

Death In The Flatlands

by

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Drunk on butter. That's where this started. Who was I to keep the mood from reaching the stratosphere? So, yes, I'll try the syrup you brought from home, marked with the letter "D." The folks on the west side would recoil at my midsection after all. So, yes, I'll take two cups of the stuff. Sweet with the slight decay of Midwestern hardwood. It was tied to a favor my childhood friend, Harry, was about to ask. Or not ask at all.

I sat on the fringes of a pop-up carnival, bathed in the corn sweat of small-town Indiana. It was a July night with all its peacock feathers on display. I'd been summoned by maple syrup, sugared right here in the great Hoosier state, syrup laced with an experimental drug. I grasped at the dirt, knowing I'd soon be close to it in a way I'd always ignored. I had only 24 hours left on Earth. Or so the drug would have me believe. That was its thing. I watched a hummingbird drink from a sprinkler, shaking back and forth to cast off the residue of the past. Its future was certain, like mine, but it didn't worry about such things.

The lights of the Tilt-a-Whirl transported me back to the South, where my young body had sipped tea the color of syrup poured from a bottle marked with the letter "D." The click-smacking of the ride, running bone on bone, reminded me of nights with Harry, his bright scarf, his jagged turn of mind. He was electric. He once smuggled a small teddy bear into the Rotor, the ride that spun you around in tight circles before dropping the floor, leaving you stuck to the wall.

Harry slid the bear out onto the orange metal floor of the ride just as we began to spin. When the bottom fell, the bear stayed in midair while we hurled ourselves outward. Away from that moment. The bear's cornea was frozen in glass, never aware that it was always to shine in this little while. Perhaps because of the way it was raised or perhaps by probability, it didn't matter. It thought of death often. The bear hovered right in the middle of a breath while the rest of us thought of elephant ears or French kissing.

We started to slide away, down the wall, on like that forever. Our faces peeled back by gravity, and the bear let out a little laugh at the mortality of it all. Then the bear crashed. Harry let it ride on his shoulder the rest of the night. It sat contentedly, knowing the fancy stuffed giraffes that people carried proudly could not see the world as it was.

Harry and I followed each other to college when we had run out of boyhood accounts. Later, he summoned me. Down a country road in the middle of the middle. The cicadas were conjuring spells, and did I mention the fancy fireflies? I was out of pavement when Harry called and asked me to write about his new project. I didn't see him dying after all in our phone call, so I came. I heard his plan, and I declined. After all, I wasn't a ghostwriter. Just a ghost. But I accepted his offer to have a late breakfast after we looked at old Ben, the largest cow ever, at nearly 4,600 pounds. Oddly, his measurements didn't get him past death either.

We sat in the middle of some veterans. Harry wore a USS John S. McCain hat over his long, wiry face to fit in. My plan was on fire. The plan I never had. I came because I had pitched all the pitches to all the managers on the west side. The money I made from my work as a script doctor all went to my ex-wife. I almost forgot to tell you that I called my daughter to let her know of my adoration. Then I coughed up a little blood. It must have been the moisture in the air.

Harry was the manipulative sort with his free-flowing Mississippi warble. He was like an illustration that moves when you flip the corners of the pencil pages. You needed to see what happened after the last scribble slipped off your thumb. And in the aftermath is where you'll find all the paper cuts. And all the drops of red dynasty.

He stole a formula from his wealthy father and roped in our old friend Mira, the brains of the operation. She was paid from his trust fund. I was promised a share of the royalties. The paper slipped off my thumb, and I needed to come through. My body had stopped clotting. I wasn't an athlete. I wasn't fluid. If I couldn't contribute to life on Earth meaningfully, she was going to take my daughter away. I'd never been able to tidily play my part like a honeybee. I never leaped out of my own head! This was a chance to write something real. I was chubby from a touch of mania, my ribs long since capsized. That's why I went for pancakes with Harry. That's why I took the extra syrup from the bottle marked "D" for death.

I had a series of video pitches right before I arrived here. I stopped at a rest area and pulled my only button-up shirt from the back seat. I tried to unrumple it over the headlight of my 1974 Beetle. Oddly, it didn't work. The unrumpled version of me went on like this: "Hello. Hi. Hey there. I'm Fulton Fields and... I'm sorry, do you want me to just dive into my pitch, or should we get to know... I never know what people prefer." I said. "It's really up to you. You are the one who has paid forty dollars for five minutes of my time."

