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Crime Spree
and Other Stories

by
Tom Larsen
BERNARDO

Take it from me. You can fall asleep on your feet, but sooner or later your knees will buckle. Happened plenty of times running presses over at Acme Press. It’s a crazy feeling waking up like that and sometimes, for a second there, you don’t know where the hell you are. Then it’s back in a flash and you see it’s so wrong for you. At least I did, which is why I quit.

Clever name, Acme, right? Believe me these guys were murder. The Donnelli brothers would screw you just to stay in shape and every guy there had gone a few rounds with them. Jack, the bulldog, throwing his arms around, smacking his head like he can’t believe it. Believe it, Jack. Things go wrong all the time in a print shop. For what the Donnellis charge, customers expect the best. But I can tell you that’s expecting too much.

Then there’s Al. The “brains” of the family, a man with more tics than a cuckoo clock. Al’s the excitable type. He has a degree in dentistry, but the histrionics make him unemployable. He’s also gay; a bad combination in a Neanderthal trade. I liked to work him up into a lather then get all big and crazy so he’d think he’d crossed a line. If that’s homophobic, so be it. Where I come from an asshole is an asshole.

Some days I’d get a long run, twenty, thirty thousand and an hour in that press would be running itself. Forget about shooting the breeze or catching a few scores in the paper. The Donnellis wanted their
pound of flesh and that meant keeping your nose to the grindstone. So you pull a few sheets and you fiddle around and pretty soon you start to fade. Maybe you were up late or you had a few too many and you know you’ve got five more hours of standing around watching the clock, worrying about one stupid thing or another. It wears you out, I can tell you. Pretty soon the eyes are drooping and the noise seems to fade and then boom! Your knees give out. It’s a funny thing to see unless your name’s Donnelli.

Most guys I’ve worked with would kill to get out of the business, but with families and the time put in it’s hard to walk away. I did and I ain’t looking back. People don’t realize the pressure printers are under. One little mistake and it’s ten grand down the shitter. The halftones are reversed or phone number’s scrambled and it’s NFG (No Fucking Good)! Skids of product no one can use and you get to run the whole thing over. Not your fault, maybe, but you made it irreversible. Shit didn’t run itself, dude. That’s not even considering the stuff that is your fault, you backed it up wrong or it’s crooked or it offset or a million other things. Every printer I know drinks too much and most have an ex-wife or two on retainer.

The schmoozing thing really bugged me. You work with guys every day, but if you can’t talk to them you can’t get to know them. And I’m the kind of guy; if I don’t know you I generally don’t like you. It drives my wife nuts but it’s something I can’t change. To me everybody’s a blowhard until they prove different. So Acme was basically a shop full of grumblers who hated the boss and kept their distance. I was there ten years. I spent more time with those shmos than I did with my
family, but I didn’t know where one of them lived. Take it from me it wasn’t natural.

So OK, I may be slow to warm, but I’m no sociopath. I’ve worked in places where the crew was as tight as a TV family. Worked together, played together, married each other, got divorced. I still have friends I haven’t worked with in twenty years. So when I say Acme was unnatural, I hold myself apart from it. From my first day I could see what the problem was. I was fifteen years younger than the next guy and I was pushing forty. A few decades running presses will knock the snot out of you and suddenly the old pension’s so close you can taste it. So the job sucks. It’s almost over. Get through the fucking day.

None of this was lost on the Donnellis.

Not that we NEVER talked to each other. Some days there’d be nothing else to do or you’d run into one of them in the mall and you’d have a few words, mostly about the boss. The Donnellis did this or said that, and always some big talk about getting even, dropping a wrench between cylinders or tipping off OSHA. The longer I was there, the worse it got.

OK, that’s my fault. You don’t like the job you get another or you do something to change it. But the only thing worse than working is not working. I’ve been there often enough. Sit around the house driving the old lady nuts, Try finding work when you really need it, especially when you’ve been around and expect to earn a decent wage. The trades have dried up here and everywhere, so you hold on to what you got. You might not like it, but you shut up and take it. Or you walk away and hope for the best.

~
When I think back to how I got into printing it’s almost comical. I’d been to college a few years, but what I got out of it was either sexually transmitted or drug related. This was back in the seventies when a career was what your dad had and your dad was a loser. Guys I know now are surprised when they hear I went to college. Most of them came from working class where higher education meant finishing twelfth grade. My dad made a good living, but he was convinced a degree would have made him and he was probably right. From the time we could listen he harped on college, drummed it in our heads until we hated to be around him. He must have thought we’d go along just to shut him up and for a while we did. Then the old man died and in the end not a one of us could hack it.

I knew I’d have to get a job, but back then I was pretty particular. No suit and tie, no sucking up, no working my way up the ladder, not me. I wanted a skill that would let me be mobile. Not a career but an occupation, something to pay the bills while I figured out how to make my mark. I was leafing through the phone book to see what was out there and when I got to the P’s my fate was sealed. If I’d given it any thought I would have seen the limitations, advancement, for instance. Once you’re the printer there’s nowhere to go. OK, foreman, maybe, but that’s a suck up job and the pay is only slightly higher. So where does that leave you? You’re never going to own the place, not on a printer’s paycheck. It took me a while to see my mistake. What’s good money when you’re 20 is peanuts when you’re hitting 50 and your kid brother just bought a place in Pompano.

