

The Toxic Cops

by H. W. Moss

“He’s on his way.” The radio report was crisp and clear. Dewey checked his watch. Ought to be home in time for dinner.

“Roger that.” He put the handset down on top of a steel drum.

A faded blue El Camino that had seen better days rolled up to the loading dock and its driver got out. He was a husky middle aged man wearing a torn tee shirt and grimy jeans, but he was surprisingly agile. Instead of walking up the three steps, he leaped easily onto the dock and said, “Knock, knock, knock. I’m here for the pick up.”

“Inside,” Dewey shouted from the shadowy interior. “C’mon in. My name’s Dewey.”

The driver stuck out his hand as he approached. “Bob. They call me Beer Can Bob. Howdy.”

Dewey drew back to reveal three 50 gallon drums. “Here’s the deal. We got 150 gallons of paint thinner we need to get rid of. How much you want to take it off our hands and haul it away?”

“Well, lemme see here.” Beer Can looked his potential client up and down. Was the man desperate or not. “Got any other bids?”

“Well, yah. Our guys said it would cost at least \$450 to legally dispose of this amount of paint thinner. One trucker said he’d do it for less.”

“How much less?” Beer Can asked cagily.

“Well, I don’t think I should tell you that. I want an honest bid from you, not just to undercut everyone else who might do the job.”

Beer Can rubbed his chin stubble. “Okay. Yah. Sure. I can do it for \$350. How’s that sound?” Easy money, Beer Can thought. Take it down the street and dump it into the sewer. No problem.

Dewey appeared to consider this for a moment. He walked once around the barrels, stopped in front of Beer Can and said, “Yah, okay. Three fifty for all of them?”

Beer Can said, “Those three right there. I’ll take ’em away for you.”

“You got a license?”

Beer Can looked surprised. “License? Yah, I got a driver’s license.”

“No,” Dewey explained. “I mean are you registered with the state as a hazardous waste hauler?”

“Oh, sure, sure.”

“Can I see a copy of your hazardous waste insurance, which is what a state licensed hauler has to have.”

“Well, y’know, I didn’t bring a copy with me. But I can get you a copy tomorrow if I haul that away for you today. What do you say I knock it down to three twenty-five?”

Dewey seemed to waver. He walked around the drums once more, stopped in front of Beer Can and said, “Yah, okay. Three and a quarter for all of them?” He stuck out his hand to shake on it.

“Done deal,” Beer Can said as he slapped his palm into Dewey’s. “I need to see the color of your money and I gotta have cash in advance.”

“No problem,” Dewey said as he unrolled a wad of bills. He peeled three hundreds off the outside, flipped the wad open and counted out two tens and a five. “There you go. Need help moving them?”

Beer Can said, “What? For a 50 gallon drum? Naw. I got a hand truck.” He hopped down, removed a red two wheeler from the El Camion’s flat bed and proceeded to trundle the barrels off the loading dock. When he was finished, he casually lit a cigarette while standing next to one of the containers which had begun to leak. The weight of the barrels caused the flat bed to sink low to the ground. As he started the engine and pulled away, the vehicle’s shocks were so weak that sparks flew when the tailgate bounced and hit the ground.

Dewey had made no secret of the two way radio which he held casually in his hand all the while he watched Beer Can work. Now he snapped the send button and said with urgency in his voice, “Get in here fast! This idiot’s about to blow us all up!”

A siren began to wail as a white Ford SUV came racing around the corner. A temporary red light stuck on by a suction cup flashed from the passenger side of the windshield. The Ford drove straight at the El Camino which came to an abrupt halt. Beer Can sat with both hands at the top of the steering wheel and an astonished look on his face. Two men leaped from the Ford, took positions behind the doors using them as shields.

“Environmental Protection Agency department of toxic substances control!” the guy on the passenger side shouted as he crouched with a pistol pointed directly at Beer Can. “Both hands where I can see ’em. Out the window. Now!” Beer Can followed instructions. The man enunciated carefully, “Turn off the engine using your right hand only.” When the engine was off, he told Bob to open the door from the outside using one hand. “Now get out of the vehicle with your hands above your head!”

