

Dead Regret

by

Peter J. Atwood

“Hey, my Miller’s empty,” Gus said.

His brother cranked up the velour recliner and headed for the fridge.

Wilhelm cleared his throat. “Um, I have some work to do.”

Gus and Tony were lounging in Wilhelm’s basement apartment drinking the caretaker’s beer. Tony returned with two perspiring bottles and set one down for him. Gus uncrossed his feet, wobbling the coffee table, and raised the bottle. “It wouldn’t be etiquette to ask your guests to leave before they finish their drinks. Would it?”

Tony smiled.

“I have some work. Please.” Wilhelm fidgeted.

“God knows the building needs it,” Gus said. Wilhelm was such an easy mark. He tilted the bottle to his lips. Tony followed suit.

A polite knock sounded from the apartment door, and a tall man in a blue double-breasted suit leaned in. Wilhelm skirted the coffee table. “Mr. Atanasoff. I apologize, I apologize,” he said. “Please come in.”

The new arrival’s face was long and narrow, with a great European honker. His skin was pale, and his dark hair coiffed. The neat points of his kerchief poked from his breast pocket and matched his pink shirt and tie. “Mr. Pressman?” he asked.

“Yes, yes. Please come in,” Wilhelm said. “My guests were just leaving.” He turned, justified by the newcomer’s arrival. “Mr. Atanasoff is taking the apartment on the top floor,” he announced.

Gus exchanged a look with Tony, acknowledging the possibilities. He stepped forward, beer in one

hand, the other extended. “Well, I’m sure pleased to meet you,” he said. “I’m Gustav.”

The man’s cologne smelled like flowers. He hesitated before taking Gus’s hand. “Roman,” he said, flashing a white smile. “My friends call me Roman.” It was too practiced, Gus thought; it would be the thing he hated about the man.

Tony came forward. “This here is my brother, Anthony,” Gus said. “You need anything, you make sure you come to us. We’ve been residents even longer than Wilhelm. Number 22.”

Roman stepped into the room, leaving them holding their beers at the door. “Oh, I’m sure that will not be necessary.”

It was almost a dismissal. Gus ignored it. “Wilhelm,” he said, “make sure your friend Caesar drops in to see us so we can show him the ropes. Come on, Tony. We’ll leave these gents to their business.”

#

Gus watched Jo behind the makeup counter in her crisp white smock, her blonde hair held back in a clip. Jo worked the cosmetic side of the counter in a square island among the handbag and shoe displays. On the other side, another girl did the perfumes. She always did her make-up perfect for work, and Gus liked meeting her during the Saturday crowds, even though the smells irritated his nose.

“What’s with the glasses?” he asked.

She let them dangle from her cocked wrist. “You like? I picked them up from optometry. I think they make me look smart.”

Tony looked up from the lipstick display. “You always look pretty,” he said.

“Thanks, you’re a real sweetie.”

Gus snorted. Tony was a good scrapper, especially if he had his knife on him, but when people first met him, they thought he was the sweet, quiet type. Jo knew better.

“Are you moving anyone this weekend?” she asked.

“Nah,” he said. “It’s the middle of the month.”

A while back, Jo had suggested he get business cards printed. “Century Movers. Hauling and moving

at good rates. Gustav Weiner, prop.” But it hadn’t helped much; all his work still came through the usual contacts.

“Someone new moved in,” Tony said.

“Your building?” Jo asked.

“Yeah,” Tony said. “He’s a foreigner, we think.”

“He’s a stuck up prig, is what he is,” Gus said.

“Didn’t want to shake my hand.”

“You should have slugged him,” Jo said. She propped her elbows on the counter.

He smiled. “I almost did, Jo. I almost did.”

“Hey, maybe he needs help moving his stuff.” Jo put the fake glasses back on. “You should ask him.”

“Wilhelm would have mentioned if he had any stuff. We have an arrangement.”

“He had two suitcases,” said Tony. “One of ’em looked heavy.”

“Fuck, what’s that got to do with the price of bananas?” Gus said. Tony looked down at the lipstick rows. “He dresses like some limp-wristed Fifth Avenue tailor I wouldn’t let within a mile of my inseam,” Gus said.

