

Hard Power

By Michael Fine

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When Rae-Anne came home from work dog-tired and weak from hunger, Marcus was snoring on the couch in the living room with his feet on the coffee table just like always. Marcus was a big man, and dark. Two-hundred and fifty pounds if he was an ounce. He wanted what he wanted and took it: he knew how to throw his weight around. Not that Rae-Anne was any kind of wilting flower herself. She was bigger than Marcus if you was counting pounds. She was big in the middle -- she wasn't even five-foot-four. Good things come in short packages.

Marcus liked to think he was from the street – he was partial to sweat-pants and hoodies, and he had a dark way of looking at you if you crossed him. He had a dark way of looking at you if you talked at all, truth be told. Marcus liked to do all the talking and he expected that Rae-Anne would jump when he said jump. Not that he talked that much. You'd never know that Marcus grew up in West Orange, New Jersey, went to Rutgers and almost graduated. That he majored in International Relations Theory and knew his way around some of them philosophers and poets and such. That he was smart as a whip and headed for great things – graduate school or law school or government or one of them consulting companies, something like that, until some professor of his, a poet who taught literature, got himself shot dead one afternoon in the spring, sitting in a pasture where he'd gone to read a book and commune with nature. Shot by a cop. Reading while Black. By mistake, in a big old stupid shoot out when some cracker who lived out in the hills starting shooting and a cop came and all of the three men there died, people being stupid and bullets flying this way and that. Messed Marcus up bad, to see that professor shot and killed. Kind of destroyed the man's soul. You might say it broke his heart. He started getting high, and the rest was history.

Marcus was a big dude and he knew how to make people listen. He did what he wanted to do. When. And how. And you were better not to cross him, all things considered. Still, there was this other side of him. The Robin Hood of New Jersey thing. The take-from-the-rich and give-to-the-poor thing. Made him interesting. He knew people who knew people. Always acted like he was so high and mighty, giving to them community organizations. Redistribution of income, he called it. The socialism of the street.

Rae-Anne was not about getting high. She would take a taste or two. Or three. Or four on the weekends, but that was all. She had Goth tastes. Pierced and tatted. Studded belts and collars. Half her hair silver half black, one side of her head shaved. She looked cool for a big girl, and she didn't take no shit off nobody.

There was a good sized filled-up baggie on the living room table next to Marcus's feet, and an old manila envelope stuffed with bills on that coffee table. Man's getting careless, Rae-Ann thought, as Marcus's snores rattled the windows. Man's getting too big for his britches. But more likely he stayed up half the night playing Monster, Hunter Rise or Fortnite. or bingeing Game of Thrones or Breaking Bad, and just fell asleep doing his daily thing, dividing the stash and prepping to pay off his man. But careless. Real careless. A man can get himself killed that way, in Marcus's business. Marcus always thought his connections would protect him. That man didn't know what he didn't know. That man needed to do a way better job of watching his back.

I'll put the fear of God into him, Rae-Anne thought. She had this app on her iPhone that lets you plug in a microphone and talk loud through Alexa. I'll put Alexa right next to his head, and then talk like I'm a cop knocking on the door ready to make a bust. That will learn him. He won't leave his shit or money around ever again, Rae-Ann thought.

But then she remembered. Marcus has a paranoid streak. He is armed and ready. He was as likely to pull his piece and start shooting as he was to awake with a start and get the joke. So maybe not. Still Rae-Anne grinned her little sly grin just thinking about it. Marcus snored on, sawing wood, dead to the world.

Hmpff, Rae-Anne thought to herself. Huh. That man is out like a light. God helps those who help themselves. Women too.

When Rae-Anne come to it was like 2 a.m. and Marcus was long gone, out on his rounds. She barely remembered coming home, what she did when she got home, or how exactly she got herself wasted. 2 a.m. All the lights were on and so was the TV, blaring like the loudspeakers at a football game. She turned that sucker off. Her head hurt some and her nose was running but Rae-Anne was feeling pretty clear headed, for 2 a.m. Which sucked because 2 a.m. turns into 3 a.m. and so forth, and pretty soon it would be time for her to go to work and play normal woman again. Ultrasound technician at the hospital, a normal kind of human who worked a normal kind of job and had normal kinds of thoughts, excepting for how she actually looked, of course. You got to torture people about their normality, a little bit, she thought. You got to keep people shook up, and open to the strange and macabre possibilities in a stupid world that don't make no

sense anyway. You got to keep it lit up. She loved being like she was, one radical human with no boundaries and no limits whatsoever, just hidden in plain sight.

Then she felt something under her pillow and when she pulled the pillow away, saw the wad of cash. Oh shit, she thought. How did *that* get there?

Then she remembered.

About fifteen minutes later Marcus burst through the door and slammed it behind him. He shoved a credenza that stood in the hallway in front of the door. Then he turned the dining room table on its side and pushed it behind the credenza.

