

Death of the Egg King

by Paul Melko

Dr. Rocque was dead -- shot in the forehead with a small caliber handgun -- and my first concern was whether he had signed my thesis.

The manuscript, in loose leaf form, lay open on his desk to the middle of Chapter 5. Rocque sat in his chair, head back, seemingly taking a moment to rest before continuing on with my masterpiece. That image was fine, if you ignored the dot in the middle of his brow.

I carefully flipped to the cover page. Empty, the slot for his signature in the lower left hand corner was empty. All the other signatures were there: mine at the top, then Dr. Forest's and Dr. Olivia-Yordan's and Dr. Khomeli's. But not Rocque's, and I had been sure the bastard was going to sign. Just to be rid of me after six years.

I heard the heavy drip-drop of blood and looked behind his chair at the pool of red. It was obvious what had happened; he'd been popped before he could sign. The row of eggs that usually lined his shelf were gone.

I grabbed his fountain pen, a gift from a Duchess during his Nobel Prize trip, and, after a quick glance at his signature on a student petition on his desk, signed his name for him. I'd done it before on a grant proposal.

The thesis was thick and heavy, and I was quite proud of the amount of material I had managed to regurgitate concerning my last six years in the Department of Aromatic Chemistry. Rocque had been less thrilled, but the bastard survived by keeping dumb graduate researchers like me in indentured servitude. The last time Rocque had been in a lab was when he was a graduate assistant. I thumped the thesis against his desk, squaring the pages.

With a look into the outer office, I exited and shut the door. I dropped the signed thesis in Thelma's in-box and departed for a well-deserved beer.

#

The Man Hole was empty, except for some rough boys in the back playing pool. Fernando was tending the bar and gave me a toothless grin.

"Hey, Stot. What'll it be, man?"

"Hey, Fernando. How much does it cost to get in here?"

He grinned again. "You know there ain't never any cover at the Man Hole."

"You never get tired of that joke, do you? Corona."

He handed me my beer and I handed him a twenty. "How long have I been here?"

"An hour, Stot, at least. We been talking about your Grammy and the good cookies she used to bake for you."

"I've been here at least two. Remember? The bells of Saint Clemens rang five times when I entered."

Fernando bounced his palm off his forehead. "How could I forget, Stot? Oranges and lemons."

I grinned, then took a sip from my beer. I liked to avoid the Man Hole in daylight hours. At least at night the grunge sort of blended in. The wooden floor was pitted and warped. The odor of the place was this year's sweat mixed with last year's beer. The moulded metal on the ceiling made the acoustics shitty. Don't ask me why I spent so much time there.

I did notice the placement of Fernando's egg at the end of the bar, close to the door where everyone who entered would pass it. I'd told Fernando he could have put it under the bar and it would have done him just as well. The aromatics filled the whole room pretty much equally. Instead he'd put it out there in the open, and worse, under a ceiling fan. Any decent defense attorney would add a time variable of plus or minus one hour for data taken out of that egg.

It was a Singaporean rip-off of one of Rocque's first models. With a mass spectrometer and a neutron activation system, a good aromatic chemist could determine to the hour who was in the bar for the last twenty-four hours. I, with university equipment and newly decreed Ph.D., could figure it for the last forty-eight hours. Cheaper than a security system and more verifiable than video, the egg was a perfect crime deterrent. Unless the thief or murderer took the egg with him.

The egg had won Rocque his Nobel Prize and now it had won me my Ph.D. I downed my beer, and said, "You can call me Dr. Aristotle, now."

Fernando laughed, and brought me another beer. "This one's on the house, Doc."

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I took it and went off to flirt with the rough boys in the back.

About an hour later, Russell walked in and we hissed at each other.

"There aren't enough gay bars in this town," I said.

"Well," he said in his ultra-lispy voice that he used in public, "when you've had as many boys as I've had, there could never be enough bars in this podunk town where I wouldn't run into somebody I'd done. And believe me, Aristotle, you're one of many." He looked me up and down and then shook his head.

Russell was my first lover when I came to graduate school, but not my first lover ever, even though I had let him think that for a few weeks. We'd parted in what I thought was an amicable way about a year earlier. Russell had seen it differently, and been a public nuisance to me since.

I was feeling nostalgic however, and said, "Let me buy you a drink, Russell."

"I thought you'd never ask," replied Russell. "Oh, Bar Wench! Bar Wench! A strawberry daiquiri, please." I passed the pool cue to one of the rough boys.

