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I Never Really Liked Hemingway

by Ray Johnson

I actually wanted to purchase a Pontiac Firehawk, 5.7 liter V8, six-speed manual transmission, sun roof, the works. Instead, I ended up with a Volvo 850 four door. Darleene said the Pontiac would be a gas hog and that I should think of the environment first, myself second. So I bought the Volvo, which made Darleene happy and Standard Oil miserable.

Now I was staring at my new Volvo 850. Two very tough looking young men were sitting on the fenders of my Swedish safety machine. Another young man had his foot on the front bumper and the fourth inconsiderate was leaning against the driver's door.

Darleene and I were just returning to the car after watching an avant-garde movie. Unfortunately, avant-garde movies are usually shown in avant-garde theaters, which tend to be located in avant-garde sections of the city. The small, somewhat seedy theater had no real parking lot, so we were forced to park almost two blocks away. The area was foreboding and treacherous, and that was during daylight. Now, approaching midnight, the streets looked truly deserted and forlorn.

There was a dispirited street light burning, but it was on the other side, almost a half block away from my Volvo, which was being violated. How in God's name did I get here anyway?

Now I remember. I had suggested that we go see a new movie at the Multi-Plex, whose parking lot was not only safe, but well lit. Darleene had nixed the idea be-

cause the movie starred an actor who had recently been arrested for biting a dog. I honestly could not see where biting a dog had anything to do with the way he acted in a movie about fighting drug dealers in Colombia, but I gave way, as always.

She had read somewhere that this Czech movie was playing in the Mission District. The thought sounded bad right from the start.

Her apartment was in the Castro District and she often chided me for condemning an entire area. I always suspected that she had picked her neighborhood well, the Castro was safe. Five blocks further east and things changed dramatically. She prided herself on being able to tell her friends that she lived close to the Mission District, close enough to be able to volunteer for two hours of service on Free Food Day.

At the moment, I wished I had some of those donated cans of Hunts tomato sauce to throw at the four villains who were sitting on my Volvo. Didn't they know that I had a three hundred and ninety-six dollar car payment? Plus the insurance. We were still too far away to see their eyes, but I knew the midnight bandits were lurking like vultures, waiting to pick clean the bones of whoever was stupid enough to park in this area.

To make matters even worse, I hated the movie we had just seen. The subtitles looked like they had been written by the fourth grade class at Jefferson Elementary.

"Are you willing to die for freedom, Pazderova?"



What an idiotic question. If you're dead, you have no freedom. Had the question been "Are you willing to *live* for freedom, Pazderova?", then I would have understood and answered *yes*. To compound my misery, Darleene loved the disjointed movie. And to further vex the logical, the subtitles were not aligned with the actors' lips. There seemed to be a perpetual four second delay between when the actor said something and when the subtitle dialogue appeared on the screen. Worst of all, it was made during the Cold War and nothing was relevant. The Czechs and the Russians are now good buddies, selling each other weapons and oil.

I would have to keep quiet about this movie misadventure because my colleagues at work would die laughing at me for being dumb enough to see the movie in the first place, and even dumber for parking my car where I did. I honestly had the feeling that the theater had rented the film from the foreign movie section at Blockbuster for two dollars and then soaked me fourteen dollars to see it.

The reason I gave way so soon on the movie was because Darleene and I had a small spat earlier in the day. We were at the Academy of Sciences, in the African exhibit hall, when the tiff started. Africa made her think of wild animals and animals made her think about hunting animals. Next thing I knew she was grumbling about men who hunt animals for sport. Before I could derail her, she took off on Hemingway. I think it was the lion display that set her off.

The lion exhibition at the Academy is magnificent, with a powerful male, black mane bristling, and three sleek lionesses, plus a bunch of cubs, all staring out over

the Serengeti. I think she was secretly angry with the male lion for having so many wives, as she liked to call them. Anyway, the big male made her think of the Hemingway story where the white hunter has to save the cowardly husband from the wounded lion.

Darleene was furious with everyone involved, but mostly Hemingway. She railed against the hunter who turned and ran when the lion charged.

"But, he wounded the lion to begin with and . . ."

She snapped, "He should never even have been there! No one has a right to harm an animal, any animal, including humans."

She is both humanitarian and vegetarian, which somewhat limits where we can go when dining out. I pretend that I'm a vegetarian also, to keep peace. Sometimes I grab a Whopper or a double cheeseburger at lunch, but who's to know?

By now I was close enough to see the quartet of miscreants clearly. All four of them were staring at us like hungry jackals. They were wearing black and silver football jackets. Darleene hates football. I'm a 49ers fan.

"I think we have a problem." I lowered my voice, trying to sound profound.

She scolded me, "Never judge a book by its cover."

"I try not to, but this doesn't look good."

