

**The Norwich
Wheelchair Murders**

A Novel
by
Bill Albert

In memory of dear friends who taught me the joys of being a bolshy crip.

Helen Caplan

Brendan Carroll

Maureen Garnet

David Litson

Alan MacKim

Christine Mortimer

Jabuliani Ncube

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(Et Rodríguez alors?)
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– literally.

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This is a work of fiction. All names and characters are invented or used fictitiously.
Although set in a more or less real Norwich, the events and the organisations mentioned are imaginary.

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LEGLISS

The little guy in the wheelchair is stinking drunk.

“Legless,” he giggles, pushing himself up to my table.

“What’s that, buddy?”

Can’t figure if it’s the drink or the broad Norfolk accent which is giving me the most trouble.

“I’m fucking legless. Yah know, boy,” he says, patting the folded ends of his empty pants legs.

“Oh sure. I gotcha.”

He laughs, showing me teeth so white, so even, they must be false. English teeth for sure. His thin face is bisected by a reddened drinker’s nose. It’s difficult with drunks, but I figure him for mid-forties.

“Drunk, pissed, bombed, sheets in the fucking wind, or something. Right, boy?”

His wheelchair slams into the table. I reach to steady my drink.

“Yeah, OK,” I say. “Take her easy there, fella.”

A woman comes up behind him. She is maybe half his age. Her badly-dyed black hair is lank. She wears a shapeless sweater over shapeless pants. If there has ever been a spark in her eyes, it went out some time ago.

“I’m really sorry about this. Ben’s had too much...”

“Shut the fuck up, Delia, will yah. Just shut the fuck up. Christ all mighty. I gotta right, don’t I? Gotta right. Sure as shit do!”

The barmaid glances over at us. Seeing that I’ve noticed, she turns away and lifts the glass she was drying, turning it with exaggerated care to catch the light.

“It’s OK,” I say to Delia. “No sweat.”

“A Yank,” Legless Ben crows. “A bloody Yank.”

“Come on, Ben. Please? Let’s not be bothering the gentleman.”

“I’m not bothering nobody, am I, Yank?”

He is. In spades. I’ve come to the pub for a drink before going to see *Dark Passage*, the largely forgotten Bacall and Bogart movie and one of my dad’s favorites. More than that, I’ve had a bad day and don’t want company, especially the company of a foul-mouthed, drunken cripple, someone who’s pushing three of my least favorite buttons all at the same time.

“Not really,” I say, hoping I’d put enough frost on the ‘really’ to send the message. If not, I give him my well-practiced-tough-guy-dead-eyed stare. It usually does the business pretty good.

“See,” he says, craning his head around to Delia. “I’m not bothering ‘the gentleman’.”

So much for the subtle inflection and the less than subtle stare. Maybe they worked at home because people had heard about my family or my rep. Here I’ve got neither. Here I’m just another harmless

civilian.

“You know they’re killing us off, don’t yah, boy?” he says pointing a trembling finger at me. “One at a time. There was Janice, she was the first one. Then there was Sarah, then there was Barry. Poor bloody Barry. All fucking dead, dead as fucking parrots.”

He makes a gun with his fingers and shoots me.

“Bang, bang, bang.”

“Sure thing, buddy.”

“ ‘Sure thing, buddy’, sure thing my bleeding arse,” he says pushing his wheelchair up closer.

“Listen, pal...”

“No, you listen, ‘pal’.”

“Ben, please.”

He ignores her.

“Think I’m just another bloody drunk crip, don’t yah, boy? Full of beer, chip on the shoulder. Sure, a crip with a chip. Ha! Maybe a bit touched in the head to boot? That what you thinking, Yank?”

“You’re dead right about that, pal.”

He laughs, reaches over and pats my arm. I feel the bony hardness of his hand through my jacket.

“Good. I like that. Honest that is. You know what most of them says? ‘Course not’, they says. ‘Course not.’ Then they runs away quick as they can. Not that you’re about to do that on me, are you, Yank?”

“No, I guess not.”

“You been in that long?” he asks, pointing at my wheelchair.

“A few months or so. Temporary kinda thing, you know.”

“New boy. I figured yah straight off for a new boy.”

“How’s that?”

“Yah spend as long as I have using a chair, yah just know is all.”

He takes a long pull at his drink.

“Sitting all kinda wrong, got new gloves there and the chair’s too shiny fucking clean is what it is.”

That’s a problem this poor schmuck doesn’t have. His chair’s frame is dented, chipped and covered in stickers – “Piss on Pity”, “Make my Day”, “Norwich City FC”. A small, scuffed yellow and green plastic sports bag dangles off the back.

