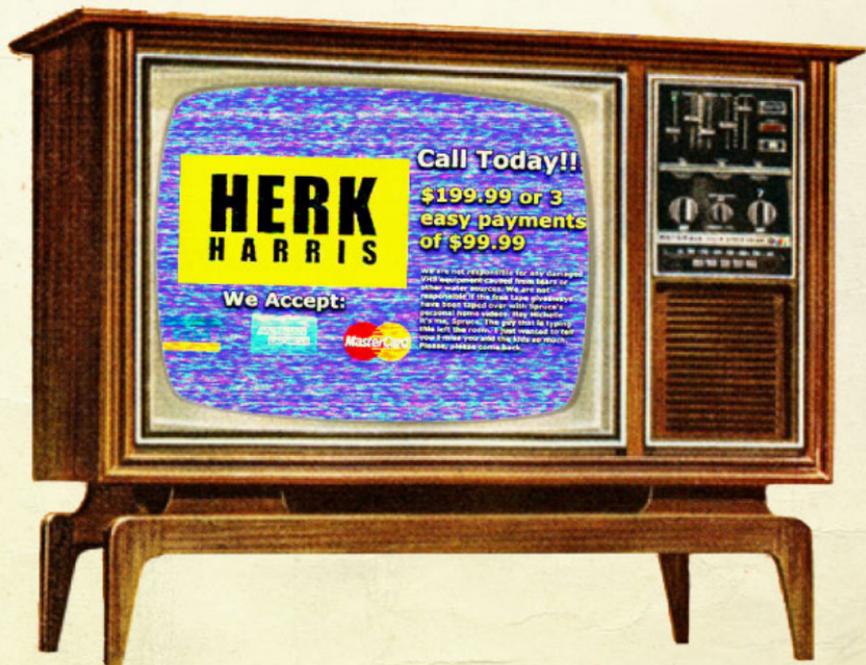




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THIS MONTH'S STORY: "HERK HARRIS"

By Eddie Mulnix.....

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“HERK HARRIS”

“I TOLD YOU there were no refunds,” said Herk. “And I told you why. I don’t know how I can make myself any more clear than I already have.”

The man across from Herk was the last kind of person you’d think of as intimidating, but he still made Herk feel uneasy. Herk always kept the blinds closed to slits in his office—he found the dim light relaxing, and it usually seemed to put his clients at ease as well—but in this case the semi-dark seemed to amplify something he had not noticed in the man he had assumed to be an acquiescent little milquetoast. Maybe it was the fact that, in the 10 years Herk had been conducting his self-help seminars, only one other time had someone demanded a refund. Or maybe it was simply the look on the man’s face, the sweat on his brow, the dark hatred in his black eyes that was

making Herk a little uneasy.

“I demand a refund,” the man repeated. It was the only thing he’d said since sitting down in the chair across from Herk and he’d said it six times. Now he added: “You don’t want to make this harder than it needs to be.”

Herk sat back in his chair and allowed himself to show his surprise. He almost laughed at the man’s bravado. The man was short and thin and wore an ill-fitting suit that looked like it was pulled off the rack at the local Goodwill. His hair was a mess of black curly whorls and you could tell he’d spent his whole life with little understanding of how to keep it under control; something resembling a part zig-zagged along the side of his skull like a ragged scar. Herk, on the other hand, was over six feet tall and corded with gym muscle. His arms bulged from a tight black polo. He looked pumped up even in repose. He was a black belt in a martial art known as Koong Dou. When he looked down at himself and looked at the man he wanted to laugh. What did he have to fear? Nothing. It was the man’s audacity that didn’t quite compute. Herk had become accustomed to the panoply of submissive losers at his seminars, the weak and easily manipulated. People who paid good money for someone else to tell them how to live. Sometimes they liked to talk and tried to throw their weight around but you could always see the fear in their eyes and the hunger for the easy fix.

So now he had a guy who’d caught on that it was

all bullshit, which was just fine, but a *refund*? Herk had a feeling that if he gave one guy a refund he'd be swamped with other hard-ons looking for the same. He couldn't—*wouldn't*—let that happen.

Herk leaned back in his chair and swiveled slightly left and contemplated. The man didn't say a word. He just sat there. Herk finally said,

“When you say I don't want to make this harder on myself than it needs to be, you show a certain resolve, a certain amount of guts. Maybe my program isn't advanced enough for you, did you consider that?”

The man's eyes narrowed the tiniest bit. Herk couldn't get a line on the man's intelligence and thought for a moment he'd laid it on a little thicker than he should have. But then the man relaxed—Herk could see it happen, could see him fall back a bit in his seat—and he said,

“I applied your techniques to my...problem. And after more than a month I realized that I was simply wasting my time.”

Herk swiveled back around, slowly, put his elbows on the desk, and touched the fingertips of both hands together. He wanted to grin but caught himself. “Problem? *What...problem?*”

“I'd rather not talk about it, and it's not germane to the conversation anyway. What I would like is a refund. I don't want to be talked out of my refund, or cajoled, or told you have another way of doing things. I simply

want the four hundred dollars back that I spent on your seminar, and I will leave.”

