

The Killing Smile

By Jimmy Gibbs

Translated by Eep and Alastor Glione

He stood at the man-sized computer, punching in the measurements for the next steel girder with his thick fingers. Rivulets of sweat clutched his furrowed brow in the inferno of a warehouse, streaming down his ruddy face with each stroke on the keyboard. Three hours and an actual ton or two of work left he thought to himself as he raised a large, calloused fist to his forehead to wipe away the slick moisture.

“Yo Ben, you gonna get you that office position today?” A throaty creole voice called from behind.

“Uh, yeah, thanks John. Keep your fingers crossed, I’m banking on this. You know I need the cash to get mom in a good home.” Ben said. He and John had spoken about this subject many times over the years. John knew how hard it was for Ben to move into his mother’s house, and how his mother’s episodes had driven away Ben’s girlfriend. It wasn’t hard to see how run-down Ben had become, not with the sagging dark rings around his eyes, and the hollow expression on his face.

“Well, laissez les bons temps rouler!” called John.

“Yeah, laissez les bons temps rouler.” Ben responded. He truly hoped that the creole charm that roughly meant *‘let the good times roll’* would ring true, but he also knew the boss was a tightwad and a bit of a jerk. Still, he needed the money, and Ben’s body could not maintain the

warehouse lifestyle for much longer. He had to try for the new office position. It was his only hope of reclaiming his life and home from his poor volatile mother.

Ben finished entering the last measurements for the beam he had been working on and walked to the boss' office.

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A few soft thuds at the flimsy aluminum door alerted the chubby relaxing figure on the other end that he had a visitor.

“Come in.” the man hollered.

“Ben, good afternoon, what can I do you for?”

“Hey boss, I’ve been meaning to talk with you about that supplies management position you posted. I’ve been working real hard for you the past five years, and I reckon I would be the best fit.”

“Mhmm, go on Ben.”

“You know I’m good for it boss, I’ve always been loyal to the company, I come in on days off to make sure things get done. I know the contacts already, so it’ll be an easy transition. I’ve been managing them boys in the warehouse all this time and making sure we hit our deadlines. Them contractors around N’awlins get purdy cantankerous.”

The conversation went on for over an hour. Ben explained his strengths and how he had benefitted the company over the years while Mike sat complacently at his desk. Occasionally Mike would ask a question, though he appeared bored, and slightly annoyed as he tapped the

desk and nodded at Ben's story. Finally, Mike decided to end the impromptu meeting and delivered his verdict.

"God damnit! What the fuck you mean you're 'laying me off'?" Ben hollered at the boss.

"Calm down Ben, we're slow right now. The hospital pulled the job from us and gave it to the other guys. We may be able to bring you back in a few months. You've done well, and we appreciate your efforts, but we have to let you go." The boss said.

"Mike, I've been busting my ass for you for five damn years! I've come in on days off to make up the workload whenever you needed me. Remember the fourth of July? Yeah, you got a big order in and I dropped my plans to come in to get shit done for you! I need this job and the damn promotion, or I'll never be able to afford to put my mom in a damn home!" Ben yelled.

"Look Ben, I'm running a business here, not a charity. We're slow and I don't need you. If things pick up, I'll have someone call you. Until then, you're out. We'll extend your benefits for another four months. That's the best I can do for you." Mike said.

Ben's shoulders burned under the weight of his climbing rage. The contents of his stomach boiled as his body quaked under the strain of his stress and frustration. A dull ticking began to sound in his head. It felt like a claw was being drug around in his skull. The muscles in his shoulders tightened and sent lightening down into Ben's balled fists. Every instinct screamed for Ben to lash out, to teach this arrogant prick a lesson by beating Mike to a pulp. Ben clenched his teeth and breathed as he counted backwards from 10 while mentally listing his favorite dishes. This was a trick his dad taught him when Ben would lose his temper as a kid.

As Ben calmed, he realized his now former employer was waiting for him to leave. Mike must have told Ben to leave a few times now. Ben flashed his former boss a huge empty smile

that showcased his perfect white neatly rowed teeth, thanked him for nothing at all and went back to the steel yard to grab his personal gear.

