Hutch walks with the bat against his leg. They’ve done this a lot over the years, and it still floods his mouth with spit each time. Adrenaline, fear. The potential for ruination is always there—his or someone else’s. You have to love it a little bit to do it, and a part of Hutch does.

He steps past the window, presses himself against the wall on the other side of the door. You have to be careful. Apartments are tough places to press up on someone. Easier to break someone’s arm in the street, even. Apartments, especially on the second floor, the cops get called and you’re stuck in a room.

Tim holds the pizza box in front of him, hits the doorbell. They share a look: In and out. No fucking around. Hutch presses hard against the wall, out of sight. They can hear the dim chime of the doorbell inside the apartment. The brim of the baseball cap throws Tim’s face in shadow.

“What,” someone says through the door. A woman’s voice.

“Mianci’s Pizza,” Tim says.

“We didn’t order a pizza.”

“Crap,” Tim says. He names an address, asks if he has the right place.

“That’s down the street.” Tim gives an awkward little wave; the woman must be peering at him through the blinds.

“Crap,” he says again. “Well, I’m screwed. We have a ‘deliver in thirty minutes or the driver pays for it’ deal going on, so I’m out twenty-five bucks now.”

Silence from behind the door.

Tim sighs. “Listen, I’ll give you this thing for ten. I might as well make a little of my money back, right?”

The silence goes on long enough that Hutch is weighing the pos-

sibility of just cracking down the door when the woman finally says, “What kind is it?”

“Large pepperoni and olive.”

More silence.

“Ten bucks?”

“Yeah. I just gotta make some of my money back, you know? You’d be doing me a favor.”

The door starts to open and Hutch feels that old surge—*we’re moving*—and he slaps at it, pushes the door open with his palm and strides in like doom itself. The woman shrieks once, briefly, and they’re inside. Tim already has his wheel gun against a guy’s forehead, walking him backward to the couch. Hutch walks the woman up to the opposite wall, holds a hand out to keep her there. He smells ammonia-burn, enough to make his eyes water: the reek of cat piss and the ghost of spent meth. He asks her if there’s anyone else in the apartment.

“No,” the woman says.

“Don’t lie to us,” says Tim.

“I’m not.”

But there’s *something* here, isn’t there? Some pulse. An itch in the dark meat of the skull. Tim was right, something feels off. Like standing next to something hot, but you could only feel it in your brain. He does a walk-through of the place. It’s a one-bedroom apartment. The bathroom’s its own unique horror show, with grand washes of pink and gray mold along the shower walls. Garbage spills from a can onto the floor in the kitchen. Old foam meat wrappers on the counters filled with congealed blood, the natter of flies. A bedroom with clothes mounded on the floor and a galaxy of stains on the sheetless mattress.

Back in the living room, he steps up to the woman as her eyes jitter wildly around the room. Thin, sore-spotted cheeks, bad stick and poke tattoos on her arms amid yellow bruises. She’s skeletal in a tank top and a pair of sweatpants. She’s thirty or sixty. Hutch asks her what her name is.

“Don’t tell him shit,” the guy on the couch says. Tim pushes the barrel of the gun against his cheek until the guy’s got his head pressed against the wall.

“I’ll scream,” she says. “The neighbors hate us. They’ll call the cops again.”

“It’ll be the last thing you ever do,” Tim says over his shoulder.

“Listen,” Hutch says. “You can do that. You can. Or you can just go for a walk. You know? Just go cop somewhere, I don’t give a shit. Give us ten minutes with Wesley here and we’re good.”

“Don’t do it, Shawna,” Wesley says, and Tim rakes the gunsight across his forehead. Wesley squeals, claps his hands to his head.

Shawna licks her flaking lips. Hutch steps back. Holds an arm out toward the front door. Shawna scratches at a sore in the crook of her elbow and says, “Are you gonna kill him?”

“God, no.”

“You promise?”

“Jesus Christ,” Wesley says.

“He’s in deep with a friend of ours,” Hutch says. “We need to talk to him, is all.”

Her eyes bounce between them.

“I don’t wanna go,” she says.

“You don’t owe this guy a thing,” says Hutch.

“That’s not why,” she says.

“Shut the fuck up about it, Shawna,” Wesley says, loud.

“Lady,” Tim says, “you better go before we change our minds.”

Shawna nods and runs her wrist under her nose once, then picks up a denim jacket off the floor. She crouches down in the doorway next to the litter box and puts her shoes on, her eyes bright and hunted the whole time. She walks over to the coffee table, and with shaking hands, her hair hanging over her face, she grabs a pack of Camels and a lighter. She stuffs them in the pockets of her coat.

“Those are my cigarettes,” Wesley says.

“You speak to her one more time,” Tim says, “and you’re gonna be

able to roll your teeth on that coffee table like dice, man. I swear to God.”

