

A Blackheart's Tale  
by  
Todd Brendan Fahey

I hadn't known Jurgen for very long -- a little over a year, maybe -- when the change occurred. And if others swear they had seen it coming from months back, I suppose I must take them at their word. But I had not, and was patently unprepared for the metamorphosis that took place just after the Christmas season, when Jurgen called me from the Ogden city lockup and asked me to post the five hundred-dollar bond because no one in his family would.

"Jesus Christ, what happened?"

I assumed that he had gone to the City Club after an argument with Patrice, and that he had knocked back five too many and couldn't survive the Breathalyzer. But I was wrong.

"It's awful," he said. And I could tell that he was crying real, anguished tears. Suddenly and with unnerving clarity, he whispered, "I feel so awful. I thought about tying off a bed sheet...", but then his voice trailed away.

"I'll be there in forty minutes. Are you good for that long?"

He said he thought so. By the exhausted resignation in his voice I felt reasonably certain that the suicidal impulses had passed and that he was now rounding the bend into that stage of dread that accompanies savage transgressions against a loved one. I knew before I'd even hung up the phone that Jurgen had beaten his wife, though I don't know precisely how I knew: I had no reason to convict my good friend of such an offense.

As fellow English instructors at a local college, Jurgen had become one of my closest allies. I had met him at a critical juncture in his life, weighing heavily, as he was, the costs of separating from Patrice. In the ensuing weeks we talked frequently about his feelings of guilt and inadequacy, both as a lover to his wife and an apostatized member of the Mormon church. "I'm glad I went on that mission before I left the church," he would say. "I learned Dutch and got the hell out of Ogden. I'd be managing the spark plug counter at some auto parts store if I hadn't gone. I swear to God I would."

But he was just as proud of the trip he made to Europe two summers later to study world literature, and he talked about that journey even more so, and particularly of the time he'd run stone out of money, his parents having no more to lend. He'd stowed away on a Greek freighter bound for France, lived in a park and swept out shops for food and wine. And he saw those six months as the highlight and real turning point of his terribly naive and sheltered life.

I've never considered myself a particularly religious man, but I have felt the transcendent ecstasy that comes with packing five or six big bags and flying over the polar cap, toward a year of the glorious unknown. While Jurgen foraged for his supper across the Channel, I was tucked away daily in a private pub inside London's Senate Library, steeped in warm Guinness. And if my sojourn had changed me at all -- which it had, in more ways than I care to go into now -- his must have crumbled the low timbers of his convictions.

He came back to the States with the hunger of a defrocked monk, moved out of his parents' home, painting houses to settle his tuition; after work, he'd scatter most of his paycheck at one of the few drinking holes in Ogden, Utah. That is when he met Patrice.

As he told it, she was the first woman he had ever picked up from a bar. And she was still a virgin, which made him happy. "It would have been a quick date if she'd had anyone to compare me with," he had said, on more than one occasion. She carried heavy baggage, but he accepted the troubled package with a Stoic's resolve.

We had become friends during our first summer session at the college, sharing an office and talking whenever we could about the stories of Raymond Carver, whose grim vision we both knew intrinsically. As new faculty, we were both teaching an extra load to pay off our student loans. It was on one of these warm July mornings that Jurgen called to tell me that his two-year-old bullmastiff had drowned in a canal while jogging alongside Patrice the previous evening -- a ritual he believed resolutely had helped his wife retain a fragile sanity during their young marriage. It was during that phone call that I first heard him cry, and I believe the rush of emotion had more to do with his fear of their future than the death of that sweet dog.

"I'm alright," he said at the time, "but I don't know what Trice is going to do. She loved that dog like a kid."

And it was hard not to: the brute stood about a yard high at the shoulder and its food bills ran higher than most orthodontia. It rode everywhere with Jurgen, seated stately in the front seat of his catshit-yellow convertible Volkswagen Thing, like a proud granite statue. She had stopped carrying Mace when the dog was a few months old, and Jurgen said he felt so secure with the jowly passenger that he was tempted to drop the theft clause on his auto insurance.

