



The Milk Man

by Michael M. Hughes

I knew something was up when I first saw the odd men in the oversized hats.

In the city you get used to seeing the whole gamut of strange and ugly people, from the doughy, slack-jawed Midwestern tourists and their vinyl fanny packs to white boy gangstas in Yankees caps with their pants hanging down past their asscracks to wiggly-eyed clubbers in ghoulish makeup staggering home cranked up on crystal meth. They become almost invisible after a while, like the stinking, homeless beggars one needs to step around on the sidewalk. For the mile or two I walk each day, I weave through clouds of faceless, empty, anonymous human beings, and most of the time I don't really see a single one.

But living in the city, you get a second sense about things that just don't belong.

The guys in the funny hats stood out.

The first one that tripped my alarms stood outside the coffee shop on 57th. He was thin, with tanned, sinewy arms sticking out of overalls that looked like they'd been stolen from a community theater production of *Oklahoma*, and wearing a way-too-large straw hat that hid his eyes. I saw two more of the bumpkins at lunch, lingering across the street from the steakhouse where I always ate alone. Same hokey hats, same cartoonish farmer outfits. Just standing there. Another one got on the train as I got off. It was getting ridiculous.

I assumed it was related to a movie, or one of those only-in-New-York performance art stunts. A few weeks' earlier, hundreds of unemployed actors and artsy-fartsy hipsters across the city fell to their knees at the stroke of noon and started praying to the sky. A flashmob, they called it in the *Post*, some Internet-fueled prank. A lot of idiot born-again freaked out and thought it was the beginning of the rapture. If only it had been.

Me, I prefer the old school ways of having fun. Top-shelf liquor. Whores. Fine cannabis. A little blow here and there, and a couple of escorts. With some good blow—and mine was delivered fresh outta

Panama—those girls will do just about anything.

And fun was plentiful. Republican administrations were always good for my business. If you were the CFO of a pharmaceutical corporation, you knew me by my first name. I golfed with the head of the FDA and played poker with chemical and paper industry lobbyists and went sailing in Annapolis with Pentagon brass and their bottle-blond girlfriends. They all knew that whenever their baby-soft, silk-lined asses landed in hot water, I was the guy to call. Simply put, I fixed things for the fat cats. Discretely and cleanly.

I was damn good, too. Several years ago, I made the cover of *Mother Jones*. A caricature of me, with an oversized head, grinning ear to ear, lying in a bed full of money surrounded by the logos of my clients: ExxonMobil. Pfizer. Walmart. Northrop Grumman. Dow. Blackwater.

My rates went up seventy percent after that issue came out.

I stopped at my secretary's desk on my way out of the office. I'd been thinking all day about firing her, but when she smiled and pushed out her chest, I decided it could wait until the end of the month. She couldn't type for shit, and she screwed up the spreadsheets, but she warmed up the stiff suits and made it a lot easier for me to work my magic on them.

I leaned over her desk. "Lee, have you noticed a bunch of guys dressed up like farmers around here lately? With big, straw hats? Like something out of *Hee Haw*?"

She smiled, but it was clear she had no idea what *Hee Haw* was. She'd probably been shitting in her diapers even after the reruns went off the air.

"No, Steve." That hideous, drawn-out Southern twang—*Naaoooh, Staaave*. As if she didn't sound stupid enough every time she opened her mouth. Nearly everything about her made me sick, from the poofy bangs that hung over her forehead to the way her shoes left raw blisters on her heels. But those *tits*—Christ, even to an ass man like me, those jugs were like the swirling spirals of a carnival hypnotist's wheel. And she loved to show them off, God bless her, packing them into low cut sweaters so tightly they looked close to exploding.

Her lunch was spread out before her. An iceberg salad with a shriveled pepperoncini. Some kind of oily mess wrapped in a green tortilla. And one of those schoolkid-sized cartons of milk. She knew I hated milk—not just a strong dislike, but the kind of visceral hatred I normally reserved for trial lawyers and environmentalists. Her first day on the job, I'd berated her for ten minutes for putting half and half in my coffee. Made her cry, in fact—I was surprised she didn't just walk out. I suppose my revulsion went back to when I was a kid and mistakenly drank some milk that had gone bad, not realizing it until I'd swallowed

a mouthful of the chunky mess. I projectile vomited on the inside of the refrigerator. My old man beat the shit out of me for that, and from that day just the sight or even the mention of milk made me queasy.