“What are you doing up?” he said, when Rae-Anne tottered to the door of the bedroom, dressed in a tee-shirt and underpants.

“What’s goin on?” Rae-Anne said, her eyes red and puffy.

“Shit hit the fan,” Marcus said. “Bad shit is headed this way. Now.”

“What are you talkin about?” Rae-Anne said.

“The Scoop is out for my ass,” Marcus said. “The money was short.”

“How the hell....?” Rae Anne said. And then she remembered again.

“I don know, I don know, I don know,” Marcus said. “It don’t matter now. I was short, that’s all. The Scoop don’t take no excuses. He ain’t interested in stories. He don’t like jokes. And he don’t take prisoners.” Marcus charged into the bedroom and right to the closet where there was an old chest on the floor and he opened it. Which was where he kept what he called his ‘personal protective equipment’. Which Rae-Anne knew to be more than rubber boots, respirators, and dayglo-vests. Rae-Anne knew to let that chest alone.

Still, Marcus wasn’t looking at her funny or giving her any shit at all. He had no idea where his money went. Marcus was smart as a whip but sometimes that man could not see what was right in front of his nose. Men are like that. All of them.

He ain’t thinkin, Rae-Anne thought. So I ain’t talkin.

Marcus threw something brown and heavy, some piece of clothing, on the bed.

“Put that sucker on,” Marcus said. “It’s extra extra large. Bullet-proof vest. Hope it fits.”

“Fuck-you,” Rae-Anne said.

“Don’t give me no shit. Put that sucker on.” Marcus said. He threw two olive ammo cans on the bed and went back to the closet.

He turned. He had two big-ass long guns, one in each hand, and a handgun stuck in his belt.

Marcus had grown up in a quiet place, that West Orange, New Jersey. His father was an accountant. His mother was a librarian. They lived a quiet middle-class life. But the world is complicated, and Newark was close by, and people talk to people, so Marcus got his share of the street anyway. Saw and heard. And learned, so he knew what was what. He never let it bother him much until that professor got killed. After that he was all about the street.

Rae-Anne was from the mountains of western Virginia. Hillbilly country. She was all hillbilly, all Appalachian, one hundred and fifty percent, all the time. She and Marcus had met on-line. Didn’t make any sense, but you know what they say -- a thing is a thing. And that was them.

“You hold this and aim it right at the front door,” Marcus said, and handed Rae-Anne a double barrel shotgun with a pistol grip. “This sucker has a pump. It holds sixteen shells. Each pull of the trigger fires one barrel. You fire once, then twice, then you pump twice and fire again. Fire once, then twice, then pump twice, then fire again. You got that?”

“I can do anything you can do only better,” Rae Anne said.

“Time will tell about that,” Marcus said. “Sucker has a kick to it, so you best put the butt end against your shoulder or your ribs and lay out flat. Somebody come through that door and you start blasting away, no questions asked. Anything or anybody at that door, you blow them to kingdom come. Even if its Domino’s Pizza. But it ain’t Domino’s coming. Not Domino’s, not Door Dash, not UPS. Blast away, baby. I don’t care who or what is in the way.”

“You headed out the back door?” Rae-Anne said.

“I’m headed to the back hall, ready to go from another direction, so whoever come through that door gets it from both left and right. But I’ll be working the phones. We got a tidal wave coming at us. I’m gonna hit those phones hard. See if I can divert it. Either got to make peace in a hurry or find some cavalry to come in after us. Cavalry. Flight squadron. The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Or the Millennium Falcon itself. I don’t care what or how. We just need all the help we can get.”

The Scoop didn’t take no shit from nobody. He didn’t do excuses. You pays your money or you takes your chances. Sort of. But your chances was exactly zero. Because The Scoop left nothing to chance. The Scoop didn’t do original thinking, bright ideas, a good imagination or hope for the future, because all of that shit cost him money, and his money was his money and that’s all she wrote. He had obligations. Needs. Desires. And wants. And they wasn’t nobody else’s business but his own.

There ain’t no room for discussion when a man’s money is short. You do not negotiate with terrorists. You find and fix the problem and get someone else to do what the body on the street who fucked up used to do. You waste the sucker who screws you and put somebody else in their place. That’s it. You get your money. And the community gets a reminder about who is who and what is what. So nobody else pulls that shit again. At least for a while. You do what needs to be done. It’s just the cost of doing business. This happens every couple of months. Like cleaning the house. Like mowing the grass. People say there is a code of silence on the street, so nobody talks. But there ain’t no code of silence. People can add, that’s all. They got eyes in their heads. They know the score. So the community is a safe place to operate.

The Scoop liked Marcus, more or less. College boy. Clean and smooth. Didn’t matter. Rules are rules. You let one of them people mess with you and pretty soon everybody is messing with you.