About a half mile from their home, the dog had become thirsty and wrested the leash from Patrice's grip. Later, Patrice said she had frozen as the dog lost its footing on the silty lip of the drainage canal. Even later, Patrice said she thanked God that the dog hadn't

looked at her as it splashed into the water and was carried in a rush through a steel porthole and down into the bowels of an Ogden city aqueduct.

"She couldn't have dealt with the eyes," Jurgen had told me. "God, the poor dog must have been terrified."

I felt sick for several days after that phone call, and I wished he had never mentioned the eyes, because it hadn't occurred to me when he first told me the news. After that, whenever I thought about it, I saw a mammoth brindle dog pull away from its owner -- a petite blonde who was probably lucky not to have been pulled in herself; a young woman who had endured four fathers, all alcoholic, all wife beaters, one of whom, after being caught molesting her youngest sister, locked himself inside the garage and fell asleep to the Roy Acuff Singers against the backdrop of a running engine; a nervous, insecure young woman who, in the dark waters of that ditch, had lost the most constant, enduring and uncomplicated source of affection she had ever known. I saw all this and still I could have put the phone down, said a prayer for the beast's newly departed soul, and gone back to whatever the hell it was I was doing without a second thought...if it weren't for those goddamned eyes.

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Two black banks of snow, the dregs of winter, lined the stretch of I-15 from Salt Lake City to Ogden, and though the heater in my old Honda had stopped working, I felt almost warm in the clear night air. I locked the car and hiked up the steps of the Ogden Municipal Jail. It was only the second time I had been to a penal institution. The first was as a freshman in college, when the resident assistant of my dormitory floor decided to celebrate his twenty-first birthday with a pub crawl along Santa Barbara's State Street.

As we staggered slowly northward, the band of ten mostly underage preps dwindled as we faced the test we had imposed upon ourselves at each new bar: a mixed drink, a shot of hard liquor, and a full beer...until the Long Island iced teas at Joe's Cafe whittled us to three. I remember riding in the front seat of a BMW back to University of California-Santa Barbara, seated next to an elegant brunette whose name kept slipping through the grey fissures of my addled brain. Then, in a shift of scenery that can be understood only by veterans of the blackout, I found myself behind a dumpster near campus heaving what smelled to be the essence of my bile duct, the birthday boy and another young cad stalking along the unlit street, snapping off car antennae and howling like a union of jackals.

We were all arrested that night. Somehow, though, I succeeded in dragging the officers several hundred feet to a puddle of my own vomit, which they recognized as authentic by cross-checking the stain on my sleeve, and I was released with a warning. And although Jurgen looked considerably better than the two hangover victims I'd bailed out the next

morning, nearly a decade earlier, his bond was much steeper. There was no restitution that my friend could proffer; no extenuation offered for crimes of youth.

"Where you wanna go?" I asked him, after the bail clerk counted the hundred-dollar bills I had just laid on the counter.

"Let's get me a couple of belts," he said. "That's what I should have done before. Should have just left the house and drank right through it. Trice would have been asleep when I got back and I could have gone comatose, and neither of us would have remembered a thing."

We drove to the City Club, as it was only three or four blocks away and Jurgen knew the proprietor and knew he would let us stay past closing time. On our way in, a handsome, diminutive waiter, wearing a gold satin shirt unbuttoned to mid-chest, stopped us, placing an index finger lightly on Jurgen's arm.

"The owner's gone for the night," the young man said, glancing at Jurgen. "But he left the boxed set on the stereo. Want me to slip it in?"

I cringed, but Jurgen tapped the little queenie on his shoulder with a fist, as he would have any fraternity buddy. "You're a good man, Stephen," he said.

The waiter blushed and walked over to the stereo in back of the bar, where he dropped a CD into the platter.