She attempts to find some good in everyone, except for Hemingway. Earlier I tried to explain that the character in Hemingway's story had been devastated by his own cowardice, only to be rejuvenated when he rediscovered his courage.

She had countered, "At the expense of a



poor, defenseless lion." By then she was seething. "Real courage would have been to dismiss the white hunter immediately, renounce hunting altogether, try to understand his wife, and vow never to harm man or beast again."

I had to be cautious how I responded. I was in no position to rile her. We slept together, but not on a regular basis. She felt that if we spent too much time together I would begin to encroach upon her space. So we went together, but not exclusively. She pretended that she did not see other men, but I knew better. Whenever I could not reach her, she would explain that she was out shopping or off visiting a sick friend. Unfortunately, these shopping sprees and errands of mercy usually took place on Friday or Saturday night.

Tonight was one of those rare nights when I was going to be allowed to stay over. These benefactions were infrequent enough as it was, and the last thing I needed was to confront her over some ridiculous story that was fiction to begin with. I secretly admired Macomber for overcoming his fears and standing firm against the Cape buffalo. He had faced down a marauding Cape buffalo and recovered his shattered manhood. Bravo.

I often envisioned myself, wearing an L.L. Bean bush jacket, Weatherby .460 magnum in hand, facing down a charging black rhino. My gun bearer would flinch at the sight of the onrushing rhino, two thousand pounds of death bearing down upon us. His thundering hoofbeats would rumble the arid ground beneath our feet, further terrifying my bearer. But my calm and steady manner would give him courage.

"Hold fast, Ngono. I'll stop him," I

would say in a resolute voice. "Keep the .378 backup at the ready." I would drop down to a .378 Weatherby Magnum for the coup de grace. More sporting.

"Yes, Bwana," his fears and trepidations now washed away.

I chamber the belted .460 cartridge, the nine locking lugs of the rifle bolt sounding like a bank vault closing. The rhino's beady little eyes are glaring at me, demanding, "Who is this arrogant human who dares to invade my territory?"

Dust is flying from his pounding hoofs. He snorts like an enraged dragon as he closes the distances between us. Tick birds jump from his shuddering back, like rats leaving a sinking ship. The other animals on the plain freeze in terror, knowing that the grim reaper will be coming for one of us. I can hear my bearer sucking in breath behind me. He sounds like an old steam engine, trying to negotiate a steep grade.

Once again I steady him, "Easy there, Ngono. I have him right where I want him."

"Please, Bwana, may your aim be true. I have wife and babies."

"No need to fear." I'm as steady as Gibraltar.

The rhino snorts out his rage, furious that I have not turned and dashed away in cowardice. Slowly I take the slack out of the single-stage trigger. I take three and a half pounds of pull on the three and three-quarter pound trigger. Only an angel's breath keeps the firing pin from driving forward, striking the primer and exploding the magnum powder, sending the Nosler bullet on a deadly trajectory. Just as I'm ready to squeeze . . .

"Are you daydreaming again?" Darleene sounded irritated.



"I . . . I must have been. I guess I was thinking about the African animals.

"I sincerely hope you were not wool-gathering about that insidious Hemingway story. It makes me angry just thinking about it."

"No, no, of course not. I was just wondering how they did such a marvelous job on these displays." A magnificent lie.

The displays are well lit, but the museum itself is rather shadowy, thus shielding my lying eyes. I had absolutely no desire to jeopardize what I hoped would be a banner evening.

I did not get to stop the charging rhino and instead found myself staring at four hoodlums. The two on the fenders were holding knives, their razor-sharp blades glistening in the shallow light.

"Darling, I . . . I think we should turn around and try to find a taxi instead." I did my best to sound confident, yet prudent.

"Nonsense. They're just harmless young men. If we prejudge them, just because they're minority, then we're no better than someone who listens to those terrible radio talk shows." Her voice was cheerful, very self-assured.

"My pet, they really don't look too friendly. Perhaps they've been unduly set upon by society and are . . . are looking to wreck vengeance upon anyone of another ilk."

"Don't jump to conclusions. They probably discovered something about your car that you failed to notice and are merely waiting to tell you about it." She remained dauntless.

As always, she was striding purposefully, in her sensible pumps. I normally had to hurry to keep up. Tonight was even worse

because my brain was telling my legs to slow down. Actually it was screaming out the warning.

Boom.

The roar from the .460 Weatherby Magnum was terrifying. Birds exploded from the acacia trees and hundreds of Thompson gazelles bolted as one. Wildebeasts and zebras shot forward, terrified by the thunder stick. The ferocious rhino slowed, but did not go down. He continued coming at me like a runaway freight train. My formerly faithful bearer threw the expensive .378 magnum rifle into the air and scampered for his life.

Unfortunately, he ran headlong into a wart hog that had been spooked by the roar of the powerful .460 magnum cartridge. It was a boar wart hog and we were right in the middle of rutting season. I could not stop to help Ngoni because I had my hands full with the killer rhino.

