

Death Runs Faster

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Published: 2008

in »Killer Year«



You wouldn't have worn your best T-shirt if you knew you were going to die today.

But you put it on first thing this morning, not really thinking, other than it was Friday, and you've been saving it all week.

This T-shirt fits best under your uniform. Doesn't bunch up at the top, or sag down near the top button.

You hate your uniform. You hate it almost as much as your job. So you take the small pleasures where you can get them.

Getting to work is a fifty-five-minute hassle, each way, because home is a dark one-bedroom apartment in the shadow of I-95, way too close to the river. This means a cold lonely walk, then a SEPTA bus ride, then a twenty-five-minute trek on the Frankford El to 13th Street, which, if you can hop on the very first car, spits you out near the end of the station, the closest to City Hall.

Which is where you work. City Hall.

You guard it.

You get nine bucks an hour to guard the City of Philadelphia's \$24 million (circa 1901) showpiece, originally meant to be the world's tallest building, but now has to settle for the dubious title of „world's tallest masonry building.” All granite and brick holding it up; no steel. Of course, it dawns on you that maybe you're not actually guarding the building itself but the people inside of it. Which would really depress you, because most of them are assholes.

But yeah, you. City Hall. You answered an ad one morning, came downtown to the building across the street, filled out some paperwork, watched a forty-five-minute video, and boom, you were qualified to guard the world's tallest masonry building.

What a country.

You're cynical, but you're thankful for the job. You hate your job, but you like having a job. At least it's a job. There were eight months there when you didn't have a job, and that was miserable.

The worst part is right now. End of the day on payday. Because you've got to take the Frankford El back across town to 2nd Street and wait for your paycheck.

This wastes another bus token. Because you then have to hop back on the El, burn another token, plus sixty cents for the transfer. Two tokens cost \$2.60 right from the machine. Machine busted? That's four bucks. Plus the sixty cents.

When you make \$9.01 an hour, that's like a half an hour's pay burned on just getting paid and getting home. No wonder it pisses you off.

But that's the deal, because the outfit that got the contract with City Hall—it's called Sherlock Holmes Security—has some extremely fucked-up ideas about employee relations.

Get this: There are only two ways you can get your paycheck. You can go to 27th and Allegheny to Sherlock Holmes Security headquarters and ask Shenice at the front desk. Or you can go to 2nd and Market to Ritz Checks and Money Orders. Direct deposit?

Your ass, direct deposit.

Two choices: burn a token and a transfer taking the subway and bus to the middle of the North Philly badlands, or burn only a token going across town to Old City.

You weren't born brain dead. You ain't going to the Badlands for a paycheck. Even if Shenice were hot. And she's not.

Of course, Ritz Checks takes 4 percent of your check before you see a single buck.

„Financial services,” indeed.

The line usually snakes out the front door.

On a good day.

Sometimes, though, like now, like today, fucking Christmas Eve, there's an absurdly long wait for the checks. Because this afternoon Sherlock Holmes Security had a holiday party for upper management, and Shenice—whose job it is to drive the checks down to 3rd and Market, because nobody ever fucking goes up to 27th and Allegheny for their fucking checks—is a little drunk, and a little late. She can't drive, so some accountant guy offers to take her down. You don't know

it, but Shenice decides to spread a little holiday cheer in the parking lot first. She blows the accountant, who can't come, because he's had too many pills and too much to drink, too. Since he can't come, he asks Shenice about other options. She suggests letting her finger his asshole, which promptly grosses him out, and doesn't help the problem one bit. The accountant asks about fucking her pussy, but Shenice demurs. She's got a boyfriend, and that wouldn't be cool. Not on Christmas Eve. They are at an impasse. The accountant says, "Fuck it, drive yourself." Shenice says, "What about the checks?" The accountant is already up the stairs, back to the party. So Shenice goes back upstairs, asking around, and finally Mr. Applegate agrees to take her down, thinking he'll be able to get into her pussy afterward. Boy is he mistaken about that.

By the time Shenice arrives with the checks, the sun has long set, and it's well past five, and you told Petty you'd meet him in Fishtown by six.

There's a long line ahead of you.

All so you can get your biweekly check for \$547. Wait. Minus the 4 percent. Which is more like \$525.12.

