

No Brainer

By Zirk van den Berg

Chapter 1

My problem, I was trying to make him understand, was not so much that he was an evil asshole, but that he pretended otherwise. I wasn't having much success communicating this distinction while he had his pistol barrel stuck halfway down my throat. In the back of my mind, while there was still such a thing, I wondered how an evening that had started with Main Divide Pinot Noir and pumpernickel cheese straws could end up like this.

I had gone to Drew Brody's house because he had money and I didn't, while I had creative vision and he didn't. I was hoping to make a trade that could benefit us both. We had met some years before next to the cricket field, where our six-year-old sons were being goaded to pay attention to the game rather than the bugs in the grass. Not having much interest in either, the two of us got to talking. He was one of those businessmen who had a talent for turning companies around. I was making my living as a contractor at the time,

doing small landscaping jobs. Drew wanted some steps in the garden of his cliff top home near Takapuna beach. We got to know each other a bit. That was eight years ago and we lost touch in the meantime, which isn't surprising, given all the things I had lost touch with. A day or two ago, it occurred to me that renewing the friendship might have its advantages. Hence tonight.

He was a bit guarded, but, I suspect, also in need of an audience. Even though school had started, his family had bugged off to Wanaka to ski and he had a week to kill on his own. The rich make their own rules. I had learned about the trip when I bumped into Mrs Brody and the kids at the airport. I sometimes work there in the parking booth, where I pretend to be a machine, albeit one with a taste for talk radio – Danny Watson and his indignant callers with their pointless arguments. Talk radio makes me despair for humanity; art offers hope. While it's good to be reminded that there are people worse off than yourself, I'm generally more interested in those who are better off. Drew Brody had surrounded himself with evidence of success. The house and everything in it was a shrine to getting one over on the schmucks. Drew used the evening to give one of the schmucks a guided tour of his achievements. He did most of the talking, with me weighing in with the occasional incredulous exclamation.

Really, you got him to sign? That must've been a great moment for you! Meanwhile I was guzzling the wine for all I'm worth, and all I'm not worth.

We sat in his lounge, heaven to earth windows, Rangitoto like a black hat on the darkening sea. Whenever I look at that low, pointed island I wonder what it must've been like to see it rising from the sea, 800 or so years ago. You're this Maori munching on a moa bone and kaboom!... a big explosion and a day or so later when the dust settles and the smoke blows away, there's this brand new island in the middle of the Gulf. After seeing a thing like that, the earth being formed before your very eyes, you must think anything is possible, even getting out of that octopus of a chair. I was stuck in a chrome and black leather construction that was like an executive desk toy, all frames and counterbalances. Every time my weight shifted, the chair adjusted to keep me in an astronaut's launch pose. Now, this is a very comfortable position, except that you feel powerless. You can't get to your feet easily. Drew sat on a different contraption that forced you to keep your feet on the ground, which was just as well, as he kept jumping up to go get me pictures of things he had bought and sold, the golf clubs that you swing and the clubs where you swing them. I had a picture in my pocket too, but it wasn't the time to show it yet.

Let me say this for my host: he knew how to play the role. Empty bottles were replaced by full ones. The snacks were being topped up. When he got a hint that I was shivering, he twisted a knob that sparked a fire behind glass. It looked warm, even though the room temperature took a while to catch up. The evening was humming along beautifully.

I watched us reflected in the window, two old friends having a good time reliving the good times. Drew was built like a blind-side flanker. He must've always been a pretty athletic guy, but quite a bit of weight had now settled around his middle. He still had a full head of hair, silver-tipped and styled inoffensively despite a hint of the 1980s. He had bright blue eyes like a doll's. Nine out of ten women would prefer his type to mine, the ten per cent being made up of homely types swayed by the smaller likelihood I'd get the opportunity to cheat on them, plus the odd nearsighted nympho. Needless to say, I normally try to target the latter. The good thing about me is that years of outside work had left me with pretty hard muscles. The bad thing is all the rest. I'm second generation Dutch, but rather than the Aryan beauty of a Rutger Hauer, the other strand of Low Country genes manifested in my features. I have the face of one of Bruegel's peasants, wrapped in rough skin and topped with

wiry ginger hair. Though not complete, this description is probably enough to make you recognise me on the street, unless it's one frequented by African albinos. Oh yes, and I have a good set of teeth on me. They may be a tad too yellow, but they're all my own, marred only by a single amalgam filling.

