

HOLES

The bottle of Merlot that sat next to the computer was already one glass away from empty. I needed to slow down a bit. Didn't need to go and end the night by 9:30. Hell, it was pathetic enough to be close to wine-smashed already, but it was New Years Eve, I was two short years from being officially middle-aged, and I was alone and sitting in front of the laptop. And a middle-aged guy who finally just gave in and re-adopted his old college nickname of Bones, along with the appropriate lifestyle to go with it, shouldn't be passing out at 9:30 from a bottle of wine. It's all too sad.

I tried not to dwell on it.

Hell, so far the night had been pretty successful. I'd found the perfect image. It had taken me a good hour and a half of searching the web, but I'd found what I was looking for. It was the perfect fit.

A crime scene photo.

A gunshot victim lying dead in his front yard. White guy. Age somewhere between 30 and 40. Shirtless. Redneck. Most likely a redneck, anyway. The rednecks were always shirtless in the crime scene photos.

He had three black bullet holes in his bare chest. Three perfect circles. One to the lower left of his fat, pasty gut. One smack-dab in the middle of his sternum. And one directly above his right breast. I wondered which one had been the finishing shot. Wouldn't have been the gut shot. No, it was definitely the sternum or the breast hit. Likely, the killer just fired three rounds haphazardly, not caring which one was going to do the job, knowing that at least one of them would.

There was a brown ring around each hole, with a line of brown trailing down from the one above his heart, extending a couple inches below the nipple. Dried blood. He'd obviously laid here a while before he was discovered. Probably just some redneck shot down in front of his trailer in the woods. Shot by a jealous wife or girlfriend, I bet.

It didn't matter. I wasn't concerned with his history. It was those bullet holes that interested me. They were the perfect fit.

I dragged the image into Photoshop. Moved the little magnifying glass over the hole in the gut and clicked it a few times. Magnified it. Filled the Photoshop window with a close-up of the shiny bullet hole in the nameless man's gut.

I switched the cursor to "selector mode," or whatever it's called. I dragged the cursor over the bullet hole, forming a blinking square around it, careful to only get the wound and the dried blood. To get as little of the man's skin as possible.

Perfect.

I hit Ctrl-C to copy the square onto the clipboard. I minimized the window. I clicked *File Open* and browsed my system until I found the file named bones_maui_2002.jpg. I opened it in the Photoshop window.

It was a picture of me, lying shirtless on a white, sandy beach. I was sleeping off a nasty tequila hangover, if I recall. There had been a lot of margaritas the night before. A lot of margaritas and a lot of late night drunken sex. It had been a good vacation.

I looked at that picture of me for a moment. Yeah, this was going to be a perfect fit. I moved the cursor over my sleeping body and clicked it on the lower left area of my gut. I hit Ctrl-V (paste). The bullet hole magically appeared. Right there on my lower gut. A perfect fit. Nice. Hell, on a passing glance, one could reasonably assume that the bullet hole was, in fact, mine. I repeated the process with the other two bullet wounds, selecting them on the picture of the dead redneck, copying, and pasting them in their respective spots on the photo of me.

I leaned back to admire my work.

Not too shabby. Not too shabby at all.

A little massaging with the Rubber Stamp tool, even out the slight differences in skin tone, and this baby would be complete.

The doorbell rang.

Hmm. She was early. No biggie. I could finish this up a little later.

I hit *File Save* and browsed through my file system until I found a folder named "personal." I navigated into the folder and saved the image as "bones-gunshot.jpg."

This was going to be one of the best.

Even better than my favorites thus far: bones-stabwound.jpg, bones-throatcut.jpg, and of course, the first one, the original masterpiece – bones-burnt.jpg.

Oh yes, bones-burnt.jpg. Man, I was proud of that one. Transferring all those burn marks, highlighting and copying every single skinny red and purple streak at a time, had taken almost six hours. But it was worth it. The results were flawless. The most studied eye wouldn't realize that I was not the original charred corpse. Yeah, I was proud of that work.

I got up and walked to the front door. I wondered what this one would look like. You could never correctly predict what you'd get. Even if you gave specific requirements, said you wouldn't have it any way but what you specifically described, you couldn't count on it. I think they just sent the first one available.