“So didya get it?” John asked in his thick creole accent. It was the kind of sound the turned New Orleans in to ‘N’awlins’.

“Nah, the son of a bitch let me go.” Ben said somewhat despondently.

“Damn, not you! Who the hell they gonna get to run these machines now? You shoulda went down to Madame Cheri’s and grabbed you some gris gris from them ol’ voodoo women. You know they luck charms work real good.”

The conversation went on for about twenty minutes while Ben fumed about how Mike had let him go. They both cursed vehemently as he recounted the tale in its entirety, especially the part where Mike claimed they couldn’t afford to keep Ben.

“Daggum Ben, how you gonna get that crazy lady in a home now?” John asked.

“I don’t rightly know; I’m just praying she’s having a good day today. I don’t think I can handle another one of her outbursts. ‘Specially after getting canned.” Ben said as he packed the last of his belongings in a box.

Ben flashed his pearly white, overly wide smile, said his good-byes to his coworker, loaded up his small pickup truck, and started his hour-long drive home from Belle Chasse to Algiers. As he traveled the long waterfront road, he became lost in the décor of the half sunken shrimp boats. Some with water covering the deck, some with only the nose protruding from the water like the nose of a garfish. The boats were trapped in the water much like he was trapped with his mother.

The itchy ticking started to silently clamor in his skull. *Tick tchhh tick tchhh*. He began to imagine his mother screaming angrily at him while waving her butter knife at him. He knew that if were one of her bad days, she would scream and throw things at him. Hell, she might not even remember who he is. Such was the game; his mother had never been the most stable person in his life. When he was younger, his mother would have periods of time where she would have been considered mother of the year, but then something would happen, and she would change. She would become nasty and violent and tell Ben how worthless she thought he was, other times she would just disappear to her room and hide for days. These days she was more likely to become violent than reclusive, and she certainly had far more bad days than good. She was the reason he had to move back to that old house, the reason he never had time to find a date or have any semblance of a life outside of work and home.

On the way, Ben stopped at a few of the retirement homes to speak with their directors about his mother. Every single one he visited told him the same thing. No money, no vacancy, and his mother's social security simply wasn't enough. It would be another long night of searching the internet for prospective homes, and now for jobs as well.

His chest tightened like the thick cords of a rope mooring the boats to their docks. His shoulders felt as if someone had placed a steel girder over them, the weight threatening to crush his body. He needed something good to happen and soon, especially with the saying '*laissez les bons temps rouler*' failing him in his moment of need. The scratching in his skull grew stronger driving in a strange urge. It was like a smoker needing a cigarette, but Ben didn't smoke, he needed something else. He needed a nice long hunting trip.

The crickets were singing loudly as Ben pulled into the driveway. He blew out a deep sigh, took a long draught from the Budweiser he kept in his big gulp as he tried to compose himself. Ben hoped his mother would be asleep rocking in her chair, he didn't believe he could handle her tonight. It took all his considerable strength of will to contain the anger buried in his heavy shoulders.

When he was younger, his father would take him hunting to ease Ben's aggression. They'd set up camp in the woods at a friend's property in Monroe, then spend the next morning in their tree stand waiting for deer to enter their line of sight. Ben especially loved gutting and butchering the deer. Nothing was more satisfying than the spray of the thick poppy colored blood, or the snapping of the sinew under his father's buck knife. Ben shook his head of the memories as he walked up to the house. A car crash claimed his father's life, there was no coming back, no more hunting trips. No one to shield him from the overbearing presence of his often-angry mother. Ben felt truly alone.

He pushed his coke bottle glasses over his hawkish nose and reached for the doorknob. He would have to cook dinner, try to get his mother to eat, then clean up. If he had time when he was finished, he'd work on scouring the internet for an inexpensive assisted living home for his mother.

"Ben! Ben! Where are you? Why are you so horrible to me you ungrateful little boy!" a shrill angry voice called from center of the house. The voice an indication to Ben on how bad the night was truly going to be.

"I'm here mother, I was just looking into some nice homes for you." Ben called out to his mother. He would have to find a way to placate her until he could get dinner done. It would be a

night of screaming, abuse, and confusion. With a deep sigh and a flash of that brilliant, strangely wide smile, Ben walked into the house to begin his nightly ritual of cooking, cleaning, and dodging his mother's temper.