“You never know,” Jo said. “He could have a crate coming or something.”

#

Gus and Tony stood on the fourth-floor landing. It was mid-morning, and a hangover of bacon grease hung in the air. Gus settled against the banister and waved Tony forward. “Knock again.”

Tony rapped on Roman’s apartment door and the sound died without echo. “Maybe he’s not home.”

“Did you see him go out today? ’Cause I didn’t,” Gus said. He stepped to the door and banged five times with the heel of his fist. Inside, a chair scraped, and the clack of leather shoes approached.

The door opened, still on its chain. Roman’s narrow face filled the crack, and Gus realized for the first time how close together his black eyes were.

“Hello?” Roman said.

“Hey, Caesar—”

Roman interrupted. “Please, do call me Roman.”

“Sure, bud.”

“Can I help you?”

“Well now, we thought maybe we could help you,” Gus said.

Tony crowded behind him. Gus was taller and wider than his brother, and almost twice as heavy.

“I see,” Roman said. The door closed, he fussed the chain, and it opened again. Roman wore a yellow dress shirt and a yellow tie patterned with blue diamonds. The crease on his trousers knifed to his cuffs. His skinny frame blocked the view inside, one hand around the doorknob, the fingers of the other curled against the lintel like a spider. “Well, then,” he said, “what’s your offer?”

Tony reached forward, opening a slim silver case. “This is our card,” he said.

Roman examined both sides, turning the card carefully. His nails were neatly clipped, and his fingers looked soft and clean. Unexpectedly, he lifted the card to his long nose and sniffed.

“If you have any furniture or crates coming . . . ,” Gus said. “As you can see, we can arrange for their safe delivery.”

“Century Movers,” Roman read. His eyes slid down Gus’s shirt to the buttons straining over his belly. “How helpful.”

“We noticed you arrived with only two suitcases,” Tony said, “and we thought—”

“We thought we’d be neighbourly,” Gus said.

Roman considered this for a moment. “I see.” He slipped the business card into his shirt pocket.

This is why Gus hated foreigners. They just didn’t know how not to be rude. “It would be much more efficient,” he said, “if you do have a load coming, to let us handle it. We should have a look around inside—get to know the layout and such. It will make the delivery more . . . ,”—he searched for a word—“efficient.”

Roman looked straight through to the back of the eyes. “I see,” he repeated.

Gus decided to assume agreement. “Let’s have a look.” He laid his palm against the door and leaned in, but Roman held the doorknob firmly to his hip.

“As it turns out,” Roman said, “I may be expecting a shipment.”

Gus smirked. "Well, there you go. I knew we'd be able to help. Shall we discuss it inside?"

He didn't budge. "It will depend on how well my business goes."

"Well, you have our card, then," Gus said. Tony looked at him puzzled, but Gus knew the direction to take. "However," he said, "you should know we are very busy these days."

"Congratulations," Roman said.

"Well, sure," he pressed on. "You may want to secure our services, so we can help you the day you need us."

There was some activity in the corner of Roman's mouth. "And how do you propose I do that?" he asked.

Gus looked at Tony to make sure he was listening. "It's a simple matter of a deposit." He set both hands on the doorframe, making a threat of his bulk. "Or else you may find it very difficult to arrange for delivery of anything."

As they headed down the stairs, Gus thumbed through the five crisp ten-dollar bills.

"Like taking candy from a baby," Tony enthused.

#

Despite the success of their first encounter, Gus could not figure Roman out. He could usually peg a guy. Wilhelm, for instance, he was your basic coward. You could tell him to stick his fist up his butt and he'd have his pants down around his ankles before it occurred to him to say "no," and even then he'd ask permission to stop. Jo, she was good looking. Not just her hips and figure and all, but her face was pretty too. The way she did herself up, she could be on a magazine cover. She needed a big guy with a strong arm, someone she could lean on. But this Roman? Gus had pinned the guy for fifty bucks, but it was like he didn't even realize he'd been outsmarted.