The driver of the Ford also trained a pistol on Beer Can.

“Slowly,” Dewey cautioned the trucker as he gingerly stepped up from behind and slapped a cuff on one wrist, lowered both the man’s arms behind

his back and clapped the second handcuff closed. “Well, Beer Can Bob. Looks like you have a problem.”

“Yah, what’s that? Hauling trash ain’t a crime.”

“It is if you transport toxic chemicals without a permit,” the Ford driver said as he approached and holstered his weapon. “You are under arrest for violating EPA rules for transporting volatile substances.”

“What,” Beer Can Bob sneered. “Since when is it illegal to haul paint thinner.”

Dewey said, “It’s the quantity, Bob, it’s the quantity. One gallon, no problem. A hundred and fifty, you have to have a permit to handle that much. It’s a felony, Bob, not to have a permit or hazardous waste liability insurance. And I bet you don’t even know how to properly dispose of it, do you Bob? Just gonna dump it down the drain, weren’t you, Bob? You know where the sewers lead, Bob? Into the bay, that’s where, Bob. You were going to destroy an entire ecosystem where that much thinner hits the water, Bob. You’re under arrest, Bob. Let me see your driver’s license.”

“Back pocket. Can’t reach.”

Dewey dug the wallet out for him and flipped it open. He handed it to the Ford driver.

“Hey, Bob,” the driver said picking up Dewey’s sarcasm. “You’re in even bigger trouble. Says here your license expired three years ago. If you’ve been hauling stuff all that time and we find anyone who says you worked for them, we can have the DMV take away every vehicle you own. How’s that for being mean, Bob?”

Beer Can Bob was in no mood to answer, so he spat on the ground.

“Careful there, Bob. That might be a law against that, too.”

The driver got close enough to smell the man’s breath. “Uh, oh, Bob. Even more trouble for you, Bob. Had a few pops already? Kind of early in the day, wouldn’t you say?”

The man who rode shotgun in the Ford approached, his weapon holstered. He listened to this exchange, said, “Okay, that’s enough. Get this guy back to the warehouse. There are three others just like him sitting there waiting on a fourth for bridge.”

The driver waved the wallet at the prisoner. “You’ll get this back after you finish a little jail time.” Then he said, “God I love this job.”

* * *

“There are two types of recycling plants,” Dewey explained to the young woman who appeared bored with the discussion. He hovered over the desk where she sat looking vacantly past him. She rolled her eyes at the

mention of recycling plants. “Have I got your attention, Miss Harmon, or are you not interested in the receptionist position?”

The woman’s eyes focused and she snapped to a semblance of attention. “Yes, Mister Tydee, I do want the job.”

“Then you need to know the jargon. We don’t want miscommunication among the staff because you don’t know what we’re talking about. Do you understand?”

“Yessir.”

“Good. All recycling plants are called Material Recover Facilities. To those in the industry they are known as murfs, M-R-F, murf. Murfs are clean or dirty, but that doesn’t have any bearing on how filthy or toxic they may be. Clean merely means they receive recycled cans and bottles in separate containers like bins or bags. Dirty murfs handle solid waste that has not been pre-sorted by the citizens it serves. A dirty murf uses a conveyor belt that people reach over to separate recyclables.”

Harmon’s eyes strayed to her watch. She wished her cell phone would ring so she could answer it. Anything would be better than listening to this dreary talk about recycling.

“You know, Miss Harmon, our office serves a valuable function and most of us are sincerely trying to enforce the laws of this state and those of

the federal government. So if you can't keep from thinking about lunch, maybe you really don't want to work here."

"Murfs," Harmon said. "Clean or dirty."

Dewey seemed satisfied with the response.

"Right. Now if you work in our office long enough you will learn that each of us has a specialty. I handle your normal everyday household toxins from rat poison to lye. Robert over there," he indicated the man who drove the Ford, "is our radiation expert. You route calls on everything from X-ray machines to nuclear fission to him. And Marty," a nod toward a man wearing a cowboy hat and boots which were propped up on his desk elicited a smile and a tip of the hat toward the young woman, "is an expert on computers. Yes, there are toxic components in every computer case and cathode ray tube."