Jurgen shrugged. "He's a nice guy-- " He sat down at a dark table in the corner, the first strains of David Crosby's *If I Could Only Remember My Name* soaring through the speakers. " --queer as a three-dollar bill, but what the hell? He knows I'm married."

I watched Jurgen swipe the first whiskey from the tray while the waiter lowered a Pepsi onto the table, and I think it was the first time I actually felt embarrassed about my sobriety. We were both in the budding flower of our careers as Men of Letters, and I felt a certain professional responsibility to meet this crisis as all great men in the budding flower of their careers as writers had met similar crises: with a hearty laugh and a glass of Scotch whiskey, maybe even a cigarette. I knew it was irrational, but so probably did John Berryman and Fitzgerald and Dylan Thomas. And as soon as I made that diseased connection, I found myself committed.

Jurgen stared at me. "If this is a problem for you, we'll leave. Seriously," he said, resting his glass on a coaster. "I mean...I've got so much shit on my head, it feels like Bandini Mountain."

"Don't worry about it," I said calmly, but I could feel myself shaking under my coat. "I'll just join you for one, then I'll take you wherever you're sleeping tonight."

"Are you sure?... " he said, stammering as he searched for just the right words. "You can leave it, after just one?"

I walked to the bar and ordered a Cardhu, rocks, and came back to the table. "It'll feel good," I said, "knowing that I can leave it. It's been so long, it'll feel good."

He nodded and sipped from his glass and watched me as I pulled my own glass to my nose, inhaling the vapors, washing Cardhu around the rim, bringing it to my lips, letting the first wash of malt nectar flow past the tongue, a sting so full of pain and beauty and recollection that I lost consciousness for a moment.

"What happened tonight?" I whispered, my voice far off in some boyhood tree house in Longview, Washington, victim to a bottle of Canadian Mist stolen by a neighbor kid from his father.

Jurgen finished off his Scotch and flagged down the waiter, who brought over two clean glasses and an announcement. "We're closing now. And so is the cash register. I can bring over the bottle if you want to pay me a little something for it now. I'll never tell."

"It's up to you." Jurgen shrugged. "I just know your wife's gonna freak if you come home three-to-the-wind. She's a good woman. You want to keep her."

I nodded and pulled my wallet from the back pocket of my jeans, removing a lone ten-dollar bill. "It's all I've got left."

The waiter smiled and left the bottle on the table. I don't know who poured first, but Jurgen didn't say a thing to me about my second glass, or my third. Instead, he repeated a variation on a story I had heard at least a dozen times in as many months. I didn't know what to say to him this time, any more than I had in the past: his wife was crazed, and I thought he was a natural-born saint for putting up with her.

She accused him of cheating at least twice a week and had flung books, ashtrays -- anything within reach -- at his skull on at least three occasions. When she drank, she had the disconcerting habit of "revealing the family jewels," as he put it, despairingly, which made every barbecue and cocktail party a source of great anxiety for him.

I'm embarrassed to admit it, but I think I would have smacked her around, too. And I said so, finally -- just slipped off my well-lubed tongue, and came as a genuine shock to my ears.

"No, no," he said, brightening, "I'm glad someone else agrees. God, I've actually worried about having a stroke! Three years of this crap. Here," he said, refilling my glass. "So, you don't think I'm scum?"

The room was pulsing. I stared at Jurgen and saw one of the most patient, decent men I've ever been privileged to know. "Huh-uh. But I couldn't tell you what to do, either. Looks like you're trapped."

He nodded. "Yeah. I knew it from the minute I proposed. She'd kill herself if I left; but I can't take it anymore. I just can't take it anymore. I was sitting in that ratty recliner in the livingroom, and she came in and started raving. It took me five minutes to figure out what the fuck she was talking about."

"What was it?" I said. I slid my half-full glass of Scotch toward the center of the table and grabbed for the watery dregs of the Pepsi, which I drank down gratefully, then began chewing on the ice. Suddenly, I couldn't stand the taste of the Scotch.