The two of us did our little pantomime in front of the picture window and it was as inoffensive as a pre-school play. Then Drew got it into his head that what we needed was some music. I don't know who buys the CDs in that house, but on the night he was the one who picked out Celine Dion. That, I think, is where I lost my sense of decorum. Drew was unscrupulous in his business dealings, there were lots of hurt and burnt people in his wake, some were bankrupt and I'd heard of at least one suicide, but this was criminal. He was building up a head of steam with another tale of inglorious adventure, but I just couldn't be bothered any more.

“Have you ever invested in art?”

His words knocked together like shunted midnight trains. In the silence that followed, I caught a glimpse of Mr Hyde. “Art?”

“You know, paintings and such.”

“I knew it! You're going to try and sell me something.”

I took the picture from my pocket. “Look at that.” The print was fuzzy. To be fair, the actual sculpture I had photographed wasn’t that great either. I made it by standing the rear axle of a scrapped tractor on end and welding smaller parts to it. What it lacked in aesthetics it made up for in size and weight.

“Did the driver survive?”

I let his attempted humour pass me by. As an artist, you have to learn to be thick-skinned. “I think that could be good in your garden, lift the tone of the place.”

“You seriously expect me to buy this?”

“Thirty thousand.”

He went into the open-plan kitchen and opened a cupboard. “For about one thousandth of that price, I can get a bottle of this wine. I like this wine. What do you say we change the topic and have some more?”

The man was trying to smooth over the moment, but I was having none of it. “One would think investing in an artwork like that would appeal to you. It shows you’re a man of refinement and taste, not just some one-track-minded money grabber, you know. It’s actually quite a statement when you think about it, about New Zealand’s rural heritage, taming of the land and all that. You can put an ecological interpretation on it too if that’s your thing. Besides, it will give

you the added satisfaction that you're supporting one of the country's struggling creative people. The way I see it, it's a win-win."

His look made me feel like an exhibit at Madame Tusseauds. I didn't like it. I was a sculptor, not a sculpture. I could prove it to myself and others by selling one of my works. I had entertained the vain hope that Drew Brody would be hit by a flash of inspiration or charity and would agree to buy my piece there and then. That would save me from what I had to say next.

"I'd rather have an art work like that out there... rather than evidence that I've, say, cheated a bunch of people with that Irirangi Investment business."

At that moment the song stopped. We had two heartbeats of complete silence.

"Are you trying to blackmail me?"

"As you're a man who appreciates art, I'm sure that won't be necessary."

The next thing my wine was knocked out of my hand and he was on top of me. I tried to get up, but only managed to fall on the floor. He jumped on top of me, placing his knee rather carelessly (I thought) in my groin and shoved metal rod into my mouth. It tasted of oil. I'd seen enough to recognise the object in his hand as a pistol, but couldn't

really believe it. Nobody has hand weapons in New Zealand – you have to be a member of a pistol club, or a criminal. Did Drew keep it on hand just in case he was accosted by a black male or blackmailer? Miss Dion, bless her soul, once again started murdering her tonsils and with it my belief in the soothing power of music. Dying with a gun in my mouth is a possibility that had occurred to me from time to time, but I can say with absolute certainty that Celine Dion has never, ever featured in these scenarios. I never thought I needed extra motivation to pull the trigger. With all this going on, I lost control of (a) my bladder and (b) my temper. That's when I started telling my host exactly what I thought of him.

Something about what I said, or maybe that fact that I was trying to say something, must've piqued his interest, because he pulled back slightly on the gun. "What?"

"My problem is not that you're an evil asshole, but that you pretend otherwise."

I could tell by the look in his eye that he had not heard this opinion expressed in these terms before. "You've got some nerve."

He was trying to compliment me, but I knew he had it wrong. I wasn't brave. Courage is either sheer stupidity or the belief that some higher cause makes the risk worthwhile. Neither applied in my case. I had already rained on Drew

Brody's parade, spilled red wine on his shaggy white carpet and pissed against his leg. There wasn't that much more I could do to upset him. "It would be a pity to lose all of this just because you lost your sense of humour."

"What evidence were you talking about, before?"

"If I told you that, I'd have to kill you."

"If you don't, I'd have to kill *you*."

The fact that he was talking reassured me more than the content scared me. I didn't believe he was really going to shoot. "If you must, but you'll be blowing your whole life away. No more view of Rangitoto. Maybe you can see Mount Eden from the prison, but it won't be the same. No more Porsche Boxster. No more business meetings with the charming Miss Taylor."

