



JANUARY 2023
VOLUME 2 ISSUE NO. 1

**I RODE THE NAZI
EXPRESS TO HELL**

**A F*CKING DOLPHIN
RUINED MY LIFE**

WE'RE BACK

That's right. We're back.

Here it is, the 6th issue of American Pulps Magazine.

In this issue we have stories featuring two characters we've had in our heads since we started writing as Shit Show Pulps back in 2015.

Agent Corkscrew's latest mission, blowing up the Nazi version of Air Force One on rails, the [Führersonderzug](#). Of course the opportunnistic double agent has no problem blowing up a Nazi train, it's' the Nazi gold bars and stolen artwork he cares about.

The other story has been a white whale of ours for some time. Like Prince or Madonna we know him simply as Dolphin, and he's a total dick. [All dolphins are dicks](#). Seriously, never take your girlfriend swimming with the dolphins.

And with that advice, let's get on with the show.

Cheers,

Matt and John
January 2023

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AGENT CORKSCREW: THE SLEEPER CAR

By P.A. O'Neil



Hayden stepped onto the train and instantly felt like he was in an Agatha Christie novel. It was luxurious and opulent, everything his last few days in war-torn Romania was not.

Everyone told him that he was lucky, he was traveling on the best train in all of Europe. A train better than the Orient Express, the Führer-sonderzug, Amerika. Adolf Hitler's personal train and headquarters. What nobody knew about this train — other than Hayden — was that it had enough explosives packed inside the baggage car to blow the whole thing to the Pacific theater.

The Amerika was the official headquarters of the Third Reich. Coupled together, the cars included: The Befehlswagen (Command Car), which had a conference room and communication center connecting Hitler with his propaganda machine as well as the front lines. Hitler's personal car, the Führerwagen, sporting a marble bathroom and a portrait of ol' Adolf over the tub. The presswagen (press car), a couple of sleeper cars for guests, two baggage cars, a dining car, a bar car, and the bagleitkommandowagen which housed a twenty-two-man SS security force. The kommandowagen was located right next to Adolf's personal carriage. If things got hairy, he had twenty-two elite fighters to distract the threat while he made his escape.

Flatbed cars mounted with anti-aircraft guns were placed sporadically between some of the cars, two sandwiching Hitler's command car. Hayden knew from his training in the Abwer that these anti-aircraft guns were strapped in place by a latch, and when released the guns could cover all directions of the sky on a well-greased gimbal ball. This whole caravan was bookended by two locomotives, ready to go in any direction when things got dangerous.

It was the most secretive and secure part of Hitler's war machine. To be admitted granted one access to the inner workings of the Third Reich. And David Hayden — Agent Corkscrew — was about to blow it up.

After dropping off his duffle bag in his coupé he immediately went to the bar car. If there was anything he'd learned from his time training with the Abwer, the Nazi's spy agency, it was that they always had the best champagne flowing at the start of a party. The bar car of the Amerika did not disappoint. It was filled with stolen artwork and flowed with commandeered French champagne.

Göring was already in the bar car wearing a toga and a crown of bay leaves like a rotund Caesar. "Greetings my English friend!" Said Göring, Hayden noticed he was wearing eyeliner and blush on his cheeks. "Enjoy some champagne and caviar. We took the best caviar out of Russia when we had our little peace talk." He giggled like a hippo having an orgasm, "They have none left! Perhaps that's why they want to fight us!"

Henrich Himmler walked into the carriage and took a look at Göring with contempt, "You won't be wearing that when the Führer boards... Will you?" Out of all of the Nazis, Hayden disliked Himmler the most. At least Göring and Goebbels threw fun parties. Himmler was as fun as venereal disease.

"No. I will be in uniform when the Führer boards, of course. But my emperor's robes are most comfortable." Göring then took a seat at one of his gold tables and crossed his legs. His balls were hanging out of his toga. Hayden and Himmler both acted as if they didn't notice.

"As long as the Führer is alive, you should not wear emperor's robes. Especially not on the Amerika." Said Himmler, reminding Göring where he stood in the rankings.

"Why is it called the Amerika?" Asked Hayden, truly curious.

"Ah, a man in the world of intelligence should know these things." Said Himmler. *He was such a know-it-all.*

"He is the man who gives us valuable British intelligence. The fact that he doesn't know the political machinations of our country shows that he is a man of one track mind." Said Göring who always felt the need to defend Hayden since he was the man who "found him." Göring discovered Hayden in a French prison while Hayden was doing time for murdering a cop in an attempted robbery. The fact that all of the "intelligence" Hayden (code name Fritz), gave them was bullshit was not known.

Himmler took a sip of his milk, "I was only joking Hermann." He turned to Hayden like an adult explaining something to a child, "The Führer says he named it Amerika in honor of the European conquest of the Americas, and how they destroyed the savages who lived there first. But really, he loves American culture. He is a big fan of Mickey Mouse and King Kong. And he admires Henry Ford and Charles Lindberg. With Lindberg, the feeling is mutual, I might add."

“And the people in America love him too. Don’t forget that.”

“What’s there to not like?”

Hayden just nodded, he realized he was going to need more than just champagne to get through this trip.

“Speaking of Hitler, he should be boarding soon. We need to be ready for our meeting in the Befehlswagen.” He looked down at Göring’s chubby pale legs, “And you need to put some pants on.” Himmler downed his milk in one gulp, stood up, buttoned his coat, and walked out.

Göring stood, “Herr Hayden, my friend, enjoy whatever you like in the bar car and get comfortable, after the meeting we shall dine together. I will introduce you to the Führer as my friend.” He got up, adjusted his toga, and walked away.

So far, Hayden’s mission seemed to be coming along nicely. But life was about to throw a curveball Hayden’s way in the form of a reporter named Tukker Moller. Tukker had unearthed some intel from a mole in MI6 saying that Hayden wasn’t only a double agent — code-named Corkscrew by the Brits — but he’d also fed the Germans a heavy dose of bullshit working for the Abwer under the code name Fritz. In fact, everything Hayden had supplied the Nazis with was a total fabrication. When another man named Simon (code name Torch) dropped a dead man into enemy waters with a lot of bullshit paperwork and an officer’s uniform, Hayden was the one who backed up the paperwork with his own “intel” written by the same man in London.

Tukker knew Hayden’s secret. And because this was Tukker’s shot at ingratiating himself in Hitler’s inner circles, he would wait until the most theatrical moment to tell the authorities. He was about to use David Hayden, aka Agent Corkscrew, aka Fritz, as a stepping stone into the highest echelon of Nazi power.

This was especially sweet because Tukker had hated the Englishman since he first met him at one of Goebble’s parties back in Berlin. Most didn’t trust him, he was a convicted felon who was serving a prison sentence in France when the Germans took over. The man was a slimy opportunist, both MI6 and the Abwer could agree on that.

Tukker was disgusted with Göring for taking such a shine to the British burglar who would not have even thought about the Nazi cause if it weren’t presented with a get out of jail free card.

And what annoyed Tukker the most was the fact that Hayden had returned from his mission in England a hero. They believed his whole spy ring of other English criminals working for him across the island was legitimate, it was absurd. This man, a hero for the Third Reich? When it was Tukker who made sure Hitler’s affair with his niece didn’t leak to the foreign press. It was Tukker’s hard work that ensured losses in Russia didn’t reflect poorly on the Führer. Goebbels took credit for the propaganda, but who pushed the stories? Who told the German people that Adolf Hitler was the genius who alone could fix the German problems and who alone would solve the Jewish question?

And now Tukker Moller had done some actual investigative journalism for the first time in his career. He had to be careful. Even if this bombshell was important to the cause, Hitler didn’t take kindly to bad news. Which is why the sycophants surrounding him never dared give him any. That was the key to sticking around, kiss his ass and tell him it smelled beautiful. But Moller knew what had to be done.

So later that night, when Hayden was good and drunk and the train was traveling 80 miles an hour safely over the Eastern Carpathians Tukker would tell Hitler. And Hayden wouldn’t have anything to say. Not because the evidence was so damning. But because he poisoned the rims of the champagne glasses in Hayden’s room.

With Hayden good and dead, Tukker would wait until the train was close to reaching the trap in the mountains over Vigo Bridge set by MI6. Where the British agent named Torch had planted enough explosives to blow the train sky high if Hayden (aka, Corkscrew) didn’t succeed in his task.

It was all in the official paperwork that Tukker had obtained from the mole, and unlike Fritz’s “intelligence,” it wasn’t tainted with bullshit.

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The only hitch in Tukker’s plan was that Hayden did not plan to go “strictly by the book” when it came to his mission. This was because he did not know about Torch’s activities in the Carpathian Mountain Range.

Tukker was right, David Hayden was an opportunist, and the Nazis had a whole lot of gold, jewelry, and artwork. Some of the intelligence Hayden held back from the Brits was the fact that the Nazis were transporting confiscated

contraband from Polish, Hungarian, and Romanian Jews. Why would he simply blow up a train full of all that loot? And if the Germans and English thought it was destroyed, he wouldn't have to worry about anyone coming to look for it. Selling it on the black market in Vichy France would be easy.

The trick was figuring out a way to plant the bomb on Hitler's Command Car and Personal car, un-couple the luggage car holding the... spoils of war and all the cars behind it from the rest of the train, and hijack the locomotive caboose. Once the train blew up the Germans would be too busy crying about Hitler to look for the back half of the train.

In order to do all of that, Hayden had to wait until the train passed Vienna. From Vienna, he could get the train safely into France where he knew people who knew people who could unload some stolen artwork and gold bracelets.

How Hayden planned to blow up the train and steal the Nazi's ill-gotten gains involved a woman, as it normally did. Elsa Schwan was a perky Nazi who earned her job working on the Amerika through a connection at the League of German Girls — a female version of the Hitler Youth program that Elsa took on with relish.

Hayden didn't care about the woman's politics, she had long legs, an hour glass figure, and was eager to please. Also, perhaps most importantly, as one of Hitler's secretaries (and the most attractive), she had access to all of the carriages on the train. The SS soldiers in the Comando Wagon gave her keys to the carriage most willingly. So Hayden laid the charm on pretty thick and while the train was chugging along, Elsa spent the afternoon with Hayden and a bottle of champagne.

Hayden had his fill of champagne earlier and decided to start belting back the whisky Göring secured for him. It wasn't the first time Hermann Göring got snagged a bottle of contraband Famous Grouse for his English friend.

Corkscrew poured himself a healthy glass and got dressed. While she poured herself some Dom Pérignon Hayden pocketed Elsa's keys before tying his bowtie. Elsa watched on from the bed with a satin sheet covering her naked body. Only her long right leg was exposed along with her right arm which held out the champagne flute like she was giving a toast. "Do you English always wear tuxedos?"

