

Teardown

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„LoDuco, what are you doing?“

I wasn't really doing anything, just standing there thinking, but the way the foreman was looking at me that didn't seem like a good thing to say, so I said, „I was about to go looking for you, find out what you wanted me to do next.“

Catelle the foreman stared at me, his eyes bulging out. I don't think he liked me. Every time he spoke to me his voice got this whiny, exasperated sound.

„Okay, you found me,“ he said. „Now how about you actually do some work today? Pick up all that crap lying around the yard and put it in the Dumpster. You think you're getting paid to stand around scratching your balls?“

I scanned the yard. There was a lot of crap. Pieces of two-by-fours, shingles, fragments of lathe and plaster wall, little odds and ends of wiring and heating equipment—all the stuff that gets left behind when you tear down a house.

I sighed and started picking crap up. The Dumpster was far away, on the other side of the house out by the curb, so rather than bringing the crap one piece at a time out to the Dumpster—I knew that would make Catelle go mental—I started a crap pile. When it got big enough I planned to figure out what to do about it.

My cousin got me this job—I had been unemployed awhile, my benefits running out, and I think he was afraid I might come to live with him again. So he got me on a construction crew as a laborer, which mostly meant hauling heavy stuff around so other people who knew what they were doing could use it.

This job site was a teardown and rebuild, where the owners had an old house demolished so they could build a new one on the lot, usually three or four times bigger than the old house and built right up to the edge of the property.

The old house was gone completely, knocked to pieces and torn out down to the foundations. All that was left standing was an old garage in a back corner of the lot. It looked pretty ramshackle, the white paint peeling off all over, the wood gray and rotten-looking underneath. It looked like a few good kicks would bring the whole thing down.

But there was shade along one side of the old garage, and picking crap up is hot and heavy work. It was late afternoon on one of those hot, humid Long Island August days that make you think you're somewhere like Mississippi. I kept looking at the shadow of the garage, imagining how much cooler it would be there. I worked closer and closer to it. That was easy, there was crap everywhere.

When I got even with the back wall of the garage I saw that it was shady back there, too, and out of sight of the rest of the crew. That was a plus.

There was some sort of rusty propane tank against the back wall, bramble bushes all around it. I sat down, smoked a cig. It was nice back there, quiet, cool. I leaned against the wall and closed my eyes, just for a second.

When I woke up it was pitch black out. Something I couldn't see was crawling over my arms and neck. I jumped up trying to brush whatever it was off, tripped over something, and went ass over teakettle into the bramble bushes.

When I thrashed my way out of that, cut to pieces, I sat back down on the propane tank and tried to think things through.

Obviously the crew had left without me. Would they come back when they discovered I was missing? I doubted it very much.

It was a long walk to Montauk Highway and my motel, and a long bus ride back to my cousin's place. It was a little closer to my old house, but I didn't think they would let me in there anymore. I sighed, cursed. There didn't seem to be any other way but to walk it.

When I stood back up I realized I needed to pee, pretty bad. I also realized how close I was to the neighbor's house. A wide-eyed housewife was staring at me out her window as she did the dishes in her kitchen. In the light of her kitchen window I probably looked like some kind of zombie, thrashing around in the weeds.

It was pretty dark out, but even so, I just couldn't take it out with her looking at me, even with my back turned. It would have been like taking a whiz with a spotlight on you. She'd probably call the cops, and I'd get busted for indecent exposure.

So I looked around for a more private place to do my business.

In the light beams from the neighbor's kitchen window I could see there was a door in the back wall of the garage. I thought it probably wasn't locked. It wasn't.

Inside the garage it was completely dark, maybe a little gray where a distant streetlight shone through the one window in the side wall. I took out my lighter, snapped it on, and held it up. There was stuff everywhere, completely covering the floor, piles of old newspapers and magazines, wooden boxes filled with rusty shit, some piles of boards. A kind of ladder made of planks went up the wall next to the door, more piles of rusty stuff humped up at the foot of it. From the smell I was not the first person to think of relieving myself there.

I put my lighter away and pissed in the corner.

Just about the time I finished, I heard a car pull into the yard, and saw headlights cut across the front of the garage. They went out, and I heard a car door slam. Cool, I thought, they came back for me after all. I got as far as opening the back door, and was about to yell out to whoever it was, when I heard someone say,

„Why don't we just do him right here?“

And I thought maybe I should keep my mouth shut.

„You must be simple,“ another voice said. „Half the neighborhood'll see us, we kill him outside. Take him in the damn garage.“

All right, this was bad. I stepped out of the back door as quietly as I could and was trying to decide whether to jump the fence and risk the neighbor lady freaking out, or sneak around the other side of the garage toward the street, when I heard some cursing, banging, and rattling from the front of the garage.

