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Down State

Jack Howland

Yummy, Jerry, and Braces met in jail.

Jerry went down on an extortion rap, which seemed much more impressive than it actually was. He wasn't made or anything. He extorted old women he met carrying their groceries home from the Jewel. The charge would have been something more modest if he hadn't been so good at it. He never asked for too much, and he was particularly good at finding (and scaring) old ladies without anyone else in the world. A lot of them warmed up with him, though. Jerry would always insist – and part of Yummy believed him – that some of them got more out of the deal than he did.

Yummy did straight Armed Robbery. Six years on two counts, one of which was somebody else. Right after the conviction, the fat cop that busted him came right up and was shaking his hand before Yummy even realized it was him.

The cop said, "Congratulations, Harold, ya fucking shithead. You're finally in jail. You shoulda been born in jail."

As if Yummy was a born crook.

Braces went down on a GTA, Conspiracy to Distribute, Possession of an Unlicensed Firearm, and Assaulting a Police Officer. He was pulled over with 50 pounds of meth amphetamine in the trunk of his car. Then, with the state patrolman at his door, Braces waved around a gun he'd been too afraid to even touch five minutes before.

"It was like he won the anti-lottery," Jerry once said.

Braces should have been born in jail, Yummy thought. He didn't make sense anywhere else.

They worked out their plans during their last few months together downstate. Jerry had always wanted to rob banks. He convinced Yummy and Braces that they'd be back inside no matter what they did on the outside, so they might as well try a big score.

"Are you two a couple a rockheads? You want to come back here because you boosted a fucking VCR? People do this. People rob banks. You ever seen a bank robber come through here?"

Then he read them an article from the Wall Street Journal about a series of unsolved bank robberies in the Southwest over the past decade. He'd printed it off the library computer. Then he lit it on fire.

Yummy watched him. He knew he didn't have a lot of other options. Now that King was dead, these were the only people he had in the world.

Yummy thought about robbing banks a minute, then said, "I'd like to go straight."

Jerry dropped the burning sheet in the sand and stepped it out. He waved away a guard.

"Yeah, well," Jerry answered. "Braces and I will come find you. See how you're enjoying your straight life packing groceries with a bunch of morons."

Yummy never packed groceries. He cleaned up the food court in a has-been mall. The letter he sent Braces made it easy for them to find him when they got out.

*

The first place they robbed was a small bank west of Cincinnati. Jerry'd had enough money hidden away from his previous life to let them watch the place for two solid weeks. They knew the different employees. They knew that the manager would take you to his desk if you wanted to open an account. They knew everybody really liked the old security guard, so they called him "Grandpa."

On a Tuesday afternoon, Jerry sat across a desk from the manager, who they'd named "Roy," and told him he wanted to open a checking account in the name of his business. Jerry wore glasses, painter's overalls, and a mask he kept under his chin as if he'd pulled it down when he wasn't working.

Roy was doing the paperwork. He'd ask Jerry a number of questions, and Jerry'd make up an answer. It wasn't until Roy asked, "What's your tax ID number?" that he stumped Jerry. Jerry was looking at his watch. Yummy was late.

"My what?" Jerry looked up.

"Your tax ID number. It's probably your Social Security number. You're a sole proprietorship?"

"Yes I am."

"Okay. Why don't you give me your Social Security number? We'll keep it strictly confidential, if that's a concern."

Jerry turned in his seat to look at the entrance. No Yummy. When he turned back around, he saw Roy was looking at him and smiling.

"Your Social?"

"Yes, I'm sorry. It's 2, 4, 6, 8, 2, 4, 6 ..."

The two tellers returning from their smoke break pulled open the back door. Jerry looked back around at the entrance again. He kept talking.

"8 ...9 ... 2 ..."

"Ah, yes, I think you can only have nine numbers ..."

"Nine numbers ..."

"In your Social ..."

Jerry stood up.

"Is everything alright," he heard Roy ask.

Jerry saw Yummy through the glass doors. He turned back around quickly. Roy was looking up at him and smiling.

"Is there something I can help you with?"

Jerry pointed at the two tellers and said loudly: "You two. Stay right there."

Jerry now saw that Roy's eyes had gone wide. Jerry turned around again. For a moment he and Roy both watched Yummy hold a gun to Grandpa's head. A couple screams woke Jerry up. He pulled his mask over his nose and mouth.

Jerry said to Roy, "Give me some money or my friend'll blow your guard's brains out."

*

They knew how lucky and unprepared they'd been. They got much better. The places they stuck up now were carefully scouted. They stuck to small cities. They tried to look like city workers. They wore jumpsuits, hardhats and shop glasses.

