

"The Telltale Pancreas"

by Eric Garcia

I'll make this short. One hour left, maybe two -- there's no way to know -- which is precisely why I sit here in the dark, dictating, shotgun in one hand, scalpel in the other, facing the only entrance to my apartment that hasn't been hastily boarded up by yours truly. At some point, my concentration will lapse and I will fall asleep, but for now...

I'll make this short.

I work for a rotating series of elite pharmaceutical and biomedical corporations that would just shit entire houses if I used their names in print, but fortunately for them there's no need to get personal -- you've seen all their ads before, on the vids, in the papers, and one biomed firm is just like the next. For that matter, I bear no ill will towards the slimeballs; they've provided me with a respectable income for quite some time, and it would be sour grapes and poor sportsmanship to blame them for my current state of body and mind.

My area of expertise is in biomechanical claims and collections, which is to say that I repossess artificial limbs and organs from those who have chosen to welsh on their debts to my employers. Unfortunately, few of these "clients" are ever willing to readily relinquish their body parts on demand, which makes my line of work considerably dangerous. To date, I have been shot at (ninety-eight times), stabbed (twelve), choked (fifteen), maced (twenty-three), and beaten with canes and walkers (only once, but I've refused to return to that nursing home on future jobs). Needless to say, my health insurance rates are a bitch.

They call me the Bio-Repo man, and I must admit that I am fantastically good at what I do. It works like this: Pharmaceutical Company X offers an easy payment plan for a brand spanking new bioengineered liver to Joe Blow, some poor bastard whose original organ killed itself after being forced to filter out toxins from years of un-Southern

Comfortable abuse. Six, ten, twelve months go by and suddenly Joe can't meet the two hundred a month any more. Notices are sent, notices are unanswered. Nasty messages are left, nasty messages are not returned. Bill collectors make personal visits, and bill collectors come back empty-handed. By this time, there's nothing left for the corporations to do but leaf through their metal rolodexes and ring up the Bio-Repo man. At the other end of the line they find me and my scalpel, and within the week they have their liver back, ready to be polished up and placed into the next ailing customer. It's not a particularly elegant profession, but it does have a certain aesthetic for those who have practiced it as long and as tirelessly as I.

To the important part, though: My last job began easily enough, in the same sparse, utilitarian manner in which all of my contracts have been initiated. The telegram read: LUCKY RAYBORNE, 116 1/2 DRYDEN RD. PANCREAS. A few additional words gave me the drop address and a confirmation of the standard fee. Pancreas repossessions generally fetch about fifteen hundred on the open market; I get more for hearts and neuro-nets, less for the more pedestrian organs such as eyeballs. This one seemed to be worth my time.

I waited until the sun went down, and then waited some more. Jobs are safest in the early morning hours, while everyone is tucked away beneath their sheets all nice and comatose. "Minimize Interference" is the safe and sound motto of the Bio-Repo man and I stick by it nightly.

Eventually, the little hand on my ancient analog clock swung around to meet the one. Stopping briefly in my kitchen to grab a spare gas mask from the china cabinet, I hopped into my van and headed for Dryden Road. My gear bounced loosely about the rear seats, metal clanging against metal in an improvised Caribbean tune. I bopped to the music.

The roads gradually became rougher, pavement giving way to stretches of gravel and dirt, and the shabby shacks that hung like barnacles to the south edge of town crept

from the horizon. I'd been down here on many a repo job, each time hating every moment of it. The nausea that rose in me as I twisted the van between upended garbage cans and abandoned tricycles could only partially have come from the bumpy ride, and I soon found myself wanting simply to get the job over with and hightail it back to civilization. No victory dance, no prayer in the end zone.

A quick drive by the house told me all I needed to know about the manner in which I would proceed. Bars adorned each window, thick gratings of ornate metalwork which might have been beautiful had they been placed in a different setting and created for a different purpose. As it was, they were a nuisance, but solved easily enough. Scanning the bare trees in the front yard, I was unable to locate any chains, rope, or hooks -- most likely, no guard dog was present. The lights were all out, and the houses on either side were both boarded up and abandoned. Piece of cake. I lived for jobs like these.

(Note from the present: I have heard six cars drive by my place this evening, two of which sputtered and coughed as they made their way down the street. Am I being paranoid? Lord, I hope so.)

I parked the van half a block away and lugged my equipment towards the small back yard of 116 1/2 Dryden. Weeds whispered beneath my feet, burrs digging past my chinos and into my shins. The metal canister I dragged behind me clanged against a rock and echoed loudly in the darkness. Throwing myself into the nearest shadow I held my breath, waiting for some sign that I'd been noticed. Every shadow was an interloper, every breath of wind the muted approach of an armed assailant. Time passed, and I slowly allowed my lungs to contract. My exhale, thunderously loud to me, woke no one. The lights remained out, the street remained silent, and I remained alive. For the moment.