„These fucking doors won't open!“

„Don't make so much noise! Take him around the back, then.“

Maybe it wasn't the best move I could have made. But the fence looked far away, and high, and I could see myself getting shot in the back trying to get over it. I could almost feel it.

I ducked back inside the garage and closed the door.

I backed away in the dark, trying not to trip over the piles of rusty shit I remembered being everywhere. I had my hand stretched out behind me to keep from bumping into things; my hand touched something in the dark.

The boards on the side wall, like a ladder.

I went up them while the back door was swinging open.

When I had got up as far as I could my legs were still halfway down the ladder. I had to hope they didn't look my way, that's all.

Three dark figures stumbled inside and shut the door after them. A flashlight suddenly lit up the floor, roamed around at random, but didn't get over to my legs and high-tops sticking down from the ladder.

„That bitch see us?“

„Nah, she's too busy with her fucking dishes.“

The third guy didn't say anything, but I could hear him breathing hard. Myself, I breathed through my mouth, trying to be as quiet as I could.

There were some boards or something laid across the beams, so I couldn't see right down to the garage floor. I could see the beam from the flashlight through the cracks, though. It jumped around a bit, then got steady. I think the guy put it on top of something.

The heavy-breathing guy spoke up next. His voice was all raspy and hoarse. I guessed he hadn't been enjoying himself much lately.

„It's all in here, I'm telling you. All of it,“ the breather said.

„Where?“ said the guy who had been so anxious to start the killing. „Where is it, here?“

Breather actually laughed. „If I tell you that, it's all over. You'll kill me.“

„It's a problem, isn't it?“ the other guy, the calmer one, said. „If we shoot you before you tell us, we might not find it. But if we say we're not going to shoot you, why should you tell us where it is?“

„Let's cut him some more,“ Kill Simple said.

„That might work.“

„I never meant to take it all, you know,“ Breather panted.

„Sure. That's why you ditched us and told the cops where to find us. That's why you ran off to fucking Ohio.“

„You were always going to get your share. We could still do that, split it. Three ways. Everyone gets something.“

The other guys laughed, or snorted anyway.

„You've got balls, I'll say that for you.“

„This is bullshit,“ Killboy said. „This place is tiny. Let's just tear it apart and find the shit, kill asshole, and get the fuck out of here.“

„You'll never find it.“ The wheezy guy sounded pretty sure of himself.

The calm guy picked up the flashlight and began to slowly shine it around the garage, like a spotlight looking for the actors.

„There's a fuck of a lot of stuff in here,“ he said. The beam was headed right toward my legs.

I felt with my hand behind me, touched boards, and, as carefully as I could, sat my ass down, pulling my legs up after me. I saw the flashlight beam pass under me, right where my legs had been two seconds ago. I hadn't made a sound. It was hard not breathing, though.

Just then the beams of the old garage let out a groan. It was loud and weird, like some kind of African water buffalo crying out to its mate. I felt the whole business sink a little.

There was silence right underneath me. Even the heavy breathing had stopped.

„The fuck was that?“

Then the whole shebang came down, me on top of it.

Apparently what I had tried to sit on was an old door laid across the beams, because the doorknob tried to go up my ass when it all hit the ground. I hurt in about a dozen places.

Probably not as much as the guy the door landed on, though.

Shaky, I stood up.

The guy with the flashlight was still standing. He shined the light in my eyes. Thick dust and powder drifted through the light beam.

„What the—“

That was all he got out. Suddenly the flashlight beam dove to the floor, and there was a sound like someone playing soccer with a ripe watermelon. With the direct light out of my eyes I could just make out the silhouette of the tied-up guy,

his hands still tied behind him, kicking the living shit out of the guy on the ground.

I thought I should give them more room, and backed away. My foot touched something hard. I bent down to move it out of the way, and came up with a gun in my hand.

That was good. I leaned down and picked up the flashlight, which had rolled over toward me. That was better. I put the beam on the kicker, easy to locate in the dark by his wheezing.

He looked like shit, face bloody all over, one eye swollen shut, his shirtfront soaked red. Even so he looked better than the guy on the ground. The guy on the ground looked dead.

There was a stream of blood running out from under the door-and-broken-beam pile on the garage floor. Legs stuck out at the other end.

The voice of the tied-up, blood-covered wheezy guy came out of the dark.

„I don't know what the fuck you're doing here, but untie my hands.“

„Why should I do that?“ It seemed like a reasonable question to me.

We both considered this statement for a while. Then the tied-up guy said, „Look, I don't know who you are. But if you untie me I'll tell you what I wouldn't tell these assholes.“

„Why would I care about that?“ I said, thinking, just go, leave the guy and get out of here.

But I didn't go.

„You want to be a rich man?“ Wheezy said. „I can do that. I can make you a rich man.“

„With what?“

„Diamonds,“ the guy said. „Diamonds, rubies, emeralds. A shitload of gemstones.“

It didn't seem very likely to me.