Fernando rolled his eyes at me as he turned on the blender. I flashed him a smile and took the stool next to Russell's.

"I got my doctorate. Handed in my thesis yesterday."

"It's about damn time, Aristotle. I figured you to be turning grey before you got that shingle. In celebration, if you buy me two more rounds, I'll buy you one."

"You are truly a gentleman."

"Stop flirting with me." Russell took the drink from Fernando. "I heard Adrian dumped you. How's it feel to be on the other end for a change?" I sensed a real anger behind Russell's mocking venom. Adrian had been my lover after Russell and until a week ago.

"He knew I was leaving. He knew we couldn't stay together."

"So you still fantasize about leaving our little community? We're spoiled here, you know? This little college town is the most liberal place in the world. Thirty-two percent of all students and faculty are gay in our little politically correct haven." He began to play with his umbrella. "Where do you think Fernando lost all his teeth? In the real world, out there among the straights." He paused to finish his drink. "Weren't you and Adrian a registered couple?"

I shrugged. Russell was beginning to piss me off. He knew me too well, knew what screws hurt when turned. I had yet to go down to the courthouse and un-register Adrian and me. I decided to do that before I left the next day.

"Well, speak of the devil," Russell said.

I turned and saw Adrian enter with a leather stud. He was dressed in tight jeans and a denim jacket. He'd added dark rouge to his eye to enhance the shiner he had. We had played rough before, but he had obviously decided to embrace the SM life-style fully. He saw me and gripped his stud tighter.

"Oh, ouch. Such immature displays of spite. I'm glad you never did that to me when you dumped me. He's such a bitch, Stot." Russell edged closer to me. "Why don't you come on home with me and forget about Adrian? I'll even be your punching bag, if you want."

I stood up suddenly, shaking loose Russell's hands. "No thanks, Russell. I've gotta pack. I'm leaving tomorrow."

"Well, Okay," said Russell, already eyeing one of the rough boy pool sharks. "See you later, Doctor. Then again maybe not."

I slipped past Adrian and out the door.

#

The pounding of Police Sergeant Claudia Clarke's fist on my door woke me the next morning. I saw it was her through the front window, so I answered the door naked.

"I just love a woman in uniform."

"I'm gay because of you, Aristotle."

"Are you sure you're not het? That crew cut makes you look scrumptious."

"Open the screen door and get some clothes on, Stot. This is serious."

I pulled on a robe and we sat at the kitchen table. She kicked at a pile of boxes. "Going somewhere?"

"Yeah. I got my doctorate. I'm outta here." I put a cup of coffee in front of her. "What's the deal, Claudia? Last minute police work you need us for?" The university aromatic chemistry equipment was a leap better than the city's and on a number of occasions, I'd helped out deciphering an egg that had come from a particularly tough scene.

"Dr. Rocque is dead."

I frowned, tried my best to look shocked. Unfortunately my cynicism is my only defense mechanism. "He ate far too much butter. Success

did him in; the Nobel Prize gave him too much spending money, raised his standard of living too high. You have to be born to upper class or the food will kill you."

Claudia smiled blandly. "It wasn't butter. It was a bullet. Through the forehead and out the back."

"Guns and butter are always linked." I nodded and looked down at the cup of coffee. "Dead, huh? He wasn't a bad sort. That's too bad. Did you dissect his egg?"

"Stolen. All seven of his eggs, including the one hidden under his desk. Did you know about that one?"

"All his students did. All the faculty did. Maybe he had one that no one knew about."

"Not in that office." Claudia sipped from her mug. "What was Rocque working on?"

"He's been pushing a new theory at the Government, using high-energy gamma tomography...."

"No. On Sunday, when he was murdered. Why was he in on a Sunday evening?"

I shrugged. I knew exactly what he had been working on, but I wasn't going to draw attention to that. "A grant. Grading papers. Anything."

"I ask because whatever he was working on was stolen."

"It was a murder-theft?"

"Apparently. We noticed it when we went to take samples from his desk. Even though the bullet came from the front of the desk, the ensuing cloud of blood, brains, and gore should have left a fine dusting of Dr. Rocque's innards all over the office. One of the forensics boys went to take a sample from the most convenient spot -- Rocque's desk -- and came up empty. He came up empty in a rectangle approximately forty centimeters wide and thirty centimeters long. There were smears at the twenty centimeter mark in the wide direction."

