

Fly-Catcher

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NO-ONE CATCHES FLIES like old McCabe. He sits there, a tired Monte Cristo cigar wedged firmly in one corner of his mouth, talking in that drawl of his out the other, and a frozen daiquiri held tight in his left hand.

It's always too quick to see. One moment he's drawling and drinking. Then a fly settles on his glass, or the table, or the vase of collapsed flowers in the table centre. The next moment the fly's an inky smudge. Then McCabe'll flick it to Pepé's scrawny pooch, who snaps his jaws in the air like a hungry croc, swallows, clicks his tongue twice and settles his head back on the floor between his paws, eyes fixed keenly on McCabe, waiting for the next succulent morsel.

He teases us, does old McCabe. He loves to watch us sitting there, our shirts soaked to our backs in this darn heat, our cold beers condensing icy water onto the table and everything – and I mean everything – about us coated with these damn flies. And he laughs, a deep, full kind of laugh like he truly does find it amusing and ain't just trying it on to rile us. So we sit there waving our hands, shaking our legs, flicking our hats – any darn thing to scarper them flies – while all the while he sits there undisturbed. It's like the flies sense the danger, are wary about nearing this man with the Venus fly trap hands. Only the foolish flier strays his way nowadays.

“Did you see that? What a beaut!”

We look and darned if he ain't squelched two flies in one. Two monster blue-ies. Now McCabe's day is really made. And Pepé's hound don't look too unhappy neither. Come to think, I ain't never seen the darned hound eat anything else. It looks good on its fly diet – leastways, a darn sight better than some of them other mutts, rotting out there in the gutters with the flies taking *them* for their dinner.

Of course, McCabe weren't always so hot on them flies. I recall when he was like the rest of us,

cussing as they buzzed round him. Sometimes they used to drive him red-eyed crazy.

“Just think of it,” he’d complain. “A moment ago they go feasting on dogshit and now they want to land on me. It ain’t right, it ain’t.”

And then something must of happened. At first he was darn lucky to hit ‘em. He’d squash, I dunno, maybe one in twenty, one in thirty. Something like that. Just enough to make him more determined. Sometimes he’d be so busy waiting to squish a fly, he’d forget all about the cards. That was real lucky for us – old McCabe always played a mean hand.

Naw, it was real sudden when McCabe changed. Not like you’d expect, slowly improving, slowly getting better at fly-catching. Just one day he sat there all cool and any fly went near him — bang! Squelched flat as a ripe tomato. You could tell he weren’t distracted no more: that day darned if he didn’t go and win every hand we played.

Later, when McCabe retired to take his winnings someplace safe, we tried to figure it. You know, a man can sometimes catch a fly, but not like that. Not every time. It ain’t natural. A fly’s a quick-moving sonofabitch. They just ain’t designed to be caught.

Before McCabe acquired his little trick, we used to joke about how the military should of learned from flies. How something that small could provoke such a knee jerk, arm-swirling reaction in a grown man. Particularly them darn needlin’, buzzin’ and biting mosquitoes. We really hate McCabe for that. While the rest of us gets bitten any place they fancy, McCabe just pulps ‘em, points at the squashed ruddy remains and says:

“Look, Luke (*or Herb, or Pepé or whoever, sometimes even Pepé’s hound*). Reckon that’s your blood he got there!”

And then he laughs. Of course he laughs.

Herb has this crazy theory about McCabe, figures it’s some kind of supernatural thing. After all,

there's some darn oddball religions still living out here in the shadows on some of these islands. Herb got to thinking maybe McCabe cooked a deal with one of them shaman types. Maybe traded his soul for the secret of keeping flies away.

Meself? Huh, I figure that's nonsense, a heap of local hokum superstition. I reckon McCabe must've just spent long dull hours practising up in his old place – like a card-man learns tricks with the deck. After all, it takes time to make that bottom-dealing become as simple as pie. Ain't much limit to what any man can do with practise and a bit of dedication.

So one time we had a bet. I backed my idea about McCabe, and Herb backed his. The regulars were split roughly fifty-fifty behind us, with maybe a slight edge on Herb. It gets to you a place like this. Men who on the mainland would never've given breathing space to some darn fool superstitious idea start believing the weirdest things.

There was only one way to settle our wager. So we went out there one night, out to McCabe's place. A fair few of us turned up for the trip, and not so good from the drinks we'd seen fit to limber up with. We squashed in the back of Ike's old Plymouth and my pride and joy, the old Chrysler I'd rebuilt from a derelict heap. All that noise we made as we rattled up I was sure McCabe would hear us, but when we parked up outside, his house stayed dark and quiet.

No-one really knew what we was looking for, what we expected to see. But a bet is a bet and sure as hell McCabe weren't gonna let us in on his little secret. That would really have made his day that would, asking him how come he'd got so fast with them flies. No-one was gonna give him that satisfaction.