But that's okay. A little surprise never killed anybody.

I opened the door.

She stood on the front step. She was wrapped in a long black coat that was buttoned up the front and hung down to the top of her ankles. To the top of the high heel stilettos she wore. She clutched a shiny purple purse against her chest with both hands. She had jet black hair that flowed down to her shoulders, blending into her coat. It was dyed, I'm sure. The hair, not the coat. She was pretty. Couldn't be any older than twenty one or twenty two. I usually prefer them to be older. The young ones don't always work as well.

But like I said, it doesn't matter what you ask for. They just send the first one available.

No biggie.

"Come on in," I said.

She did. Began unbuttoning her coat. She was wearing a tight purple dress that stopped at the top of her thighs. Same bright, tacky color of her purse. I've had dress shirts that hang lower than that dress.

I held out my arm for her to drape the coat over and said, "So, they told me your name is Evelyn?"

"That's right," she replied. "And yours?"

"Bones."

"You got a real name, Bones?"

"Yes, I do."

She paused. Slightly taken aback by my shortness. I hadn't meant to be rude to the girl, but I guess

the bottle of wine had maybe numbed me enough where etiquette seemed a little less important.

She probably figured that I was just another horny asshole with no regard for the feelings of an escort girl. Only concerned with the outcome. To hell with the pleasantries.

“Well, Bones,” she began. “First of all, I carry a can of mace and a cell phone in my purse. Any funny business and I’ll...”

I waved my hand impatiently. “Yeah yeah, I know the rules.”

“You’ve done this before, then?” she asked.

“Yeah, I’ve done this before.”

“Well then, time is money, isn’t it? Where do you want to do this?”

“Ummm,” I stammered. This was always the hard part. The determining factor of which direction the night would go. “I was thinking that maybe we could have a glass of wine first.”

She just looked at me, untrusting.

“It’s alright,” I continued. “I’ll pay you for your time. I promise. And it’s good wine.”

“Whatever floats your boat, I guess,” she said.

I turned around and carried her coat into the kitchen. She followed. I folded her coat in half and placed it on the counter. I pointed over to the part of the counter that extended out of the kitchen, into the den area. Just a small rounded peninsula that served as a single man’s dinner table, so that he can watch TV while he eats his take-out. So he doesn’t have to sit there alone in silence. There were two chairs over at the “booth.” One was pulled out away from it a bit. The other was pressed up and under the counter, which is how it remained at all times. Except for nights like this, I guess.

“Have a seat,” I said.

She did.

I snatched a bottle opener from the drawer, grabbed the top bottle of wine from the rack above it, grabbed two wine glasses from the cabinet, and sat down in the empty chair across from her.

I watched her as I twisted the corkscrew into the bottle, grabbed the two thin silver wings of the opener, pushed down, and heard the peaceful pop of the cork going free.

“I hope you like Merlot,” I said. “I’m a red guy, and Merlot is pretty much all that I’ve got.”

“Merlot’s fine,” she answered, glancing around the counter, looking for an ashtray. “Do you smoke in

here?”

“Only when I’m drinking,” I replied.

“When’s that?”

“Most of the time.”

She laughed a little. Kind of a sympathetic chuckle, like she understood. And it seemed to humanize her just a bit, reduce that whole business aura that was stinking up the room. It opened me up a little, too. I laughed as I reached into the sink and grabbed a dirty glass. I put it on the counter between us.

She lit a cigarette as I poured the wine into her glass. She leaned back against her chair, turned her gaze up towards the ceiling and exhaled a cloud of smoke as I poured wine into my own. She held her box of Camels out to me and I took one. I lit it with her lighter that she had placed next to our makeshift ashtray.

I lifted my glass of wine to my lips, tilted it, and filled my mouth with Merlot. A whole mouthful. I swished it around, felt it wash across my teeth, rinse my gums. Not to taste the variations in grapes and subtle bite of tannins, but to taste the alcohol. Not in the oenologist way, but in the alcoholic way. I closed my eyes when I swallowed. Felt it flow down my throat, tickling my insides, warming my gut. I opened my eyes to see her looking at me.