"Turned out she was still mad about a party we were at last week. She got really drunk and I lost her. When she finally came back from God knows where, I was talking to a cousin of an old student of mine. I wasn't doing anything wrong. Like, seven of us were standing around and, Jesus, I was just talking to the girl."

He shrugged. "So I finally got it out of her, what was bugging her. And then she went berserk! Ran into the kitchen and came back with a bunch of dirty plates and shit from the counter. She missed my head by about half an inch with a big meat fork. And then I lost it. Goddamn it, I was just tired of cleaning up all the broken pieces, just tired of dealing with her moods. So I socked her, knocked her out cold. After about three or four minutes, she wasn't waking up too good, so I called the paramedics."

"I thought she called the dogs."

He shook his head. "They brought an Ogden sheriff along with 'em, arrested me on the spot -- something about a 'cooling-off period'. Trice couldn't stop screaming...sh' kept saying, 'I deserved it. He didn't mean it, I deserved it!' I felt like a turd."

The waiter poured the last of the fifth of Scotch into Jurgen's glass. "Almost closing time, boys. Unless you want to get locked in."

Jurgen shrugged and shot back the whiskey. "You wanna know what's weird?"

I nodded.

"She's gonna love me when I get home. She's gonna treat me better than she's ever treated me before; she's gonna keep a lid on it." He stared down into his empty glass. "Some gals need to be dominated -- know where the power's coming from. I wasn't thinking like that when I slugged her, but before you came and got me out of the can, I started thinking about Ray Carver. His wife was just like Trice. Carver used to tie on a big one, I mean a really big one, and when MaryAnn picked at him that 'one last time,' he'd bash a bottle over her noggin and then they'd make up and go to bed. It just came to me -- one of those

moments of resolution you read about but never really ever have yourself. Everything I ever read by Carver just came at me, and I realized that Trice's been knocked around by every guy she's cared about until I found her. Here I was, thinking I was about to deliver her from a life worse than hell. I thought, I'm a nice guy, a returned missionary for Chrissakes, and I can treat this poor girl better than anyone's ever treated her before. I thought, y'know, maybe one day we'll have kids and start going to church again. I'd like my kids to go to church. But Trice didn't respect me. Now she's gonna love me."

I laid the ten-note on the table and buttoned the topmost button of my coat, and Jurgen and I walked slowly down the icy steps of the City Club. I asked him, one more time, whether he wouldn't rather come back to my apartment and sleep in the guest room and see Trice the next morning, but he declined graciously, and I dropped him off at the base of his driveway and drove back to Salt Lake.

I was glad that I had cut my losses at three, was actually very proud of myself, and the drive home went smoothly. The key slid quietly into the dead bolt, after which I took great care not to bump into the furniture. In high school, if my mother were still up, which she would be, I would be made to breathe into her face, and then I would invariably be grounded for the next two weeks. My father, having never enjoyed the taste of liquor, not even beer, grieved at seeing a nearly grown young man being subjected to such scrutiny, but he always supported her decision. When I turned twenty-one, a few months after I had returned from London, he paid for my admittance to a private rehabilitation clinic, but not once did he speak to me about it, not once did he ask how I felt in those early morning hours around a group conference table with eleven other shivering alcoholics. As for my mother, she thought her boy had been delivered unto her again.

I heard a stirring in the bedroom, and when I did, I groped quickly for the refrigerator and sought out something spicy, stuffing my mouth with what was probably the dinner my wife had made for us and had to put away alone hours earlier -- a complicated dish, tasting of chicken marinated in a curry -- as she walked across the hardwood floor and I strained my eyes and saw the crushing hurt, then the anger.

No dishes would be broken in my house this night, no punches thrown. I would not make love to my wife for many days, and when I would, it would be for both of us a lonely, passionless affair.

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