

The Black Sedan: Owl & Fex to Tully's ...

Leaving the *Come Ye Heather* to her floundering list, Owl and Fex walked up to Owl Man's car, a dark blue Toyota Prius, which was parked a few spaces away from the boat ramp, next to the coke machine and the dumpster. This was convenient, in terms of access to the docks. It was not convenient, however, in terms of Fex's bulk. Whether the parking space was near or far, it still took a few minutes of curses and complaints, sweating and puffing, before Fex finally got himself tolerably settled in the passenger's seat. Owl Man drove off. Heron Man had brought his own car, a Mini-Cooper, so there was no question of Fex's riding with him. The Prius was bad enough. They drove in tandem toward the dark-roasted, urban oasis of Tully's.

“What kind of a piece of shit is this, anyway? A Toyota Tuna Can?”

Owl Man did not respond.

Apparently, Fex had no appreciation for the environmental benefits of hybrids, the limits on world oil supply, questions of economy and the like. He himself drove a long 1966 Lincoln Continental with a 462 cubic inch V-8 engine. It was a car he could stretch out in. As a matter of fact, it was a car he and Heather, together, could stretch out in. It was, he liked to remind people, “a classic.” Though it burned oil and required a lot of care from his mechanic, Manny, to Fex it was well worth the extra cost and effort. People turned their heads when he drove past, especially since the springs and shocks on the driver's side were shot, and the entire rig listed at about the same angle as his houseboat was listing at the moment. But it was an impressive hunk of metal, to be sure, made in the days when they still used metal to build a car.

Owl Man noticed Fex's reverie and brought him back to the moment.

“Who’s got it in for you, Fex? Any ideas? That was no accidental worm hole drilled in the hull of the *Come Ye Heather*.”

“That’s what you’re supposed to figure out, Owl Man. You got all the ideas.”

“I thought you had all the ideas, Fex.”

“Yeah, well, not this time. I ain’t done nothin’ to nobody.”

“Nobody?”

“Not recently, anyway. Not for a long time, in fact.”

“Well, when was the last time you did something to someone?”

“What? Oh, I don’t know. Maybe a month or two ago, somebody might have gotten a little ticked off at me, over nothin’.”

“Over nothing?”

“Yeah, nothin’. There was some idiot I whacked with a tire iron.”

“Where did you whack him?”

“At the dance club.”

“No, I mean where on his body did you whack him?”

“On the back of the head. Just a little tap. He was getting’ on my nerves.”

“Can he still talk?”

“What? What the hell are you talkin’ about, Owl Man, of course he can still talk. Otherwise, he’d be dead.”

“Maybe, if he can still talk, he might just remember that you tapped him on the back of the head with a tire iron. He might not like that.”

“It was his own fault.”

“Really? What did he do to deserve the tap?”

“I didn’t like the way he was lookin’ at Heather.”

“And what way was that?”

Owl Man was conducting an interview of sorts. He wanted to learn a little more about how Fex’s mind worked. So far it wasn’t working so well. Still, the recording was going well. Since he was driving, Owl Man couldn’t jot down notes, so he used the foot-switched, voice-activated recording system he had installed just so he could keep a record of his thoughts and observations when in traffic. The two condenser microphones were of high quality, well-positioned, and the system had a noise-cancellation feature to block the roar of traffic. As a result, it also worked perfectly for mobile interviews.

“He was lookin’ at her funny, sideways like. It was at the dance club, the “Dirty Dozen.” I thought he needed a lesson in manners so I tapped him in the parking lot.”

“Does he know where you live?”

“Everybody knows where I live. Everybody knows Fex.”

“Do you know where he lives, Fex?”

“Him? Hell no. What do I care where he lives?”

“If you’re going to go around tapping people on the head with tire irons, maybe you should know whom you’re tapping, in case they decide to tap you back.”

“Hmm. Yeah. I never thought of that.”

“Maybe that augured hole in the *Come Ye Heather* was his idea of a little tap, or a preview of a bigger tap still to come.”

“Yeah, you got a point there, Owl Man.” Fex hated to admit that anyone but himself might have a point.

Before they could follow up on the idea, however, they were in front of Tully’s,

parked on the opposite side of the street. Owl Man found a good parking spot, Fex extracted himself from the hybrid and they crossed the pavement. They had arrived just in time to see Heron Man walking up the sidewalk.

They had also arrived just in time *not to see* the black sedan with tinted windows that was parking three cars behind the Prius.

The window on the driver's side slid down with a whine, but it stopped half way. The entire car was engulfed in the shadows cast by the buildings surrounding Tully's. The driver's face seemed tinted like the windows. The shadowed head turned toward Fex and his retinue, following their progress as they disappeared into the steamy, aromatic chambers within.

The driver's door of the sedan opened slowly and an enormous shoe swung out and down to the asphalt. It must have been size 13 or 14, and was white, athletic, with built-in reflective tape on the heel and large Velcro straps across the arch. Black sweatpants, hiked up over white sweat socks, covered both massive legs. As the entire figure emerged from the car, it unfolded, extending upward like a scissors jack lifting the sky. Dressed completely in athletic gear, bull-necked and solid, the figure seemed a cross between a professional wrestler and a rhinoceros.

He walked—it was in fact a man—he walked slowly across the street, heading straight for the entrance door to Tully's. Before entering he looked up and down the block, then grasped and jerked the handle. The heavy glass door practically snapped open, and Jimmy, the barista, stopped dead in his tracks. He nearly dropped the bussing tub he was carrying to the kitchen.

