

Peacemaker

by Mathew Paust



He knew it was wrong the instant he threw it. Not the punch per se. The punch was perfect. His best. A quick left, lightning strike from hip straight to head. He'd practiced it one hundred times a day for years, smashing the heavy bag in his writing room, between paragraphs. Practiced it so much his left arm was the only part of him still buff, its hand nearly double the size of the right.

No, there was nothing at all wrong with the punch. Never had been. Never failed him. For this he loved it, the punch, his friend. Best friend, truth be told. Bodyguard. Hell, that damned punch had saved his life *and* his alpha male reputation (linked umbilically), as a writer, of course, but, almost as importantly, as a man.

He had the cannonball head of Hemingway, the stump neck, sloping shoulders, barrel chest. He had a full head of white hair, which he kept trimmed just so, and had cultivated the full beard, kept likewise. He'd perfected the immutable *youlookinatme?* mien, with the mitigating oral sensitivity that signaled grin-or-grim-it's-up-to-you that could work only with the promise of a lethal punch to

back up a call. He had the good sense with the literary crowd to feign an almost convincing embarrassment at the obvious resemblance, playing instead a reverence for the more contemporary favorites.

Make no mistake. He was no lightweight with the writing. He had the chops, just not the luck. Not yet. Yet, he feared, as all good writers fear. He feared his chops were frail. Oh, God... The punch, though, no fickle conceit that. It was there for him. It had never failed. If it ever... But not now. The punch was as much god as he dared embrace.

And here's this little shit in front of him. This dumpy, pasty little shit who'd smirked at him earlier in the day at the conference, sneered as he'd lisped his way through prepared remarks on the pleasure it gave him to reject unacceptable manuscripts. The little shit editor had smirked straight at him, it seemed. And he knew this was the same little puke who'd rejected his submissions, numerous times, at least nine separate times, nine separate damned good stories, rejected them without a peep of encouragement. Just no. No. No. No no no no no no. Faggoty little twit.

Perhaps you'd like to come up for a drink. The puny editor had dared to proposition him in front of the urinals. No. You're a writer, I saw you in the room. No. You're the McCarthy aficionado heehee. That's when the nasty pile of shit reached out a hand. Assault. Any witness would agree.

The punch came without thought. Ordinarily it sprang from a conviction it was do-or-die, to end a threat or preempt one implied, establish boundaries, primacy. Ordinarily he need only shift some weight to toes, a subtle crouch, widened stance. The potential adversary, if worthy, knew instantly his hand was in play. Hesitation meant blood. Ordinarily a graceful retreat, visible uncoiling of implication, nod, manly smile, buying of drink...and that was that. Ordinarily the punch rarely fired.

He knew instinctively, too late, this assault had quotes around it. The punch here could kill, and for what? Punish a sneer? Deny the queer? Ha. Deny that in the pen. What?

Head now in urinal, coming to as face slides down to splash among browned butts in puddle, piss stinking yellow wet, sore hand, oh shit hurts like hell, bleeding, something broke, oh goddam shit!

A hand. Shit. Come. My room. Clean you up. OK, honey, upsy daisy...

