

KEEP PULLING OUT GUNS

By Michael Stephen Fuchs

I'm behind a small airplane, on my third and fourth guns; that leaves one. And I don't carry spare mags. I don't believe in reloading.

The first and second guns are out in the open, lying on the concrete floor. I dropped 'em there after unloading both at several Honduran guys with whom, until a few minutes earlier, I'd been pretty cordially working on a drug thing.

At some point, though, it came up that I actually work for the United States Drug Enforcement Agency, of which fact I guess these guys took a dim view.

Now, being as I'm down to three guns, no spare ammo, and no friendlies showing up any time real soon, I figure I should formulate some kinda plan. Because I can only stay behind this plane for so long; not with four or five guys working in on me. You can only hide from so many people behind one small aircraft.

It's a Cessna or some shit. Always it's planes and speedboats. I can all but guarantee I eventually buy it either on a dock or in a hanger.

I just need to come up with some way to keep it from being tonight.

Quick peek around the fuselage—I see a couple of foreheads, some muzzles; they're under cover of pallets, and the truck we came in on. A bunch of rounds track in on me as I pull my head back, the roar of gunfire floating to the ceiling.

Where the fuck is the fuel tank on this thing? 'Cause I definitely smell fumes. And, oh shit—an oily puddle at my feet, spreading fast.

With gunfire still coming in, I think this location is about to get uncomfortably hot.

My back pressed to the plane, the Hondurans out behind that, aviation fuel pooling around me, charged air sucking through pursed lips . . . I try to clear my head and take stock. I see a couple solid looking crates out ahead—but across forty yards of open floor. Is this a very clever idea I'm having, or another really dubious one? I mentally review the quality of the decisions I've been making this week.

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"What does the rest of your day look like," my boss asks across the dark air of his office.

"Talkin' to the snitch after I leave here," I say to the boss.

"What you need the snitch for? There a problem?"

"No." I rub the bridge of my nose. "Shipment going out late tonight, the Hondurans won't tell me who to. Don't wanna keep asking, for obvious reasons. Snitch might know."

"Right. I don't have to tell you to limit your public meetings with the snitch."

"I won't get made."

"Right." Boss looks at me from under the shadow of his forehead, palms flat on his desk. He says, "Correct me if I'm off, Theron, but this is like your fifteenth transaction; with your third gang; in twenty-five weeks undercover—uninterrupted."

I work my jaw muscles a little. "Who's counting," I say.

"Count the teeth in my smile, Theron."

There are none; I get his point.

I get out there with a promise to come back and put on a suit for a few months. Work the phones. Take crime scene reports and shit. Yeah, I'll come up for a few months.

Right after this one last bust.

Of course, now I'm totally fucking jinxed: "Just one last job." It's like a bad buddy-cop movie. Except I got no buddy.

I leave the building out the back door, put my head down, and start the slog toward the public library. Snitch a bookworm.

The sun's down and the streets quiet. I jam my hands in the pockets of my duster and get into my head.

The boss thinks I been down too long, that I'm getting ragged. He may have a point. It's nothing dramatic like I forgot my real name, or nothin' like that. I've just sort of trained myself not to answer to it. I'm almost always going by some name not mine; being some person not me. Plus answering to my real name could get me slightly dead.

It's strange, though. After a while you get this sort of detached view of your own person. It's like you look down at yourself from ten feet over and to the left. You still scared of dying; but not in your bones, anymore. Just in your head.

And you start thinking of your covers, and yourself, in the third person.

I wait for some cars at an intersection before jaywalking. I scan the shadows up ahead; neon splashes on the sidewalk now.

The only thing I really give a shit about is that my mental state don't affect my performance.

Because this shit is serious stage work, method acting for real. I mean, I'm not Marlon Brando, or nothin'. But I'm a pretty good actor, or I would have hit the bottom of a dumpster months ago. 'Cause bad acting is bullshit in this job. Bad acting is bullshit.

When I'm a gangster, every rival gang want me dead—and any cowboy cops who come in blazing could easily do me themselves, oops. When I'm a cop, I'm afraid to even go to the corner store, for fear of who I might run into.

Okay, yeah, I'm scared to death. But you get used to that.

I see the stone lions out front the library up ahead. I take the steps two at a time.

