

Blood and Clay

By Brendan Peveril

Before the truck stopped I was out and running, the passenger side door yawning open behind me.

“Hold on,” Ben was shouting, “That thing could explode!”

It could, I knew that. After rolling end over end the car had landed upright, but the engine was on fire. I could see the rain steam wherever it touched metal. There was no helping the driver, his brain was on the dashboard, but the girl in the passenger seat was screaming, her face torn up by broken glass.

“Help me! Help! Oh, God!”

Ben turned back to the truck while I pulled at the door handle in vain. “I’ve got a crowbar in the truck. That thing’s not opening on its own.”

“No time, Ben.” I clamped my hands onto the door and the frame of the car. The metal was hot to the touch, I ignored the broken glass scraping my palm. I pulled as hard as I could, but the metal groaned and stayed put.

“Help, please.” She touched my hand, her eyes were desperate. I braced again and pulled. The heat seared the sole of my foot through my shoe, worn thin from walking.

With a screech, agony, the door gave. “Hurry up, man!” Ben threw down the crowbar and ran to us. I tossed aside the scrap and scooped up the girl. The tank caught as I walked away, I could feel the heat on my back through my threadbare jacket, my hair buzzing and burning as I shielded her as best I could from the flying, burning debris. A bit of shrapnel flew past my ear, humming like a bee. I was on my knees when Ben reached us, stumbling over the uneven ground.

Other cars had stopped by now. I could see the flashing lights of an ambulance or a police car down the road, still a mile or so off on the long, straight Midwestern highway.

“Come on, Ben,” I said, as I laid the girl down by the side of the road, “there’s nothing

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left to do here.”

Ben looked at the passenger lying there, bloody and torn, gasping for breath in the grass on the roadside. Alive, though. Another motorist was already kneeling down next to her.

“Really? You’re sure?”

“Hey!” A young man stepped between me and the truck. “I’m with the Trib’, can I ask you some questions?”

“The what?”

“The Tribune. Local paper, no big deal. Did you see the car go off the road? What’s your name?”

“No, I didn’t.” I pushed him aside.

“But, your name?”

“I don’t have a name. I’m a golem.”

“Gollum? Like in the Lord of the...”

“No,” I climbed up into Ben’s rig. “Nothing like that.”

“Can I have a number to reach you? I have questions.”

“No. I’m just passing through.” I slammed the door in the reporter’s face. “Let’s go, Ben.”

I hoped the silence would last, but it didn’t. “No offense, stranger, but what’s your deal?”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, I find you walking down the road in the rain, not even looking for a ride. You rip that car apart like a beer can, who cares that it’s about to explode. You’re a hero, but you just blow off that reporter. You’re not looking out for yourself, and I can’t figure out what you’re doing. Are you secretly a serial killer or something, on the run from the law?”

“No. I just do what I must.”

“You told that kid you’re a golem. You mean the kind created by a wizard from clay, right?”

"Yes, Ben."

"And you weren't afraid that the car would blow up because you're not alive and you can't get hurt." I held up my palms, dirty but unmarked by the heat and glass.

"Well, that's something. Tell you what, though: you're either telling the truth or you're lying and you're going to kill me. I'm dying anyway, though, so I might as well pretend like you're telling the truth, since it's not going to make me any more dead."

"You're dying?"

"Cancer. It's why I shave my head. I stopped the chemo, though. Figured I might as well die on my feet like a man. Nobody to draw things out for a few more months for, no sense being sick all the time."

"Fair enough."

"Can I ask you another question?"

"Yes, of course."

"Why Cairo? Lots of places with more going on than Cairo. I can't think of anything a golem might want to do there."

"I don't know. I just know that I have to get there."

"Okay. So that's your purpose, the reason you were created, right?"

"Something like that, yes."

"So, why did you help the girl? You don't seem like the emotional type, and it didn't help you get to Cairo."

"I don't know that either. I just knew that I had to do it, had to help. I do what I have to do. That's all."

"Fair enough, I guess even a golem can have a sense of duty. Hell, it's probably all you've got. That aside, do golems eat or sleep? Whether you'll admit it or not, you did something heroic. Seems the least I could do for a hero is buy you dinner and let you sleep in my motel room for the night."

"I don't eat or sleep very much, but I do. I can accept your offer."

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“Good. Let's just hope that reporter kid doesn't find us, right?” A few minutes later Ben pulled into a parking lot. “This is my favourite place to stop in this little town. There's always an empty room, they have a decent steak and the coffee's alright. Can't ask for more than that, can you? You go sit down in the diner, I'll be right there.”

The waitress knew Ben, brought him a bottle of whiskey and ice when he asked. After we'd ordered she came by to make small talk. When she asked him about his wife, he just shook his head, she clucked her tongue in concern.

“You have a wife, Ben?” I asked when she was gone. He frowned a bit and took another pull from his glass. “I thought you said that you have no family.”

Ben shook his head. “I had a wife. I've had three. The first one left me; we got married too young, the baby we got married for died. Second one cheated on me; I loved her, but she said she never loved me. Maybe she loved the next guy, but I doubt it. Number three, I thought we were doing well, but the cancer ended it.”

I pushed the ice around in my glass with my finger. “I hate to pry, Ben.”

“After the third degree I gave you earlier? Shoot, man, ask me what you want.” He scooped some more ice out of the bucket and poured us both more whiskey.

“Well, did she die of cancer too?”

