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but because they're moving around.*

FINGERED BY THE MARSHMALLOW

Dragsters are the fastest race cars on the planet, lately hitting up to 230 miles an hour in their short, quarter-mile races. It's an art form for connoisseurs, each endeavour lasting only about six seconds or so, fueled by nitro, one on one, "Big Daddy" Don Garlits and all the rest, competing against the laws of physics, against the limitations of matter itself.

Jack listens patiently, there in his living room, while Bobby shares all manner of drag racing lore. Most of this is unnecessary, but Jack is patient. And Bobby gets a kick out of talking about this stuff.

Bobby "the Marshmallow" Marshall drove both dragsters and funny cars there in 1967, '68, making more money with funny cars — he had one that looked like a Pontiac GTO he did pretty well with — but his heart was always in dragsters, that was the ultimate for him.

The wreck that burned him up happened in Santa Ana, in a sling-shot dragster, when the clutch disintegrated, engine over-revved, and the Marshmallow bounced end over end engulfed in white-hot flames.

His career is over now, and he's become addicted to Demerol, supplemented with heroin now and then. He doesn't like heroin as much, however, because those who manufacture it don't care too much about quality control. In other words, out of nowhere, without warning, you might drop dead from an O.D. But his nerve-endings are either dead or constantly jangling with pain.

Last night Jack treated Bobby to a local prostitute, who danced slowly to Elvis singing "Love Me Tender" with a black blindfold securely in place. She did not flinch when Bobby touched her with his left hand claw. She was high. She smiled. Jack left them alone, smoking cigarettes and watching television in the next room.

When Candy came out, an hour or so later, no longer blindfolded, Jack gave her a very large tip. She accepted the cash, looking at him with red-rimmed eyes, no words. Jack could not hold her stare.

Bobby strolled out sometime little later, looking around, saying, "It looks like you've been reading books on the fall of the Roman Empire. This help you understand America these days?"

"I don't think like that," Jack said, which made Bobby laugh and then start to cough. His lungs are shot since inhaling all those flames.

Jack had known him before the wreck. He had been at the track now and then, betting against the damn fool and generally cleaning up.

Bobby knows the innovative cam grinder, Chuck Girard, who has gambling debts from Lake Tahoe he apparently thinks he can put off indefinitely, because it was a "private game."

Girard has barricaded himself in, on his five acres up near Bremer-ton, Washington, with his Dobermans and semiautomatic weapons, trip mines, land mines and bouncin' bettys, at least that is the word.

Chuck Girard is working on something special, a revolutionary new chassis, and people are curious. If anyone might show up with an incredible innovation and amaze everyone in 1969, it's Chuck Girard.

The Marshmallow (the "Marshmallow Roast," some called his notorious wreck) has made a deal to betray Girard, without too many second thoughts it would seem, for a thousand bucks.

The next day, Bobby spends some time on the phone.

Everyone always needs a backer, and the cover story is that the Marshmallow is going to introduce Chuck Girard to a backer, a guy who's backed some dragsters down on the Florida circuit, a guy who works for NASA and is interested in the pure aerodynamics of the problems involved. This will be Jack's role.

Now, Marshmallow gives Jack a smile. It's funny: as burned up and grotesque as he is, he's not shy. He still has a certain optimism, even. Maybe it's the Demerol. Sometimes Demerol-addicts get the heebie-jeebies, but this doesn't seem to be the case with Bobby Marsh.

Jack was once awarded a Bronze Star. A couple of Purple Hearts.

That was a long time ago. He remembers two blue-eyed German teenagers with their hands high up in the air, seeking to surrender, standing there next to the road. He and Frank were hurtling and bumping along the bad road in their jeep, smoking Lucky Strikes. But the POW camp would have them going right at the next crossroads, and he and Frank were in a hurry needing to turn left.

“Ja, ja. Danke.”

The German boys sat precariously on the front of the jeep. Frank looked at Jack, frowned. Jack looked at Frank. Yeah. They weren’t going to leave these guys loose wandering around.

Okay, let’s do it. It’s all set. Chuck buys it, Bobby says.

“He still might search us,” Jack remarks.

Marshmallow nods. Smiles. What a smile. He seems enthusiastic about the business, as if, within reason, this expedition will be fun. He has faith in Jack’s expertise.

Jack says, “I’m guessing he won’t look under your balls. This is a .38 with a two-inch barrel. We’ll use some electrical tape so it won’t fall out of your ass. When I give you the signal, you go to the bathroom, come back and give me the gun. You positive Chuck’s still a drinking man?”

“Drinks like a fish, always has. Only thing that improves his disposition, the sonofabitch.”

They drive up to Bremerton from Portland, which takes two and a half hours, and commence following the complicated instructions away from the highway to the home of Chuck Girard.

The place isn’t as big as Jack expected. Or at least, from this side it doesn’t give the impression there’s a lot of land to spare for raising sheep or planting corn. The big barn back over yonder must be where he works on his engines. The mad scientist’s secret lab.

Girard is a runty guy with a Luger and three fucking Dobermans. He pats Jack down and Jack says *What the hell?* like he’s surprised.

“I’ve got enemies,” Girard says.

No, he doesn’t do more than a very cursory check of the Marsh-

mallow.

"Sorry," Girard says, as he puts his Luger into a holster worn on his belt and only now moves to shake Jack's hand.

"Glad to meet you," Jack says, remembering he's supposed to work for NASA, prepared to respond to any questions, but they're left unasked. The Marshmallow Man has a brown paper bag with an unopened bottle of Jim Beam.

"Now you're talkin'," Girard says, with a grin. "Let's go in the house. We can go out to look at what I'm doing later on, if it sounds halfway interesting to you."