I figured out a while ago the act of "selling your soul" is really metaphorical. You don't need the devil's bargain to trade your soul; for earthly pleasures, profit. You can give away your honor, your morality, your soul, anytime—and almost always profit by it.

Then it's all hell on Earth and like that.

The snitch surprised to see me. He yanks off his wire-rim glasses. I sit down in my coat.

"Theron . . ."

"Not with the name," I tell him.

"Sorry. I was, uh, just—"

"Right," I say. I lean over his book. It's not in English. "Talk to me about the shipment coming in tonight."

He puts his glasses back on and stares across the table at my hands.

"It's a standard deal."

"Where to."

"D.C. By truck. It's coming in by air from Toronto. The Hondurans are just a transfer point."

"Right."

He looks at me. "Are you going to this one?"

"Why; there some problem?"

"No, sir. No problem." He looks over my shoulder. I turn around; nothing there. "It's just that it's been getting hot. I'm thinking you should take them tonight. Take them at this shipment." His lip trembles. "And then cut me loose," he says.

"Cut you loose."

"I've done a lot for you," the snitch says.

"You done a lot for me."

"I've given you the Hondurans. I was only up on possession with intent to distribute. I've worked that off. I've given you these guys."

"You've given me these guys exactly when I take these guys."

He winces, then speaks more quietly. "Look, you've got to let me out. I can't do this anymore. I've done my bit. I think they're on to me."

"Look, they ain't on to shit. Unless there something you not telling me."

"No, there's nothing. I'm just scared."

"Right. 'Cause believe me, there something you not telling me, I will fuck your wagon for you."

He doesn't answer.

"Also," I add, getting up, "you try to run, I will fuck your wagon for you. You're cut loose when I say you are. Or when I get killed."

I exit the building in my coat.

Like that punk knows what scared is. He ain't never been in half as deep as I am, week in and week out.

Outside the library, the wind hits me like cold stone. I start hoofing it toward home.

The snitch got me into the Hondurans with a personal recommendation. They took me on as an entry-level soldier/dockworker. They use the same guys to do both—load and unload boxes of product, but also ready to start pulling out guns if things get hot. It's a corporate efficiency thing.

The thing tonight is at an airfield outside the city. I'll meet the crew at an in-town address, then we take a truck out there.

I get home, work the locks behind me, and hit a light. I toss my guns on the couch and slump down beside them. My face resting in my palm, I spy the ex looking at me out of a picture frame. Man, she's beautiful. I should really take that picture down.

To my amazement, I have found that as the one-year anniversary of our breakup went by, I'm thinking about her more, not less. Not a day goes by, actually . . . Two good years, then fini. I don't know whether I'm working so much because she's gone—or vice versa.

The ex told me once that for every act you live not only with the consequences of the act . . . but with the increased likelihood that you'll do it again. Behavior is self-reinforcing. Habituation is a bitch.

When you're undercover, when you're someone else, someone fictional even, you don't have to deal with your own issues. You don't have to face yourself in the morning, only some other guy.

The undercover work is a drug.

Which is so ironic I've forgotten to laugh.

I set the alarm and grab a couple hours sleep.

I get to the address a few minutes before midnight. Just outside the building I'm serenaded by some birds, a night song. I stop in my tracks, listening, watching the birds hop around the interior of a tree, in and out of moonlight. I look out past them to the night sky.

Never ceases to amaze me. Here we are in a universe made up pretty much totally of freezing vacuum, and big ole burning balls of hydrogen. That's the universe, in a nutshell. And somehow we got songbirds out of the deal. Birds.

Never mind undercover federal agents, drug cartels, ex-girlfriends.

All this is very, very unlikely.

I duck into the building.

The Honduran foreman greets me. There are two others, loaders like me. I'm the last to arrive; we descend to a garage and pile into a SUV. A corrugated steel door rises and we drive into the night.

The ride is ninety minutes, and passes in silence.

Off the highway, fifteen minutes through total blackness, then we hit the airfield. A single building, a hanger, illuminated. We drive right into it.

Inside there are two new guys, standing beside a small plane. As soon as we spill out the truck, one of them pulls our foreman aside, just around the side of some tall pallets. I can see him speaking intently, gesturing.

Hairs on the back of my neck.

These boys definitely looking at me funny. I mean, in this job, it always feel like everyone looking at you funny. You get used to the press of eyes on your body, all of them with X-ray vision, reading your soul. But this is different.

