

The Jab-Squirt Syndrome

Marlin, Nat, Dalton, Caramen and Roderick tumbled out of the bushes that lined the road, and ran through the field. Though there was no-one following, they ran quickly and hid themselves in a clot of bushes far from the road. Well behind them, in a carriage on the road, a handful of unfortunate citizens of some foreign district were sleeping very deeply. Stripped to the waist, and piled on top of each other like firewood, these ladies and men were still warm, steam rising in the autumn night from opened throats and exposed organs. The two cart horses, impatient, flicked flies with their tails, and waited for someone to give them direction.

"Well, damn good night this," said Roderick, who was always the first to speak.

"It's always a good night, these days," remarked Nat as he dumped the contents of his pockets into Roderick's lap.

"Ere ya go Rod'rick. Da spoils ah war, dis is," croaked Dalton, emptying his pockets similarly.

"And you, little bunghole," Roderick asked Marlin, "What 'ave you got for Rod'rick in your trousers there?" pointing at Marlin's pants.

"It's jus' a trinket, not worthy of your attention, Rod'rick. I gived all the best stuff to Nat," he explained.

"I think I'll be the judge of what is below my attention, Marly, little bunghole. So let's 'ave it!"

From his pocket Marlin pulled a silver chain, slowly enough to prompt Dalton to encourage him with a number of kicks.

"Rod'rick wants dat stuff quicker, bungy," he ordered, and finally yanked the chain from Marlin's hands, which bit eagerly into the flesh on his fingers.

"What is it? Bring it to me," commanded Roderick to Dalton, who unhesitatingly complied.

"It's a brooch," said Caramen.

"What's them?" Roderick asked her.

"It's got a picture in it, see," she said, and opened it for Roderick.

"Whatcha want this for, little bunghole? 'Tseems a little posh for the likes of you," Roderick said.

"I don't want the thing anymore, now that it's been in your hands," said Marlin, mumbling the last bit.

"What's that, bungy? Better watch what you say or you might lose some of the priv'ledges that you get from hanging around with us," and with this Roderick placed the brooch with the rest of the acquisitions, closing the conversation.

Nat, Dalton and Marlin moved from where they had been sitting to the edge of the bushline, and seated themselves. An attempt at idle conversation didn't last long, which they gave up to listen to the sound of Roderick and Caramen.

When it was his turn, Marlin wasn't given the luxury of privacy that the others received. Heedless of the eyes upon him, he expended himself mechanically, and helped Caramen to stand. Then they all walked home.

It was another autumn night, full of moon and stars and carriages carrying dinner guests from here to thee and to home. Occasionally, one would be lost to the perils of the night.

"Rod'rick, why are we stickin' around?" asked Marlin, "The roads aren't the safest place to be hidnin', y'know?"

"I know that, little bunghole, but I'm not satisfied, yet. Perhaps another coach will come our way, and I can have some more of this."

Marlin sat in the velvet-lined body of the carriage with the others, waiting for other denizens of the road. The three former inhabitants of this particular vehicle lay quietly on the floor of the coach. Roderick was sitting atop them, handling a pair of breasts which he was particularly fond of.

"Look at this, then. This bird has got one of them brooches as well. I wonder if all women has 'em?" he asked, and overturned the others in his search.

"They 'aven't," he said. "But what if they 'ad, and one of you took it?" He turned his face to Marlin.

"I ain't," Marlin stated.

"You would, though, wouldn't ya?" Roderick asked, nodding to Dalton to knock Marlin about a bit.

"Leave me alone, you big stupid ass! I ain't got nothin' that Rod'rick don't already 'ave!"

"Hey, shut up, I hear somethin' outside," demanded Nat.

Roderick was the first out of the coach, and was safely in the bushes that lined the road. Everyone else followed, and drew their skin-openers from their sheaths. With the first light of the lanterns from the new carriage, there escaped a general exhalation of exclamation, upon seeing the coach in question accompanied by several mounted soldiers.

"What do we do now?" whispered Marlin to Nat.

"Run if we have to. Fight if we must. Hide if we can."

"Shut up, you bungholes, or I'll stick you myself," muttered Roderick.

"They're slowing down," whispered Marlin.

Shut up, I can see that," grumbled Roderick.

The carriage stopped several paces behind the other, and the riders dismounted, drawing weapons.

"Let's go," whispered Roderick, and quickly they withdrew into the field, and started to run.

The voices behind them exploded into yelling and commands. The bushes behind opened and released three armed men, who accelerated upon discovering first

The field rose and fell in a series of small hills, ending at a stream beside a forest. Here, Roderick stopped, and stood to face Marlin, Nat and Caramen, who were directly behind him.

"I'd rather fight," he panted, "than keep up with all this runnin'. Besides, Dalton is still well behind us, and with him we are five to their three...We fight."

There was no discussion. They sipped at the stream to refresh themselves, and waited for Dalton and his three assailants. There was little time to waste, for he arrived within a few minutes, three armed men mere lengths behind him.

"Stupid ass never did like to run," said Roderick upon seeing Dalton. Roderick, Nat, Marlin and Caramen ran out to meet him. There was much shouting and opening of flesh on both sides of the fray, but it ended quickly, with four men face down in the grass, Dalton being one of them.

"Damn good night this," said Roderick, after relieving the three and Dalton of anything valuable. "Damn good night."

They settled in the spongy grass in the darkness of the forest on the other side of the stream. Roderick was into Caramen almost immediately, while Nat and Marlin sat at the edge of the trees, looking at the waning moon as it set over the hill. When it was Nat's turn, Marlin sat in solitude, staring at the hill on the other side of the stream. Dalton and the other three were still visible in the dimness of night.

