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Brainquake

Written by Samuel Fuller

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BRAINQUAKE

by **Samuel Fuller**

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To Christa Lang
and our daughter, Samantha

Love makes a bagman
a poet or a madman.
—Al Capone

I

Sixty seconds before the baby shot its father, leaves fell lazily in Central Park. Sparrow-weight with bulging jugular, the balloon peddler shuffled past the man sitting on the bench near the path bend, saw nothing to remember in Paul's thirty-year-old cipher face. Paul was half-hidden behind a book of poems. Reading and re-reading Emily Dickinson's *If I can ease one life the aching*, Paul relived the ten-year-old Paul suffocating his mother with a pillow. She didn't struggle. He lifted the pillow. She weighed 97 pounds dead.

A leaf fell gently on the poem.

Paul heard the music box playing *Frère Jacques* without knowing the tune's name. He'd heard it first a day ago. He didn't look at his wristwatch. She was on time. Music or no music, she had pushed the carriage around that bend every morning at 9:30 for two months.

A bad thought flashed through his head. He had a ten o'clock appointment with Dr. Adson, arranged by the Boss. The doctor was to examine Paul, try to cure his brainquake. But Paul was going to be late.

For two months he had lacked courage to speak to her. This morning he had the courage.

The sun made the big, black carriage nosing round the bend shine like wet tar. He would write a poem about it. The red rose he'd left at her apartment door yesterday was clipped to the top of the carriage hood.

Suddenly he was slammed by an emotion he had never felt. Jealousy. For two months she was alone. Now the blonde, blue-eyed, ivory-faced girl—his girl, his Ivory Face—was with a stranger, pushing the carriage past the two cops. One cop younger, one older. Paul had seen them every morning for two months at the bend. They were smiling at the baby in the carriage.

The baby was hypnotized by the toy monkey dangling from the wire clamped to the top of the hood between the music box and Paul's rose.

The balloon peddler stopped shuffling. Only the cluster of his balloons was moving in the gentle breeze. His amused eyes followed the hypnotized baby who believed that the monkey was making the music.

It stopped.

The baby, having learned the magic way to make the monkey play the same music again, pulled the monkey's long tail.

The music box began playing *Frère Jacques*. The gun fired from the carriage. The bullet shattered the stranger's throat. His blood splattered the baby. The stranger fell. Ivory Face collapsed beside him. The baby cried. The balloon peddler hurled his soprano shout:

"*The baby shot him!*"

The two cops streaked past the peddler holding onto the cluster of balloons, his finger pointing at the carriage and the crying baby. Paul jumped to see if Ivory Face was hurt but his jump didn't take place. He was nailed to the bench. The nutcracker squeezed his brain. Shouting in silence with excruciating pain, he heard the music of the flute. The tidal wave of blood drowned his brain. Paul jerked, shook, rumbled.

The brainquake came.

The explosion turned everything pink. The epicenter cracked his brain open, registering 7.7 on the Richter scale. Blood cells

fell into the crevice. Fleeing blood cells were sucked into it. Paul ran naked. Another tremor. 7.8. Paul was chased by the toy monkey playing the flute. The monkey was chased by the two naked cops. The young cop was cranking blood cells out of the music box. The older cop swung the crying baby tied on a rope like a bola. The baby smashed into Paul who fell into the crevice. The rope coiled around Paul's throat. Blood cells sucked them down toward death…

The brainquake was over.

Sound of flute, color of pink gone. *Frère Jacques* still playing on music box. Baby crying. Green grass blinding. Blue sky beautiful. White clouds lovely. Sitting on the bench with book still in hand, the sweating Paul was a trip-hammer staring at the darker blue blur rising from the unconscious Ivory Face.

"Just shock." The blue became sharper. The young cop left Ivory Face on the ground.

His older partner, now in razor-sharp focus too, was still checking the dead stranger. The young cop reached into the carriage for the blood-covered crying baby.

"Don't touch it!" his partner boomed. "Don't touch a goddam thing in that carriage!" The old harness bull grunted, forcing himself to his feet, his back killing him, his hip knifing him. "Get Homicide and an ambulance."