“Is that it?” I ask.

“Be enough for starters, don’t yah reckon?”

Why do handicapped people think they own other handicapped people? I haven’t been here long enough to work it out. I’m not planning to have the time to work it out.

“Listen, buddy, I’d love to sit here and talk, but my movie is about...”

Delia grabs the back of his chair and begins to pull him away.

“What the fuck do yah think you’re after doing, woman?” he shouts.

“Gentleman’s gotta go, Ben. He just said.”

He clamps his hands on the wheel rims. The chair stops dead.

“Figure yah know what it’s all about, don’t yah, Yank? All bloody Yanks think yah know everything. Know every bloody thing. Don’t yah?”

I sigh. Drunks. Wheelchairs or not, they’re all the same.

He leans closer and lowers his voice. His breath is sour with beer.

“Like I says, one at a time. That’s right. One at a fucking time. And yah know who’s next on the list?”

He stabs a dirty thumb hard into his chest. “That’s right, mate. Sure I am. Stands to reason that do an all.”

“Don’t pay him any mind, mister,” Delia says. “He’s upset is what it is. Some of his friends...”

“Will yah fuck off out of it, woman. I’m talking here. Yeah? Fuck it!”

The pub fills up with the silence of people not paying attention. A thin man with tired eyes comes wearily from behind the bar. He leans over the back of Ben’s chair.

“You all right there, Ben?”

“Yeah, Nick. I’m good. You?”

“Just fine. I don’t have to say anything now, do I, mate?”

Ben twists around.

“No,” he laughs. “Less yah want to be telling her to leave me be.”

“Right,” the woman says, her dark eyes flaring into life. “You’re so bloody independent, Benjamin Castle, push yourself home. And good bloody luck too.”

She goes quickly up the three stairs which lead from the pub to the movie theatre and is gone.

He watches her go, shaking his head.

“Bloody woman. What yah gonna do, huh? Can I get us in another round?”

“No thanks, pal.”

“Speak out, they be after putting you on that list. Maybe the bastards will put you on the list too, mate. Then you’ll know what I’m fucking talking about here. Wadda yah think?”

“I think I’m out of here, my friend. I gotta movie to see in a couple of minutes.”

I turn my chair around and start for the side door.

“Well,” he calls after me. “I’m here to tell yah, yah don’t know shit, Yank. Yah don’t know what it’s about, any of it.”

He’s probably dead right about that.

SORRY

I've always disliked handicapped people. Not personally, you understand, but as a group. And it's not really dislike I feel, it's more distaste. They are just too damn close a reminder of vulnerability, decay and death. They're big time losers. Disgusting. Unpredictable. Embarrassing. Helpless. I only need to see a blind face sniffing the air, white stick tapping or stumblesurfing behind a seeing-eye dog and I'm gone. Wheelchairs? I cross the road quick as I can, quicker when the person stuck in the chair twists and squirms, trying to talk but instead can only manage dribbles and grunts. Then there's all those crazy-eyed old guys who left bits of themselves over in Vietnam and the younger ones with broken bodies and messed-up minds from the show in Iraq or the one in Afghanistan. Arms, legs, faces, minds, all gone. Terrifying, right? I figure who needs it? Not them. Not me. No, sir, for damn sure not me.

OK, you're thinking maybe I should feel sorry for them. Sure thing. I can do that. Easy. Sorry as hell. But you see 'sorry' and disgust work together pretty damn good. In fact, if you didn't feel a certain amount of disgust, quite a gigantic load of disgust, why would you feel sorry? So I guess if you cut it right down and right close, I do feel sorry for the poor bastards. It's just that I don't see why I need to feel sorry for them so damn close up and so damn personal.

All of which brings me to 'sorry'.

"I'm afraid we can't tell you, Mr. Green. The condition is so variable and so unpredictable. I'm terribly sorry."

"That's it, you're sorry?"

The doctor took off his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose with thumb and forefinger. He looked tired. Giving out bad news all day is a real tough business. Poor guy.

"Yours is a most unusual case, Mr. Green. Most unusual. Apart from fatigue, it appears that it's mainly the muscles in your legs that remain affected. Sudden onset ruled out such things as any of the muscle wasting diseases. The way the condition presents, as well as the tests we've carried out, strongly indicate a rather rare type of what's known as Guillain-Barré Syndrome. We were extremely fortunate that we had Dr. Ho, a visitor from Beijing, with us. Do you remember seeing him when you were on the ward? Yes? Well, he is of the opinion, and I am in agreement, that we are looking at a case of acute motor axonal neuropathy, something which is very rare in Europe, but far more common in China. The difficulty we have is that with any type of Guillain-Barré it is virtually impossible to determine when or even if you will recover completely."