“Pretty fucking good,” I breathed.

“Apparently,” she said, lifting her own glass.

And we sat that way for a while, drinking wine and smoking cigarettes, refilling our glasses when they got low, small talking about nothing of any consequence, until the bottle was empty.

“Another?” I asked.

She opened her mouth to speak. Glanced down at her watch.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “I fully intend to pay you for this time.”

“No,” she said. “It’s just that... Ok. Another bottle sounds fine.”

I stood up. Swaggered just a bit. Bit it didn’t matter. If you’re paying a girl to spend her time with you, the one thing you can expect is that she won’t judge your being a drunk. I walked over and grabbed the next bottle in the rack and brought it back.

I opened the bottle and held it out to her, resting it over my forearm like a waiter.

“Madam?” I announced.

She smiled and lifted her glass. I poured her a sampler, which she sipped. I looked down at her, and she nodded.

“It’s good,” she said.

I filled her glass. Filled my own. Sat down. I waited till our glasses were half-empty again, allowed the meaningless conversation to run its course. Until she was a little buzzed off the wine, comfortable in the knowledge that the guy she was sitting with wasn’t her ordinary run-of-the-mill creep. Just a harmless lonely drunk.

I looked at her. She was pretty. And she was young. At least young in the sense that she hadn’t been on earth very long. But she seemed so much older. I thought about what she must have been like as a child. A beautiful little girl waking up on Christmas morning, racing down the hallway to the Christmas tree. I thought about the little girl getting ready for her first day of high school. Fixing her hair, picking out her best outfit the night before and laying it over her chair. I thought about her standing next to her date, a crowd of proud parents snapping pictures as the limo idled in the driveway, waiting to take her to prom. Did she go to prom? Or was she one of those girls who had allowed the entire football team to have her, only to find that they reserved prom for the good girls? Did she even make it far enough in school to think about prom? Or was she one of those who ran away from home as soon as she could, escaping a father who would creep into her bedroom in the middle of the night, when mom was asleep?

What was it that would take a little girl and turn her into a bitter, empty shell that fucked strange men for cash?

I needed to know her story.

Would she tell me?

“Evelyn, forgive me for prying.” I gulped down another mouthful of wine.

“Hmm?” she hummed, looking up at me. Yeah, trust had been established. And that was good.

“So... What... What was it that got you... here?”

She exhaled a massive cloud of smoke. Rocked the cigarette back and forth between her fingers.

“A car,” she said.

I smiled. “No. You know what I mean. What made you, uh, choose this profession?”

She was tapping the end of the cigarette against the rim of the glass, eyeing me suspiciously.

“So, you’re one of those,” she said. “The kind that likes *questions*. Wants to know all the sordid details of the girl he’s about to fuck.”

“No, it’s not that,” I said, defensively. “Well ok, I guess it’s *kind of* that. But not how you put it. Really. Just conversation over wine is all.”

She lit another cigarette, inhaled quickly and blew it right back out. Her eyes narrowed at me.

“So, *Bones*,” she countered with a deliberate sneer. “Why don’t you tell me something?”

She looked around the room. “Nice house. Expensive wine. What got *you* here? What makes a man sit alone on New Years, getting drunk, calling escorts? Is there not enough middle-aged ass out there for you? Or are they just too old?”

I lit a cigarette of my own.

“Fair enough,” I replied. “Fine. I guess I’ll start then.

“Well, first of all, I wasn’t always a drunk like this. I was married once. A number of years ago. Just a regular ole’ husband, I guess. Promising career. Beautiful wife. And when that all...”

She cocked an eyebrow. Drew in another mouthful of white smoke.

“...ended, I... Well, I would come home from work, eat a lonely shitty meal, and realize that I had absolutely nothing to do. So I’d head out to the bar for a couple drinks. Sit alone. Talk to no one, except for the bartender to order another wine. And then eventually I wouldn’t even bother coming home first for dinner. Would just drive right to the bar. Eat there. Drink. Then go to bed. And then get up, go to work, and then back to the bar.”