Herk decided to give the guy a glimpse of reality. Just a tiny one. He leaned forward and said quietly,

“Money problems? Work problems? Or...” he leaned back again. This time he let himself grin, showing his big white teeth. “Or relationship problems.”

He was surprised when the man smiled back.

“Relationship problems,” he said. “That’s rich.”

The man picked up the little cloth satchel he’d brought in with him and set it on the desk. Herk watched his small, fastidious-looking hands undo the clasps. He withdrew a manila envelope from the satchel and set it in front of Herk and Herk looked at the envelope with both his hands still on the table. Then he opened the envelope and pulled out the pictures inside. Herk only looked at the first picture and even then for just long enough to know. He put the pictures back in the envelope and in the top drawer of the desk and leaned back in his chair.

“Tell me what it is you want,” he said.

“I told you I wanted a refund,” he said.

“That—” Herk tapped the desk. “You brought that in here because you want a refund?”

“I wasn’t sure I was even going to use those unless absolutely necessary.”

“It’s not just a refund you want. You want something

more. You want to get *paid*, is that right?”

“No, that’s not right. Money’s not important to me. I learned that from your book, Mr. Harris. Herkism number twelve: Money Is The Most Important Thing, Until It’s Not. And when I came in here I made sure to employ Herkism number eighteen—”

“—Leverage is Everything.”

“Right.”

“Well.” Herk put his hands up. “You’ve got all the leverage.”

With that the man relaxed a bit. Herk kept his eyes and his facial expression neutral. Herk was already working out solutions to this problem.

“You want to tell me how you got those pictures?” said Herk.

“It’s a hobby of mine,” said the man. “I call it creeping.”

“Creeping.”

“Yeah. The internet is an amazing thing. You can uncover details about people, find the names of their associates, people they’ve lived with or known, places they lived. You can cross-reference those things and those people and find out more and more about the... subject...”

“Meaning me.”

The man didn’t quite smile, but almost. “You, or whomever else. I’ve had a lot of practice. I mean, the reason I started going to your seminars is because I’ve

never been able to get ahead in life. Never been able to get a good job. I've been working as a security guard in a bank since I left high school. I don't have friends or hobbies. Well, except for one...I doxx."

"Dock?"

"Doxx. Find out people's personal information. In a way, I almost fancy myself a private investigator."

"This is all well and good, Mr.—"

"Fletchengen. Gary Fletchengen."

"Mr. Fletchengen. I'll write you a check, but I'll need some assurances. You understand that?"

Fletchengen gave him this condescending look—like he was just so goddamned slick. Herk ignored this and pushed on.

"I'm going to give you a cash refund, and you're going to give me those pictures. Then, a few months from now, you're gonna need a few bucks...and since you've still got digital copies of these pictures on a computer somewhere, you're gonna try to squeeze me again."

"I'm afraid I'm not following your reasoning," said Fletchengen. "Or seeing the point, really."

"The point is that you've got me by the short and curlies. You've got these pictures of me that will end my career. I've no way of being assured that you'll never go public with them. Do I?"

"Not just end your career," said Fletchengen, and his tight indignant mouth and glittering black eyes

made Harris realize for the first time that the man was mentally off in some way. “Not just end your career, but put to rest this sickening false image you’re using to sell bogus, made-up ideas.”

“Most ideas are made up, Mr. Fletchengen.”

“YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN!”

Fletchengen clutched the manila envelope to his chest.

“I’d love for you to attack me right now,” said Herk. “So I could choke you out and dot your face a few times. But that’s what you *want*, isn’t it?”

“Pardon me?”

“You’re one of these freaks who wants a guy to beat them up. If I got you in an arm bar you’d probably cream your friggin’ jeans.”

The indignant little mouth pursed and opened and closed and he started stammering:

“Are we projecting, Mr. Harris? Because of, heh, what’s in these pictures?”

“Enough, Fletchengen. Here’s your money, scum.”

Herk opened the top drawer of his desk and pulled out the little black money pouch. Inside the pouch was neat stack of carefully organized bills. Herk peeled 100s out one by one and threw them on the desk in front of Fletchengen.

“There’s your refund. Give me the pictures.”

Fletchengen picked up the bills as if this transaction were beneath his delicate sensibilities. He straightened them and rolled them up into a tight little tube and put the tube in the breast pocket of his shirt. Then he pushed the pictures towards Herk and got up to leave.

“Hey, Fletchengen?”

Fletchengen turned around.

“Yes?”

“You got your money. I’ve got your name. If this isn’t over I’ll end it however I need to.”

Fletchengen’s lips trembled again, and he seemed about to say something; but then he thought better of it, and walked out the door.

“Or maybe I’ll just end it now,” said Herk.

HERK OPENED THE envelope and took out the pictures and looked at them. He felt no shame: he’d done it for money, a young man trying to make his way in the world, and it had been well before the modern age of the internet, where every transgression ever committed exists somewhere out in the digital void. Young people today are careful about what they do, what they say. They know the unspoken rules, the digital wages of sin. Herk was from the last generation that didn’t have the internet. He’d been blindsided

by technology. If he'd understood the world that was coming he'd have been a lot more careful.

