



## THE BITTER ENDS

by

Johnny Fontaine

*Fate will catch up, like a CNN headline crawl with breaking news...*

That's my first thought as both eyes open to the pain of focusing on somewhere I've never been. The naked woman asleep next to me is no clue. The bullet hole seared black into the middle of her forehead rings no bells. My groin stirs for half a second then dies a peaceful death. I pull on my clothes, stumble around until I find my gun and have a bowl of Cap 'N' Crunch before exiting her apartment. On the sidewalk I struggle to remember what her car looks like (*a Lincoln?*). It's mine now, so this is important. I'm in St. Louis, maybe Indianapolis. America is at war, Cronkite is dead, and I can smell the bitter ends in the air.

I smoke the dope left in her car. *Why didn't I take her purse?* They say I killed both parents and the courts took twenty-five years of my life as proof. Half my teeth are gone, so I haven't smiled since yesterday. Nobody smiles back, so maybe it doesn't matter if they fear me. I became the place I was put in long enough. Ask me why I do what I do and I might say it's

because my redheaded sister never slept with me or because we lost in Vietnam or because the Kennedy's kept dying.

I follow the mailman down a suburban street for no reason after abandoning the car on the outskirts of downtown, telling the squeegee man he could have it. Stepping up to the front door of a spacious brick Tudor, I'm met by a statuesque elderly woman who insists on wondering out loud what my business is in her box. *Lady, you don't want to know.* She protests anyway and raises both her voice and hands to me. I'm inside, past the screen door and not caring whether she's a Taurus or was disgusted by the war in Iraq. I punch her once, laughing as I think of my mother and the way she used to beat me to the sound of Frank Sinatra on the stereo.

"*Scream now,*" I whisper and this queer look comes across her face as I keep repeating this mantra for the moment as my fists strike out in unison with my voice. She's down for the count, her body dancing on the floor in the convulsions of a life fighting death. I try imitating her moves but catch a reflection in a mirror and see I'm breathing heavy, cursing out loud that so much work isn't so much fun. *I have a conscience.* She's whining now, pleading with her hands like a porno star wannabe as I pick up a crystal vase off a table and begin to nail her skull to the Persian rug.

My clothes look a little wrinkled but none the worse for wear, even with the blood splatters. I spend a time walking naked through the other floors as I do laundry in her basement, watching *The View* and going through her mail, finally masturbating over her naked body. No one writes her at all. She's a junk mail widow. This time I take the money, some jewelry, and the black high heeled pumps off her feet. *Maybe I'll drink Black Jack out of them before my eyes shut for the night and the exact pitch of her last breath tickles my ear.*

Her stolen car is much more fuel efficient than the last. Driving past the school, the idea

is fixed before it's forgotten. I leave the Cadillac three blocks away with the keys still in it, putting one of the heels into my jacket pocket. The Jack Daniel's I stole from her bar is gone, so I throw the empty bottle at a snarling dog behind a fence. The school parking lot offers no distraction so I head for the front door, softly whistling *Hey Jude* while fighting the urge to piss in my pants.

Several people give me one glance in the hallway, thinking here comes Mr. Sunshine to pick up little Billy. I look through each of them and continue on. The grade school smells of chalk, paint, freshly scrubbed faces and the lies of little boys and girls who didn't do their homework. I find an empty stairwell next to a classroom and sit down, taking off my tie. I use the Hermés silk to clean my gun, taking the pawnshop .45 apart and wiping it down. There is a hope of a better tomorrow by doing it thoroughly. As I finish I hear the stairwell door open. Slowly lifting my eyelids, I see a small boy standing there, his eyes stuck in that PC watching stare. Raising the gun, I point it at him as I cock back the hammer. Counting down from ten in Spanish, I wait for the scream or to see him fight the urge to piss in his pants. He slowly raises one hand, makes a gun out of his fingers, and holds my aim.

"Pow!" he says in a voice no more than six years old. "*You dead, mister!*" He smiles, puts down his finger gun, and walks away.

*Fate doesn't ask why, but it does place a face with the name...*

After leaving the school, hitting the bank was eccentric, a quick thought at ignoring the lottery and retiring with enough money to buy a new name, face, or soul. Perhaps the dope was talking, saying that I'm never going to win the Boston Marathon or pilot the Space Shuttle. I pick the first bank I see, saluting the American flag hanging outside its door.

Smiling for the security camera, I take a deep stage bow before I shoot the guard in both

knees, joyfully watching him crumble in pain as his day job goes down the toilet.

“*Money,*” I tell them, “*is what I came for. Keep the jewelry, save the car keys, and don’t worry about your piss poor lives.*” They all cower in fear as I am pointing the gun at the guard’s head and making myself clear with a third bullet. “*He died so that you could live.*” I think they all stop breathing for several seconds. “*Give me the dead Presidents,*” I say, “*with no paint bombs or silent alarms,*” although a small thought flies between both ears informing me that I’m too late to spend the money I’m borrowing. Two minutes later I have a bag of cash and am on the sidewalk, hearing the soft rush of angels bidding me welcome into their wings.

The first cop I see reminds me of my father. There is that look in his eyes and it’s obvious this is the first time he’s drawn his weapon. I write a quick tune in my head and begin whistling it to the cop, watching his aim steady and hearing his voice crack.

“Drop it or we will fire!”

*Choices.* I don’t draw up quick enough, and the second officer unloads a round from his shotgun at me. My mouth spits out a laugh as I’m hit in the gut, the searing pain overlapping my desire to think about how many prayers in my life went unanswered or to return fire. The gun has fallen from my hands, and I’m flat on my back. Reaching down before the cops swarm towards me, I place my hands into the open wound of my stomach and feel the heat of my blood and life. I scream for my mother, wishing I hadn’t killed her. It’s almost naptime, the distant memory of her abuse slamming me in the groin. Fate will catch up, that first thought giving me pleasure as I realize it’s my forty-fifth birthday today and I won’t be blowing out any candles. It was a lifetime of passing by others on the streets, invisible, a pawn on a chessboard.

My life stirs for half a second, and the sound of a siren reminds me of my name.

*Johnny Fontaine is a writer from Louisville, KY whose short fiction has appeared in decomp, LEO, The Legendary, The ManKind Project Journal and Thieves Jargon. He sometimes loses sleep at night wondering if The Beatles ever had a favorite Rolling Stone. He has never written himself a fan letter.*