They walk up a little hill to the plain white frame house. Skeeter, Chuck's wife, is introduced. The dogs stay outside.

Skeeter is an unhandsome woman, friendly but a little shy. She attends to chores in the kitchen while the men drink and talk, sitting in the living room.

Marshmallow has briefed Jack, and he's a quick study, but luckily once Chuck Girard has had a drink he can't stop talking, as though he's had it all pent up, waiting for an audience, and he just goes on and on.

How the engine is the key variable, but the chassis is important for getting hold of the race track. Damn right.

"It's a matter of matching your horsepower to what the track will take. You can overpower any surface," Girard says, "but if your car bogs coming off the starting line it'll probably do a wheelie, and you're screwed. The driver can't pedal and play games—it's got to be hammered every time. People have been talking about controlled slippage, the slider clutch, for years now, but I think I've got something new. A 'planetary' transmission. You ever hear of that? Makes it so you can upshift on the top end. The thing to do is test it and get the bugs out, make it reliable. Wait'll after we eat, I'll show you what I'm up to. I've got a proto I'd like to run down at Woodburn in a month or so, but after that the cat'll be outta the bag."

Jack nods appropriately and feels completely relaxed. Everything is going very well. Chuck seems pretty full of himself.

Marshmallow gets Girard talking about famous crashes, and then they drift back into such arcane topics as *heat sinks* and *killing the torque*.

Jack finds all this detail boring, but he isn't bored.

He's keenly alert to every nuance of the atmosphere, the mood.

Dinner is served.

Skeeter sits down with them at the dining room table. Chuck says grace and they eat pork chops and candied yams and green beans from the garden, fresh-baked biscuits — it's a good old-fashioned homecooked meal. But before it's done (Jack doesn't want Skeeter to be bustling about clearing the table) the sign is given, and Bobby looks perplexed for a moment, his shiny pink bald head, pale blue seemingly lidless eyes . . . but he excuses himself, goes to the bathroom, and when Jack hears the toilet flush he says, "Be right back," dabs at his mouth with a napkin, and gets up to meet Marshmallow in the hall.

He takes the gun from him, removes the safety, then strolls up quickly and puts it to Chuck Girard's left temple and blows his head apart before Chuck even has time to be alarmed.

"Sorry, honey," Jack says, and shoots Skeeter, poor unlovely woman with a halfassed beehive, shoots her basically right through the heart. She hasn't screamed or yelled, just gasped, but now she falls backward out of her chair and somehow takes her plate with her, making an inglorious mess. She noisily farts before she dies.

"Whew, that was fast work," Bobby Marshall says, nervously, admiringly, and Jack shoots him in the forehead.

He sits down then and takes off his right shoe, fetches some more bullets from a hollow space under the lining going down into the heel. He reloads, and goes to the front porch. As anticipated, the Dobermans are here, in a state of maximum alert, not barking, milling around. Damn. This is the hardest part. Not because he likes dogs, but because they're moving around. He doesn't want to just wound one and then have it try to bite him as he leaves.

Jack has an idea. There are more pork chops in the frying pan. He sets this out on the porch, beyond the screendoor, with extreme care,

and the dogs are interested . . . even if they're still skittish from the earlier noise. Though hell, Girard probably shot off guns here all the time. He seemed the type. And his nitro-fed drag racing engines had to be awfully loud.

The dogs go down, one two three. Jack puts an extra bullet in the head of one he's not absolutely sure of, it was still twitching one of its paws there for a sec.

Now to clean up.

The gun goes in Chuck Girard's right hand, or rather, thrown clear a bit, after first being wiped clean and then smudged with the man's prints.

Some kind of domestic dispute. Girard must have killed them both, Bobby and Skeeter, and his dogs too, so they wouldn't be lonely, killing himself to finish things off.

No fingerprints. Jack washes his glass, his plate and silverware, dries them, puts them away. Takes Girard's Luger and almost decides to steal it, but calculates it might be known and possibly missed. Puts it in the bedroom closet, up in a shoebox.

Now leave. The dogs all stay dead. Jack has been careful not to track blood, but if he misstepped he's not too worried. So what if by the time the cops come, it looks like some local yokel got curious and had a look around.

There's nothing else particularly in his head as he leaves. He hears some birds, some crickets down here by the road. He feels good.

He's not thinking about playing blackjack, drinking bourbon, or some blond prostitute with soft breasts.

Maybe he hears North Dakota when he was eight years old. Maybe he sees some abandoned barn full of bullet-holes, landscape overgrown with brambles and weeds. A scarecrow trampled and maimed.

Is that a crow up on that wire? It speaks to him, sarcastic as any crow in bomb-blackened Germany. Pecking out the soft blue eyes of a dead kraut.

The sky here is the same, it smells the same, rubber and some kind

of wood burning, meat somewhere, black plume of smoke bending horizontal, squandering its form. Somewhere there must be all sorts of old buildings burning down.

Jack starts his car. He sits there for a moment, adjusts the rear-view mirror.

A few days later, some quantity of alcohol in his system, he's in a motel room on the outskirts of Vegas, sleepless, looking outside without opening the window at the slow-to-nonexistent traffic, remembering that look of unsurprise on the Marshmallow's face. Remembering that face.

"Honey, can't you sleep?"

This is from Debbie, no it's Vickie, maybe Candy, who he's known for six, seven hours now at least. Or maybe it's been longer than that. Jack stares at a slowly moving Lincoln Continental, maybe wine-red, cruising slowly, slowly, like a shark, through amber-tinged ruins.

They know where he is.

Everyone deserves it. Everyone. Every time. ■