"Of course. Of course. Here we go... It's a story about a ballet dancer who takes a job as a mascot for a minor league basketball team to exact revenge on the team's owner, who she believes is responsible for her father's death."

"Sounds... interesting. Is it a comedy or a drama?" she said.

"Whichever you prefer," I said.

"Does that mean you don't know?"

"Um... It's got some guffaw moments because of the physical comedy inherent in the life of a mascot, but it's dark, too. I mean, I'm not a purist. I think comedy can be farting fish, but this is..."

"What are some comparables? Is it a TV show or a feature?"

"Comparables... of course. I had all of this sorted out... have you ever seen Fawlty Towers?"

"Okay. The seventies. Yes. So... it's a TV show?"

"Shit. I'm sorry... that's another one of my scripts..."

"Do you want to try another pitch?"

"Did I mention she is African American?"

"Who, exactly?"

“The lead,” I said.

“The mascot?” she said. I hung up under the weight.

Next.

“The first episode ends with our black female shop owner stabbing all the balloon animals that belong to the artist, blocking the door to her store in hysterics, and then pushing him into the water and screaming at the sky,” I said.

“Okay, so I'm a little unclear about the tone,” he said.

“Um. I suppose it's Earthy?” I said.

“No, not like a wine. Is it dark comedy, or satire?” he said.

“Well, there are clowns and such, but you also have this dramatic element of a woman trying to run a successful shop on a pier owned by a bunch of asshole men,” I said.

“It doesn't seem like the show would last more than one season. What's driving it forward for season two and three and beyond?”

Pause.

“I can do horror if you like,” I said.

“Looks like that's the end of our time. Thanks,” he said.

I got off the mat, covered in discomfort.

“It's about a woman running a drug racket from the seat of her golf cart at a luxury Los Angeles country club called *Cart Girl*. It's got dirty politicians, sex trafficking, investigative journalism...” I said. This manager was giving an Uber driver instructions. “Sorry, should I wait?” I said.

“Tell me a little about your brand as a writer, Fulton,” she said.

“Brand? Okay. Well, I write about women who are transitioning from one phase of their life to another.” I said.

“Why should I listen to you write about a black female lead character? Why you? And why now?” she said.

“Well, I once dated an actress. She was black. She never liked me to bother her while she was slicing a pomegranate or steaming a sundress or breathing, really. She was very intent on the business of life and success. I didn't quite fit,” I said.

“Well, it does seem a bit dangerous to bother someone when they have a knife in their hand,” she said.

“Huh,” I said. “But I loved her dearly. Staggeringly so.”

“Thank you for your time.”

“Wait! Did I mention she wears a cape?”

Round ten.

“It's about a woman who quits everything and starts her own business that helps people quit their own jobs in spectacular fashion,” I said.

“Is that a truck driver getting a blowjob from another guy in the back of you?” she said. I turned to look. It certainly was. “Never try to contact me again,” she said.

Last call.

I was out of ideas, so I told him about my real life. Forced to consider a job chronicling the life of my old college roommate, who was holed up on a maple syrup farm in Kokomo, Indiana. He was hiding from gangsters, addicts, and tyrants, and I assumed there must be a local sheriff involved because he had stolen a formula for a capsule. A parlor trick. Or so I thought. To my surprise, this man actually seemed intrigued by it all. Then the battery on my phone died. “Fuck.”

I shrugged at the man getting a blowjob. Rumpled myself back into shape and then headed towards the flatlands. Toward the “City of Firsts.”

I arrived on the farm. Harry showered me with Old Grandad just like at Brown University. Then a pig nearly knocked me off my feet. Harry was giddy with deception. He was finally getting back at his father after all. He went to him with the idea of the pill and the brain that could produce it. Mira, with the round shoulders and the red silky hair. She was covered in a lab coat and disdain for me. I'd fled after one year at Brown for a job on Wall Street.

She would have found another reason to stop liking me anyway, with my pigeon-toed walk and lack of concentration. She smelled of precipice and latex. We went to the beach together once, near Coney Island. I missed a blob of sunblock in my ear. She seemed like she might explode if I didn't do something about it soon. She was the second-smartest person in our class, behind her alter ego, Helmut.