"No more than you Germans wear togas. Did you and Göring go to the same tailor?"

This got a smile from Elsa, but she knew not to make fun of the powerful men in Hitler's circle. She took a sip of the champagne. It tasted funny. Before she could put her finger on what was wrong with it (it tasted like almonds and arsenic), she was writhing on the floor trying to breathe. The poison attacked her nervous system with deadly speed. Hayden was in shock, it only took her half a minute to breathe her last painful breath, but to him it felt like an eternity. For her too, he supposed.

Elsa's death complicated matters. He had two choices: go with the mission and just blow up the train, or put her body somewhere else and hope nobody assumes he was involved. His mind was made up before he drew up his list of options. He had to wait til Vienna.

There was a reporter Hayden despised who had a coupé two rooms down. His name was Tukker something, he forgot the guy's last name, but he would be in the press carriage by now. Hayden decided to hide Elsa's body in his room and then go outside and test the waters. He put her body on the bed and folded it up like a Murphy bed.

Took a step outside, ready to see if the journalist was in his room. If not, he'd pick the lock (easy for an expert safe cracker such as himself), and plant her body in there. If Tukker was in the room, Hayden would just ask the guy if he wanted to come over for a drink and test out some of the other bottles and glasses with his new lab rat. If Tukker died he'd put both bodies in Tukkers room and make it look like a Romeo and Juliet type situation. For an ad-libbed plan, it wasn't half bad.

Hayden walked out in the corridor and knocked on Tukker's door. No answer. He knocked again and waited a few beats. Again, no answer. Just as Hayden was taking out a pocket knife to pick the lock to Tukker's room the door swung open. Hayden looked into Tukker's horrified eyes and then down at the knife he was holding.

"I'm sorry," said Hayden with a congenial smile. "I must have the wrong room. I thought I was locked out."

With a magician's flourish, Tukker's hand produced a gun. Hayden parried the gun hand away and took a swing with the knife in his other hand. Tukker's round missed — blowing out a window. Hayden's knife slashed Tukker's left arm, opening a deep gash in the mans forearm. Tukker swung his gun hand around and fired a second

time. Hayden ducked down instinctively. The explosion from the gun bellowed in Hayden's ears, but a loud ringing was the only injury he sustained. Two feet away and Tukker still managed to miss Hayden's head. Hayden was glad Tukker shot handguns like a journalist.

He looked up and Tukker was gone. Tukker's loafer was dangling out the window and suddenly it disappeared, Tukker was on the roof. Hayden had no choice, he went out the window after him.

Hanging from the window with the wind in his face and the Carpathian Mountainside whistling past him, David Hayden regained his hearing just as he heard the crack of Tukker's handgun. Up ahead, standing on top of the train car was Hayden's unlikely adversary, a man of the press — and a terrible shot — pointing a gun at Hayden. A whole train of Nazis and the most dangerous one to Hayden's well-being was a cog in Goebbels' propaganda machine.

He tried to pull himself to the top of the train but his hands were already frozen and numb. The wind shrieked in his ear like an angry tea kettle. It was so loud he didn't hear the whistle of his train calling out another train on the adjacent track like old friends saying hi. He saw it in the corner of his eye, a cattle car carrying soldiers — or prisoners — what it was hauling didn't matter. What did matter was the fact that this train was about to rip Hayden in two.

Cold hands or not, getting ripped apart from asscrack to chin is an incredible motivator. Hayden was able to pull himself up and waddle in the direction of the "investigative journalist," who was on his way to warn the Führer that Agent Fritz was a double agent.

After three steps Hayden heard the whipcrack of a gunshot up ahead. He figured someone would sound the alarm and bring the train to a screeching halt. But what Hayden didn't know was the fact that the train cars were all heavily armored and could withstand fire from an anti-tank gun. This left the train cars not only incredibly safe, but they were also bulletproof. The SS Commando manned Flakwagons however, were open air and heard everything.

Cold and bored, Rottenführer Jahnke, the squad leader of SS unit went topside to check out what all the fuss was about. As soon as he stuck his head up, Tukker fired a round at Hayden. What ensued was a most unfortunate instance of

miscommunication and Hayden was in the middle of it. He simply ducked and let the two Nazis shoot it out, lying in a prone position in no man's land, on top of the sleeper car of Hitler's personal train. Jahnke, a marksman rifleman made short work of Tukker. But right before the bullet from Jahnke's gun entered Tukker's forehead, Tukker was able to fire off a shot that clipped Jahnke. The SS officer lost balance, slipped, and fell off the train.

Hayden ran to Tukker's body and pocketed his gun. He rifled through his coat pockets and found a piece of paper. It was from Tukker's informant and it was pretty goddamn damning. Amongst the paperwork were official MI6 documents signed by Sir Stirling, head of the SOE.

As he read the paperwork marked "Most Secret," he marveled at the ruthlessness in the organization. Stirling was a belt and braces kind of man, but Hayden didn't expect this. He read that "Agent Torch (code name for a brute of an agent whose real name was Simon) is under express orders to rig Vigo Bridge with explosives. As soon as the Amerika is over it's expanse, it will be detonated." They didn't even bother to tell him his train was never going to pass Vigo Bridge in the Carpathian Mountains.

A fail safe! Hayden was so shocked he didn't feel the wind whipping around his face. So angry he didn't think twice when he saw the two SS officers come up to inspect the scene and shot them both with Tukker's gun. He stood up, looked at the paper, looked at the bodies of the two men, and thought, "*why did they even send me?*"

With the rumble of the train, the reporter's slack body slowly slid off the roof like a turd in a toilet. Hayden watched it land on the side of the tracks and disappear in the distance. He looked up and saw two SS officers looking back at Tukker's broken body, then down at one of their fallen comrades, then the two of them looking angry and pointing at Hayden. He suddenly realized his troubles were far from over.

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In the SS barracks the sound was alarmed: Kill the Englishman. Captain Karlson never understood why they trusted this man anyway. A British bank robber — and the Abwer seemed to have put all their eggs in that basket? Now the Führer was in danger, Rottenführer Jahnke was dead, and Karlson's men would have to clean up Goring's mess.

A small team of four ran out of the kommandowagen with MG42s in hand ready to take out the spy. The rest held back, with orders to keep Hitler safe at all costs. If anything went wrong, they would de-couple the train cars behind the bagleitkommandowagen and fire up the rear locomotive.

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An erratic staccato of gunfire erupted outside Hitlers personal car. But the Führer was blissfully unaware, with the extra armor and sound proofing, Hitlers train car was as quiet as a library on a nice day. The train car slid gracefully, gliding on a specially made axis — which was good because his doctor was injecting him with bull semen to keep him virile and Adolf wasn't a fan of needles. And he hated getting stuck awkwardly on a jolting train. The bull semen and cocaine made Adolf feel invincible. He had no idea his life was in grave danger.

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Outside the car, Hayden jumped down on the flak gun, shot one officer, and was hit with the butt of a rifle from another. They grappled and rolled on the flatbed like two Ancient Greek Olympians; eye-gouging and biting one another into submission. The soldier pinned Hayden down at the base of the gun and pulled out a knife with his left. His grip grew slack giving Hayden a little more leeway to reach out and unlatch the flak gun.

Once unleashed, the barrel of the flak gun rocked and rolled with the movement of the train, swaying like a drunk. The gun swung around clockwise then swung back counterclockwise, hitting the Nazi in the jaw like a left hook from Max Schmelling. The man dropped like a bag of bricks. He fell clear off the train and onto the tracks. If he survived it would have been a miracle.

Panting and sweating, Hayden stepped off the flak wagon and into the press wagon with trepidation. He was worried that Moller told his fellow reporters about Hayden's work for His Majesty's Secret Service. He didn't know if he was walking into a friendly train car or a hive of angry sycophantic Nazis hell-bent on revenge.

To Hayden's surprise, they were so busy writing articles about Adolf playing 4-dimensional chess, they barely noticed the man. To be safe, he waltzed through the room as if he were sent on a very irritating errand. Everyone on the train knew he was a secret agent in the Abwer and would have given him a large berth regardless, but Hayden didn't know that and instead overplayed his hand

like an overworked and overdressed personal assistant. The reporters kept clacking away at their typewriters, not wanting to upset the man they all assumed was very dangerous.

It was when an SS soldier ran in, spotted Hayden, and started firing his machine gun in Hayden's direction that any of the reporters took notice of the Brit in a tux. One propagandist with a weekly column in the Sunday Völkischer Beobachter took a few bullets to the chest and neck, he was later awarded a posthumous Iron Cross.

