

A Moment's Thought

by Tim Ryder

Author's note: This short story was my contribution to “Former Baseball Player Sucks At Crowdfunding: A Time Travel Adventure,” a ridiculous book that, for legal reasons, was in no way making fun of Jose Canseco. But I will come clean to you, dear reader, and confess that it totally was. Each chapter had to be set in a different era and follow three rules:

1. Jose, I mean...Former Baseball Player, has to be a total dick to someone.
2. Specific reference has to be made to how tiny FBP's penis is.
3. The chapter ends with him finding another portal, which leads to the next chapter (and author.)

With that in mind, enjoy this harrowing* tale.

*It's not that harrowing.

The girl was beautiful. Hair, red like rubies. Skin as smooth and creamy as milk. And not that skim bullshit. The good kind – the kind that tasted great even as you knew it was bad for you. She was wearing a red dress, which you would think would be too much red with her hair and all, but it wasn't. Yeah, she was beautiful all right. The kind of beautiful that made you wish she wasn't dead. But she was. Dead, I mean. But also beautiful. Beautiful and dead.

She was also covered in blood. That was way too much red.

The early morning fog settled over the harbor like gravy on mashed potatoes. Mashed potatoes so smooth and delicious and yet deceptive, so when you take your first bite you're like, "Oh, these are garlic mashed potatoes HELL YES"

I began to think I was hungry.

I'd been called out to the docks by my old friend Detective Hawkins. He often called for my help when cases took a turn for the bizarre. He had his hands more than full chasing bootleggers and appreciated the extra pair of eyes. And since I was often drunk enough to be seeing double, my eyes were extra useful.

The girl was splayed out near the end of the dock, her eyes looking out to sea like she was just waiting for her ship to come in. I guess, in a way, it already had. It just wasn't the ship she was expecting. Instead of a beautiful pleasure cruise, it was a grisly murder ship. The kind of mix-up that'll make you find a new travel agent. Still, the way her green eyes were looking out at the horizon – it was almost peaceful, like in her last moment she had found some semblance of –

"whoa this dead chick has a sweet rack what a waste lol."

I was snapped out of my reverie as I often was, by the insensitive ramblings of FBP, my new partner. Partner maybe isn't the right word – it implies a sort of intellectual parity that I can assure you was in no way present. He was a partner in the sense that a good dog is a partner, except a dog drooled less. He was a partner in the sense that a gun is a partner, except a gun was more reliable. He was a partner in the sense that...okay, he was a partner in exactly no sense at all.

But he was a huge brute of a man and made a decent bodyguard. He could snap a man's neck with his bare hands and would do so without a moment's thought. A thought, if that indeed was something he was interested in pursuing, would take a great deal longer than a moment.

I had met him a few weeks back at Charlie's, a local speakeasy that was one of my many watering holes. And when I say watering hole, I'm using the term like an animal would. Sure, I drank there but I also occasionally slept on a small bed of leaves. I was just shaping a few leaves into the general shape of a pillow when I heard FBP boasting about his baseball career and how he was better than Babe Ruth. Through some smooth talking and a few purchased drinks, I was able to calm the place

down before a riot broke out. We got to talking and he started telling this crazy story of how he fell through a blue portal and ended up here. A story like that would often be followed with tight jackets and pleasant orderlies wearing all white, but I don't judge. I was born in Shreveport and originally wanted to be a floral designer. We all have our stories.

It was around then that Charlie started yelling at me about how when you say “the next round's on me,” you actually have to pay for that round of drinks with money or some other acceptable currency. Not wanting to argue semantics, I beat a hasty retreat. I had made it all the way back to my office before I noticed FBP had followed me the whole way home, like a little lost puppy. A little lost giant asshole puppy. He's been with me ever since, partly because he's useful, partly because I'm not entirely sure he can survive without adult supervision and partly because I've got a thing for lost causes.

“whoa all this blood is this chick on her period someone get the midol lol.”

Goddammit. Some people have no respect for a decent reverie.