He thought about Fletchengen and what he would do to protect himself. He knew Fletchengen was the type of person who'd go to the cops if Herk so much as farted in his general direction.

Herk picked up the picture sitting on top of the pile and held it up and winced. He had no idea where the pictures had come from nor any memory of who might have taken them. There he was, with leopard skin spandex leggings and a belly shirt that said DIAMONDS ARE A GIRL'S BEST FRIEND. His arms were out and one knee was up and his mouth was open and his ponytail (he'd still had his hair back then) was frozen in mid-air. Brisk and flamboyant was the act back then.

Back when he was a Jazzercise instructor.

Shit.

The story was this: in 1992 he was just out of the military and had come into some money from the death of his mother. It wasn't a lot of money, but it was enough for him to put a stake in a business, and in the summer of that year he partnered up with an old high school buddy named Mel Bergerson. Mel had secured a cheap lease on a storefront in West Hollywood and wanted to open a business. Herk's dream had always been to start a hardcore bodybuilder's gym. Mel observed that West Hollywood was lousy with gyms

already. Herk asked him if he had a better idea. Mel didn't.

They opened The H&M Gymnasium in February of 1993.

It was a complete failure.

They were a month away from closing when Mel had the idea to pivot the franchise towards aerobics, in particular the Jazzercise craze that was sweeping the nation. Herk was reluctant to go along with the idea, but when they added a single Wednesday class business picked up immediately.

Herk was the instructor. The locals loved him.

The clientele was 90 percent gay men. Herk was 100 percent hetero. He was also a narcissist, and attention was attention, so he didn't mind putting on a flamboyant act if he thought it would save his business.

Herk assembled various outrageous outfits from his wife's clothes and studied Richard Simmons videos to fine-tune his persona. At night over dinner his wife would tease him about the secret exit he used to get out of the gym to escape his male admirers. It was all jolly good fun and they were making money and neither Herk nor his wife took any of it very seriously.

Then word got out that Herk was straight. One of his students was enjoying dinner at a Mid-City steakhouse one night when he spotted Herk and Mrs. Harris swapping spit over a cooling plate of prime rib.

The men who came to his gym felt betrayed, Herk's

flamboyant persona now seen as an insulting and cruel caricature. His life was threatened. A group of men tried to sexually assault him as he walked out to his car. The business went bankrupt. Everything went to hell.

Despite the steakhouse canoodling that had caused all of this, Herk's marriage was on shaky ground. Three months after the gym closed, he was divorced. This was quite destructive to Herk's self-image—he had no idea how any woman could ever leave him. Women were liars, he concluded. Women couldn't be trusted. Only iron could be trusted. Iron tried to break your will, but it didn't lie to you. He hit the weights harder than ever and began to dabble in steroids. While he worked out he thought about what he was going to do with his life. The iron had a way of bringing it all into focus, usually, and one particularly brutal leg night he prayed to Jesus that a business idea would come to him.

He wasn't sure if he believed in Jesus, but the idea did come just a week later. It all started because of a burrito—a Del Taco Classic Chicken burrito, to be exact.

Usually Herk followed a strict diet of chicken breast, steamed broccoli, and boiled rainwater from a collection barrel on his apartment balcony. One day on the road, however, he was overcome by a powerful craving. He pulled off the freeway and into a Del Taco drive-thru and ordered a burrito and devoured it and

then five minutes after he got back on the freeway he heard a yawning groan from somewhere in his bowels. “Oh sweet CHRIST” he screamed, and pulled the car off the freeway onto the streets of Alhambra. To his right was a shopping center and a Toys ‘R’ Us. He floored it and pulled up to the Toys ‘R’ Us and ran in and a fat employee with heavy-lidded eyes told him the bathroom was somewhere at the rear of the store “next to the Ninja Turtles stuff”.

Herk ran at full speed, conscious of the stares by the dumpy Moms and their wide-eyed kin. He tried to flex his buttocks as he ran, to keep the levee of his sphincter from being breached. He found the restroom right away through some providential act of mercy, then saw that the door would have to be unlocked with a quarter. He didn’t have a quarter. He spun around to see a woman and a little boy walking along. The little boy looked like Yoda and the woman looked like a cross between Groucho Marx and a fire hydrant. Herk had only a moment to take in these details before he ran forward and put on a smile that was intended to put the woman at ease. What she saw was a sweating madman who was moments away from strangling her and her darling child.

“Lady. C’n I have a QUARTER?”

The woman didn’t seem to understand. Herk gesticulated wildly toward the bathroom. The little Yoda-child regarded Herk with mouth open. Finally

the woman understood and, relieved she was not going to be killed by this hulking, tanned, sweating, flat-topped beast, pulled a quarter from her overstuffed Bebe purse. Herk grunted and ran over and shot the quarter down the slot and plopped down on the seat just as the gusher let go. His right asscheek was still half-perched on the lid, however, so the dump came out at an odd trajectory and splattered across the toilet and part of Herk's inner asscheek. He groaned like a wounded animal and then sat there in the cloud of stink and sweat, waiting for his body to give the "all clear" signal.

