

- NARCOLEPTIC -

by Steve Hussy

1

The light blasted Steve Hussy's eyes. He had been sleeping again. Each time he would wake with a jolt... his eyes stinging and his mouth dry.

The more he drank, the stranger his dreams became. He enjoyed the way his brain kept trying to attack him. He would ride each dream through to its end – always somewhere between conscious and semi-conscious.

Yet this time when he blinked he knew he was fully awake: "I'm in trouble, aren't I?"

Not necessarily.

"Hmm."

Would you like a drink?

"Vodka, thanks."

We don't serve spirits here.

"Hmm."

We do a lovely red wine if you're interested?

The barman handed over a large glass of Pinot Noir.

Hussy drained it, then said: "I suppose you want to hear it all?"

Isn't that what all barmen do?

Hussy breathed in, then exhaled fumes that tasted of iron. He put on his best tough guy voice and his pale blue eyes stared forward.

The glass was refilled, and he told his story...

2

He had been asleep for 12 hours that day.

The wind and rain pulsed outside. These sudden bursts and gusts of noise infuriated Hussy. He pulled the bedsheet over his head and sleep came after thirty minutes of frustration at the endless noise of a seemingly endless world.

People say they're dead to the world when they sleep, yet Hussy felt exhilaratingly alive. He yearned for each lengthy sleep.

Entire movie plots would play out for him. They entertained him so much more than reality.

That night the tale that stuck was basic: he was dreaming about flowers. A field filled with pansies, roses, marigolds, daisies, dandelions, fat fleshy lilies and more. They stretched out, chest high, as far as he could see. They were every shade of black and white. They provided a nice contrast with the sky, which was a cloudless blue.

Hussy waded through the flowers, and now and then he came across a flower that wasn't monochrome. A purple pansy. A

red rose. A white daisy with a yellow centre. As he went along, he picked them and gathered them.

Now there was a pond, and he looked down at a single golden tadpole darting around. A magical creature. And then there was a beautiful pink water lily and it grew before his eyes. Hussy looked at it, smiled broadly and added it to his bouquet.

He drew a long sniff of the flowers. They smelt clearer and cleaner than reality.

Then his eyes and nose started to run, and he sneezed a dust-cloud of neon yellow pollen. He started to choke and cough: "Kha-kha-ha-ha-khhha-ha".

And then a loud ringing sound woke him up.

3

Hussy dragged the phone to his ear and it made clattering noises along the way. He hated the rise of mobile phones even more than the corded phone he had resolutely stuck by.

"HELLO? HELLO?" it said. The voice was far too loud so he held the receiver away from him.

"Wah?" Hussy wet his lips and tried again: "What?"

"IS THAT HUSSY?" It was male, deep at first but then it went up at the end of the sentence: "HUSS-EEEE?"

"Yeah," he groaned, "you can stop shouting now."

"THIS IS..." Hussy put his free hand over the earpiece to

muffle the voice: "Marcus."

"Urgh."

"'Fraid to say Rick's dead."

"Oh."

"He's been killed."

Hussy didn't say anything.

Marcus said: "Shot in the ol' noggin."

Hussy still didn't say anything.

Marcus eventually said: "You better come down an' have a look... We can talk more then."

"Uh-huh."

"It's not far. Just on the east road leading outta Yarmouth."

"I know where you mean."

"See you soon, boy." The voice hung up.

Hussy thought: "Boy?" as his right eye unpeeled with a pop and the left followed soon after.

He slapped himself across the face and felt it sting. He was probably awake. He had spent so much of his life asleep, it ceased to matter much.

The only surprise he felt about Rick Acton's death was how it may have happened. Acton was the equivalent of a time-bomb that would spew random numbers until it hit zero.

Hussy clambered out of bed and into a shirt, creased suit, baseball cap and some dirty black trainers. The lace snapped on one of them.

So Acton was dead. That meant he would be next.

Ah, well...

He felt his face. It wasn't shaved but it didn't matter. All he needed was a full head transplant.

He called for his favourite taxi... 0-8000-CABGUY.

"Olympia building, please."

The cabbie said: "Gimme five minutes, my friend."

"Thanks, Shubey."

"The turd shall guide me!" They laughed and he hung up.

