

Laid Low
by
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The sound was a low rumble; brief, monotone, then gone. Silence...dead silence. Then it erupted again; so close, resounding, almost overwhelming. Strange, the disturbance appeared to be timed with breathing. Silence...silence. Then a subsequent encore halted mid-rumble, the abrupt cessation timed perfectly with the evolution of consciousness.

Shit, I'm snoring, Buster Swingle guessed correctly as his eyelids became functional.

It was dark, darker than he had ever experienced dark.

Where am I?

Suddenly he understood perfectly the meaning of the word oppressive when linked with the absence of light. Buster slowly raised his head until it met with soft reluctant resistance a few inches above the beginning of the effort.

What the hell?

It felt like a pillow suspended above his head.

A pillow?

Both hands in unison reached to explore the soft canopy. They told him it was a quilted surface. No, tufted was the word; tufted with buttons every few inches. Slick, like silk? Satin? His hands drifted down the luxuriant expanse as far as the arms would consent, then separated and ventured east, west individually until they encountered a virtual kingdom of tuft that apparently enveloped their master.

Okay, Buster thought, *am I awake or dreaming? Or, am I dreaming that I'm dreaming?*

He pinched his cheek. It hurt. He wiped his brow. It was wet. He pushed against the silken ceiling, it was immovable.

What the hell's goin' on?

He waded through a slurry of untrustworthy memories attempting to determine the progression of incidents that led to here. Whatever, wherever *here* was. Then his mind grabbed a recollection that appeared to be recent and viable. *TV...he was watching wrestling on TV. The Gelded Goliath, that sick fuck, was beating the shit out of Red, White and Brute. He yelled at Dee to bring him a Turkey and Coke. Hell, he had to yell at her three times and almost got out of the recliner before the bitch brought it to him. Then...here.*

Is this some sort of fuckin' joke? Damn, it's quiet. My jackknife!

Buster fumbled in his pocket. His fingers enwrapped a metal object that was decidedly not a knife.

A flashlight?

He hesitated a long moment before he switched on the small Maglight, suddenly not certain he wanted to see what it revealed. When he did, the slashing illumination nearly blinded him. His eyes adjusted to the brightness and confirmed the earlier explorations of his hands...he was in a tufted enclosure. They also discovered a note taped to the fabric directly over his head. The writing was too close for his eyes to focus on properly so he gingerly removed it. Underneath was a black hole. He studied the circular cavity a few inches above his nose before realizing it was the end of a pipe...a threaded, galvanized three-quarter-inch pipe. As a plumber, he knew the other end most likely looked the same.

What is going on?

His attention returned to the note. He propped it on the considerable mound of his stomach and squinted at the clean cursive lines under the flashlight's glow.

"Buster," the note read, "Harold and I decided you needed a rest, a long rest."

Harold?

“You remember Harold, from high school,” the note continued.

Harold Feeney? The funeral home dork Harold Feeney?

“The last time you beat me up, Harold said it *was* the last time. So, he prepared a special little place for you...hope you like it. I made sure it had all the comforts of home, sorry about the lighter though.”

Lighter?

“Harold got us a super deal on a cruise for next winter, should be a respectful time for mourning, but shit I really don’t care what anybody thinks, Harold’s a real stud.”

Harold? Stud?

“The time in your new little home shouldn’t be much different than what you’re used to since you don’t move around much. Couldn’t figure out what to do about the potty thing though, sorry...no, not really. Hee, hee, Dee.”

The note confirmed what had been niggling at the edges of his still fuzzy brain. The question of *where* he was. The realization made his throat constrict as he studied the sumptuous accommodations, so he turned the light off. His throat constricted even more so he clicked it back on. The light glinted briefly on an object near his head. He reached over and picked up a half-pint bottle of Wild Turkey. Unfortunately, the turkey had flown, not even a dribble left. Buster noticed other things next to where the bottle had resided. He fished them out one at a time; a half-empty pack of Marlboros, his Zippo, a roll of Tums and a TV remote. He glanced at the cigarettes, then the pipe above his head.

Must be an air hole, he considered.

Buster’s trembling fingers prized a Marlboro from the pack and obediently inserted it between dry lips. He grabbed the Zippo, flipped open the lid and spun the grooved metal wheel with his thumb.

*Nothing. No spark, no nothing. No fucking flint! The bitch!
The fuckin' bitch! I'll kill her!*

Buster spat the cigarette out and threw the lighter. It hit his knee with a dull thunk.

Fuck!

He laid his head back, popped a Tums and stared into the black hole. But, it wasn't black anymore. It was now a hazy gray.

Daylight, he thought, daylight!

Buster turned off the flashlight and stared into the shaft until the circle of luminescence gradually revealed the homely features of his sweating face; then his eyes widened.

Was that a noise? A shadow? A person? Buster started screaming up the pipe, "Help...help!"

"See those pipes with hose adapters every thirty yards or so?" Harold asked Jimmy, his young groundskeeper.

"Yes sir," the boy replied.

"It's a sprinkler system I had installed. Attach the hose to each one and flush 'em out for about thirty minutes." Harold pointed to a pipe sticking a few inches above a pile of freshly dug earth. "Start with that one over there."