Shawna rifles through the trash on the coffee table, her eyes locked on Wesley. She picks up a box cutter, the handle wrapped in black electrical tape, then grabs a plastic baggie cinched with a rubber band, puts that in her coat too. It’s maybe a teener of meth. Tim laughs outright.

“You’re dead,” Wesley says wearily.

“Shouldn’t have hit me, motherfucker,” Shawna says. Hutch opens the door for her like a valet. They can hear her footfalls reverberate through the wall as she runs down the steps. Hutch locks the door behind her.

“She’s gonna call the cops,” Wesley says, touching his forehead. “Y’all are fucked.”

Tim laughs. “She’s going down the street to do your dope, is what she’s doing.”

“Cut the shit,” says Hutch, crouching so he’s eye level with Wesley. “You owe Peach Serrano a lot of money.”

Wesley leans back against the couch, spreading his arms wide. Rail-thin, pit stains in his shirt, a beard coming in patchy. Wesley’s maybe twenty-five and looks like heated-up dogshit. His forehead’s beaded with blood. “Peach Serrano?” He grins, and Hutch sees that his gums are bleeding too. “Peach Serrano can lick my withered balls.”

He considers hitting Wesley as hard as he can. Just pushing the table aside, slamming him right there in the chest with his fist. Could he stop Wesley’s heart? He doubts it, but he bets he could crack the man’s sternum. The desire is right there, bellowing and insistent.

Tim says, “You owe Peach twelve grand, dude. He’s given you two extensions with low-as-shit interest and you’re still fucking him. Be reasonable. You gotta call the guy back when he calls you.”

“Oh, what,” Wesley says, and grins. “What’re you gonna do? Knock my teeth out?” He reaches into his mouth with a pair of dirty

fingers. Latching onto a yellow incisor, he starts working it, rocking it back and forth. He pulls the tooth out of his mouth. There is a soft pop that Hutch actually hears, and watery blood spills down the man's lip. He tosses the tooth on the coffee table. It bounces off, falls to the carpet.

"Be my fucking guest," Wesley says.

Tim stands in front of him, delighted. He grins over at Hutch. "This guy's alright," he says, and then he bends down and breaks Wesley's nose with the butt of the .38.

"Bathroom is *gnarly*," Tim calls out.

Wesley's face is a pulped mess. He's slumped over on the couch. Blood everywhere. Tim has done his work with vigor; it was rare that someone doesn't buckle when faced with the two of them. And the thing with the tooth—that was wild. Hutch can see why Tim's gone a little extra on the guy. A leg of the coffee table has gotten busted in the process, trash avalanching onto the carpet. They've bound Wesley's hands in front of him with electrical tape. Hutch glances nervously at his phone. They've been there sixteen minutes. Way too long.

Tim stands in the doorway of the bathroom, wiping his hands on his shirt. His knuckles are pitted with Wesley's teeth marks, still welling blood. "He's dumb as shit."

"He thinks he's untouchable."

"You think you're a fucking made guy," Tim calls from the doorway in a terrible Italian mob-guy accent, puffing his chest out. Wesley snuffles blood onto the couch cushions. "You think you got your button, man? You little dope-fiend asshole. You're a shot-caller?"

"I'm invincible," Wesley says, grinning through the blood.

Just lean in and crack his chest. One punch. Just do it. Some dark animism inside Hutch wants to go to town on him.

Tim walks over to Wesley, stands there with his hands on his hips. "We smoke him," he says, "or we take him to Peach."

Wesley's eyes fly open.

“Oh, *that* woke you up, huh?”

Hutch grabs Wesley’s arm, hoists him up. “We’re taking a ride, son.”

“I ain’t leaving,” says Wesley.

“The fuck you’re not,” says Tim, who takes hold of his other arm. “Let’s get him to the warehouse.” To Wesley, he says, “You got about ten minutes until an ex-cop is popping your eye out with an ice-cream scoop or something truly terrible like that, dude. Digging around under your fingernails with a nail file like he’s looking for treasure. You really want that?”

“I can’t leave my shit,” Wesley says, and the veneer slips. He sounds hurt, finally. Scared. Want is carved and writhing in every word. “I can’t, man. Please.”

“What shit is that, Wes?”

He lifts his head toward the kitchen. The three of them head in there. Behind bags of ice and a half-pint of generic vanilla ice cream, there’s a tied-off bread bag. Tim lifts it, wincing; even without opening it, Hutch can tell that the bad feeling is coming from this, from whatever’s in there. It drifts from the bag like radiation. Emanates from it, and Hutch feels halved—in such close proximity, some part of him wants to puke and mewl, while another part wants to just start biting at Wesley’s face, the skin of his neck. Just savage him.