The office phone rang. Dewey paused in his lecture and arched an eyebrow in her direction. Obviously, she was supposed to answer it.

Miss Harmon picked up the receiver and punched a button on the console. Although she was not familiar with the specific equipment, she had worked with many PBX and key systems. Her experience was the primary reason she had been chosen over several other equally qualified candidates.

“Environmental Protection Agency, Irene Harmon here. How may I assist you?”

Apparently she passed this first test with flying colors because Dewey applauded her silently.

“I see. Yes. And who may I say is calling? Mr. Dunfy. Just a moment please.” Irene put the caller on hold, replaced the handset in its cradle and said, “I believe it is for you. The caller, a Mr. Dunfy, said he left his trash dumpster open over night and someone dropped five hundred half full cans of paint in it.”

“Good choice,” Dewey said as he rushed toward his desk. “I handle paint, too. Put him through.”

She picked up the handset, pushed a button, said, “Transferring you now.” She quickly located Dewey’s extension on the console and sent the call to him.

Another line flashed and the ring tone signaled an incoming call. “Environmental Protection Agency, Irene Harmon here. How may I assist you?”

This time when she put the caller on hold she had a concerned expression on her face. She placed an intercom call to Robert explaining what she had just heard.

“This sounds serious. I believe he said there is a horrible chemical odor coming from his neighbor’s business.”

“Got it,” Manor said as he punched the phone and responded with, “Robert Manor here. What’s the exact location of the complaint?” He began writing.

Manor asked a few more questions, hung up, turned toward the other two members of the office team. Dewey had finished his call. “Sounds like a contamination site. Guys ready to roll? Irene, you man the fort. Er, uh, woman the fort. We’re available on our cell phones.”

Harmon watched as, without hesitation, all three opened drawers in their desks, withdrew pistols, checked the ammunition and slid the weapons into belt holsters she had not noticed until now. Two grabbed jackets from the back of chairs, one off a rack behind him, and they were out the door before she could shout, “I don’t know what your cell phone numbers are!”

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“Map Quest tells me this is an electronics service center,” Dewey said from the back seat as he looked up from his laptop.

“Sign on the door says used computers,” Marty volunteered. “Big business. Who we looking for?”

“Owner of record at the business tax office is a guy named Steve Penrose.”

The building was free standing with a completely vacant parking lot. Close inspection of the front doors showed they were padlocked on the outside with a thick chain.

“Well, it looks like Penrose went belly up.”

Manor said, “You know the drill. Dewey, stay near the front doors. Marty, bring the sniffer. We’ll see if there’s a side or back entrance. Nothing out of the ordinary right off. No odor knocking me down.”

They followed a sidewalk that skirted the structure. Half way around, they found a door. Marty aimed the business end of the sniffer toward the base as Manor turned the door handle. It was unlocked. He pulled the door wide.

They were completely unprepared for the horrible stench that blew out on a gust of fetid air and tore through their lungs. Marty doubled over and began retching. Manor withdrew a handkerchief from his pocket and covered his mouth as tears began streaming from his eyes. He coughed and said, “That’s not chemical. Smells like a rotting corpse.”

Marty recovered enough to scan the readings on the sniffer. “Yah, well it’s not picking up any hydrocarbons. Can you handle going inside?”

“Let’s leave the door open.”

There was little light. Marty flipped a nearby wall switch, but the interior remained dark. “Electricity is probably shut off. The guy didn’t pay his bills. Hey, Penrose,” he shouted into the void of a large warehouse. “You here Penrose? Hey! Anybody here?”

Marty held a small but powerful flashlight up and threw the beam around the room. Their eyes followed the shaft of light which revealed a chaotic mess. Computer parts were strewn everywhere. Metal shelves lined the walls eight layers high, every one crammed full and spilling over. Where once there may have been a semblance of order there was now nothing of the sort. On the floor spread out in heaps that flowed toward the center of the room were piles of e-waste including LCD monitors, mounds piled high with metal cases, keyboards, wiring harnesses, CPU boards, hard drives and memory chips.