Fex looked up and recognized his colleague, Mr. Moto, in his casual gear.

Helen guides Fex ...

Fex's repetition of his new storyline for a screenplay was considerably more embellished than the first version for Owl Man, but the main features were the same: Shaman Song interrupts the heist. Batman, black cape fluttering, suddenly appears from above. He "conks" Song on the head, etc. Singled out for special Fexian embellishment were all the details about the optioning of the script, Marty and Leo "in the bag" as co-producers, Fex's mounting consultant fees, and all the rest.

Once the narration was complete, Fex waited—we can assume—for applause. But the group was strangely silent. Coo scratched his head. Sal, Sally and Heather remained silent. Foxy polished the beloved tommy gun she had brought with her. Sal twisted his napkin. Mr. Moto stood impassively, as always. Owl Man cleaned his glasses on his tie. Heron Man, focused on Helen, communicated wordlessly with her.

Then, wordless communication over, Helen spoke up.

"Fex, it's wonderful that you've taken the initiative to generate your own ideas for the heist. Unfortunately, I'm afraid there's a slight flaw in your otherwise brilliant design. And you've touched on something that Owl Man, Heron Man and I are deeply concerned about."

Fex was unaccustomed to the word "flaw," especially coming from someone he barely knew, like Helen. But in her presence, he was strangely calm, and did not pop off with a snotty retort. He simply said, "Yeah? What else?"

"Oh, I don't suppose there's anything wrong with introducing a new character like Batman at this late stage, although I wouldn't encourage it. No, it's not that. It's something else, Fex. You see, *Batman is dead.*"

Fex's moment of calm came to an abrupt end. His face began turning lobster-red, the way it usually did when he was about to explode—eyes bulging, nostrils flaring, lips pursing. But then his normal color returned, his eyes retreated back into their sockets, his nostrils deflated and his lips relaxed. Fex actually calmed down again. Heron Man, noticing the change, assumed it was due to some quality of Helen's, some knock-on effect she had on people.

Fex shook his head, then nodded, and said, “I knew it. All along I knew there was somethin’ wrong with the whole thing. Yeah, you’re right, Helen. Batman—he’s dead. Dead as a cold turkey two days after Thanksgivin’. Nothin’ but the neck and giblets left. Even the wishbone is broke. Why didn’t I see that before?”

“Oh, I think you knew it all along, Fex, but just didn’t realize it because the idea was so exciting.”

Owl Man and Heron Man were mesmerized by this quiet conversation between Helen and Fex, and sat wondering what they would say next.

“But what I don’t get,” said Fex, “is, if he’s dead, how come he still brings in so much dough?”

“Isn’t that obvious, Fex? Think about it. Then you tell me.”

“OK, OK, I will. Lemme see here. Batman’s dead, but he still brings in the dough because people have their heads up their you-know-whats. They don’t know he’s dead, so it’s like they’re rootin’ for some ghost. Like some zombie is gonna save ‘em.”

Helen touched Fex’s hand.

“See, Fex? You knew all along.”

“Yeah, and the whole zombie thing is like people lookin’ in a mirror, thinkin’ something’s gonna eat ‘em up, when *they’re* the ones doin’ the eatin’ and droolin’. Yeah, I get it now.”

“But,” said Helen, “the problem you have to solve now, Fex, is this: If Batman isn’t going to save us, who is?”

“It’s obvious, ain’t it?” interrupted Sal, shaking his head at how obtuse the others were. “It’s all plain as day. Two plus two.”

“Go ahead, Sal,” said Helen, like a group therapy leader.

“Well, the way I figure it, the reason Batman’s dead is because *all* them stupid heroes is dead. Sure, they did good for a long time, and everybody loved it, and felt safe. But, I mean, look at what’s happening now. Look at the banks, for example, like Ling Bank. Everybody’s screwin’ everybody else and the nobody’s lookin’ out for us little guys.” Sal hesitated, then continued. “OK, OK, so maybe we want to pull off a heist, but at least it ain’t a real heist and it ain’t real dough, is it? It’s Owl Man’s funny money, and it’s a *book* heist anyway. These here bird-men are writin’ the whole thing. But what about Old

Man Ling? He's screwin' people right and left, and I'm talkin' big bucks. You wouldn't believe the crap he gets away with, 'cause the heroes are all in on the take. There ain't no more Lone Rangers."

Sal's speech left him out of breath and upset, agony all but written across his face. He shot a glance in Helen's direction, then looked down at his hands, examining a hang-nail. Sal's concerns about the hero problem had obviously been building for a long time.

Helen said, "Well, Sal, that was very astute, very perceptive. I think you've put your finger on something that's bothering a lot of people, more than they realize. Don't you agree, Owl Man?"

Owl Man was caught short by Helen's sudden query. "Hmmm? Oh, excuse me, I must have been tracking rabbits, as I like to call it. Thoughts, that is." He cleared his throat and issued a long sigh. "Yes, Helen, Sal, Fex—I'm afraid you're all correct in your assessment of our situation. Not us personally, but, you know, us generally." Something was preoccupying Owl Man, who was usually more articulate than this.

Helen caught Owl Man's eyes and held them. Reams of communications seemed to pass between them. Heron Man watched the by-now-familiar interaction, sensing a faint glow in the air between Helen and Owl Man, like a subtle energy-field, though he doubted it could be measured by any machine.

Owl Man's features softened. He cleared his throat and took a sip from his glass.