Absolutely no part of him wants to get away from whatever’s in there.

Tim spins the bag open—it’s a Wonder Bread bag, white with little colored polka dots all over it—and peers inside. He stares at it for a while.

“What is it,” says Hutch. Wesley’s like a wax statue beside him. Glassy and slack-jawed.

Tim exhales, looks up at him. When he does, it’s a look that Hutch, in all their years together—both as lifelong friends and as men who openly hurt other people for money—has rarely seen. It’s a kind of fearful wonderment. “It’s a hand,” he says.

“What?”

“It’s a hand.”

“Like a real one?”

“Like some dude’s hand, yeah.” He spins the bread bag shut and Hutch can see the weight at the bottom. “A chopped-off fucking hand.”

They all live in that moment for a while. The desire to bite and punch, just fall into the red darkness of the thing, is so strong in there, in that small room. Finally, Hutch comes to, like he’s pulling himself from a dream. “You got the rest of a body in here somewhere, Wes? Under the floor or something?”

Wesley sighs like someone drifting off to sleep.

Hutch looks at Tim. Twelve years working together. Friends since they were juvenile dipshits in Rutherford. His closest friend, without a doubt, especially when you considered the number of deadly secrets they share. The pair of them have done difficult, sometimes awful things to people in the pursuit of money, in feascance to an objectively bad man. If Wesley doesn’t come home alive from Peach’s warehouse tonight, the cops will eventually search this apartment. Shawna can describe the two of them. Neither he nor Tim are much of a challenge in a lineup. But no matter what, if the cops search the apartment and find a severed hand in a bread bag, it’s even more of a problem. A problem for them is a problem for Peach, and it’s easy to figure out how that ends. He still wants to rend Wesley in half, luxuriate in the man’s guts, and part of him—to his dismay and wonder, it’s a not insignificant part—wants to do the same to Tim.

“Let’s take it,” he says. “Just put it in the car.” Tim nods, and the look of relief on his face is obvious.

They both want it around.

Wesley sags like a punch-drunk boxer all the way to the hatchback. Tim makes sure to clang his head against the Datsun’s doorframe as he puts him in the backseat.

They put the bread bag and the pizza box in the trunk, under a spare.

Hutch breaks protocol and texts Peach: *It’s complicated.*

Don Sr. calls him back a minute later. A rarity. Nine out of ten times, Hutch and Tim get a debt paid, either in full or in part. Just by showing up. The other 10 percent, the debtor gets worked over, like Dolph had, the severity dependent on a number of things: where Hutch and Tim have cornered the guy, the amount of money owed, and, absolutely, the guy's attitude. Once the damage is inflicted, the debtor's given a date when they'll return. It is a simple enough equation, and it almost always works. Unrepentant men like Wesley are not unheard of, but rare. When it does happen, they go to the warehouse and have a palaver with Don Sr.

Hutch is sitting next to Wesley in the backseat. His thinking is still off. It's muted, now that the hand's in the trunk, but it's still there, like the hum of an appliance in the back of his brain. Dark and warm, full of whispers and weird recriminations. Blood. Paranoia.

Over the phone, Don greenlights taking Wesley to the warehouse. They know enough not to get too specific over the line.

"He had a friend there," Hutch says, "but she left."

"You let her leave? That ain't smart."

"Yeah, well."

"Yeah, well," Don parrots. "Is it a complication or not? Will this bite us in the ass?"

Hutch looks out the window, the smeared neon of Eighty-second. "No. We can tell you in person."

Don had been a cop for thirty years before going to work for his son-in-law, and waiting is hard for him. "I'll be here," he says, and hangs up.

Hutch finally can't stand it anymore. The noise is just too much, the snarl of it. The bloody clamor in his brain. He reaches over, grabs Wesley's skinny thigh and squeezes as hard as he can, which is pretty hard. Wesley screams and bucks and Hutch feels good for a second. Up front, Tim laughs his hoarse laugh and lights a cigarette.

"Was that your girlfriend in there?" Hutch says after Wesley calms down. "Shawna."

“You’re gonna fucking die,” Wesley sobs. “You’re gonna die so bad.”

“Pay attention,” Tim says in the rearview, snapping his finger. “She said you hit her. You like to hit women, Wes? You into that?”

Nothing.

“How’d you get ahold of a chopped-off hand, dude?” Hutch leans in close, smells piss and body odor, that acrid meth-sweat. He resists the urge to bite Wesley’s ear clean off his skull. “You’re running out of running room,” he says. In the trunk, the hand throbs, mutters, sings.

“You feel that, right, Hutch?” says Tim in the front.

“Oh, I feel it.”

“I just want to fucking *hurt* something, dude.” Tim takes a jubilant drag off his smoke and laughs again. “It feels awesome.”