My first thought was, typical socialized medicine. If I was back in the good old U S of A, Dr. Steve, our family doctor, would know who to send me to, and they'd have the answer, and quickly. If I had

enough money to go to a private quack, I'm sure they'd have an answer here as well.

'Better than nothing. Better than nothing.' I repeat to myself to keep my head straight. If I was broke in LA, I'd probably still be waiting to see a doctor. Might even be dead meat by now, although sometimes I feel that's what I am. Dead meat rolling.

"So, you're telling me I have to wait and see? That's it?"

"How long has it been now?" he asked, searching the green folder of notes on his desk. "Remind me."

Just another number, like the defeated people slumped on plastic chairs or stuck in wheelchairs in the corridor outside his office.

I'd been feeling sick for a couple of weeks, lightheaded, tired, weak, with numb hands and feet.

Figured it for a bad chill or a really bad cold. Then one afternoon as I was leaving the house I passed out. I woke up in the emergency room at the hospital. They rushed me to a ward, where I was hooked up to a lot of machines, examined by one head-shaking doctor after another, as one bit of me after another closed down - arms, legs, breathing. After a couple of weeks almost everything came back but my legs. I still had some feeling, but couldn't stand up, the muscles had apparently lost interest. Then there was the other problem.

"It's not at all difficult, my dear," the continence nurse had assured me. "Once you get over the psychological barrier. Of course, some men feel a little pain at first, as well as a little discomfort. But with practice, that will pass. The important thing is to relax. Think of it as a kind of sword swallowing. If you keep it straight and relax, the sword goes down without cutting your windpipe."

That didn't help at all.

"First you clean it with an antibacterial wipe. Good. Then you clean your hands. That's fine. Aren't we doing well?"

"It's not showing much interest is it?" she observed, looking down at my very clean, but shriveling-in-terror schlong. "Here, if you don't mind, let me give you a hand."

As if she was dealing with a random bit of hose, she took me in her gloved hand and shoved my flaccid cock flat against my stomach.

"I'm afraid that closing your eyes defeats the purpose, my dear. Come on now, be brave. Here take this. No? OK, not to worry. Just hold your penis for me. There. That's fine. Now I want you to relax. Can you do that for me?"

As she took a long, narrow plastic tube that she'd removed from its plastic wrapper and held it poised above my penis, relax was a big ask. As I watched, hoping that it was happening to someone else, she inserted one end and slid it down slowly until the only thing that remained visible was a small, white, megaphone-shaped plastic nozzle. I waited for a public announcement. Instead, I felt only discomfort, but more, immense relief as a stream of urine appeared and the pressure on my bladder eased. Magic. Although I didn't like it, I quickly got used to catheterizing three or four times a day. What else to do? No choice.

"Much better than an indwelling one, my dear. Because you still have feeling there, it will be much

more comfortable. Less chance of infection as well. And think how very lucky you are that you can still open your bowels.”

Oh boy, oh boy. Lucky me.

“About two weeks, doctor, since I left the hospital that is. Something like that anyway.”

“Well, that’s not very long, is it? Let’s say we keep on with physiotherapy and see what happens while we explore other possible solutions. How does that sound?”

“Not real encouraging.”

He looked at his watch.

“I’m afraid it’s the best we can do at the moment, Mr. Green. I know it’s not easy, but let’s look on the bright side.”

“The bright side? The god-damned bright side! Give me a break here, Doc. What particular kinda bright side would that be?”

Behind me his nurse coughed.

“Well, the bright side is that you don’t seem to be in much pain, and unlike almost everyone who is left unable to walk because of a spinal injury, you don’t have to go for a long and demanding rehab at Addenbrookes. Furthermore, your bowels seem fine and your waterworks, well we’re having a bit of a problem in that department, but...”

“Water works?” I interrupted. “That some kind of joke?”

“Not in the least, Mr. Green. Your personal plumbing? Is that better? Would you care for something more medically precise?”

I didn’t reply.

“As I was going to say, everything else seems to be just fine, of course, besides passing water and your legs.”

“Besides my god-damned legs? Besides having to piss through a straw? Jesus H. Christ, man! I can’t piss! God damn it. I can’t walk! What the hell kinda life is that?”

“Please, Mr. Green, there’s no need to raise your voice or to use such language. I understand that you’re feeling angry and frustrated. That’s natural. Of course it is. I assure you we will do everything we can to help, but you must be patient.”