When he was done he gave a few desultory wipes and walked out of the bathroom without washing his hands. A line of people were in line for the bathroom. They glared at Herk. He glared back. As he walked away he heard a man scream from inside the restroom: "*¡Huele a huevos podridos y mierda de perro aquí!*"

Herk's favorite thing to do after taking a good shit was walk around feeling his asshole clench and unclench as it returned slowly to normal size. He strolled around the store looking at all the toys and sundry, marvelling at the Technicolor explosion of worthless plastic being sold at absurd and offensive prices.

As he walked around he realized something was gnawing at him. At first he thought his bowels were readying themselves for round 2 but then realized that his instinctive need for order had been offended. The shelves of toys were a shambles: Barbie dolls

were stranded in the land of GI Joe, soon to be the victim of wartime atrocities; Elmo was perched head-first in a plastic pail with a sand shovel jammed into his posterior; The Octonauts and Little Einsteins had apparently formed a cartoon character supergroup and were having a conference atop a half-assembled Lego Guantanamo Bay. It was clear that the stinking little crumb-crunchers liked to pick up toys, play with them a bit, and discard them somewhere in the store far from their original location.

Herk's innate values were so deeply offended that he brought it up to the heavy lidded kid who'd greeted him when he walked in. The kid was ringing up a Slip-N-Slide and looked up with blunted surprise when Herk said angrily:

“Hey MAN. This place is a frickin' mess! You guys know how much business you probably lose 'cause no one can find what they're looking for?”

“Uh...yeah...I know...but they understaff us. Look at how many people we have working here now. Just me and Chuey in the whole store.”

Herk had been so focused on his bowel problem when he stormed through the front door that he hadn't noticed the long line of customers waiting to check out. They had to wait for one cashier because the other guy (Chuey) was busy trying to help people find items that weren't where they were SUPPOSED to be.

Herk's eyes bugged out of his head with indignation.

He stormed out of the store and got in his car and it hit him, right then and there. Jesus had given him a sign!

He drove home and contacted the Toys R Us customer hotline. After a long conversation with someone in Bangalore he was able to obtain the store manager's office number. The next morning he called at 9 AM sharp.

Herk tried the hard sell first and the manager almost hung up so Herk gritted his teeth and tried a softer approach. The sudden switch from intense anger to ersatz empathy put the manager off-balance enough to keep him on the phone while Herk laid it on him: the place was a mess, customers couldn't find what they were looking for, and the store was surely losing money. The manager got defensive again, even indignant, pointing out that corporate had left him with no budget for extra staff and no ability to pay overtime. So Herk laid down his pitch: he would have the store completely organized once a week for the paltry sum of \$100.

Silence on the end of the line. Herk knew the manager was considering it. After all, the store in its current state looked like it had been hit by a hurricane.

"I don't know. That's a pretty good price, but... corporate don't like to contract work out for any reason at all."

Herk decided to go for it.

"Maybe you can't make the decisions yourself," He

said. “Maybe I gotta go to a district manager, somebody with real pull in the organization, huh? And then they can take credit for the idea when your sales numbers go through the FUCKIN’ ROOF.”

“Okay, okay,” the manager said. “Look, we can do it for two weeks, okay? If I see a spike in sales then maybe I’ll take it to corporate.”

Herk pumped his fist. The manager had collapsed like a Mexico City tenement. NO ONE FUCKS WITH HERK HARRIS!

In reality, the manager had just spotted a four-year old boy urinating on a Sesame Street display, and would have agreed to almost anything to get off the phone.

“I got to go,” he said.

“I’ll be there with my crew at closing,” said Herk.

SO THAT WAS how he’d started. He hired a crew of laborers from the parking lot of the Home Depot and hustled them over to the Toys ‘R’ Us. He gave each one of them a shopping cart and had them pick up anything that looked like it was out of place. He had a megaphone he’d use to bark orders, and it didn’t matter that most of the laborers couldn’t understand what he was saying—they got the concept. In fifteen minutes every stray toy was rounded up; then they started to put them back. Herk directed them with pointed finger

and squawking screams from the megaphone. By the end of the first hour the laborers all had the hang of it, and the job was nearly done.

Herk had paid out sixty dollars in overhead. That meant a 40 dollar profit. And this was just the beginning.

The store manager at the Toys 'R' Us noticed an uptick in sales almost immediately. No surprise there—people could actually find what they were looking for.

The manager reported this to corporate. Corporate fired him for thinking outside the box, then offered Herk a multi-store contract.

Herk negotiated a higher fee and signed the contract.

For the next five years he built the business. He had crews of sub-minimum wage laborers organizing shelves all over the city.

There were problems with activist groups and with a few businesses who worried about the legality of Herk's low-paid labor. He finessed these problems as much as he could and when the hassle became too much he sold his company to an Iranian car wash mogul for two-and-a-half million dollars.

He put the money back into real estate just as the market was exploding in the decade following the Great Recession. He sold condos to upwardly-mobile Chinese in the San Gabriel Valley.

By any metric he was rich and successful: cars, hookers, dinners in nice restaurants.

He wasn't satisfied, though.

