



HAINT PUNCH

By Richard Murff

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The offices of the *Daily Brute* were mostly dark after hours, but dotted with the odd light still burning across the cube farm. At the far end of the long, cramped room Editor-in-Chief Anna Degrasse sat in an office that ate up all the window space in the narrow building overlooking a narrow D.C. street. Through its glass walls, Degrasse watched over her hipster bastion of mewing new media sorts, looking about as adult and out of place as possible in black slacks and white silk blouse. The transparency of the glass wall, she said, illustrated her “open door” policy with her employees. Although she never fully explained why its glass door was nearly always shut.

At the far end at the long room, Deke Kipling dropped his battered leather Ghurka bag and briefcase on a pristine desk and retrieved a bottle of bourbon. He headed toward Degrasse in her glass box and forced a smile, rapping on the door before going in. “Greetings from Kentucky.” He said, waving the bottle.

“Well, what have you got?” Degrasse asked.

“Charming as always. The QED is that basically Kentucky is making so much bourbon that it comes dangerously close to running out of water every summer.” Deke poured out a couple of tumblers.

“Okay, environmental disaster, I like it.” Degrasse pressed the intercom on her phone, “Francis, will you check on which liquor companies advertise with us?”

“Mom!” came the distressed voice on the other end of the line. “I told you it’s Frank now!”

“Your name is whatever I say it is!” She turned back to Deke. “It is so hard to find good help these days. Where was I?”

“You were going to put me on staff.”

“I’m almost certain that wasn’t it.”

“Look, Ms. Degrasse, I’m sick of freelancing and you’re sick of this conversation. Why don’t you take me on as a staff writer? I’ll open up the *Daily Brute’s* New Orleans desk.”

“Deke, you aren’t a team player and you know it. When was the last time you promoted one of your stories over the social media? I mean, I can barely get the rest of the staff off to actually write anything they didn’t pull of the Internet. Of course, it’s shit, but it gets clicks!”

Deke laughed, “I’m not sure that social media is where I need to be right now.”

“Well damn Deke – where should you be?”

He squished into his chair, “Is hashtag: *damndeke* still a thing?”

“Yes! You really are clueless, aren’t you?”

“Ms. Degrasse, my phone crashes twice a day.”

“Did someone hack it?”

“Lord if I know. At any rate, I need a new one so I’m a little behind on making myself obvious at 280 characters a pop. Besides, have you ever been a man online? All the bigoteers take you for a rapist or at least criminally creepy.”

“That’s ridiculous, women are constantly harassed on social media.”

“So why is anyone one on it?”

“God only knows but they are. Why, my son Francis is a regular social media guru.”

“I said a man.”

“Oh, quit whining.” Degrasse said with a lingering sip of her drink, “*Vodka, Bears and Furry Hats* spent eight weeks on the bestseller list. Granted not very high on the list, but I paid for your plane ticket. And by the way, Mr. Kipling dear, those ridiculous books you write wouldn’t sell have as much if I hadn’t made you fashionable.”

“You’re paying me in exposure, how modern. Look, someone actually has to write these books. After expenses, I’m basically working for the *Brute* for free.”

“Where have you been, Deke? Nobody gets *paid* anymore... welcome to the new economy. That’s why we’re pushing the social media... It’s all about the platform! Awareness! Go start a funding campaign to cover your expenses. Hashtag: *damndeke* is lighting it up!”

“I’m not sure I want to beat that drum too loudly.”

“Deke, you are a very nearly award-winning writer, you might come out ahead with a fundraiser.

“You want me to raise money so that I can write a story for the *Daily Brute*?”

“You’ll never know unless you’re out there being a twit. Or a twat. Is that what they call the online social justice set on that hellscape?” She looked at Deke hard, “Oh, what am I asking you for? Francis knows all about that foolishness.”

Deke grabbed the bourbon. “Here, lemme top you up, Ms. Degrasse. Courtesy of Rock Ridge. How long can sobriety stay fashionable?”

“I don’t like your tone, young man.” She contemplated the bourbon. “Now quit fussing. I’m thinking of replacing all of you with AIDCB.”

“Beg pardon?”

“AIDCB – Artificial Intelligence Driven Click Bait - AIDCB”

“It certainly sounds more efficient than what I do.”

“Oh, it is. We’re going to brand our AI program ‘FRANCYS.’”

“After your son?”