„Diamonds?“ I said. „In a garage in Patchogue?“

„I hid 'em here. This place used to be my mom's.“

„Okay, but diamonds? Where did you get them?“

The guy was quiet a while. His breathing had gotten a little less noisy.

Finally I heard him hawk and spit, a full, heavy loogie that hit the garage floor like a pound of beef liver.

„What do you think?“ he asked me. „We dug 'em up? From a jewelry store.“

„You stole them?“

„They didn't just give 'em to us.“

„How long have they been here?“

The guy sighed. When he spoke again I could hear that whiny thing getting into his voice, like Catelle.

„You got a lot of questions, don't you? Ten years, buddy. The stones have been here ten fucking years.“

Ten years. I seemed to remember something from ten years back, a jewelry store stickup where the stealers cleaned out the store, which just happened to have a major shipment of jewels passing through. Pretty heavy for Long Island. That's why it stuck in my mind.

That, and I can remember thinking how much you could do with that many diamonds.

The robbers got away with a pile of gemstones. As far as I could remember, the rocks had never been recovered.

I couldn't remember anything else, but it sounded like this guy could fill in the gaps.

„Was that the jewelry store in Bay Shore?“ I asked him. „In 1988? Because I remember that one.“

„Good for you. Yeah, that's right. Geister's Jewelry, in Bay Shore.“

„If you got caught, how did you manage to hide the stones?“

The guy got quiet again. I knew he was adjusting to my habit of only asking questions. I can't help it, but I know it freaks people out.

The situation I was in, though, you couldn't blame me.

„Well, the cops got onto the other guys somehow and pulled them in. I kept my head down for a while, hid the stones for when things cooled off, and left town.“

„How did they catch those guys so fast?“ I wanted to know. „Didn't you even wear masks?“

„Oh, yeah, we wore masks.“

There was a long silence after that, during which I answered my own question and really began to wish I hadn't asked it.

„They thought I dropped a dime on them,“ Mr. Wheezy said after a while.

„Jesus, why would they think that?“ I said. But maybe sarcasm wasn't such a good idea right then.

„Well, it served 'em right. They fingered me as the head guy, the guy whose idea the whole thing was. The judge believed 'em, I guess; they got off pretty light considering.“

More silence followed this remark. I could hear the guy shuffling his feet around, like maybe getting himself in position for something nasty.

„Wait a minute,“ I said, just to change the subject a little. „Where have you been for ten years? Why didn't you come back for the stones sooner?“

„I went down for something else. Hit up a convenience store on the road, got ten years. They never made me for the jewelry store, though.“

„What about those other guys?“

„Caught some bad luck there. They were good boys; they made parole and got out early. Before I did. They were waiting for me. I knew they would be, but there was nowhere for me to go, except back inside. I thought I'd take my chances.“

„Wow.“ I considered what he had just told me. „So you never told them where the loot was. No wonder they seemed pissed at you. But why did you bring them here?“

From the little silence before he answered, I could tell it was costing him. But he said, „It was a negotiation. They would almost kill me, and I would almost tell them where the stones were.“

„Why not just give them the jewels?“

„I was counting on the stones. For my retirement. Say, buddy, are you going to untie me or what?“

„If you wouldn't tell these guys,“ I said, meaning the guys on the floor, „why would you tell me?“

„They were going to kill me, one way or another,“ he said. „You, you have no reason to kill me. You’re gonna let me go, and we’ll both be rich.“

„I could shoot you, and take all the stones,“ I said. I would never do that, but he didn’t know.

„You don’t know where they are,“ he pointed out. „Just like the dead assholes.“

„I could call the cops, turn you in. There’s bound to be a reward.“

„After all this time? Insurance company’s settled that a long time ago. Besides, the stones’re worth more than any fucking reward.“

He had stopped wheezing, and sounded pretty sure of himself for a guy that was tied up and beat half to death.

„I don’t know,“ I said. „I should just go.“

„Go? And leave the diamonds?“

„What would I do with a bunch of diamonds? I wouldn’t know the first thing about getting rid of them.“

More silence. The tied-up guy had run out of talk.

„I’m out of here,“ I said, and turned to go.

As soon as I turned around I heard him come after me. I knew he would do that. He didn’t want me out there spreading the word, and was looking for a repeat of his soccer match with the guy on the floor.

But I was ready, sort of. I turned around and let him have it with the gun. At least, I meant to. But nothing happened when I tried to pull the trigger. Maybe it was empty, or jammed, or something, or maybe the safety was on. I don’t know shit about guns.

Anyway, no big noise, no bullet.

The guy had stopped when I turned around. Now he said sympathetically, „What’s a matter, gun not working?“

I didn’t say anything; my thumb was groping around the side of the gun like a caterpillar.

