

What Comes Next

Omar Schmidt leaned over his coffee table and butted his cigarette in the overflowing ashtray. He then placed his hands on his knees to ease the oncoming strain and stood up. The heat and humidity were overwhelming. He ran a hand over his balding head and breathed out. Outside his third-floor window he heard cars go by with a siren wailing in the distance.

He shuffled to the kitchen and grabbed the jar of instant coffee on the counter, putting a spoonful in a mug. Beside the jar was an ant, possibly a scout on patrol for riches. Ants had been around almost since he had retired and they drove him nuts. It picked up the pace once it sensed Omar's attention. Omar waited until it was almost to the counter's edge to go down the side, then crushed it with his thumb. Too bad so sad. He lifted his thumb to wipe remnants on his pajama pants only to see he hadn't actually gotten it. They were quick.

Omar then went to the fridge. He barely glanced at the lone picture on it before opening the door. Two dated pizza boxes greeted him. Beside that, a jar of jam, a half-emptied jar of pickles and a carton of milk. It was still three days away from his cheque but he had seen things worse.

Omar grabbed the carton and shook it, feeling only a dribble inside. He sighed and threw the container in the garbage bag because screw recycling. He closed the fridge door and took a longer look at the photo. In it, he was in his prime while meeting the governor in 'sixty-four. Omar, along with some of his closest tribe members like The Magician, Samson, and a woman called Seer were all wearing their costumes and

smoking Cohibas. Life was good back then. Before arthritis, high blood pressure, and waiting for meager pension cheques.

Omar decided the lack of milk may be for the best. It really was beer weather, even if he only had warm ones. He walked back to his couch and swore out loud when he realized he had no beer either. Things were more dire than he realized.

He made his way into his bedroom to see if he had any cash in his wallet, grabbing his second last twenty and stuffing it in his pajama pants. He then turned, pausing in front of the partially open closet door. It may have been the nostalgia from the photo on the fridge, or maybe it was just the fact he hadn't felt Egyptian linen fabric in a while. Omar opened the door further revealing a coat rack. On it hung a full body black religious habit including the hood.

He ran his nicotine stained fingers along the stretchy fabric. It rolled under his fingers. Bullet resistant and amazingly light, the habit was virtually indestructible. He thought back to a better era and smiled.

Things WERE better back then. He could lift a truck if the situation demanded it. Dames were a dime a dozen. Even the crooks were better, with a shared level of etiquette with the cops. When he was called upon, no one got in his way and he had the keys to the whole damned city.

But that was back then, before downsizing to a seedy one-bedroom apartment because- well, because he just didn't plan ahead for what comes after. Like a good fire, everyone wants you when you're hot. Not so much when all that's left is the ashes.

Omar's mind went back to the last day he wore that outfit. It must have been over thirty years ago.

Crime fighting was volatile at best. It was hard on the body and mind alike. Adding methamphetamines and absinthe like they did didn't help. At what point crime fighting becomes vigilante justice is hard to say and even harder to care about.

A bad tip ended up with one gangster crippled and two on a slab. The big problem was, they were the wrong gangsters. Omar, better known as Priest to his group, and his fellow crime fighters went from Town Darlings to Public Enemy Number One with one quick oops. One oops will erase a hundred atta boys he was told. Too bad so sad. He stepped into the shadows that day and never put the habit on again. He couldn't bring himself to get rid of it though. Good or bad it was a part of him, and god help anyone who tried to separate him from it.

Omar closed the closet door and shuffled back to the living room. He went to the bathroom and tried to use the bathroom, supporting himself against the wall with his arm. He had zero intentions of pissing himself again. He lit another cigarette and left the apartment still wearing his slippers, pajama pants, and white stained tank top.

The burrow in which he lived was steady, but not busy like downtown. Omar squinted as he left the dim stuffiness of his apartment complex and turned down towards the store which was three blocks away.

His joints loosened up some as he walked down the sidewalk. The smell of fuel and exhaust filled the air. Further down, delivery trucks and vans delivered their goods,

their air brakes squealing as they idled forward fighting traffic. Their windows down, Omar could hear their radio stations belt out news and old hits. It was a good day.

Omar got to the corner store. It had bars on the windows and door signifying when it was closed, it was closed. There was a teenager sitting on the curb, looking around occasionally then down at his phone. The kid smelled of dishonesty and fraud, but Omar paid little attention to things like that anymore.

Omar may have been old, but he still viewed himself as stealthy. He often played a game with himself to try to go unnoticed by someone. He did it now. The kid took no notice as Omar slipped by and opened the door just the right way to almost stop the bell from tingling. An easy trick once you learned how. The breeze from outside caught the cashier's attention, and Omar and she gave a neutral nod to each other. Her name was Mel and she had been serving in the trenches here for nearly twenty years. At least she had her nose in a book and not a phone.

He went down a faded tiled aisle to the coolers in back and selected a six pack from behind which would be colder. He paused and closed his eyes as the refrigerator's cool breeze chilled the sweat on his body.