“Okay, FBP,” I said calmly. “Let's just look for the facts here. Remember, the facts lead to the truth and the truth leads to -”

“hamburgers lol.”

“Getting paid,” I said, shaking my head. “But close.” Which wasn't really true. It was close in the way that Moscow and Chicago were close. They were on the same planet, but no one short of an idiot would try to drive between them. But FBP needed encouragement. Like a gorilla learning sign language, occasionally you give him a treat even if he signs “butt.”

“That's strange,” I said. “No sign of a struggle. This came as a surprise.” I delicately rolled her over, like I was trying to escape a one-night stand without waking her. I was good at that. “Yep. There it is. Someone stabbed this girl in the back. Puncture wound, right under the rib cage. But not with a knife – the shape's wrong. It was something long and thin, like a screwdriver or a -”

“or a icicle perfect murder weapon just melts away no fingerprints lol.”

Jesus Christ. An icicle. The first go-to of any amateur private eye. It's never an icicle. Never. It's completely impractical – how do you transport it? How do you get a decent grip on it? It's ice, for god's sake. But it doesn't stop morons from guessing it.

“Sure, FBP,” I said. “We'll keep icicle on the list.” Give the gorilla a treat for not throwing all his feces.

Hawkins finished up with the medical examiner and walked over. “Whaddya think, Mac?,” he asked. My name was Joe McKinney, so it was technically an abbreviation and not just cool police slang. Enough people called me Mac that I thought about legally changing my name but then I'd be

Mac McKinney and there are only so many hard k sounds one name can bear. I'd also briefly flirted with the idea of changing my name to Dick so I could tell people I was Dick the private dick but that was asinine. Now I had a deal with myself where every time I thought about changing my name, I took a drink and that seemed to work well.

"This girl's dead, Hawkins," I said.

"Crackerjack investigating as always, Mac," said Hawkins, cracking a smile but just barely. It was an old joke between us, dating back to our days on the force together. Before our lives took different paths.

"What's more, I know who she is. Her name is Savannah," I said, realizing that it had been a little tacky to refer to her as "the girl" this whole time when I knew damn well what her name was. Oh well. She wouldn't be taking offense anytime soon. "She's a singer down at The Silver Spoon. Good one too."

"Maybe someone didn't think so," said Hawkins.

"Hell of a bad review," I replied.

"yeah hell of a bad review what the hell its like dont like my singing okay but dont stab me geez lol"

"Pipe down, FBP. The grown-ups are talking," I said. "Why don't you go move those shipping crates around for a while." He dutifully did as he was told.

"He's really something," said Hawkins as he watched the brute go about the menial task with enthusiasm.

"Yeah," I replied. "My own private battleship, walking and talking. Kind of."

"So what do you think," asked Hawkins, our attention turning back to the still very dead Savannah. "Robbery gone wrong?"

"A robbery doesn't make her come out to the docks in the middle of the night. Besides, she's a fine singer but she doesn't make that much money. No, this was someone she knew. You don't turn your back to a dangerous stranger."

"Love affair gone wrong, maybe?"

"Maybe. She's a heartbreaker, that's for sure. I'll ask around at The Silver Spoon, see if she had a fella."

"Or a crazed fan."

A shipping crate fell to the ground and splintered into pieces.

"what the fuck I guess you loose at jenga dude lol."

"Be careful with that one," said Hawkins. "I don't know if I trust him."

“Oh, I definitely don't,” I said. “But I don't think I have a choice.”

The fog got foggier.

The people at The Silver Spoon took the news about Savannah hard. Like a trail of ants crossing the highway, they didn't know what hit them. Breaking bad news was my least favorite part of the job, aside from the pay, the hours, and the job in general, but sometimes it seemed like it was all I did. I just kept reminding myself that the news was already broken – I was just relaying the message that it couldn't be fixed. It was small comfort and didn't make much sense, but sometimes, like a barn full of midgets in a tornado, you cling to the little things to survive.

