

THE CASE OF THE SERIAL INFLATOR

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Sunlight nagged my eyelids open. A ray of golden light was coming in my apartment window through the drawn blinds. It glinted off my gold tooth as I yawned myself awake. Sitting up in bed, I brushed the pizza crumbs from last night off my gray sweat pants. Taking one look around my bedroom, I knew I needed to clean up. It was littered with things like playing cards, computer game manuals, and various other bits and pieces of things.

My next stop was the bathroom. I glanced in the mirror. A six foot Doberman with an average muscle build stared back. Glancing myself over, I was glad my girlfriend wasn't a live-in; I'd probably get a "dear Mike" letter on the night stand if Janet saw what I looked like when I got up too early. After a quick shower, I flicked on the T.V. in front of my bed as I got dressed. It came on with the news. Just as I was buttoning up my shirt, the vixen anchorwoman was handed a document. "This just in, a shocking crime was reported last night. At three this morning, a young lady was walking home after working late, when she was attacked by an unknown assailant."

"Well I hate to be cynical," I said to the T.V, "But that's not all that unusual for this city."

"Although assault isn't an unusual crime in this city....." the reporter said,

"Well there you go," I snickered.

"The nature of this one is." The screen was filled with video footage of a large crowd gathered around what looked to be a float for a parade sitting in the middle of the city park. But when the camera zoomed in, I arched my eyebrows and couldn't help but laugh, my sense of humor being what it is. A female raccoon, roughly about twenty years old, was blown up like a blimp! She was in a sitting position with her legs sticking out in opposite directions and her arms held out sideways to keep her balance. Her clothes must have been spandex (thank God), saving what was left of her dignity. I say what was left, because her stomach had bloated to monstrous proportions. Her skin seemed very taught and had stretched a great deal. The raccoon's belly button was also stretched to the size of a desert plate. Her upper body seemed to sit on top of the giant balloon that made up her stomach, much like my friend Jason does when he balloons up. Also, like Jason, her arms, legs, hands, and feet had swollen, but proportionately. The raccoon's shirt and skirt had been pushed up and down, respectively, by her expanding mid section but fortunately hadn't ripped or torn. The look on her face was one of surprise and embarrassment.

"Several people," continued the voice of the anchorwoman, "who have been known to indulge in the hobby known as 'ballooning' have been asked for help in returning the victim to her original state. These individuals assure us that once returned

to normal, anyone who had been inflated will not have been harmed permanently in any way. In the meantime, police tell us that this crime has been classified as an assault, and will be investigated with the procedures due to it. For News channel 8, I'm Brenda Fillen, reporting."

I switched off the T.V. The picture of the girl swollen to the size of an air balloon still lingered in my imagination as I pulled on my boots, causing me to chuckle in spite of the circumstances. "Oh well," I thought to myself, sticking my revolver under my shoulder, "I guess it's just one of those weird crimes that make the record books." Grabbing my coat and hat off of the card table I'd thrown them on, I headed for my office.

The letterbox that hangs just outside my office door is usually empty. Still, out of habit, I stuck my hand in as I probed my pockets for my keys. Then my hand in the box felt paper. I stopped searching my person long enough to pull out the envelope. It was from the city council. I rolled my eyes and flattened back my ears. "If it's another complaint about my business, I'm going to investigate the council for harassment." Strangely, it wasn't a complaint.

Mr. Fang,

We the members of the city council have recently had a meeting about the assault in the public park. As you may know, the nature of this crime is somewhat strange, and is quite unfamiliar to the police. We have heard of your reputation, Mr. Fang, and judging from the work you did on the burglary case several months back, have elected to offer you a contract to find the person responsible for the assault. Please call the following phone number to negotiate the fee.

Sincerely,

Arthur Trimble, C.C. chairman

"Huh," I smirked, opening my office door. "First time there's an unusual crime in several months and the council starts running around like chickens with their heads cut off. What do they take me for, an idiot? Do they think I'd just forget about all those vulgar letters they sent me?!" I looked at the letter a second time. "On the other hand, maybe I should think about it." I plopped down in my desk chair. A private eye can't be very choosy about who he works for, since he never knows when his next paycheck is coming. Still, the idea of being labeled a city government stooge wasn't very appealing.

I was still mulling over the letter when there was a knock on my door. I immediately balled up the letter and threw it in the waste basket; if that was a potential client, I didn't need the council's false flattery. But when I cracked open the door, it wasn't a client. It was Jason.

“S’up man!” he said, with his customary grin. “Hey Jase, come on in!” I said, pulling the door open all the way. He sauntered in, scratching at his neck under the collar of a gaudy Hawaiian shirt that clashed with his blue scales, sunglasses looking anything but out of place propped on his head.

“So what brings you to my little corner of town?” I asked, offering him a soda. He took it gratefully. “Well, I’ve been looking for a place to crash.”