„The safety, that’s like a little lever on the side of the gun?“

„On some guns.“ The guy sounded a lot closer.

My thumb felt something, a little lever, and pushed it forward. I pulled the trigger; the gun went off. A big piece of the roof disappeared. I could see stars through it.

The noise of the gun going off made me completely deaf, so I couldn’t hear the guy coming after me. I could see a big black silhouette coming straight at me, though, and tried to swing the gun down on it. I was too slow.

But it didn’t matter. Because the black shape suddenly disappeared. The guy had tripped on something coming after me and done a face plant on the garage floor. He was just laying there in the dark. I couldn’t hear his wheezy breathing anymore.

When I put the flashlight on him, I could see where his head had caught the sharp corner of some rusty metal shit lying on the floor, right in the temple. I ran the beam around, looking for what had tripped him, and saw a little sparkle, down by his shoes. I bent over and picked it up.

A diamond. A good size one, I guess. I didn’t know much about diamonds, but it seemed pretty big.

I shone the light around to see if I could find any more. I did. Quite a few diamonds, big ones and small ones were lying around. I picked up about a dozen out of the litter of broken wood on the floor.

Now I was getting excited. There had to be more than just twelve diamonds. I started digging through the pile of broken beams, got all the way down to the body of the kill-simple guy without finding anything.

Running the flashlight over the stuff I had thrown aside to make sure I didn't miss anything, I noticed something funny. I picked up one of the broken beams for a closer look.

The two-by-four was broken off a couple inches from the end. It looked like somebody had drilled out the end of the beam, made a big hole six inches deep. No wonder it had snapped off under my weight.

I knocked the beam with the heel of my hand, like a ketchup bottle. Another diamond rolled out of the hole and fell on the floor.

I moved the beam around the garage and picked up lots of sparkle on the floor. A shitload of jewels must have been hidden in those hollow joists.

It didn't take me long to pull down the rest of the beams. They were each just held in place with a couple nails. I even found a rusty crowbar on the floor that made the job go a lot faster.

Every beam had had its ends drilled. Every beam was stuffed with stones—mostly diamonds, some rubies, emeralds, sapphires, some stones I didn't know the names of. And one string of pearls.

I never worked so hard in my life.

I swung the flashlight across the floor to check and see if maybe one of the other guys would come to and give me shit, but they were still out. They looked like they would be out forever.

Just then the whole world lit up. It looked like an A-bomb test had just gone off in the driveway; beams of light poured through every crack and hole in the garage walls. There were quite a few cracks; it was amazing the building was still standing.

A megaphone voice cracked out: „*Police*, Put down your weapons and come out of there slowly. Put your hands on your heads. If we see a weapon, we'll fire!“

I can take a hint. I took the gun out of the waistband of my trousers and put it down—a lot of good it did me, anyway—laid down the flashlight—there was plenty of light to see by now—and put my hands on my head.

I walked out of there, nice and slow. I didn't fall down, and I didn't get shot.

As I left I kicked the door closed behind me. It slammed; there was that weird groaning noise again, and the whole building tilted sideways. It didn't quite go over, though.

The cops were surprised to see me, but even more surprised when they saw the pile of jewel thieves and diamonds on the garage floor. I thought of what I could tell them that they would believe, but couldn't think of anything. So I just told them what had happened.

I was right about one thing—they didn't believe me. The hardest thing for them to believe was that I was working a regular job. (Like I said, I knew some of these guys.)

„LoDuco,“ Sergeant Halligan said to me—I’d gone to high school with him—„You have a job? You expect me to believe that?“

But when they called the contractor, the foreman vouched for me. I bet anything he would like to have said he’d never seen me before, but he backed me up.

The housewife at the sink had kept an eye peeled, it turned out. She saw me sneak in the garage, and kept peeking through the curtains, waiting for me to come out. She saw the jewel thieves pull up, and when the ruckus started she called the cops.

The cops couldn’t believe I had nothing to do with the jewel robbery, but I didn’t, and after a while they let me go. The newspapers had fun with the story. The tied-up guy—he lived, but probably wished he hadn’t—was wanted bad for the robbery, which everyone in town still remembered. The guy I fell on went back inside for violating his parole—after he got out of the hospital. And the guy who got kicked pretty good was still dead.

That left me still standing. The papers decided to make a hero out of me, though I notice they never printed my picture. That might have spoiled the illusion. Still, I got some good headlines for a while.

And the wheezy guy was wrong about the insurance company. The reward was still out. The jewelry store came through, too, big time. It seems there was a reward outstanding for the missing jewels and the missing robber, and after some deliberation they gave it all to me.

So between the reward and the big-ass diamond I had pocketed—I I forgot to tell the cops about it in the confusion, and then I was too embarrassed to mention it—I made out all right.

Good thing, too, because there was no way that foreman was ever going to hire me again.