They caught me up on their plan, and I declined. Harry had a lover there. A nutritionist named Devon. I never knew he was gay, but there he was, floating in mid-air while the rest of us slipped down the wall.

Back to the field outside the pop-up carnival. Harry didn't realize he gave me a dose from the batch that actually killed you. And I didn't realize I had taken a dose of anything. I played rope-a-dope with the stalks of corn, blowing in the wind. I was to be shucked soon after all and devoured by the subsoil. Then down into the bedrock of the stars. I was everything.

Harry's father, Chase, was a middleman who had a fixer named Vik searching for Harry and Mira. Vik was a destructive force, imposed upon Chase by "The Investors," akin to the "Outfit," the "Society," or the damned "High Table." He wore spaghetti-strap dresses and bright nail polish, a jarring contrast to his ruthless nature. I just hoped I hadn't left out any crucial details when I spoke to Gerhard. I hoped he knew I once wrote an episode of *Monk*, even though I went uncredited.

It turns out he liked the story and traced my call to Indiana. He convinced his boss to fly him to the middle of things. He needed a break, too. He needed a fresh story.

Then I saw her, the black woman who appeared in all my stories. Her name was Sasha, and she was rehearsing her lines. We had dated for a few months when I lived in New York before she became famous. I never understood what she saw in me, but this was before the ribs were meaty and the dying had begun. Or was it? I knew the answer to why I write about black female lead characters: I was hoping to sell one of my scripts and cast Sasha as the lead. Then she would finally see me as her equal, as an inspiration.

And there she was, right in front of me. After all, the pop-up carnival was merely a movie set, and I had just happened to stumble through this particular field...

Oh. That son-of-a-bitch!

Actually, it didn't matter that Harry had orchestrated this. I had forgotten how to hold a grudge or even a fist. How could I trust my mind now? Perhaps it had already begun to wither. I suddenly craved pistachio-flavored ice cream.

I pictured Sasha dead. I didn't want her dead, but we were all dying and dead already. This put us on even ground, avoiding the awkwardness. She concealed her death, of course, with the make-up artist who trailed behind her like the particles that rise from a Davenport, the name my grandfather used for the old sofa. I used to swat at the cushions with furious hands until the residue filled the air, then mimic the sound of a whoopee cushion with my lips, sending spit particles to war with the dust. Grandpa wasn't a fan of dying, or this game I had invented.

I remember the day I met Sasha. The windowsill rattled with a blinding thrush of orange rays. I could have spent the rest of my life right in that frame, watching her walk through Soho as her high heels bent ever so slightly from side to side, like the wings of an iridescent bird sipping from the turns and spills of the planet as it rotated. I asked her to watch the Lunar New Year Parade in Chinatown with me. She must have thought I was an actual screenwriter. I told her as much. It turned out she wasn't going anywhere in particular; she just walked that way so people would think she had an important engagement. She agreed, and we were packed in by the people.

The dragons danced, and our hands brushed together. Then it started raining, and I had no umbrella. She reminded me to breathe before she left. I watched her dark hair brush back and forth across her shoulders and continue the process of dying.

And when the illusion in my eyes came down, I felt like a mountain lion confined to a single, desolate hill. Highways cut me off from nature in every direction. I had tried to cross them a thousand times, only to be struck down by motorists rushing to spill their savings in Primm. Once, I nearly made it to the other side, but the scent of desert lilies distracted me just long enough to stop me in my tracks.

EXT. FAIRGROUNDS – NIGHT

Harry and Mira are running towards me. "Fulton!" Mira said. "I understand why you partnered up with Harry. He's outdone himself this time."

"He's ineluctable in his way, and his Irish aura is robust," I said.

"I gave you the wrong dose. Don't move," Harry said. Just then, Harry was tackled by a security guard from the film set. Mira kept running, but then she too was tackled by a second guard.

"Harry, you always were a manipulative fella, but I let it slide because of how talented you were. But this is next level," I said.

"Fulton, I can explain, but the dose I gave you is killing you. We have to give you the antidote," he said.

"Would you have me convince her to star in the movie about your life?" I asked.

"It's not bad, right?" he said.