“Swell. Looks like we have a little toxic playground here,” Marty said.

“Real Humpty Dumpty. Took ’em apart, couldn’t get them back together again,” Manor mused out loud. “Where’s that stench coming from?” Their eyes were becoming accustomed to the dark and their noses to the smell, but it was still overpowering.

Toward the front of the building there were several sets of doors. One set led to restrooms, another to a customer counter at the entrance. There were stairs to one side which they took up to a second floor row of offices. Their eyes had adjusted to the dim conditions and more light filtered through on this level than from below. All the windows facing the parking lot had curtains drawn to shut out the midday sun. At the second entrance they saw someone lying on a couch apparently asleep.

“He could be dead,” Manor muttered. “Which would explain why the place smells so bad.” He stepped through the door and was hit hard with an even more powerfully foul odor of rotten flesh. The door creaked as he passed through which startled the man on the couch who sat up at the sound and said, “Who’s there!?”

The two investigators showed their badges and identified themselves. “We’re with the EPA. Got a complaint about a bad odor. Phoned, got a disconnect, so we came out. You Penrose?”

Before the man could respond, Manor said, “I found the carcass. It’s over here,” he covered his mouth and nose with one hand in an ineffective attempt to maintain control over his body’s involuntary response to the nauseating smell. He was able to keep from regurgitating by sheer force of

will. “It’s a dead dog. Big. Size of a Doberman. I’d say it’s been dead a week at least.”

“That’s my Queenie,” the man on the couch said brightly, somewhat proudly. “She’s napping. I have to get her dinner ready. Good girl, Queenie.”

Marty looked at Manor and said sotto voice, “Uh, oh. Mad Scientist Syndrome.”

“You are Penrose, right?” Manor insisted. “I need some I D. What happened, you lose your lease? What?”

“Why no, officer,” the man on the couch did not reach for any identification. He did start talking, though. “I work with the mission, the Mission of Evangelical Harmony. And we took up a collection to buy a new organ. But now that it’s installed we can’t find anyone to play the damn thing. Do you play the organ?”

Manor pointed to a family photo on the desk. It depicted the man on the couch standing beside a woman, who was probably his wife, and two children, a boy and a girl. The teenagers had wry smiles and the husband and wife appeared uncomfortable to be so close together. There was a nameplate on the desk near the photo which read “Stephen Penrose -- CEO.”

“Yah, okay Mister Penrose. You want to come with us?”

The man stood with a quizzical expression on his face. Manor took an elbow, began leading him out of the room.

Penrose said, "Do you want a chicken? For free, no charge. We raise them out back, y'know."

At the car, Dewey was ready with some answers.

"I've been working the net and this guy Penrose is way behind on everything. He had a license to handle hazardous waste, but it lapsed and he failed to renew it. He's behind on payroll, utilities, workman's comp payments. His wife filed for divorce a couple months ago and when I phoned the house she said she hasn't seen him for several weeks. She thought maybe he might be living out of his office."

"Yah, and then his dog died," Manor said as he pushed Penrose's head down to fit into the back seat of the car with Dewey.

"How the hell could you possibly know that?" Dewey was astonished at the news.

"Instinct." Manor said enigmatically.

* * *

Within days the office routine became nicely settled once Miss Harmon knew who handled the more obscure environmental problems. Division of materials was a concern at first, until Dewey made an alphabetized list and

placed a name beside the appropriate substance. Some of their expertise overlapped and it did not matter, for example, who received greenhouse insecticide questions. All seemed versed in landfill issues, alluvial problems having to do with dredging or with wetlands. But there were specialties within these broad categories.

“Anyone know what Hexygon is?” she asked one afternoon.

“Yah, it’s a miticide, an insecticide with a 12 hour REI,” Marty said nonchalantly as he read the newspaper, his feet as usual propped up on his desk.

“Well, the fire department wants to know how to handle it.”

That got Marty’s attention. He put the paper down, seated himself properly at his desk and said, “Lemme have that call.”

