

*This is, no joke, basically a transcript of events from a roleplaying game I wrote and ran. It's called A Dirty World and it's based on hardboiled crime novels and film noir. I really should give Tim Toner, Joe Donka and Thomas Manning coauthor credits on this.*

## A Hole in the Darkness

After a long drive into the country, Matt pulled onto an unmarked dirt track, parked behind a stand of pines, and said, "There's shovels in the trunk, I think we should dig a grave." John nodded.

There were flashlights in there too, they propped them on the bumper so they could see. There was only a thin moon in the cloudless sky. The soil was wet and John thought about tractors plowing, dirt sloughing off in the rain, how long the secret could last.

"Man it's cold," John said.

"Shut up," Matt replied.

# # #

It was that purse, that damn black handbag. John saw it in his dreams. That was why he'd agreed to come out with Matt Barbarossa. He knew it would be awful, their ride into the dark and how it would end, but that tiny woman's clutch, just a cheap black nylon oblong... it couldn't be worse than that.

# # #

As he dug, Matt took John's measure. Little glances, up from under furrowed brows, watching how the other man's muscles moved around the shovel and dirt. John Mancuso was a big guy and he'd kept up with the boxing. They'd had a couple matches before, when they were kids. John had claimed he didn't remember. Matt did, but it was vague, foggy. Couldn't recall if he'd won or lost.

Matt had gone back to the old gym and trained for a couple months. He'd been surprised, like he was wearing a whole new body. He hadn't been allowed to box before that. His penitentiary didn't permit it, or weights. He'd done a lot of pushups and pull-ups and squats, played a lot of basketball. At first, it'd been from boredom. When he found out about Mary, he'd had another reason. After Mary, jumping rope and doing sit-ups to the point of exhaustion let him sleep, let him blot out the anger and grief.

# # #

“Jeez, who knew it would take so long?” John asked, pausing to wipe his forehead with his forearm.

“Maybe if you quit chattering and worked that spade, it’d go faster.”

“Chattering, c’mon, don’t bust my chops. I’ve said ten words to you in two hours.”

Matt straightened to glare, but was secretly glad for the break. He told himself he couldn’t afford to overwork, he’d sure as hell need his strength later, his stamina.

“We should tape our hands,” John added.

“What?”

“Look, I’m getting blisters.”

“I’m not. You actually brought tape?”

“Of course.” John reached into a shirt pocket and produced a white roll. “Here. I’ll do your hands and you do mine.”

Matt shook his head in disgust, but he complied.

# # #

“You killed my sister.”

That’s what Matt said to John, the first time they met, after Matt got out of the joint. They said some stuff first, Matt’s basic “Hey you” start to a conversation, some tough-guy stuff from John so Matt would know he wasn’t a chump, Matt’s gruff reply and then John asking what Matt’s business was. It just came out.

“I’m sorry about that,” John had said.

“Sorry? Sixteen and dead and you’re *sorry*?”

“She shouldn’t of been there.”

“Oh, that makes it okay for you?”

Another man walked over from John’s cruiser, hands hooked in belt-loops. Matt had people around too, standing behind him, starting to mutter. He hadn’t told them, hadn’t asked them, but they knew.

“No, it doesn’t,” John said, biting his lip, “I...”

“I gotta live with her gone every day from now on!”

“I do too.”

“Yeah, but the difference is I have to care about it.”

John had been about to slug him then, Matt could see it. Matt would hit back and that would be the end of it, back to the cell if he wasn’t gunned down in the street. But then the other guy put a hand on John’s shoulder and said, “Get back in the car.”

John shrugged off the grip but turned his head to look. So did Matt.

His nameplate read “Burroughs” and he was older than John and Matt, probably ten years older. Not as big as either, lean and hard-worn with gray peeking out from under his blue cap.

“That’s an order, officer,” Burroughs added. John took a deep breath and turned his back on Matt, walking back to the patrol car.

“This ain’ over! We ain’ done, Mancuso!” Matt had yelled.

“Yes you are,” Burroughs had said, quiet, but it was John’s words Matt heard. Officer John Mancuso, who shot and killed Matt’s sister Mary, had turned back at the car with his face bright red and shouted, “Maybe if her brother had been around, she wouldn’a been there! You ever think about that?”

# # #

“Deep enough yet?”

“You six feet tall?”

John climbed down into the hole. “Six two,” he said, and measured the lip of the grave against his forehead. “Close enough for government work.”

Matt looked down at him and clutched the shovel tight. Now he could do it pat, a good swing while Mancuso couldn’t get away. What would he do? Cower on the bottom? Matt could just start throwing the dirt in, then clobber him as he tried to climb out.

John looked up and Matt was pretty sure he knew. “Well?” he said.

Matt lowered the spade and reached a taped hand to help John up.

They’d set out late, maybe ten o’clock. Matt had picked up John, miles from John’s own vehicle. On the drive out, Matt had told John where to leave the car, if he had to.

“Do I need to leave the key in it?”

“Nah, I made a copy. It’s fine.”