It was time for him to find his mother a home. Ben wanted, no, needed her gone, he was so sick of being the only one to care for her and be the sole bearer of her abuse. Ben was done dealing with his mother's constant ridicule and tirades.

Ben shook from his reverie as a loud screechy voice sounded from across the dinner table.

"Are you as simple boy?" Ben's mother asked furiously. "You're always trying to get rid of me! You hate me! Why would you be so cruel to an old woman?"

Ben frowned while setting his roll down and with a soft low voice said, "I'm sorry mother. I was just thinking." He let out a long-troubled sigh. It had already been a long day, and the night didn't seem like it would be any better. His mother, Ms. Dara Wright, had already begun her confused screaming. Ben would have to disconnect the phone lines tonight, there was a strong chance she would forget who he was again and call the police on him for the fifth time this year. At least she missed him with the remote today Ben thought to himself.

Ben flashed his oddly glowing ever wide smile at his mother. The smile seemed like that of a restaurant server, fake and bubbly. He attempted to engage his mother in a joyful conversation to calm her down.

"Mother, I think I found the perfect home for you. The nursing staff seemed so kind and the other residents seemed happy. They even have a bridge club, and I know how much you love bridge. Why don't you check it out with me tomorrow?"

Ms. Wright stiffened in her chair and glared at her son. Her frail veiny hands turned white as she gripped her fork and butter knife tightly. Her dull grey eyes momentarily flared with life as her mouth opened, and her loud shrill voice spewed forth with the intensity of a volcanic eruption.

“You ungrateful little bastard! Why do you hate me? Why are you trying to get rid of me? This is my house, mine!” she fumed. “I done carried you, and raised you, and I’ll be damned by the heavenly Father hisself a’fore I let put me in a home!” Ben watched helplessly as her rage built to a crescendo. Ms. Wright had a penchant for throwing things when she was angry. When she was raising Ben, her favorite weapon had been a shoe, which Ben remembered an occasion where one went flying after him around a corner and still smacking him right on the back of his head. The memory sparked the stark realization in Ben that he might very well be in danger.

THUD.

The butter knife struck Ben in the shoulder and bounced away to rattle on the dining room floor. The knife stung him a little, but it wasn’t sharp, and didn’t even cut through his shirt. It was time to give his mother her medication and send her off to her room where she would eventually pass out in front of the tv watching her old westerns.

After cleaning up and taking care of his mother, Ben left for his basement room. He approached the door and wrapped his fingers around the cold molded bronze knob. A slight clockwise twist from the wrist and the knob released the latch from the wooden frame. He opened the door and slid into the thick velvety darkness of his sanctuary.

His hand glided down the splintery handrail as he descended the old creaking stairs. Once at the bottom, Ben blindly allowed his right hand to explore the wall near to where he knew the

light switch to be. He wasn't sure he wanted to flick on the light, not when his mind was still racing from the barrage Ms. Wright lobbed at him. Though there was a small measure of solace to be found in the darkness. It was a place where he could sort out his inner most thoughts. It was here, in this dark room, where he first contemplated how great it would be to finally have the home to himself. It was now, in this very darkness, where he decided that it was time to get rid of his mother. There was nothing left to wait for. He wouldn't tell his mother that he had been fired from his job. It wasn't worth his breath or inciting another violent episode. Ben felt a frigid chill roll down his back and into his chest as he realized he was out of options. With no job, and no money, there was absolutely no way he could afford to put his mother in a home now.

Ben flipped on the light switch and quietly surveyed his bare, tidy basement room. Across from him, in the square fourteen by fourteen-foot room was his full-sized bed, a small nightstand and his plain black reading lamp. To the right of his bed was another door which led to a small walk-in closet, and to the left was his father's old oak dresser. With a loud sigh, Ben crossed the mostly empty room towards his closet. He wrapped his fingers around the bright golden aluminum knob and gingerly pulled the door open.

