

Vengeance
By Paul Dailing

The cigarette was an affectation. Phil hadn't smoked since high school, as his phlegmy, sputtery inhale attested. But he had to go through the motions; Detective O'Brien had offered him one and smoke was what people in this situation did.

O'Brien, a hirsute man with a truly unfortunate mustache, pocketed his recently returned lighter and slowly took his seat behind the table in the otherwise empty room. The luon table held only an ashtray, a manila file folder, and a cassette recorder. O'Brien pressed a button on the latter and spoke softly to the young man spitting for air.

"This is for the record, so in a loud, clear voice, please state your name and why you're here."

The young man shot a quick glance at the wall with the large mirror, leaned forward, and began to speak.

"My name is Phil Davenport, I'm from Louisville, and someone is trying to kill me."

O'Brien gave a small nod to the mirror and returned his attention to Phil.

"Mr. Davenport, I'm going to ask you a few questions. May I call you Phil? And don't worry, that's not one of the questions," O'Brien added with a sickly chuckle.

Phil appreciated the attempt at levity and mustered a weak laugh of his own.

"Sure," he said.

"When did you first suspect that your life was in danger?"

Phil gulped slightly and took a fevered pull on his cigarette.

"Well, I was going out this morning, you know, just stepping outside to get the mail and the paper, and I heard this whistling sound."

"A whistling?" O'Brien interrupted.

"You know," Phil said, attempting to whistle, a task his inexperience with cigarettes and general nervousness did not aid. "And it kept getting louder. Louder and louder, you know? And I kept looking around, but couldn't see where it was coming from, you know?"

He paused to knock the long ash dangling from his almost unsmoked smoke.

“Then I looked up and saw it. It was big and black and headed right for me. I dove out of the way, head first into my lawn. It nearly killed me.”

O’Brien opened the manila folder and removed a black and white photograph.

“Is this what almost killed you?”

Phil gulped.

“Yes,” he said, laying his cigarette in the ashtray.

O’Brien spoke directly into the mic.

“Let the record show that Mr. Davenport identified the object currently embedded in his sidewalk as the object in question. The object is approximately four feet tall, four feet across at the bottom, 18 inches across on top. The object is trapezoidal in shape and black in color. There is a small hoop attached to the top of it. Lab analysis showed the object is metal, 99% iron with a 1% nickel impurity,” O’Brien cleared his throat. “The legend ‘16 TONS’ is written on the side of it. ‘Sixteen’ in numerals, ‘tons’ in all caps.”

O’Brien put the photo back in the folder.

“Do you have any enemies, Phil? Anyone who would want to hurt you?”

“No! Of course not! Who would want to hurt me?”

“Well, apparently someone.”

Phil glanced down sullenly and asked for another cigarette. O’Brien obliged.

“What do you do, Phil?” O’Brien asked while lighting.

“Nothing much. I work in a PR firm. Nothing special. I’m just an intern.”

“No one there would . . .”

“No,” Phil said, shaking his head.

“So not business. Have a girlfriend?”

“No.”

“Boyfriend?”

“No.”

“Any trouble at home?”

“I have no family.”

O’Brien sighed with frustration.

“The officer on the scene noticed some camping equipment in your car. Care to explain that?”

“What? Oh, yeah. I went up to the lake last weekend. Too lazy to unpack.”

Detective O’Brien’s eyes lit. Then as quickly as they did, he forced a casual air.

“Lake Wanateesee?”

Phil Davenport nodded.

“Shit,” O’Brien muttered.

“What? What!?”

“Probably nothing,” O’Brien said, lighting himself a cigarette. Phil noticed the detective’s hands were shaking.

“I need you to be perfectly honest with me, even if it hurts,” O’Brien finally said.

“At any point on that trip did you . . . antagonize a small, furry woodland creature?”

“What? No, well, there was this otter.”

“Otter?” O’Brien asked, forcing nonchalance upon forced nonchalance.

“Yeah, there was this otter on the campsite I chose, so I chased it off.”

“What was the otter doing?”

“Nothing. Just swinging in his hammock, playing his banjo.”

“Was the otter seemingly defenseless?”

“Why, yes. It was small and fuzzy, so I assumed . . .”

“Did the otter walk on its hind legs or all fours?”

“Hind legs.”

“Could it talk?”

“Yeah. What’s this all about?”

“Hopefully nothing. I just have one more question. Was this small, furry, talking woodland creature you antagonized . . . and I hope for your sake I’m wrong. Was it wearing white gloves?”

A thin trickle of sweat began to form on Phil’s brow. It ran down the bridge of his nose and dripped onto the lit, unsmoked cigarette still in his trembling hand.

“Yes. The otter was wearing white gloves.”

“DAMN!” O’Brien yelled slamming his fist on the table “DAMN DAMN DAMN DAMN HIDEOUS HORSEFEATHERS DAMN!”

“What?” Phil shrieked. “Do you think the otter . . .”

“I don’t know what to think, but it doesn’t look good.”

O'Brien slumped in his seat and buried his head in his hands.

"Not again. Not again," he whined.

Before Phil could say anything, O'Brien straightened up.

"I need to talk to the captain. Listen. While I'm gone do not answer the phone."

"Okay."

"Do not accept any telegrams."

"Okay."

"Do not take any special deliveries from people wearing false mustaches, a Western Union uniform, and no pants."

"Okay."

"Do not make passes at any women with parasols; avoid all thing shaped like a smithy's anvil; do not accept any bouquets of red, tube-shaped flowers with long lit fuses extending from them, that goes double for cigars; do not eat piles of birdseed you find lying in the road even if there is a sign sticking out of it that says it is free. And most importantly, no matter what anyone else may say, it is in fact duck season. I'm going to keep you alive, boy!"

"W-what can I do?" Phil stammered.

O'Brien paused to contain himself.

"Nothing. We deal with this sort of thing every day. I do apologize for getting worked up. It's probably freaking you out," he said with another forced chuckle.

Phil nodded nervously.

"Don't worry. We have this completely under control. I worry so you don't have to. You just sit back and let us take care of this. Would you like some coffee? Tea?"

"Tea would be nice," Phil quietly said.

O'Brien grinned a large, toothy grin and adjusted his bushy red mustache. The mustache, Phil noticed, was of a different color than the slick, matted, chestnut hair covering the entirety of Detective O'Brien's face and body.

"Really?" O'Brien said, reaching behind his back to clutch something large and heavy. "Would you like one lump, or two?"