He went white.

I had met Denise Taylor a week or two earlier, at a party in the house I share with her cousin and another woman. Drew's PA and I were the only two straight people in a house with more dykes and queens than all the Low Countries put together. Under those circumstances, our critical faculties were not on a par with our libidos and we ended up on the couch together. At first we chatted about our preferences in food and the movies we had seen. As time wore on, Denise became more open about the

problematic relationship she was having with her boss, as well as some of the other things around the office that worried her. The moment I realised that I knew who her boss was, it was my interest rather than my ever hopeful male member that became aroused. I asked a few probing questions and pretty soon had the clear impression that Drew Brody had at least two things to hide – one from his wife and one from the police. While his relationship with this healthy young woman wasn't that hard to understand, I couldn't form a clear idea of what had been going on around Irirangi Investments, beyond the fact that she found it a cause for concern. Which it was for me, too, since whatever inheritance I could've hoped for had somehow disappeared into that scheme.

“One thing I can say about Denise is she's thorough, makes copies of everything. Complete records and a lack of discretion... quite a volatile combination, I reckon. I certainly wouldn't recommend having an affair with someone like her. If you have anything to hide, you'll have something to fear.”

The gun barrel tapped against my teeth as he withdrew it and got up. He walked to the window and stared into the night.

Behind him, I struggled to my feet. I wonder if he had ever noticed my surname among his investors. My father, a

careful man who had planned his life step by step, had put his life's savings into Irirangi Investments. It was partly my fault. Since none of us know crooks (right?) and I knew Drew Brody, the man had to be above board. I told my dad not to worry, his money would be safe. Famous last words.

"You think over there would be a good spot for your piece?" Drew Brody asked.

I looked out, but saw only the reflection of the lighted room. "I guess so."

Afterwards, I tried to fathom what had led to his abrupt change of heart. Did Denise Taylor remind him of his own higher self? Or did the mention of her name simply convince him that I really had some dirt on him and he'd better not take the chance? At the time, I was simply trying to get my bits and wits together. I refilled my glass, picked up some cheese straws and parked myself close to the fireplace so my pants would dry. "Would you mind if I switched off the music? The mood's ruined anyway."

He motioned for me to go ahead. There, Miss Dion was silenced. I was getting ahead.

"I could write you a cheque right now," he said. "What worries me is how do I know this will be the end of it? No offence, but I don't want you back here next week or next month. Or ever again, for that matter. We're not going to get

into a Waitangi Treaty situation here, with claims that keep on coming until doomsday.”

“I won’t raise the issue again. It would be bad business. Because it would signal to you that the price is really limitless, which may well compel you to stick that pistol in my mouth again, and I don’t like the taste of it.”

He was wheeling and dealing, back on familiar territory. “Okay, so... we said thirteen thousand?”

“Thirt-eye.”

“That’s just very hard, that kind of money. I’m not sure it’s worth it. What do you say we make it fifteen?”

“You’ll be getting a bargain at the full price.”

Did I spot the hint of a smile? “I can’t believe you’re as poor as you make out.”

“Neither can I. It doesn’t change the fact.”

He nodded slowly and sank into his own mind. His body was perched on a bar stool, his eyes fixed at a point in midair, halfway to the ceiling, but his thoughts were in a faraway place. There was something in the moment I could appreciate, that frozen life quality of an Edward Hopper painting. His breathing changed and then he spoke again. “You must forgive me. I’m not used to losing.”

“It’s still the best character developer around.”

“You would say that, someone like you. You have to find justification for the miserable mess you’re in. As they say, show me a good loser and I’ll show you a loser.”

“It ain’t over yet.”

He shrugged. “I tell you what. I give you twenty now and the other ten later. But I want you to do something for me.” He put the corner of one nail between two teeth, trying to dislodge a pumpernickel seed. “I want you to do more or less what you did tonight, but I want you to do it to this guy... I want you to sell him a sculpture in the next two weeks, pretty much the way you did with me.”

Lives hinge on moments such as these. What had started as an opportunist attempt at flogging a sculpture suddenly opened up a whole new career. “That’s not a lot of time.”

“I’ll give you some info to get you going.”

“I mean to make a sculpture,” I lied.

“I thought you just weld all kinds of shit together.”

“You would.”

“Just tell me if you’re in or out.”

The twenty thousand, even if the other ten never came, was the easiest money I’ve ever made. Now he promised more... It was a no-brainer.