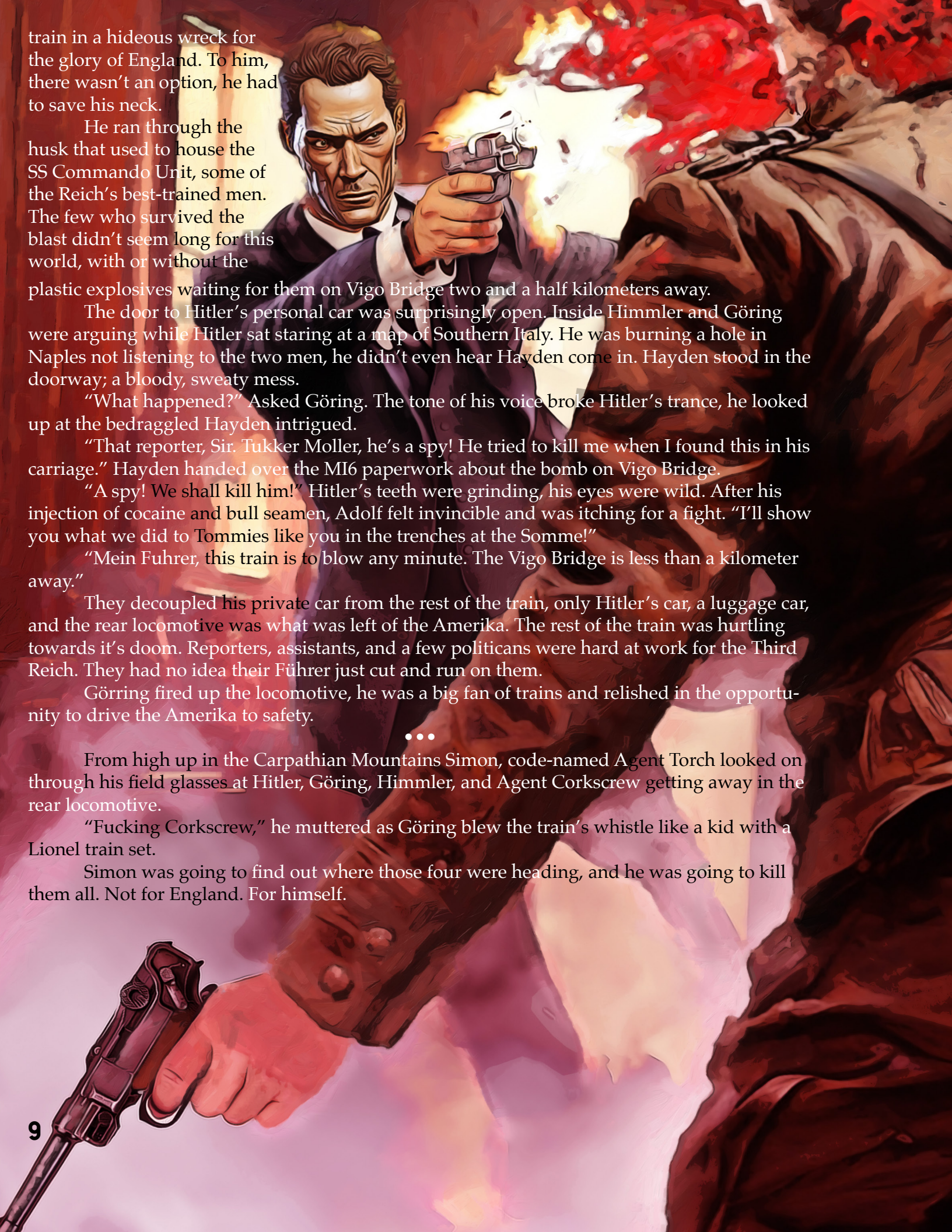
Hayden ducked behind a mountain of papers on a desk fitted with radios. Bullets peppered the table; exploding paper and electronics. Feedback from the radio speakers gave off terrific screeches. Hayden flipped the table and in the shuffle tackled the soldier. They grappled among the office supplies. Hayden grabbed a letter opener, holding it like a switchblade.

Throughout the tussle he couldn't get the blade in position to sufficiently stab. As he tried to readjust the Nazi seized his hand and broke Hayden's right ring and pinky fingers. The pain shot up Hayden's spine and left him ridged. Before he realized his fingers were broken he was staring at the tip of the letter opener. He tried to parry the blade away but as he hit the man's fist with his right, pain went through his body; from his tailbone to his jaw.

Hayden reeled back in agony, tilting his head backward just as the letter opener came down on the floor. Hayden punched the Nazi with his one good hand. Suddenly another SS officer came in and sprayed bullets in their direction, the brunt of them hitting his comrade and the overturned desk. Hayden rolled away unscathed. He grabbed the fallen Nazi's MG42, popped up from his hiding spot behind the desk, and let out a spurt of fire into the commando Nazi. He grabbed more ammo from the fallen Nazi and a couple of potato masher grenades.

The next car down the line was a hive of danger — the bagleitkommandowagen — where the SS unit called home. He fumbled with Elsa's keys, trying out each like a harried janitor. Finally, he got the right one, tossed both grenades inside and locked the door shut.

Hayden had no choice but to barge into the next cabin and save Hitler. It was either save Hitler — and himself in the process — or come through on his mission and go down with the



train in a hideous wreck for the glory of England. To him, there wasn't an option, he had to save his neck.

He ran through the husk that used to house the SS Commando Unit, some of the Reich's best-trained men. The few who survived the blast didn't seem long for this world, with or without the plastic explosives waiting for them on Vigo Bridge two and a half kilometers away.

The door to Hitler's personal car was surprisingly open. Inside Himmler and Göring were arguing while Hitler sat staring at a map of Southern Italy. He was burning a hole in Naples not listening to the two men, he didn't even hear Hayden come in. Hayden stood in the doorway; a bloody, sweaty mess.

"What happened?" Asked Göring. The tone of his voice broke Hitler's trance, he looked up at the bedraggled Hayden intrigued.

"That reporter, Sir. Tukker Moller, he's a spy! He tried to kill me when I found this in his carriage." Hayden handed over the MI6 paperwork about the bomb on Vigo Bridge.

"A spy! We shall kill him!" Hitler's teeth were grinding, his eyes were wild. After his injection of cocaine and bull seamen, Adolf felt invincible and was itching for a fight. "I'll show you what we did to Tommies like you in the trenches at the Somme!"

"Mein Fuhrer, this train is to blow any minute. The Vigo Bridge is less than a kilometer away."

They decoupled his private car from the rest of the train, only Hitler's car, a luggage car, and the rear locomotive was what was left of the Amerika. The rest of the train was hurtling towards its doom. Reporters, assistants, and a few politicians were hard at work for the Third Reich. They had no idea their Führer just cut and run on them.

Göring fired up the locomotive, he was a big fan of trains and relished in the opportunity to drive the Amerika to safety.

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From high up in the Carpathian Mountains Simon, code-named Agent Torch looked on through his field glasses at Hitler, Göring, Himmler, and Agent Corkscrew getting away in the rear locomotive.

"Fucking Corkscrew," he muttered as Göring blew the train's whistle like a kid with a Lionel train set.

Simon was going to find out where those four were heading, and he was going to kill them all. Not for England. For himself.

CURSE OF THE WEREDOLPHIN!

**AN UNNATURAL
TALE OF MYTH,
SEDUCTION AND
MURDER!**

By: Bill Kubitschek



**BECAUSE LADIES
LOVE A BAD BOY!**

Tom would be fifteen minutes late to the crime scene. He was supposed to have the day off, but budget cuts had gutted his department. So, he agreed to take the call. From the car, he went about the unpleasant task of informing his moonlighting job he'd be late. His boss took the news as well as expected.

"Jesus Christ, Tom! You can't fuck me like this!"

Tom's world-weary voice boomed through his giant white beard, "I'm the only officer they got, Joe. I'll be there in a couple hours. I'm already dressed. I'll be ready to go."

"A couple hours!? It's the middle of July, you bastard! How in the hell am I supposed to..."

Tom hung up as he pulled up to a sprawling waterfront mansion. He swung his considerable heft out his 1994 Trans Am. As he closed the door, he revealed himself to be dressed in an elaborate Santa Claus costume. He fit the uniform perfectly. In fact, no bottle of Coca Cola ever displayed a more convincing St. Nick.

There were no cops in the house, only Paramedics and the Coroner. The deceased lady's maid had found her dead and was trying to reach next of kin. Tom lumbered up to the scene with his trademark grim expression. Two young paramedics noticed his incongruent scowl. The bigger one blurted, "Hey, Kris Kringle! Ain't you supposed to be jolly?"

Tom gave them both a withering sneer and flashed his badge. While it wasn't the detective badge he'd carried years ago, the motion was so fluid, it succeeded in shutting the hotshots up. His then face loosened into a smile as if he'd forgotten he was wearing the red costume. He mustered a good natured reply.

"Once I visit some ladies on the naughty list, I'll be nice and jolly!"

Judging by the looks of the house, he assumed the lady had been a cat hoarder. As an animal cop, Tom's job was to investigate cases of cruelty and neglect. However, the majority of his calls were for cat hoarding, particularly when it came to the elderly. The way many people saw it, "animal cop" compared to "cop cop" was sort of like "male nurse" compared to "doctor." Tom couldn't care less. As far as he was concerned, animals were more consistently worth saving than the people he'd met. Pretty soon, he'd have enough to retire and spend his days fishing. "Splendid Isolation," as Warren Zevon had said.

Tyrone, the Coroner, led Tom down to the basement where he encountered a seven-foot long chest freezer. Inside of it was a solid block of frozen flesh, which appeared to be a dismembered dolphin. Its snout protruded slightly from the ice. Instead of the expected bluish/grey color, this Dolphin was an unexpected bright pink.

"We've been thawing it," said Tyrone. "You ever see one with that color?"

Tom hadn't, and the creature's wilting flesh struck him with a pang of sadness.

An hour passed, and the body parts had thawed enough for Tom to investigate. He removed the head and exclaimed, "This isn't a dolphin!" Tyrone entered the room wearing a strange look.

"What do you mean?"

"It has human limbs! Look," said Tom.

He pointed at a muscular human-shaped arm, which was frozen to a severed foot and calf. It was true that the limbs were human-like, but they still had dolphin skin. They were bright pink and had the slippery quality one would expect from a marine mammal. Against all common sense, Tom believed the body to be some sort of dolphin/human chimera, or dare he say, a cryptozoological marvel.

He lifted the dolphin's severed head and peered into its opaque eyes. The eyes were physically dead, yet Tom couldn't look away. There was an invasive, telepathic quality to them. They were like two cursed stones from a folktale - the kinds that granted wishes imbued with a hidden curse. The dolphin's skull showed significant blunt force trauma. His chest had a cluster of close-range bullet holes. The body was also peppered with puncture wounds, all of which were a half inch in diameter. It had been butchered in such a haphazard way, it looked as if it had been cut out of something as opposed to cut into smaller pieces for storage.

Tom took pictures of the corpse, visually cataloging each piece. He flipped over the torso and discovered a hard plastic object shoved up its rectum. After some considerable massaging, Tom removed the item. It was a "flip style" cellular phone and appeared to be a prepaid "burner" device. The battery was dead. Tom slipped the phone in his pocket before anyone caught a glimpse of it. He couldn't quite articulate why he'd kept the phone to himself. It was irrational, but he'd al-

Tom exclaimed, "This isn't a dolphin! It has human limbs!"



ready begun to regard the dolphin as his own personal secret, something to be jealousy guarded.

He called police headquarters and reported his findings directly to Lieutenant Spears. He and Spears had a lot of history, but Tom didn't know the two detectives that actually came to the scene. He had retired from the department five years earlier. During that time, it seemed the hiring pool had gotten as messy as incestuous genetics. Both detectives were broad-shouldered with hard muscle and petulant, thuggish demeanors. Detective Kraus was sandy haired with a tight jaw. His face had an otherwise bland appearance, like the styrofoam heads used to model wigs.

Kraus' partner, Detective Branson, had skin like a wallet and a full head of white hair. His handsome features were made intimidating by the presence of a glass right eye. The prosthetic looked very convincing and must have cost a fortune, but it didn't dart back and forth with the same manic pace as the left one.