They never saw Roman in the hallways. In fact, he and Tony cut back on their hours drinking Wilhelm's beer so they could watch Roman's comings and goings. They switched to smoking out front with the building's sun-warmed brick at their backs.

A couple of mornings later, after Gus sent Tony to the corner for a packet of Kents, Roman crossed the

street at the end of the block, headed towards the apartment carrying a case like a doctor's bag. He was going to breeze past without stopping. Gus kept quiet until he could smell the man's rose-petal cologne. Then he stepped out and bumped him. Roman stumbled. Bottles clinked in the leather bag.

"Hey, Caesar, what's the rush?" Gus said.

"Oh." It took him a moment. "Mr. Weiner. I didn't notice you."

Gus laughed. "Most people find me hard to miss."

"True, true." Roman stepped ahead, reaching for the door.

"That's quite a kit you've got there. Sounds like a regular pharmacy."

"Sales samples, that's all. Good day to you," he said.

"You bet, Caesar," Gus said, but the door had swung shut.

Tony came hustling up. "Was that Roman? What'd he want?"

Gus took the smokes from him. "I believe the man snubbed me," he said.

#

"I wonder what he's going to have sent to him?" Jo said. She stirred the icing on her cake with her fork. Her eyebrows were plucked into a thin line and coaxed into an arch with a pencil.

Gus had decided to take her out. It was a magnanimous way to spend the fifty dollars. "Hell, it doesn't make a difference to me. I'm happy if he doesn't ship so much as a toothpick." He sipped his beer and set it on the blue tablecloth.

"He must be rich," Jo said. "Giving away fifty bucks like that."

Sometimes she was just as clever as she pretended. "You're right, Jo. He must be fucking loaded." Gus thought for a bit. "How would you like to meet him?"

#

Saturday night, the three of them sat in a corner booth, Jo beside him, Tony across. A dusty lamp in a plastic sconce lit the ketchup bottle and the salt and pepper shakers on the gleaming mahogany table. The bar smelled of mopped beer.

"What if he doesn't show?" Tony asked.

“Don’t be ignorant. I invited him, didn’t I?” Gus searched the room. He flashed a smile at Tracy behind the bar.

Jo swished the cherry in her Manhattan with its little plastic spear. “I hope he comes. You guys make him sound fascinating.”

Gus grunted. “You know what he was doing when I asked him?”

Tony leaned forward. “You gotta hear this, Jo. This is good.”

“I almost shit myself.” Gus leaned back. “He was clipping Wilhelm’s fingernails!”

Jo laughed, open-mouthed, and Tony joined in as if he hadn’t been there himself.

#

They had been sitting around Gus’s apartment, the door open so they could hear any noise on the stairs. “Why don’t we ask Wilhelm?” Tony had said. He sat in his boxers on the cot against the wall, his skinny knees spread wide.

Roman seemed never to be home except after dark, so Gus had sent Tony up there the previous night. Tony had a better chance of seeing inside if he went alone. Tony had knocked with no answer, but heard footsteps, and then the light under the door had gone out.

“Ask Wilhelm what?” Gus said.

“About Roman. I bet he’s seen him more than us. He’s a foreigner, right? Wilhelm probably made him sign a lease and everything.”

Gus was cleaning his nails with a short polished shiv. He slipped it under his watchband. “Get some pants on, then.”

At the bottom of the basement steps, they opened the caretaker’s door. “Hey Wilhelm, open a beer. My brother and I—”

Gus stopped. Seated on the coffee table, facing Wilhelm on the couch, their knees almost touching, was Roman. A tissue scattered with nail clippings lay across his lap. Wilhelm withdrew his hand.

“Hello, gentleman,” Roman said. “No worries. We were just finishing.” He tipped the contents of the tissue into a vial. He closed the clippers, dropped them into a small leather case, and added the vial.

“You could have knocked,” Wilhelm said. “You guys never knock,” but it was more to Roman.

Roman grinned: white teeth, black eyes. “Thank you, again,” he told Wilhelm.

Gus had wanted to stay and rib the caretaker, but he wasn’t about to let Roman slip away. He blocked the apartment door. Roman was taller than he’d realized. “Good to see you again,” he said.

