

The Fishermen of the River Styx

The Vic Spleen Stories

By Shane Norwood

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The Black Death.

Some people think they can get away with murder. Tod Schwarz did. But then, why wouldn't he? He wouldn't have been much good at his job if he couldn't. Guy's in his line of work don't usually have much of insurance plan, so Mrs. Schwartz, if there ever was one, found herself shit up shit creek the day old Toddy boy's luck ran out. Or maybe it wasn't luck. Maybe it was just dumb stupidity. Hubris I would have called it, but I doubt if Schwartz knew what the word meant. It means that a fighter looking to his next big money opponent instead of the stiff in front of him is liable to get his clock cleaned. This is more or less what happened to Schwartz.

It seems that Tod got contracted to take care of this florist, of all things. Now florists are not customarily found at the top of anybody's people to be whacked list. What did the guy do, try to take out the competition in the carnation trafficking business? But old Tod didn't care one way or another. He figured it to be a candy from a baby deal. Plus, apparently the guy was a screaming faggot, which in Tod's mind makes the gig even easier. So he doesn't do the ground work. Doesn't case the joint. Doesn't watch the mark's comings and goings. Doesn't take the trouble to find out anything about the guy or eyeball the kind of company he keeps. And his biggest, and as it turns out last, mistake, he doesn't concern himself with whether the guy is packing or not.

What it comes down to is that Tod finds himself face down in a bed of roses, with a neat little hole right between the peepers made by a .22 long, fired from an antique but obviously still functional Smith and Wesson Ladysmith revolver. Well there you go. Hubris. Just because a guy don't play pool don't mean he can't shoot.

I got the low down of the whole sorry affair from Wingy the Sponge down at Riffó's, the joint I usually hang out in when I'm between gigs. Riffó's isn't much to write home about, but the brews are cold, and you do tend to meet a nicer class of lowlife. Wingy and I aren't friends exactly. You could call us drinking buddies but even that doesn't define the nature of the relationship. Don't get me wrong, I really like the guy, but we're like two guys walking the same tightrope. Apart from the thing that keeps us together we don't have much in common. And we both know what happens if you look down.

Wingy is a guy that always knows things. I never know where he gets his information. If I did, I'd would be cruising round in a caddie instead of a shit box Camaro with shot

suspension, and have suites on Park Lane instead of a walk up office down by the waterfront in a part of town so poor that the rats carry life insurance.

Before I get carried away with the story, the name's Spleen. Vic Spleen. Yeah I know. I heard 'em all before, pal. The grand pappy was a Dutchman out of Rotterdam by the name of Speelendam. Some clown on Ellis Island either couldn't spell, or figured he was some kind of comedian.

I don't know what you'd call what I do for a living. I don't know that you'd even call it a living. I call myself a resolver. Catchy no? That's because I resolve things. Not solve. Resolve. Solving is for cops and crossword puzzles, and sad Seamus' standing around all night in cruddy clothes and cheap shoes, scrutinizing the surreptitious comings and goings of the immoral masses.

No, people come to me with situations. I do something about them. Sure there's a certain amount of straightforward private dick work, and I been down that route, baby, but that's not how it works. It's prestidigitation and divination, a doctorate in the law of the inevitability of betrayal, predicated on the venality and viciousness that inhabits the human condition. I deal in extrications, disentanglements, resolutions and dissolutions. Bad things gone away. I deal in dissolve. In clean. Part repo man, part dog catcher, part nemesis, I'll dance to any tune, as long as someone feeds the kitty. It can get kinda hairy in spots, like snorkeling with sharks, with a bad cut and a leaky mask, but you can't do this kind of work if you're worried about buying a one way ticket, so I'm not afraid to cross the line, or go to the places where, if you go there, you can never come back the same. Let's just say I'm not scared of the dark, and let it go. There's a kind of perverse morality to it, but you have to think like me to understand that.

When it pays, it pays good, but by their very nature, jobs are few and far between, which means I'm always somewhere between the trough and the breadline, chomping with a full snout, or a crumb short of a loaf. It's a precarious existence. So why do I do it? It's like Cinderella's slipper, kid. It's hard and its cold, but it fits!

Anyway, whatever name you want to put to it, at the time that this deal went down I guess you could say I wasn't exactly at the top of my profession. Shit, I wasn't even at the bottom. I wasn't quite desperate yet, but the situation I was in would sure as hell do till desperate got there.