It's Christmas Eve.

Good thing you wore your best T-shirt today.

Your buddy Petty thinks he's a gangster.

Maybe he is.

He's probably full of shit, but maybe he isn't.

Anyway, he promised you something tonight. A job. An easy job. Easiest job you'd ever heard of.

Usually Petty is full of shit, but it's Christmas Eve, and you want to believe him, because you need the money, and if you can't believe on Christmas Eve, when can you believe?

„You're a security guard, right? I got a guard job for you. Hour of your time. Five hundred bucks.”

Petty thinks he's a gangster because he has a friend who says he has an in with the Polish mob.

The Polish mob?

„Don't laugh. They're serious as fucking shit. They're worse than the Russians.”

The Polish mob.

„Hey. Seriously now. They've been making inroads in this town for years, and nobody knows about them except the people who need to know about them. It's a war waiting to happen.”

Who's this friend?

„Ernie Cifelli.”

Sounds Italian.

„He is.”

With the Polish mob?

It all sounds loopy, but Petty swore to you it was the truth, and it sounded good over Yuenglings at the Longshot Lounge, so what the hell. Petty finished college. Even a little bit of law school. Your Christmas Eve plans were kind of fluid anyway.

It's tomorrow, Christmas, you've gotta sweat.

And that five hundred dollars would come in handy.

You don't know this, but Petty is telling the truth. There is a Polish mob, and it's growing stronger by the day in Philadelphia.

They're like Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy and Satan: they're incredibly powerful because nobody believes they exist.

Except the Russians, of course.

Even the Russians are scared of them.

You don't know any of this, and you don't care right now, because you're standing in line at the Ritz Checks place. You're almost in the door, but not quite there. The rest of the guys are all bunched up, trying to keep warm. You're too far away from the TV to see it, but they've got *Action News* on, and the temperature is in the lower right-hand corner. It's got to be close to thirty. Maybe even upper twenties. A cold Christmas is in store for the Delaware Valley. It's colder since the sun set.

It's past 5:30 P.M. now.

Where the fuck is Shenice?

You're not wearing the right boots for this weather. Sherlock Holmes requires black lace-ups, doesn't matter which kind. You found these at Payless, but the outer shell is too thin for the cold arctic air Philly gets this time of year. Bad enough standing in City Hall, feeling the freeze creep up through the soles of your boots. Out here on the sidewalk it's worse. The cold is like a battering ram against your feet.

If only you could be inside and wait. Even if the heat's not on, it's got to be better than outside.

People with much better jobs pass you by on the sidewalk. You can tell they have better jobs because they're not wearing fucking guard uniforms. The people making the most money wear jeans. The new-style jeans where you can see the threads. You want to save up to buy a few pair yourself. You never can seem to save up.

„Smoke?”

The guy behind you.

You shake your head.

„No, man.”

You turn around.

„Smoke?”

He's not asking to burn one. He's holding.

The check-cashing line is a smart place to deal. You know you've got money coming. You've probably got a long nothing night waiting for you. A little weed could even things out. Let you think again.

You don't have money for weed, though.

You need it all for Christmas, and where the fuck is fucking Shenice?

There's Shenice.

Climbing out of the back of a Lexus.

She's got the checks.

Suddenly you're not thinking about the checks. You're thinking about the Lexus.

You need to buy a Lexus by 9:00 A.M. tomorrow morning.

Your kid has always been into cars. You bought him his first Matchboxes when you and Lora were still together, even though Lora was worried he'd bite off a rearview mirror or something and swallow it. They were only ninety-seven cents at Target. Sometimes you could get a ten-pack for five bucks. They made him happy, so what was the five bucks?

But you and Lora had no idea you had an auto savant on your hands.

He's only five, yet can name any car down to the make, model, year—on sight. He'll still shock the living shit out of you, walking down the street, headed to your apartment for a Saturday-night sleepover, naming cars as he goes.

Chevy HHR.

Subaru Forester.

Pontiac Solstice.

Chevy Cavalier.

And he's never wrong.