What's worse is that in between the sobs, no one was able to tell me much of anything. Savannah was a good girl – came in, sang her songs, kept her nose clean and stayed out of trouble. No rivals, no jealous boyfriend, no one who would want her dead at all. I walked out with less than I had coming in. Although to be fair, I had purchased a few drinks, so my lighter wallet was my fault.

I'd gone back to my office to think. Try to make sense of it all. The flask was helping. FBP wasn't. He'd taken his pants off, something he did a lot in private and also pretty frequently in public. He was currently attempting to climb my filing cabinets like a dumbass. The gorilla analogy was looking more and more accurate. I was worried about the stability of the cabinets – they were empty, so they didn't have much weighing them down. I wasn't much for keeping files.

“Get down from there, you idiot,” I said.

“haha im donkey kong get ready to jump some barrels lol”

At this point, I feel I should clarify that he was literally saying “el-oh-el” at the end of his sentences. It was super annoying. I was about to tell him as much when I heard a knock at the door.

It was quickly followed by a few more knocks, which was comforting. Just one knock would have been strange.

“Get down from there. And put some pants on. No one wants to see your tiny penis.”

“hey fuck you i dont have a -”

“Yes, you do. You really do. I was going to make my next case figuring out what the hell happened to it but then I remembered I don't care. Put some damn pants on.”

The knocks continued. I could see the silhouette of a woman behind the door. I'd seen plenty of silhouettes through that door. This was in the top 5. Maybe top 3. I decided to make opening the door a priority. After a couple attempts at the handle, I finally found purchase and swung the door open. Savannah briskly walked through.

This was surprising for several reasons.

“what the fuck how the hell did the dead chick just walk in zombie attack i guess lol.”

The fact that FBP and I were on the same mental page chilled me to the bone.

“I imagine you have several questions, Mr. McKinney,” said the somehow-walking around Savannah.

“Please, call me Mac. Most people do,” I said, mostly on instinct.

“Well, Mac, before we get to those questions, I feel I must inform you that you have a large man with a tiny penis on top of your filing cabinets.”

“hey fuck you zombie lady its not -”

“Unprompted, FBP!” I yelled, still baffled but glad to at least have an easy target for my emotions. “She brought it up totally unprompted! That should tell you something.”

“i bet she could bring it up lol”

“And yet,” said Savannah. “How would we know?” FBP shifted his weight to properly angle what was certain to be a devastatingly stupid retort. It was one shift too many. The cabinet gave up the struggle to remain upright and toppled over with a crash. I really should keep better paperwork. Properly chastised, FBP sat in the corner and sulked.

“Have a seat, Savannah,” I said, my wits slowly coming back to me like a frightened squirrel who remembered where he stored his nuts. “Care for a drink?”

Savannah glided gracefully across the room and into the chair in front of my desk. I was always jealous of how dames could do that. I wasn't the lightest on my feet – each step for me was another opportunity to hurt myself in a new and exciting way. You would think that, having practiced walking for many years, I would be at least halfway decent at it. You would be wrong.

“I'd love one, Mac,” she said. “But I have to make a correction that should answer a few of your questions. I'm Julia. Savannah is my sister.”

A twin. I should've known. Actually, wait...strike that. There's no way I could have known that, aside from the fact that an alarming number of my cases seem to involve twins. Something in the water around these parts, I guess. I poured us both a drink. That felt right. I could always count on drink pouring to make sense in this crazy world.

“I see. I'm sorry about your sister,” I said, sliding the drink across the desk. “She was a good singer.”

“She was a better sister. She died trying to protect me,” said Julia. Her hand shook as she lifted the glass to her lips. “I got on the wrong side of some very angry people. I owed them a lot of money.”

“What was it, if you don't mind me asking? Drugs? Gambling?”

“Exotic birds.”

“what the hell i know girls who are crazy for cock but none who are crazy for cockatoo lol”

“Shut up, FBP,” I barked. “Let the lady talk. Sorry about him,” I said to Julia. “His brain developed at an inversely proportional rate to his biceps.”

“And his biceps are huge,” said Savannah.

