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Opening Extract from...

Honky Tonk Samurai

Written by Joe R. Lansdale

Published by Mulholland Books

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First published in Great Britain in 2016 by Mulholland Books
An imprint of Hodder & Stoughton
An Hachette UK company

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A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

Trade Paperback ISBN 978 1 444 78721 4
eBook ISBN 978 1 444 78723 8

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

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Hodder & Stoughton Ltd
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

www.hodder.co.uk

Just when you think you got things learned good,
and life's flowing right, a damn Mack truck comes
along and runs your highly attractive ass over.

—Jim Bob Luke

1

I don't think we ask for trouble, me and Leonard. It just finds us. It often starts casually, and then something comes loose and starts to rattle, like an unscrewed bolt on a carnival ride. No big thing at first, just a loose, rattling bolt, then the bolt slips completely free and flies out of place, the carnival ride groans and screeches, and it sags and tumbles into a messy mass of jagged parts and twisted metal and wads of bleeding human flesh.

I'm starting this at the point in the carnival ride when the bolt has started to come loose.

• • •

The truck windows were rolled down and the heat wasn't quite unbearable yet, but the air had the smell toast gets as it begins to brown and you know the butter will spread clean. In less than a half an hour, about noon, my butt crack would be completely filled with sweat and breathing the air would be like swallowing fishhooks. I was already looking forward to loose clothes, a big glass of ice tea, and lots of air-conditioning.

We were sitting in Leonard's new-to-him pickup truck. He traded a

lot. So did I. I'm not sure why, but we were always getting a different car or truck, usually used. This one was a Dodge and it was silver, and it was only a few years old. We were two blocks down from the house we were watching.

The guy who lived in that house, the fellow we were waiting on, had a wife who thought he was cheating and had hired the Marvin Hanson Agency to find out if he was and who with. She was brokenhearted and wanted everything to be all right, and if it wasn't she wanted to divorce him in a serious and financially lucrative way that would cause him to have to sell his balls for a place to sleep.

We weren't full-time employees, but we worked for Marvin quite a bit, a lot more lately. Divorce work, or potential divorce work, however, was not my idea of a good time, but the lady had hired the agency for two weeks of surveillance. We were on the last day of the job, and what we had pretty well determined was her sixty-year-old husband wasn't cheating on her at all, but he was going at odd hours to the gym, and we had a pretty good guess he didn't want to tell her.

Leonard thought it was because the idea embarrassed him, having to work out, or wanting to. That seemed peculiar to me, but Leonard understands that kind of thinking more than I do. For a gay guy he's much more tuned in to machismo than I am, so I guess he could be right. I figured the fellow was just going to surprise her with his new body, hoping one day she'd look up and say how good he looked. Maybe he kept going so much because she hadn't said anything.

Irony was, we had noticed that even in the last two weeks he'd dropped some pounds and muscled up a bit, and she had noticed over the last few months the same thing, but hadn't mentioned it to him because she thought he was dieting and buying new clothes because he had a chippie piece on the side. That's how she said it. "I think he's got a little chippie piece on the side."

I hadn't heard the word *chippie* used in many a moon, but the sad thing was I was old enough to remember when it was more common. I was starting to feel as if I were getting along in years and the recent ones

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were angry at me. By the time you're fifty you start to realize just how much of your time on earth you've wasted.

Anyway, we were sitting there watching him come out of the house, ready to follow, knowing full well by this time he didn't have a chippie piece on the side and that this was our last day so we would coast it on out for the dollar and give her our report. She had paid in advance and wanted two weeks, so I didn't feel we were sucking money she didn't want to spend.

I had been on a diet myself. I always exercised, and hard, and was usually in better shape than I looked, but lately I wanted to look it again, because Brett, my red-headed woman looked so good. I wanted to make my body more like the way I felt. But truth was, I had had to change my workout methods. I had dropped lifting heavy weights and gone to doing more reps with light weights. Jogging a little, but doing more walking than before. It seemed to be working. I was never going to be pretty, but I preferred not being able to rest a glass on my stomach when I was sitting down, as if it were an end table.

Even Leonard, who normally looked firm and ready for action all the time, had changed his eating and workout habits a little, because for the first time in a long time fat had crept in around his middle. He claimed it was protecting his gooey chocolate center. But since he was black as rich chocolate all over, I told him that seemed kind of redundant. And on top of that I didn't want to know about his gooey chocolate center.

There we sat, me reflecting on these things and holding in a wheatbread fart out of courtesy, when Leonard said, "What the hell?"

He was looking at a yard across the street from our car. A man had a dog on a leash and the dog was cowered on its belly and the man was kicking it, and I could hear him screaming at it. The dog yelped a couple of times after the kicks.

Leonard was already out of the car by this time and crossing the street.

I got out and went around and followed, heard Leonard yell, "Hey, motherfucker, how about you try kicking me?"

The man stopped his dog abuse and looked up.

I let the fart ease out. I did it quietly, not wanting to frighten the dog. I left the fart where I had laid it like a rotten egg and moved away from the smell.

