

"No Good At All"

There was a knock on the door as Pascal Weber was folding the white shirt with the small blue and red stripes. He placed it with great care into the drawer of the oak dresser and, sliding the drawer shut, set the laundry basket aside. The knocking at the door became more insistent, but he made no great hurry to reach it any faster. The rapping was becoming rather fevered and heavy when he finally slid back the chain, turned the deadbolt, twisted the lock and swung the door open.

"Yes?" he squeaked in his decrepit, ancient voice, made more decrepit and ancient by his habit of remaining completely quiet in his home for days on end until finally being forced by politeness to emit sounds, like the twisting of dry leather.

The two gentlemen outside his door, one rat-faced and sneering, the other a blank, greasy giant, looked down at him, having found their expectation to have been a foot too high in regards to the placement of Pascal's head.

"Mr. Weber?" the rat-faced man asked, sneering even more, as if Pascal's insistence on being a small, balding man of nearly 70 years were somehow an intense nuisance. "Mr. Pascal Weber?" he asked again in a salami-thick goombah accent after Pascal continued to stare at him, unresponsive.

"Yes, I know who I am. Who are you?" he creaked again, sounding more and more like an unoiled rocking chair.

The rat-faced man frowned and began "My name is..." before he was interrupted by a long string of racked coughing from Pascal, who was bent in half with choking gasps. The men looked worriedly at each other before the coughing finally slowed to a wheeze.

"I'm sorry," Pascal said, more clearly now but still hunched over, gasping. "Please continue what you were saying."

"Oh... Um." The rat-faced man looked back at his large compatriot, who was still blank-faced, before continuing. "I am Mooky. And my large friend here is Dubo. We have come on behalf of Mr. Tony "The Belt Sander" Scallopini." Mooky dwelled on these last words, as if recognition were expected.

"Isn't scallopini an Italian seafood dish?" Pascal asked, appearing to have heard nothing except the last word.

Mooky looked confused for several seconds before answering. "I believe that, indeed, besides being Mr. Tony "The Belt Sander" Scallopini's name, that it might, in fact, be an Italian dish of a seafood orientation."

"Belt sander?" Pascal blurted.

"What?"

"You said 'belt sander'. Tony "Belt Sander" Scallopini."

"Yes, I did. Mr. Tony "The Belt Sander" Scallopini is my employer, as I had stated previously."

"Yes, I believe I heard you. But why Tony "*Belt Sander*" Scallopini?"

"Well, Mr. Tony "The Belt Sander" Scallopini is well known amongst the community for his usages of a belt sander as a deterrent to the disobedience of those, such as us, who are in his employ. Or, possibly of interest to you, those in his debt. But that is currently not what I was talking about."

"Oh?"

"Yes, Mr. Tony "The Belt Sander" Scallopini has recently taken over some interests which you might be aware of. So, as such, we have come to collect on these outstanding interests."

"Oh... I'm sorry, but I don't subscribe to the paper and I don't wish to." Pascal began to close the door before Dubo laid a hand on it and pushed it back open, as if Pascal weren't applying any weight to it at all.

"Those are not the interests of which I speak," Mooky said, stepping into the apartment, followed closely by Dubo. "This may bring more quickly to your attention, in detail, the exact nature of your debt to Mr. Tony "The Belt Sander" Scallopini."

Mooky handed over to Pascal a small sheet of paper with an itemized statement of monies owed. Pascal read them over closely before responding.

"But, as I told the librarian four months ago, I never checked out a Danielle Steele novel. I don't think I'm even capable of reading a Danielle Steele novel."

"Well, that is none of my concern. It is not my place to question the agreements reached between you and the interest currently acquired by Mr. Tony "The Belt Sander" Scallopini. It is only my place and my objective to acquire the money owed to Mr. Tony "The Belt Sander" Scallopini as part of that interest."

"You librarians have become a devious, unreasonable lot. In my day, no one would have stood for this kind of strong-arm treatment. A librarian that showed this level of disrespect and distrust in honest book-borrowers would have been run out of town on a rail."

"I am certain they would, pops, but I'm afraid you have mistaken my place in this endeavor."

"I won't pay it." Mooky's face dropped to an even deeper scowl. Dubo frowned and cracked his knuckles. "I can't pay it."