“Exactly. Now if you don't mind me saying so, miss, as tragic as your situation appears, it seems your problems are over. Someone bumped off your sister thinking she was you, so you're dead to them. I recommend you skip town and try to put this behind you.”

“I'm afraid it's not so simple, Mac.”

“wait what the hell is going on someone explain this to me is this girl a clone or what lol”

“SHUT UP!” yelled both Julia and I at the same time. We caught each other's eye and she looked away, embarrassed. The good kind of embarrassed where you know she cares what you think. At least a little. I wasn't used to seeing that look. Except at deli counters. I order a lot of meat. And I'm very specific as to its slicing.

“Someone tipped them off that they got the wrong girl. Now my sister's dead and I'm back to where I started,” said Julia, her eyes brimming with tears.

“I see. And what exactly would you like me to do about it?” I asked.

“It's the Brunelli Boys that are after me. I was hoping you could convince them to forgive the debt.”

“They've already killed once over this debt of yours. And you think I can just talk them out of it?”

“I'm told you can be very...persuasive.”

“oh hell yeah does someone need some persuading ill get my persuading stick lol”

“Easy, boy,” I said to FBP. “We've gotta find them first. But no offense, miss. I don't know you. What makes this worth my while?”

“I'll see to it that you're very well...compensated,” said Julia. The way she looked at me and said the word “compensated” led me to believe that she meant, like, you know. YOU KNOW. Okay, not one of my better descriptions. Words were hard just then.

“Well, I could never turn down a decent compensation,” I managed to stammer.

“I've heard that too. I'll try to lay low for a little while. Let you do what you do best,” said Julia as she got up and headed for the door. “Oh, and Mac?”

“Yeah?”

“Be careful.” She slipped out the door and walked away, her silhouette slowly fading away. I took a deep breath and tried to gather my thoughts. They were like sheep sometimes. And I was a piss-

poor shepherd. I poured another drink. Every shepherd needs a crook.

I looked out the window for a minute as my sheep thoughts slowly came back to the pen. Then I grabbed my coat.

“Put some pants on, FBP. I'm serious this time. We're going to see Mabel.”

“oh hell no i hate that stupid bitch she can't -”

“Hey, watch your mouth. That's my friend you're talking about. And the best source of information we got. If the Brunelli boys are operating anywhere in the city, she'll know about it. So shut up, get your persuading stick and for the last time, put on some goddamn pants.”

We headed out together into the cold, unfeeling city.

As the sun set, the fog blew away. Then it realized it didn't have anywhere better to go, came back and really settled in for the long haul.

It took a couple hours to find Mabel. I had to check a few of her normal hangouts before I found her at the corner of North and Wells. Mabel is...how can I put this delicately...a whore. Hmm. There were probably more delicate ways than that. But that's what she was. I'd say she was a hooker with a heart of gold but that's a cliché. Also, it wasn't true. Her heart was bronze at best.

She and I had a bit of a fling a while back. It didn't end well. I ran out of money. She ran out of pity. But we were cordial and she knew everything that happened in the city, so I paid her a visit every now and again. Not like that. Okay, sometimes like that.

I slowly pulled the car up to her corner and rolled the window down. She walked over and leaned in.

“Hey there big boy, you looking for – oh, it's you. And you.” Her tired eyes lit up when she saw me. Then darkened again when she saw FBP in the back seat. I made him ride back there ever since an unfortunate wheel-grabbing incident. Now at least when I hear him say, “lets go off-roading lol” it isn't immediately followed by a physical demand to do so. Safer for all involved. Many would worry that this arrangement would make the driver feel like a chauffeur. I feel more like a harried mother with an unruly toddler. Which was worse.

Even on this chilly evening, Mabel wasn't wearing much. But she made what she was wearing count. I caught an eyeful as she leaned in.

“Hey pal,” she said sharply. “My eyes are up here.”

“I know where your eyes are,” I said with a smirk. “I'm looking at your bosoms.”

She gave me a hint of a smile. She might as well have been a stablehand for all the bullshit she had to shovel on a daily basis. I think she appreciated my straightforward approach.

