

Slow Boat to Heaven

by

Doug Shear

I live in a crackhouse for senior citizens. The brochure calls it Paradise. Welcome to Crackhead Paradise. The adventurous among you will love our muddy duck pond and pigeon-shit walkways. Or stay inside and enjoy the friendly natives: lopsided grins and glassy eyes, drooling chins and days gone by.

We're a tribe of old hippies, here in Crackhead Paradise. Stoned all the time. Mostly legal drugs. You know, the dangerous ones. The miracle of chemistry that transforms a multitude of zings and zabs and stabbing pains into one constant, bewildering throb that feels like it belongs to someone else. I know that thub thub thub well. And though it can't make me walk, it makes me fly, thanks to the lovely Miss Heather, our resident pharmacist. When things get too rough, I can always beg Miss Heather for a few extra pain pills, that sweet, naïve little girl. She hates to watch anyone suffer. Or beg.

A rancorous old prune by the name of Pricilla Preston lurks across the hall. Big bitch in a small pond. She's richer than me, and richer than you.

I can hear her kids, Garth and Edith, screaming at her. They visit every week, whether she likes it or not, and spend the entire time begging for what they call her extra money. They believe their mother has way more than she needs to live out the rest of her life here in Crackhead Paradise. The rest of it is just sitting there in the bank gathering dust like a treasure chest covered in cobwebs.

But Pricilla believes the future is unknown. Perhaps she will live longer than her malfunctioning body would predict. Maybe someone will invent a cure for old age. What if she changes her mind and decides to have her head frozen?

Garth and Edith believe their mother is insane because she records every conversation on an old eight track. Labels and numbers the tapes, stacks them in shoeboxes. Quirky habit, but doesn't make the top ten in this place, although I did resent it when she played me the one called Ed Makes an Ass Out of Himself, December 24, 2009.

She's also played several Garth and Edith Beg for Money episodes, which sure takes the sting out of not having children.

What Pricilla doesn't know is that I hear everything anyway. Walls are thin as the skin of an old woman, and the hallway is barely wide enough for a wheelchair. Even with the doors closed I can hear her fart.

But right now she's screeching, "I am not a bank! I am not going to loan you my money so that you can pay it back after I'm dead!"

Do I have to tell you Pricilla Preston has the voice of a wounded Harpy?

Garth's voice: "We'll have you declared incompetent to manage your own affairs."

Pricilla's voice: "Take the smallest step in that direction and my attorneys will destroy you and your sister. Now get out! This is my house! Get out!"

The door snaps open. Garth and Edith step out and carefully close it. I can see them through the crack in my own door.

Garth is a tall, rigid man. The stick up his ass travels all the way to the top of his head. Always looks like he's about to fall over backwards. I've only spoken to his

nostrils, which I could describe in detail. Watch him goose-step through the hallway like a Nazi Undertaker and you'll agree he's one scary guy.

The only person who scares me more is his big sister, Edith Preston. I put her at six two – not including that thorny red bush sprouting from the top of her head. Always looks like a door has just been slammed in her face.

They start whispering. I turn my hearing aid to full volume.

"She looks better than when we took care of her," Pricilla says, voice filled with booze and unfiltered cigarettes. "You told me they go downhill fast, when you stick them in a place like this."

Garth sways forward and backward.

"It's supposed to be a slippery slope," he says. "A slippery slope."

"Not slippery enough."

If Garth and Edith are waiting for Mom to die, they got a long wait. Pricilla's a tough old hen. Kick Death in the balls when he comes to get her. Only thing I like about her.

They go back inside the room, round two. I hear Edith - "But mom, you don't need the money. There's nothing here to spend it on." And Garth - "It's just sitting there, doing nothing." And Pricilla - "You already said that, a hundred times. Do you want me to play it back for you?" And Edith - "Put that damn tape recorder away!"

They slam the door so hard all the doors in the hallway rattle.

"She could go another ten rounds," Edith whispers, "just to spite me."

"I don't feel the slightest remorse now."

"Finally. I'm sick of your vacillation. I'll be an old lady by the time I'm rich."

"It has to be perfect, Eeed."

“It will be, Gar. Perfect from start to finish. Just like mom would do.”

“I’m sure mom would be proud.”

“You know, little brother, I believe that in many ways, she would be.”

I move my knee to adjust the pain. The door shuts with a soft click. I don’t move. I press my ear against the door and listen. They aren’t talking, or they’ve gone home. But what if they are still out there? Suspect I heard something? And what exactly did I hear? I wheel away from the door. There’s a soft knock.

The door opens. I close my eyes. Mouth goes slack. A rattling snore. I even produce a little drool. After a while I hear Edith’s scratchy voice.

“Are you awake? Hey, are you awake?”

I don’t answer, which I guess is my answer.

“He’s wasted,” Garth whispers. “He heard nothing.”