I emptied my wine glass. Reached out to grab the bottle, and almost knocked it over. Damn, I was getting pretty drunk. She picked it up and refilled my glass. I liked this girl.

I took another long gulp and then continued.

“And after, I don’t know, a year or so of drinking, drinking alone, it becomes... Well, it just begins to feel natural. The loneliness becomes comfortable. Safe, I guess. Every morning you wake up for work and know that there is a barstool waiting for you once you get off. A warm glass of wine. There’d be no surprises. Just the good old loyal barstool... And next thing you know, you haven’t been in a relationship for years. Haven’t had to worry about someone else. Haven’t heard ‘I love you.’ Haven’t had to discuss where to eat or what movie to rent. And you don’t care. Those things all become a blur, just a fading memory. And

one you don't really even want to remember anymore."

I waved my hands in front of my face like a magician. "And... Waa-La! You're a drunk!"

She looked at me for a moment, and then finished her wine. "It's surprising how easy that can happen, isn't it?"

I poured the remnants of the bottle into her glass. I raised an eyebrow and motioned over to the wine rack in the kitchen. *Another?*

"Sure," she said.

"You've got a similar story?" I asked as I pushed myself up and stumbled over to the wine rack.

"Well, I wasn't raped by my father, contrary to popular belief."

I turned back to her and laughed. It's funny what kinds of horrible things you can laugh at after so much wine.

I opened the bottle, carried it over to our seats, and poured it into my already half-full glass. To the rim. I filled hers. I looked at her.

She took a sip of her wine and began her own story.

"I came from a good home. Nice parents. Good school. All that. I started dating this older guy my sophomore year in high school. He had an apartment. Some shitty job at the mall or something. He'd pick me up from school and we'd go back to his place. Smoke weed. Eat acid. That kind of stuff, you know? I'd tell my parents that I was staying at a friend's, and I spent more and more time in that apartment. And soon enough we're doing coke. And then we're doing lots of coke. And I stopped lying to my parents about where I was staying. And sooner or later I wasn't allowed back home."

She put another cigarette in her mouth as she mashed the other one out in the glass. We'd almost filled it halfway with butts. I held out her lighter and lit her cigarette.

"Next thing you know, we're a couple of coke-heads. He'd lost his job and I'd quit school, and we sat around day after day snorting. Of course, with no job, there was no money for coke. And without thinking too much about it, I began meeting his dealer alone. I'd sleep with him, he'd give me a bag of coke, and I'd take it to the apartment. I didn't tell my boyfriend how I'd gotten the coke. He didn't ask. What mattered was that there *was* coke. And when it got low, I'd go back to the dealer and do the same thing and return home with more."

She sipped her wine.

“I think you know where this one is going, don’t you?” she asked.

I was pretty sure I did.

“And one time I came home to see him lying on the couch. Dead. Just lying there, dead and fucking... white and bloated. By now I was too far gone to even care. I walked into the bathroom and grabbed the remaining cocaine from the medicine cabinet, walked out of the apartment and straight to the dealer’s place.”

Then she did something that impressed the hell out of me.

She waved her hands in front of her face, mimicking my magician impression: “And Waa-La! You’re a hooker!”

I just sat there for a moment looking at her. She was beginning to get a little blurry. But I could see that the wine had dusted a slight glaze over her eyes. It made them shine a bit. I could only imagine how I must have looked at this point. I’m sure my own eyes were beginning to do their familiar sag. The drunk dog’s eyes, as my favorite bartender referred to them.

I tried to say something. “It’s funnah how life can...” I stopped. Man, I was slurring. Instead I just lifted my glass.

“It’s fucked up,” I toasted.

She lifted her glass and clinked it against mine.

“Exactly!” She laughed a little.

We put our glasses down and I reached over for her box of cigarettes. She was doing the same thing. Our hands touched. She didn’t move hers. I didn’t move mine. I looked up at her. She was looking back at me. Breathing heavy. She was nervous, I think. I could see the rounded curves of her top teeth through her slightly opened lips. Her teeth were straight. Teeth of a girl who had come from a good home.