"Homework. He was grading homework, and some insane student came and blew him away. He was too tough a grader."

"Do you have a listing of all of Rocque's students, cross-referenced to their psychological stability index?"

"That was going to be my next Ph.D. thesis."

"Too bad." Claudia stood. "So you have no idea what Rocque was working on?"

"None."

"Okay. You know the routine. If you think of something before you leave, let me know." She handed me her card.

"Will do."

#

As I walked into the aro-chem building, Vladimir Rostov called to me. "Hey, Stot, man!"

"Hey, Vlad."

"We're throwing a 'Rocque is Dead' party. You coming, man? My place, tonight."

Vladimir had worked for Rocque for two years on the theoretical side, coming from Moscow University to study with the man. Vladimir had switched advisors, incensed by Rocque's inability to grasp any of his more subtle theoretical points. I had to admit that some of them were quite beyond my grasp as well. But my work was experimental.

"Isn't it rather morbid to have a party celebrating a man's death?"

"I will dance on his grave, when he is buried. Until then, I will toast his brains leaking out the back of his head."

"Well, I can't go. I'm leaving. My thesis is done."

"Hey! It's done? Congratulations. It's about time. Well, all right. I wanted to invite you. I knew you and Rocque weren't best pals."

I shrugged and headed to Thelma's office. The inner door to Rocque's office was roped off with yellow and black tape.

"It matches our school colors."

"What? Eh?" Thelma's head lolled lazily towards the door. "Yeah, sure Aristotle." She burped under her breath. "It does."

"How are you this morning?"

"Shitty. Just shitty." Her words slurred only slightly. She was a true veteran.

"Did you send my thesis off to reproduction, Thelma?"

"First thing, Aristotle. First thing. And they were back at noon." She pointed to a box standing next to her filing cabinet. "Twenty quick copies with paper covers. Five stayed behind for leather binding, to be delivered next week. He was the only man I ever had an affair with."

"Do you have the original?"

She opened a file and handed me the original. "It was twenty-two years ago. A beautiful June night. He took me, all of me, I gave of myself freely. He never said a word about it. Not for twenty-two years."

"Then it's tough for you now that he's dead?"

"Hell, no. I'm glad." She wiped her nose with a tissue. "And I miss him already. Do you understand, Aristotle?"

I shook my head. "Heterosexual love just confuses me."

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"I would guess so."

"Good-bye, Thelma."

"Bye, Aristotle."

I then looked up the surviving three members of my graduate committee, dropping off a copy of the thesis for each.

"So he actually signed it? Son of a bitch. I was sure he'd dig his heels in and push you for another year. I couldn't see why. You have some good stuff in here." Dr. Emil Forest leaned back in his chair, peering far too closely at the cover page. In a moment, he turned to the interior. "Congratulations, Aristotle. What are your plans?"

"Taking the summer off, then I'll start pitching my resume. A couple of police departments have already expressed interest."

"Ha! The last aromatic chemist we graduated took one-hundred-twenty thousand from the LAPD. Don't settle for a penny less."

"I'll put you down as a reference."

"Please do, please do."

Dr. Marlina Olivia-Yordan looked up at me over a copy of Material Engineering Quarterly. "Congratulations, Aristotle. Well done." Her hand was dry and raspy in mine.

"I want to ask you again to consider taking a post-graduate position here." She held up a hand. "I know how you feel about it. I feel the same way about academia myself sometimes. But perhaps, however sorrowful it may be, Dr. Rocque's death may change your mind."

"The man was merely a symptom, not a cause," I said. "Thank you for the offer, but no."

She nodded. "Well, I'm still quite taken with some of the materials you mentioned in Chapter 5 of your thesis. Your idea of using an aromatic collector as a plaster on walls or ceilings is quite ingenious. Perhaps some eager new student will pick up where you left off."

"I hope not," I said, smiling as well as I could. I wanted to yell at her that I was suffocating in the sterile environment of the University. I was dying and would be as dead as Rocque if I stayed. I wanted out, and I wanted out now. I added, "Thank you again for the offer. I plan to get into the private sector perhaps."

"Yes, of course. They offer far more money than we ever can."

And far more air.

Dr. Mohammed Khomeli smiled nervously at me. "I am quite ruffled today, Aristotle. The police have been here already, and this matter of death in the building. Quite bothersome. And my productivity will be quite low today."

"The police questioned you already?"

