

**RAVENOUS**  
*(A Curmudgeon's Tale)*

by  
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When the cops arrived at my apartment to arrest me I gave them a difficult time. First of all, I was in my house trousers, which my neighbors claim is a shirksome euphemism: any one of them will take every opportunity to instruct me that, no matter what I call the things covering my lower half, association rules prohibit the wearing of pajamas in public spaces. “Fuck the rules,” I tell them, “I’m only fetching my mail.”

I told the cops they had no right to arrest me. I didn’t give a crap what video they had as so-called evidence. (One of them went so far as to replay it for me on his telephone: miserable hack.)

“I shot a crow,” I protested. “It was a public nuisance: kept shitting on my windowsill. It would swoop by like a demon with wings, squawking its shrieks of death. Of course I shot the thing. Since when is it a crime to act on your conscience in this country? Huh?”

How I loathe authority.

Loathe and crave.

We always want the one thing we can not have.

“You gonna put a shirt on?” asked the first cop.

Bear witness, mind you: it takes two elephantine whorebusters bulging at the seams of their grey cop pantsuits to arrest me. Two! Two steroid junkies to bring down one sad wreck. What a match! Put it on pay-per-view! “Lousy whorebaiter,” I said to him. “Of course I’m going to put a shirt on. I’m not going to spend my last night on earth in a freezing cold prison cell with a bunch of murderers and no shirt on. Afford me to put on a pair of shoes, as well—or isn’t there enough time before the donut shop closes?”

I then got dressed at gunpoint, muttering invectives beneath my breath.

“Want me to add *resisting arrest* to your charges?” threatened bespoken cop number two, who had overheard my grumblings. In my head I whispered that he could don his mother’s dresses and parade through the streets of Chicago with his asshole painted yellow, I didn’t give a shit. “What’s another 30 days in solitary confinement?” I said. “Go for it.”

So this is my reward for seventy-nine years of life: some little fuck, some shitty little fuck takes a video of me pulling a gun out of my trousers and gunning down a crow in the park across the street from my apartment building. He posts it on YouTube and gets 18,000 views. Meanwhile I have to spend a night in the slammer with bona fide murderers.

Miserable wretch of technology.

“WHEN DID THE LAWS OF PRIVACY GET RESCINDED? AT WHAT POINT DID MY LIFE BECOME FODDER FOR THE PIGS OF SOCIETY TO LAP UP FROM THEIR PUBLIC TROUGH? WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH THIS COUNTRY? I’LL TELL YOU WHAT’S WRONG! THE MORAL ATHEISTS WILL TIE YOU TO AN ELECTRIC CHAIR WHILE COMPASSIONATE CHRISTIANS SLIT YOUR THROAT AS BANKERS PULL THOUSAND DOLLAR BILLS OUT OF THEIR ASSES. THAT’S WHAT’S WRONG WITH THIS GODDAM COUNTRY!”

Some deputy comes by and hammers his nightstick against the bars: “Got a problem, gunner?” he says to me. As his leer shifts toward the sorry landscape of my neighboring convicts, a few of them shout at me to “Shut the hell up, old man!”

“Fuck off!” I tell them, “I’ve a right to speak my mind. I’ve a right to seek out the one quiet spot on earth, which is my mind, even if it resembles to you some geriatric circus.”

The deputy bangs the bars again and I sit down on my spot on the bench in the overnight tank and I flip him the bird.

“Watch it!” he barks.

“What’re you going to do?” I say. “Rape me? Doubtful. Throw me in solitary? Do me a favor!” Lousy fuck. Lousy law school flunkie. The only reason he’s on prison patrol is because he couldn’t survive a beat on the street. Pansy cop. Holds arguments with old men behind bars. USELESS SON OF A BITCH.

Just then a black man with the girth of a train car and the scent of a Southside gutter hovers over me and groans, “Shut it, old man. We can hear every word you’re saying.”

“Fine,” I tell him. “What are you going to do? Kick my ass? Go ahead and prove your manhood. Not good enough? You wanna kill me? And add 15 to 20 onto what’s already your life sentence, just for this sack of skin and bones? Go ahead. Such prowess. Do me no favors. Take me out of this miserable wretch of an asylum.”

I came to my senses, or what’s left of them, some unknown moments later. The throbbing in the side of my face reminded me of a gun butt I took to the chin right before the Army flung me out of basic training onto my “sorry, pathetic ass. You’ll never be a soldier.” To which I replied: “Fuck you. Keep me out of your belligerent arms. I don’t need to fly to Asia to kill a bunch of Koreans so the French can get their cotton for nothing and the Russians can steal natural gas from the Chinese...or whatever it is you’re sucking us in for: killing for sport and economics. Go fuck yourself!” I hollered as they escorted me off of the grounds.