That was why he wrote the first book. Well, that wasn't exactly accurate—he paid some college kid \$100 to ghost-write it for him, the material taken from a bunch of notes he'd scribbled on a legal pad. The book was called *Herkisms: Change Your Life Today, Now, Forever*. That version had been about hard work as the only solution to life's ills. "There is no problem so big it can't be solved by busting your ass," he wrote.

He published the book himself and it was ignored. Undaunted, he decided he needed an angle to hook the reader. After careful thought he realized that the masses were lazy and were looking for the quick fix and that if you wanted to sell a million copies of a book you'd better pander to their needs. With this firmly in mind he hired the college geek for another \$100 and wrote the book that became *Herk Harris' Three-Minute Solution*.

He got an agent. The book was picked up by Harper Collins.

It made the New York Times bestseller list.

From there it was on to speaking gigs, seminars. That's where the *real* money was.

He had an infomercial, too—The Herk Harris Show. He sold Herk-branded protein powders, MCT oil, and kettle bells. He had his seminars recorded and put on DVD and he sold them in a box set for \$300.

People would pay almost any amount of money if

you could make them believe in themselves, even if it was a temporary condition—and it always was.

They were losers. Like Fletchengen.

THE NEXT MORNING Herk drove the Pathfinder down to the Home Depot on San Fernando Road. After all those years of hiring laborers for his work crews he was sure he could find a Home Depot from any point in the Greater Los Angeles area—blindfolded. The men sat around waiting for work near the dumpsters on the side of the building. A sign above the dumpsters read:

CITY OF GLENDALE
MANUAL LABOR HABILITATION CENTER.

Herk screeched to a stop and got out of the car. The laborers eyed the 6-foot-4 flat-topped Herk with wariness, sure that he was at the an off-duty cop or maybe even ICE. “Three men, big job, mucho dinero,” Herk said. They all ran toward him at once. He pointed to the ones he wanted and gestured for them to jump in the back of his pickup. They hesitated.

“What’s the problem?”

A wizened old man with one glass eye and tough, sinewy limbs, probably the oldest of the group, shook his head and pulled himself up into the bed. After that

the others followed. “*Ondale*, bros,” said Herk.

They drove along San Fernando road and got on the Ventura Freeway. The men huddled together in the back against the onrushing of the wind. A few good citizens were disturbed by this and reported it to the California Highway Patrol, but by the time a car was dispatched Herk had pulled off the highway and was almost to his place.

THE MEN STOOD at attention in Herk’s living room. They looked nervous. Herk paced back and forth, grinding his fist into his palm.

“I know you guys have done roofing, dug ditches, all that stuff. Well today you’re going to make more money in a day of work than you’d ordinarily make in six months.”

One of the men, a kid with thick black Erik Estrada 1970s hair and a face full of nickel-sized freckles, said “We don’t—we all are married, we like girls.”

Herk looked stupefied for a moment, then his face pinched up in disgust.

“Jesus Christ. You got your hand down the wrong pants, Pablo.”

Freckles looked like he didn’t understand.

“*No soy homo*, okay? At ease, men.” The men visibly relaxed. Herk left and got a pitcher of Sangria from

the fridge and when he came back the men were still standing there awkwardly.”

“Jesus. AT EASE, I said. Mellow out, guys. Let me tell you what we’re gonna do.”

He motioned for them to sit on the big white leather couch. They sat. The old man, whose name happened to be Emilio, looked around the apartment with an expression that seemed part consternation, part wonder. Herk grinned, assuming the man was impressed by his “modernist” digs. In truth the man was thinking to himself that the chrome and gold and glass and the gargantuan paintings of black-gloved women smoking cigarettes that adorned the walls reminded him of an apartment he’d seen in the late 1980s—the Mexico City apartment of a well-known cocaine dealer who disappeared one day and was found in bits and pieces all over the city a week later. This made the man nervous. He assumed Herk was also a drug dealer and that he and the other laborers were going to be asked to do something illegal. His fear did not abate when Herk pulled out a picture of a non-descript man in a security guard’s outfit.

“You see this guy?”

Emilio looked closer at the picture and nodded vaguely.

“He’s a good friend of mine. Maybe my best friend.” Herk smiled, showing again the big white teeth. “I’m gonna do him a solid. Here’s what we’re gonna do, so

let me lay it out for you.”

Herk pulled out the manilla envelope that had previously held the pictures of him in full aerobics gear. Those pictures had been burned one by one in the hibachi on the porch outside. Now the envelope contained the seeds of Fletchengen’s destruction.

Herk pulled out a photo of Fletchengen’s unassuming one-story house in Panorama City. The private investigator Herk kept on retainer had found it in about two minutes and had pictures of it in an hour. The PI also got the story on Fletchengen: he did indeed work as a security guard at a bank in the Valley, daytime hours, Wednesday to Sunday. He lived alone. Herk smirked when he heard that. Yeah, no *shit* he lives alone. It occurred to him for a moment that he lived alone, too—but that was by choice, not because he was a lonely loser like Fletchengen.

“Essir,” said Emilio. He spoke deliberately so he could be sure Herk would understand. “I do not want to do anything that would go against my morals as a man and as a husband. I say this with respect.”

Herk’s mouth fell open. He shook his head. “Nobody is asking you to do anything you wouldn’t do for any other jerk who picked you up at the fuckin’ hardware store. Here, let me show you something.”