Jerry and Braces went in the front door. Yummy sat in the car with the scanner and the phone. After about five minutes, if nothing was happening, Yummy called Jerry. If Jerry was in the middle of opening his account, then Yummy hung up and called a bank on the other side of town. He always said more or less the same thing: *I was just in your bank. There are two men with guns in your parking lot.* He called the bank because, if you called the cops directly, they asked you a thousand questions. If you called the bank, they triggered a dedicated alarm that brought every cop in town to their front door. After that, Yummy pulled up his medical mask, walked in, and pressed his .38 to some lady's head.

They usually made everyone lie down, then Braces zip tied their ankles and wrists. Then they picked everyone up and put them in a vault or conference room while Jerry walked the manager to whatever money there was to get.

They left quietly and drove to the airport in the next big town, where they picked up their own cars from long-term parking. Then they drove home. They pulled this job four times a year. Even that was probably too frequent. Eventually either Jerry or Yummy would stay in the car the entire time. They figured it gave them different looks – sometimes two white guys, sometimes a white guy and a black guy – that would hopefully make them harder to profile.

The Friends Bank was on the northeast side of Lincoln, Nebraska. They'd flown into Omaha at the end of June and cased it for three weeks. On a Friday night, Jerry and Braces went in and stuck it up.

Everything went exactly as planned. Yummy made his call. The scanner went wild. A cop car actually flew past him at about 50 mph. Five minutes went by, then Jerry and Braces came out. Braces was limping. Yummy saw his hand was slick and red.

They entered the van.

Jerry said: "Go."

Yummy went, but he kept looking up at the both of them in the rearview mirror.

"Is that dye on Brace's hand?"

"It's blood."

"Blood?"

"Braces stabbed a guy."

Jerry looked out the window. Braces smiled. There was blood on his teeth too.

"You stabbed a guy?"

Braces answered: "Yeah."

"Was he going for the alarm or something?"

Braces: "He was zipped up."

"What?"

Braces: "They led us straight to the money. We got more than two hundred grand, Jerry thinks."

Jerry looked at Yummy in the rearview. Yummy got on Rt. 6.

"Should we call an ambulance?"

Braces said: "We didn't even get any blood on the money, Yummy."

Yummy: "Jerry, should I call a fucking ambulance?"

Jerry: "He's gonna bleed to death. If he hasn't already. They're all tied up in there."

Yummy's eyes jumped back and forth between them.

Braces: "I cut that dude!"

"Jerry, did you tell him to do that?"

"No, he just did it."

*

Jerry and Yummy talked about it more later.

"It was like they wanted to rob the bank worse than we did," Jerry said.

"Where'd he get the knife?"

"He brought it in himself."

"Why?"

"I think he wanted to stab somebody. That's why."

Four months later, Jerry and Braces were robbing a bank near Minneapolis. It was going south, and they were off their time.

Braces walked up to Jerry and said, "Let me stab somebody."

Yummy couldn't believe it had happened again. That he was driving into the sunset with two murders to his name and a killer idiot in the back seat of his car.

The problem was that it worked. If things started going badly, if they were off their schedule, Jerry sometimes nodded to Braces, and Braces lit up like it was his birthday. When Braces cut someone, it

was usually a guy and he usually did it just above his hip pocket. Braces walked right up to whoever it was, his hand jumped out like he wanted to shake, then he had him. Usually it sort of stilted them up, like they just threw out their back. If Braces could, he'd loop his thumb through the guy's waistband and pull him close. Sometimes he'd run his fingers through their hair. It would stun everyone for minute or two, then the place would come apart as whoever it was bled all over the floor and Jerry quietly locked them all in. When the cops showed up, they had to deal with a terminal case first. They had to scramble the paramedics. They had to manage a couple dozen freaked out regular people. If the town was small enough, it shut everything down.

*

They were back home celebrating after a job when Yummy started talking about Braces. They usually indulged themselves for a few days to let the energy burn off.

"I ain't kiddin' about Braces," Yummy said.

Jerry didn't answer.

"It ain't because I'm a humanitarian or nothing. What happens if we run into the wrong room and he slices somebody up?"

"We're already accessories to a murder."

"I ain't talkin' about that. I'm talkin' bout you knife somebody in front of other people, somebody may act up."

"It's working exactly the other way. It shuts everybody up. It paralyzes them."

"So far it has."

Jerry waited a moment, thinking. Then he said: "You mean, what if he cut somebody's brother who's in the room."

"Or there's some crazy war vet in there."

"Yeah."

"I'm talkin' about heroes."

"Yeah."

"He's fucking crazy." Yummy emphasized every word.

"He was a date half his life. He's got a right to be crazy."

This stopped Yummy for a moment.

"The past is the past," Yummy said eventually.

"The past ain't the past for anybody." Jerry answered.

*

Braces and Jerry had both been in six years before Yummy showed up. They worked in the prison kitchen together and they did some sweeping and mopping, but mostly they sold stuff for a 6'8", 240 pound high-up in the California Street gang named King. King was Yummy's cousin.