Besides, humans shouldn't be drinking liquid sucked from a cow's filthy udders, right? That seems like basic biology. You want milk, you should be willing to crawl under a cow and suck it right out of the udder or just admit it's goddamned disgusting.

Lee saw my eyes fix on the milk carton, and the embarrassment made her flush. Looking at her hot cheeks, and the blush spreading down her neck, I suddenly had the urge to tell her to get down on her knees and blow me. To open those country girl lips and take me deep in her mouth.

Not yet. I'd wait until she did something *really* stupid.

She smiled hard and nervous. Lips parting, showing teeth. Not a professional smile, not a city girl smile. But the boys who came through my doors ate up that kind of halfwit naïveté.

I couldn't believe she hadn't run into the suddenly ubiquitous hicks. "No farmer-in-the-dell types? Amish boys in overalls? You haven't seen them?"

She shook her head. Just smiled, stupidly, staring up at me. Maybe she was too dense and self-absorbed to notice them.

I touched her shoulder. Just my fingertips. A quick brush of my index finger against the fuzzy nape of her neck. Yeah, I'd definitely have her on her knees soon, or bent over my desk. "Why don't you take the rest of the day off. Go shopping."

I know how to treat my employees.

I guess the bastards hit me over the head. Maybe they whacked me with a pipe, or a crowbar, and stuck a chloroform-soaked rag in my face like in the old movies. I don't know. I'll never know. I was jogging one minute, thinking about Lee's wide open mouth, and the next thing I knew I was in a dark, windowless shed, my head throbbing, face-down in a puddle of puke.

I crawled around in the dark for hours, pulling at boards, scrabbling in the dirt like a dog, and banging on the door. I screamed, cursed, and begged. Nothing. I was fucked, and I don't like being fucked. I'm the *fucker*, as any of my clients will tell you, and the more helpless I felt the angrier I got. I wanted blood. In copious amounts.

Not knowing who was behind my imprisonment sent my brain into overdrive, and I tried to count all of the possible perpetrators in my head until I realized it was pointless. Might as well have been counting grains of sand. I'd made plenty of enemies. That was my game, after all. I accrued enemies like garbagemen accrued stink.

I figured they—whoever *they* were—were waiting for a ransom

payment. That had to be it. I was worth a lot of money, and the firm had plenty to spare. They'd let me out of here once the bags of cash showed up. That's what I kept telling myself because I didn't want to consider other possibilities.

The thirst kicked in long before the hunger. On the third day, by my loose estimation, I came close to drinking my own piss. Straight outta my hose. Before I did it, mercifully, the door opened. The sunlight felt like acid in my eyes.

"Who are you? What the fuck are you doing to me?" I started to my feet, my fists clenched, ready to fight my way out of my dirty little Abu Ghraib.

All I saw was a silhouette. A burly guy with a big hat. My eyes adjusted to the light and I stopped breathing. One of the farmer freaks I'd seen around town was pointing the business end of a shotgun at my face.

"What do you want?" My throat was so dry it hurt to speak. "Let's talk about this. Please. If it's money you want, I can get it for you. Name your price, I'll have it to you in an hour."

Nothing.

Another farmer stepped through the door, this one with a long, scraggly beard. He put something on the ground in front of me. A glass.

"I can get you anything you want. Let's talk about this. It ain't worth keeping me here."

Nothing. They just backed away, the shotgun barrel never averting my face until the door slammed shut and several locks clicked. Back to darkness.

I crawled toward the glass, searching with my hands. I almost knocked it over. Lifted it to my lips. At least they weren't going to let me die of thirst.

And gagged.

Milk. Motherfucking *milk*.

Much later, after I revisited the idea of swilling my urine, I held my nose and drew a sip of milk into my mouth. And immediately gagged, heaving up the few acidic dribbles of fluid left in my stomach and a string of mucous. But then I managed to swallow a bit and keep it down. And then a little more. As long as I held my nose and told myself it was the only way to stay alive, I could get it down. Afterward, I had to lie back and close my eyes and struggle not to throw it all back up.