One day you got tickets to the Philly Auto Show. You ran to the nearest phone, pumped in a quarter, and ended up gushing to Lora's answering machine. By this time you were split up, so she wasn't exactly rushing to return your calls. The show started the very next day. A Sunday. Family Day. She didn't call you back until the middle of the week. You'd tacked the tickets to the corkboard above the wall phone. She said Friday might be good, but Friday you had work. She knew that. She offered to let you have him Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, but seemed unable to understand that you couldn't get off work on Friday.

You hung up on her.

A month later, you saw the tickets, and ripped them from the board and threw them in the trash.

A week later, you realized that you could have gone to the show after work on Friday, maybe taken the boy for an hour or so. Not wasted the tickets. At the very least, grabbed an armful of the slick brochures for all of the new cars.

You hate how fucking stubborn you can be.

Now this Christmas the boy wants a model of a new Lexus. The kind that parks itself. He told you on the phone last week:

„Daddy, it parks itself.”

How does it do that?

„It goes up, and the wheel turns, and the computer inside tells it to go back, and it goes back, and it parks all by itself.”

Wow. I had no idea cars could do that.

„It's an amazing Lexus, Daddy.”

You did a little research.

It was the LS 460 L.

A hundred grand.

The toy version was \$79.95.

It didn't park itself, but the six-year-old operator could pretend.

You told Lora:

I'm getting that for him for Christmas.

Shenice handed over the checks but now they've got to sort them, and it's ten minutes until six, which means there's no way you're going to meet Petty on time. Which means you've got a choice to make.

Stay for the \$525.12 check.

Or leave now and meet Petty and make \$500 cash. Pick up the check Monday.

Thing is, the check from Sherlock Holmes is a sure thing. It's there, cash in pocket. Take the subway to Allegheny, bus down to Aramingo, walk over to Toys R Us and pick up that toy Lexus. Toys R Us is open all night on Christmas Eve.

But that would be like throwing away five hundred dollars.

A thousand bucks at Christmas would be a very good thing.

Considering you're going to be spending a lot of it alone.

If you skip the check though, and Petty turns out to be full of shit, then you have zero dollars for Christmas.

Sure, you've got an ATM card.

And if you used it at an ATM machine, you wouldn't be able to do a damn thing, because the minimum withdrawal at most machines is twenty dollars.

You've got \$17.45.

You know because you checked this morning.

You ate a single hot dog for lunch, and washed it down with rusty water from a City Hall fountain, because all the cash you had in the world was four dollars. And three bucks of that needed to go to public transportation. You wanted another hot dog.

So there's your choice.

Cash the check now, or cash the check later.

Fucking Shenice.

Why couldn't she have been here at 5:15 P.M. like she always was?

The guy behind you keeps saying, „Smoke? Smoke?” looking for buyers. After all, the checks are here. It's Christmas Eve. The party's just getting started. The line inches forward. You're almost in the door. You can almost feel the warmth from within.

You make up your mind.

You give Shenice the middle finger and tell her:

„Merry Fucking Christmas.”

Not your wisest move.

The job with the Polish mob pretty much involves standing there and looking tough. The Polish mob doesn't have the numbers yet, so for now, they're content with renting numbers. They want to terrify the Russians. Make them crap their dress pants. There are casinos coming to the waterfront, and everybody's playing angles. The Poles figure strike early, strike audaciously.

They're going to meet the Russians at an abandoned furniture warehouse down near the waterfront.

They're going to tell them how it's going to be.

Take a few fingers and testicles, if need be.

The Russians, though, don't want to mess around. They've already got the warehouse wired.

With enough C-4 to send the roof over to Jersey.

You don't know any of this. You ride up the service elevator with Petty, who's giving you the useless lowdown.

„All you got to do is stand there,” Petty tells you, „and look like a bad motherfucker.”

You get to the floor, join the others.

You stand there.

You look like a bad motherfucker.

Right up until—

A cell phone rings.

„Allo?”

And then—

Ah, you shouldn't worry.

All's well this Christmas Eve.

Your boy, as it turns out, will get his Lexus. Lora's new boyfriend picked it up for him, in an effort to ingratiate himself with your ex-wife.

And what's happened to you isn't even going to ruin your son's Christmas. The police won't notify Lora for a few days, when they find your head on a roof across the street and learn your name from your teeth.

Your body is in the ruined basement.

They'll dig it out eventually.

But hey—at least you're wearing your best T-shirt.