We stood under the trees for a time, arguing about what we should do next. A couple of us snuck up to the windows and tried to peer through the narrow shutters. By now a few of the regulars were bored and after some more fussing and cussing, a group motored off in the Plymouth, leaving me and just three others.

There was more talk. A couple of ‘em wanted to get inside McCabe’s house. Me? I was all for waiting. I mean, there weren’t no hurry or nothing. And then a light went on, right in the room we was standing outside. We were sure McCabe must’ve heard us, that he’d come to check out what the fuss was about. We ducked down all the same and waited.

When nothing happened, I stood up and put my eyes to the shutter. I had to keep moving up and down like a broken jack-in-the-box to make sense of anything through them narrow slits. And then I saw old McCabe, sitting in this big, ugly chair.

“What can you see?”

“McCabe,” says I, pushing them down.

“No shit,” comes the response, and suppressed laughter and the scent of booze.

But McCabe seemed too pre-occupied to notice us hopping up and down outside his window like some pissed-up spring hares.

“What’s he doing?”

Now that I couldn’t answer. McCabe just looked to be sitting there, waiting. We guessed that maybe he was waiting for flies. Well, that was my guess anyhow, since the purse we were chasing weren’t at all bad, and I sure could’ve done with some cash that month.

One of the other guys took my place and whistled when he looked through the window. Of course, that got the other two going and they had to have a look see too.

“You never said nothing ‘bout the room,” they accused me.

So I got back up and took another look. I guess I’d been too busy staring at McCabe and wondering what he was doing to pay much notice to the décor the first time I peeked inside. That room sure as hell weren’t like any room I’d ever seen before — except maybe that weird museum they used to have

down on the west side. Full of creatures and bugs and things. Case after case of them. Strangest thing I ever saw. And yet that's just what McCabe's room was like. Row after row of glass cabinets just packed with dead flies, all neatly mounted on little specimen cards.

"Weirdo," the others murmured.

"Maybe," I said. "And just maybe that's how he learned his fly trick, catching and studying 'em and all." I was still thinking about winning that purse, see?

"Hey! Look at old McCabe!"

And we peered through, watching him. He'd stood up and darned if he weren't wearing the strangest costume, like one of them superheroes you see in kids' comics.

"What's he reckon he is? Superfly man?" one of them snickered.

We stared, waiting to see what weird stunt McCabe was going to pull next.

All of a sudden the Plymouth burst back through the undergrowth and ran straight into a rain-barrel out the back of the yard. Turned out the other guys had drunk a mite more, picked up some takeout liquor and decided to return and catch up with the outcome of our wager. Well, that blew our cover for sure and we ran and drove like hell, getting out of there like a hurricane or something was coming at us.

For days afterwards we kept well away from the bar, sure that McCabe was gonna come after us. But in the way of these things, we slowly drifted back and McCabe never said a thing, never once mentioned something strange had happened out at his place. Sometimes I reckoned I caught him looking at us in a way he hadn't before, but I guess I could've just imagined it.

And then one day he just weren't there no more. Never showed up. Nor the next day. Nor that week. Pepé's old fly-eating hound was getting mighty hungry by the weekend. He must've been starving real bad, because now he'd try to catch them flies himself, but he weren't a patch on McCabe. Most

times his jaws just clackety-clacked shut on empty space.

So a few of us fell to talking and figured we should go out to McCabe's place again, only this time just to check he weren't ill or nothing. It's not like he had any close neighbours, stuck away in that fancy old wreck of his.

It was late in the day by the time we pulled onto his plot. Once upon a time his place must've been a posh flunky's house, you know – back in them days when some European power had run the joint. But these days no-one had the money to care for the big old houses. It's a damn shame I reckon, watching them fancy places slowly rot and subside into the dust. Maybe someone'll feel the same nostalgia one day about them concrete boxes they're building everywhere nowadays for the farmers, but somehow I doubt it.

The house was dark, real dark, and quiet like no-one was in.

“Maybe he's taken off, gone someplace else. Got tired of our company,” I said, but I didn't convince no-one, including myself.

So me and Pepé and Pepé's pooch and Herb climbed out the Chrysler and mooched aimlessly around for a time, like we'd all found something interesting in them overgrown grounds. No-one wanted to be the first up them steps and onto the gloomy porch. But we sort of drifted up them together, trying to persuade the motley hound to explore ahead of us. Not that we were afraid or nothing of course, but you never know what you might find in some dark corner in an old place like that. You know, like maybe the boards were rotten and unsafe, or something. I don't think any of us would've agreed to live there even if someone'd installed ice-chilled beer on draught and a machine to print dollar bills.

Herb knocked on the door, a real quiet sort of knock and cleared his throat.

“No-one home,” he announced.

I stepped forwards and pushed at the door. It opened, thumping back against the damp wall. We

looked at each other.