He dumped the rest of the contents of the envelope on the table: notes and diagrams on paper torn from one of Herk’s legal pad; a number of sample paint

chips; and \$1000 in hundred dollar bills.

“A day’s worth of work. A grand at the beginning of the job and a grand when it’s done. You do nothing illegal. You in, or what?”

GARY FLETCHENGEN TOOK a sip of cold coffee out of the styrofoam cup and looked at the clock. Ten more minutes until he could lock the doors. He hoped someone was trying to get into the bank as he was locking the doors so he could tell them to fuck off. That was his favorite part of the day.

Just like clockwork the girls behind the glass were jabbering away like they always did when the work day was coming to an end. Then the branch assistant manager Carlos walked over and made some comment and the girls giggled even louder. Guys like him thought physique training built wit and charm as much as it built pecs. Gary was pretty sure Carlos’ rep count on the bench press was higher than his IQ.

That made Gary think of Herk Harris. He still seethed with indignation thinking about that con artist, about the money he’d blown on that stupid seminar, and he felt righteous, too—righteous about asking for his money back, just the money he’d been swindled out of and no more. He might be just a lowly security guard, someone guys like Carlos and Herk thought of as subhuman; but he had integrity, damn it, and that was

something those iron-pushing nimrods would never understand, not in a million years.

“It’s the principle of the thing,” he muttered to himself.

He took another sip of his coffee and chucked it into the trash still half-full of coffee.

Three minutes left before quitting time.

He looked out the door and was jingling the keys in the pocket of his worn gray khakis when he saw an old beat-up Saturn driven by an elderly woman pull into the parking lot. He felt a nascent excitement in his guts. This was what he lived for. He watched as the driver side door opened and the woman extricated herself from the vehicle with the infinite and excruciating slowness of the rheumatoid arthritis sufferer. He grinned as she propped herself up on the door and reach down slowly to get her cane off the passenger side seat and then shuffled gingerly across the parking lot. He looked at the clock: it was already closing time, and he could easily lock the door before she was halfway to the bank, but he decided to wait.

Just as she stepped up onto the sidewalk in front of the bank he pulled out his keys and locked the door.

She tried the handle and gave it a pull. He waited for her age-addled brain to register the fact of the door being locked, then jingled his keys to get her attention. She looked puzzled, like a decrepit ancient sheep dog. Old white people were the one remaining group he

saw as morally acceptable to hate. *Everyone* hated old white bitches like this.

She stood there with her mouth hanging open. In one hand she was clutching a check—an SSI check, no doubt. She finally saw Gary standing on the other side of the door and started waving her arms in the air.

“I just have a deposit, please.”

Gary smirked and put the keys in his pocket. Then, relishing the moment, he held his wrist up to the glass so she could see the face of his cheap Timex.

“Bank’s closed, ma’am,” he said.

Now there was anger and bewilderment in her eyes—and entitlement, thought Gary. This old lady has been getting her way for decades upon decades. It’s over, you old biddy. Die!

“Please! I have to deposit this! I have a check at Pavillions that is going to BOUNCE if I don’t—”

Gary shrugged and turned away.

Carlos was standing there with a perplexed look on his gorilla face.

“Did you just lock the door in this lady’s face?”

“Did I do what now.”

“I was watching you, man. As she got closer to the door you pulled out your keys and locked her out at the last second. The hell is wrong with you?”

“Well I—well I—” All of the sudden Gary felt like the

look on his face must mirror the old woman's. He felt angry, bewildered, made a fool of. Finally he said: "I'm following the rules and regulations of the bank. That's my job."

"Your job." Carlos smirked and Gary felt his face go hot with anger. Then Carlos walked over and unlocked the door. The woman was still standing there with her mouth hanging open.

"Ma'am, we'll help you right over at the first window." She walked in and Carlos locked the door again behind her. She walked past Gary without looking at him but said to Carlos as she shuffled to the counter:

"I for one cannot believe the way you are treating your customers. For twenty years I've been coming here—"

"I apologize, ma'am," said Carlos. He looked at Gary. "I'll be sure to talk to the branch manager personally about this."

The girl behind the counter gave the old woman a smile and flipped over the sign in teller window so it went from SORRY THIS WINDOW CLOSED to HOW CAN I HELP?

Carlos and Gary faced each other. Carlos shook his head and turned to walk away.

"Talk to the branch manager, huh? And what are you gonna talk to Hector about? The fact that I do the job I'm asked to do, while you sit back there grab-assing and flirting for eight hours?"

Carlos turned back around and he didn't look angry, he looked amused, which pissed Gary off even more.

"The security guard should never even come *up* at manager meetings, Gary. And you know what? Yours has. More than once."

Gary felt a cold finger of ice on his spine. The idea of people in a room talking about him brought forth all the specters in his subconscious of being left out, pissed on, ridiculed. Somewhere in him was the kid in the fourth grade who'd been the school loser, the weirdo, the kid who'd been forced to eat dog shit, literally, by a gang of boys. That tortured child was preserved inside of him like the volcano-blasted corpses at Pompeii—covered by the sediment of years and anger and of denial, yet perfectly preserved. Dead.