I stood up and stepped over to her, our hands still touching on that box of Camels. I stared down at her. I put my other hand on her cheek. She inhaled, but she didn’t resist it. I bent down and put my mouth against hers. I closed my eyes. And we began to kiss.

And it wasn’t the kiss of a drunk and a hooker. It was the kiss of two young lovers. Two high school kids sitting in the car in the driveway of her parents’ house. Two newlyweds kissing at the reception. I could

taste the wine on her lips. Smell the smoke in her hair. The perfume on her neck. Two college sweethearts in the back room of a frat house kegger. A young couple on the beach on the first night of their Honeymoon.

She stood up.

Stepped in closer to me. Slowly lifted her arms and wrapped them around my sides, placing her hands against my back. Timid. I could feel them trembling a bit. She was nervous. This was unfamiliar territory for her. Girls in her field don't kiss. They lie down on the bed and mentally run through the list of items they need from the CVS for the next 15 minutes or so. They don't make out next to two half-empty wine glasses.

I was nervous too. Nervous like you were the very first time you pressed your lips against a girl's and thought, "I'm doing this!"

And that's what we were for that moment. A couple of youngsters sharing their first kiss. And just like those kids, we started out awkward. Concentrating too hard on the technique. The opening and closing of mouths. The texture of lips. The movement of tongues. Insecure teen that I was, I opened my eyes for a brief second to get a read on her. Hers were closed. That was good. I re-closed my own.

And just like the young kids and their first kiss, the awkwardness began to fade as a rhythm was established. Concentration was overcome by the subconscious, and both parties began to move together, gracefully, like newlyweds in their first dance.

It felt good. Felt innocent and new. Felt good to forget that we were a drunk and a hooker, and for that moment, to just make out like a couple of young people.

Her hand slowly began to move up my spine, up my neck, to the back of my head. Her fingers clinching tightly to it, grasping my head as if to ensure it wouldn't go anywhere.

She was wearing a ring.

I could feel the cold rounded metal against my skull. And it rested there, just a mere inch or so of bone separating it from my brain, where an old memory was awakening and beginning its slow crawl out from the dark depths. It's as if the memory were being *pulled* out to the surface, as if this ring was not a piece of cheap metal, but a magnet.

It pulled up a memory of another ring.

Stop it, Bones! Knock it off!

A memory of another ring on another finger.

Block it out, Bones! Push it back down! Push it back down deep, as far as it will go!

Do it!!!

A wedding ring. A wedding ring that was once a bright silver, but now a tarnished smoky orange. A ring on what was once a beautiful finger on a beautiful hand, but was now buried deep into the dark brown, cracked, leathery folds of a finger that had been literally burned to a crisp. Attached to a hand that was the same. A shriveled, blackened hand that looked like a hand of one of those fossilized Romans found buried under centuries of hardened lava.

The fingers, or what used to be fingers, were clinched tightly at the joints, as if they were still wrapped around the steering wheel.

That ring on that finger on that hand.

It looked like... beef jerky. My first horrified thought, when the mortician had pulled away the white sheet to show me the wedding ring on my wife's finger, to get it over with, to not make me have to suffer through the hellish wait for the dental records or license tag recovery, was that it looked like beef jerky.

My wife's hand. I'll never forgive myself for that thought. And I guess I'll never allow myself any respite by letting that memory fade. For the image of that hand was as clear to me now while I kissed this hooker as it was years ago when I saw it.

I had put that ring on that finger on a Saturday afternoon, smiling back at my wife as her eyes filled with tears and our friends cheered and clapped and whistled. I had held that hand through movies, walks, kisses, cries. And as it laid there on the silver table in a blackened death grip, I had thought that it looked like beef jerky.

The mortician had spared me. Didn't make me look at the rest of her. Didn't pull the sheet away from her face to reveal the ghastly sight beneath.

And afterwards I'd often wonder if the mortician's mercy wasn't actually the worst thing he could have done. Because instead of seeing that face under the sheet, seeing the reality of it all, I was left with just my imagination. My cruel imagination that formed its own image of the grisly charred skull. The one frozen in a permanent silent scream of terror from a full gas tank exploding in a car laying upside down beneath an icy overpass on that New Years so many years ago.

