

Death on Two Legs

Mitchell looked down at the gleaming silver gun he cradled in his thin hands. The setting sun shining through the windshield gave it a red-gold shimmer and caused bronze lights to dance on his drawn face. Blinking back tears, he took a deep breath, slipped the pistol into his jacket pocket, and left the car to go into the house to face his nemesis.

Pete sat on the couch with a fresh beer in his hand, gazing absently at the TV screen filled with the decaying visage of a zombie teen behind a flashing “PAUSED” indicator. “Hey Mitch, how goes it? You’re running late today. Where’s the grub?” Mitchell just shook his head and stood in the doorway.

“You okay, buddy? You look a little strained. Want to talk about it?” Mitchell stood silently, looking down at the floor.

“Man, I’m getting kind of hungry. You said you were going to pick up some chicken on the way home, remember. I didn’t get anything ready. I was kinda counting on you to pick up the grub.” Pete shook his large head slowly. “You disappoint me, man. You used to do what you said you were going to do.”

Mitchell continued to stand quietly, though his shoulders began to quiver slightly.

Pete rose and walked to the small kitchen and opened the refrigerator door. “I guess I’ll just have to make do, as usual. “ He assessed the contents of the fridge with a frown. “Shayna’s coming over later. I’d appreciate some privacy, bud. Like we agreed.” He found a leftover sandwich and carried it back to the couch. “You know, that’s what did you in with her. Shayna, I mean. She said she couldn’t count on you.”

Mitchell looked up and narrowed his eyes at his roommate. “Don’t.”

“I’m just saying…”

“Don’t just say anything.”

“Dude, what the hell is your deal?”

“You know exactly what my deal is.”

Pete sighed heavily. “Man, we talked about this. At least three or four times.”

“That’s just it, Pete. We talk about shit. And you turn it around and around and next thing I know I lose my house, my girl, and my self-respect.”

Pete shook his head. “Dude. You didn’t lose your house. You’re the one standing in your own doorway like you’re in a stranger’s house. You lost your girl *because* you didn’t have any self-respect. That’s your own fault. I tried to help you, but you don’t want to listen to me. You just want to blame me for your own troubles. Now Shayna’s happy and you’re free to figure out your shit.”

“How about your shit, Pete? Have you figured your shit out?”

Pete smiled and shrugged. “Dude, I’m an open book. I’ve got a lot of shit figured out. You’re the one that can’t handle it. Not me.”

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“That’s right. It’s always someone else. You talk shit and it’s ‘Oh, no man. You took that the wrong way. You don’t have a sense of humor. You’re not listening.’ You say anything you want, cut people up and tear them apart, but you walk away as the good guy or the victim. It’s always someone else’s shit.”

Pete stood up and pointed at Mitchell. “Look, man. You’re starting to piss me off. What the hell is your problem?”

Mitchell looked Pete in the eye, his shoulders shaking. “You are, man. You are.”

Pete nodded. “All right. Let’s do this, fucker.” The larger man started heading toward the doorway. Mitchell took the pistol from his pocket and aimed it Pete’s chest. Pete’s eyes widened as he put his hands up. “What the…”

Mitchell smiled. “I finally figured some shit out, bro. See, I got issues.” The smaller man chuckled. “Clearly I do. But that doesn’t mean that you don’t. And just because you got reasons and excuses for all the shit you do and can sell ice to fucking Eskimos doesn’t mean you’re right.” He motioned Pete toward the couch with the gun. Pete backed away, his hands still raised, and sat down silently.

“You took *our* place and made it *your* place. I just stash my stuff here and run out whenever I can. It’s the only way I can find any peace. You took Shayna, talked to her, convinced her to leave me and, lo and behold, you’re there to pick her up when she’s down. Then, when I have the unmitigated gall to be angry about it, you convince me it’s all *my* fault. And you did a good job of it too.”

Mitchell cocked the gun. Pete’s eyes widened. “Look man, you don’t need a gun. We’ve been friends a long a time…”

Mitchell chuckled. “Too long, Pete. Way too long. And of course I need a gun. Why is it, do you think, that it’s the strong men that always like trial-by-combat while the small men have to rely on their wits and the mercy of larger men? You think I want to ‘settle it like men’? The only thing that’ll prove is that you can kick my ass…which we both already know. It won’t make you right and it won’t make me wrong.”

“You used me. You spin people around till you get what you need. I bet you get a big thrill out of helping out old hopeless Mitch. You prey on people’s better natures and if they don’t deliver, you guilt them into compliance. You’re a master.” Mitchell clapped his hand against the gun. “Bravo, man. Bravo.” Pete shook his head incredulously. Mitchell continued.

“See, I finally figured it all out. You’re like a disease. You come in and attack what’s inside of people, turn it inside-out and feed on it. You even convince them that they’re the cause of their own pain. Like a virus using a body’s own immune system to destroy it. You kill everything you touch by inches.” The smaller man shook the gun once. “And I have the pills to cure myself.”

“Christ, man! Are you crazy?”

“Probably.”

“Fuck that, man. I’m your friend. Put the gun down. You’re not thinking right.”

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“Don’t you see it, Pete? For the first time, you *have* to listen to me. You have to hear what I’m saying. You’re not going to bulldoze your way out of it again! My god, what a coward you are! If you can’t be on top of the situation, you just can’t stand it!”

“Maybe I can’t stand it that my best friend is aiming a gun at me and telling me how much he hates me!”

Mitchell shook his head. “Don’t you see Pete? That’s what makes me crazy. You’re that bug in my brain. Everything I think and do I have to explain to that voice in my head. Reason with it. Argue constantly with it as it tries to tell me what my problem is and how screwed up I am. And that voice in my head is *yours*.” The gun rose to rest level with Pete’s head. “I’m already dead.”

Mitchell never heard Pete’s voice again.