“No, we’re spelling it with a Y.” One of Degrasse’s rare girlish smiles rent her face. “He *hates* it.”

Beyond the glass wall, Lucy Burton came into the newsroom and stopped to look at the bags resting on her desk like a pair of rotting whale carcasses on an otherwise neatly ordered beach. She looked up and saw Deke beyond the glass wall and headed across the cube farm. Sticking her head in, she said, “Hey, Deke. Your bags are on my desk.”

“I have too. I don’t have one, you see. I’m freelance.”

“That sounds like a damn Deke problem, not a Lucy problem.”

“Don’t you start. Can I buy you a drink?” Deke poured out another glass.

“Thanks. Wow, that’s good.” Lucy looked at Degrasse, “Have you told damn Deke about the lawyers?”

“Lawyers? Is it bad?”

“Deke, are lawyers ever good?” Degrasse asked, “Professor Blanche Barker – you may remember that you profiled her in that little article of yours...”

“You know you published the story, right?”

“...has decided to sue the *Daily Brute*.” She sighed, “I think it’s because you won’t join in on some ridiculous online slapfight – which would be click-bait gold, Francis tells me!”

“Can you actually sue someone for that?” asked Deke. He was curious.

“Well...no....” said Degrasse. “But she *can* sue for libel for alleging that she or her organization has any ties to a domestic terrorist organization ... what was it? The OLA ... What does that even stand for?”

“Ovarian Liberation Army.” Deke explained.

Lucy laughed, “Do the white nationalists know this? Aren’t they still trying to dox you too?”

“Well, Dr. Barker suing *me*.” Degrasse looked at Lucy. “Seriously Lucy, what do the feminists have against me? I’m a feminist icon!”

“Icon?” asked Lucy.

“I mean, I can see why these women hate Deke – he wrote the article and gave it that silly title. Just look at him in his wadded seersucker, flying around like some half-in-the-bag country squire who can’t keep help, or afford dry cleaners.”

“Ma’am, I’m right here.” Deke scratched his head, “I don’t have anything against feminists. And yes, Ballyhoo, or whatever the white rights crew is calling themselves this week, are still trolling me for the ‘We’re No Wankers’ piece. I’d have thought you’d be happy the traffic.”

“Listen up, my aggressively moderate friend, it’s Blanche Barker who is suing us this week.” She quaffed the last of her bourbon and waved the glass at Deke who gave her another slug. “I guess that’s my problem. When you get back to New Orleans, write me a draft for Kentucky. And weren’t you kicking something around about some illegal casinos down there? Why is that interesting? I thought Louisiana had legalized gaming?”

“They do. So something other than cards must be going on. My guess is whores and drugs. I’ve also heard that you can buy a voodoo hex on a horserace.

“Cocaine, hookers and voodoo? Ok, I’ll bite.” She smiled fleetingly. “Oh, and one more thing, I got your email and we are not running Kentucky under the title ‘Flogging the Bung.’”

Lucy stifled a laugh.

“It’s an industry term, I swear.”

“Be that as it may...”

“Look, I’ll write Kentucky, but after that I’m driving up to Clarksdale for a dove shoot.”

“I’m not paying you to go hunting.”

“You aren’t paying me at all! I need a break and I haven’t missed a Labor Day shoot since I was twelve. I’ll call you about the ghost casinos when I get back to New Orleans.”

“Fine. We wouldn’t want to wreck your boyhood memories. Go fry up some catfish and buy some ribbon for Ellie May Clampett. Meanwhile, I’ll put someone else on the story.”

“No, you won’t. I’m your only guy in New Orleans and you’re too cheap to fly anyone down there.” Before Degrasse could hurl her cocktail glass at Deke’s head, he said, “Hey Lucy – you ought to come with me. Can you shoot? Press isn’t officially allowed, but Senator Laudermilk will be there – the last one he missed was for Vietnam. It’s gotten to be quite a political to-do down in the Delta. All the politicians and kingmakers in Mississippi will be there, for what that’s worth. I’ll bet that Betty Sue Wallace is trying to get an invite as we speak.”

Before Lucy – eyes now very wide – could answer, Degrasse put her drink down with a rap. “Deke, dear, you’ve been hunting with Senator Aubrey Laudermilk – the ‘Old Bear’ of the Senate – every year since you were twelve and never thought to mention it?”

“What can I say? I’m freelance.”

“Being an idiot has nothing to do with your W-9.” She waved at Lucy grandly, “Didn’t you think that our newbie political correspondent might need to know this?”