A couple of days after Wingy told me the tale, I get a call from some foreign dude who talks like he's got an elastic band wrapped around his lips. He introduces himself as Mr. Amboseli, and asks me if I wouldn't mind stopping by his office if it was convenient. The state of my billfold, trust me, it was convenient. A plastic doll looking manicured bimbo answered the door. From the look on her kisser I figured that either she just found a bat turd in her purse, or I'm not the kind of guy that keeps her awake at night with lurid dreams. She showed me into the office. The white carpet was so deep I almost needed snow shoes to cross it.

Behind a desk you could skate on sat a small immaculately dressed man, with collar length curly blond hair, and a lavender silk tie. I don't know what this guy bathed in, but it damn sure wasn't the East River. He held out a manicured hand and pointed to a leather chair. His watch was so heavy I didn't see how he could lift it.

"Ah. Mister Spleen. Good of you to come at such short notice. May I offer you a refreshment."

"A Bushmills wouldn't go amiss."

I took a gander round the room while I waited for the bar service to arrive. There was enough mahogany in the wall panels to deforest Malaysia, and if the art work was original, the guy could have charged admission. The chink of ice was music to my ears as Miss Personality held out the glass at arm's length before running off to the bathroom to decontaminate herself.

"Now Mr. Spleen,"

"Call me Vic."

"Alright then. You can call me Mr. Amboseli. Tell me Vic, what do you know about flowers?"

"Well Mr. Amboseli. When you've been to as many funerals as me, you know a flower when you see one."

I could tell from his expression that my wit was knocking him out.

"Er quite. Well do you know anything about orchids, specifically?"

I decided to change tack.

"I am afraid that they represent a gap in my education, Mr. Amboseli

"Well allow me to fill it. Orchids are thought to be eighty million years old. There are around twenty six thousand species, which means they represent eleven percent of the total

seed plant population of the planet, plus over a hundred thousand cultivars. The name orchid derives from the ancient Greek *OpXic*, which means testicle.”

I almost gave the guy’s carpet a whisky re-spray.

“Amusing, no? Apparently the Greeks saw a resemblance between the orchid’s roots and the human testicle.”

“Hell of a name for a flower. The nut flower. I’ll remember that the next time I give one to my sweet heart.”

“Good idea. Now not all orchids are so ubiquitous. Some of them are quite rare. In fact some of them are extremely rare and people are prepared to pay surprisingly large amounts of money for them. The one that concerns us here is the rarest one of all. In fact it is so rare that it is thought to be the only one of its kind in human hands. So rare that it even has a name. It’s known as the Black Death.”

The carpet came close to getting it again.

“Damn. This is some kind of dandelion. First it’s a scrotum, now it’s a disease.”

“Hmm. Another little pun. Well, it’s actually the Black De’Ath. Named for Wilmington De’Ath. The discoverer. Stumbled upon it by accident, quite literally as I understand. For obvious reasons, he is not telling anybody where he found it. It has another distinction. It is pure midnight black. A black orchid. The Holy Grail of orchid collectors everywhere. This makes it outrageously valuable.”

“But hold your horses there, Mr. Amboseli. I don’t know how long these things live, but if this flower is the only one, why would anybody fork out serious dough for something that is going to croak?”

“A sensible question. The orchid has intrinsic value, but its real value lies in its ability to self-pollinate. It can reproduce itself. So even after it ‘croaks’ as you so poetically put it, the owner will be able produce more.”

“Ok, I’m following you so far. But then whoever has one of these orchids can do the same thing. So before you know it, every Joe Schmo and his mother will have one, and they’ll be on sale at nine ninety nine in Walmart.”

“Also an astute observation, Vic, but the idea would be to reproduce the flowers in secret, until one had enough to introduce them onto the market. They would be a sensation, in florists terms the equivalent of a hit record. The owner would increase his investment many times over.”

“I see. So where do I come in.”

“I want you to find Wilmington De’Ath. We know he’s somewhere here in New York, but that’s all we know. If we find him, we find the orchid.”

“And then?”

“And then I take it from there. All I need you to do is find him.”

“Ok. You’re on. But just so’s I know, just how much of the famous folding stuff are we talking about here?”

“Somewhere in the region of five million dollars.”

This time I couldn’t help it. The carpet got a nice tasteful amber tinge.

Mr. Amboseli was less than impressed by the new design work on his carpet, but he managed a tight smile as I left, which was more than could be said for the secretary. The only thing tight about her, she was sitting on it.