Acme Press is a real shit hole, I can tell you. Funny thing is I loved the building, a hundred years old, easy,
with high ceilings and big windows facing out on the city. You couldn’t really see through them, what with fifty years of grime, but some mornings those shafts of light were as soft and warm as an old flannel shirt. The place was a monument to industry, one of those brick monoliths that take up the whole block, covered in graffiti, rust belt down to the dumb waiters and the wood brick floors. From a distance the building looked haunted and up close it could break your heart. I got to like going to work in a scary looking place. When I left for the last time I pried up one of those wood bricks and took it home with me.

It was the mouse that pushed me over the edge. Being old and semi permeable, the building was a haven for the lower life forms. Rats, bats, pigeons, the odd crackhead, and bugs! Holy Jesus! Horrible things with fat, hairy bodies and more legs than they’d ever need. And not shy about making an appearance either. You’d be smoothing ink into the fountain and all of a sudden something would catch your eye, moving fast over the wooden bricks, slipping under your press and not coming out. Gave me the willies, I can tell you. One time Big Lenny crushed three toes stomping one of them on his shoe, a truly funny thing to see.

So the place was a dump and a few bugs weren’t gonna make much difference. But then Jack brought his wife in to work the phones and the Godzilla of bugs took up in the file cabinet. Like she’d found a head in there from the way she went off. Jack called in an exterminator, skinny guy with a spray wand. He went along the floors and into the corners, nodding and smiling like we were all in the same boat. The smile of a man who expected more from life, but believed, in his way, he was making a difference. We watched him angling around work tables, squeezing into places
no one ever thought to go, spritzing every cranny with God knows what. We stood there smirking in the time-honored way of slightly skilled men lording it over slightly less skilled men.

“What the hell is he so happy about?” Big Lenny wondered.

I shrugged. “Maybe he’s drunk.”

“What kind of job is that for a grown man?” Owens shook his head. “I stopped killing bugs when I was six.”

“The kind you have right before you throw yourself off the bridge.” Lenny snickered.

Owens sucked his teeth reflectively. “It’s the uniform, with the name above the pocket. That’s where I draw the line.”

I looked down at my own uniform, then to Lenny’s, then Owens.

“OK, but ours are cool,” Owens said in all seriousness, glancing at the name above his pocket, something long and Polish. “It’s like a disguise or something.”

“The bow tie,” Lenny muttered, almost to himself. “That’s where I draw the fucking line,”

The guy wasn’t wearing a bow tie but Owens and I never let on.

I first saw the mouse when I was cleaning up to go home. Things were slow and I was drawing it out. It’s the slow days that never end. I was digging through a box of parts when I spotted him under my workbench. There was something wrong with his leg or back, some deformity or old injury. It didn’t seem to bother him much, but it made me wonder what was in that spray wand.

I watched him poke around an old gripper
assembly, nosing along as the press pounded a few feet away. I figured he was hungry so I tossed a few donut crumbs over. The crumbs startled him and he darted off, but a few minutes later he was back, sniffing the length of chain, sniffing the crumbs then sniffing all the other crap down there. Marking things for later, or so I thought. But the crumbs were there the next day and may be there still for all I know.

He'd only show when the press was cranking. Maybe with the noise he thought I couldn't see him, or maybe with the noise he couldn't see me. What I know about mice is they're smaller than you'd think. I'll admit I looked forward to seeing him. What the hell, he was cute. I thought about what it must be like creeping around the old plant at night, not so bad, I suppose. There's heat and water and plenty of junk to hide in. You can pass in or out in a million places and there are two fast food dumpsters in the alley out back. A mouse might spend his whole life in here, generation after generation passing down the secrets.

How long does a mouse live anyway? My guess is not too long. Almost anything will kill you and tunneling through garbage all day can't be healthy. To me mice seem super skittish and I'm thinking lots of them die of fright. When you're that small and that defenseless you know your place on the food chain. Low man must be stressful. When your number's up you blow all the gaskets.

"Got a little mouse at the job," I told the wife over supper.

"A mouse? You sure it's not a rat?"

"Believe me, you wouldn't get them confused. This guy's tiny," I held my finger and thumb a mouse length apart.

"Better kill it."
“What do you mean? I like him.”
“Mice have fleas and fleas carry diseases. Remember that show on PBS?”
“I’m not going to kill him. He’s a friend of mine.”
“OK.”
“His name is Bernardo.”
“Bernardo.”
“Right.”

I was running Safeco’s annual report when the pest control guy showed up again. Watching him, I couldn’t help wondering what it was like, exterminating for a living. The day’s work measured in small-scale carnage, genocide, when you think about it. Sure it’s bugs and vermin, but they were living and now they’re dead. Where he goes tiny organs dissolve, synapses misfire, little limbs and segments wriggle their last. Whole populations, countless thousands wiped out in the wave of his wand. The few who survive breed a stronger strain, immune to the toxins, then stronger toxins.