The detectives sighed at the dolphin and its very human-looking limbs. Tom found himself in the strange position of trying to convince them that a corpse was their business. They all silently agreed that it was very weird, but only Tom regarded it as anything other than a nuisance. As a former detective, Tom understood their desire to pass the buck. If this pile of meat somehow went from an animal cruelty case to a homicide, it was going to add to an already impossible caseload. Well, if it did, so be it. Shit, Tom couldn't say for sure how many dinners and birthdays he'd missed when he was on the force. The detectives agreed to take the body to the police morgue for further examination. From there, they would decide what in the hell the thing even was.

Tom pulled onto US 19 and its mad max-ish summer traffic. He got three miles down the road and pulled into a liquor store to buy a phone charger. He scrolled through the burner phone, finding fifty-six missed calls from a single number. Every call had been made a year earlier, and they were all made over the course of twenty four hours. Along with the suspicious phone number, Tom found a trove of photographs that showed the dolphin man very much alive. The photos showed the dolphin man leading a fringe existence of promiscuous sex and hard partying. Meanwhile, Tom's own phone whined and squawked with demands from "The North Pole" at Baron's Christmas Won-

derland.

Baron's Christmas Wonderland was a hold-over from the golden age of Florida roadside attractions. It was a strip mall that had been turned into a perpetual White Christmas. Tourists from all over the country flocked to its doors, enticed by its fanatical bent for the Yuletide spirit. Inside the storefronts, one could find baubles, candy canes, strings of lights and every imaginable tchotchke intended to bring good tidings. There were Christmas villages, fake snow and plastic reindeer, which stood proud and incongruous to the blistering heat. Even in July, Baron's Christmas Wonderland attracted a curious contingent of Winter-lovers who braved sweltering conditions to gaze at holiday bric-a-brac with wistful eyes. An indispensable attraction in Baron's Christmas Wonderland was a year-round presence of a top-notch Santa Claus. The concept was straightforward enough: Santa spent the other three hundred sixty four non-Christmas Eve days of the year in his Florida "workshop" soaking up sun and preparing for the holiday season. The "true believers" that made a pilgrimage to Baron's Christmas Wonderland could drop by to see how the progress was going on the toys and things. The tourists were treated sort of like shareholders in Santa's corporation who had the right to drop by for impromptu progress reports. Tom parked and made the torturous walk from employee parking to "The North Pole." As he struggled to get into character, the dolphin's face stuck with him the way a ghostly image of the sun follows in roasted corneas.

As Tom's "Santa" made a grand entrance, the children's screams of joy acted as a temporary palette cleanser. One could not imagine a chorus of "amens" or "hallelujahs" that could rival the screams of children when they saw an authentic Santa Claus. Tom had learned through hard lessons to relish the simple majesty of a happy child. On the other hand, there was nothing so heart-breaking as a child asking why Santa didn't come to their house the previous year. The child always insisted that they had been really good. In those cases, Tom would blame a miscommunication with the elves and assure the child that he would make up for the error this year. The intelligent kids always seemed dubious, but they smiled anyway, hedging their bets. Tom would watch the deprived children's faces and ache for each one. Then, he would think to himself, Christ, have I grown too soft for even Santa work?

Within an hour, he was soaked with sweat under the red suit. Only a sadist would expect a three hundred pound Santa Claus to don his normal attire in the Florida summer heat. One of his colleagues called it "Santa Claustrophobia." On his fifteen minute mandatory break, Tom slipped out the back of the "North Pole" and smoked two Winstons back to back. Having a hiding spot by the dumpsters was crucial. He couldn't let a child see Santa smoking. In fact, for the same reason, he didn't even share a smoking area with the adults that worked at Baron's.

It was a good hour past closing time and Baron's was practically empty except for the occasional throng of tired parents with a few grubby kids in tow. He watched a mother with her child. She was exhausted and over extended by the year-round Christmas machine Tom was the face of. It made him think about Tracey, and how she'd single-handedly made every Christmas special for him and the kids.

On his way out of Baron's, Tom swiped a whole pumpkin pie. Outside, a young couple stood in front of the "North Pole" arguing over a bicycle. They were both very drunk. "Fuckin' holidays," he muttered to himself. It was a private joke that summed up everything, no matter the calendar date. Despite the heat, Tom was glad he had several more months before he had to endure the emptiness of another Christmas. He remembered Donna and the yearly tensions, the fights over money and decorations and presents. She'd called him "Scrooge" for years. Their son, Danny, had taken to calling him the same when he'd gotten old enough.

Some of the other guys on the force had embraced the holidays as a respite from all the ugliness of the job. He, on the other hand, had never seen the point until it was too late. Donna and Danny now lived in Phoenix with a dentist she'd met online. Tom watched the bicycle drama escalate as he ate the entire pie in his car. He opened the Weight Watchers app on his phone and realized that it would be another blowout day. He'd had too many of those since joining the organization in a moment of vulnerability. The whole charade seemed silly anyway. He was getting the gastric sleeve in January (after making some serious holiday Santa money). It just occurred to him that this would be his last winter looking like the "real" Santa.

Thoughts of the dolphin comforted Tom.

He felt an inexplicable intimacy with the decaying, dismembered creature. Maybe he was just happy to have a mystery, something to keep him distracted through another lonely night.

He went home to his ancient Nineteen Seventy CAL 40 sailboat. It had been his father's, and was currently his key to a happy final act in life. Tom had kept it in mint condition and looked forward to sailing it wherever his heart desired. He'd been saving aggressively since the alimony ended, and he'd soon have enough of a nest egg to bum around the globe. He certainly enjoyed thinking about relaxation, but so far the concept was just theoretical. Sleep wouldn't come tonight, but the fish would be biting at dawn. He sailed out into the Gulf Of Mexico and watched the moonlight give way to sunrise. He caught several mackerel and a respectable Cobia. The bottlenose dolphins played in the water nearby. Tom sailed back to the dock earlier than planned, and drove to the police station.

Inside the morgue, the air was thick with a smell of sanitized carnage. It was a sickening metallic scent that clung to the spaces between each breath. It was as if this place existed outside of time itself; a respite from reality where death took precedence over life. Lieutenant Spears had told him that the dolphin would be there, safe and sound. But upon arriving, Tom was met with nothing but cold, empty answers. There was no body and no trace of it ever having been admitted. To make matters worse, he was a civilian now, and the morgue was as closed off to him as it would be to any civilian. Each death drawer in that building would remain shut, silently holding its secrets from prying eyes. Tom pressed the issue at the front desk. The officer in charge was clearly confused by the mention of a dolphin. In fact, he seemed so bewildered by the question, Tom couldn't help but believe him.

Tom then bulldozed his way into a meeting with Lieutenant Spears, who spoke with vicious detachment.

"That dolphin thing is gone. I told them to get rid of it."

Tom turned his head to the side. He couldn't have heard that correctly.

"Where?"

Spears rolled his eyes.

"If you wanted to work cases, you shoulda stayed a cop."

The lieutenant pulled a stick of deodorant out of his desk and applied some to each armpit. He spoke without eye contact. "The DNA came back. It's not human. Not human means not our problem."

Tom was about to show Spears the burner phone with its photos, but that would have been quite stupid. For one, it was not a good idea to use stolen evidence to prove a point. But, more importantly, he could tell Spears was lying to him. They were covering something up. Around here, cops could wait weeks for DNA results. How did they get a lab to pull an overnight job on this?

Instead of measuring dicks with Spears, Tom elected to create a distraction. He didn't want to question the Lieutenant's story, but rather throw him off the scent. The cops obviously had an interest in covering something up, and it would behoove Tom to play dumb. If he voluntarily explained away the things he had seen, he could work the case on his own without suspicion. and there certainly was a case here. So, in the meantime, it was better to fight bullshit with bullshit.

Tom waved his hand, as if satisfactorily explaining away the entire incident

"I was way off base yesterday. Those weren't human limbs. It was just some stupid hipster taxidermy project gone wrong."

"Taxidermy?"

"Yeah, this kind of thing is real popular out in California. They make dead animals look like they're doing human things, like ballroom dancing or having a tea party. Fucking weird if you ask me. It's one thing to mount a fish or a buck's head. But this other shit..."

Spears nodded his agreement. It was all forgotten as far as he was concerned. Tom knew that a complete dismissal on his part would look suspicious, so he continued.

"But, killing a dolphin is a federal crime. Also, the only pink dolphins I know of are in the Amazon river. So, this might be an exotic smuggling case. Just tell me where the body is so I can work it on my end."

Spears grimaced. "Do you know who's house that was?"

"The dead woman?"

"Her son is married to Vernon Kinsel's daughter."

"Kinsel? So...what? It's off limits then?"

"What the fuck do you think?"

"How much money is Kinsel donating to your boss' campaign this time?"

"Oh, have a heart, Tom. You know how crazy Kinsel's daughter got. The girl's in a fuckin' rubber room, and I don't mean that as a figure of speech. So, probably, while she was starting to really lose it, she tried to do some of the weird taxidermy shit on a dolphin. Then, she lost interest and left it for someone else to clean up. That's what rich kids do. They make a mess and people like us clean it up."

Tom grunted a poisoned laugh. Spears sighed.

"Look, Tom, I don't know how she got the dolphin, but the statute of limitations is probably up anyway, and I'm not gonna cause that family any more pain. Mister Kinsel has lost enough."

"So, that makes it okay to butcher a protected animal?"

"Sometimes you gotta let things go."

The lieutenant opened the door as he made his final point.

"Look, Tom, we go back a long way, so I take no pleasure in saying this. But, you are not police anymore. You are not part of us. When we have trouble with an animal, we'll give you a call. In the mean time, never fucking tell me what to investigate again. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have murders to clear.

Tom stopped at a Denny's and ate a grand slam breakfast while scrolling through the dolphin's phone. Through LexisNexis, he'd verified that the missed calls came from Vernon Kinsel's cell number. The Kinsels were more of a mythical clan than a family. They lived in an exclusive community called Brent Island, unencumbered by the accepted codes of "right and wrong." Put simply, the Kinsels were the closest things Floridians had to royalty. One was tempting fate by approaching their patriarch. Tom may have been grizzled and stubborn, but even he recognized an immutable law: If the police wanted to cover up a case that involved a wealthy family, it was time to get your affairs in order. You'd either have no job or no pulse by the time you'd solved the goddamn thing.

Because Vernon had called the burner phone so many times, Tom assumed he wasn't the killer. But, he did feel confident that Vernon would be the lynchpin in the dolphin's story. If Tom had to name a suspect this early in the game, he would choose Vernon's son in law, Mitch Permsley. According to Tom's research, Mitch was the number two in Vernon Kinsel's empire. He was also married to Stephanie Kinsel, the "rubber room" resi-

dent Spears had mentioned earlier. Tom couldn't articulate why he thought Mitch was his guy, except for the fact that the body was found in Mitch's mother's house. Unfortunately, Mister Permsley was out of the country on business and his secretary gave no indication as to when he'd be back.

