

Mountain Pulp

By Eamon Gerber

The cubby we cooped up in saw few visitors. It sat under a line of elevated tracks, on the first story of the brick behemoth. Usually we sat together early in the morning, and waited for something to hook us. I was the only one in when a young man burst through the door practically in hysterics. I must have leapt up in surprise, for he stopped suddenly and nearly toppled.

“You the sleuth?”

“Yes, I am a detective. My title is Turkey, and my currently missing partner is Ginger.”

“Mr. Turkey—”

“Turkey’s fine.”

“Please, you gotta help me, my ring! It’s gone, taken!”

“Please, sit, sit. Let us sit. I assure you, er, what was your name?”

“Thomas Wrinkle, sir—I messed with him, that sick man,” the young man positively broke down, weeping and snotting into his sleeve.

“I assure you, Thomas Wrangle, that all will be taken care of. I need you to steady yourself, okay? Yes, steady now, and tell me more.”

“My ring—”

“Slow down please.”

“Sorry, sir.”

“Continue.”

“I was with this man, this great brute called Leroy—he was a gambling man and a drunken ass—and he...he bet...it wasn’t his!”

“What does that mean—please—more, but now from the beginning,” I was starting to worry that Thomas had gone to the police, that he had been turned away because of his ravings. I had heard similar inventions before. “How often do you see this man?”

“We...used to live together, many years ago before I was married, but he’s been over before he’s...”

“Yes, he bet your wedding ring, I assume, for nothing, yes. Where does the ‘brute’ live?”

“I’m—I don’t know—I’m not sure—” Ginger burst in through the front door, interrupting Thomas and scaring him through.

“Ah, there’s Ginger. Hello, Ginger.” I said.

“Who’s that one?” He pointed at Thomas.

“That young man is Thomas Wrang—Wrinkle, yes, and his ring is missing. Have you heard of a ‘brute’ named Leroy?”

“Could you mean Leroy ‘Pig Iron’ Glaucon? I sure hope not, though he is brutish in nature.” Thomas’ eyes got big. He shrunk in his chair. Ginger glanced twice at him. “Well.”

“Do you know where to find him?” I asked.

“Yes, but I do not want to.”

The next night we found ourselves in front of concrete mid-rise. Light glowed yellow out from the plate glass windows. They were a hope of warmth and shelter from the night's cold breath. We waited for someone to come out or in, to open the locked side entrance. We had been waiting for an hour.

"You locked and loaded?" Ginger grinned at me.

"Yes, I'm loaded, yes. Sounds like you plan on it going that way."

"I know it will go 'that way', and as you do not know Leroy, I'm not shocked that you are missing the gravity of meeting him spontaneously, like we are about to do. And forcefully."

"We will have to warm up when we get inside, I do not want to ask for a blanket when we arrive." The side door swung open and a bundled woman and child walked out. We slipped in before the door closed. We started up the stairs, six flights, then seven. At the ninth floor we walked into the hall. At room 978, we paused. Then, as if it took all his strength, Ginger knocked on the door. It opened, and a massive, drunk man stood in front of us.

"What 'chu want, boys, I shoot solicitors," He mumbled over bloated, red lips. Come to think of it, his whole face was bloated and red and big as a watermelon. He wore basketball shorts, the baggy ones, and a black blazer over a ridiculous pink guayabera.

I must admit that my memory fails me here. Ginger pulled his gun on the big man, and the big man panicked and hit me with, and I can only assume here, as I was out before I hit the ground (or so I've been told), an empty, green bottle of wine. When I came to, I was in Leroy's apartment and he was bleeding in the corner. Ginger was writing down something in his notebook, and pacing.

"Ginger! What the fuck happened!" I was reasonably mixed up.

"The man lost it to someone called 'The Lotterman'." He said with anguish. "I know someone who can help us, but we have to leave, and leave now. You alright there?"

We stood, two nights later, in an alley, in front of a staircase that led down to who knows what. Two men came up and asked us some questions, and we gave them money. They pulled us down into the basement where a few old men sat around rolling dice and shouting and drinking flat beer, and many more young men and women stood around them watching and passing money between hands. There was a grandfather clock in the corner and a table there with a white-faced and black-haired woman posted atop it with a box and a bottle. The whole place smelled of tobacco and grass and a kind of cologne that smelled sour. They pulled us to the woman by the clock, and she smelled good like ginseng and smiled at us.

We left the antechamber behind and went into a different, cavernous, unfinished room. It was all pipes and insulation and mouse droppings. Several tables sat in a loose array, and a bar hugged the far wall. The woman led us through the tables, past greasy people and drunken, sloppy people; men wearing patchwork blazers and tuxedo trousers, women wearing plaid skirts

and peacoats. The hodge-podge populace turned as we passed. We tried to emulate causalness, but we stood out. We were not 'in'. We reached the bar, and sweated through our button shirts. The barman was old. His head—bald as a plate—shined with sweat droplets, and he looked wired with wide, bloodshot eyes. The woman spoke with him, and he poured us gin tonics, squeezing lime juice out of his calloused fingers.

"The pilot's over there, in the helmet," he pointed. A graying man sat by himself in a silver open face helmet. He had a bottle of sake and two small ceramic shot glasses to keep him company. We finished our drinks and walked to him. He looked up, his face carved like a gargoyle, his eyes squinty and small like a hawk's.