What he heard sent the hair on the back of his neck straight up. His face was ashen when he turned to Dewey. “Get Bob on the horn. Tell him to meet us at the corner of Fifth Avenue and Twelfth Street in Oakland. We have a three alarm fire at a Chinatown supermarket. And right next door is an insecticide transfer center.”

Sirens wailed and acrid smoke filled the air as they approached a dark plume of boiling grey that rose ominously into the sky. They had to show identification to get past a police security line. They were greeted by a fire

marshal who said, “Just pulled the fourth alarm. My men have moved from offensive to defensive positions outside the building. The entire roof is about to collapse and I’ve cordoned off the area. We need to know how to deal with the stored pesticides in the adjoining building. The businesses are separated by a party wall. One goes, the other follows.”

“That’s easy,” Marty said. “Move them before they ignite.”

“Well, that’s problematic,” the chief explained. “We don’t have any way to do that and no place to put them if we could.”

“Plenty of room in the parking lot.”

“We won’t be moving them,” the fire marshal said firmly.

Dewey asked for clarification. “You’re telling me none of your people will risk going inside or you won’t let them go inside?”

“Both,” the chief said aggressively. “I pulled them off the roof ten minutes ago because it’s unsafe. You don’t expect me to tell them to go inside the place now, do you?”

The question was rhetorical, so none of the EPA crew replied. Dewey was already at the back of the SUV. He threw open the doors and began pulling boxes out.

Marty opened one of the equipment packages, removed a bulky yellow outfit. He started pulling on the suit, a self-contained living apparatus. As he

slipped the hood over his head his last words to his co-workers were, “God I hate this job.” Breathing through air filters, he was escorted as close to the storage facility as possible.

Manor grabbed his arm before he could proceed. “Listen to me Marty. I inspected this supply house maybe ten years ago and warned EPA at the time. Pesticides are trucked here from all over the country, then they are shipped to Fresno and the Central Valley on demand. None of the politicians down there want that much toxic crap near where they live, but it was grandfathered in here in Oakland. They store everything from Astro to Orthene 1300 and some of it’s in foggers. There’s gotta be a way to get as much of that out as we can, and fast. Especially the foggers. They’re industrial strength aerosols and look like fire extinguishers, but they are under tremendous pressure. If one of them gets hot it’ll explode like a hand grenade.”

The building was not totally engulfed in flames and the storage center was not, as yet, on fire. But it was plain to all who watched that it was merely a matter of time before it, too, was consumed.

Marty walked through the front doors. The others watched in silence for several minutes as the fire brigade brought hoses to bear on the roof in that section. Without warning, the front windows burst from within. The

shattered panes flying toward them were followed by a yellow Hyster forklift which had punctured the front windows with its two half raised prongs. Marty rode the machine like a cowboy in a rodeo, slapping his thigh for speed and steering with one hand. Behind the Hyster were several pallets filled with metal containers; the pallets followed along like fish on a line.

The forklift rolled past Manor and Tydee, came to a stop. Marty kept the engine idling but stopped just long enough to pull a pin from the back of the forklift which separated the pallets from his machine. Then he turned the vehicle around and started to head back into the storage facility apparently intent on retrieving more of the dangerous chemicals.

“No, Marty, no,” Manor shouted and stood in the way before Marty could get up speed. “It’s too late. We have to withdraw. You got some of them out, but that’ll have to do. It’s too dangerous.” He pointed and said, “See where the fire has spread to just this side of the roof?”

Marty climbed down from the machine and unzipped the hood. “You’re right, of course, but you ain’t gonna like what’s in there, hoss.”

“I have a feeling it’s going to be bad news. Shoot.”

“Vendex 50, a ton of it. Well, that’s an exaggeration, maybe half a ton. In aerosol cans just like you said.”

“That’s bad,” Dewey said when he heard Marty’s report. “Vendex has a 48 hour restricted entry interval, the longest on the EPA’s approved greenhouse chemical list. We do not want that loose in the neighborhood.”

Marty said, “We may have no way of preventing it. I saw at least two pallets of the stuff in there. I couldn’t get to them until I got these out of the way first. What do we do now?”