“Perv. So what can I do for you?” she said in that low gravely voice. That voice that sounded like it started from somewhere deep in her chest before being fed through industrial gears like Chaplin in that one movie where he worked in a factory and then finally emerging from her mouth like she barely noticed she was talking. I used to make her read me Chaucer in that voice. She charged extra for that. It was worth it.

“hey baby how much for butt stuff lol”

“There's not enough money in the world, asshole.”

“really theres a lot of money in the world put it all together and lets get to business lol”

“Fine, get me the annual GDP of India in rupees and we'll talk.”

“what the fuck you want to play zelda here i dont think they even have atari yet lol”

Mabel and FBP had only met a couple of times before but she hated him instantly. Most people did, so I suppose that wasn't notable. There was no love lost between the two of them. She hated him like the Royalists hated Oliver Cromwell in 1650. Maybe that's a weird comparison to make, but in 8th grade there was a scheduling mix-up and I had six history classes in one semester. Some of it stuck.

“Sorry about him,” I said. “He's a little jumpy.”

“yeah id like to be a little jumpy lol jump on you lol i mean jump your bones you get it lol”

We ignored him. “Don't worry about it,” said Mabel. “He's probably just mad about his tiny penis.”

“Wow, how'd you know?”

“It doesn't take a detective to figure out why some people act the way they do.”

She was impressive. Why she ended up in this line of work, I'll never understand. Of course, people probably say the same about me and I don't make nearly as much as her.

“hey baby get out of my dreams and into my car lol”

“First of all, it's not your car,” said Mabel.

“Definitely not your car,” I echoed.

“Second of all,” she continued, “I'd love to get out of your dreams. Consider this a verbal restraining order against your dreams. Finally, you have a tiny penis.”

“hey fuck off ive banged hotter chicks than you in my sleep lol”

“Oh, so definitely in your dreams.”

“shut...shut up.”

I loved watching them verbally spar. It was like watching a boxer get beat up by Godzilla. But I had pressing business, so I couldn't let Godzilla rampage all day.

“Okay, simmer down back there,” I said. I tossed him one of those mechanical logic puzzles

where two nails are wrapped around each other and you have to twist in just the right way to get them apart. FBP never managed to solve them, but violently bending the nails would keep him occupied for a while.

“I'm here on business, Mabel. Need some information.”

“Oh, just business? That's a shame.” The look in her eyes made my head swim. I tried to calm down. I often had to tell myself it could never happen between us. Our relationship was like my 8th grade class schedule: too much history.

“Yeah, just business. Got a client who's in deep in exotic bird debt to the Brunelli boys. Need to talk them into forgiveness. Or at least a sensible payment plan. Know where I can find them?”

Her eyes narrowed as she stood up with a start. She looked around like she was trying to remember where she put her keys, then leaned back in.

“You say the Brunelli boys?”

“Yeah. There a problem?”

“Maybe. Let me check on a couple things. Meet me at Belmont Harbor in an hour. And as much as I hate to say it, bring the big guy. I think you're getting played.”

“Played? What the hell are you talking about, Mabel?”

“I'll explain later. One hour, okay Mac?”

“Sure. Hey Mabel,” I said as she started to walk away.

“Yeah?”

“Be safe.”

“Never,” she said with a smile and then disappeared into the night.

I sighed. “These broads are gonna be the death of me,” I said.

“solved it lol” FBP held up two bent and separated nails in his bleeding hands.

“Nice job, buddy,” I said as I started to drive off. “Let's go get a drink, whaddya say?”

The fog tried to remember something from its fog childhood, but the memory was...foggy.

It was an hour and a half later when FBP made our way toward Belmont Harbor. Just like money and my gun, I often lost track of time. As we got close, we could hear the distinct sound of two female voices arguing. That was a rarity for me. I was more used to holding up one half of that equation.

We stayed out of sight until we were close enough to make out what they were saying. I crouched down to hide behind a shipping crate. I motioned for FBP to do the same but instead he walked right into a forklift. Close enough.