“My work keeps me busy at odd hours,” Roman said. “If you’ll excuse me . . .”

“Hey, not so fast. We wanted to ask you something.”

Roman looked at his leather case as if it needed attending. “I’m afraid I still have no news on my shipment,” he said.

“You got it wrong, Caesar, this isn’t about business.”

Roman waited. Gus looked directly into the man’s eyes. This was it. This was it right here. The thing that irritated like an over-starched shirt. Every sentence with Roman was like talking to a flat wall. He could never get his patten on a roll. He could feel Tony waiting.

“Well, that’s just it. You’ve been so generous and all . . . with the deposit. We thought the least we could do is buy you a drink.”

“I am not really a connoisseur of beer.”

“It’s okay, you can drink anything you like, you know,” Tony said. He was as subtle as a puppy with its nose in your crotch.

“I see,” Roman said, looking at his case again. “When did you have in mind?”

#

“Wow,” Jo said. “I never met a man who knew how to do nails.” She inspected her own.

“Hey Gus!”

They all turned. It was Tracy behind the bar. Standing between two stools this side of her was Roman. “This guy says he’s looking for you.”

Roman joined them. He sent his first cocktail back twice, sniffing it carefully each time, but he insisted on paying for it himself, so Gus didn’t mind. By the third round, Jo was flirting with him the way Gus

expected her to. Even Tracy was joking around with him.

"How's this one," Tracy said, lifting the martini from her tray.

Roman raised the glass to his nose. "You are an alchemist," he said.

He had removed his jacket and rolled up his sleeves. Jo was playing with his red-jewelled cufflinks, linking and unlinking them. "Are these rubies?" she asked.

"Oh no, nothing so expensive as that. They are garnet, my birthstone."

"Hey Gus," she said. "How come you don't have a birthstone?"

She was tipsy. Gus said, "But you have done pretty good for yourself, haven't you? What kind of line are you in?"

Roman sipped his martini. He wasn't quite drunk, but he had loosened up. His hometown was in Bulgaria, the Valley of Roses, he said, but that sounded like bullshit. He had also mentioned two sisters who lived in Paris, and then impressed Jo with a little *parlez-vous*.

"It's a very particular business," he said. "My family have been . . . in this line since my great-grandfather. Unfortunately, finding clients here has been slow."

"You're pretty cagey about it, aren't you?" Gus said, as if he admired the caginess.

Jo took a cigarette from her purse and rolled it between her fingers.

"Joanna," Roman said, surprising everyone, "could I trouble you for a cigarette?" He was the only one not smoking.

"Be my guest." She tossed hers across and pulled a fresh one from Gus's pack.

Roman held the cigarette between his thumb and index finger as if he might put it to his nose and sniff. Then he slipped it into his breast pocket, like he had with the business card. "For later," he said.

Gus lit Jo's. The man had managed not to answer his question.

Tony cleared his throat. "What do you do up all night?"

"Oh guys," Jo said. "You've been pestering him all night. Let him be."

"Well, aren't you two getting along like a pair of whores on a corner," Gus said.

Jo winced.

"Hell, you'd think I smacked her!" Gus said.

Tony looked down.

He ignored them. "Jo, you should take Roman out. He hasn't been out much since he arrived. I'm sure our Bulgarian friend would enjoy some good old American cinema."

"That's a great idea," Tony said, too loud.

Roman looked across at Gus. "Would I have your permission?"

"Jo will be more than happy to keep you company. Right, Jo?"

"It would be my pleasure," she said in her sophisticated voice.

"See," Gus said. "We're all friends here." He turned to the bar. "Tracy! Another round!"

#

They found Wilhelm on the third-floor landing pushing dirt around at the end of his broom.

"I'm working," he said, as they came up the stairs.

Gus planted his foot in front of the broom. "Don't let us stop you."

Wilhelm sighed.

"Hey Wilhelm," Tony said. "We need to borrow your key ring."

"What do you want it for?"

"Ah, Will, you know we can't tell you that," Gus said.

"We'll be back with it quick, we promise," Tony said.