This was where the responsibility fell squarely on Manor’s shoulders as the bureau chief. It was not a feeling he relished and not a position the others were jockeying to take from him. He turned to the fire chief who had overheard their concerns.

“Is there any chance your guys can concentrate on this area,” Manor motioned toward the roof line that separated the two businesses. “If we can drench the inside through those windows Marty just blasted out, maybe we can keep this section from catching fire.”

The chief agreed to move some of his men and equipment over to the chemical warehouse side. One of the hoses was trained directly on the front doors as they desperately tried to prevent the contents from being engulfed. A stream of water began overflowing from the interior out into the parking lot where they stood, but they were too late. The roof above the chemical facility began to collapse.

Over the sounds of gushing water from high pressure fire nozzles, a hissing whine filled the air. It was not immediately apparent where this sound was coming from until a lighted rocket arced up from the inside of the building and shot straight into the air through the hole in the roof. Like a gigantic Roman candle, the canister rose 100 feet, sputtered as the interior pressure subsided and then it exploded with a resounding thunderclap that rippled through the bodies of the men standing below staring up at it.

A rain of plastic and metal shrapnel began falling all around them and a distinctly unpleasant chemical odor filled the air as the poisonous contents of the makeshift rocket wafted toward them. Marty pulled his hood back on and zipped it tight. He was not the only one whose lungs were protected, but he was the first in their group. The chief yelled, “Masks. Get your masks on!”

Another rocket launched itself, then another. At least five containers filled with insecticide exploded in the night air in this fashion.

Dewey began frantically rummaging through one of the containers in the SUV. He came up with two strap-on breathing masks. He pulled one on his face, adjusted it and handed the other to Manor who stood helplessly watching as the fire continued undeterred in its rapacious consumption of the doomed structure. He placed the mask over his face reluctantly, as if

unwilling to concede this much to the blaze which would burn itself out before it could be put out.

* * *

“Busy week,” Irene said to Dewey as he entered the office. “And it’s only Thursday. I can’t wait ’til tomorrow to see what kind of witch’s brew you three cook up.”

Dewey was immediately defensive. “We don’t make these messes, we try and prevent them.”

Marty said from the back of the room, “You bring your shoes and socks in for proper disposal?”

“Right here.” Dewey held up a plastic garbage bag. “What did you do about those fancy boots of yours?”

“Total loss. I scrubbed them and dried them and they still stink of insecticide. If I wear them my toes will curl up and fall off.”

“I just left the haz mat people who are cleaning up at the Chinese market,” Dewey said. “The fire department says it was definitely arson. They found residue of an accelerant. Said it was the second time in nine years the building has been torched.”

“Insurance scam?” Irene suggested.

“Payback. The owners were extorted to buy protection from a local Asian gang. They refused to pay and this is the result.”

“Well,” Marty remarked, “the unintended consequences are that some of the poison they set free is going to find its way into their own blood streams. How you doing with the list of toxics, Irene?”

“Well, I was wondering why two known toxic substances are not on the list.”

“What two are those?”

“Teflon and Malathion.”

Dewey snorted a laugh. It was Irene’s turn to become defensive.

“What’s so funny about that?”

“Because they are not toxins,” Marty explained. “Teflon is dangerous only if you burn it at high temperatures. And even then you have to stand over it and inhale. It is completely safe to eat if it flakes off in a pan. Other than inhaling its smoke, you don’t have to worry about it.”

“Well, what about Malathion?” she asked. “That stuff stinks. I bought some once to spray my houseplants and stopped using it it smelled so bad.”

“Again, non-toxic to humans,” Dewey put in. “You could drink it, although I really don’t suggest you do. Way it works is it changes when you

spray it on a bug. It is transformed enzymatically in the insect to toxic form, but is relatively harmless to mammals, which is what we are.”

“Not to change the subject, but anyone seen Manor this morning?”

Irene read from a post-it sticker. “Called to say he’ll be back in the office late afternoon. He’s at a convention.”

Dewey expressed surprise. “What convention?”

“Wester 44 I think he called it.”