Inside the closet rested his collection of threadbare suits, a few sweater vests, and a small collection of cardboard boxes labeled "dad's stuff." Ben's shoulder's slumped as he considered the boxes and fumbled around in the partially dark, dank room for the dangling string that would produce the much-needed light. Ben found the string and pulled it down gently to turn on the closet light. He slowly lowered himself to his knees and began to rummage through the top box of the stack which held his dead father's hunting equipment. Ben moved aside the dusty camouflage and ropes as he groped toward the bottom of the box. Ben's fingers brushed the smooth hilt of a knife, an old 1980's Buck #121 hunting knife his father used to gut the bucks

they'd kill on hunting trips. Ben gripped the hilt tightly and reverently removed it from the box with tears forming in his round eyes as he began to remember one of those hunting trips where he had shot a 10 pointer. Ben's father Joe beamed with pride that day.

Ben relished the memory of the salty iron scent of the warm, red, sticky blood that poured down his arm as he gutted the buck. His father always watched and guided Ben's cuts to ensure the pelt would remain unblemished.

He cleared his throat, refusing to be distracted by his memories. Ben shook the thoughts from his mind and began to rise to his feet. His knees creaked under his weight as he began to stand, clinging on to the wall for support. A wide grin spread across his face, stretching from the corners of his mouth toward his ears in a skeletal fashion.

The scratching began to hit him again. It was no longer a subtle feeling, the cacophony of grating noises reverberated in his head. *TICK TCHHHH, TICK TCHHHHH, TICK TCHHHH.* The need for freedom mingled with the memories of blood. Ben's muscles tightened, his repressed anger causing them to grow as taught as dragnet lines on the old shrimping boats. Ben would have his freedom soon. Ben dragged himself from the closet and meandered over to his bed.

The television set sounded in the dark room, an old western playing on the screen. The sound of gunshots occasionally disturbing the creaking of the oak rocking chair as it rocked back and forth like a metronome. Pausing only on occasion to regard particularly riveting scenes. Ms. Wright's eyes were glued to the screen as she continued her rocking, entirely unaware of the figure stalking behind her. Ben liked it that way. It was time to scratch the itch and take his life back.

Ben snuck up to his mother's rocking chair as silently as a cat stalks its prey. Ben tightly gripped the old knife and flashed his gaping skeletal smile. He silently reached his empty, heavy hand around the rocker and gripped his mother's mouth and nose. With his palm covering her mouth and nose, Ms. Wright's scream was stifled, which gave Ben time to savor the terror he could feel coursing from his mother's body and into his hand. His torment would end, and they would both be free.

Ben's mother's scream was stuck in her throat by Ben's strong hand. He saw how her eyes widened and her thin arms raised her arthritic hands to the hand that held her scream hostage. She dug her nails into that powerful hand of steel and began to pull with all her might to no avail. A hot sticky voice sounded in her ear.

"Hello mother, my aren't you lovely this evening." Ben taunted as he whispered in his mother's ear. "Well dear mother, it is time for you to finally smile and be free. And guess what? Your loving son is going to help you!"

Ben's jack-o-lantern grin took to his ears, freedom finally at hand. With a wicked laugh, Ben took the hand holding the knife to the other side of the rocking chair and placed the shiny, freshly sharpened blade to his mother's neck. He pressed the blade hard enough to draw blood, and with a frightening quick motion, drug the blade across her throat. The blade ripped through her pale thin flesh, the sound grating like scissors cutting paper. He saw her bulging eyes in the reflection of the television while she desperately grasped at her torn throat. He could only assume she wished to stem the flow of her lifeblood as it poured out freely to the floor.

Suddenly Ms. Wright's quaking body fell silently still, her cool greying eyes dulled and filmed over. She was quite dead.

Ben removed his hand from his mother's mouth and chuckled as he moved around the chair to face her corpse.

“Something is missing mother. We're free now, you should be smiling”

Ben pressed his empty hand against his mother's forehead, steadying her head against the chair. He then put the knife in the corner of her mouth and began to carve a true smile into her face. The blade tore through the corner of the old woman's gaping mouth, slicing through the muscle of her cheek until the blade struck bone. Then again to the other side.

When Ben finally finished, he stepped back to admire his handy work. He finally *made* his mother smile. She would never frown, scowl, nor scream again. She could finally be happy. They were finally free.