The turd was a Walnut Whip on the top of the Olympia. It lit up at night as a glowing maroon testament to bad architecture. Great Yarmouth had been named by someone with a severe sense of irony...

Yarmouth was a mass of hotel rooms, drug deals, affairs, angry English, angry Polish, angry Portuguese. But Hussy knew that all of them were surrounded by water and occasional people of absolute beauty. Acton would have been killed anywhere. The location of it had as much importance as a green screen behind an actor.

Hussy wandered into the office, lifted up the blinds and glanced outside. It was dark, with only the faintest sliver of a moon. The small town was lit the wispy clouds sliding across the sky as they danced on a breeze.

He reached into the drawer and put his vodka into his back pocket.

Hussy carefully decanted booze into small plastic bottles

to avoid detection and to avoid breaking them when he passed out.

He put on his trenchcoat from the hatstand and then plopped on his hat. He ambled out of his office, through the reception room and out of the glass fronted door. It was marked "Acton & Hussy: Private Investigations."

The cab was waiting outside. Shubey was the only cab driver Hussy wanted to use repeatedly.

"HEY. MY MAN." It was Shubey, with his crinkled amber eyes and red checks that always sent out warmth. "You again?"

"Yep, me again."

"You keep my grand-kids in shoes!" Shubey laughed his beautiful laugh. His wife was a lucky woman...

"That makes me very happy," Hussy said.

"Where to, man?"

"East road outta here."

"I'm goin' to put the pedal to the metal for you, my man."

He roared off, and a couple of minutes in he said, a beaming smile reflected in the rear view mirror: "You know my son discovered the Tiktaalik roseae?"

Hussy looked confused: "Could you say that in English?"

Shubey thought for a second, then said: "It's the first fish-man." He smiled: "It proves we're all evolved from fish."

The concept made utter sense to Hussy: "That's great."

The cab kept swimming through the rainstorm.

Shubey moved his head gently back and forth as he said:

“Ya know he doesn’t believe in God? Did I tell ya that before?”

“No, you didn’t.”

“It’s ok,” the cab swam onwards, “he’s a beautiful son.”

“He certainly sounds like one.”

Shubey’s looked at Hussy in the rearview mirror: “You look ill, man, you ok?”

Hussy shut his eyes: “I don’t know.”

“Hey... Steve... STEVE!”

Hussy opened his eyes for a few seconds and said: “Please get me there.”

“Don’t worry, man,” Shubey said, the wrinkles on his face forming into worry. “I’ll get you wherever and whenever, ok?”

Hussy fell asleep yet again.

4

It was 2004 and life was a confounding flux for Steve Hussy.

Why couldn’t he think in straight lines? His machine mind sent out signals erratically. He was a human glitch, flicking on and off with sudden electric pulses shocking his brain.

Yarmouth was just the same... a low rent, ersatz version of something bigger. Both comprised of a strange, thin surface covering something they never were and never could be.

But Hussy liked Yarmouth for that reason. No-one cared

about its chaos and everyone disappeared into its mediocrity.

Hussy loved the sensation of being invisible. He corrected the pace of his breath and slowed it down so he couldn't hear it in the silence of his bedroom. Then he perfected walking like a cat, padding his feet so calmly that no-one knew he was there.

Hussy was only twenty-six but he had already seen too much. It was the manner in which he might die that bothered him. Meeting Rick Acton – who provided him with a clean gun – was both soothing and horrific.

Acton was a strange human being, but who isn't? His ego was both strong and fragile, like a shard of glass.

Stake-outs were gruelling for Hussy. He was trapped with a glutton chomping away at greasy food and watching philanderous lives.

Acton asked: "Why don't you swear?"

He gave Rick a disgusted look... he could see the half-eaten food in Acton's mouth: "Why would I?"

"Anger..." Acton gulped down some lukewarm, takeaway coffee. "Pain..." Hussy could smell that it had been laced with cheap whisky. "Emotion..."

"It seems redundant."

"Don't you ever get so angry you need to..." he fought for words, "to release it all?"

That made Hussy smile: "That sounds like defecating."

Acton stared at him: "That's exactly what it is."

Hussy kept smiling and kept his eye on the door.

Acton glared and said: "SAY IT."