Wilhelm's hands shifted on the broom handle. Gus could see him doing the math. They would get the keys eventually, and Wilhelm knew it was better not to know anything about Gus's business. He unclipped the ring from the shoelace on his belt. "I need them back."

"We'll take good care," Gus said, and tossed the keys to Tony.

Jo and Roman were out on their date, and she had agreed to keep him out until after ten. The plan was to case the apartment quickly.

At the top of the stairs, Gus swung around the bannister and headed for Roman's apartment. Tony jangled the keys, hunting for the one labeled 41. He found it and slipped it into the keyhole.

"Crap-hole!" Gus spit out. "The commie bastard!"

At shoulder height, a flap of metal folded from the lintel over a steel hasp fixed securely to the door. A new padlock hung there. Gus stared at it as Tony uselessly snatched the deadbolt.

"Come on," Gus said, and they headed back down.

Wilhelm was where they had left him, staring down at his broom. The pudgy-faced coward looked like he was grinning.

"Are you smiling?" Gus yelled. He threw the fat key ring. It clanked against the wall behind Wilhelm's head, and his broom clattered to the floor. In two steps, Gus had his fat fist under Wilhelm's chin, twisting his white shirt. He could smell the little man's sweat. "You're a bastard, Wilhelm. And I'm not going to forget it." He let go, and Wilhelm's shoulders slumped. They didn't stay to watch him stoop for his keys.

#

They headed down the sidewalk, under the streetlights.

"It's like Roman doesn't trust us or something," Tony said.

He was trying to make a joke, but that was precisely the point; his brother was too stupid to see it. "He better goddamn trust us," Gus said. "You don't get anywhere without respect. That's lesson number one. I'm tired of pussy-footing around Mr. Roman." He strung out the last syllable. "The man does not respect me. And tonight, tonight that arrogant ass-pick is going to sit down, shut up, and learn some."

They cut diagonally across an empty street. The theatre marquee lit the end of the block where movie patrons were spilling out. Couples moved off, and noisier groups chatted under the canopy, attracting a taxi to the curb.

Gus stopped where the awning's lights defined the line between the jovial theatregoers and the dark concrete behind him. "You have your knife," he said.

"I get it," Tony said. "It's one of those lessons."

"Shut up," Gus said.

They watched the crowd swell and thin. The cab drove off, groups broke up, and stragglers came out of the theatre, singly and in pairs. Jo and Roman weren't among them. The silence counted down.

The glass double-doors opened, releasing a bouquet of hot butter and popcorn. Roman stepped out, his back to Gus. He held the door with one hand, and held out the other, palm up in an invitation. Joanna came through, and the two fell into step in the other direction. Neither had noticed them.

Gus followed. Tony scuffed at the litter of tickets and popcorn. They trailed the couple around the corner and pushed to catch up. The street was dark and empty. Granite office buildings lined the narrow sidewalk.

Jo's arm was hooked in Roman's elbow, and her head leaned toward his shoulder. He walked like Fred Astaire, all fake and tip-toey. "Hey Roman!" Gus called.

Jo batted Roman's arm playfully, they stopped and turned, and then waved at Gus and Tony.

Gus had never seen him smile like this. There had always been something of a fence about the perfect rows of white teeth, but this was relaxed and happy. Then his eyes found Gus, and the smile disappeared behind thin straight lips.

"Hey guys, I didn't know you were meeting us," Jo said.

"You smelly, groping pig!" The words streamed out of Gus as he closed the gap. "Did I give you the right to touch her? Did I give you fucking permission?"

He stepped between them, grabbing Roman's offending arm. His fingers clamped the thin bicep, and in a perfect swing, Gus slammed him against the polished stone of a building.

"Gus?" Jo was shocked.

Tony moved fast. He was at the wall before Roman had time to catch his breath, his knife in his fist,

knuckles hard against Roman's clavicle, the tip of his blade pricking the skin under Roman's chin.

Roman's jaw quaked to lift itself off Tony's blade. "I didn't . . . Mother of God." Roman struggled to get it out. "I . . . Please, I didn't . . ."

Gus was trembling. "You are a piece of shit," he said. "You are my piece of shit!" His vocabulary failed him. He didn't know what he wanted from Roman. He loathed him. His own face glistened with hate, and he hated Roman for putting it there. "You are shit," he repeated.