“No. Kate left me when I got diagnosed. She gave me a bunch of reasons. She said she loved me too much to watch me die, she was too young to spend her life taking care of me, she needed to move on if we didn't have a future. Doesn't really matter, though, does it? No matter how you cut it, she's gone with half my money, and I'm dying all alone. It is what it is, though. I don't like it, but crying isn't going to change it.” The waitress brought our food then. Ben made it clear that he'd rather not talk about ex-wives and cancer during dinner. “My mom always told that talking about unpleasant things at the table would give a man the runs.”

We passed the rest of the evening without talking about the cancer. Ben got more and more drunk. He told me stories about his life, his childhood. Growing up in dusty Midwestern towns, firefly summer nights, dry windy winters, hairy dogs. He had stories about his first

marriage, moving to the city, living poor in a boarding house, trying to find jobs as a 17 year old father. His second marriage was to an older woman. Her friends treated him like meat, she barely acknowledged him, but he was well kept. Kate represented a return to his roots, in a way. He'd gotten his stable trucking job, found a pretty young girl and gone back West.

The night waned and the stories continued, some funny, some less. Ben had a few minor run-ins with the law before the baby, the same stupid, angry teenage troubles everyone has. He'd once nearly died on a camping trip, rescuing someone's golden retriever from a swollen river. He swore he'd once seen a UFO, and ghosts at least three times. He wasn't superstitious or anything, he assured me, but he'd seen enough that a golem didn't seem so farfetched. Long after the little restaurant was empty, I followed him as he staggered to the room.

Ben leaned against the door frame, nearly doubled in pain. He staggered over to the bed and sat down letting his shoulders hang slackly. "Man, you know why I've never killed myself, haven't even tried?"

"No, Ben. Why would you kill yourself?" I filled his glass with the last of the whiskey. A little spilled on the bedside table when I set it down. "Seems you should keep fighting the cancer."

"I'm in constant pain, some days I can't get out of bed until I'm so fucked up on the pills that I can barely walk straight. Everybody I've ever cared about is gone. I've got no reason but habit to keep going. If I don't die on the road I'll croak my last some cold lonely night in a cheap hotel in some nameless town like this one. But, I keep going."

"Okay, why haven't you killed yourself?"

"Because, I feel like it doesn't matter if I do or not. Nobody cares about me, even people I used to think cared, they don't." He leaned gently back onto the bed and looked wistfully at the ceiling. "Suicide doesn't seem like a proper thing to do, but doing it when the only person's going to care is the maid who finds you? Feels so damned pathetic. Empty. If nobody cares that something's broken, why are we fixing it?"

I had nothing to say to that. I sat on the edge of my bed and pulled off my shoe. My sock

was worn to almost nothing underneath it, threadbare and full of holes. "Ben," I studied the way my toes peeked through the tears in the fabric, "I hope you don't think this is strange. I haven't known you for long, but you and I have been through a lot in a few hours, and we've had some time to really talk and get to know each other, I think." I couldn't feel my toes very well; the whiskey had made my feet and hands pleasantly numb. I ran my tongue over the roughness of my lips while I formed my words.

"I know it's not the same as your wife loving you, but I love you, Ben. As well as I'm able, anyway. Without sex, or intimacy, I feel like there's something special between the two of us. We saved that girl together, and I'd die to save you because you're a good man. If I set out tomorrow, and I know that you're still alive and suffering this pain you don't deserve, it's going to bother me forever." Ben slowly laid his head down on the bed. He laid still for a very long time. "If there were anything I could do for you, I'd do it."

Before he spoke again he made like he would speak a few times, but he choked on his words and stopped. When it came, his voice was full of tears.

"That's... that's decent of you, Mr. Golem." And he laid there again, motionless and silent, for a long time. I thought he'd fallen asleep, or passed out. I sat in the chair, listening to the cars, passing now and then on the freeway.

The car slowed down and I shook my head. I hadn't asked for a ride, but people kept offering.

"Just keep going," I said. "I don't mind walking." The driver was getting out.

"Dennis Bash." The man held up a photograph, to compare it to my face. "What the Hell, I found you."

"You must have mistaken me for someone else." I changed my course to pass him. "That is not my name."

"Really? Then who do you think you are?" He moved in front of me again, put his hand

to my chest to stop me.

“I am not Dennis Bash.”

“You are, man. I'm Darrell Riggs, P.I. Your family hired me to track you down.”

“I don't have a family. I'm a golem, created to serve a purpose. You have me mistaken for someone else.”

“I don't. Your children died in a car crash, and you started making up this golem thing before you left.”

I folded my arms defensively. “I have no children, I'm a golem.”

“You don't have to run, man. It's not your fault.”

“You don't know what you're talking about.”

“You do. Stop running.”

“Stop it.”

“Bash, the other driver was drunk, it's not your fault.”

The road had been so long, and I felt tired for the first time. I shoved him away and turned to run, my feet hurt from so many miles, though, so I crouched down, there on the side of the road. I could hear him approaching me from behind. I ignored him. I am the golem. There was nothing he could do to me. Me, the golem.

“Mr. Bash, your family wants you to come home, so you can grieve, get better.”

I sat silently for a while. My ears were pounding and my legs began to get tired from the way I was sitting. When I heard Riggs' cell phone ring I looked over my shoulder. He had turned away and was speaking so quietly that I couldn't hear him over the moaning of the wind.

When he ended the call I caught him from behind around the throat with my left hand and chopped my right down hard on his collarbone. His right arm fell nerveless and the phone clattered on the road. I turned my head away from him while he gasped for breath and flailed against me. I squeezed his throat and twisted his neck until, finally, I could feel vertebrae crack and break.

His cellphone was still on, possibly still connected, so I smashed it under the thin sole of

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my worn, old shoe before I walked away. I'm a golem, and I do what I have to do to make it down the road, to reach my destination, to serve my purpose.

The End

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