My father told me that unless you can muscle them or buy them, never piss off anyone you have to depend on for something really important, especially if you don’t have the expertise or can’t see what they’re doing. Car mechanics, waiters, roofers, insurance adjusters, and, of course, doctors.

“They’ve got you by the cojones, Bobby. So, no matter how mad you get, you bite it back and smile as if there’s no tomorrow. If you don’t, if you yell at them, they’ll just go behind the door and spit in your soup.”

For sure I didn’t feature this guy spitting in my soup.

“Sorry,” I said.

NOT SWIMMING

“Robert Green?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

He pushes a photo ID card at me. There are two of them. Cheap suits, thin ties and over-polished, heavy, black shoes.

“I’m Detective Sergeant Richards and this is DC Cornish. Need to have a brief word, Mr. Green. Mind if we come in?”

And if I do? The same all over the world, cops asking questions for which they expect only one answer. I’ve grown up on a steady diet of those questions. I motion them inside.

Richards, overweight and comb-over balding, looks to be in his early forties and permanently out of breath. His partner is a mousy guy. Mid twenties. More store clerk than detective.

“Not much furniture, Mr. Green,” Richards observes. “Just moved in, have you?”

The door opens directly into the small front room of my council house. Besides our rolled-up futon mattresses parked against one wall - my daughter Anna and I both sleep here because I can’t make the stairs and I want her as close as possible - there’s a metal standing lamp, an old portable TV, a leatherette easy chair I picked up at a sort of Goodwill place on Magdalen Street, some of Anna’s drawings scotch-taped to the wall and a scattering of her toys. Soon after I was taken to the hospital, my wife left, taking everything, right down to the light bulbs and the toilet paper. She’d also made off with my iPhone and all my painstakingly collected Delta and Chicago blues, the music that connected me with the heart of my former self. Worse than all that, my entire stash, more than \$17,000 had vanished. Granted, it hadn’t been a long or a happy marriage. I can’t complain about the short or the unhappy, as she was our bought-and-paid-for ticket to dance around the British immigration laws, although there was more dancing to do before all the paperwork is nailed down tight. With Tina in the wind, that is going to be a problem. For the moment, however, I’ve got more urgent things on my plate – no money, no working legs and, now, a couple of nosy cops.

It’s been a long and sudden drop for me, Bobby Fishbaum, the sharp dresser with a new metallic yellow 911 GT Porsche, the guy with a 60-inch flatscreen, a penthouse apartment in Santa Monica overlooking the ocean, the guy who could take care of himself and take care of business, to this - dead broke, chained to a wheelchair, having to crick my neck to talk to anyone except little kids and living in the English version of the Projects. Can’t even say, “Still, I’ve got my health.”

“I like the simple life,” I say to the cops. “Besides, gives me more space to move around.”

My visitors exchange detective looks.

Being a smartass is not my best move, but I can’t help myself.

“An American”, declares Cornish, looking pleased with his detective skills

“That’s right.”

“What part you from?” Richards asks as he walks to the far door and glances into the kitchen at the back.

“California.”

“Big place California,” he says.

This character is real sharp.

“Sure is.”

But me, I am a regular razor. No one cuts it better than Bobby Fishbaum.

“How’d an American come to wind up on a council estate in Norwich?”

“My wife, she’s a local girl.”

“In the forces, were you?” Cornish asks. “Over to Mildenhall?”

“Your wife, the local girl, she like the simple life too?” Richards says, spreading his arms to take in the room.

Sure as hell they’ve rumbled our immigration scam. Tina has tipped them off. If I could buy her, she’d not be slow to sell me on. It makes perfect, cold-logic sense.

“Listen, fellas, I’m sure you have more interesting things to do than hear about my little domestic problems. Really a dull, dull story.”

“Yeah,” says Richards with a sigh. “I know, marriage can be a real bitch sometimes.”

He pats me on the shoulder.

“Can I help you guys with something?”

Cornish walks over.

“You know this man?” he says, handing me a small photobooth photo.

The face is familiar but I can’t place it.

“Can’t say that I do.”

“That’s funny,” Cornish remarks, “His wife said he spoke to you just the other night over to Cinema City.”

I look at the photo again.

“OK. Yeah, right. It’s him, Legless Ben. I can see it now. Not a very good likeness. Hard to recognize him without the wheelchair. Listen, I don’t know the guy at all. Only ran into him for a few minutes the other night. What’s he done?”

“Done? Nothing,” says Richards. “Nothing we know about that is. His body was fished out of the river up near Pulls Ferry yesterday morning.”

I wonder whether he was still in his wheelchair. I don’t ask.