Pushing eighty, I’ve turned into the madman I’ve always feared becoming. Often I wonder, as I climb the stairs to the second floor after getting my mail each day, as I scream at the habitual drunkards outside my window at night, as I curse under my breath at the poor derelicts who are forced to sleep in their cars at the edge of the park due to grim economics and perhaps a dose of their own stupidity, at what point did the vehicle of life take such a sharp turn that I was flung out the back door and landed in this spot on my ass? Or has it simply been dragging me along all these years unknowingly, tied to its ragged bumper?

I like to tell people—those who will speak with me kindly—that I’ve reached nirvana: I don’t give a shit about anything. In the prison cell, however, surrounded by maudlin thieves and the miscellaneous refuse of society, some of it foul-smelling, some of it unsurprising, this ruse, this *schaudenfreude* of nothingness that compels me forward long enough to see what will follow in the course of a day after I’ve had my coffee and wiped my ass—there in the cell, where the chill seeps into your shoes and the universe watches you take a piss, I suddenly cared a great deal for my life’s sad disposition. In that squalid hole in a cavernous maze alongside the freeway, freedom lay out of reach for the prisoners, the sound of racing cars an intentional taunt heard round the clock by detainees, myself included—.

Oh, and fine, now my head is throbbing...Lousy sons of bitches. Which of these rapists is the one who socked me in the jaw? He’ll die a gruesome death, if only I could have my way.

“What did you do with the gun?” the public defender asked me through the bars of the cage. She was a tough cookie, a man-spearing lesbian who no doubt took a shimmy up the rumpole every once and a while.

“Why should I tell you that?” I replied. “If I tell you where the gun is then there will be evidence against me.”

“There’s already a videotape of you shooting the bird.”

“What if it wasn’t me? How can they prove it? If they don’t have a gun for evidence they can’t prove a goddam thing.”

“You’re laughing as you shoot it; and then you’re shown walking back into your apartment building. There’s a closeup. That’s more than enough proof. If you tell me where the gun is the judge might consider that a willingness to cooperate. That would play in your favor.”

“Will it get the charges dismissed?”

“No.”

“Then why bother?”

“Because it’s the difference between doing time and going home free.”

“Free?! Do you think I’m free in that grey hovel?”

The woman shook her drab head of hair and said insistently, “Just tell me.”

“Fine,” I told her. “I threw it down the trash chute.”

She looked at me oddly. “The trash chute?”

“What’s a man supposed to do after committing homicide? Hang the thing on his front door?”

The public defender laughed. “This isn’t homicide. You’ve only been charged with discharging a firearm within city limits. That and a lesser charge of malicious intent.”

“AND FOR THAT I’M BEING HELD IN THIS GULAG, BEING BEATEN BLOODY BY DRUG FIENDS AND PEDERASTS?! I’ve lived eighty years with malicious intent—(well, 70 if you discount my reasonably happy childhood). How is it now that I should be so illicitly punished?”

“Just—,” she raised a hand, “—hang on. We’ll get you out of here soon enough. I’m going to see the judge and ask that you be released and get a trial date set.”

“I’m to be taken to trial?! For killing a bird?!”

“Your first charge is a felony. Granted, there are extenuating circumstances—.”

“Yes! The life I took was unable to speak except in warbled laughter! Meanwhile I’ve been beaten to a pulp by a gorilla with pseudo-language skills and a miscreant odor about his chest.”

“Take it easy, take it easy. So the weapon is in the dumpster in the apartment building?”

“Yes,” I said to her insipid inquiry. “The trash is picked up on Thursday, and unless I’ve been so beaten that I’ve lost my sense of time and been in here for days as opposed to merely a scratching surfeit of insufferable hours, than the trash has not been picked up and the weapon is still in its place.”

“Where did you buy it?”

“It?”

“The gun.”

“What does that matter? Dive in the dumpster and retrieve your prize. I’ve already had mine, and one presumes that after the trial I will be given yet more.”

“If we can demonstrate that you purchased the gun legally, that’ll play in your favor, too.”

“Of course it was legally purchased. What do you think, I went to the worst possible part of town, schlepped my skin and bones up to the ugliest-looking hoodlum on the block and asked him to sell me a pistol? What else do you want from me?” I demanded. “My shoe size so I can be fitted for shackles?”

“Just tell me,” she said.

Very well.