Tom tried several polite ways to speak with Vernon, but was ignored each time. It wasn't until he texted a photo of Vernon posing with the living dolphin man that he got a reply. Vernon agreed to meet at the San Seair, one of his many luxury condo developments.

The San Seair was a building of Babylonian proportions and appeared to be perpetually under construction. Despite the constant buzz of work, an average condo on the property cost two million dollars. Tom met Vernon at The Observation Deck, a rooftop pool bar that adorned one of the complex's four towers. Vernon was in his early sixties and expertly tailored. His voice had an affected deepness, like he was preoccupied with his testosterone levels. The men exchanged niceties and danced around the explicit reason for their discussion.

Vernon offered Tom a cigar, which he gladly accepted. The men smoked and surveyed the Gulf of Mexico.

Vernon said, "You don't listen to Sheriff Butters, do you?"

"Butters isn't my Sheriff. I'm an animal cop."

Tom watched Vernon's eyes flare. For a moment, the look made Tom realize how vulnerable he was atop that structure. He looked down at the construction site sixty stories below. The Observation Deck was still under construction. None of the surrounding condos were finished. Nobody was living in that specific tower yet. It would be very easy for Tom to have an "accident" and fall into the forest of rebar below. There wouldn't be any witnesses.

Vernon said, "My friend, I'm going to save you from embarrassing yourself any further. I don't know anything about a pink dolphin with a human body because there is no such thing. That photo you sent me is the result of an artificial intelligence program. Unless you live under a rock, you've seen social media filters that make you look like a cartoon, or a monkey or whatever. I've invested in several such tech ventures myself, and it's amazing what they can do."

Tom opened the photos on his smartphone

and showed Vernon the pictures of the dolphin man's dismembered corpse. He asked Vernon, "Is that the work of an app, too?"

Vernon possessed an extraordinary poker face, but Tom could see that the image stung the man. Vernon stared at the photos and uttered, "I don't even know what I'm looking at."

That was a lie, of course, but Tom actually felt a little guilty. Vernon's reaction was one Tom had seen countless times. It was the reaction of an innocent suspect being traumatized by crime scene photos. The man had just seen a dead friend.

"I know it's shocking," Tom said.

In response, Vernon looked Tom dead in the eyes and said, "There's very little that would shock me, friend. I've seen things in my day that would uncurl your pubes."

Tom responded with a half shrug.

Vernon continued, "I'm serious. I'd flatten them straighter than Japanese bangs. But, a human/dolphin hybrid that parties on yachts and has banged half the female population of Brent Island? Not on your life, pal."

Vernon turned and left with the abruptness of a man about to cry. Tom granted him the courtesy of a private breakdown. He would show himself out.

Later that evening, Tom found that the dolphin-man was infecting his thoughts. It was as if there was a telepathic virus exerting its independent will over Tom's mind. He had become a prisoner of intense thoughts. The internal presence of the mysterious creature continued to grow. He had witnessed its power firsthand, and it was clear that the dolphin-man had capabilities far beyond what Tom could understand. The obsession manifested as a severe feeling of protectiveness over the Dolphin. Tom's mind raced as he thought about the possibilities of what had happened to his beloved creature. Had someone frozen it to sell the body to the highest bidder? Maybe they had wanted to cash in on scientific interest or the tabloids. Tom shook his head at the sheer absurdity of it all, but a feeling of dread kept creeping back into his thoughts. Someone had desecrated a magnificent being, and that perversion must be punished.

The next morning, Tom drove a hundred miles to the Florida Cryptid Museum. It was a ramshackle building that had perhaps been a post office some time after Ponce De Leon arrived. Inside, Tom weaved through the tight aisles filled with "evidence" of mythical beings ranging from Moth Man to the Skunk Ape.

The museum curator was a thirty something man-child with dark features and golf ball eyes. Tom explained why he was there. The man-child blinked slowly and said, "A pink dolphin?"

Tom nodded. The man-child blinked again, slower this time.

"You're sure it was pink."

Tom could have shown him the photos, but he didn't want every yahoo cryptid hunter in the Southeast trampling on his investigation. Instead, Tom affirmed that he had, in fact, seen a pink dolphin with a human body. The man-child gave a tight-lipped nod of approval. He wrote down an address and said, "You want to talk to my aunt."

The Aunt's name was Angela. She lived in a swamp trailer outside of Matanza. She was elegant despite her squalid surroundings. Tom described the creature and she interjected without hesitation.

"You speak of a Boto Encantado."

She took a deep, grim breath, and described a mythic beast with terrifying allure. The Boto Encantado was a shape-shifting dolphin that lived in the Amazon river. During festivals, the Boto would walk the land as a beautiful man and seduce local women. Before sunrise, he would change back into a dolphin and return to the river, leaving pregnant maidens in his wake. When the women gave birth, their children would turn into Botos and swim down to the magical paradise of Encantado.

Angela warned, "You must not look directly at a Boto Encantado, for they will drive you mad. They often provoke madness in their sexual conquests. The males target beautiful women while the females are known to seduce lonely fishermen."

Tom tried to joke, "Lonely fisherman. I'd better watch out."

Angela went on to explain that Boto Encantados not only possessed the ability to shapeshift into human form, but that also possessed more sinister abilities. They could control storms, enchant humans into doing their will, inflict illness, and even death. They could even transform humans into Boto Encantados themselves. The only way to protect oneself from Boto Encantado was to avoid them. Harming or killing them resulted in irreversible madness.

Tom's curiosity finally overpowered him, and he showed Angela photos of the dolphin man. She studied them without a hint of shock or skepticism.

"Yes, I see," she said. "He has a dolphin head and human body because was born here, too far from the Amazon. He has never returned to Encantado, so he cannot fully shape-shift into either form. He is stuck in-between."

That night, Tom's dreams whisked him to the land of Encantado. It was an underwater paradise filled with exotic plants and multicolored fish. In the center of it all, he spotted a large glowing rock surrounded by pink dolphins swimming in perfect harmony with each other. Tom approached the glowing rock, which called him closer. He felt himself transforming into one of them – a Boto. He could feel the enchanted dolphins' collective wisdom radiating through him. They welcomed him into their world and invited him to join their ritual dance. The Botos whirled around him in an intricate pattern, changing shape mid-dance as if they were made of liquid light. Tom felt himself being swept away in the ethereal beauty of it all – until he suddenly awoke, feeling both fulfilled and exhausted.

Upon waking, Tom sipped coffee and scrolled through the photos on the burner phone. Most of the pics were detailed but nondescript images of deviant sex and debauchery. However, there was one photo of a woman in a "mermaid" costume. She was swimming in a custom water tank that was decorated to look like a sunken pirate ship. Tom knew the location as well as any man in the area. She was part of the "mermaid show" at Smuggler's Dive, a local institution. Aside from the family-friendly mermaid shows at Weeki Wachee Springs, Smuggler's was the only place in Florida that still featured the lost art of "Mermaid Burlesque."

That night, Tom entered Smuggler's Dive near closing time. He sat at the bar and instantly recognized the "mermaid" in the tank. As he watched her glide through the water, he imagined how the dolphin man must have admired her the same way.

Tom approached the mermaid in the parking lot after closing time. He flashed his animal cop badge in an attempt to seem "official." The way she sized him up, he could have been showing her a handful of Play Doh. She smelled of chlorine, cigarettes, and cheap body spray. It was incredible. She read Tom's badge and asked.

"How can I help you, officer Doerrler?"

"I want to ask you about the dolphin man."

Paige grew still and smiled at Tom as if basking in a memory.

"His name was 'Dolphin.' Just 'Dolphin.' He refused to be called anything else."

"So, you knew him?"

She lit a smoke and exhaled a conspiratorial chuckle. "I would say so."

"I'm, uh, sorry to tell you, but he died."

Paige nodded. "I know." She saw Tom's reaction and clarified. "Nobody told me or anything. But, we shared a sort of dolphin consciousness. I could see things through his eyes."

"Like a telepathy?" Tom asked.

"You get it too?"

Tom shook his head, but she could tell he was lying. "I'm here because I believe he was killed."

"Of course he was."

"You knew that too?"

She shook her head. "No, but that's the only way it would end for him."

They stood in awkward silence. The mermaid extended her hand. "I'm Paige."

They shook. "Tom." Tom fitted a Winston into his lips. Paige lit it for him.

"You came all the way out here to tell a strange mermaid about a dead dolphin?" Paige asked.

"I'm trying to find out who killed him."

Paige gave him a knowing look. "He's in your head, isn't he? You looked him in the eye?"

Tom spoke as if downplaying a dirty secret. "He was already dead."

"A dead bee can still sting," Paige said, then followed with, "Are you having the dreams yet?"

"I'm starting to."

She laughed to herself at painful memories made funny with the passage of time. "Fuckin' Dolphin." She crushed her cigarette under the soul of her Chuck Taylors. "Well, shit, Tom. I feel like we should do something in Dolphin's honor. The bars are closed, but if we hurry, we can hit a liquor store and have a drink by the pool. Whaddaya say?"

Tom very much wanted to.

When Paige said "drinks by the pool," she meant a bottle of Old Forester by the algae-flecked pool of the Conquistador Court motel. Despite the shitty decor, this was the closest Tom had been to a date in ages. Paige flattered Tom by asking him about himself. The whiskey loosened the conversation, and Tom found himself opening up. They

talked about his life as a combat marine and a cop. But, Paige mostly seemed interested in Tom's life as Santa Clause. At her insistence, Tom indulged her in a hearty "Ho Ho Ho!"

Paige clapped her hands in delight. "God, you do it just like one of those guys!"

"I am one of those guys. I even went to Santa School at the Institute of Mirth And Girth."

"Stop! There's no such thing!"

Tom opened his wallet and showed her his official laminated card. She squealed with amusement and poured them another round. They clinked glasses and Paige's thoughts went back to Dolphin.

"Those Kinsels tried to change him. That's where they screwed up. They tried to own him like they own everything else. I mean, it was some real Sea World shit if you think about it." As soon as Paige made the statement, she amended it. "But, I mean, Dolphin played himself too. He got too comfortable. It happens. I've dated plenty of rich guys, and it's easy to get caught up in their life. Dolphin forgot who he was. He tried to domesticate himself for that girl. But, in the end, all it did was get him killed and get that girl put in a looney bin."

Tom lit his last smoke. "How did you keep from getting obsessed with him?"