“I heard something.”

“Too bad he doesn’t need the money -- ”

“Shut up! He could be faking it.”

I hear them rummaging around my room, but don’t react. For all I know, Garth is holding a switchblade over my chest, ready to plunge it into my heart. But I don’t move. I’m a waste, a vegetable, a slobbering, stoned, senile old man. I hear footsteps and the door closes. I don’t move. Wait for a few minutes, in case they’re still watching me. Now I’m starting to feel silly. Just in case, I pretend to wake up, snorting and coughing and rubbing my eyes. They’re not here. Now I really feel silly.

But I want to know where they’re heading. I drop into my wheelchair and move into the hallway. Pricilla crying into her pillow. I wheel past her door in pursuit of Garth and

Edith Preston when Old Man Kelly hobbles out of his room and blocks my way. I jam on the hand breaks and screech to a halt.

“Afternoon, Ed,” he says, knuckles shaking as they grip his shiny metal cane.

“Afternoon, Old Man.”

I ease my chair toward him, try to hint him aside. He doesn’t take the hint.

“I’m thinking about lunch, Ed,” Old Man Kelly says. “How about you?”

“Me? I’m always thinking about lunch. Unless I’m thinking about dinner.”

Old Man Kelly is one of the youngest residents here in Crackhead Paradise. He got the nickname back in Ohio, when he was only fifty, because he lived alone in a small town. Grew into it, and brought the nickname with him. He’s on my most admired list. Vietnam vet. Police officer. Volunteer firefighter. Gay, when it mattered.

As for me, I’m just an old hetero who blew his best chance for happiness a few months ago. Crap! Forget I mentioned that. Don’t want to talk about it.

When we get to the cafeteria, I’m repulsed see Diane sitting with Garth and Edith Prestons. My Diane. With the Prestons! Satan and Satan’s little brother!

Before I go on, you probably need to know a little bit about Diane. I met her a year after I arrived at Paradise. Bedroom blue eyes, black hair with a few skunk stripes, a body to get old for. I knew I had to make a sales call.

This was back when my knees still worked, although I had to be stingy with their use, like a broken down car you only drive to the bank, or the hospital, or to make a beer run. But I wanted to make a good first impression with Diane. I caught her eyes, smiled and stood without a wince. Approached her with the grace and confidence of a Dale Carnegie graduate.

“Hello, I’m Ed -- you must be visiting your parents.”

I extended my hand. She took it and held on, laughing, crystal eyes glinting with merriment.

“You must be that old dog they cautioned me about,” she said, with a smile that was bold, but a little shy around the edges.

“Because I’m so loyal and friendly?”

She still held my hand in hers. I was afraid to squeeze too hard and hurt it, or let it go and lose the warmth of it. She looked me straight in the eyes, pushing in and probing. I let her. The tough guy. The salesman. The married man. The old man. Then, just Ed. She patted our clasped hands and released me.

“I can tell you’re a good doggie, Ed.”

I looked at her like a dumb mutt and took a deep breath. That’s when Margie Stone walked over and clasped Diane’s arm.

“If you lie down with dogs,” she said, “you stand up with fleas.”

Margie would know. We shared a few fleas in our time.

Diane let Margie steer her away. I followed with my eyes, hoping she would look back and give me a smile.

She did.

And now you know all you need to know about Diane. Because right now I need to find out what business she’s got with Garth and Edith.

Margie Stone is in the cafeteria too, sitting a few tables away, also sneaking glances at Diane and the Prestons. Our eyes meet for an instant, but she won’t hold the look. I want to move to a closer table, but Old Man Kelly won’t stand up for someone

else's convenience. We eat our food without a lot of chitchat. I keep glancing at Diane and the Prestons. They're doing all the talking; she's doing all the nodding. Even from here I can see her ears getting red, which means she's either getting hot, in a conjugal way, or getting burned up by what she's hearing. I'm guessing it's the latter.

Now I've never been much of a conspiracy nut because I know how hard it is to coordinate a surprise birthday party, let alone assassinations or alien abductions. But the Prestons, in my cafeteria, talking to my ex-girlfriend, making her ears turn red as a bedsore? Maybe I'm just crazy. Maybe it's the pain pills. Maybe my mind is moldier than I think it is. For all I know I'm laying in a hospital room, with tubes up my mouth and nose and veins and penis, slipping into my last coma of the evening, and this whole experience is a pathetic delusion.

"Damn good ravioli," says Old Man Kelly.

"You bet. Needs a little No Salt, though."

With one exception, there is no salt in Crackhead Paradise. Even the salt doesn't have salt. A shame, because taste buds are like canaries in a coal mine. Once your taste buds die, the rest of you soon follows. I'll watch a well-meaning family try to coax someone to eat, just a little, just a bite, that's good, now one more – and I think it's cruel, because someday I'm going to want to spend my final hours remembering meals better than the one being forced down my throat.