“Who the hell are you?” the man said to Leonard.

“I’m the man fixing to put that leash on your neck and kick you all over this goddamn yard like a soccer ball.”

“You’re trespassing,” the man said.

“That’s just where I start,” Leonard said. “How about I put one of your goddamn eyes out?”

Appeared like a start to a fairly ordinary day for us.

I stayed at the curb while Leonard stood in the yard talking. I was waiting patiently, ready to stop Leonard from the death blow, which I was fairly certain might be coming.

“Take two of you to do it?” said the man, checking us both out. He was a pretty big guy, about Leonard’s height, wider than both of us, bigger belly than us put together. He had the air of someone who had once run with a football and thought that gave him an edge for life. Maybe he should get with his neighbor who went to the gym, get some diet and exercise tips. Still, he was big enough to cause problems, even if it was just falling on you.

“No,” Leonard said. “Just one of us.”

I said, “And you can choose which one. Just for the record, I can hit harder. But I was thinking I’d rather not get all worked up. The heat, you know.”

“He can’t hit harder,” Leonard said. “Faster, but I actually hit a little harder.”

“He’s a braggart,” I said. “We both know I can hit harder, and I’m faster, too.”

“You don’t neither one of you look so tough to me,” he said.

“Why don’t you show us how tough you are?” Leonard said. “You do pretty good with a defenseless dog wants to please you, but we don’t want to please you. Right, Hap?”

“Right,” I said.

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"Tell him again."

"Right. Not in the pleasing mood."

"Tell you what, ass wipe," Leonard said. "Give me the dog, let me take it with me, and we'll call it a day, and you get to keep your face like it is. With a nose on it and everything. Without me punching a fucking hole in it."

The guy laughed. "You are nuts. Both of you."

"That's what I'm trying to warn you about," Leonard said. "But I don't think you're listening."

By this point I could tell the man was starting to worry a little. That was a good idea. Leonard might truly be nuts. Some people didn't even think it was open to discussion.

"You want him, or should I go on and beat the shit out of him?" Leonard said to me.

"I'll just be here to stop you should you go too far."

"Hey, now," the man said. "You're in my yard. I'll call the cops."

"I don't think you'll make it to the door," Leonard said. "Got a cell phone in your pocket, you won't have time to punch in the numbers. I promise you that. And if you call afterward, it ain't going to help you none. The deed will be done. And they might have a hard time understanding you, as you might be missing some teeth, trying to talk with your nose gone. They might have to read your fucking lips you still got any. Now apologize to the dog and give the poor thing to me."

"Apologize to the dog?"

"Yeah, apologize."

"I'm not apologizing to any goddamn dog."

"I would if I were you," I said. "He means it."

"Fuck you. She's my dog."

"Not anymore," I said.

Leonard crossed the yard then. He moved swiftly. It was like those old Dracula movies when the vampire glides over the earth with the ease of a windblown mist. The man let go of the dog's leash. The dog, a young German shepherd mix, maybe a year old at the most, remained cowed.

I hated to see that. I loved dogs. I loved animals. People I'm a little more mixed on, so I didn't hate what was about to happen to the asshole in the yard, though I had to consider the cops might take a different view if the guy lived long enough and was strong enough to call them. Or maybe some neighbor looking out the window had already given them a call. Probably filming the whole thing on a cell phone.

The man put his hands up, clenched his fists in what he thought was a boxing position.

Shit, I could tell from the way he stood this wasn't even going to be a good fight.

Leonard didn't even put his hands up, just walked right up to the guy. The man threw a haymaker so slow and cumbersome we could have damn near driven home, had a cup of coffee, and come back before it landed.

It didn't.

Leonard looped his arm over the strike as he stepped in, most of the guy's force going around Leonard's back, the arm itself trapped to Leonard's side. Leonard lunged forward and shot out a palm that caught the guy in the nose and knocked him to the ground, or as close to that as he could get with Leonard still clutching his arm, partially lifting the guy's side off the ground.

The dog started to slink off on its belly like a soldier crawling in high grass. I went over and took the dog's leash. When I did the dog winced.

"It's okay, doggie," I said. "Uncle Leonard is kicking the bad man's ass."

By this time Leonard had let go of the man's arm and was kicking him sharply in the ribs, way that bastard had done the dog.

"How you like it?" Leonard said. "Enjoying that, asshole? Bark for me, cocksucker."

The guy didn't seem to be enjoying it. He started yelling, not barking. Hell, the dog had only yelped a little, this guy, you'd have thought was taking a real beating. And for him, I guess he was. Leonard actually seemed a little altruistic, I thought, considering it was all about animal mistreatment. Maybe he was getting old. Though actually he hadn't

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had much breakfast, so it might have just been his blood sugar was down.

After a bit, I guess Leonard got tired, because he quit kicking the guy, bent down, and retied his shoe, the string having come loose. When that was done I thought he'd go back to it, but he didn't.