Marty slapped his forehead. “I completely forgot. This is the week the recycling centers for the western states meet at Moscone Center. The driest bunch of speakers you’ve ever seen. They talk about the latest vertical balers, can densifiers, glass crushers. Boy, am I glad he didn’t invite me to that party.”

“What if they go on a field trip?” Dewey asked hopefully. “Do you want to join them then?”

“Only if it’s to an exotic land. And I don’t count Berkeley exotic.”

* * *

Manor was like a kid in a candy store surrounded by all kinds of wonderful toys. He stopped to stare in wide eyed wonder at the latest in vibrating screens. There were several of the devices being demonstrated and all shook with an intensity that was masked by their nearly silent efficiency.

They were nothing like the machines he had grown up working around during his college years, the rattletrap sifters that were as dangerous as they were noisy. And talk about finicky. A stray can was enough to clog the gears and then you had to manually remove the offending metal container which was always risky. More than a few had lost fingers or hands in the process.

“What do you do with a glider?”

The man in charge of the demonstration was taken aback. “Now that’s a term I haven’t heard in a while. You must of worked the old Sweeco machines, you know a glider.”

Manor was pleased to find a knowledgeable person running the show.

“Yah, I came up through the ranks. Used to operate an air classifier at a dirty murf. Now I get to recommend them to facilities all across the state. Hey, have your R ’n’ D people been able to do anything about . . .”

He was cut short by a screeching sound that was not supposed to be part of the separating process or the demonstration. It sounded as if a piece of thick, heavy metal was being torn as it passed over another piece of thick heavy metal somewhere deep inside the machine. What it suggested to the animal in every human, the basic flight or fight part of everyone’s autonomic nervous system, was immediate flight as far away and as fast as possible. Robert Manor was able to overcome that initial reaction, again by force of

will much as he had in the room with Penrose and the dead dog, but those around him were gone almost instantly. The man opposite was condemned by his position as instructor to stay his ground.

The man had a different reaction to the horrible screeching noise than those around him who fled. He bent toward the controls, hit a bright red button which said OFF in large letters, but it was too late. A two inch piece of metal sprang from the interior of the machine like a spinning fan blade traveling at perhaps 90 miles per hour and struck the man squarely in the center of his bald head as he bent over the console.

He took the impact stoically, stood straight up and looked directly at Manor who had an instant to think, “Looks like a duck been struck in the head, stunned,” before the man’s heart pressure in a last pump spurted a fountain of blood a foot into the air. Then he fell forward into Manor’s arms.

All death is ironic; it goes against life. This one was particularly so for here was someone who died literally trying to save the planet. It was the technology that killed him, not the contaminants he was trying to sift out and reuse.

Manor had no time to think about the unusual circumstances in which he found himself. He also had no choice but to carry the corpse away from

the machines which had all been silenced with that one switch. A crowd gathered now that there was no longer a threat from the sorting devices.

Long minutes later, Manor took an attending physician's advice and went to the bathrooms to clean up. He caught sight of himself in the washroom mirror. He was covered in blood.

Can't go in to work looking like this, he thought. He retrieved his cell phone and flipped it open, punched a speed dial number. After a few seconds he said, "Irene? Robert. Say, listen, I don't think I'll be in after all. Gonna take the rest of the day off. Any pressing issues I should know about? No? Well, okay then, I'll see you Friday. Hunh? Oh, no, nothing exciting, nothing worth talking about. Yah. Tomorrow. Friday."

He hung up and began splashing water on his face. The sink spilled over and ran red.

* * *

Manor told no one of the previous day's experience and did his best to put it out of his mind. Fridays were usually slow, but Irene forwarded an early morning call to him. It was the manager of a dirty murf who said he had found an unusual device in his collection stream.

“Looks like some kind of medical supply thingy,” the man said over the phone. “Naw, no writing on it, just the black diamond shaped warning symbol.”

Robert knew exactly what that meant. “Keep your men away from it, do not touch it.”

“Kind of too late for that, pal,” the man replied laconically.

“I’ll be right over.”

He arrived and asked to see the piece of equipment. It was lying on the floor where it had been tossed by one of the workers who knew only that this was not something which could be recycled.