He left a trail of blood to reach the closest eyewitness, sitting on the bench with a book of poems. He jerked Paul to his feet, thumped Paul's arms above his head, frisked him for gun, seized wallet, plucked the book from his hands, checked the book for a gun, tossed book on bench, checked bushes behind bench, turned trash bin upside down, dumped bottles, plastic bags, condoms, trash on ground, kicked around for the gun, pushed down Paul's upright arms.

"Where'd that shot come from?" he thundered.

A scraping sound from Paul's mouth. With effort he forced out each word.

"I was reading."

"That why you're sweating?"

Paul nodded.

"I didn't hear you."

"Yes."

The old bull pointed to Paul's throat. "What's wrong with you? Cancer?"

Paul nodded. That was easiest.

"See anybody running away after the shot?"

Paul shook his head.

The bull boomed over his shoulder at the young cop, who was now ringed by men, women, children. "Keep 'em away from the carriage, goddamit! But don't let 'em leave!" He blasted Paul's ear, "You heard the shot. Where'd it come from?"

"Backfire."

"You thought it was *backfire*?"

Paul nodded.

"You a wiseguy?"

Paul shook his head.

"What do you do, wiseguy?"

"Drive hack."

"Why aren't you?"

"Day off."

"Come here on your day off?"

Be careful! He'll take me in. The Boss'll be angry. Why aren't they taking care of her? She looks hurt. She looks dead. I'm all mixed up. What did he say? His voice hurts…

"I asked you—"

"Yes. Sit here. On my day off."

Why did I tell him? Why is he staring at me?

Paul felt fear. The cop was old but big.

The cop pointed at the carriage. "Seen that carriage before?"

Paul shook his head.

"What company you hack for?"

"Indie."

The cop opened Paul's wallet, studied his driver's license, read the words aloud: "Paul Page. One Rose Road. Where is Rose Road?"

"Battery."

"Still reside there?"

Paul nodded.

"Rose Road…Rose Road…" He rumbled through years of street names in his head. "Old graveyard there?"

Paul nodded.

"Busted-down shacks near a busted-down warehouse?"

Paul nodded.

"You live in one of those shacks?"

Paul nodded.

The cop slapped the wallet shut, pushed it into Paul's chest. "Stay put on that bench. Homicide'll want to talk to you." He left to question the people his young partner had detained. Paul sat down slowly, his eyes on Ivory Face, still lying on the ground looking bloodied and lifeless just like the dead man who lay only steps away. Why weren't they doing anything about her? About the baby? How could a baby shoot that man?

Angry voices invaded his thoughts. The balloon peddler was screaming at the cops:

"I saw the baby shoot that gun!"

"Listen to him," a man called out. "He's a witness."

"You cops are a joke!" a woman shouted.

The old bull controlled himself. "Ma'am, there's no gun in the carriage."

"Look again!" a man shouted.

Heckling didn't bother him. But one of those bastards could report him for not following up on a citizen's eyewitness bullshit. Four months to retirement, he had to tiptoe. Angrily, ashamed of himself, he returned to the carriage, trailed by the young cop.

He knew the people were watching him closely so he made a big deal of the way he looked in the carriage, saw nothing, just blood on the torn blue blanket and under it the baby, wailing. He whirled on the peddler, seizing chest bones, lifting the sparrow off his feet.

"You spread word that baby fired the gun, you castrated sonofabitch, I'll book you in the shithouse."

Then, thinking a moment, he put the man down, turned back. The baby's shrill crying tore the cop's ears but oddly enough it wasn't the sound that bothered him. He looked in the carriage for the third time because he remembered that rip in the blue blanket. It was hard to see in the blood. But he remembered it, now studied it, kept leaning over, bending lower. He lifted the blood-splotched blanket. Why the hell hadn't he done this before?

Between the baby's blue booties was a tiny hole in the white comforter. Slowly lifting it, he met the muzzle looking up at him.

His partner was by his side. "I'll be a sonofabitch, you'll retire a sergeant!" The young cop reached down for the baby, and was jerked back hard and fast.

"The nut that rigged it could've planted a booby trap under the baby," the old cop said.

"Bullshit!"

"I seen 'em in the war in toilets, water faucets, under dishes an' corpses."

"Bullshit!"

"Okay, go on, then, pick up the baby."

The young cop's hands reached down, touched the crying baby and froze.