The two men looked at their handiwork. It wasn’t a nice, square-edged grave with a tidy pile of dirt beside, although Matt had thought to bring a tarp for the soil. It was a raggedy, mouth-shaped oblong about seven feet at its widest, sloping down to a rough, muddy, three-foot floor.

“That’ll do, I guess,” Matt said. It was probably two in the morning. He’d been staying up nights, day sleeping, trying to prepare. He still felt exhausted and disconnected. Like the whole thing, John and Mary and her left hand, like it was all a black and white movie in a foreign language, and he was just sitting in a dark theater baffled and alone.

“You want any more water?” John asked.

“Yeah.” Matt had brought a gallon for each of them. They sat on the bumper and drank for a bit, staring at their crude tomb.

Eventually, John stood. “Well, someone’s gotta work in the morning,” he said. He turned to face Matt and backed away, raising his fists.

Matt put up his, too.

# # #

“Where’s your bulldog?”

“Are you following me?”

The woman with John had looked from him to Matt. It was a first date.

“Is there...?” she asked.

“Didja tell her, Mancuso?” Matt asked.

“How do you know about my dog?”

“I saw you walk him in the park.”

“So you have been following me,” John said.

“S a free country.”

“I’m gonna just go...” The woman had stood, but John stopped her.

“No. Mr. Barbarossa and I have some... business to conduct, we’ll just go take care of that.”

With a nod, John had risen from the outside table at the bar and led Matt to a nearby alley. Matt had smirked.

“What do you want from me?” Mancuso demanded

“Just tell me the truth.”

“I did what I had to do!”

“John... may I call you ‘John’? Look, the official story that she had a gun and you had to shoot her and it was justified... we all know that ain’t true and we all know that nobody wants to look in it any deeper. Mary wasn’t like me. She studied, she played the *flute* she was...” Matt had looked away then, a small, frustrated sound coming from his throat like a smothered cough. “Mary was good, okay?”

“Then what was she doing there?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know why she was at that party. But I sure as hell know she wasn’t carrying no gun.”

“It was...” John trailed off.

“Tell me the truth!”

John hadn’t spoken.

“The report said it was in her right hand. She was left handed.”

John still hadn’t replied.

“You can’t even say it to someone who already knows it. Can you?”

“What do you want? Huh? I can’t bring her back. I can’t ever make it right, so what do you want?”

“Make it even,” Matt said. “Or just make it fair.”

“How?”

“You and me. No friends, no backup, no guns or anything. Us two. We go somewhere and... settle things.”

The pause had seemed endless, and Matt had been surprised when John nodded.

“Okay. When? Right now?”

“...no...”

“What?”

“I’m surprised you agreed, that’s all.”

“I’m as sick of this as you are,” John said. “You probably don’t believe it, but I’m as sorry as you are.”

“I don’t believe it but... yeah. Let’s do it in two days.”

“All right.”

“Give us time to say our goodbyes.”

# # #

The two men shuffled back and forth on the uneven, muddy soil. John threw out a jab when Matt was still a few good strides away, then a combination, right-left, trying to work the stiffness out of his muscles. Matt started doing the same, getting back into it, finding his range. Slowly they curved closer, like water circling a drain.

John made a sudden spring forward, jabbing high and then striking low. Matt turned out of the gut punch after the glancing hit on his head, and he struck back, hard punches to the trunk driven with quick turns of his hips, driving his whole body up into John like Matt was climbing stairs. The cop huffed out a breath and retreated, swinging a right round to the head as he did. Matt got his arm up to cushion it, but it still connected, still rang his ear with that loud flat sound of impact.

The pair came apart, steps turning, eyes wary.

John was used to having canvas under his feet, gloves on his hands, a mouthpiece. When Matt struck, with only a layer of tape and John’s thin shirt between knuckles and ribs, it was a different pain. It sank deeper, bit harder.

Matt raised his hands. Those head-shots had been weak but he was out of practice, wasn’t used to his brain rattling anymore. He’d done some fighting in stir – you had to – but those weren’t measured matches, backed by a science, guided by rules that were trained into instincts. Once he’d done enough damage to make a reputation, he’d been left alone. Besides, boxing was different. Back in his golden-glove kid days, he’d usually left the ring liking his opponent better than when he stepped in, even if he got beaten bloody.

*Mary.*

Matt thought of her and gritted his teeth, charging in. John braced and met him force on force, the dull thuds of fist on body increasing their tempo, they got close and too close, they tangled arms before Matt got a lucky gap, right up the middle. His

left skinned up John's chest and hit jaw. John's head snapped back and he stumbled, arms rising by instinct but he was falling, falling...

# # #

It was an unlawful party, breaking and entering and trespassing, John and Burroughs had been one of three cars responding. They were coming up on a side door when they saw a wave of bodies surging out the back, heard the commotion from the front, swearing and indignation and alarm, and then a gunshot. That sound had changed everything.

It was the first time John heard a gun go off while he was on duty, the first time he heard fire from a perp. His own weapon's grip felt sweaty-slick in his hand even before he realized he'd drawn it. His trembling left hand had tweaked the safety and cocked the hammer, even as Burroughs said, "Stay cool..."