Two more sets of bars covered the windows that let into the backyard. Sighing, I pulled out the smallest of my three blowtorches and set it in the dry, brittle grass. Some of the other guys I know have lasers for this purpose, but a thin green line just doesn't

have the same base appeal to me as that slippery yellow flame licking and trickling through the evening air. A vicious instinct of *Torch the house!* rose in my mind, and I suppressed it as quickly as possible. First work, then play.

Only a minute or two was wasted in removing the bars from the largest window, and it took twenty seconds more to cut out a bottlecap-sized hole from the glass pane. Silence and stillness continued to reign at 116 1/2 Dryden as I fitted a ridged hose that led from the heavy canister I carried into the window's new orifice.

I turned the gas on. All the way.

I'd figured the place to be only about 100 square meters or so, 270 cubic, just enough for one bedroom, small kitchen, living area, toilet. And while the gas canister was filled with enough anesthetic to cover up to 400 cubic meters, more than enough for this job, I let it run all the way out nevertheless. The pancreas is one of those annoying organs which surrounds itself with tough, meaty tissue, a real pain to get to, and the last thing I needed was for my client to wake up during the middle of the repossession. It's not a pretty sight, what with the heart suddenly pumping out liter after liter of blood due to adrenaline and such -- blood which ends up, I might add, all over my nice white apron -- so I wanted to make sure he was out but good.

Donning a gas mask and snatching my medical case, I slid the window neatly out of its frame and slipped inside. I'd been right about the size and condition of the house -- barely large enough to live in and filthy as a fraternity party. *Whoever this Lucky character is*, I thought, *he sure hasn't lived up to his name*. It stank of sweat and cheap air-freshener, the essence of poverty.

It didn't take me long to find the bedroom. Two figures lay slumped beneath the sheets, a pair of chests moving up and down in a slow, even dance.

"What the hell..." I mumbled softly, moving slowly towards the bed. The telegram hadn't mentioned the existence of a spouse or housemate, important information that was usually included in the original transmission. And this particular corporation

was noted for its accuracy in such matters.

That's when I saw the stiletto heels, crotchless panties, and microthin hot pants strewn about the bedroom floor. Prostitute. A closer look at Lucky's sleeping companion clinched it for me -- a small tattoo on her right buttock designated her as one of the girls of Zone Thirteen, the red-light district a few blocks away. Of course, they weren't supposed to pull tricks outside of the Zone, but what was I going to do? Arrest her? Another momentary flash of anger suddenly sparked within me: *This is why this man hasn't paid his medical bills? For the cheap thrills of a whore?* For his own good I wanted to wake him from the anesthetic and beat him senseless before finishing my job, all the while watching him writhe in much-deserved agony, but once again I was able to corral and quench my simple desires and concentrate instead on work.

I have always felt that discipline is the hallmark of the great.

As for Mr. Rayborne, he was an insignificantly frail man who didn't even twitch a muscle as my scalpel dug into his torso. I didn't bother with clamps or my mobile suction unit; there was little of value in the bedroom that needed protection from the staining element of blood, and no one around to complain about the mess afterwards. With little but plastic gloves and a white apron to protect my clothing, I pulled away at tissue that puffed out like so many wads of cotton, tossing it onto the comforter, onto the wooden floor. I whistled while I worked, a samba maybe, I don't remember.

The Keystone PX-13 I was searching for had a small red light on its anterior abaxial panel; I saw the blinking beacon before the glint of metal and used my blade to chop furiously away towards the mark. Like a fevered explorer I dove towards that machine, trailblazing a path through the sinewy jungle. With a few more snips and slices, I had the Keystone in my hand. *They don't make 'em like this anymore.* And they certainly didn't -- though only slightly over a year old, the Keystone PX-13 Pancreas had been replaced just the previous month by the PX-14, a model that offered the same benefits as the PX-13 plus an optional package that allowed it to operate as a homing

beacon for one's car keys. *Guy's better off now*, I thought. *Rather be dead than obsolete*.

Now by this point, it is my educated guess that Mr. Rayborne had gone into shock, though I can't be completely certain of this. The man was lying there without a pancreas, for god's sake -- you figure it out. Still, I felt it important to check his pupillary response, just in case. If he wasn't in shock, he might be feeling some pain despite the gas, and it's a code of mine to put these poor slobs out of their misery no matter how much they personally deserve to suffer.

That's when the prostitute opened her eyes and lunged for my throat.

Had I mentioned that she was fat? Not just pudgy or pleasingly plump or any other euphemism we all use to make ourselves feel better. There's no other word that fits the bill but fat fat fat, three hundred pounds if she was an ounce. I don't mention this mockingly, mind you, but only to support a theory of mine that the anesthetic I sprayed into the air wasn't enough dosage to contend with her body weight. If this is not the case, then I have no idea how she was able to fight off the drug and leap for me like a mongoose on its prey, claws raking my neck, nails jabbing at my eyes. And in truth, I don't want to know.