Paige laughed. "Oh, I fell for him as hard as anyone else. I mean, dolphins are hardwired into a girl's mind. They sit in our brains next to ponies and unicorns. It's a primal thing. But, if you swim with a dolphin, you just bask in the magic. You don't try to take it home and teach it how to do the fuckin' dishes. I enjoyed the moment and kept it movin'. That's how I stayed sane after the good times were over."

Paige drifted off momentarily engrossed in the theater of memory. She waved it off with a "what can you do" gesture.

"I mean, look, a lot of this shit is a Florida thing."

Tom wasn't following. Paige closed in on her point. "Look, it's basically just science. You let an ancient Amazon myth get corrupted by modern day Florida, shit is gonna get weird. For one, he's gonna spend a lot of time fuckin'. In the Amazon, they worship the Boto, or at least fear him. But, this is Florida. We don't worship shit. So, anybody that runs around screwing that many wives and girlfriends is gonna get killed. If he had been able to get to his Encantado land, or whatever, he'd

probably be alive."

Tom asked, "Why do you think he couldn't go?"

"He was a river dolphin, man. He couldn't swim that far in salt water. It would kill him. And, it's not like he could get on a plane. What he needed was a boat to take him straight to the Amazon. That would have saved his life. Or, he could have stayed hidden in the Everglades, but he liked partying too much to do that."

They sipped in silence after that. Santa Claus and a mermaid had just spent an hour discussing promiscuous weredolphins. Florida was truly a magical place.

Tom got home to find his boat had been ransacked. Whoever broke in had been looking for Dolphin's burner phone, which Tom kept on him at all times. In a fit of rage, Tom pulled his iPhone out. He was going to motherfuck this Vernon Kinsel clown. That was when he realized his personal iPhone's data had been erased. Everything was gone, returned to factory settings. There was no trace of Tom's data. The photos of Dolphin's dismembered corpse were gone along with everything else. Someone had hacked into his cloud account and wiped out everything. Tom spent a hours at various cellular stores and "genius bars" trying to recover his data, but everyone agreed that he had been thoroughly hacked. His smart-phone life had simply been vaporized.

Later that day, Tom was doing a shift as Santa. As a five year old sat on his knee describing a coveted Paw Patrol item in excruciating detail, Tom noticed a man watching him. He recognized the man from his research. It was Mitch Permsley. Even from a distance, Tom had an instant dislike for Mitch. He was the type of kid to constantly remind you that he went to Yale. But, the guy waited until Tom's shift at the "North Pole" ended, and approached him. Mitch told Tom, "I'm here to confess. I killed Dolphin."

The "Santa" in Tom's face retreated and the "Cop" took over.

"Why are you confessing?"

"I want to pay for my crime. What kind of damage am I looking at?"

Tom scowled. "The maximum penalty is a one hundred thousand dollar fine. You could technically do up to a year in jail, but I've never seen that happen."

Mitch stroked his hairless chin. "Okay, a

hundred grand. Fine. Can we just take care of that between the two of us?"

"Are you offering me a bribe?"

"No. I'm just a busy man who trusts you to do the right thing."

Tom shook his head, happy to patronize a rich boy. "You can take your chances with the judge."

Mitch's eyes grew desperate. "No, you don't understand. I need this investigation to go away. If my father in law finds out I killed Dolphin...he'll kill me."

Tom suddenly found this brat interesting. "Vernon doesn't know you're speaking to me?"

"He thinks I'm still in New York."

Tom lit a smoke. Mitch bummed one. He sucked at it with the guilty pleasure of a former smoker falling off the wagon. He began, "You see, Vernon and Dolphin, they had this weird thing together. I think he pressured Stephanie to stay in the relationship because he wanted to be married to Dolphin. Vernon was really jealous and secretive when it came to his 'spirit animal.' And they were, like, sexually obsessed with each other. For example, he and Dolphin played this weird game called 'monsieur rear' where they would put phones up their asses and call each other randomly throughout the day."

Tom's old detective instincts kicked in. He had a suspect that wanted to purge his demons. He said, "Look Mitch, I could use a drink, how 'bout you?" The men adjourned to a nearby Applebees and drank "two for one" specials. Mitch unloaded his burden with weary directness. Dolphin was dead and gone, but Mitch still carried the poison of emasculation in his veins.

"It started on our wedding day of all things. The plan was to have the ceremony on a yacht, and the reception on Conch Island. But, a freak storm caused us to shipwreck. Honestly, we should have died, but Dolphin 'rescued' us." Mitch made finger quotes as he said "rescued."

Tom arched an eyebrow. Mitch clarified, "Dolphin caused the storm, man. There's no other explanation."

As Mitch described the painful perversion of his wedding day, Tom could picture it. It was as if he were seeing the events using Dolphin's eyes as a lens. Remarkably, he could even picture embarrassing details Mitch was leaving out.

It was their wedding day. Mitch's bride, Stephanie sank towards the bottom of the open water. Her bridal gown flowed like a lace apparition around her. She could make out the brutal elegance of an approaching shark. Stephanie bubbled a muffled shriek as she realized she would be devoured. Her mind went black with terror. For an instant, she knew she was dead.

Instead, she woke to a brilliant Florida sunset. She was still in her wet bridal gown, but she was wrapped in the strong arms of a stranger. Her golden hair dripped sea water onto his strange pink skin. The stranger looked down on Stephanie and warmed her with a smile.

"Uh oh, someone's awake!"

Stephanie found herself surrounded by mangroves. The stranger was dressed in an impeccable white suit. He was dashing, scary, and everything a woman would be too afraid to want. He had the body of mister universe and the head of a brilliant pink dolphin. Although he was objectively a grotesque sight, Stephanie was transfixed with desire for this man. Every twitch of his muscle and glimmer in his eye sent electric sparks through her. She was thoroughly and irrevocably enchanted by this...Dolphin.

She asked, "What happened? Where am I?"

The Dolphin responded, "Shh...you're safe now."

"I remember...there was a shark."

"There was. I saved you from it, darling." Dolphin's hands grew curious on her body, as if checking the ripeness of a pear. It was a sort of degrading tenderness. "You pretty much owe me your life."

"How can I ever repay you?"

Stephanie noticed that Dolphin had set up a beach picnic complete with champagne, grapes, and candles.

Dolphin smirked, "We'll think of something."

"Are you real? You can't be real?"

"You mean most guys don't save you from a shark and bring a picnic?"

Stephanie laughed. She and Dolphin felt an overwhelming attraction. Seized by primordial desire, they kissed and groped each other.

Dolphin pushed away suddenly. He grasped her hand oh so gently and cooed, "I must warn you, darling. By doing this, you are living out every woman's fantasy. This will be a sensual journey of unbridled ecstasy. And, it will

change you forever"

Stephanie breathed heavily and sighed, "I've been warned." She pulled Dolphin down to the towel with her. Their bodies intertwined.

The sun had set, and Mitch lumbered through the sand. He was sunburned and weather-beaten. His tuxedo was shredded and water-logged. He'd had the strangest vision of a dolphin rescuing him, but he didn't know how he'd ended up on the far side of the island. He saw lights from the wedding reception in the distance. He followed them along with the sounds of live music. Whoever Stephanie had hired to sing sounded exactly like Michael Buble.

Mitch made his way to the reception party and saw Dolphin performing for the wedding guests. Stephanie was next to Dolphin, staring at him with undying love in her eyes. Dolphin finished a spectacular rendition of Sinatra's "My Way" and bantered with the crowd.

"For those of you that haven't met me, I've been called many things. Everything from a symbol of timeless strength, to God's perfect creation. But one word says it all...Dolphin."

The wedding party exploded in applause. Mitch beheld with horror their expressions of vacant obedience. They were awestruck, as if witnessing the Greek god Apollo or a heavy metal concert starring Jesus Christ himself. Dolphin and Stephanie shared a passionate kiss.

"What the fuck is going on!?" Mitch screamed.

Dolphin spoke into the mic, referring to Mitch, but regaling the crowd. "Ladies and gentlemen, this is the part where the goddess tells the needledick that their silly coupling ritual is canceled."

Vernon turned to Mitch. He had the mania of a man freshly devoted. "God killed your wedding so he could bring me this one!"

Mitch tried to talk sense into Stephanie. He tried to tell her what she meant to him. He tried to put his faith into the unassailable power of true love, but the crowd had turned on him. They were no longer "people" in the recognizable sense. They were serfs in the wedding kingdom, and Mitch was a heretic to be banished. The wedding guests pushed and kicked at Mitch until he was too terrified to engage with them any further. He retreated to the dark side of the island and struggled to

make sense of this new world. He told himself he was dreaming, but he was not convinced. He'd been convicted in some kind of pagan court, and he wasn't sure they wouldn't execute him.

Up on stage, Dolphin got down on one knee and genuflected to his goddess. He said, "We've done Mitch a great service, darling. A man like him can never shine next to a woman like you. There's an old dolphin expression..."

He spoke in a series of clicks and squeaks. "'Eh eh eh eh, eh eh eh eheheh...,' which roughly translates to, 'A dandelion may be beautiful when examined up close, but next to an orchid, it looks like a turd.'"

The crowd howled with laughter. Vernon screamed, as if testifying in a revival church. "He's a turd next to you, princess! I've always thought so!"

Mitch watched helplessly as the giddy throng swarmed to congratulate the happy couple. Vernon spoke up, utterly entranced by Dolphin "Hey, the priest is still here, how 'bout you two get married!"

The crowd blossomed with a chorus of "Oh yes, wonderful!" And "please!"

Vernon wiped tears from his eyes and said, "It would be my greatest dream come true!"

A disheveled and tipsy Father Merkle stepped on the stage with an obliging smile. Even he seemed to be an instant convert. He was ready to do his part in this inhuman ritual.

Dolphin looked at the priest and cocked his head to the side. He looked like a dog reacting to a suspicious noise. His face made an almost imperceptible twitch of concentration. Out of nowhere, a storm cloud opened up, and a single bolt of lightning struck the priest dead.

Stephanie stared down at the charred remains of the Priest. She remained expressionless. She was hypnotized, existing on another spiritual plane. The wedding party stood in stunned silence.

Dolphin shrugged, "Look baby, it's better we don't put any labels on what we have together."

Back at the Applebees bar, Mitch winced at the memory. He signaled for another round. His face was a sculpture of despair. "I put up with a lot of shit because of that dolphin's specialness. Jesus Christ, she even took him on what was supposed to be our honeymoon!"