I headed down to Riffo’s to think things through, and have another word with Wingy the Sponge. This was too much of a coincidence. First the late and not lamented Tod Schwartz gets himself smoked trying to ice a florist, and then Amboseli calls me in to find some kind of superstar daisy. I was definitely on the team. For the kind of bread that Mr. Amboseli was offering, I couldn’t afford not to be, but I had to find out what I was getting myself into.

I was nursing a beer and back and waiting for Wingy to show up for his shift when I saw Complexion Jones walk in with his talking dog Moze. Pocko’s boys. I never saw them down to Riffo’s before, which meant they were looking for someone, and I had a feeling it was me. I wasn’t too concerned about Complexion and Moze. Complexion was an ex-pug whose face had more hand prints than Hollywood Boulevard, hence the moniker, and Moze couldn’t lick his finger after KFC. But who they represented was a different story. Ivan Pocko was a guy you didn’t want on your dance card.

“Mr. Pocko wants to see you,”

“Hey, Complexion. How come you never told me you use the same plastic surgeon as Mickey Rourke?”

“Aw, Moze. I think we made a mistake. This guy’s too funny to be Vic Spleen. Can I get your autograph Mr. Leno?”

“Quit kiddin’ around Spleen. Mr. Pocko aint a patient guy. When he says he wants to see you, he means now.”

I could have stretched these two bums and walked, but Pocko would have just sent some better talent. Some people are sensitive about having their invitations refused. And some people are sensitive about having broken light bulbs stuck under their fingernails, so I downed by bourbon and back and followed the two apes out to the jungle mobile. The room seemed darker just by having Ivan Pocko in it, as if he somehow leeches the light out of it.

“You looking for Wilmington De’Ath.”

It wasn’t a question. I decided not to ask him how he knew.

“You working for the fruit that wants the five million dollar flower.”

That wasn’t a question either. While I was trying to figure out how to answer a question that wasn’t one, Pocko said,

“Bring him in.”

A door opened at the back of the room, and Complexion and Moze dragged in Wingy the Sponge. They shoved him in the chair next to mine. He looked like he had just gone three rounds with Smokin’ Joe. No Gloves.

“Tell him what you told us.”

Wingy didn’t try to look at me.

“Jeez, Wing.”

“Don’t sweat it Vic. I like soup. Anyways, the guy that Tod Schwartz gets hired to take out is Wilmington De’Ath. And Amboseli is the guy that hires him to do the deed. That’s why no one knows where De’Ath is, because he did a Houdini, and why Amboseli wants to find him, so he can finish the job.”

“How do you know?”

“It was me that put Schwartz onto the contract after I found out about it.”

“How did you find out?”

Wingy must have thought he was smiling.

“You know me, Vic. I hear things. De’Ath and Amboseli was partners, if ya see what I’m saying. They discovered the Black Death together, somewhere in some shithole swamp in Belize or somewhere. Amboseli comes down with some tropical disease, and gets banged up in hospital in Costa Rica. De’Ath heads back stateside on his lonesome, with the flower. Somewhere along the line, De’Ath decides to cut Amboseli out of the deal. By the time De’Ath gets back, the word is out that De’Ath is selling to the highest bidder. Amboseli was

with Schwarz when he bought the farm, waiting to move in and snatch the flower. That's how come he hired you, on account of you was a known associate of Tod Schwartz."

"I was kind of curious as to how come an upscale guy like Amboseli picked on a downtown guy like me."

I turned to Ivan Pocko.

"So what now?"

"I want you to do what Amboseli is paying you for. Find De'Ath. Make sure he has the flower, then we find out where he has the flower stashed."

"What about Wingy?"

"Wingy can go. It ain't like we don't know where to find him."

"Ok. When I find this guy, does that mean were done?"

"Yeah."

So. How do you find a guy with a funny name and a black flower worth five million dollars, hiding out in New York City? You hire yourself a private eye. Yeah I know. I am one. Well, kind of. But I needed someone who could get inside the world where these people operate, and not stand out like Denis Rodman at a Hobbit convention. That put me out of the game. I called Silky. Silky Jones wasn't your run of the mill private eye. You might say she had her own little niche. Strictly society jobs. She knew all the right people, and was the kind of woman people find it hard to say no to. If you want to know how come a mug like me would know a class act like Silky Jones, let's just say I wasn't always a mug, and she wasn't always a class act, and leave it at that.

Three days later, I was on my third brewski in Riffos, when Wingy handed me the bar phone. Wingy wasn't looking too pretty, but if he was still hurting, you'd never know it to look at him. I could never listen to that voice without getting a kind of lonely feeling in the pit of my stomach. This time was no exception.