"You wanna know the truth, Gary, you're walking on thin ice already. Management knows about the bad attitude you have with the customers."

"What bad attitude."

Carlos leaned towards Gary and said quietly: "Someone mentioned you on Yelp. Not by name, but they gave your description. Said there was a creepy, dorky guy with curly black hair who was so rude they're never coming back to the branch. The post was 'liked' by 40 people. 40. It's not just Hector who sees that; it's brought to the attention of the divisional and regional managers as well."

"You're lying," Gary said.

“You’d like to think so. Another incident like this...” he motioned towards the old lady, who had for whatever reason taken every last item from her voluminous purse and placed it on the counter. “I don’t know, man. I think you’re gonna be out of a job.”

Carlos walked back toward the teller windows and said, loud enough so the girls behind the counter could hear him:

“Go ahead and clock out, Gary. And have a great weekend there, buddy.”

TRAFFIC WAS BAD on the 405. Nothing new there. It was Friday night and Gary wondered if he should bother going to the Copper Penny later that evening. If he did he would sit there and someone at the bar would start picking at him like they always did. He thought vaguely, as he usually did, about the Browning 9mm under the passenger seat next to him. He saw himself walking into the Copper Penny. Lloyd would be there at the end of the bar laughing too loud and when Gary walked in Lloyd would say “OH HELL BOYS HERE COMES SHIT ON LEGS.” And he saw himself laughing and walking over to Lloyd and Lloyd putting up his hand for the big handshake and then the look on Lloyd’s face when Gary jabbed the Browning’s muzzle into his stomach and blew his internal organs all over the 1980s Budweiser girl on the poster behind him.

He'd never really considered it, had he? Not in a serious way. It was just a fantasy. He didn't really want to shoot old Lloyd, or anyone else at the Copper Penny for that matter.

What about good old Carlos, though, or the girls behind the counter? That old lady?

In a *second*.

As Gary pulled off the 405 freeway onto Roscoe and headed east he found himself suddenly wondering: why did he go to that Herk Harris seminar? It wasn't to learn more about Herk's Three-Minute solution, was it? And if it was, why had he strapped the Browning to the inside of his jacket? For that matter, why did he always have that gun in the car with him? *Well, just in case. Just in case you need it.* The gun and what he was going to do with the gun was part of the running dialogue between himself and The Other. He knew he would use it and that he would use it soon but he was not sure if it would be on someone else or himself or both. Only The Other knew for sure and The Other wasn't saying diddly-squat.

He turned off Roscoe into his neighborhood and felt some small anxiety at being alone tonight in that house, just him and the TV and the gun in his lap.

He relaxed, though, thinking about the Copper Penny. It would be warm tonight and they'd have the big fan that blew the cigarette smoke across the room and made the drunken voices blur until they were

indistinct as running water. He would sit there and drink Bud Lights and eat peanuts and see if there were any new skags around— touch base with his sex drive and see if things had changed at all. When he got home he would take the Browning out of the car and put it in the shoebox in top of his closet and he'd forget about the whole thing.

He rounded the corner and was actually feeling a little better.

Then he saw his house.

HE'D NEVER REALLY thought much about the place, had never taken any pains to improve it or stand out from the rest of the neighborhood. His lawn was dead, but Southern California was in the middle of a five-year drought and most of his neighbors' yards looked as bad or worse. The house itself was a faded pale blue and it blended in with all the other variegated pastel-hued bungalows on the street—anonymous and unremarkable, which in some way was the perfect expression of who Gary Fletchngen was.

Not now.

His home had been repainted.

Yellow was the predominant color—a bright, glaring, garish yellow. The front door was a primary blue; the garage, fire-engine red with multicolored polka dots. Flagpoles had been attached to each corner of the

roof, and flags adorned with clown faces flapped in the early evening breeze.

Three men in paint-spattered clothes sat on the open tailgate of a battered Nissan pickup truck eating sandwiches. As Gary pulled slowly up to the curb one of them gave him a brief wave and smiled.

Gary got out.

The guy who'd waved got up. He was older and had that weatherbeaten look of a guy who's worked outside his whole life. He walked toward Gary with a grin on his face and gestured toward the house with his sandwich.

"You like it?"

"What do you mean, 'like it'? You painted my house to look like a fucking circus tent. Why?"

The man looked confused.

"That was the job you wanted done. Your partner, he say—"

"My partner." Gary's stomach felt as small and cold and hard as an apricot pit. "Who told you to do this?"

The man took his sandwich and put it on the tailgate of the truck.

"The big guy. The bodybuilder. He give us \$1000 to do the job, he say you gonna give us another \$1000 if we can finish in one day. We been working so hard to get it done for you."

"Herk Harris."

“Excuse me?”

“His name. Herk Harris. Is that his name?”

The man looked at the other two guys—one guy with big freckles and the other a stick-thin kid with a wispy Errol Flynn mustache—and said something in Spanish. The two of them looked at each other; the guy with the freckles said something else and shrugged.

“We din’t get his name,” the old man said. “He pay us in cash.”

“He paid you in cash.”