"Who are ya?" The old man said.

"I am Ginger, and this is Turkey." Ginger said to him. The old man laughed.

"What kind of names are those, boys? Lay it clear and honest."

"Those are our names, Ginger and Turkey, honest. We changed them to be so, legally. We have no other names."

"What do you want?" The man wasn't laughing anymore. No, he was not. He squinted harder, predatory.

"We cannot tell you here, the drift listens, and this is secret. Let's be very quiet about this. If you don't mind, we would like to discuss *the Lotterman*," Ginger whispered, leaning close to the old man's pierced ear.

"I do not know them...or of them. I would like to drink now, uf Wiedersehen!"

"Oh, aber wir müssen es wissen. You know him surely, he's been around." Ginger said, smiling. He was good with languages, knew a few well and many others in bits.

"What do you know of 'around'? Off with you!"

"Please, we must know, must!" I said. We knew coming into this that we would have to beg for scraps. The old man grabbed his bottle and one of the glasses and retreated to a table in a dim corner.

"He—he lives just north of here, wears a red scarf." He said as he was leaving. He turned white, regret taking his color. We walked away.

The Lotteryman woke with the sun. He turned on a light and pulled on his shadow and walked out into the hall. It was cold there, and his body moved slowly. He put a kettle on the stove and tried not to fall asleep in his chair. He looked around the room to keep his eyes busy. The stove was covered in soot, dominating the small room. The table was made of wood and old, and had one chair in its company, which he now sat in. His boots sat by the door, as did his coat and his scarf. The scarf was red and glared out in the dim monotony. Everywhere there was dust. The water began to boil. He got up to fetch it and pour coffee. He did this every morning, surveying the room; he saw the soot and the dust and the worm-eaten wood legs of his chair, and felt comfort in their company.

Now he stood at the door of his brother's house. He waited on the stoop for him to come out, and he did. He was short and old, and bald as a plate. He stooped there, under the awning, and the men began to talk.

"Morning to you," the Lotteryman said.

"Morning," said his brother. "Will you come in?"

The Lotteryman nodded. His brother opened the door, and the two went in. The Lotteryman noted the expanse of the room, the walls clean and painted. There were four chairs around a round table. There was boiling water on the stove.

The Lotteryman and his brother talked about the meaningless, and prayed. The Lotteryman left. He walked down the muddy streets. He saw many people, and didn't recognize them, and felt no relation to them. He wrapped his red scarf around his face. A man, dressed in ridiculous garments, fur coats down to his ankles, stood on the corner by his front door. *Why were they waiting there?* He thought to himself. He turned down the alley before his block and swung around to the back. He could see his back door, unwatched and unguarded, and felt a surge of safety.

A different man, one the Lotteryman hadn't seen, for he was standing in the shadows, crept behind him. He grabbed the Lotteryman around the neck and put a gun to his head.

"Yes, relax now, yes. Quiet, you don't want to scare the birds," I said. The man in the fur jacket rounded the corner with Thomas Wrinkle. "Hello, Ginger, Thomas."

"This is the man who has your ring." Ginger said proudly. The Lotteryman was still and stiff in the cold. He didn't buck, but I could feel his hatred.

"I don't know anything about no rings. I'm simple. Let me leave this issue to you, and crawl back into my home," The Lotteryman said.

"You won't be 'crawling' anywhere, yes, anywhere. Not until we get this ring back, that you have but do not rightfully own. You are the accessory of a thievery." I said.

"And you have a gun at my head, you ass."

"If you have it then bring it, otherwise we will search and find it ourselves, starting by checking your hands," I said suddenly, jerking the sleeve of his shirt up. He wore no rings on either hand.

"Off me, off me!" The Lotterman was beginning to get noisy, but a look of shock and fear also spread across his face, more vivid than before. It was as if you suddenly realized that he had left the oven on, or that he had dropped his keys. No, it was more personal than that. It was as if...

"Quiet, now, the birds, remember? Very jumpy birds live around here," Thomas was starting to agitate. Ginger was trying not to laugh.

"The ring was won by me, rightly and fair-like. Do you know my name?" The Lotterman said.

"Yes, you are the Lotteryman."

"And why do I have the title?"

“Why does anyone have any title? I do not care about your name, the ring please.” Ginger said coolly. I was cramping from holding him for so long. I didn’t feel the priming of his muscles, couldn’t sense his unrest. He suddenly and haphazardly threw his elbow back into my side. It knocked me off balance and he tried for his door. Ginger shot and hit him in the back, but he crawled in and the heavy bolt was set.

“We better get the fuck out of here,” Ginger said, kneeling over me. I got to my feet. Thomas was nowhere to be seen. “You think he’s dead?”

“Likely...yes, likely.”

“Shame about the ring, looks like we aren’t getting paid.”

Thomas ran like the wind from the alley. He heard the echo of another gunshot, and tripped out of fear. He landed hard in the gutter, his glasses breaking on the concrete. Feeling around between the broken glass for the frame, he felt his finger brush something cold and round. It sat in the muddy footprint of a heavy boot. Sliding the golden ring onto his finger, Thomas hailed a cab. He watched the street fade into wet fog. The sky was stormy and yellow like a bruise, and the city sat below it in its shadow.