“What do you reckon? Shall we go in?”

“Hell, I dunno. McCabe sure won’t like it if he comes back to find us poking round his place.”

Herb sucked at his cheeks. “Sure. But what if he’s ill, or something? What if he’s fallen and hurt himself? We’re none of us getting younger.”

So we moved on inside. The pooch stuck his nose here, there and everywhere. But there weren’t much that impressed the rest of us. The whole place was flaking and dusty and rotten. It was kinda hard to believe anyone could live there. I’m sure the whole darn place was held together only by spider webs and dust and memories, and would cave in on top of us any moment it chose. There were pictures and things on the walls, maybe mirrors, but you couldn’t see them much beneath the dust. They were just dark grey squares hanging from the picture rails.

“McCabe?”

We listened, but there weren’t nothing much to hear.

“Say! Look at this!”

It was Pepé. Herb and I were there beside him, quick as if he’d promised drinks on the house. But that weren’t it at all. Pepé was standing staring and as soon as we got there we stood and did the same. I’d seen this room before, but only from outside – through the shutters that night we came up here for the wager. It took a little time to figure. The last I’d seen it, there’d been row on row of cases of flies. Now the cases were there all right, but all smashed to pieces. And there weren’t a single goddam fly to be seen, just scattered specimen cards all over the place.

“What the hell happened here?” I asked, but no-one answered.

After that we stuck much closer together.

There weren't much else to discover downstairs, unless you've got a fetish for dust and creaky wood and rotting smells, so we moved on up the old staircase.

“Hey!”

Pepé put up his hand. We stopped and looked at him and he pointed down at his hound. It stood still as an empty bottle, head to one side like it was listening to something. So we listened too and maybe there was something, a sort of soft murmur. Like a radio left on low, or an old rain barrel slowly filling.

We moved on more quickly, staying close to each other, though it would've been a darn sight quicker to break up and search a few rooms apiece. The noise got louder and we stopped alongside one of the doors.

“It's in here,” Herb said, pointing.

We all knew that anyway, but we looked at him like he'd said something real profound. And then we opened the door.

“Goddamm!”

Jeez! My heart nearly gave up on me right there and then. As the door swung open, a massive black cloud burst from the room. A living, swarming noisy cloud. Flies! They were everywhere. And I mean everywhere. In our hair. Brushing past our face. Darting into our eyes. Getting into places I'd long since forgotten about. Thousands and thousands, maybe millions, of the dammed things came streaking out that door, washing around us like a flood tide.

We hunched over, trying to make ourselves small and waiting for them to pass. Only old Pepé's hound seemed pleased, jumping and snapping and biting like a demented beast at this mobile living feast.

When the worst was over and the noise and the black cloud had gone, we stood and brushed ourselves, shaking loose a few that'd settled. The floor was littered with crippled and dead flies, all

the way back along the landing. Pepé's pooch had a coughing seizure and choked up a few from the back of his throat, his eyes bloodshot red.

"Hell and damnation," was Herb's verdict.

I think we knew what we'd find before we entered the bedroom. And sure enough, there he was. Old McCabe. Leastways, we guessed it had to be old McCabe. Despite the thousands and millions of flies that'd buzzed from the room, despite the noise of the swarm, there must've still been thousands of the darn things crawling and hopping on him.

The others turned away, retching, but I stood and stared. It kinda looked to me just like someone had swatted him.

"Let's get out of here," Herb suggested.

None of us was going to argue with that. We turned away. But just as I was about to shut the door, a sudden movement caught my eye and stopped me short.

"Jeez!"

The others hurried back.

"What gives?" asked Pepé.

"Look," I said.

So they did.

"He's gone," Herb said quietly, like he was in a church or something.

"No way," Pepé insisted. "Impossible!"

I shook my head at that. I weren't telling no-one what I'd seen. They'd have thought me real crazy.

After that mad day, no-one saw McCabe again. There were rumours from time to time of course. That

he'd done a bunk from gambling debts. Or been seen with a young woman and child on one of the other islands. You know the way stories get whispered and warped in these small places.

I never did tell anyone what I saw, but I don't reckon there's been a day since when I haven't thought 'bout it. How that squashed old McCabe suddenly pulled himself from the floor and jumped over to the window. And the strange, superhero costume we'd seen him wear that night of the wager? It sort of made sense then, when I saw this thing squatting on the window sill. See, I don't think it was a costume at all — he weren't just pretending, or dressing up.

I know that must be right because just before Herb and Pepé reached me, I saw this ugly giant fly thing turn. And I'd know that grin anyplace, that big, self-satisfied look he always had when he was swatting them flies down in Pepé's place. That thing was McCabe, no doubt about it. And then a moment later he – it – was gone, buzzing away from the window like some angry monster blue-bottle, and was never seen again.

THE END