Then I *really* got thirsty. Thirsty for a glass of ice-cold water to take that phlegmy, thick, chalky aftertaste out of my mouth. Sweet, sweet water—I drank bottles of the stuff every day. Expensive shit in cobalt blue glass, purified through reverse osmosis and shipped from Fiji to my

office every week. But right then I would have drunk from a Mexican toilet. The more I thought about how much I wanted a glass of water the more my parched throat felt like it was going to seal shut, which, in turn, made me want nothing more than a drink.

That's how people go crazy, I suppose.

When the two farmboys arrived again, much later, I was licking moisture off my skin. Again, they ignored my babbling pleas. Again, they left a glass of milk.

I drank it down. Didn't even come close to vomiting that time.

And so it went. For days. Maybe a week or more, I couldn't say. I marked time by the two inbreds' milk deliveries and the growing pain in my guts. The sensory deprivation pushed my mind off the rails, and I started inventing crazy scenarios. Was I the human equivalent of a veal calf for a family of rural cannibals, milk-fed to make my flesh marbled and a delicate shade of white, like in some stupid horror movie?

I half believed it. I needed to believe in *something*.

The cops had been alerted a few days after I'd disappeared, I told myself, and sooner or later they'd find a piece of evidence—maybe a scrap of straw from one of those moronic hats—that would lead them straight to me. My company would spare no dime hiring the best detectives. People like me just didn't disappear for good. I was valuable. I was *important*.

While flies buzzed around my head in the darkness, lighting on my lips and trying to crawl into my mouth, my enemies' faces danced behind my eyelids. Mothers, fathers, kids, burned, maimed, limbless, poisoned, orphaned, faces across a courtroom, all conveniently forgotten but coming back to haunt me now. Any of them could have wanted to do this to me.

I waited because there was nothing else I could do. I didn't pray, because I don't believe in God or any of that superstitious horseshit, but I came close for the first time in my life. No one came to rescue me, and the longer I waited the more I realized that no one was going to come—just the farmers and their glasses of warm milk.

It didn't take long before I learned to like the taste. And not much longer after that, I craved it more than anything else.

They finally brought some food. A block of sweaty, ripe cheese. I gobbled it down, barely chewing, and they were gone before I even had a chance to beg for more. At least they weren't going to let me simply starve to death. They seemed to want me alive, if barely so.

Darkness, despair, milk, and cheese. Rinse and repeat. One long, interminable, unbroken nightmare.

I finally accepted that I was dying. My bones were so sore it

seemed they would snap. I hadn't pissed or moved my bowels since I could remember, and my belly was swollen and hard, like one of those starving Ethiopian kids that were always making Sally Struthers cry. Sores erupted across my skin. I thought of ways to kill myself that wouldn't be too horrific. Scratching my wrists until they bled? Banging my head against the wall until it cracked open? Swallowing dirt?

But I couldn't do it. Not when I knew the milk and cheese would come. My captors had turned me into the kind of thing I'd always despised—a weak, pathetic animal, whimpering and begging for scraps.

I lived only for my next feeding.

When the guy with the newspaper walked in, it took me a very long time to understand what was happening. I couldn't speak because my tongue was stuck to the roof of my mouth. His face showed no pity, just the same blank, merciless coldness. He put the folded newspaper on the ground in front of me, then put a stubby, white candle on top of it. He lit the candle with a wooden match, turned, and left.

I could barely pull myself out a fetal, cramped ball in the corner of the shed, but I managed to crawl on my belly to the candle and its pool of light. I looked even worse than I'd imagined. My ribs stuck out like bicycle spokes, and skin hung off my arms like a loose shirt. Fatty, purple-tipped pustules, as big as golf balls and riddled with tiny, blue veins, had spread irregularly across my arms, my chest, even my groin. When I touched one it jiggled. Tumors of some sort, I guessed.

The candle flame danced. I lifted the yellowed newspaper with my thin, dirt- and blood-blackened fingers. The letters were like hieroglyphs, but with concentration my mind assembled them into words and sentences.