"Well, that is not a potential outcome of the arrangement we have with Mr. Tony "The Belt Sander" Scallopini."

"You are knaves, robbing good people in the night." Mooky and Dubo had nothing to say to this and glazed over noticeably at the statement. "My government check doesn't even arrive until the beginning of the month, so I don't have the money to give you. If you insist upon this bullying, I will have the money in two weeks, at the first of the month, and will relent it to you, though your petty scare tactics turn my stomach."

Mooky gave Dubo a doubtful, sour look, tapping his foot idly before finally formulating a reply.

"I do not have within my power the ability to make such deals directly, so I will have to speak to my employer, Mr. Tony "The Belt Sander" Scallopini. Might I use your phone, please?"

Mooky picked up the receiver from the ancient yellow plastic wall phone. It felt leaden in his hand after using so many modern phones.

The resistance was incredible as he tried to turn the dial with his index finger and he wondered how the small man, the phone at Mooky's eye level, was able to dial it.

After a grueling minute of work, the call was made and the phone rang.

The phone continued to ring, ringing six times before there was a click and the hiss of an answering machine recording.

"Hey, baby! This is the voice of Tony "The Belt Sander" Scallopini! If you leaves me all the info, I'll give you a call right back when I'm in! Later!"

There was a mild pause, then a beep.

"Hello, Mr. Tony "The Belt Sander" Scallopini. This is Mooky. I am here with my man Dubo at the apartment of Mr. Pascal Weber, who is currently unable to pay his outstanding debt for two weeks. I am calling for further instructions and

verification." Mooky left the number for the apartment after much struggling to decrypt the yellowing label in the dial's center.

Then the wait began.

"So, if you don't mind me asking, how much do you pay per month for this fine apartment, Mr. Pascal Weber?" Mooky handed Pascal a pair of folded plaid boxer shorts, picked up a white undershirt, and went back to folding.

"Oh... Well. It's currently up to four hundred and fifty per month, only gas included."

"Well, it is spacious, indeed."

"Thank you. I rather enjoy it." Pascal smiled slightly and rolled socks into small balls. "I've lived here for seventeen years."

"Always you've lived here by yourself, Mr. Pascal Weber?"

"Well, I moved in here after my wife died..."

Mooky cut him off. "I'm very sorry to hear that, Mr. Pascal Weber. You have my condolences." Dubo grunted and nodded his agreement solemnly while buttoning and hanging a dress shirt.

"Oh... Well, it has been seventeen years now. I remember her fondly, but the hurt has faded."

"Well, Mr. Pascal Weber, it is with much happiness that Dubo and myself see that you have dealt emotionally with the loss in your life. It brings me much pride to see that you have processed these emotions, Mr. Weber."

"Oh... Thank you." Pascal folded his fifth undershirt and added it to the stack.

One hour and 23 minutes later, Pascal, Dubo and Mooky sat in the living room, quietly passing the time, still waiting for the call from Tony "The Belt Sander" Scallopini.

Mooky looked down at the ash grey cat that whined and rubbed up against his foot.

"Mr. Pascal Weber, if you don't mind my asking, what's the name of this little cat right here?"

"That would be my wife's cat, Princess."

"Well, hello, Miss Princess. How are you doing down there?" Mooky questioned idly. "What is that that you're doing down there with your whiskery face on my shoe, Miss Princess?" Mooky sat, staring at the cat for some time before looking to Pascal.

"Your cat, if you don't mind me saying, Mr. Pascal Weber, is rather inattentive to my more inquisitive nature."

"Hmmm?"

"I have asked this Miss Princess why she, and I am making a large but not terribly drastic assumption in assuming that it is a *she*, is and continues to rub her whiskery face along the tip of my expensive Canadian leather Jimmy Proshuto brand dress shoes for fine wearing."

"Yes. Cats tend to do that."

"Well, the previously regarded Miss Princess has also made no attempt to in any way pay attention to or make recognition of the question that I had posed to her previously."

"Well, cats don't talk. And they don't understand English."