Block it out, Bones! Please!

I tried. I tried so hard. I tried to imagine that this hooker named Evelyn who I kissed – who had probably once been named Katie or Amy – was actually my wife. I tried to pretend that it was my wife I was kissing for the first time, so many years ago.

I tried to imagine this. Just as I had so many times before.

But as always, the face of my wife that I imagined wasn't the young beautiful one from our first kiss outside her apartment, but the one that lurked underneath that white sheet.

I wondered if I opened my eyes, would I see that I was kissing that face? And that the shriveled face was kissing me back? It was an irrational thought. But so is thinking about beef jerky. I had to know. I had to open my eyes and find out. I didn't want to, but I had to.

I opened my eyes.

It wasn't my dead wife. It was Evelyn. Evelyn, who was once a normal high school girl named Katie or Amy and was now a cokehead hooker.

Her eyes were open. She was looking at me. She had a strange look on her face. Had my turmoil been that evident?

She pulled her mouth away from mine. Dropped her head and looked down at her shoes.

"I... I can't..." she said.

It hadn't been me. She was just scared. Scared to feel something. It was a bad idea for a girl like her to go and start *feeling* something. Bad for business, you could say.

"I'm sorry," she said. It sounded like she meant it. "I'm sorry. Excuse me. I have to use the restroom."

She quickly released her grasp from my back. My head. She looked at me one more time. Then turned and scurried through the kitchen and out of sight.

She had left her purse behind. It lay on the counter, open, next to her cigarettes. I took a quick involuntary glance at the contents. They could have been the contents of any twenty one or twenty two year old girl's purse – makeup, cell phone, wallet – other than that fat strip of condom packages that rested atop it all. So sad.

And then I heard her scream.

A loud, horrified shriek.

Oh my God! What had happened? What had happened to Katie? Amy? Evelyn?

I ran through the kitchen and to the bathroom. The door was open. The light was off. She wasn't in there.

Then I turned and noticed the light was still on in my office. I rushed in. And there she was. Just standing there. Frozen. Her eyes wide. Her hand over her open mouth.

She was staring at my laptop.

On the screen was the photo of me, lying shirtless on the beach, with three bullet holes in my chest. bones-gunshot.jpg.

Oh hell, I had forgotten to close fucking Photoshop.

She turned and glared at me, terrified.

"Katie, wait a second, I..." I tried to say.

"Stay away from me! Stay the fuck away from me!" she screamed, and then she ran past me and out of the office.

I turned and raced after her. She was going for the front door.

I yelled as loud as I could, "Evelyn! Stop!"

She turned around, her back to the door, her hands held out defensively in front of her. She was scared shitless. She literally feared for her life. She didn't want to die. As sad and lonely as her life may be, she didn't want to lose it. That was good, I guess.

I looked at her for a moment. Why did I keep doing this? Why did I *have* to keep doing this?

"Evelyn," I said. I paused for a moment. By now, I realized, there was no use in even trying. "You'll need your purse."

She just stood there, continuing to stare at me. I took a step backwards, then turned and walked to the kitchen. I stepped over to her purse on the counter. Again I saw that strip of condom packages. It about made me sick to my stomach. I grabbed the purse and carried it back to her.

She yanked it out of my hands, whipped open the door and ran out, slamming it behind her.

And this was the end of my night with Evelyn. It hadn't really gone the way I'd hoped, I guess you could say. It never did.

But...

But for a moment there, kissing her, I had felt something. Just a little *something* deep in my gut. A little spark of something I used to feel a whole lot more often. So many years ago.

I walked into my office and sat down in front of my laptop. There was still about a glass-full of wine in the bottle next to it. And there was a photo of a bullet-riddled me on the screen. Damn, it really did look good. As evidenced by Evelyn, one could very easily believe that the guy in that photo was really truly dead.

Not too shabby. Not too shabby at all.

I refilled my wine glass and then reached for the mouse, to continue the finishing touches on my dead body until I would become either too drunk or too tired and decide to go to bed.

End.