Jo took a half step. "Gus, you can't. You told me to be nice to him. You wanted me to."

Roman turned his head to look at her. Tony's knife tip followed.

"You told me to!" She was frantic. "I did what you said! He's nice."

The terror left Roman's eyes. He watched Jo with pity, with tenderness . . . something, as if he knew her better than Gus.

"You fucking pig!" Gus screamed. "Don't you look at her!" He let go of Roman's arm, and with both hands grabbed Tony's fist and shoved the knife straight up through Roman's chin. Roman's head tilted back, and the blade stuck in the roof of his mouth.

Tony stepped back. Blood bubbled around the knife hilt. Jo screamed.

Roman's throat gurgled like an empty milkshake, and he clutched at the knife. Gus knocked his hand away, grabbed it, and ripped it from his throat. The knife tugged free in a slash that tore open a vicious wound. Roman's head snapped forward, and he fell face down like a sack.

Jo screamed again.

"Get her out of here!" Gus yelled. Tony grabbed her waist and tugged her away, off balance. The street was empty. Gus watched Roman's blood spill onto the pavement. This wasn't how it was supposed to work out. He stepped clear of the puddle. "You shit bastard," he said.

#

He stood at the door to the top-floor apartment. He had insisted Tony stay in his room with Jo.

After rifling Roman's pockets, he had wiped his hands on the man's suit. The bloody smears had dried on his fingers. In his palm was a key with a brown paper tag. He had recognized it easy. He inserted it into the padlock.

Inside, he flipped the wall switch: blank beige walls, a dust-faded floor, one empty desk with its chair pushed under. Gus had expected it to be bare, but somehow he was still disappointed. There was a secret here. There had to be. A path of dusty scuffs led to the bedroom.

In the bedroom, a cot opposite the window was neatly made up with a small pillow. It was the same kind that Tony slept on, borrowed from Wilhelm. In the closet, shirts, pants, and jackets lined up on hangers. Undershirts, shorts, and socks lay folded on the shelf above. A suitcase leaned against the back of the closet. Gus grabbed its handle, but he could tell right away it was empty. He lay it flat on the floor, squatting next to it. Then it occurred to him: Roman had arrived with two suitcases. He found the other easily. It was under the cot, pushed against the wall.

The cot smelled of old canvas. He pulled the suitcase out and whatever was inside clinked satisfyingly. The latches were unlocked.

Gus lifted the lid, releasing a bouquet. Flowers, something sharp like pine needles, and something sweet. It was strong and delicate at once. His nostrils twitched. He remembered leaning against Roman, pinning him to the marble. He remembered the man's sweat and terror. One of the scents from the case was inside that memory, carrying it forward, opening it up in his mind. He stopped it.

The suitcase held glass jars and bottles, carefully arranged, filled with clear, faintly tinted liquid. Some were stoppered with corks, others with silver caps. He selected one. It was three-quarters full of a delicate pink oil. The label was old, brown, and written with a fountain pen in a language he couldn't read. He uncorked it and smelled. A dense aroma of roses hit his nostrils, and he re-corked it. One of the silver-capped bottles was full, the liquid inside was clear, and floating in it was a pale green shirt button. The label, strangely, was in English. "Jill Hope," it read.

He picked up another. This one contained a faint brown liquid. “What?” he said out loud. Five or six crescent nail clippings jostled in the oil. He turned the bottle so he could read the label. “Wilhelm Fear,” it read.

Disappointment fell onto Gus’s shoulders. Caesar had been a stupid crazy. He was going to find nothing here, nothing worth hiding, nothing worth his fading rage.

He examined the bottles one by one. Their perfumes growing distinct as he lifted them to his face. He found one with Tony’s name on it, paired with the word “envy.” Inside were torn pieces of the business card.

“Wacko,” Gus said. “He was completely wacko.” Somehow the thought softened the guilt about the body he had left on the street.

He held up a vial. Inside was an unlit cigarette. The label was carefully written in fresh blue ink: “Joanna Regret.”



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