

Salvation in Reverse

First published in Sonoran Mirage, March 2004

By John Safin

“So, how many drinks have you had?” asked the man as he lowered himself onto the love seat. “Haven’t you had enough yet?”

“This one...” Mark gulped half of the dark liquid from the sweaty glass “...will make the seventh double rum and cola. And I’ll *tell* you when I’ve had enough.” He took a defiant sip and gently placed the glass on the coffee table in front of him. The glass dripped condensation onto the coaster, a mere six inches from the semi-automatic pistol, also on the coffee table.

“I didn’t mean to imply you’re drinking too much. I just thought it might be time.” He crossed his right leg over the other. He brushed away some lint from its cuff, and then examined his gray sweater for errant fluff. “Are you stalling?”

Seated in the middle of a larger sofa, Mark leaned back and turned to his left to glare at the man. He stared into dark crystal eyes for a couple of seconds, and then turned his attention back to his drink. Mark stood, took his glass and drank the remaining amount of cocktail. He walked over to the small kitchen of his small one-bedroom apartment to replenish his drink. “What’s it to you? Can I make you a drink? Unless you’re in a hurry to take my soul. Or maybe Death doesn’t drink alcohol?”

“Oh, I stopped drinking alcohol quite a while ago.” Death smirked. “That water-to-wine event spoiled the enjoyment of the wine, and you’re changing the subject. I think you’re stalling because, like everything else in your life, this will go just as bad.” Death watched Mark return to his seat as he drank. With a third of the new drink already consumed, Mark held the glass between his hands and stared at the gun without really looking at it. Death could tell Mark was thinking about the things that had gone wrong in his life. “You know she would never be interested in a guy like you. That’s why you haven’t even asked her on a date.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Mark took another sip. After so many drinks, he could no longer feel the tingle and burn of the booze. He should just drink from the bottle.

“But that’s the way your pathetic love life has gone, isn’t it? Any girl you’ve had an interest in is out of your league.” Death placed his feet flat on the floor and leaned forward with his arms resting on his legs. “Do you realize that it will take eight people to carry your coffin because you’re so fat?”

Mark emptied the glass in one swig and quickly went to the kitchen to make another, glancing at his beer belly as he walked. Mark decided it was time to get serious with his drinking. Rum and ice were the only contents of the tall glass he carried back to the living room. “So I’m overweight. There are a lot of people in that category.”

“It doesn’t bother me.” Death leaned back and gave a nonjudgmental roll of his eyes. “You’re right. There are a lot of fat people. Fortunately for most of them, they have wealth to compensate for their physical inadequacies.”

“Whatever. I have enough money.”

“Sure you do.” He waved a hand in the air. “You have a new car, a nice place to live, and go on vacation all the time.” Death was a master at cold sarcasm; an instigator for Mark to drink more. “Anyone can see you’re just beaming with delight getting up and going to work every day.”

“Are you just going to badger me all night?” Mark screwed the top back on the rum bottle and drank the clear liquid from his glass.

“Don’t be mad at me.” Death held up his hands and shook his head. “Remember, it’s the friends who really care about you that will tell you the truth, even when it hurts.”

“You’re not my friend.”

“Of course I am. Who else is here? It’s just you, me, your refreshment and a means to your salvation.” He nodded toward the weapon, a gunmetal black, semi-automatic .45 caliber pistol. “You need someone, and I’m here for you.”

“Then stop telling me things I already know. What am I missing? If you’re really my friend, tell me what I’m doing wrong.” Mark almost shouted his demand, the booze having had an effect on his composure. He set the glass down on the table, nearly dropping it in the process.

“Why do you think I have the answers to your problems?”

“You tell me about girls I’ll never date. You tell me I’m fat. You needle me about my job. You see so much in my life that’s wrong. You’re on the outside looking in. Tell me, *friend*, what’s wrong with me! What can I do to fix it?”

“I think you just told yourself what’s wrong with you. There’s only one easy way to stop all your troubles.” Death set his gaze in the direction of the gun.

Mark looked at the coffee table – at the glass of iced rum, and the gun. He leaned forward and chose to pick up the glass. He took another swallow. It was nearly empty, and he was feeling the effects of drinking straight Bacardi. His eyes swelled with tears. Death, sensing victory, leaned back so as not to be overbearing at a crucial moment. Mark sipped again and placed the glass on the coaster. A few tears streamed from his eyes. He looked at the weapon. “There’s a song that says suicide is painless. Is that true?”

“The people who come with me don’t have any pain. There is nothing to make them feel bad or inferior.” Death sensed his victory was close. “Are you sure it’s loaded correctly? When you choose to go with me, I don’t want another thing in your life to go wrong. You deserve to have something good happen to you.”

Mark started to reach for the glass, paused, and picked up the gun. He examined it as it lay flat in the palm of his hand. “I’ve heard that the church frowns on suicide. I heard that the Bible says it’s a sin.”

“I’m not so sure about that.” Death was getting anxious. “Are you concerned?”

“A little bit.” Mark’s tears dried up as he stared at the pistol. “I didn’t want to take any chances. This morning I went to St. Mary’s and dipped the bullet in holy water.”

“That’s an unusual step. You probably don’t have any-thing to worry about. I’ll stop your pain. Come with me.”

Mark took a solid grip on the pistol and pulled the hammer back – click, click. The sound seemed extraordin-arily loud. “So, what’s waiting for me when I come with you?”

“You’ll be free of your burdens.”

“What else?”

“What else?” Death was becoming impatient. “What do you mean?”

“That’s all you’ve told me - that I’ll be free of my pain. What about my wants and desires?” The weight and reality of the weapon in his hand seemed to sober him.

“Most people are grateful to have their ills removed, and you have a lot of them.”

“I’m not all that bad.” Mark took a deep breath and let it out. “A while ago I asked you what’s wrong with me because you’re on the outside looking in. You only told me how to stop all the troubles in my life, not how to fix them. Why?”

“I can’t tell you.” Death had started to become annoyed with this delay.

“Can’t or won’t?”

“Take your pick. I can only take away your pain.”

“Who can fix things?”

“You know the answer!” Death hissed his reply, practical-ly jumped out of his seat to close the distance and looked Mark in the eyes. He slowly brought his gaze down. Mark followed the gaze to the cocked pistol his right hand.

Mark looked Death right in the eyes and in a matter-of-fact way said, “You’re right. I do know who can fix things. It’s me. And you can just shut up!” Mark leveled the gun, pulled the trigger. With only a couple of feet between them, Mark’s aim was true. He shot Death in the center of his forehead. Death fell backward on the small sofa as a trickle of glowing black liquid oozed from the open wound.

Mark tossed the gun to the coffee table and picked up his glass. As he was about to take a sip, he gave a thought and put the glass back down. He slumped further into the sofa as he watched Death’s body melt into a gelatinous mass of glowing black tar, trying to think how he had managed to kill Death. Maybe the blessed bullet had something to do with it.

Mark breathed out a loud sigh, “I wonder what happens now.”