"I knew where you'd be Vic."

"I know where I'd like to be."

"Usually it's the guy brings the girls flowers."

"You found him."

"Did you think I wouldn't?"

"Not for a New York minute."

The Madison Club Lounge was not my kind of watering hole. For one thing billiard tables don't have pockets. Plus the bar staff don't have a sense of humor. The kid behind the bar never even cracked a smile when I asked him, after getting a look at the prices, if it wouldn't be possible just to rent a drink. But I had to look the part. I was supposed to be Powel Frower, a man capable of dishing out five mill without fluttering an eyelash.

Willmington De'Ath wasn't what I expected. He was a big rugged guy with a beard who looked like he would be more at home in the saddle than in a lounge chair, and you don't get hands like that from pruning roses. I expect Tod Schwartz was thinking something similar just before the store closed.

De'Ath said he had drinks in his suite, and held the door open for me. I should have known. I heard a click behind me, and it wasn't the door chain. I had to admit it was a pretty gun, but that didn't make me feel any more comfortable staring down its barrel.

"You don't see these much anymore. Nineteen twenty three. Still works though. Who are you? And don't tell me Powel Frower. If you thought I would fall for such an obvious anagram you must be even more stupid than that last imbecile that Amboseli sent to do me in."

"I'm not here to do you in. I was just hired to find you, and make sure you had the orchid."

"By whom?" And please don't be tiresome. I'm a first class marksman and this little thing is no louder than a champagne cork. The IRA call it kneecapping. I understand it is very painful."

I consulted my crystal ball. The forecast was cloudy, and the gypsies were laughing. Get shot now by De'Ath or get shot later by Pocko. I decided to take a rain check on getting shot.

"His name is Ivan Pocko."

"And Mr. Pocko wants the orchid, of course."

"Of course. And Pocko usually gets what he wants."

"Well he can get it this time too. Give him this card, tell him to call me, and tell him not to bother looking for me here, because I won't be here. Would you like to see it?"

I had to admit I was curious.

"Don't try anything stupid. It's not worth dying for."

Without taking his eyes off me he walked over to an alcove, and pressed a switch. In some kind of bell shaped glass container sat the Black Death. It wasn't as big as I thought it would be, but it was exquisite. Perfectly formed and as black as night. There was a weird hypnotic fascination about it. An allure. It made you want it. You could almost see why some people thought it was worth killing for. Almost.

I looked up at Willmington De'Ath. He was only feet away, but the thought of a little neat hole right between Tod Schwartz's eyes kept me honest. I'm not even sure I could have taken him, even without the gun. He had that way of carrying himself. He was looking at me as if he was making a decision. I was hoping it was whether to have steak or sushi for dinner. Finally he spoke.

"Perhaps you could do something for me?"

I went straight round to see Amboseli, but laughing girl told me he was out. I didn't bother asking if I could wait. Down on the street, I saw him climbing out of a canary yellow El Dorado. I was just about to walk up to him when Ivan Pocko climbed out of the passenger side. I just had time to duck behind a news stand. They walked right past me just as pally as could be, two sports on their way to the game.

I did the only reasonable thing and headed down to Riffo's to think things through. I had sucked back a few before Wingy showed up. I could see that he was all fired up about something so I moved away from my usual seat and took a stool at the far end of the bar. As soon as he could he came down to speak to me. For Wingy the Sponge, he was animated.

"You seen Pocko?"

"I saw him a couple of hours ago."

"Well you won't be seeing him no more."

"Why?"

"He's dead."

"Say what, now?"

"Yeah. Got what was coming to him. .22 right between the eyes. Don't expect to see Complexion and Moze no more neither. They both caught it as well."

"When did this happen?"

"An hour ago. Found 'em in a rented Caddie in the car park at the Met."

"This calls for a drink."

In fact, it called for several. I wasn't exactly on an even keel when I sailed into Amboseli's office. I must have had a look in my eye or something because the secretary never said a word. Just sat there meekly and let me pass.

Amboseli gave me his best theatrical how dare you look when I opened his door and walked in unannounced. He gave me his best B movie you got me look when I shot him twice through the chest with my silenced Beretta 92. I looked at the blood.

"Sorry about the carpet," I said as I walked out. I let Miss Conviviality have it as she was trying to decide between patronizing and disdainful. She wasn't part of the deal, but she was a witness, so she was on the house. I stepped over her and picked up the phone to call Wilmington De'Ath.

Like I said. Some people think they can get away with murder.