"Why?"

Prodding Hussy's shoulder, he said: "At least, say ****."

Hussy said: "Hmm," and took a long swig of vodka. It went down easy. His throat had already been burnt by drinking for so long. He felt nothing then, and it was a wonderful feeling.

5

Shubey nudged his arm: "Wake up, man."

"Uh?" Hussy stirred awake.

Shubey had parked the cab close to the scene of Acton's murder. It was now raining heavily.

Two police car lights and an ambulance's lights blazed into the air. Hussy liked the way they lit the raindrops.

Shubey nudged him again: "Rick's dead?"

Hussy stared blankly ahead: "Yeah."

"I'll wait for you, ok?"

"Ok," Hussy smiled at one of his two friends: "Thanks." He adjusted his hat and Shubey helped him out of the back seat, saying: "Look, man..."

"It's ok."

Hussy walked over and looked down at Acton's body. There were no crime scene signs and no crime scene tape. Just a dead man laying in the rain, staring up at the sky.

Hussy reached into his pocket and he took a longer slug of vodka. He know he would die soon, but any pain was constantly anaesthetised. He could wake with welts on his body, or covered in blood, and he barely felt anything.

When Hussy was awake, the booze numbed him. When he was asleep his narcolepsy did the same thing. A 50/50 split that had formed something like a life.

Acton's corpse made Hussy look closer, tilting his head as he did so. Acton had a big grin... even with a big black hole where the centre of his forehead used to be.

Acton's second wife had christened Rick as "Upside-down Face." Even when Acton did break open his lips, the result looked like a down-turned bone. Most of the time he had a look of abject misery. Everything else was a leer, a smirk, a lip curl...

"AMAZING, AIN'T IT?" The voice splashed over and stood next to Hussy.

The wind breathed in and out, carrying the sand and the cold, hail-like rain. It soaked and rippled the white sheet that was stuck to Acton's body.

"Yeah." Hussy tucked down his hat and tried to hide behind it.

"Worked with Rick for years, ain't never seen him smile once," Marcus said. "Took him to see the strippers. Knew he liked the ladies a lot cos he said so..."

Hussy's eyes started to hang and he went to the side of the road. He sat down on the grass verge, worried that he would

fall asleep again. The wet permeated through his trousers and tugged at his backside. Ah, ah, it didn't matter...

Frank Marcus waddled over again. He was 6 foot high and increasingly wide. He wore a blue and white tent that flapped in the gale. "NOTHIN'!" Marcus went on, "A titchy little smirk, that's it!" His words rasped like a file, slow but sure: "Went out with a BANG! That's for sure."

"Ah," Hussy said, and tried to focus on staying awake.

Marcus had a purple face, purple nose, purple ears, three purple rolls of flab which connected the bottom of his purple mouth to his blue collar.

"Found anything?" Hussy asked.

"Ah... his wallet. Credit cards. Membership cards to his clubs. Coupla hundred in notes. Nuttin' else, 'fraid."

The murderer hadn't tried to make out it was a robbery. Someone with a bit of style and originality.

"No suicide note," Marcus added.

Hussy sighed: "There goes my theory."

"Theory?"

Hussy lifted himself up from the verge with a wet backside and a soggy brain.

Marcus went on: "What grandiose theory might that be?"

Hussy hated the way police – usually the dumbest of society – tried to use big words to seem important: "The one where he flings himself out of a car with a hole in his head."

That shut Marcus up for a few seconds, but after that

Marcus yawned and dragged it out with some ahh-ing noises as if he expected a round of applause at the end.

“Tired?” Hussy said, looking down at the way Acton’s blood had merged with the rivulets of blood and rain.

“You should know,” Marcus pantomimed another yawn as he waddled back to his car. His midget partner with meerkat eyes greeted him. Cops were paid to strategically look, investigate, sleep, ignore, eat, excrete, urinate and fail.

Now he was alone, Hussy looked around fully.

He saw faint marks in the mud where Acton had been thrown from the car. They were in the process of being washed away, but there were clearly no skid-marks. The sheet did as good a job as anything thin, wet and white does. Hussy peeled it off.