The two other loaders move toward the foreman and the pallet, then sort of fan out.

I stay rooted to my spot.

The foreman pins me with his gaze; and I know that look.

We're all way deep into it now; the social space here is about to get seriously fucked up.

I don't understand exactly, precisely what is going on. But the jig is definitely up. No buildup, no suspense. Just boom—I'm busted.

The foreman raises his hand to the edge of his jacket.

And that's all I'm gonna give him; I pull a gun with each hand and open up.

The foreman goes down jerkily; everybody else dives for cover, pulling out guns.

I end up behind the plane.

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Breath going in and out of me. Cold sheet metal of the airplane against my back. Hondurans sniping at me, moving around for a better shot.

Pile of crates across the bare expanse of concrete. Aviation fuel pricking my nose.

So the reason I don't believe in reloading is: the average gunfight happens inside of ten feet, includes two or three shots, and is over in less than three seconds. Almost always, it's two guys facing each other across open air; some shit happens and one or both draw and get off one shot, maybe two. Boom; it's over. If you got any time at all, it's maybe just enough time to keep pulling out guns.

That shit with people running, and dodging, and shooting from behind cover, and reloading all the time, it's pure Hollywood.

This plan I have hatched is also pure Hollywood. That I'm thinking about trying the shit in real life makes my knees weak. But it's the only plan springing to mind.

I suck in some air.

I shake my head.

I lean out around the plane and empty guns three and four, sweeping thirty degrees of visual field, raking fire. Pow, pow, pow. I don't aim; I'm just putting heads down.

When the guns go dry, I let go and leave 'em in mid-air as I turn and sprint flat out.

I eat up the forty yards of open floor like a man with his ass on fire, then dive over the crates, underneath a new volley of gunfire. Scrambling back into the lee of this bitch, I pull my Hail Mary piece from ankle leather—a snub .357. This is, lamentably, not the most accurate gun I own. But it is the last.

Reciting rosaries under my breath, I peek low around the crate: One, two, three . . . four guys, all advancing on the plane, taking up the position I just bailed on; pressing their advantage.

I sight down all three inches of the .357's barrel; I look for the wet spot under the Cessna.

Bang, one; bang, two.

Forty long yards.

The bad guys reach the plane, pull up, and sight down.

Bang, three; bang four.

Lots of rounds coming in now, closer.

Bang, five—MOTHERFUCKER!!! I lurch backward from the heat, light, and head-rending noise that crash full over me. The Cessna heads for the roof of the hanger in movie slow-mo; for one second I think it's going to make it and go straight out the building. Instead, it comes back down on its roof, noise like a train wreck. Then this burning, disintegrating plane fires a wing directly at me; it caroms into my crate and pushes it and me back fifteen feet.

I cover my head as splashes of flaming fuel hit all around. Clinking of engine parts bouncing across the cement floor, a hundred yards away.

When the sound dies down to just flames crackling, I peek up again, pointing my very last gun, with its very last round. No Hondurans; no guns; no pieces of Hondurans. Nothing. They have ascended directly to Heaven.

Which works for me.

I cut a wide circle around the burning debris, looking at corners and shadows over my sights.

Ears still ringing.

I think that I should call the friendlies; and the fire department.

I take one in the back of the leg, above the knee. The shot rings out after.

"Motherfucker!" I yodel and hit the cement full-on with my right side. I kick with my good leg, swinging my body around in a one-eighty.

It's the snitch.

I mentally replay my last comment to him from the library: You're cut loose when I say you are. Or when I get killed. That wasn't very smart.

Now I know what happened, at least; I got sold out.

The snitch is backlit by flames, sighting down on me, thirty yards away, coming in at a walk. The flames reflect on his glasses.

I pivot and start to snap fire; but pull up short. Only one slug in this bitch. No choice but to take my time and make it count.

Me and the snitch trade blank expressions across the expanse; then he lets loose with another one. I clench my jaw, ready to take the bullet.

The shot hits in front of my face; cement chips rip into my cheek, below my eye, closing it.

I prop my arms and the .357 on one elbow and sight with my open eye. I aim for just above the center of body mass: heart and lungs.

I let it go.

The snitch rockets backward and hits the deck on his back.

You're cut loose, I think.

We both are; fuck this job. Maybe I don't need it no more.