

It's Hard To Know When You're Gonna Go

By Christopher Byrd (1965)

The door knocks tonight, and I open it to see a great big smile, a fat face, and a hulk to match. The guy seems nice, and the way he says hullo, makes me think I should know him, but I don't.

I feel a little stupid, 'cos he's so friendly, like he's a distant relative I've forgotten about. My wife's in the back, and she's not worried, so he can't be a guy she's invited and I'm in the way. The kid's in the back too, and he don't look like he set fire to this guy's house -- so what am I to think? Anyway, I make myself pleasant, and invite him in.

The way he looks around the room makes me think I live in paradise. I show him to the sofa with the beer stain, and he sits. I wait for him to reveal himself, but he's asking how things are going, all the time that big smile. I think maybe I should tell him, so I do, but he makes as if he knows all along. Now I think I'm telling him for nothing, and I'm just a little tired. When suddenly, his mug gets sad, he looks me in the face, swallows hard and says something that hits me like a fist in the plexus. The guy tells me I might die tomorrow.

Now I will not deny that it is possible I might die tomorrow. O'Reilly went on his wedding night, and he thought he was happy, and gonna have ten kids. But to die tomorrow I cannot take too lightly, and I still owe on the fridge. So I ask the guy to come again. He asks me what I will do if I die tomorrow. I say, I'll give back the fridge (the guy's making me just a little nervous). "No, no" he says, "don't do that, the wife'll need it, and the kid. What you want is life-protection."

By now, I'm hot and cold, and my underarms is wet with fright as you imagine. The subject is very personal. The guy's all smiles again and this makes me unhappy. He says, if I want to die right off he'll give me fifteen grand, but if I want to hold it until I'm sixty-five, he'll triple it. There's plenty of guys I know would dig their grave and jump right in for this kind of cash. I have to act cool, I'm rattling like a skeleton. Maybe this guy's got some kind of arrangement, maybe he's got a friend to bump me off sometime when he's unhappy, This I don't know -- what's he want?

All I have to do he says is sign right here and pay ten bucks a month. I laugh like a hyena, for this I cannot believe -- no I cannot believe it -- this I will not believe. No guy on earth would pay me fifteen grand to drop dead tomorrow if I give him ten bucks. And then I almost die right there. I have a fright so big my brush-cut stands on end.

There's a story I read in a *Classic* comic once, about this guy, a Dr. Frost, I think it was, and some devil, I forget his name -- uh -- Memphis -- yeah,

something like that. Anyway, this Memphis wants to buy the soul of Dr. Frost for a lot of smackers. The Doctor says O.K., and has a great life, 'til it's time to go, and he doesn't want to, 'cos it's hot down there. But Memphis gets him in the end — with a fork, and pulls him down.

The more I look at this guy who's all eager and sort of measuring my soul, he reminds me of old Memphis. I'm putrefied, I really am. My feet are wet, like I'm standing in a puddle. I'm all confused and Memphis has put a pen in my hand, and I swear he's drooling on the paper, or it's my sweat, I dunno. Anyway, I'm hot, and he's prancing around on his cloven-hooves, telling me I'm very wise, and my wife and child won't miss me so much when I go, and before I know it, I sign.

Memphis is all over me, he cannot contain himself, like I'm doing him a favour. He is waiting for something, and I remember the ten bucks, and I find some in the bible where the wife's hidden it. For my part, I'm anxious not to see him no more, not 'til I get my thirty grand. So I show him the door, but nicely, in case he gets impatient and takes my soul right then and there.

Well, the guy is gone -- the place is cool -- and I'm alone -- except for the wife and kid, who're rich, but not in the know. And I get to thinking, maybe I'm a little hasty, maybe I should contact the other agent, maybe they pay more up there. This I do not know, I am perplexed and ten bucks less. I am a little depressed. I feel I'd -- no control.

Oh hell! -- No, no! I don't mean that!!! -- Maybe you can help me -- what bothers me is -- did I do wrong?

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