I explained to him that while I did make her laugh occasionally, I wasn't certain she would ever remember my name. A friend had spotted her on a plane once, flying over the ocean. Recalling the story of how I once dated a movie star, he decided to use it as an icebreaker. "I believe you know a friend of mine. A writer. He once wrote an episode of Monk but went uncredited. His name is Fulton Fields," he said. I was told her eyes went dull, and she shook her head slightly. "I don't know who that is," she replied.

When he relayed this story to me, it felt as if I had slipped out the bottom of that plane through the cargo hold, crashing to the sea floor. He didn't realize the devastation it would wreak on my spirit. After all, I had invented the spit vs. dust game. And yet there I was, small and foolish to think I would be remembered. Harry must be even more naive, but I knew that wasn't the case.

"I've got a situation in the east field. We've got some overzealous fans trying to get on set. Might need to tell our trooper friend to head this way," the security guard belched into his radio. "I'm pretty certain that at some point I must have told you about a drug that would make people act as if they only have twenty-four hours left on earth," I proclaimed to both of them.

"Now that's rich. Maybe I won't give you this antidote after all, you selfish bastard," Mira said.

"You know what's rich? That fucking syrup. The accidental dose of death syrup on my pancakes."

Just then, Vik approached with his gun out. Everyone stopped. "Fuck me," Harry said.

"Okay, okay. Enter, the henchman. A little derivative, but I can work with this," I said.

"I knew you would see the potential!" Harry said. Vik motioned for the two security guards to get up and leave. They quickly obliged. Then, from out east, Gerhardt, the manager, approached. He was desperate for a fresh story after all. Desperate for death. Mira tried to move toward me, but Vik pointed the gun at her. I collapsed to one knee.

"Vik, you gotta let her give him the injection," Harry said.

"The only thing I have to do is get you and the scientist back to your dad," Vik said. "Now get the fuck off the ground."

"Fulton! I had a feeling I'd find you here. It took me a while to piece everything together, but now it all makes sense. I think Sasha would be perfect for the lead role. I know her agent, and I'd love to represent you and your script. It needs some polishing, but together, I believe we can make it a hit," Gerhardt said.

I collapsed to the second knee, and my neck became heavy with laughter. "What script?" Harry questioned.

"This doesn't concern you, Harry!" I said. "The stuff about the drug that makes you feel like you're dying... that feels fresh," Gerhardt said. I told Gerhardt I loved him and that he could represent me. But there was a problem. He was late. The old Tilt-a-Whirl ride was bone on bone after all.

I had figured out why Harry was so excited by this notion. He had never been interested in money. It bored him. We had this in common. Only he still bathed in it regularly. The answer was that Harry must be dying himself. It was contagious, you see. Perhaps a liver, or a lung. It didn't matter. He couldn't conceal it any longer. He was crashing to the floor. Stadium lights and all. Jesus. Of course. Hence the "nutritionist."

Gerhardt was also late to his own life that night as Vik turned his gun toward him and fired. He collapsed to the ground.

“No witnesses!” Vik yelled. He tore at the corn around him like Grassman. I got up from the ground and, in a white flash of rage, tackled Vik and began to pummel him until he was in the fucking band with Harry and me. At least I thought. But even with those last flurries, I recognized the absurdity of hatred. I crawled toward Gerhardt. “I don’t think this is a deal breaker,” I said.

Harry noticed a state patrol officer named GENIE running in our direction. “We have to go, MIRA,” Harry said. Mira dived at my foot to try and inject me with the antidote. She was a scientist after all. Not possessed by the insignificance of being forgotten. Vik clocked her over the head with the butt of his gun and knocked her out. He staggered to his feet as Harry fled into the night. Genie checked the vitals of both Vik and Gerhardt.

“This is Sheriff Jones. I have multiple shots fired at the fairgrounds. Two wounded and a suspect on the run, armed and dangerous. I need an ambulance now.”

Just then, a sound in the distance: the rustling of sage scrub. But we were in Indiana. Someone had built a bridge covered in vegetation, allowing mountain lions, bobcats, and groundlings to cross over the highway where I had died a thousand times. That someone spoke with a soft, Muppet-like undercoat. This voice alerted us to the vast possibilities beyond the mind and all its senses. So, I went to leaping and hopping as her molten words released me. "Fulton, is that you?" Sasha said.