

Unfinished Business
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By diedre Knight

A horrific car crash, a three-alarm fire and a bank deposit all have something in common, except he's missing.

For a full fifteen minutes torrential rain pounded as resounding thunder heralded vicious vertical lightning; effectively flooding the industrial area of Park and 18th Street on an otherwise scorching Thursday afternoon. Visibility was reduced to near zero and the screeching tires and subsequent collision had practically been inaudible.

Employees from the Welding Supply store mingled on the corner in grim silence, gaping at the mangled remains of an old Buick sedan and the 4X4 that had broad-sided it. The driver of the 4-by had climbed out and was staggering around dazed as blood ran in stark red ribbons down one side of his face. There was no movement in the Buick, which lay on its side, undercarriage in full view of the now halted south-bound traffic. Sirens wailed in the distance.

"One minute and 45 seconds." A heavy-set bearded man remarked, checking his watch.

"They've sent out the whole brigade, by the sounds of it" said a guy in a yellow hard hat.

"Probably be more than enough –" began the bearded man, and then "Holy skeet! Would ya look at that!" he exclaimed, pointing down the street where another crowd had gathered outside a two-story building; time-worn and fully engulfed in flames.

"That's Wong's Corner Market!" cried Ed, manager of the Welding Supply store.

"Aw, that's a shame. The old man's had that store better than forty years." the bearded man shook his head.

"How old does that make the old man?" Yellow hat wanted to know.

"Just seen him this morning. He don't look a day over fifty." The bearded man replied. As First responders began to arrive at the burning building, he abruptly broke into an awkward trot and headed down the street to where three fire engines seemed to converge on scene at once.

"That explains the whole brigade." Yellow hat mumbled aloud. He turned his attention back to the crash scene where two paramedics attended the guy from the truck, slumped against the bumper with one hand holding his bloodied face. Three more emergency personnel were peering into the over-turned car and looking – well, confused – is what Yellow hat thought.

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Ed the manager seemed to suddenly realize his store was empty and ordered his employees back inside

“Let them do their job.” He told his protesting gawkers.

Yellow hat was obliged to step back as a homeless man labored by, pushing an old squeaky-wheeled shopping cart full of cans and who-knew-what. A faded red t-shirt with cracked white lettering, read “Poo Service”, and clung damply to the man’s slight frame.

Among the curious items that threatened to spill from the cart, Yellow hat thought he saw what appeared to be a blue bank deposit bag and was about to question the homeless guy about it when one of the Officers inspecting the Buick called to him.

“Did any one leave the scene? Any one that may have been involved in the crash?” He asked with all the authority possible for a man who’d cut one side of his mustache way too short.

Yellow hat gaped with amusement before seriousness took over. “What? Shoot no, there’s been no movement what-so-ever, and I’ve been here the whole time.” He reported honestly.

A squad car, siren blaring, came to a screeching, curb-grinding halt and Yellow Hat saw the homeless guy abandon his cart and dive into a thick stand of Oleanders where he crouched until the siren stopped before continuing on his journey. Yellow hat thought the Oleander flower entangled in the homeless guy’s matted hair was about as comical as the uneven mustache and was smiling when the Cop walked up.

“Excuse me, Sir. Ah, have you been injured?” One of Tucson’s finest asked with genuine sincerity.

Probably shouldn’t be smiling like an idiot, Yellow hat thought.

“No. No, I’m just a witness, sort of.” He answered.

“Sort of, Sir?”

“Well, I was inside” he gestured toward the Welding Supply Store. “With the rain and all, but we heard it, sort of. You know, above the storm and we all came out.” He noted the officer’s name tag read “A. *Meddler*” and tried not to grin.

“We, Sir?” Meddler pointedly scanned the general area where the two of them stood alone.

“The manager made them go back in, but I was – shopping.” Yellow hat suddenly remembered what he’d even been in the neighborhood for and became anxious about the construction crew that awaited his return – with supplies.

“I’m going to ask you to wait right here. I may need to take your statement.” Meddler ordered as he headed into the Welding Supply Store.

It was a directive Yellow hat thought he should heed, but curiosity was just too much and he hurried after the homeless guy.

“Hey! “ he said cheerily. “Not staying around to see what happens?”

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But the homeless guy concentrated only on the sidewalk ahead, as if he hadn't heard. The sun had quickly dried the 'Poo' shirt and catching a pungent wiff of unwashed skin, Yellow hat decided "Poo" was a fitting name.

"Where're you headed?" He tried again. "What's your name?" he asked, trying to get ahead of the cart and perhaps slow the man's determined gait.

"Where're you going?" he pressed, effectively stopping the cart with his body.

"Unfinished business." Poo answered matter-of-factly.

"What? What business?"

"*Get down!*" the homeless man suddenly screamed before dashing behind a dumpster as another siren blared passed on its way to the scene of the fire.

Shaking his head at the incongruousness, Yellow hat crouched beside Poo behind the rusted metal box.

"How long you been here?" he asked conversationally.

"Just over seventy five seconds." Poo pierced him with a sardonic watery blue gaze.

Oh, jeez. "No, I mean *out* here. On the streets" Yellow hat stifled a laugh. But Poo had already sped around the dumpster and resumed pushing the cart before he'd finished his sentence. He tipped his hard hat to the hooting dock workers at the Moving and Storage place, who'd gleefully witnessed the whole 'hiding behind the dumpster' incident.