It gets worse. Live long enough you stop eating real food. Just predigested chemicals pumped directly into your veins, skipping your shriveled taste buds entirely.

Kelly passes me a Costco-sized bottle of No Salt. I douse my ravioli. It's not bad, with the No Salt. In fact it would be quite delicious, if it only had a little salt.

The Prestons shoot me a look, then kick back their chairs and tower over Diane. Pricilla whips out a compact and reddens her lips. Garth smiles his icy, alien smile, then reaches down to shake Diane's quivering hand.

Edith takes Garth's arm, and together they take long, stiff steps to the glass door that leads to the courtyard. Garth holds it open for Edith, then follows her outside and down the cobblestone path to the duck pond.

It's a murky green pond, home to two hundred and seventy three ducks and a million pigeons. Their constant quacking, squawking and pooping are the bane of Mr. Tolly, the Chief Pimp in Crackhead Paradise. Mr. Tolly would love to poison the pond, or maybe trample the birds to death with his bare feet, but the law says the ducks have a right to be here, and he can't poison the pigeons without killing the ducks. He's tried everything, even sprinkling the manicured greenways with boxes of real salt. Succeeded in killing the grass and providing a salt lick for the ducks. Right now he's testing a plastic alligator that randomly shoot up little geysers of water.

But the ducks won't budge. Why should they? We smuggle enough leftovers to provide an endless supply of delicious food. All the ducks were missing was the salt. Some are as old as the residents, with weird flaps of discolored skin on their faces and tumors growing out of their heads. Their eyes are yellow and rheumy, duckbills shredded from a lifetime of pecking. Like us, they probably live well beyond their years, lives unnaturally prolonged by the enriched leftover cafeteria food.

They're also very demanding, which has created a bit of a controversy between those of us who feed them, and those of us who think they should be scavenging

garbage with the rats and pigeons. Personally, I like the ducks. Then again, I don't have a problem with rats or pigeons. I do have a problem with Garths and Ediths.

The two of them are still outside, huddled together, looking into the cafeteria and pointing out one person or another, then nodding or shaking their heads. They see me looking at them and turn away.

"Hey, you know the Prestons?" I ask Old Man Kelly. "Outside. Pricilla's brood?"

"Yeah, I know them," Kelly says. "I know them pretty good, actually."

"Really? That's a kick in the pants."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't mean anything. Just, I'm surprised to see how many people seem to know them."

Old Man Kelly looks down and concentrates on his food.

"You talk to them?" I ask.

"Now and then," he says.

"What about?"

He pushes away what's left of his ravioli. That doesn't happen often. We both came from a generation that was taught to clean our plates, and if you had the chance, the plate of the guy next to you.

"I don't know, Ed. The usual stuff."

He stands up and walks away without saying another word.

I watch him leave, then wheel towards Diane, threading through the maze of kicked-back chairs and old folk humps. She sees me coming, gets up all of a sudden, and leaves through another exit.

That hurts. Our 'thing' ended a few months ago. It's really none of your business, and I'd rather not talk about it, if you don't mind.

One of Mr. Tolly's employees, Dimwit Drizen, is chatting with the Prestons in the courtyard. He's the most hated employee here at Crackhead Paradise, which tends to attract either angles or demons. We try to avoid him, which is fine with him because he would rather study the dog races than actually do any work. Not that we complain to Mr. Tolly. You know how difficult it is to hire someone to watch over a bunch of blithering, incontinent old farts? If we complain to Mr. Tolly, he'll just call Dimwit into his office and yell at him, which will only make Dimwit hurt us in a million nasty little ways. So we make do and console ourselves with the belief that what goes around comes around, and someday he'll be in a place like this, Dimmer and more Witless than ever.

Edith takes out a checkbook and scribbles in it. Tears off a check and hands it to Dimwit. He shakes his head. Edith says something. Her lips form the word 'more.' Or 'moron'. I'm not sure. I'm not, I'm not...oh my god, I'm exhausted. I could close my eyes right where I am. A little catnap. Blissful sleep. But I refuse. I don't want to be one of 'them.' I don't want to wake up in the middle of the day, disoriented, drooling all over myself. Once I cross that line, it won't be long before they send me to the next building, which makes Crackhead Paradise look like Disney World. I'll tell you about it later, if I have the time.

Right now I need to concentrate. Grab my wheels and push, and push, and push, out of the cafeteria, down the hall, was it really this far? and into my room, where I drag myself out of my chair and onto my bed. Sure, I toss around a few pity thoughts. Why did I have to screw up my knees so bad when I was a salesman? Why did I get so

damn old? Why did Diane blow me off just when I was starting to fall in love with her? I don't want to think about it. I'm too tired to think. All I want to do is sink into oblivion, knowing that my odds of floating back up get smaller every day.