The sounds from behind me were incredible. Never had I heard such screaming and grunting. Ngoni was bellowing at the top of his lungs in Swahili and the wart hog was grunting out sounds that only another wart hog could comprehend.

I had no time for playful Serengeti games. The rampaging rhino was almost upon me, with fire blazing from those pygmy eyes. I took careful aim. Again I took the slack from the trigger.

Boom.

One of the assassins pounded on the hood of my financed Volvo.

Darlene touched my arm to calm me. "Don't get excited. They're probably just trying to see if the car is as sturdy as the ads say it is."

The two on the hood slipped menacingly



to the ground. The one by the driver's door joined them. The loser with his foot on the bumper turned to face us. By now we were close enough to see the determined looks in their evil eyes.

I mustered my courage and demanded, "What do . . . do you want, fellahs?"

They all looked to be in their late teens, a dangerous age when out at midnight on a dark and deserted street. Their leader may have been twenty; it was difficult to tell in the poor light.

The leader, who was a shade taller than the rest, said in a thievish voice, "We want your money, your watch, and . . ." he hesitated, seemingly for effect, "and your woman." He eased a wicked-looking Buck knife from an ankle sheath to emphasize his sincerity.

All of them glared at Darleene, with lust burning in their depraved eyes.

Darleene was mortified. She offered sincerely, "I . . . I volunteer at the free clinic on Ashbury on alternating Tuesdays."

This artless revelation invoked a chuckle from the menacing quartet.

The moment of truth had arrived. I was alone. No Weatherby Magnum rifle to down the rogues in front of me. No faithful bearer with a backup weapon. No white hunter to back me up with his Rigby .500 Nitro Express. It was just me and the four young assholes.

I was alone in the chilled night, armed only with my Nike Air Max trainers, with synthetic leather and breathable upper mesh. What would Macomber do?

The windshield of my Volvo had three gaping holes in the safety glass. Both right windows were completely broken out. The

left front window was cracked and the rear window was gone, vanished. The headlights, as well as the taillights, were all broken. The driver's door had been kicked in and all four tires were flat, slashed by finely honed knives.

Unfortunately, my car was in better shape than I was. Both of us had insurance, but at the moment I felt the car had gotten the best of things. I had made my decision in a heartbeat. Macomber was right the first time. That damn lion had big teeth. I bolted for safety, but not before shouting to Darleene. The shortest of the villains had just grabbed her by the wrist and she was screeching some obscenity at either him or me, I wasn't quite sure which.

"Be brave, my darling. I'm going for help." I tried to sound reassuring.

My shouting required a great deal of dexterity. Rather than shout over my shoulder, I instead turned and ran backwards, yelling as I continued running—a feat in itself.

"Fight them off, sugarplum. I'll be back with the police in no time." I flung my words over her like a protective shield.

I heard her snarl "I'll kill you for this, you bastard!" Obviously she was screaming at her young assailant. Two of the gangbangers started after me and I was forced to stop shouting my words of encouragement.

I heard one of the pursuers yell, "Get him, Ruhulio. I want them shoes." I ran even faster, for the police.

My right arm was broken in two places. Not compound breaks, thank God, but still it was in a cast. Two knuckles were cracked on my left hand. My nose was broken and



I had three large knots on my skull. I had numerous welts on both legs and a broken big toe on my right foot. Other than that, I was in relatively good shape.

Darlene caught me just as I stepped from the elevator at work, on the eighth floor. She had one of those little wooden bats that parents buy for their children when they're too young for a real bat. The damn thing must have been made of hickory because it refused to break.

She was lurking behind a huge potted palm and jumped me like a hungry cheetah going after a springbok. She was pounding away with a vengeance when Bryce and Justin tried to pull her off. They said she turned on them, screaming something about a cowardly white hunter who ran away and left his client facing a pack of wild hyenas. Obviously they were mystified. She apparently continued pummeling away until security arrived and dragged her off me.

I never hurt so much in my entire life. She was screaming that she was going to castrate me and the two security guards were doing their best to restrain her. Their

hats were cocked off to the side and they were both panting heavily, winded from the battle. Rather than her usual stylish pumps, she had worn spike heels, to better stomp me.

When I thought they had a firm grip on her, I asked, "Darling, does this mean we're not going to the Exploratorium on Saturday?"

For some unknown reason, my innocent query seemed to set her off. She broke free from the guards and started beating on me all over again. My co-workers jumped into the fray and six of them finally subdued her.

The doctor says that I'll be as good as new in another five or six weeks. Apparently there was no lasting damage done to my testicles. My Volvo is now serviceable, but the insurance company canceled my policy. Darlene sued them as a co-principal to assault and attempted rape charges and stung them a good one.

That Macomber fellow got me into a world of trouble. I swear, I'll never read Hemingway again.