“Yeah. You got the rest of our money? Like I say we been working as hard as we can—”

“The rest of your money.” Gary felt himself smile. It felt crooked on his face and he knew it looked crooked too. He felt the grin widen and had the odd sensation that the grin was a hatchet wound and that his head would flip open, would split right in half.

“Oh sure, I have your money. It’s in the car. Let me go get it for you.”

As Gary walked to the car Emilio put his sandwich on the tailgate and exchanged looks with the other two men and the look said: *something’s not right with this guy*. They watched as Gary opened the passenger door and reached under the seat and at first when Gary walked back towards them they didn’t see the gun—didn’t quite see it until he lifted it up and pointed it at them.

“Here you go,” said Gary.

He fired.

The first bullet missed and blew out the rear window of the Nissan. The second bullet caught the kid with the Errol Flynn mustache in the throat.

Emilio dropped to the ground and reached under the driver’s side wheel well of the Nissan. That was where he kept the strap. In Mexico he always had a gun nearby, never on him but nearby, and it was a habit he’d brought with him to *Estados Unidos*.

He pulled the gun out from the wheel well and fell on to his back and aimed the pistol at Gary.

They fired at the same time.

Emilio’s bullet came up at an angle and entered the soft spot under Gary’s chin. It was a small caliber bullet and lodged somewhere in the parietal lobe.

Gary’s bullet entered at the bridge of Emilio’s nose. Emilio’s face imploded.

Instant death for both.

The kid with the freckles was still holding his sandwich. He heard a voice from somewhere say: *¿Has oído eso Lupe? Sonaba como disparos...*”

The kid with the freckles stood up and walked over to Emilio’s body and took the cash out of the breast pocket of Emilio’s blood-spattered shirt. Then he walked up the street to Roscoe Boulevard still carrying his sandwich.

An MTA bus came. The driver told him he couldn't get on with his sandwich, so he threw it in a garbage can and got on the bus.



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ZINES

BORAX HILL COLLECTION

This collection of four short stories tells the tale of desperate exurban youth lost in a high desert hell. Sometimes funny, sometimes moving, always perverse. This is a limited edition with letterpress-printed covers and once they're gone, you'll cry knowing you've been assted-out yet again.

SMOG CITY NUMBER THREE

What can we say about this zine that hasn't been said before? This shit is fucking awesome. Period. This issue features part three of "The Night Snacker," "The Continuing Adventures of Fozzie," "Punk Rock Paralegal," and "Moo." Fun, games, violence. Isn't life a fuckin' game, yes, but not when you've got SMOG CITY in your grubby little hands.

SMOG CITY NUMBER FOUR

We take a break from our usual glut of short stories to bring you a foray into non-fiction: *History of the Eichelbaum Studios, Part One*. Don't you hang up on me, what are you doing in my house? I'm having something to eat. So, he calls me a turd huh? Call him back. What do you want? What do you mean?

SMOG CITY NUMBER ONE

The first issue of this our zine appeared in 2009. Sure, the writing can be embarrassing, but you have to realize that when this one came out we were in a different time, a time in which we were still at least two years away from a travel. Things are different now. Limited quantities available.

SMOG CITY NUMBER TWO

You'll get your money's worth with this. The central piece, "Highway 66," is pretty much a novella. Think about the kind of value. "The Night Snacker" is also, Dick Wegmans (author of *Give the Cleft*) offers up a few pages from his "Smog City Diaries." High-brow graffiti congregate with tales from the low life. Worth a read, motherfuckers.

STRIP MALL #1

A group of WWI veterans are recruited out to do battle with a mysterious menace lurking in the Rocky Mountains, but can they survive each other's company? Also, Eddie Mulnix reminisces about his wasted youth on the hard streets of Denver, Colorado. This one is RECOMMENDED! SRSLY

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BOOKS

FOOZ PINKLEY

Adventures of a Punk Rock Paralegal

He's brash. He's passive-aggressive. He's woefully out of touch. He's Fenton "Fozz" Pinkley: aging poseur, punk rocker, and paralegal for Felcher, Smith, & Rosenblum LLP. As documented by his best friend, Jack Meecher-Barajas, Fozz is on a collision course with middle age—and is having a complete meltdown.

BIGFOOT DEATH SQUAD

And Eight Other Stories

In this and eight other astonishing tales of the so-called ordinary world, EDDIE MULNIX transports the reader to a world as strange as it is familiar—an unsettling landscape of ghostly occurrences, speed-dealing superheroes, strip-club stickups, and more.

MY LIFE IN RADIO

By Dusty Klugman

Long thought to be out of print, a stack of Mr. Klugman's autobiography was found in a box at Four Points Swap Meet in Glendale, California. Detailing his youth as a hungry young disk jockey, and culminating in his ascension to the top of the overnight conservative talk radio market, *My Life in Radio* is a Horatio Alger story of perseverance tinged, too, with tragedy. Recommended. 100 pages, paperback. Extremely rare. Limited quantities available.

CLEFT

Eddie Mulnix's classic novel is the tale of a man on the razor's edge of desire, a journey that sends our heroes into the hard of darkness. One well known website even listed this as "recommended reading" while snubbing JG Ballard and Graham Greene. We're serious.