Tom listened politely, but inside his own dolphin-infected mind, he was silently mocking Mitch's pain. Tom was unconsciously distancing himself from the cuckolded man, and regarding him as a target for ridicule. As if sensing that, Mitch continued.

"There was a time that I actually thought I had been sent to hell, and Dolphin was my personal tormentor. At work, Vernon gave Dolphin my job. He demoted me, and made me train Dolphin. I literally had to give that monster a fish every time he did something right. It took me a bucket of herring just to teach him how to log in to the company email."

Tom learned that, during the year leading up to the wedding, Mitch and Stephanie had lived in a San Seair penthouse. While their residence was quite luxurious, it had been completed long before any of the other units. In fact, the lower floors were still in the middle stage of construction, so the penthouse stood like an oasis amid the iron and debris. With its isolation and fences, the residence felt more like a zoo exhibit than a home. Upon Mitch's banishment, Stephanie and Dolphin had made it their love nest.

One Saturday afternoon, Stephanie sunned herself while Dolphin did flips in the pool. With a constant refrain of "Hey babe, check this out," Dolphin did a series of double somersaults. He also raised himself three quarters of the way out of the water and glided backward like an anthropomorphic Flipper.

The fires of courtship still burned, but, if they were being honest with themselves, the initial rush of falling in love had lost its luster. The grind of a day job had taken its toll on Dolphin, who wasn't accustomed to responsibility. Stephanie was finding out that her aspirations were far more "normal" than she'd initially thought. Dolphin sensed her trying to "domesticate" him. He was fond of saying, "Baby, why are you trying to turn me into an awesome version of the rest of these dipshits?"

Stephanie looked up from her phone and acknowledged Dolphin's stunts with a halfhearted "That's great, baby." But she had seen these tricks many times. Dolphin, sensing a lack of awe in his beloved, moved on to another tactic.

"Babe, come in with me."

Stephanie gave Dolphin a seductive look. "Why don't you make me?"

"You asked for it."

Dolphin leapt out of the pool, grabbed a giggling Stephanie, and carried her into the water. They kissed. Their passion was still second to none. The two lovers fluidly moved on to heavy petting. Dolphin gyrated his hips, grinding into her. Driven by instinct, he took her under the water. His Boto Encantado soul longed to find the paradise of his kind. But, his primal homing beacon did not recognize that they were in a rooftop swimming pool.

Time passed. Too much time. The tranquil surface of the water broke. Stephanie came up splashing and gasping for air. She scrambled to the edge of the pool. Dolphin followed her. He had no idea what the problem was. Stephanie took desperate, gulping breaths.

"Are you crazy!?! You almost drowned me!"

"I just got so hot for you. What's the big deal?"

She rubbed the water out of her eyes. As her vision cleared, she saw Mitch standing on the pool deck. She was mortified that he'd seen it happen. "Mitch? What are you doing here?"

Mitch tried to avoid Dolphin's soulless gaze. "I'm here to pick up my stuff, remember?"

Stephanie directed Mitch to the living room where his clothes and pop culture memorabilia were neatly packed into two boxes. It amazed Mitch how little of their life he would take with them. He walked by the pool on his way out. He didn't need to pass them, but he did. He saw Stephanie and Dolphin frolicking and couldn't resist asking, "So, Stephanie, has your new beau gone totally dolphin yet?"

Dolphin shouted, "What the fuck did you say?"

Stephanie placed her hand on Dolphin's chest, signaling that she would handle Mitch. "And what does 'totally dolphin' even mean?"

"It means, he might be your celebrity boyfriend right now, but he's a wild animal and you can't predict what he'll do.

"I never realized you were so prejudiced."

"Steph, it's like this: Remember when your cousin thought she was John Mayer's girlfriend, but really he just banged her in the chill-out tent at Coachella?"

Stephanie rolled her eyes.

Mitch continued. "All women want to be John Mayer's girlfriend, until they actually get involved."

"Because he'll 'go dolphin?'"

"Yes. Exactly."

"Dolphin wouldn't do that. He's adapting just fine."

Dolphin chimed in, affecting the air of the football star who also writes poetry.

"You know, Mitch, there's a lot you don't know about me. I think if we took the time to understand each other, we could be bros."

Mitch wasn't getting the fight he wanted. Dolphin had just used mental jiu jitsu on him. He was playing "4D Chess" as he continued.

"Mitch, did you know that my mom was an American? It's true. She met my dad in the Amazon. She was a scientist, a strong woman, but we got separated when I was a baby. I was never lucky enough to meet my dad, so I never had the role models you take for granted. I'm sorry things didn't work out between you and Stephanie, but I'm trying to build the family I never had, and I hope you can respect that."

Stephanie wrapped her arms around Dolphin's magnificent chest and murmured sweet nothings. God dammit, Mitch was really failing to expose this jackass. Mitch knew there was no more room for subtlety. He stated his case.

"Oh, come on, I've been doing a lot of googling while you were enjoying my honeymoon. And I know for a fact that dolphins are the biggest dickheads in the animal kingdom."

Stephanie exclaimed, "Mitch!" Her expression of horror was loud enough to be an apology to all marine life. Mitch was unphased.

"He's a fucking enchanted pink river dolphin, Steph!"

Stephanie stood up for her man. "Yeah, well he saved me from a shark, okay. He's smart, romantic, and I feel safe with him. And guess what, Mitch...everybody loves him!"

"He's just using his dolphin-ness to hypnotize you all!"

"Maybe he's just amazing and you can't deal with that. If he's 'hypnotizing' everyone, then why isn't it working on you, Mitch?"

Dolphin interjected with the answer to that question.

"That's because I don't speak cuck."

Mitch waved his iphone, as if gesturing with the research itself. "Look it up! Dolphins are rapists, murderers, and complete fucking deviants."

Stephanie had had enough.

"You need help, Mitch. Dolphins are the most magnificent creatures on earth. When I look at him, I see so much wisdom. I see a natural connection to the past and future, and an intelligence that is so far beyond ours."

Mitch's mind was in full smoking overdrive. He wanted to point out that they were standing at the top of an architectural marvel that was designed by humans, not dolphins. He could go into Stephanie's bedroom, reach into the nightstand, and pull out the pistol she kept there. He could shoot Dolphin with her gun. A gun that humans designed. He could film the event with a smartphone that humans invented, and post it on an internet that humans built. And, to be frank, the resulting social media outrage over the killing would be worth it. It would be worthwhile because he would have proven that dolphins, with all of their "collective consciousness" horseshit, were just a useless, narcissistic grifter species that had no business being compared to human beings!

Instead, he could only muster a feeble, "You know what? Fuck dolphins. Dolphins are fucking idiots compared to humans."

Mitch grabbed his boxes and stormed off. Dolphin called after him.

"And, how many of those 'awesome human things' did you build, Mitch?"

Back in present-day Applebees, Tom and Mitch polished off another round of drinks. Tom asked if they could visit Stephanie. Mitch agreed. He would be happy to show Tom the extent of Dolphin's damage. They arrived at Suncoast Pyschiatric hospital an hour later. Mitch and Tom entered the hallway of the psych ward. Ghostly figures floated through the hallways in a Thora-zine fog. The physical apparition of the woman who used to be Stephanie walked past them, and barely registered a reaction when she saw Mitch. Mitch spent a half hour or so speaking loud, soothing trivialities to her. When he and Tom left, Mitch started the car and broke the silence.

"As you can see, I take no satisfaction in the fact that he "went totally dolphin."

Tom said, "But, you didn't kill him."

"Excuse me?"

"You didn't kill Dolphin. According to those Cryptid whackos, that's not the way it works. Stephanie is the one that lost everything. She's the one in the psych ward. I think she snapped, killed Dolphin, and you're protecting her. After everything that happened, you're pro-

tecting her.."

Mitch bummed another smoke from Tom. "It's not that simple." Mitch exhaled and arrived at an elusive conclusion. "Regular life is what killed Dolphin. A Boto Encantado is supposed to shape shift, seduce a maiden, and disappear back to paradise. He's not supposed to hang around and become a regular jabroni."

"That's for guys like us," Tom agreed.

"Exactly. So Dolphin basically kept thrashing around in his cage until it killed him. That cage just happened to be a really nice penhouse"

Mitch realized how heavy the burden had been. He threw his hands into the air and described the last few hours of Dolphin's life. What the hell did it matter anymore? He'd spent his whole live giving fucks and never bothered to check the inventory. It appeared he had run out. He went on to describe a typical scene of domestic tension. Stephanie was up in the middle of the night, waiting for Dolphin to come home. When he finally did, he smelled like sex in a brewery. Stephanie tried to keep calm, but she had been stewing for hours.

"Where have you been?"

Dolphin grabbed a beer and put a tray of leftover lasagne in the microwave. "You fell asleep, so I went out. I'm not mad, though. There's still time to fool around.

"Fool around? I wake up to an empty house and you just saunter in here at Four A.M.!!?"

"Why are you getting weird?"

Stephanie took a deep breath, and did her best to keep a measured tone. "Look, I went into this with my eyes open. I knew you were a Dolphin when we met."

"I was very up front about that."

"And, I admit that being with you makes me feel..."

Dolphin interjected, "...Alive in a way you never thought possible? Of course it does."

"Okay, yeah, but if this is going to work out, I need something more."

"Something more? Sure. I can call some girls over. Guys? Whatever."

"No. It's nothing like that."

Stephanie grabbed Dolphin's hand. "I want to start a real life with somebody. I want that somebody to be you, but if you can't tame your..."

"My what? My dolphin-ness?"

Dolphin freed his hand and stomped around the room. Stephanie shadowed him. "Hon-

ey, don't get defensive."

"I'm not getting defensive. I am getting conservational. Because this isn't just who I am, it's what I am. I'm sorry that's not good enough for you."

"Well, I'm sorry, but it's not."

Dolphin ate several handfuls of lasagne straight out of the tray. Between bites, he asked, "What do you want from me?"

"How 'bout you consider my feelings for three seconds before doing stuff like this?"

"Should I wear a dress too? Maybe I can ride a unicycle and juggle."

"Well, if you want to fit in around here..."

"I don't want to 'fit in', Stephanie. I am a majestic creature of the deep, and I will be revered as such!"

"It's your choice, but playtime's over, Dolphin. Do you want to be with me or not?"

Dolphin wiped his hands on a set of decorative towels and made his way to the door. Stephanie's jaw dropped open. "You're leaving again?"

"I just remembered that I could be living life right now. So, have fun with your bullshit." Dolphin exited the house, and left Stephanie stunned.

In truth, it appeared that Dolphin had underestimated his own susceptibility to domestic life. He genuinely missed "normalcy," and he soothed that yearning with dope and hookers. During that time, Stephanie took the opportunity to reconnect with Mitch.