“Our?”

“I’m not that new...” Lucy grumbled.

“Deke,” Degrasse continued, “did you just forget that Laudermilk is a senator?”

“It’s easier to do than you might think. Listen Lucy, I’ll call Ferg and tell him I’ve got an ‘and guest.’”

“Who?”

Degrasse thundered, “Deke! As of now I’m putting you on the Mississippi senate race!”

“No!” Lucy and Deke screamed in unison.

Degrasse's eyes gleamed, smiling brighter than she'd ever smiled at Francis. "You know there is a rumor that Laudermilk is planning a run for the White House."

Lucy calmly topped off Degrasse's highball, "Ms. Degrasse, I've been following Betty Sue Wallace for months now. I picked up the trial of that deranged, wannabe Southern Belle before anyone thought she could knock Davison out in the primary. It hasn't been easy, either. Do you have any idea how hard it is to come up with good copy from a woman who thinks that all political issues can be reduced to a metaphor about Gamaw's deviled eggs?"

"Nonsense." Degrasse said, swirling the tiny bit of ice in her glass. "You two will be equal partners. Right Deke?"

"It's all equal until someone has to clean the birds." Deke sighed. "Look, Ma'am, this is Lucy's story. I'm gonna take it easy, bag my limit and drink some of that wicked whiskey barrel punch Mr. O'Conner makes. I'm off the clock."

Lucy relaxed. "So you'll be drunk most of the time? Really? Deke? You promise?"

"...and well armed."

"My, that sounds perfectly reasonable." Said Lucy. "Just remember to point the gun upward."

"Kiss the sky with brass!" Deke stood and quaffed the rest of his bourbon. "Alright boss-lady, give me a few days on Kentucky." He and Lucy walked back to her cube where she wordlessly pointed out the offending baggage. "So, listen." Deke said, ignoring the finger. "I've got an early flight tomorrow."

"I've got an early interview with Congressman Carlton. It's part of my job. You know, one of those things you don't have."

"Right. Please don't make me get into hotels and taxis. I'll get into a fight with Degrasse over expenses and we both know that I'll lose. The woman is terrifying. Can I sleep on your couch? Or bathtub? Or the perfumed embrace of your bosom? C'mon, I'll make you dinner."

Lucy gathered her purse and pointed to the exit. "The couch is good. And I've eaten your cooking, so what you'll do is make reservations...**AT A PLACE THAT TAKES RESERVATIONS.**"

"Fair point."

They got outside and Lucy turned to Deke. “Where are we eating? Nothing in a basket. And I want cloth napkins, understand Mr. Hashtag Damn Deke?”

“Don’t forget oppressed white men hate me too.”

“Always making friends, aren’t ya?”

“Yeah, they love me to death. I’m getting it in stereo these days.” Deke looked into the window of Milo’s Greek Cuisine, “You want to eat here?”

Lucy kept walking, “Do you not know what a reservation is?”

“Well, let’s get a cab then. You work in a shit neighborhood.”

“That’s most of D.C.”

He hailed a cab and slid in behind Lucy. As they drove away, small groups of young men began to come out of the shadows and filter into the alley Deke and Lucy just passed.

“Seriously Deke,” Lucy said, “be careful with those ghost casinos. That sounds like the mafia.”

“I just got back from Syria... Don’t worry about me I’ll wear my Kevlar turtleneck.”

“I’m serious.”

Deke turned and took Lucy by the shoulders, “Tomorrow I fly into the belly of the beast.”

“You mean home?”

“Well, yes. Eventually, though, my luck will run out.” Deke looked theatrically into the night.

Lucy failed to keep a smile at bay. “Now that was a good line!”

“Thank you.”

Lucy settled into the seat. “You think you’re pretty clever, don’t you? You just fly into town after a month – having infuriated every women’s group in the country and drinking whiskey with the fellas - and you just assumed I’d be free? Is that it?”

“Hoped is a better word.”

“I’ll have you know that I was invited out for cocktails tonight.”

“I don’t doubt it. You’re a catch Lucy Burton of the *Brute* ...and yet here you are...”

“Here I am.”

“So what happened to your gentleman caller?”

“Date got cancelled. I was whacked with an elk penis.”

“I’m listening.”

“Well, not *literally*.”

“Lucy, how do you *figuratively* get whacked with an elk penis?”

“What time is that flight, Buddy?”