The store's bell gave another tingle as a new customer came in and greeted Mel. Omar instinctively checked out the security mirror in the upper corner. These habits were also hard to break. Another young man, possibly late teens, was making small talk with Mel while asking if she could break a fifty if he bought bread. It was hard to get a scent off him in here but his voice gave him away. A wavering silkiness, like an inexperienced fox seducing its first young warm rabbit before eating it. Omar grabbed

his six pack of beer and quietly closed the cooler's door. He was god damned if there wasn't another ant on the cooler door. The ant smelled and looked a lot like the one at home. But Omar had a bigger barn to paint right now. He glared at the ant then walked slowly up the aisle to the counter. His slippers were very quiet on the faded tiled floor.

By the time Omar was to the counter the knife was out with the assailant threatening to cut a surprisingly calm Mel open if she didn't open the till and give him the cash right goddamned now. Omar came up and remained unnoticed until he opened a bottle at ten feet away from them.

Both looked at Omar as soon as he twisted the cap off and dropped it to the floor. "Don't mind me," Omar advised them as he slowly waved a dismissive hand in front of him and shifted the case of five remaining beer to his left hand.

The assailant shifted his focus and knife to Omar. "Hands up old man. I 'll take whatever you got too."

Omar thought over what had been said. "I'm an old man, yes. But this woman doesn't need this. Go play your little game elsewhere," Omar answered as he took another swig. "Actually, get a job. Better pay and easier on the body. Trust me."

"Shut up," the young man warned him. Then looked at Mel. "The money. Now."

Omar spoke slowly as he ignored the man's advice. "When I was young like you," he nodded at the teenager in front of him, "I was in a... gang, I guess you could call it. But it wasn't like a gang for someone like you. In my gang, we did good things. And fought bad people. Priest, they called me. Back when being a priest meant something. I haven't been in this gang for a long time. People got hurt and we had to lay

low. Now, I don't care. Anyways, there were other people in my good gang. We had Samson, The Magician, and Seer. And there were more. An old member from this same gang before my time ran this very store. Its why I still come. In her later years we watched out for her without her even knowing. That's what my gang did for its older people back then. But we didn't tell them because we knew they would be too proud to accept help.

While I was in my gang, almost every week we would fight the guys in the bad gang. Sometimes it was one on one, other times five on four. And after we fought, me and my gang would get drunk. Sometimes, the fight didn't happen right away. And by the time it did, we were already drunk. But because we were good and they were bad we always had to fight. And get drunk.

One weekend, Seer got popped in the nose by a bad gang member- a French guy called War. Broke her nose and gave her two black eyes. She gave as good as she took though. Seer was a tough dame.

The next Monday, Seer had to take her kids to school. A teacher saw her two black eyes and called child services. I think it was War that really called. His day job was a cop and he knew how to pull strings. Can you imagine a guy like War being a cop.

Seer couldn't explain her broken nose and two black eyes and the kids were taken away for their own safety. For all she could see, Seer couldn't find her own kids. We looked for a long time before finally finding and taking them back. That really blew

things up between our gangs because family was supposed to be off limits. A few months later, I was with Seer and who did we run into but War.

He was coming out of a hatch on the Commerce building roof with a bag of money in his backpack. He wasn't expecting to see us, but there we were. Seer had said she would kill him, but we all say a lot of things."

The robber put his knife closer to Omar's face. "What the hell are you talkin' about? Never mind your money. Just shut up."

"I was pretty messed up that night on drugs and booze," Omar continued. "A news helicopter saw the commotion and filmed the three of us up there on the roof, Seer and War fighting under the helicopter's flood light. War didn't have a chance. Even if he beat Seer, I was gonna do him. His time had come. But I think War got the last laugh, as he gave us the bad information before seer through him off the roof."

The teenager had had enough, lunging at Omar with his knife but Omar was already out of the way. There was a snap as he twisted the kid's arm and threw him to the floor, kneeling on the screaming kid with his knee. Omar barely broke conversation as he continued. "Killing a man in public doesn't do any good for anybody. And we were already warned by the chief of police we were on thin ice."

Omar didn't hear the tingle as the store's door opened. Nor did he notice the boy that was no longer sitting on the curb, or the glint of metal in his hand. Omar was starting to tell the teenager that if he chose a life of crime there would always be guys like Priest, Samson or Seer to kick his ass and put him where he belonged when he felt punches to his back.

He ignored the punches at first. As the pain grew it multiplied a hundred-fold and he felt wetness on his torso. Omar realized he had been stabbed. He went to stand up but fell forward to the floor. Omar glanced at his attacker and saw that he was now also on the floor and now unconscious, Mel standing over him with her eyes glowing. She knelt by Omar. She spoke an undecipherable tongue into her hand, and gently placed an ant on the floor allowing it to run out and under the door.

“Don’t talk, Priest,” she cautioned. “Help will be here soon.”

Omar thought he may have pissed himself, but he didn’t even care.