I peeked out from the side of the crate and saw the unmistakable form of Mabel, but the other girl was standing right behind her. I couldn't make out who it was until the argument grew heated enough that a shift in physical position was warranted. Mabel angrily stepped to the side to reveal a furious Julia.

“what the fuck is going on what is she doing here”

I hated how much we were agreeing today.

“are they gonna make out oh yeah baby things are heating up lol”

I wished that was the case. I even allowed myself a couple seconds of imagining it. But from the looks of things, that dream wasn't going to be coming true tonight.

“You stupid bitch,” snarled Mabel. “You owe me money for those damn exotic birds. The Brunelli boys haven't been in the bird business for years. What the hell are you doing putting Mac on their tail?”

“He was investigating my sister's murder, you dumb whore!” Julia put a point on the word “whore” that made it clear that she wasn't using it in the affectionate way that sorority girls did. “I had to throw him off the trail. Besides, the Brunelli boys are assholes. Getting them roughed up would be icing on the cake.”

Wait, this wasn't making any sense. Why would Julia want to throw me off the trail of her sister's murderer?

“Wait,” said Mabel. “That doesn't make any sense. Why would you want to throw Mac off the trail of your sister's murderer?”

Oh. Good. I could stay behind the crate for a little while longer.

“Oh, it's already been solved. I did it,” said Julia proudly.

Holy shit. On the one hand, this case just got a lot easier. On the other hand, getting fairly compensated just got a lot harder.

“Jesus,” said Mabel, noticeably shaken. “Why the hell would you kill your sister?”

“Because...she was always prettier than me.”

“You're TWINS!!”

Okay. Now was as good a time as any to make my entrance. “Ladies ladies, let's all calm down,” is what I planned to say as I stepped out from behind my hiding place. I got as far as the “la.” That's when Julia pulled the gun out of her purse and I ducked right the hell back before she could see me.

“This ends now,” said Julia coldly. She pointed the gun right at Mabel. “I should have done this a long time ago. Of course, it's not as clean as the icicle I used on my sister, but it'll have to do.”

You've got to be fucking kidding me. She actually used an icicle. I didn't know which way was up anymore.

“And besides, who's going to miss one ugly little whore?” said Julia, cocking the gun.

That snapped me back to my senses. I was out of time. “Okay, FBP! Get her!” I whispered.

He jumped out and without a moment's thought walked right up to Mabel and snapped her neck with his bare hands.

Shit. Should've been more specific. That one's on me.

“Okay, that one's on me, pal! I meant the other one! The one with the gun! Get her!”

He charged Julia like an angry rhinoceros. Like a double-horned Sumatran rhinoceros that had been incorrectly referred to as a single-horned Indian variety. They hate that. Makes 'em real angry. He charged like one of those.

She got off a wild shot in sheer panic. It whizzed right by his crouch. Good thing he had such a tiny penis or else it would have been shot right off. He was on her in three steps and then she was gone. All was quiet except for the sounds of the water lapping against the dock.

I ran up to Mabel and cradled her head in my hands. I could almost hear that beautiful voice of hers telling me what an idiot I was. “Yeah, sorry about that,” I said softly. “Not my best work. Maybe your next life will be better anyway. I hope we meet again.” I'm a Buddhist. Didn't seem appropriate to mention until now. I could hear sirens faintly off in the distance, but I didn't care. I just knelt there, smoothing Mabel's hair.

“hey two dead chicks and the cops are coming cheeze it the fuzz you know lol”

“Hey, FBP?”

“yeah”

“You're a fucking idiot.”

“hey fuck you too man im outta here lol”

I started to see the lights from the police cars. Red blue red blue red blue. It made the whole scene look like a shitty dance club. FBP stepped behind a crate and there was a flash of blue. It could've been from the cars but I didn't know. I didn't know anything anymore. Wait...I did know one thing. I shouldn't be here right now.

“Hey, FBP! You're right, pal. We gotta get outta here. FBP!”

He was gone.

Shit. This one was going to be tough to explain. The sirens grew closer.

The fog just fogged all over the place without a care in the goddamn world.

THE END