Then the door had slammed open and he'd seen a figure in silhouette, black shapes moving behind it and something in its hand, something held in its right hand.

"Drop it!" he'd squawked, shocked by how high his voice was and the figure charged forward, there were others behind it and the arm with the black... *thing*... at the end of it was dropping, everything seemed to slow down and he aimed and breathed out and pulled the trigger twice.

The gun-flash illuminated the shapes in the doorway, teenagers, kids really, their mouths open and eyes wide. It was like a strobe light, like two lit photographs in quick succession. The first image was them rushing forward, looking behind or around them. In the second they were turning, stopping, screaming even before the girl's blood had a chance to hit them or splash the ground.

Burroughs had cursed and John had frozen at the party-goers' retreat, some now climbing out windows as the police in front and back yelled at them to get down, to halt, to show their hands. More sirens were coming and John just stood, transfixed. He saw it, saw the little black purse, it wasn't a gun she was holding but a little black clutch purse, and then Burroughs was gently disarming him saying, "It's cool buddy, it's going to be fine."

Soon John's own gun was back in its holster and he was staring, dumb and numb, as Burroughs pressed a drop piece – something small, like a .22 or .25 – into the girl's palm. He curled her dead fingers, still warm, around the trigger and pulled it twice, sending wild shots winging over the trees and the garage. Then he put the purse by her other hand.

"Listen," Burroughs said, his voice close and intent. "She came out, you yelled 'drop it' and she fired twice. Do you understand?"

John had nodded.

"Say it back, John."

“She came out shooting...”

“No! She came out, you yelled ‘drop it.’”

“She came out, I yelled ‘drop it’ and she shot at me. Then I shot her.”

“That’s right. She’s out, you yell, she shoots, you shoot. Stick to that and we’ll all be okay. They’ll sweat the hell out of you, but you just stick to the story, no matter what, okay? Okay?”

# # #

John caught himself on one knee and as Matt shuffled in John launched an uppercut to the groin. Matt reacted slow, clamping his thighs so that the fist slid up into his gut and John followed it with another body blow, a straight one from the shoulder into Matt’s bladder. Matt cursed and his hands opened reflexively, clawing and clutching at John’s head. He got an ear in his right hand and a fistful of cheek in his left, thumb hooked into John’s lip and fingers curling below the eye, he jerked John up and off his feet, forward and away. John slid on the wet turf but scrambled to his feet, raised his hands again.

For a moment they were both still and silent. John’s face was bleeding where Matt’s nails had caught him. Matt felt warm moisture on his leg and realized he’d pissed a little. Then they crashed forward again.

John’s low punch seemed to have shocked Matt into greater efforts, making his sledge blows to John’s body harder and faster. John, on the other hand, seemed dazed, drained, lost. He realized he was losing and was going to lose and he was tired. All the guilt, the nightmares, the sharp questions at the beginning of the inquest and then the boredom as his investigators decided there was no case and they just had to go through the motions. It had fallen on John like a shadow, to learn that he could make such a deadly mistake, but when he found out he’d gotten away with it he was afraid. He was relieved. It had opened something up inside him, cold and empty, a hole in the darkness.

John felt a moist pop when Matt hit his ribs, and the roundhouse to the head caught John with his mouth open, gasping. His teeth clicked shut, loud. Then his feet tangled in a shovel and he went down on his back.

When Matt had showed up from nowhere, John had resisted out of instinct and denied it from reflex, but it had been a relief. He could finally pay. He could finally fill the hole.

Lying on his back in the cool mud, John’s lungs were burning from his effort, his belly on fire from clenching to protect, the heat of the abrasions bright over the deeper ache of tissues already swelling or burst. He went as limp as he could, but his shoulders and his back and his arms stayed locked.

He waited for Matt and then Matt said, “Y’ tripp’d.”

Matt's mouth was swollen and he could scarcely form his rough, rasping breath into words, but as John stared up at him he said, "Geh up. Y' tripp'd. Geh on y' feet."

Trembling, John obeyed. He couldn't raise his hands higher than his shoulders, couldn't make fists. If he'd held an egg in each hand, he could not have clenched tight enough to crush them, but as Matt closed on him he made a slow, clumsy strike to Matt's chest. Matt didn't even bother to dodge or block, he felt nothing as John's wrist folded under like a dog's paw.

Matt drew his right back to his ear and drove it into John's nose with all the force he could conjure from his bruised and weary muscles. There was a wet crunch and blood spattered as high as Matt's elbow. John fell and stayed down.

They were right at the edge of the hole and Matt sank to his knees beside John.

"Do ih," John muttered through split lips. "Finis' it," he whispered, past broken teeth.

Matt stared down at him and tried, he tried to do it, he tried to remember that this poor broken bag of flesh had killed his sister, he tried to feel justice or anger or anything that would let him deal a killing blow. He looked for murder in his heart.

He couldn't find it.

Instead of death, tears came. Matt collapsed on John beside the grave they had dug and wept in frustration. As soon as John realized there was no longer an end in sight, his bitter sobs joined Matt's.