Acton was dressed in an open, brown overcoat and a white, now mostly brown, shirt. He was wearing dirty black trousers and shoes. He’d got dressed in a hurry or had bad hand-eye co-ordination because the buttons on the shirt weren’t lined up right. He was laying on his side, and his right arm was bent wrongly. Like his left ankle, it had been broken. He had a large deep gash in his chin, but there was almost no blood.

His face was old and tired but there was that rictus smile on Rick’s whitewashed face. The car lights emphasised the thick black lines around his mouth and forehead. The entry wound was small and round. The skin around it was burnt. The rain had mostly washed away the a lot of his blood and his small brain.

Hussy crouched, head down, and watched the rain trickle off the brim of his fedora. They were the only tears he could muster. He drew the sheet over Rick's body and the face, but Acton still grinned through it at the black sky.

Marcus fidgeted and then came over again. He dug his own little hole in the ground with his shoe and he fiddled with his truncheon. He started to whistle. Then he stopped: "Well, boy, um..."

"He been here long?"

Marcus burst into life: "Got here meself after the first guys here found the wallet and they knew I knew Rick. They'd got the call at the station from a motorist, y'see? An' then..."

"Get a name?"

"Nah. Male, probably young, they said. Don't get many who submit their names these days. The guys called me cos I was on patrol and y'know Rick ain't popular no more so they said they'd like it if I could handle it."

Hussy blinked his eyes.

Marcus rambled on: "Then me and Rob came, soon as we could."

"How long?"

"Well, um, prob'ly... well." Somehow he turned even more purple. "Must be only 'bout coupla hours or so."

"TWO HOURS?"

"I 'spect there's another homicide somewhere in town, y'know." He had a nervous chuckle. His sixty-something chins

and moustache shook: "Shouldn't be long now. He ain't going nowhere, anyway."

Hussy knew he hated cops, but he couldn't pinpoint why. All he knew was every encounter with a cop solidified that nebulous thought: "So Acton festers away and the stuff for forensics washes away? YOU'RE A MORON."

"Don't get at me, Hussy." Marcus poked a podgy finger at him. Then he withdrew it when Hussy didn't flinch.

"Like anyone who dishes out casual insults," Hussy said, "you can't take the truth yourself."

"Look, after Rick quit I stuck by him, OK? Just me." He was now the colour of beetroot. "All those things he said... Crazy and lonely, even when he HAD a woman." His head wobbled from side to side.

Some headlights blazed down the road. They turned around. The meat wagon had arrived, going a steady 25 but still veering from side to side.

Marcus said: "Here comes the cavalry." Another inane comment to add to his collection.

"I'm going," Hussy said. He walked down the road and his shoe got stuck in the mud. Another dramatic exit ruined...

Marcus laughed.

Hussy shoved the shoe back on and tucked in the lace again. Then he walked back and flicked Marcus' policeman's hat off with his forefinger.

Marcus said "WHAT?" as the hat fell down. His red rug fell

down with it. Moments of sheer beauty were few and far between for Hussy, but this was one of them.

Marcus' head was completely bald except for two strips of double sided tape with a couple of strands of red fibre on them. Fat drops of rain fell on his head and trickled down.

Everyone else called him by his surname, but Hussy knew his true first name: "See you next time, Francissssssss..."

Marcus steamed, the heat rising from the anger and rain. His fat head was like a purple pool ball ready to be racked up.

"Now," Hussy said, "that is beautiful." He looked down at Marcus and smiled.

Marcus' mouth flapped but the words didn't come.

Hussy walked back to Shubey's taxi. Outside the door, he reached into his pocket, fumbled past his gun, and he took out his Modafinil and a tablet of speed. He washed them down with the vodka. He didn't want to fall asleep here.

All the pettiness of life had damaged him, but how many people were pristine? Everyone was scarred by the horror of life, death and love. Aside from food and water, they were the only things that mattered.

Hussy's only strategy had been to breeze through life in the best way he could, floating on a current of red wine and vodka.

Until now, it had worked reasonably well.

6

Hussy knew he was strange, but he had become accustomed to his strangeness. He had an unnatural hatred of obese people, the smell of coffee, TV programmes, the limpness of modern music and the callousness of organised religions.

The barman looked at him and smiled the vacuous smile of someone who could accept these things and not worry.