One way or the other, there she was, shrieking away at eighty-eight decibels as she flailed about the room. Stunned for a moment by this unexpected occurrence, I was unable to defend myself as she ripped away at my gas mask, knocking it off my face. Forced into action, I batted her arms out of the way and tossed her heavily back onto the bed, where she landed on Lucky's prone carcass. Stepping backwards, I readjusted my mask (the last thing I needed was to pass out now) and hopped towards the bedroom door. The hooker bounced roughly off of Lucky and jumped out of bed, her bloodied body jiggling and joggling past my horrified eyes. Waves of flesh carved a wake through her breasts.

"For Christ's sake, lady," I shouted over her squeals, "put some clothes on!" It was the least she could do out of common decency.

"Murder!" she howled. "Murder!"

"Lady, I'm just doing my job here." I really hated when all this nonsense went down; it caused me to look bad as a professional. I made a mental note to call the anesthetic supplier once I returned home and bitch them out for selling me cut-rate goods.

"Murder!" she screamed again. "You murderer!"

I'd have rather avoided making contact with the hooker altogether, considering the array of diseases that must have set up camp in her body, but as it was I ran up beside her and clamped my bloodied hand around her greasy mouth, whispered as loudly as I could through my protective mask.

"Listen to me," I began. "This is a job, nothing else. Under Title Fourteen of the Biomedical Repossessions Act I am legally entitled to remove Mr. Rayborne's artificial pancreas at this time. Do you understand me so far?" She quivered beneath my hands, and I fought down my rising gorge.

"And section three clearly states that if the client is deprived of life functions due to the removal of the contended organ or organs, the repossessor -- that's me -- has no legal obligation to resuscitate or otherwise restore the client. Again, do I make myself clear?"

This time she nodded. I believed she finally had become frightened for her own life, and this cheered me up a bit.

"This means that if Mr. Rayborne is dead, Mr. Rayborne is dead, and it's his own damn fault for not paying his bills. I could cite the legal code for you line by line if it would make you feel better." And I could, too -- many a widow and I had engaged in that precise conversation.

Shaking her head rapidly back and forth, the prostitute began to slump in my grasp and I let her fall to the floor with a thud.

"And put on some goddamned clothes," I added, tossing a bloodied shirt atop her quivering gobs of flesh.

So maybe it was the fresh blood, maybe it was just her mind waking up again, but she started screaming and flailing about once more and there was nothing left for me to do but knock her out. Just a quick hit alongside the head, no permanent damage, but it shut her up. There'd been quite enough caterwauling that evening and I could feel a whopper of a headache coming down the line.

I took my pancreas and left.

The drop was back in the center of town and I nearly fell asleep at the wheel six times before reaching the alley I'd been directed to in the telegram. The night's events, no more than half an hour or so in duration, had managed to drain me completely, and I wanted nothing more than to make the drop and get some sleep.

Howie waited patiently for me in the alley, smiled as I parked the van.

"Getting slow in your old age?" he called out.

"Real cute, Howie. Wouldn't have taken so long if your boys had done their job right. I need up-to-the-second info, you know that." I hauled the icebox out and slid it along the ground. We shook hands.

"Run into some trouble?" Howie didn't look too concerned.

"Nothing I couldn't handle," I answered. "Prostitute, woke up in the middle of it." I shrugged. "What can you do?"

"Que sera sera, right?" Howie laughed, opened the storage box and examined the intact PX-13. "Nice work."

I nodded humbly. "And the money is...?"

"In your account, as usual." We shook hands again. I staggered back towards the van.

"You want another job tonight?" Howie called out tentatively.

Slowly, very slowly, I turned around. "You see these bags under my eyes?" I asked. "I don't need a full set of luggage down there. Lemme get some sleep, and

telegram me tomorrow."

"It pays double," said Howie. "And it's gotta be done tonight."

Now this should have tipped me off right away. No repo job has to be done right away, no matter the circumstances. We're the kings of procrastination in this business, mirroring the chronic do-it-tomorrow attitude of our unfortunate clients. So I should have known right then and there that something was up, but I was tired from the previous job and... Ah, screw it. There's no defense for idiocy and carelessness. Now I can sit back and call myself a moron, but I've found that hindsight's even better than 20/20, especially when you have all day to just sit in a room and beat yourself over the head for past indiscretions and errors.

Stupid me, I took the job.

"It's a heart. New model, Klondike 39b. Fancy, lots of features." Howie showed me the specs. Rated up to 300 bpm, titanium release valves, solid gold casings -- an impressive piece of machinery. "Beats the hell out of the Panda brand," said Howie. "We've got this market cornered."