Once upon a time, The Scoop would have been quiet about it. Come in through the back door when no one is looking. Catch a man when he’s with a woman. That way it gets called a domestic dispute. Cars run off roads into the ocean or a lake, that sort of thing. Accidents

happen. People get the message either way. Things happen. Accidents don't. Everybody who is paying attention knows the score.

But now The Scoop was too old for that shit. No need to pussyfoot around now. You just do what needs to be done.

Marcus was a man with ideas, regardless of his current occupation. Even when he was out dealing, he paid attention to people who needed paying attention to, and was into the robber-saint vibe, steals from the rich, gives to the poor kind of thing. Okay, junkies are not the rich. And he got that. But Marcus wasn't a run of the mill street-level dealer either, not him. He was the West Orange and Short Hills man, the brother who used his Rutgers connection to supply the stockbrokers, the architects and the personal trainers who got off on the combination of him looking like the street but talking Ivy League. He dropped cash in this and that church from time to time, in this and that community organization, or helped out this and that person who was down on their luck. A little used car here, some dollars for an interview suit there, a little quiet tuition aid someplace else goes a long way if you put a little money in the right place at the right time, and he was careful to keep it all on the downlow, so as not to call attention to himself or his little operation. He was careful about who he supplied. Never sold to kids. Never sold in his own community. You know what this shit can do. Don't want it near yourself or your own people.

Rae-Anne thought he would have come at her by now, looking for the money. But Marcus wasn't like that. He was also somehow a good man without one ounce of anger in him. Just a lot of sadness. Rae-Anne, on the other hand, was a woman who always kept her options open.

It got tiresome, laying there like that, waiting for somebody to come through the door shooting. Marcus was working the phone, calling up this old friend and that one, asking people to just drop by, on the theory that The Scoop wouldn't waste normal people who were hanging around for fear of bringing attention and heat on his own heat. Nobody cares if drug dealers

waste one another. They are the scum of the earth, as far as most people are concerned. But a city councilperson? A minister with a big old church? A community leader, so called?

It *was* 2 a.m., though. Nobody was answering their phones. It didn't matter if they did. They all knew who Marcus was and what he did. He wasn't fooling nobody. People were happy to take his money and ask no questions when the need was there. But they weren't going one step further than that. That robber-saint thing? That was all his imagination. The Scoop wasn't taking Marcus's calls. Nobody else was either. They were dead meat.

"I got to pee," Rae-Anne said at last, and laid her shotgun down on the bed, safety off. She was from the hills. She knew a thing or two. Then she grabbed a pillowcase off the bed and slung that shotgun over her shoulder.

"Be quick about it," Marcus called from the hall. "You don't know when and where it is coming from. If we lose the lights, you know the shit is about to roll, and then you get your ass back here quick."

The bathroom had a fire escape. Rae-Anne was a big woman, but she knew how to move when she had to and she knew when she was beat. She had the wad of cash in her pocket. Better to be gone before Marcus figured the whole thing out.

She got herself through the window. Marcus yelled for her. She hit the ground right about the moment that the lights went out.

That's the deal, ain't it, Marcus thought. Power still grows out of the barrel of a gun. Power corrupts. Absolute power corrupts absolutely. Death is permanent. Fear works. The man with the gun gets to do what he wants, and take what he wants, and live how he wants, until somebody else with a gun stops him.

That's power, ain't it? Take what you want. When you want it. Let nobody stop you. Hard and fast. Hard power rules. Soft power is bullshit.

So what is a human being to do?

You can sit on your haunches and let the guns rule. Or you can stand up.

They talk about democracy, but there ain't no democracy of humans sitting on their hands. Democracy ain't about voting, not really. It ain't about parliaments, legislatures, likely voters or exit polls. Democracy is what happens when people act. Government of, by and for the people? Not a chance. Each man, woman, and child taking matters into their own hands. If you don't stand up, somebody else will stand up first, and they will eat your lunch. Or blow your brains out. Or both.

. If you see something, say something. If you think something, do something. And if you are even a little as smart as you think you are, you damn well better get ten people to stand up with you. You can't do this shit alone.

What everybody does matters, damn it, every second of every day. Why is that Vladimir Putin invading Ukraine? Because we let him. Them people in Russia let him push and pull them into this. The world stood by and watched. You sit on your hands, you die on your knees.

Democracy is a pain in the ass.

Here's the bad news: all choices have consequences. You can choose community, life and democracy. Or you can watch TV.

Rae-Anne got halfway down the street, the cash in her pocket, that shotgun in a pillowcase stuck under one arm. Then she stopped and turned around.

She was a big woman. BBW, yessiresir. She couldn't hide behind no tree or even in the shadows of the stoop of one of them brownstone houses lining the street. But who says big women don't know how to move?

She came in through the front door. There was a dude with a flashlight on the stairs. She let go with both barrels. The flashlight fell first and bounced down the stairs. She couldn't see who held it or how their body landed but she didn't care.

She called Marcus on his cell when she got to Atlantic City.

No justice no peace.

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