Yummy and King were close, so Yummy mostly did easy time. Then one day King had a heart attack and suddenly Yummy was looking at 18 months on his own. So were Jerry and Braces.

Yummy had no idea what to expect. Braces cried. But Jerry could see it.

Jerry said: "Juice is gonna run us. He's gonna step up. Brace, you'll be his girl. Probably you too, Yummy."

Jerry lit his cigarette, then zipped up his windbreaker to his chin. In the wind, it held against his chest like ice. It was February, and they were outside in the yard.

Brace said, "What are we gonna do?"

Yummy couldn't think of a thing, but he kept his eyes on Jerry.

Jerry said, "We're gonna kill Juice."

A week later Juice and a guy named Shady caught Braces in the kitchen. A guard everyone called Opie stood at the kitchen door providing security. Opie was looking away, trying to ignore the sound, which made it easy for Jerry to hit him with his homemade blackjack -- three pounds of frozen piss in Styrofoam cups that he'd tied off in a couple of socks. Juice and Shady nearly got to Jerry before he wrestled out Opie's gun from the holster. As they came around the big steel table in the kitchen, Jerry could tell they thought they were the two black princes of hell. He thought he could see it in their eyes, as he staggered back, trying to find the safety. They couldn't believe a fucking cracker like Jerry would pull some shit like this. He stuck up the gun and shot them both.

What stuck with Yummy was the feeling of wrapping the gun in the guard's warm fingers.

What stuck with Jerry were the four square metallic pops of the gun and a hate so thick he could smell and taste it.

They both remembered finding Braces. He was out cold, lying at the foot of the pantry lockers. He looked like he'd been batted from the sky.

*

"We kill. It's our method now."

Jerry didn't answer.

"I mean, we don't just rob banks anymore, man."

Jerry took a moment to make it look like he gave a damn.

"Yeah," he said. "I know."

"It's gonna catch up with us."

"Yeah," Jerry said.

"I know he doesn't understand what he's doing, but Jesus."

"Yeah."

"We're killers now."

"..."

"We gotta stop."

"By killing Braces."

"Yeah, man. By killing Braces."

"Yeah."

"I hate to say it. I really do. I don't think anybody in the world could understand or even like this kid except you and me. And I do like him. I like him. King liked him."

"King felt sorry for him."

"What's the fucking difference, man? We gotta put him down. We gotta put him away. Because sooner or later, he's gonna do it to us."

Jerry listened to Yummy, his hands flat on the table, his head cocked. He thought about Braces. He thought, *They* named him "Braces." The brothers did. Cause they kicked his teeth in so many times to put him out to date. When you dated, you got your teeth kicked in. Braces had his kicked in so many times they gave him dentures. Then they kicked those in. State wouldn't buy a con another set of dentures, so the dentists wired his old ones back together. Looked like an erector set in his mouth. Then it started all over.

"We got to, Jerry."

"Yeah, I know."

*

The last bank they robbed was in Utica, New York. It was a rainy day in late September. The hills were all the deeper shades of fall. Even Jerry said that it was pretty.

They watched the bank for about a week. At night, they went to a movie or the mall.

They talked about Braces for the last time on a Monday night at the city ice rink. Jerry and Yummy couldn't skate, but for some strange reason, Braces could skate pretty well. He went around and around trying meet girls.

Yummy watched him. He felt sick and hamstrung. Braces looked like a demented little ballerina out there. Yummy remembered how he didn't really like Braces or Jerry while they were all downstate. No one seemed to. Yummy never asked King why he kept them around, but one day King gave him an answer anyway.

King told Yummy, "Jerry makes me money. Braces my mascot. You know you big when you got a mascot."

But that was just what King said out loud. Yummy knew somehow that King kept Braces alive because he wanted to go to heaven. He always had some religion in him.

Braces tripped as a girl tried to quickly skate away from him. He rolled on an elbow and smiled at Yummy and Jerry. He scrambled back up.

Yummy said to Jerry, "Forget it. Forget it, man."

Jerry said, "Alright."

Two days later Yummy stole a Chevy van from grocery store parking lot in Oneida. When he picked Jerry and Braces up at the motel, they were already in their overalls. They drove across town and parked half a block down from the bank. Yummy watched Jerry check his gun and Braces sort through his bags. Yummy turned on the scanner and put it up on the dash.

He saw Braces rise up in the rearview mirror, but didn't think anything of it until he felt Braces's

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fingers under his chin. Braces jerked the blade across Yummy's neck as they looked at one another in the mirror. There was blood everywhere now. Braces looked strange to Yummy, there in the mirror with all his features reversed. He looked so serious, even though his face seemed off kilter. Yummy kicked at the pedals. He broke his wrist against the driver's side window.

They left Yummy there with a few things to make it look like the end of an argument about drugs.

Jack Howland lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

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