"Yes. They checked the computer records and found everyone who was logged in at the time of the death. I was here on Sunday, but no one saw me but you." I had met with Khomeli briefly on Sunday to clarify a point in the thesis. That was before I had gone to see Rocque about the signature.

"I wanted to ask you about that pistol on your desk...."

"Do not make jokes, Aristotle! How atrocious a sense of humor you have." But I saw his lips quiver slightly. He came around his desk and shook hands warmly with me. "Good luck. Please contact me if there is anything I can do for you. Good luck."

"Thank you, sir. Thank you very much."

#

Sergeant Clarke was standing in the student lounge when I entered. She was interviewing a student, but stopped immediately when I walked in.

"Let's take a walk, Aristotle."

"Sure." I dropped the box on a chair and was about to follow her out the door, when she turned and picked up the original copy of my thesis.

The campus was quiet, like always a week after finals. A slight wind rustled the leaves of the trees lining the road. We walked for about a hundred feet down the curb before she spoke. Claudia said, "How did you know that you had your doctorate Sunday night? You told a number of people in the Man Hole that you were done."

"I assumed it was done. All but the signatures."

"That was a big assumption. Faculty members have mentioned that Rocque was holding back. Hard enough to keep you here."

"Not that hard."

"Was this sitting on Rocque's desk?" She waved the thesis at me.

"No."

"You went to Thelma and picked it up. Slightly irregular."

"I wanted to make a few extra copies."

"You have an alibi."

"I was at the Man Hole."

"You have another alibi."

"Hmmm."

"Dr. Khomeli is quite certain you talked with him from just before four until 4:45pm. Two alibis, Stot, are better than one, even if one is a lie. So I know you didn't do it." Damn. I'd forgotten about

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Khomeli. Fernando had done me the favor of lying; but I hadn't needed it. I hadn't known that Rocque had been killed during the hour I'd spent with Khomeli.

"I'm glad you know that."

"You felt the need for an alibi, Stot. Why?"

"Fernando was obviously confused. Feeble-minded."

"Was your thesis sitting on his desk?"

I stopped. "I answered that question already. More than anything else in the entire Universe, I want to get the fuck out of this hole. I want out! I didn't kill him and we both know that. And I don't know anything more than you do, so just let me go, okay?"

"I'll think about it."

"I'm leaving tonight, Claudia."

She paused, then said, "You are so fucking smug. Did you hate him so much?" She handed the thesis to me.

"No, just this place."

She smirked. "Welcome to the real world."

#

I was packed, my apartment empty except for cobwebs and dust bunnies. It had taken two trips to Goodwill, but I'd managed to get everything I owned in my car. Everything but the thesis sitting on the floor next to the telephone jack.

There was nothing holding me there, and I knew I should just get in my car and drive like I had meant to. But I kept looking back at my thesis.

It was the only witness to the death of my advisor. It was too bad that a book didn't reveal in its text what it saw.

I paused. What page had the book been opened to? I tried to recall. Chapter 4? No, Chapter 5, the chapter on alternative materials for aromatic collection. Dr. Olivia-Yordan had mentioned the plaster idea, but there were others, including a sample of filamented paper substance that worked rather well.

The sample. The thesis had been open to the sample collector. Rocque had known the murderer might take the eggs, but the murderer wouldn't have known about the filament. Perhaps Rocque had opened it, casually, desperately hoping that I would notice. Bastard. He was drawing me in again, just when I was almost away.

I flipped open the thesis, then shut it. I would have to hurry. It had been twenty-four hours

already, and the paper had a definite time limit before the uncertainty was too great.

The lab was dark, and I fired up the mass spectrometer and the neutron activation system. While they warmed up, I cast a few micro-tubes from the sample. The eggs were filled with a micro-tubule structure that stored molecules from the air, larger than a certain size, in a temporal sequence. By excavating backwards, a researcher could determine the sequence of events around the egg. There were huge databases of odors maintained by the domestic and international agencies. Whenever a criminal was booked, fingerprinting was less common than an odor sample.

My paper sample worked the same way. The only difference was that the micro-structure was not ceramic, and so it required a more elaborate casting method. But, hey that's what Ph.D. dissertations are for: they take a simple idea and expound on it in more and more complicated ways until the original idea is buried beneath piles and piles of unrelated intellectual refuse.

The murder was easy to pinpoint. Blood has a unique signature. At that point, I needed only to identify the possible odor traces right before and right after the murder. It took me several castings to get a good enough sample of that time period. Luckily, there were several million samples in the paper collector.