But when Hussy computed all of his issues – in bed at night, sitting in a cab, in this bar – he knew his true hatred was simply his own life.

Would you like another drink?

“Always,” Hussy smiled and hacked a drinker’s cough: “Judge not, lest yet lest be judged.”

Hussy finally grinned at the nonsense of it all.

But how did you feel?

Hussy said: “Wet.”

The bartender withheld a sigh, and drained off a glass of wine himself. Even he was getting tired.

Emotionally...

“Look, we’re almost in the same business. You can see everything at anytime.”

But not inside.

“But you know the answer.”

Yes. But not why.

“You need to look harder.”

Some watch, but when you can access everything only certain things appeal.

“So what do you want to see?”

The truth.

7

Hussy nestled in the warmth of the taxi seat.

Shubey said: “What happened?”

“Ah, you know...”

“Rick?” He revved away from the scene of the crime.

“Yeah...”

“I saw the police lights,” Shubey said, “and the meat wagon...”

“Yeah.”

“You ok?” Another gentle look in the backview mirror.

“I will be,” then he paused before saying, “or not.”

Hussy thought about the movement of life as sleep came. It was as quick as Shubey speeding through the streets.

Life was alien in so many ways. He thought about how small Acton actually was. Even puffed up by the water soaking into his body. What had Acton ever been?

Being a narcoleptic had its advantages, and it gave Hussy’s stomach and mind enough time to fully digest Acton’s death.

Shubey woke him up when they arrived at the apartment

building. He helped him out of the taxi and up the stairs.

“Shubey...”

“No need to say anything, man. Get yourself dry, ok?”

Shubey left, and the Yale lock on the door clicked across.

The memory of the first time he met Rick flared as Hussy laid face down on the office couch.

It was cold and wet. The trees were dropping multi-coloured fire. The wind took the fire and spread it around until it died on the pavement. Then it merely laid in a sad brown mash.

Hussy was already angry and insular. He'd been to university and studied films. He'd had a girlfriend before she jetted off around the world with a new guy. She had invited him to travel with him, and he'd declined. Stupid, stupid...

He'd been scared to commit to difference, a situation he regretted every day. So he continued to work in the same bar that had funded his university course. It was at a holiday camp. The punters were only be there for a week at a time, and that appealed to him. The customers were films too – snapshots of lives and conversations that had a finite end after they left.

He thought about the beauty of the free booze there, and took a long slug of vodka from the remnants of the innocent looking bottle in his pocket.

Over time, he had become bored of the regulation drunks. Their rambling stories and their tenuous relationship to the truth. Over time, the best material ended up repeating, just spoken from different mouths. They became progressively more

ugly and stupid. Numbing himself with booze was an occupational hazard that he had fallen into head-first.

The alcoholism had started in the bar, but the voyeurism had always existed. He watched and listened, permanently outside and impossible to pin down. He'd been offered the chance of becoming a Film Studies' teacher from a previous tutor who was quitting to become a writer.

The thought had scrambled his nerves. What if he fell asleep during a lesson?

Instead of hiding in the background, he would be front and centre. He knew the thoughts would pound away like hammers. He knew he would have to drink even more to survive it all.

So Hussy stayed put, reading books and Wanted Ads during the quiet times at the bar.

When he saw the words PRIVATE DETECTIVE WANTED, they stood out in glorious 3D.

Here there would be difference.

The advert went on: EXPERIENCE NOT NEEDED. CALL RELPENO & ACTON: P.I'S. CALL 0-800-PIGUYS.

Well, ok... He broke out into one of his rare smiles.

8

Above all, Hussy thought it would fun. A story to perk up

his mundane life. As a goof, he bought a fedora and wore some dark glasses. He developed his noir character beforehand and practised in the mirror like Travis Bickle.

The door was marked *Relpeno & Acton: Private Investigations* and it opened out into a small office.

A woman sat cross-legged behind a desk in the middle of the room. She was blabbing into a phone and lazily tapping on a keyboard her free hand. She didn't stop when Hussy walked in. She just peered around the computer and winked.

"...then Bobby tells Tommy that, you know, he isn't going to stand for this anymore, so I'm like, ohmigod, don't hit him or nothing..."