"Hey! Wait up!" he called as Poo surprised him by breaking into a run, bumping down a curb as cans bounced out, clanking noisily on the blacktop. At 2nd Ave. Poo stopped short and gaped open-mouthed at the calamity going on around the burning building, where the firefighters seemed to be gaining the upper-hand. Taking a dirty white hanky from a tattered fanny-pack, he wiped his eyes before balling it up and tossing it into the cart. Water hoses stretched from tankers and a hydrant provided challenging passage for the cart and just when Yellow hat thought Poo would abandon it all together he took a sharp left onto Bean Avenue and broke into an astonishingly fast run, carelessly crossing 19th Street without checking for traffic.

"You'd better be careful!" he couldn't help admonishing. "What's the hurry any way?" he asked without expecting an answer.

"*Unfinished business!*" Poo snarled over his shoulder.

Yellow hat stayed purposely back a couple feet. Enough cans had bumped out of the cart that more of Poo's 'possessions were visible inside the metal basket, among which were a greasy-looking sweatshirt, one shiny black dress shoe, what appeared to be a well worn black and white picture of two men in uniform – and the bank bag that had initiated the whole pursuit.

Nearing Santa Rita park, Yellow hat figured he'd gone and followed Poo all the way home but Poo took a right at 20th, skirted the park down 3rd Avenue where he waved to apparent acquaintances lounging in the grass, and continued

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right on into the Bank parking lot at 22nd Street! Yellow hat watched with mild amusement as Poo carefully parked his cart in an open parking space, but was astonished when Poo took the bank bag and walked purposefully into the building as if it were an everyday routine.

The late afternoon sun had dipped behind the one-story bank building and glancing at his watch, Yellow hat realized he'd been chasing Poo for over an hour, nearly two hours had passed since the storm, the crash and the fire at Wong's Corner Market. And he still hadn't picked up supplies. He figured he was going to hear about it at the office but was confident his story would beat any excuse they'd ever heard. His cell phone buzzed and assuming it was the office he answered "Caid here."

"Yellow hat? This is Sgt. Meddler. I thought I told you to wait at the Welding Supply. I still need your statement, where are you?"

Incredulous, Caid said "How'd you get my number?"

"At the Welding Supply. Got your address too." Meddler boasted. "I'm still at the scene, where *are* you?" he repeated with annoyance.

Seeing Poo come out of the bank, Caid was distracted. "Uh, a few blocks away, be back in a jiff." he said and ended the call. Poo seemed unconcerned about Caid's presence beside his cart as he stuffed the presumably now-empty bank bag inside the belt of his fanny-pack.

"Finish your business for the day?" Caid asked him.

"Yeah. It's all over now." Poo replied, clearly despondent. He reached for the balled up hanky but changed his mind and sniffed instead.

"Who's in the picture?" Caid figured it was worth a shot.

Poo shuffled through his belongings and produced the photograph. "I still had all my teeth." He remarked as he handed it to Caid. The two left the bank parking lot at a leisurely pace as Caid studied the ragged five by seven.

On closer inspection Caid could see the resemblance of Poo in the soldier on the left. "Who's the other guy" he asked of the Asian on the right.

"Johnny Don, my friend." Poo said solemnly. "Best ever."

Caid tried to press for more details about the picture, about Poo himself, but to no avail. Poo had clammed up. Back at Santa Rita Park, Poo turned to Caid and issued a firm salute.

"Bye." He said and steered his cart toward a small gathering of park dwellers in the grass.

Caid tipped his yellow hard hat and literally sprinted back to 18th street where several emergency vehicles remained at the nearly destroyed business, though the fire seemed to have been put out. Above the now glassless storefront window on the fire-scorched brick the name of the business "J.D. Wong's", was barely visible as half a dozen Asians embraced, sobbing on the sidewalk.

"Do you have somewhere to stay?" Caid overheard a fireman asking.

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Back at the Welding Supply Store, Meddler chewed his lip, his words terse.

“I thought I told you –“ he began.

“I know, you already said that.” Caid replied. “So what do you need from me? Did you find the guy in the Buick? Cause I never saw anyone get out.”

“Yes. They found him just a while ago.” Meddler replied. “Now, I’ll need –“

“Is he alright?” Caid interrupted.

“No, I’m afraid he’s dead.” Meddler nodded toward the somber ambulance crew. “Now. If you’ll just –“

“Well where was he? In the glove box? Why’d it take so long to find him?” Caid wanted to know.

“Sir, I’ll have to ask you to cooperate and stop interrupting me. If you’ll just step over here so we can take care of unfinished business.” Meddler motioned toward his squad car. Taken aback by the choice of words, Caid uncomfortably complied.

Giving a statement had taken all of about ten minutes and half an hour later, after calling the office and relaying the events of his afternoon, Caid sat in his apartment sipping a beer and watching the early evening news where he was treated to more information about the ‘18th street tragedies’, as they were being described by a perky brunette with a turned up nose.

“Our community lost a venerable leader today, both in business as well as the Asian community. J.D. Wong died this afternoon in a tragic traffic accident at the corner of Park and 18th Street, possibly due to storms in the area – and not two blocks from the family business he built- that’s J.D on the right (she referred to a duplicate of the picture Poo had showed Caid) - and successfully ran for nearly forty years, which, - and this is incredibly tragic folks - was nearly destroyed by fire this afternoon as well.” Taking an almost imperceptible breath, she continued

“Officials are still investigating the source of the fire and our hearts go out to the family and friends of J.D. Wong tonight. Brad? Can we expect any more storms this evening?” the camera panned to Brad as Caid switched to a different channel where an animated elderly woman was recanting every success – “A phenomenally successful businessman, tireless advocate for the homeless, and devoted family man...” – and failure ever attained by Mr. J.D. Wong, including the fact that “Just this very day his building had been saved from foreclosure by an anonymous cash donor”. Caid turned off the T.V. and sat for awhile in stunned silence.

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