There must be consequences to his line of work. He made his way toward me and smiled his big smile. I gave him a nod and motioned him over.

“Hiya,” he studied the thumping Heidleberg, eyes wide at the wonder of it. “Boy, ain’t she something.”

I glanced back then led him off a few paces. He stood solemn and trusting, the wand at his side. My smile was barely menacing.

“Listen,” I checked his shirt, “Bert, can I ask you a favor?”

“Sure. What’s the problem, uh...” he squinted at mine. “Pinky?”

“The problem is I got a thing about, you know,” I pointed to the canister.
“Oh...?”

“Look, I know you got a job to do, but...” I ran a hand over my face for effect. “You remember Agent Orange, right Bert?”

“You mean?”

“That’s right. Pleku, it’s not something I like to talk about.”

“No hey, I understand.”

“I mean most of the time I feel OK, OK?”

He looked down at the wand, the canister. I did the hand over the face thing again.

“Whaddya say Bert, can we make a deal? Do what you have to do, but can we skip around here. Just, you know,” I gestured to the immediate area.

“I gotta tell you though, this stuff has been tested by every underwriter in the business. Seriously. The chances of you...”

I let the smile sag.

“Uh,” he looked around as if someone could hear us. “See, I’d have to check with the owner.”

“Bert, look at me,” the smile gone now, replaced by a world-weary grimace. “I didn’t ask to be sterilized. You know what I’m saying? I didn’t sign on to have my liver pickled or my brain cells scrambled.”

“Oh my Lord.”

“You ever get night sweats, Bert? How about it?”

“Gee no, but–”

“C’mere,” I drew him to me. “Answer me this. Did you ever catch yourself staring into space trying to remember your kid’s name?”

Bert turned deathly pale.

“It’s not that much to ask, my friend. Not that you owe me a thing.”

“OK,” his eyes didn’t quite meet mine. “It’s against company policy, but you’re right. Jesus. We’ve
done enough to you already."

“You’re a stand-up guy Bert. I won’t forget it,” I clapped him on the shoulder and sent him on his murdering way.

Not that it would make any difference. Hosed down the way it was the building had to be toxic. The mouse came around now and then but he probably combed the whole building, soaking up poisons like a sponge. Spray day had to be the worst, though, a fresh coating of lethal substance settling over. Surely he can smell it and feel it in his eyes. Hey, I’m no animal rights nut, but I’m no sadist either. The nature of pain is to be painful. For the creepy-crawlies you can overlook it, but a crippled little mouse? I don’t know. It didn’t sit right.

I didn’t see Bernardo for a while. I went on vacation and when I came back, the shop had been painted. They’d covered the presses, moved everything else away from the walls and sprayed the whole place. The color, a slight variation on the old toothpaste green made it feel more like prison than it did before. I couldn’t see why the Donellis would bother, but then Lenny told me they’d gotten a “deal” on it, some poor schlub working off his business card debt, if I had to bet. He said Jack’s wife had nagged him into it, but brother Al was refusing to kick in. I don’t know why this cheered me up but it did. Something about the brothers going at it always made my day.

The schlub’s crew really botched the job. Paint had hardened into lumps and dribbles. The floor was rimmed inches deep and the windows and fixtures had taken a dusting. Anything that hadn’t been moved had been painted over, including the arm of my chair and my poster of Westbrook breaking a long one. Paint was
everywhere. I could still smell it.

Shortly after lunch something moved under my workbench. Crouching down I saw a gob of green inching along the green gripper assembly. The mouse was crusted in paint, just his legs moving under a green shell. It didn’t look like collateral damage either. Someone had zeroed in. On top of everything else Bernardo had been gang painted.

Enough was enough. Those Donellis always struck me as sadists, but this was way beyond the pale. I scrunched down on my hands and knees and poked around with the dolly hook. Bernardo rolled out and I scooped him up. Oh man, it was pitiful. One of his legs was bound up inside and his eyes had been painted shut! I took him to the sink but it was hopeless. I could pick away bits and pieces but only a solvent would do the job. And then I noticed he wasn’t moving anymore. I touched his little head but it just rolled back in the collar of paint. I’d been careful with the water so he couldn’t have drowned. I might have scared him too much, but I had to do something. I was sure he was dead, but I laid him on workbench and checked on him all morning to be sure. Little guy never moved a muscle. Just before noon I walked into the lunchroom, opened the refrigerator, popped a Tupperware top and buried Bernardo in Jack’s lasagna. That done I cleaned out my locker, pried up a floor brick and took the el home.
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Thank you.

Ginger Mayerson
Editor, the Wapshott Press and Storylandia
Tom Larsen lives in the Pennsport section of South Philadelphia, home to Mummers, Flyers and that screw you slant that made the city great. He and his wife lived in Pennsport for a decade in the 90’s then moved away, then moved back again. Where the heart is, yo. For a writer auditioning characters, the 19148 zip is a casting gold mine.
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