She was maybe 22, with blonde hair halfway down her back. Her big red lips flapped away quickly and easily. She had an open desk and her red micro-skirt was hitched almost all the way up. The top of her sheer stockings showed, little brown lattices. The voyeur came out in Hussy once again...

She was certainly American, so why was she here?

"...but then Tommy says somethin' like 'You think I care?' and then he walks off, so I'm just standing there and Bobby's smiling but I think that maybe I like Tommy more..."

Hussy crossed his arms, sat back and listened.

"...and then..." There was the click of the door behind her. She slammed the phone down and started typing with both hands.

Hussy watched a short, chubby, older man in a white shirt

step out of his office.

“This gentleman,” Erica’s voice dripped with sarcasm, “has just arrived, Mr. Acton.”

“Thankyou for buzzing that through so quickly...” He held a lengthy look at Erica before he turned and said: “You Hussy?”

“Yeah.”

“Great name.” More sarcasm, this time it was pointed.

“Thanks,” he glared at Acton, “I was born blessed.”

“Funny.” Acton turned, and in the doorway he paused and said: “Lose the sunglasses.”

Hussy put them in his pocket as he passed Erica. He had no luck at catching what her breasts were like. He was shallow, but the deeper pool of water in his thoughts was growing.

Acton took a seat behind the desk. The office was dark and dingy and smelled of sweat. Hussy’s chair was low... a ridiculous power game.

He noticed Acton had a big forehead. A big target. It wasn’t that his hair was receding – although it looked dumb perched up there – it was just his forehead was out of proportion with the rest of his head.

Hussy passed him his curriculum vitae. Acton looked at it for a second, screwed it up, threw it at a bin in the corner. It rimmed out.

He interlaced his fingers on the desk and stared at Hussy. Hussy stared back. Acton was pasty faced, and he looked like a peeled potato with a little brown leaf on top.

Narcoleptic

“So. You want to be a private eye?”

No. A teacher. “Yeah.”

He drew out a pencil and started writing.

“Steve Hussy, hey?”

“We did that.”

“Still love that name.” He said the next line deadpan: “As you know, we have an opening.”

“Yeah.”

“My partner just died.”

“Oh.”

“Natural causes. Heart... Too much booze,” Acton said. “Do you drink?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. What makes you think you can do this job, boy?”

“A degree in Psychology,” which was only half a lie...

“That doesn’t mean much.”

“I know law.”

“That could help. Sometimes. You married?”

“No.”

“Girlfriend? Children?”

“No and no.”

“Do you have any charm?”

“Some.”

“Do you mind working late?”

“No.”

“Do you know private eyes aren’t so popular?”

“I do now.”

“Do you care?”

“No.”

“Every now and then you have to punch someone or be attacked.” Acton narrowed his eyes when he said that: “Does that bother you?”

“No.”

“Do you think you’re tough?”

“Enough.”

“Do you think you could take me?”

Hussy knotted his eyebrows and looked at Acton. He was below average height and paunchy. The three shirt-buttons straining over Acton’s belly were hard workers.

Hussy was 6’2”, thin with broad shoulders and big hands that were ideal for fighting: “Yeah.”

“It says here you got,” one corner of his mouth as he traced the word with his fingers, “nar-co-lep-sy.”

Hussy shrugged: “I fall asleep a lot.”

“You don’t think that’s a major problem?”

“I can’t drive, but I can get around.”

Acton now rubbed his left forefinger around his eye: “You need a crash helmet on the streets?”

“I have a hard head,” Hussy sighed, “and the meds have got better over time.”

They stared at each other for twenty long seconds, with neither of them blinking.

Acton leaned back on his chair. Hussy felt like pushing it so it would topple over.

Acton said: "You have a lot to learn."

"Yeah."

"I think I can work with you," and he reached out a clammy hand.

"Hmm."

Acton said: "I can be some kind of... mentor... to you."

Hussy let out a slow breath, barely audible: "Ahhh..."

"You act like a pussycat," Acton set his teeth together, "and I can teach you to be a doberman."

Hussy stifled a laugh.

Acton clearly thought he was Mike Hammer.

Hussy thought he was Philip Marlowe.

Loser and Loser were open for business.

– END OF SAMPLE –
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