One night, she and Mitch sat on Stephanie's balcony together. They gazed out on the sprawling construction site and clutched wine glasses. They enjoyed the familiarity. It felt like college, back when they'd met as a lonely hearts club for two.

"He wasn't all that bad at first," Stephanie said. "I mean, he's always had this kind of animal thing going on, but that last outburst was just scary, you know?"

Mitch tried to lighten the mood. "I know, but you handled it well. Gosh, in the meantime, you're making me feel like a lush drinking alone." Mitch grabbed the bottle and refilled Stephanie's glass.

Her eyes welled up with tears. Mitch stroked her arm. He did his best to be the man she needed. "What is it? It's fine, don't worry. No matter what happened, I still want you safe. I still care about you.

Stephanie blurted, "I'm pregnant."

"What? Do you know who the father is?"

"Fuck, Mitch, do the math." Stephanie was now fully crying. Mitch's face made an involuntary patronizing expression.

"You and Dolphin didn't use protection of some kind?"

"Sure, we did, but it was like putting a tube sock on a shotgun."

A piercing dolphin squeak echoed across the sky. Mitch and Stephanie froze with apprehension. Stephanie's body trembled as a responding squeak emanated from her belly. Father and son were locked in a prehistoric dialogue.

The dolphin squeaks grew louder and closer until they were replaced by a fleshy thud against the front door. Mitch and Stephanie barely had enough time to register the noise before the entire door splintered. They found themselves face to face with Dolphin. His pink hue was scintillating in its intensity. He looked larger, fearsome, inflated by the prospect of a new offspring. Stephanie and Mitch were scared shitless. Dolphin chirped, "I'm gonna be a papa."

He began undressing with ritualistic pomp. The silence was unsettling. Stephanie asked, "Dolphin, what are you doing?"

Dolphin responded with icy calm. "I'm going to kill Mitch, baby."

Mitch replied, "Wait, what?"

"It's the Dolphin way. Stephanie is pregnant. Mitch is a romantic rival. Mitch is going to die."

Stephanie fumbled with this new reality.

"Dolphin, baby, you don't have to do this." Dolphin waved her off, the way someone would volunteer to kill a roach.

"I don't have a choice, baby. All I've got is instinct. Now get the fuck out of my way." Dolphin cracked his knuckles and neck. He slapped himself a few times like a cage fighter. He looked genuinely excited.

"Let's fuckin party, motherfucker!"

Stephanie inserted herself between the men. She stroked Dolphin's muzzle, desperate to calm him.

"Baby, it doesn't have to be like this. How 'bout you just let Mitch go, and we'll do a little night swimming, huh?"

She flashed Dolphin a seductive look. Dolphin scoffed at Stephanie's advance. "You two are funny. You think you can change my mind

with sex now that you're damaged goods, and he thinks he's gonna live? You two really make me laugh.

Dolphin let out a thunderous series of squeaks. "Eh eh eh eh eh eh eh eh!"

The sound was deafening. Mitch held his ears. The laugh was so loud, it almost drowned out the gunshots. It stopped abruptly when Dolphin looked down to see three holes in his chest. Stephanie was pointing a nine millimeter Glock. A river of burgundy flowed from his bare pink skin. He looked at Stephanie. It appeared that the emotional pain was worse than the physical. Dolphin sobbed.

"You shot me!? Baby, why did you shoot me? I'm your BAE! Remember when a big fucking shark was about to eat you, and I beat its ass. Not only should I get blown like every hour for something like that, but it's the kind of shit they write legends about. Instead, you shoot me?"

Stephanie kept the gun aimed. Her hands shook. Shooting someone was no small thing. "Dolphin...if you don't exit the house immediately...look...I'm gonna have to shoot you again. I mean...you're leaving me with no choice here. "Shoot me?"

Dolphin erupted into another psychotic squeak laugh. The blood was really flowing now. "I treated you like a queen, and you shot me. I showed you what a real man is. I protected you. I did tricks for you. I wanted you so bad, I convinced a shark to attack you just so I had a way in!"

Stephanie repeated this revelation in a half whisper. "You set me up to be attacked?"

Dolphin gesticulated with sincerity. "Yeah, that's how hot I thought you were!"

"Ugh...it all makes so much sense now. You are such a colossal piece of shit!"

Dolphin glared at Mitch. "This is all neededick's fault!"

He lunged at Mitch with murder in his eyes. Stephanie squeezed the trigger as Dolphin crossed the room. More bullets ripped through his flesh, knocking him off-balance and causing him to tumble over the balcony. God's perfect creature fell sixty stories down and impaled himself on the vertical stalks of rebar below.

Mitch grimaced at the memory. He bummed another smoke from Tom. He continued, "We couldn't leave him for people to find, so we spent the whole night sawing him off the rebar, piece by piece. By morning, Stephanie had lost her

mind."

"Cursed by the Boto Encantado," said Tom Mitch nodded.

"She cursed herself to save me."

Tom scratched his beard.

"But, why freeze the body?"

Mitch snorted. "I thought I could use it for leverage against Vernon."

"Like blackmail?"

"It was stupid, man. I found out later he's too fucking crazy to leverage."

Tom hesitated, then asked, "What happened to the baby?"

Mitch exhaled a plume of blue smoke. "Vernon tried to raise it, but it ran away."

"So, there could be a dolphin kid living in a river around here?"

"That's what Vernon thinks. Not just one, though. Dolphin was banging everything in sight. Vernon's obsessed with the idea. He has goons all over looking for them. He wants nothing more than a 'dolphin heir.' What he really wants is to find a female Boto Encantado that he can personally start a new race with."

Tom shook his head. He'd met some real pieces of work in his day, but he'd never considered the existence of a dolphin eugenesisist.

Mitch grimaced as he dropped Tom off at his car. "It's the fuckin' world we live in, man."

Tom spent his next "North Pole" shift in a daze. He stepped outside for a quick two-smoke break. As he was lighting his second, he felt a leather sap to the back of his head. He'd still been wearing the Santa hat, which interfered enough with the blow that he could stay conscious. Two towering men in baseball caps and neck gators descended upon Tom. One put him in a carotid restraint while the other patted him down. The men gave themselves away with their economy of motion. Tom could tell that they were cops, and they were so tightly choreographed, he assumed they were partners.

He was getting fuzzy from the sleeper hold. The other cop found Dolphin's burner phone and hissed, "I got it!" It was time for Tom to make his move. He lifted his right heel and drove his considerable weight into his assailant's foot. The man let out a whimper and loosened his grip enough for Tom to shake free.

Tom whipped around and caught mister sleeper hold with a beautiful left hook. The man doubled over cupping his eye socket. Tom don-

key-kicked mister burner phone in the chest, feeling the satisfying “oof” of a man losing his wind. Mister sleeper hold was seeing red now, both figuratively and literally. He pulled a small revolver from an ankle holster. His partner screamed “Not here!”

It was too late, bystanders had called the police. Half a dozen kids had seen masked men beating up Santa Claus. The two men fled the scene. Tom caught his breath and caught a hell of a break. In a small puddle of blood he saw a glass eye. He pocketed it before he talked to the local cops. Once Baron’s Christmas Wonderland closed, Tom put the eye back where he’d found it and staked out his smoking corner from across the parking lot. Glass eyes were expensive, and Tom knew Detective Branson would be back to retrieve it.

Tom didn’t even take the time to change out of his Santa costume for fear of missing his suspect. At around two in the morning, both Detectives Kraus and Branson arrived in a nondescript sedan. Branson searched with a flashlight and quickly located his eye. The men drove off with Tom expertly tailing them.

They drove out to a familiar locale. They drove to Smuggler’s Dive. It appeared detectives Kraus and Branson were waiting to follow Paige. Tom felt a pang of guilt. They must have seen the bar in Dolphin’s photo reel.

The detectives followed Paige deep into the Everglades. Tom had a lot of trouble tailing them and staying inconspicuous. His headlights were off and he had to use the moon to guide the car. He rolled his windows down, attempting to enhance his limited sight with hearing. Halfway into the swamp, he lost them. He kept driving, using blind faith to guide him. After another mile or so, the dirt road dead-ended. *So much for collective dolphin consciousness!*

That was when Tom heard a scream. It was a woman’s scream complimented by the injured grunts of a man. Tom grabbed the pistol from his glove box and sprinted into the swampy darkness. He found a narrow walking path and followed it towards the sound. In the silvery moonlight, Tom came face to face with a small dolphin child. The girl was bright pink and roughly the size of a five year old human. The child screamed, “Santa! They’re hurting my mom!”

Tom followed the child into the swamp and found Paige struggling with Detectives Krause

and Branson. Paige saw Tom with the dolphin child and screamed, “get her out of here!” Tom realized she’d been distracting the men, giving the little girl a chance to escape. Krause had had enough. He pulled his pistol and aimed at Paige. Tom was quicker on the draw. He shot twice, hitting Krause once in the chest and once in the temple. Krause’s gun hit the ground. Tom turned his pistol onto Detective Branson, who held the dolphin girl from behind with a gun to her head. Tom did his best to deescalate the situation.

He took a breath, ready to tell Branson that they could all walk away happy if they just took a second to think clearly. But, it was too late. Paige had picked up Krause’s gun and fired a tunnel through the back of Branson’s skull. The man’s forehead opened like the back of a moving truck, spilling Brain matter all over the dolphin girl. There was no explanation necessary. Paige had kept the girl safe in the river, dreading the day Vernon found out about her. Now that he had, she’d done what was needed to protect her baby. But they’d killed two cops. In no time, they would be the subjects of a manhunt. If they were going to escape, they had to do it immediately.

“Come with me,” Tom said.

They stopped at a Walmart and grabbed as many supplies as the Trans Am could carry. The three of them cast off in Tom’s sailboat and charted a course to South America. From there, they’d find the Amazon River. Maybe the land of Encantado needed a Santa Claus. Of course, that nice old lady in the swamp should have told Tom that nobody ever visits Encantado and returns.



HOW DOES A DESPERATE STARLET BECOME THE WORLDS GREATEST NAZI HUNTER?

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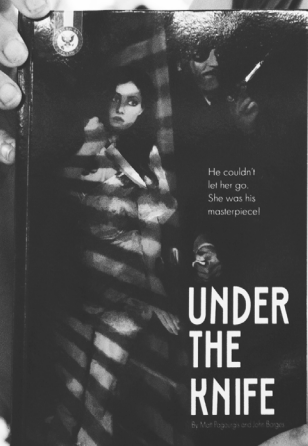


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