I had gone to the worst neighborhood in town and looked around for a pawn shop. I found one, luckily, not too far from the bus stop and adjacent to a Baptist church. The inside looked like a psychotic’s attic, filled with trash he’d been collecting from yard sales held by the relatives of deceased grandmothers over the years. The place smelled old and rusty, the way you would expect such a dump to smell.

“Help you?” asked a beige man with a round face and a black beard and moustache, who was leaning back in his chair behind the counter.

“I need a gun.”

He righted himself. “What kind of gun?”

“What kind of asinine question is that?” I said. “I want a gun that kills.”

“Well, there’s lots of guns: handguns, shotguns, semi-automatics...”

“What on earth does anybody need a machine gun for?”

The corduroy doughboy shrugged his shoulders, feigning ignorance.

“I want a simple gun that kills,” I repeated. “Got anything like it?”

“How big?”

“Small. Small enough to fit in my trousers.”

“Gonna kill somebody?” he asked drably.

“I’m going to kill a bird.”

“For that you need a gun?”

“What do you propose I use? A screwdriver? The goddam thing flies. It’s not like it’s sitting in a cage. If it were in a cage I could take it out of the cage and break its neck and flush it down the john and we wouldn’t be having this conversation, would we?”

“Ever bought a gun before?”

“Of course not, you fool. If I’d bought a gun before I wouldn’t be in here looking for one. I would’ve saved myself a bus ride across town into this shithole of a neighborhood and killed the bird and cooked it for dinner by now, instead of being harangued by not one but two irrelevant questions out of your smarmy lips.”

“There’s a two week waiting period to buy a handgun.”

“Two weeks? Two more weeks I have to endure that screeching devil?” Twenty years I survived a screeching wife, but two more weeks with that bird would have pushed me into insanity. “Do I have to wait for something more effective?”

“Any gun: two weeks wait while we run a background check.”

“What do you mean a background check?”

“You give me your social and your driver’s license and we run a check with the FBI and the police to make sure you don’t have any priors.”

“Prior whats?”

“Convictions.”

“Of course I don’t have any prior convictions. I’m an eighty year old lethargic who makes one pass around the park each day on foot while waiting for my social security check to arrive. What kind of priors would I have? Think I killed my wife? (I should have. Would have, if I’d known she was going to take me to the cleaners when she divorced me. Would have, if I’d known where to buy a gun easily in this goddam town.)”

The bearish looking salesman—junk trader is what he was; a crook and a charlatan—looked at me with a wrinkled forehead as if to suggest my little tirade might be jeopardizing my Second Amendment right. “It’s the law,” he said.

“Fuck the law. I only want to kill a bird.”

After we naggled a little bit over the validity of making the elderly wait to get their guns and casually discussed the efficacy of *cash* in the clearing of bureaucratic hurdles, the camel baron laid out a few shiny weapons on the counter. They lay on a burgundy cloth like metallic corpses in a coffin. The sight delighted me. It titillated me in spots within my body I’d long since forgone as already dead.

“What about this one?” I pointed to a chrome-barreled beauty with a mahogany handle. “Will it kill a bird with one bullet?”

“Shred it to smithereens,” he said.

I had to clap my hands I was so delighted. “Can I hold it?”

“You better. That’s the only way to know if you can shoot it.”

“Ooh, it feels good,” I told him. It *was* good. It felt delicious in my decrepit fingers. I slid my finger round the trigger and dallied it with my finger the way I once, early in our courtship, dallied with my wife to her profound delight. “Ha ha!” I laughed, and was worried I might wet myself. Then: “What about this one?”

He traded me the mahogany-handled beauty for a long-nosed, solid shaft of chrome. *Like a Cadillac*, came to my mind. “Sleek.” I moved it down towards my hip. “May I?” I asked. “I just want to see if it fits.”

“Be my guest.”

I slid the shiny beauty into my pocket, only to find that the handle juttred out too far and was slung uncomfortably. “I’d need a holster,” I told the counterpuss.

“No good,” he said obligingly. “It’ll ruin the element of surprise.”

“Damn birds,” I muttered before swapping the Cadillac for a little Trojan. “Now this one—,” I said wickedly of the small dark beauty as I slid it into my trouser pocket, “fits perfectly.” The steel of the gun against my fragile thigh gave me a surge of strength and autonomy I’d never had before. “I’ll take it,” I told the man.

“Two-fifty,” he replied.

“Two hundred fifty dollars for this?!”

“It’s a beauty,” he said.

“Yes,” I said astonishingly, “but this is a pawn shop, it isn’t Cartier.”