I nodded, pocketed the data sheet. "Can I get a telegram on this? Something from your boss, just for my records."

"Telegram, right... uh... sure." Howie smiled (too widely, I know now) and patted me on the back. "You know, he dictated one this morning but I completely forgot to grab it off his secretary's desk when I came out here. Can it wait till tomorrow?"

"Sure," I answered. "Whatever." It was against the law to sign off on a contract without explicit authorization from the head of the company's division, but we played with minor rules like these all the time.

Howie handed me a set of keys and a slip of paper with an address on it. "It's an apartment, easy access. Had a copy of his keys made just last week; he won't even hear you coming."

When I told Howie that I didn't have any anesthetic gas left, he had yet another

quick answer for me. "Guy's practically a narcoleptic," he said. "Sleeps twenty hours a day. You're in the clear." Howie grinned again and walked back towards his car.

"Lemme guess," he called out. "You don't have a defibrillator on you either."

He was right. Had I known that I was going on a heart job, a defib unit would have been the first thing in the van as it's most helpful to stop the heart before you try and take it out, but for a pancreas it was unnecessary.

"Lucky for you," Howie said, "I've got a spare." He tossed the familiar battery and pad set into my arms and hopped into his car. "See you back here in about an hour."

"Okay," I responded. "Hey -- why are we meeting in an alley anyway?"

"Office is being fumigated," he answered back.

"Oh. Right."

Christ, what a frigging imbecile I was.

The apartment complex did indeed have easy access, with no gates or passcard entries to bar my way. No one stopped me. No one looked at me. No one questioned the presence of a stranger in a downtown apartment complex at three in the morning, and I couldn't have been more grateful.

The keys slid easily into the lock and made little noise opening the door. With the battery of the defib machine in my hands and the two attached pads slung over my shoulder, I made my way through the apartment and into the bedroom, where my client lay sleeping.

For a fleeting moment as I approached the bed, I was struck with the thought that the man's face looked familiar. Dark, ruddy complexion, eyes set wide apart, thin lips framing a small mouth. It passed as quickly as it came, and I set up my equipment. Flicking on the defib unit to allow it to warm up, I donned my apron and gloves, sharpened my scalpel, and extracted a small electric bone saw just in case I should have a problem breaking through the sternum. All of this was done in near absolute silence, and took less than a minute or so.

I placed the battery on the ground, grabbing the shock pads by their handles. Now here's where it all gets a little fuzzy, so bear with me. As far as I can remember, I rubbed the bases of the shock pads together, partially to build up a little friction, and mostly because that's how I'd always seen it done on the vids and it had become a habit of mine. The client breathed evenly, steadily.

My hands firmly clenched around the handles of the shock pads, I pressed the unit into my client's chest and depressed the thumb buttons that would send the beautiful streams of electricity racing through his body.

And that's when my heart stopped.

Oh, I thought indifferently. So this is what it feels like.

I was dead for over an hour, they tell me, but hurrah hurrah for modern medicine they brought me back. Fortunately for me, someone in that seemingly apathetic apartment building did indeed notice me casing the place and called the local police department; the boys in blue found my body a few minutes later and called their ambulance units in.

As far as the doctors and the investigators and I can piece together, the defibrillating unit I was given had been tampered with so that the handles, rather than the pads, were made to act as the electric conductor. Howie had set me up, probably in conjunction with another Bio-Repo man -- there's plenty of us out there, and some guys are always looking to get the jump on the competition. But the cops tell me that Howie's disappeared and that the apartment in which I was found had been empty for three months. As well, there's been no sign of a dark, wide-eyed, thin-lipped man, and the case is considered closed.

As for me, I'm good as new. Sort of. After an attack of that magnitude, my heart was covered with myocardial scarring bad enough to render the organ practically useless. So while I was out, while I was under, while I was dead or dying or sleeping on some

hospital gurney, they made the decision to give me an artificial heart.

It's a Klondike 39c. Best in the business. They tell me it's years ahead of its time. They tell me it's got a 2.3 billion beat warranty. They tell me I'll be the envy of all my friends.

And all I know is that it costs six hundred a month.

And all I know is that no one will hire me anymore. A Bio-Repo without a real heart? Unheard of.

And the bills keep coming. And coming. My mailbox is filled to exploding.

I haven't made a payment in eight months.

I've ignored notices.

I've rebuffed bill collectors.

I've sealed my windows and my doors and my basement and my attic.

I know they are coming.

So I sit here with a shotgun in one hand and a scalpel in the other, my entire body a radar for any sound, any movement. The telltale hiss of a gas, the giveaway shadow of a hunter.

I hear my Klondike-39c pinging away.

I hear a noise outside.

I don't know which is louder.