DAIRY CONTAMINATION RULED ACCIDENTAL

Oh, fuck.

Associated Press.

Oh, yes, then it began to make perfect sense.

...ruled that the chemical, which has been shown to affect hormonal and neurological development, was an unknown metabolite of the growth inducing feed additive. Animal tests had ruled out toxicity, but

I remembered.

A smiling guy, in a tight wool suit. Nearly breaking my hand as he shook it, his gold tooth reflecting the fluorescent office lights. *Jack wanted me to relay his appreciation for all of your good work on his behalf. He wanted you to have this—a private gift, you understand—as a token of our thanks.*

Oh, yes, he'd rewarded me well.

The plaintiffs say they will appeal the ruling. "Our children's lives have been stolen from us," said Rebecca "Becky" Strickland, president of Parents Against Chemical Industry Abuse (PACIA) and a mother of one of the children affected by the contaminant. "This is a clear, well-documented example of willing and unlawful adulteration of the food supply, in flagrant disregard for the health

The toxicologist I'd met with—a Dutch guy with bad breath—had been shaking like a wet rat in a freezer in spite of the warmth in my office. A straight, well-intentioned family man, he'd clearly had qualms about cooking the data. Like all of them, though, he did what we asked when the price was right. The not-so-veiled threats against his kids probably helped, too.

Fourteen children, aged six months to eight years, suffered gross physical abnormalities and dramatic hormonal surges. Of the fourteen, only two remained

After the verdict, I'd rewarded myself with the usual binge on champagne, female companionship, and blow. The little Thai hooker hadn't been anything special, but she fought when I pushed her too far, and her struggles beneath me had been quite charming. Otherwise, it had been an utterly forgettable weekend.

Company stock did not fall as sharply as some analysts had expected, and rose after news of the verdict. Spokesman Larry Shoemaker said, "We are confident that this ruling will put to rest the bizarre rumors and allegations of conspiracy theorists

I laughed, convulsing in the dirt, but no sound passed my lips, only hot, fetid air. It was exquisite, how they'd punished me—so perfect I had to admire it.

And at least I'd die knowing that it all made sense.

Light.

The door bangs open. Several of them enter. They lift me, and I realize I must weigh no more than a child.

The carry me—I cannot walk anymore, can't even lift my hands—through a dry, brown field and into the darkened doorway of a long, windowless building. The air is dank and smells like newly turned earth and animal waste. A string of lights leads into a larger room.

There are lots of them inside. Men, women, mothers holding babies. Children at their parents' sides. The men lay me down in the center of the room, in a pile of straw, and all I see are their faces. Eyes boring into mine. All of them.

Squeeeeeeeak.

They turn away from me towards a doorway.

Squeeeeeeeeeeeak.

Three men back into the room. They're pulling something, straining. The handle of a large cart, or a wagon.

Squeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeak.

Metal wheels, groaning under weight.

The odor rolls into the room and smacks me in the face. Rotten milk, curdled, spoiled and sour. The assembled cover their faces with hands or handkerchiefs, and the children bury their heads in their mothers' long dresses.

Then I recognize one of the women—Lee. My secretary. She's dressed like them, in a plain, dumpy long dress, and her hair is pulled back. She sees me looking at her, and her expression hardens.

Squeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeak.

I can't make out what's on the cart. At first it looks like a bunch of balloons stuck together. All knobby and round and bulbous. Then it moves, rippling and wiggling, and I realize it's not a collection of things, but one thing. And

Squeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeak.

It has a head. A face.

"No," I say, barely a whisper that only I can hear.

I can't tell the sex of it, or how old it is, but it's hundreds of

pounds of flesh spread across the buckling farm cart, sitting in a pool of clotting white liquid. There's a head, or something like a head, but only one eye—the other is hidden beneath one of the those *things*—those fatty protrusions, each one etched with blue veins and capped with a purple, oozing knob. And the wiggling bulbs. . . now that I see them individually, they look remarkably like—well, if they were on a woman—

I close my eyes. I'm screaming inside, and falling into blackness.

I've already checked out of my body when they lift me again, when they carry me over to it, when they lay me across the flesh, and when I open my mouth, instinctively, to feed.