The man, not learning his lesson, his face covered in blood from his nose to his chin, said, "That's assault, nigger."

"Couldn't leave well enough alone, could you?" I said.

Leonard had already grabbed him by the ears and was picking him up just enough to knee him in the face. Blood went everywhere, and the guy lay on the grass without moving. I hoped he had fallen in dog turds. I thought I saw one of his teeth gleaming wetly in the grass, like a cheap Cracker Jack prize.

Leonard came over to pet the dog. The dog let him. The dog seemed to know we were on her side. Leonard said to the dog, "When he wakes up I'll get him to apologize and maybe lick your ass."

"You didn't kill him, did you?" I asked.

"No, but I wanted to."

"Well, yeah," I said. "Me, too. But maybe it's best not to."

"Reckon so," Leonard said. "Still, not nearly as satisfying. Goddamn, what's that smell?"

"I'm having a little intestinal disturbance going on. My body does not deal well with wheat."

"Quit eating it. God, man. That's just foul and wrong. Let's move to some other spot."

2

I continued petting the dog, soothing it, and as dogs do, it stood up, wobbled, and licked my face. I think it would even have licked its crummy master's face. It's why I prefer dogs to cats. Cats aren't independent, they're just entitled assholes who want to be fed and do nothing. They're your owners. A dog just loves you. It's not about ownership or anything like that. They are sincere as death and taxes. They're the best creatures on the earth. Still, had it been a cat being mistreated, the bastard would still have gotten his ass kicked. But I would have taken a moment to tell the cat how I felt about his species. Not that it would have been listening or interested in thanking me. It would already be making its plans for the day. Lie around and shit in a box, puke hairballs on the floor, scratch up the furniture, and expect a treat for the effort. All dogs go to heaven. All cats go to hell.

The cops pulled up. One car. We were a little surprised to see Marvin Hanson, our boss, get out of the passenger side and stroll across the yard, look down on the guy, and say, "He doesn't look so bad."

The officer got out of the car. I didn't know his name, but I'd seen him around. Young guy. Leonard and I were no strangers to the police station. I tried not to worry too much about the cops' names, since they came and went faster than a john on holiday in Amsterdam. The

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young cop came over. He said, "Lady across the street called, said a guy was kicking his dog and we ought to come get him for animal cruelty."

"That's a good thing," I said. "But we thought it might take a little while, so we made a citizen's arrest."

"And trespassed and committed assault," Marvin said. His worn black face creased in a half smile. At least I think it was a smile. He might have been baring his teeth. I couldn't quite tell the difference. Marvin is not what you would call a pretty man.

"If you want to be that technical," Leonard said. "Sheesh."

"What are you doing with the cops?" I said to Marvin.

"He doesn't care what company he keeps," said the officer. He was a little guy, fat-faced, with stubby arms and legs, dark-skinned. He looked like a gingerbread man made with the last of the dough.

"Yeah, if my wife asks who I was with," Marvin said, turning to look at the cop, "for God's sake tell her I was buying drugs and was with a male prostitute. Don't mention the boys in blue."

"Done," the cop said.

"But between me and you," I said, "I still got to ask. What are you doing with the pigs, as we old rebels used to call them?"

"That's just mean," said the cop.

I liked this guy. I looked at his name tag. He might be worth remembering. Carroll was his last name.

"I been meaning to tell you," Marvin said. "I got my old job back. Police chief."

You could have knocked me over with a green pea. Before I could ask about the particulars, Marvin, who had recently abandoned his cane, though he had a slight limp if you knew to watch for it, strolled over and looked down at the guy, who was awake now and trying to sit up.

Marvin said, "Can you stand up?"

"I think so," said the man.

"Why don't you do that if you can?" Marvin said. "I'm with the cops."

"He called me a nigger," Leonard said.

"That's a tiebreaker in this modern world unless you use it in a rap song," Marvin said.

"I was just angry," said the man.

The guy gradually got himself collected enough to get to his feet. Marvin put his left hand on the guy's right shoulder, said, "Were you kicking this dog?"

"She kept pulling the leash," the man said. "I was trying to teach her."

"What were you teaching her?"

"To behave. To quit yanking me."

"So you kicked her?" Marvin said. "That was your instruction?"

"Had it coming. Hell, it's a dog. My dog."

Marvin's right hand moved then. It was quick, a slap to the guy's bloody face, a back hand, another slap, a swift knee in the nuts, and the guy was on the ground again. Marvin looked at the officer. "Damn if I wasn't just angry."

"You were just trying to teach him," Leonard said.

"I can't believe that," said the officer. "That son of a bitch tried to resist arrest. And to the brand-new police chief."

"Yeah, ain't that something?" Marvin said. "No respect for the goddamn law."

"Sign of the times," said the officer.

"Next the sun will go cold," said Leonard.

"I hear you," said the officer. "Just this morning, my coffee wasn't quite right."

"There you are," Leonard said. "It's already started. The end of the world as we know it. The goddamn fucking apocalypse."