"I'm sorry, little bunghole," said Roderick, "but we've no time for your turn tonight. It's a long walk 'ome, and we've gone well out of our way."

"But Rod'rick," complained Marlin, "I 'ardly gets a good turn when I do 'ave one."

"Bungy," chided Roderick, "there's no good being selfish now, when we've got to be getting 'ome. Would you 'ave us wait all night for your wee little dinky?"

Marlin chose not to argue.

"There's no use losin' our ambition just 'cause we're one less now," explained Roderick the following day. "There are enough Daltons for this world and the next. Just as there are enough of you and me. We needn't stop the slash and grab on account of what's 'appened. Need we?"

Marlin looked desperately at Nat, who was looking at the grass below his feet.

"No," Nat agreed. "Needn't fall apart. These are good days."

That evening, after acquiring a brickhead named Lukus, Roderick led the other s down a road, where they were bound to discover some fellow night travelers, and they did. This introduction was quickly followed by plenty of in and out with the knives, and the usual gathering of the wealth. Roderick was very pleased.

"Damn good night this," he said in the cover of a bush clot. "There was never such a good night."

Lukus and Nat emptied their pockets into Roderick's lap, and Marlin did similarly.

"Ain't hidin' nothin' Bungy?"

"I don't got none of them brooches, if that's what you mean," replied Marlin.

"I didn't mean nothing. I was just askin'," said Roderick, who then went into Caramen with relish.

"What's he mean by askin' me stuff like that, Nat?" asked Marlin. "I ain't no thief...and I better get my turn this evenin'."

"Whatchyou mean by dat?" asked Lukus.

"Doesn't matter for you, 'cause you're last," said Marlin. "I've finally got someone behind me in line, and that's you. Right, Nat? I get what's comin' to me now, don't I?"

"Lukus, come over here," beckoned Roderick from where he lay.

Lukus walked away from Marlin and dropped into the grass.

"Be carefull with her, you big ass," warned Roderick, "she's my sister." He then patted Lukus on the shoulder.

There was time for neither Nat nor Marlin's turns that evening.

"You ever wonder who these people are, Nat?" asked Marlin.

"What for?"

"I mean," said Marlin, "is it right?"

"What're you guys talkin' about?" asked Roderick, emerging from the darkness of the trees the next evening. "It's not me, is it?"

"No."

"No."

"It's your turn, Nat," said Roderick, and Nat bounded off into the trees.

"What're you thinkin' about, little bunghole?" Roderick asked, knocking his fingers on Marlin's forehead. "What's going on in here?"

"I'm not thinkin' anything, Rod'rick, 'cept how these are damn good days."

"Yes, isn't they?" They sat in silence until Nat tapped on Marlin's shoulder, and Marlin left into the trees.

"What's your brother been up to lately, Nat?" asked Roderick. "He's been a little odd of late."

"I wouldn't know," said Nat.

Marlin, Nat, Lukus, Caramen, and Roderick sat patiently in the trees the next evenings, waiting for the next carriage. When it arrived, there was much shouting and pleading, and a great many veins were opened, since the coach had carried five women of the upper class. They sat, stripped to the waist, in a heap in the carriage. The bodies of the three men who had ridden atop were cast on the crest of this pile. Again, Marlin was asked about brooches.

"Why're you pickin' on my brother, Rod'rick?" asked Nat. "He gives you all the grabs, don't he? Are you questionin' that?"

"Nat... I've had 'im steal from me before," Roderick responded. "I'm just bein' precautious."

"I wouldn't give it no thought again, Rod'rick," Nat continued, "the boys all cured of them brooches."

"Good that he is."

In the darkness of the field that evening there was an unusually long wait for the end of Roderick's turn. Lukus, accustomed to getting into Caramen following the jab-squirt of the knife game at the carriage, was getting a little impatient.

"Lukus, Nat, bungy, I'm afraid there aren't any turns for the rest of ya's tonight," said Roderick as he emerged from the trees.

That night, only four of them walked home.

"I'd like to introduce my little sister, Chelsea," said Roderick several days later, "who will be joining us this evening."

"She looks even younger than Car'men was, Nat," said Marlin quietly.

"Yes, she does."

At the carriage-game later that day, Marlin took a brooch from the breast of one of the bodies, and hid it in his shoe. They were successful that evening at encouraging yet another coach to stop, and swarming over it, rendering the occupants naked and helpless.

"Damn good night this," said Roderick.

"Yes, it's a day of triumph," said Marlin. "I guess you was right about Dalton."

"How so, bungy?"

"He has been replaced without any great loss to us," explained Marlin. "And Car'men too, for that matter."

"And your turn will follow, eventually, little bunghole," said Roderick. "As surely as there are carriages on the road, and knives to stick people with. As sure as this."

"And your time, too, Rod'rick."

"Yes, and mine as well. But, if you will excuse me, I've got a thing or two to teach my little sister before I let you lot on her." And with that, Roderick led her into the depths of the forest.

"Good haul, this," stated Lukus.

"Yes," said Nat.

"Scuse me," said Marlin, getting up, and walking into the darkness of the trees.

"Where you going?" asked Lukus, getting up, for it was his turn.

"Sit down, Lukus, it's none of your affair," said Nat.

"Why not? It's my damn turn, and I'm not gonna let your brother 'ave it!"

Nat held him back, but after much strain, Lukus charged into the darkness. Nat followed walking.

Nat had little to say to Lukus upon reaching the clearing where he sat. Lukus was picking through the pockets that lined Roderick's body, which was laying heavily on top of Chelsea, who was sleeping deeply. Marlin was gone. Nat recognized the knife buried to the hilt in Roderick's back. In a few minutes, the red bubbles that were escaping Chelsea's neck stopped, but Lukus and Nat had left.