"I find this news mildly disturbing, Mr. Pascal Weber. Having never grown up around any pets, Dubo and myself find it odd that cats do not speak or understand English. I have seen parrots, which talk fairly regularly and in much more fluent English than many Puerto Ricans I know. And if such a bird can speak, why not can a

cat, because cats have to be smarter than stupid birds, who shit on cars fairly regularly?"

"Yes... Well, cats don't speak."

"And you are very sure of this, Mr. Pascal Weber?"

"Quite... In my seventy years, I have yet to come across any talking cat."

"Perhaps they exist only in areas which are, as yet, untouched by human corruption. There may be large populations of native English-speaking cats roaming the Amazon, or the Serengeti, or Papua New Guinea?"

"That... That is, I suppose, possible. Though not terribly likely."

"Science is a mystery in many ways, Mr. Pascal Weber. A strange and unknown, frightening mystery of many ambiguities and things that we cannot necessarily comprehend in our limited understanding of what all is entailed."

"Yes... Well, is anyone else hungry?"

Pascal stirred at the small pot and covered it again.

"I'm truly very sorry. As I said, my check doesn't come for another two weeks and my lack of money has prevented me from going to the store. I didn't realize that I so little left to eat..."

"Do not give it any more thought, Mr. Pascal Weber. Mooky and myself have often had very little money on which to eat with and we would consider the sharing of your fine Uncle Ben's Wild Rice to be an enjoyable treat for our taste buds."

"Well, I'm glad I could offer you something at all... The cupboard is rather bare."

"In that case, I feel almost a sense of guilt for having to come collect this money from you, Mr. Pascal Weber, but sometimes fate is not in our hands and sometimes we do not enjoy the jobs that we do, but we do them anyway, because they are our jobs and it's our job to do them."

"Yes. I suppose." Pascal began to dole out steaming heaps of rice into two small brown porcelain bowls, which he passed out to Mooky and the grunting Dubo.

The phone began to ring as the two of them were eating their rice, Pascal going to answer it. After he managed to reach the receiver, he found that Tony "The Belt Sander" Scallopini was on the other end and called Mooky to the phone.

"Hello, this is Mooky."

"Hey! Mooky! This is Tony "The Belt Sander" Scallopini! How's it hangin', bacon?"

"Everything is well enough here, Mr. Tony "The Belt Sander" Scallopini, except in regards to the question which I called you about. We are here to collect on one Mr. Pascal Weber, a fine gentleman with too limited funds to be paying his fourteen dollars in debt at this time. What should we, under those circumstances, do?"

"Hey! Yeah! Kill him, Mooky! Alright?"

"Heard loud and clear, Mr. Tony "The Belt Sander" Scallopini."

"Okay, then! Ciaos to ya!"

Mooky hung up the phone and returned to the kitchen.

"Dubo, you're going to need to hold Mr. Pascal Weber for me."

"What is the meaning of this? I don't understand what's going on!" Pascal yelped at Dubo cracked his knuckles and grabbed him by the shoulders.

"Well, Mr. Pascal Weber, we have been instructed to take care of you." Mooky dug around in a brown leather satchel.

"I don't feel very taken care of!"

"Well, you will soon enough, Mr. Pascal Weber." Mooky held up a pneumatic staple gun in front of Pascal's face.

"What in the name of God is that for?"

"Well, Mr. Pascal Weber, every man must earn for himself his level of street credibility and his own regard in the minds of other criminal types who hear of his nicknames and his methods and use those as the judgment on which they base their own opinions and how they deal with this person. I, Mooky, would like to be taken seriously and to move up in the world someday, so I am currently working toward making a name for myself that someday I might be known as Mr. Mooky "The Pneumatic Staple Gun" Minneapolis. Does this not seem in some way reasonable?"

"I don't like this!"

"Well, unfortunately, Mr. Pascal Weber, this is not the first and foremost function of this type of punishment. But I only wish that I could make this easier for you..."

At roughly this point, Mooky keeled over stiffly onto the linoleum.

Dubo looked down at him, grunting inquisitively, before his eyes widened and he too fell over onto the floor.

"Oh, dear..."

Pascal wandered over to the kitchen counter and read over the exterior of the discarded and empty rice box.

"Hmm... directions... ingredients... best if used by... January fourteenth... 1987." Pascal frowned. "Oh, well, fiddle. That's no good. No good at all."