Manor drew close to inspect it and was appalled. He recognized the inner part of a cancer therapy machine, his worst fear realized. One corner was pried open and leaking out like fine grains of sand was a luminous powder which he knew immediately was cesium-137.

The X-ray machine it once lived inside was long gone, probably sold as scrap metal, but the container with its magic powder had been thrown in the garbage. The total quantity was no greater than an ounce, but it was deadly, more deadly than it had a right to be.

Manor dug a radiation detection survey meter out from the back seat of his car and held it in the air. As he walked around the tipping floor sampling

the air, he was followed by the manager who started admonishing his workers to get back to work pulling recyclable materials off the moving belt.

“No!” Manor began frantically punching numbers on his cell phone while telling the manager how to handle the situation. “Stop the belt, get everyone out, the place is closed by order of the EPA now, this minute. No one is to leave the premises and no one, I repeat no one, is to go home or communicate with anyone from the outside. You,” he pointed at a burly man standing near the conveyor belt, “collect everyone’s cell phone. If they want to remain employed, they are not going to tell anyone about this.” He turned his attention to his own phone. “Marty? There is an EPA condition one at the murf on Tunnel Road. Get the Asimov loaded, bring me plenty of KI pills, at least a hundred doses, contact Anderson at headquarters in DC, tell him we have a code one. I need everyone here in haz mat suits immediately. Call you back in fifteen. Or call me if Anderson wants details. Bye.”

He turned his attention to the manager who stood sweating profusely after hearing one side of the conversation. “I know what a code one is, pal, and I don’t like it one little bit. How bad, you think?”

Manor was tight lipped and told the man he did not know enough yet to answer. “There was a similar outbreak in Juarez, Mexico, back in the early

80's. Only it was not caught as fast. We're lucky. I don't think we'll be burying anybody in lead lined caskets under six feet of concrete."

He did not explain that when something goes wrong at a dirty murf, the consequences can be minor or major. Toxic waste is one thing, but this type of contamination turns the place into an infested dirty murf. It might never be clean again.

"Everyone, your people, you and me, we all need to take a Potassium Iodide pill to prevent radiation from attacking the thyroid. I ordered them just now. They should be here within the hour. And I ordered a remote control device that will pick up the container. So don't anybody touch it. However, your entire belt, the contents of this whole facility, every scrap of material separated by the air classifier will have to be collected and removed to a disposal site. Your people will have to strip naked and get fully scrubbed in a portable unit that does not allow the waste water to escape into the environment. Until we get a good look at how far the trail leads, I can't be sure we won't have to destroy the building and store it in Yucca Mountain."

"Yucca Mountain?" the man said with surprise. "Did they open Yucca Mountain to radioactive disposal already?"

“No,” Manor said as he ushered them both outside and closed the doors behind him, “and they never will. That was a ruse. It was never intended to be a disposal facility. It’s a gigantic fallout shelter for government employees, politicians, the military, everyone associated with the government. They called it a radioactive disposal facility in order to get it funded and built. They couldn’t very well have told the public the truth, now, could they?”

The manager was truly aghast at the news. “You’re kidding.”

“Yes, I am,” Manor said with a smile. “But it sounds plausible, doesn’t it?”

Before the manager could reply, Dewey drove up in the SUV. Five hours later it was determined that the building would, indeed, have to be deconstructed and hauled away to a proper radioactive disposal site.

“Look on the bright side, Dewey,” Manor said as he sat at his desk late that night and initialed the cleanup report. “At least we aren’t buying an entire town and shutting it down like we did Times Beach.”

Dewey was not impressed. It was late, he should have been home hours ago, had to call and make excuses. But that was part of the job. His wife understood.

“Man, that was a full week,” he managed a sigh. “I’m glad we have a weekend to look forward to. Hey Marty, did you find time to set things up for Monday?”

“Oh, yah. I pulled the names of eight cheap haulers off Craigslist, called them up and told them to meet us at the same loading dock starting at eight in the morning. Sounds like fun. But Beer Can Bob is still my favorite.”

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