“Two-twenty-five,” he countered.

“Oh, you want to haggle?” I told him—lousy dime store buggerer. “I’ll give you forty dollars.”

“You’re crazy, old man! Two hundred. That’s it.”

*See how easily you go down on me*, I wanted to tell him. But it was clear he was willing to haggle so therefore I didn’t want to insult him. Hagglers get upset if you impugn their dignity. Better to toss this one a few words of false charity—a virtual cocksucking, if you will; only a few lickers, though, not the whole shebang. So I told the rugmaster sweetly, “I’m an old man on a budget. Haven’t you anything cheap and effective that I can kill a nasty raven with?”

The public defendant asked me why I shot the bird.

“That’s really a rather personal question, isn’t it?”

“You committed a felony,” she said coolly. “Expect to be asked personal questions.”

“Couldn’t I just plead the Fifth Amendment?”

“You can, but more likely than not you’ll be convicted.”

“How about insanity?”

“Do you like psychiatric hospitals?”

The options gave me pause, allowing my blood—that which hadn’t been spilt on my shirt—to begin to boil.

“No answer?” she probed.

“Fine, then, the sons of bitches.” I motioned for her to lean closer to the bars.

“You’re not going to grab me, are you?” she asked. “Try something daring?”

“Of course,” I told her, “I haven’t had enough beatings for one day.” If she would move her tight-cropped mens’ suit closer to the cage I would tell her why I shot that motherfuckingbird.

“Was it because...” she referred to a paper copy of the arrest record, which she held in a file, “... ‘*it shit on your windowsill*’?”

“Hardly!” I told her. “Do I look like an idiot? What idiot would shoot a bird for taking a shit? If every idiot in this city shot a bird for taking a shit, we would be living in a fog of gunpowder.” No, I told her emphatically, “I shot it because it mocked me!”

“It mocked you?”

“It mocked me,” I repeated quietly, hoping to avoid the words falling on felonious eardrums.

“How—?”

“Sh-h!” I instructed, and she repeated herself in a softer voice, no doubt a strain: “How did it mock you?”

“By flying.”

Once she’d finished badgering me, the public defendant disappeared down the corridor. I went back to my bench, leaned down and tried to rest away the aching in my face. In time I

managed to fall asleep. In one dream I was at trial, where it was revealed that the crow I killed was actually a rare, urban dwelling red-tipped raven.

I yelled at the witness, some putative ornithary genius with a pointy beak like a sparrow's and a grey business suit he'd retrieved out of the garbage: "Lousy false intellectual!" Then to the prosecutor: "In which tea-bagging rest stop did you find this so-called expert?! How much did you pay him to spout these lies?"

"The red-tipped raven—," the bespectacled witness started to speak.

"Commie bird!" I shouted. "Enough of your lies of rarity; death to your Greenpeace antics! Stomp the warbler desert mouse! Slaughter all the whales!"

"But there are no more communists!" shouted a spectator from within the courtroom. "Castro's dead!"

I stopped my tirade in mid-expression. Castro's dead?

Are you kidding me? I had to ask.

Yes, the stranger swore, Castro was dead.

In my dream I wept: Castro's dead. The world's last true communist—no more idealist activists—they're all dead.

What about Chavez in Venezuela? someone else hollered out.

Fuck Chavez, he's an impostor! The Chinese, too! They're a bunch of ill-mannered oligarchs in neckerchiefs, and nothing more. A bunch of goddam pervert pretenders, all of them.

Some other torment of sleep ensued and in short order I was awakened by the sound of voices and rummaging—if you could call it waking; it was more like sleepwalking in death. My left shoulder was numb from resting on the miserable bench and my right hand was stuck to blood on my shirt. In my sleep I must have re-opened my wounds, as my hand was covered in crimson tears. A gaggle of convicts, one or two them nothing more than lousy drunkards who'd slept off their binges and been given back their shoelaces, were being led out of the cell down the hall, ostensibly to be released. In some other country they might have been executed. This being

America, they were being re-given their freedom, a right they forfeited for a brief period of time due to actions both unsuitable for civilized society and, if you subscribe to certain loftier opinions, morally reprehensible.

“Who you talking about?” asked a hovering convict who saw fit to appear menacingly in front of me.

I’d had my heady dose of shadowy felons and didn’t care what this one intended to do with me. “Are you the son of a bitch who hit me?” I asked him.

“What of it?” he said.

In the corner of my eye I could see my nut-crushing gal in pinstripes approaching with the cocksucking deputy, who was reaching for his keys. “Go fuck yourself if you are,” I told him ravenously.

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