Once I had my sample of molecules from the murder time, fifteen minutes on either side, I eliminated Rocque's signatures, then mine, then Thelma's, whose signature was all over the office. I was still left with a number of possibilities, since each person acts as a molecule collector. Whoever Rocque, Thelma, the murderer, and I were around on Sunday probably were in the sample in some small part. So I eliminated Rocque's wife, Thelma's poodle, and Khomeli. Then I opened my personal database, including samples from all my old lovers and all my aftershaves. It was amazing how a lover's odor can cling to you. I'd seen egg technicians fooled into thinking a husband had been there, when in fact it was the wife. There was a sort of melding of odor between lovers. I probably still smelled a little like Adrian.

I eliminated all that and I was left with nothing. I had eliminated Rocque's murderer. All that was left was inorganic or trace chemicals.

"Shit," I muttered. "Maybe I did do it and I don't remember."

Then I realized that it had to have been Thelma. Khomeli had an alibi, I had an alibi, and Rocque's wife probably had one or she'd have

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been arrested by now. "Thelma, you old dog. Twenty years of silence was too much for you, huh? Beware a lover scorned."

To be certain, I took another group of samples and eliminated Thelma's signature, then set about eliminating what was left completely. I got up to Rocque, his wife and me, then I was left with a couple trace odors, and one major one that my personal database had gotten rid of before. I figured the major one was Adrian -- it had only been a week since we were living together -- and the minor signatures were Khomeli and who knew who else.

To be certain, I queried my personal database, expecting Adrian's cologne to appear. I was surprised to see it was Russell's.

But suddenly not that surprised.

#

I let myself into Russell's apartment when he didn't answer my knock. All right, so I still had a key. I hated burning bridges. He was in the shower.

I rummaged around in the kitchen, then the living room. I had about given up when I noticed the line of seven eggs sitting on his mantel. Only Russell would store evidence of murder on his mantel.

Behind me, the shower turned off, and I heard Russell climb out of the shower. "Oh, hi, Aristotle. I was wondering if you were going to say good-bye before you left." He didn't bother to put on a towel before sitting across from me.

"Those eggs will put you away for a long time, Russell."

"Oh, those old things. I doubt it. I even have the gun around here somewhere." He looked under the magazines on the coffee table, then pulled out a small pistol. He put it squarely in my palm.

"You've just handed me your murder weapon. I could go to the police right now."

"No, you can't."

"Do you think I won't through some devotion to what we had? Do you think you still mean that much to me? Adrian doesn't mean that much to me."

"Oh, no, no. I have something stronger than Adrian does. You can't go to the police because I know the thesis wasn't signed."

A rush of blood filled my cheeks.

Russell added, "We are bound by more than lust or love, Aristotle. I had hoped to simply frame you for the murder. But then I realized that taking away your freedom would be so much better. You're not going anywhere, so you might as well have a seat."

"Russell...."

He stood and I stood too. "We're accomplices now. Maybe you should move in here with me. I know you really want to stay here with me."

"What have you done, Russell?" My stomach was churning. My mind was spinning. Had I forced him to this? The gun in my hand was heavy as I brought it to point at his chest.

Russell made a motion with his hand. "Shoot me, Aristotle? That will only incriminate you more. Face it, you're stuck here in this little piece of heaven. I've always thought you were a fool to want to leave."

I looked at the row of eggs. Each one would show that Russell had entered the Rocque's office, killed him, then left with the eggs. And when Russell was arrested, he would tell the police that the line for Rocque's signature had been empty. He would tell. Unless he was dead.

The gun wavered in my hand. "I can't let you do that," I said. I'd forged a signature, built an alibi, and lied to the police. It was the slippery slope to murder, just one more felony to be rid of this place forever.

"I can't let you do this," I said, but now I was unsure what I meant.

I put the gun on the table. No more. He looked at me with unconcerned eyes.

I turned and left.

"I'll tell them, Aristotle," Russell yelled after me. "You'll have wasted six years."

What was six years in a lifetime? I thought as I pulled open the car door. Fishing in my pocket, I found Claudia's card.

I looked at it for a few moments, then I started my car.

END

*Paul Melko is a writer of speculative fiction, with stories published in **Realms of Fantasy**, **Terra Incognita**, **Talebones**, and other magazines. His next story is "Singletons in Love" in the anthology **Live Without a Net** from Roc Books. He reviews short fiction for **Tangent Online**.*

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