“Huh?” I started, “I thought you had that house downtown?”

“Oh I still do, but I can’t hang around there for now. It’s a real bummer, but the neighbors don’t seem to want a guy like me around since some wacko ballooned some chick without her say so.”

“You’re kidding!” I groaned. I couldn’t believe it. Jason was a friendly guy; how anyone thought he could attack someone could only have been the result of bias toward his hobby, which I need not mention is ballooning.

“I wish dude,” he sighed, propping his feet on a cardboard box filled with old case files. I briefly, and irrationally, reflected on the fact that dragons are among the few people whose feet are tough enough that they don’t need shoes. “Probably saves a pretty penny not needing them,” I thought before snapping my attention back to the matter at hand. “....I’m just glad my boss is more open-minded than my neighbors. So, here I am,” Jason grunted, “cruising around, trying to find a place that won’t notice me bringing in air tanks.” Finishing his drink, the dragon crunched the can against his forehead. “Well,” I mused, “I do have an extra room at my place.....” That made him sit up and take notice, “Dude, you serious?!” I grinned at him, “Well, I put up with you in college, and I wouldn’t want anyone else to have to go through that.” He threw back his head and laughed. “Thanks man; you’re a lifesaver!”

“So your saying I’m a piece of candy?” I smirked. This time, Jason just groaned. “Man, that’s a bad one! You’re not going to make wise cracks all the time I’m hanging out, are you?” I shook my head, walking him to the door. “I’ll be with you in a minute,” I said, planning to help him bring his things in up the fire escape; I didn’t think my landlord would be very open to the idea of my having non-paying guests, especially ones that could attract unwanted attention. “Nah, that’s okay; I’ve got to get to work anyway. Drop by the restaurant tonight around eight and I’ll follow you back to your place.” After Jason left, I turned back to my desk. Bending over, I fished the piece of paper out of the waste basket. “It’s not just business now,” I thought, “It’s personal.”

The city council had been reasonable, to an extent, with the contract. They had told me what I already knew, that this incident could cause rioting and they needed action soon to keep the lid on the pot. I managed to get them to agree to a flat fee, but had to shave off a hundred from my usual grand. When I was finished, there wasn’t much left to do that day. It was somewhat late, and I decided to visit Janet at work. I pulled up in the crowded parking lot of the Museum of American History.

Okay, another brief background. I met Janet in college. I was living with Jason in a dorm after he was transferred. When it came time to pick our classes for the next term, I picked a history class. It was there I first laid eyes on the angel that had come down from Heaven that was Janet. We were made partners in a research program, and became a lot more interested in each other than in studying. When we graduated, we came to the city together, and haven't gone a week without seeing each other since. Now, your probably wondering; why does a guy with a college diploma work as a detective? Well, that's too long a story to tell for now.

The museum lobby was a spit-and-polish kind of room, with a high glass ceiling, buffed marble floors, and portraits of famous Americans. A bear security guard met me at the reception desk. "Can I help you?"

"Yes, I'm looking for Janet Strauss."

The guard put on a look of thoughtfulness that suggested that his mind wandered and he just went along for the ride. "Strauss, Strauss.....Doberman, right? 'Bout as tall as you, long brown hair?" I nodded. Again, he put on the dumbbell look. I flattened my ears back; if I have any flaws, and I most certainly do, my lack of patience with morons is one of them. More often than not, I get myself into trouble trying to get around some ignoramus by losing my temper. "That's okay," I said, holding up my hand, "I'll find her myself." The guard nodded dumbly, and went back to some sports magazine.

Actually, it wasn't that hard to find Janet. She was the curator of the museum's Civil War wing, so I just headed in that direction. They were setting up a new wax figure model of the battle where Stonewall Jackson earned his nickname. Janet was in working clothes, with a yellow T-shirt, purple vest, and tight blue jeans. Is it just me, or can some women look sultry in just about anything? She walked around the crates, taking inventory. I snuck up behind her. "Ms. Scarlet I do believe I'm falling for you." She started just a bit, then turned and gave me her knowing grin, "Why Red Butler, you are the scoundrel they say you are." She chuckled and poked me with her clipboard, then turned and went to pick up a crate of uniforms. "Need any help with that?" I asked. She turned, raised her eyebrows, and grinned, "My parents didn't raise any fragile children, you know." She turned and bent over to pick up the crate. "And how," I said under my breath, surveying the scenery. She lifted the crate easily, and toted it off to a storage room. "So what have you been up to?" Her voice echoed from out of a closet. "I've got a contract with the city to catch that weirdo that attacked that girl in the park." Janet poked her head out of the closet. "Yeah, I heard about that. You know, ever since that incident, the whole town's been in an uproar about those 'ballooners', trying to label them demented nuts just because of that one sicko."

"Yep," I sighed, remembering Jason. "You know it's amazing honey; the moment one person in a strange group does something wrong, everyone wants to use it to label anyone he, or she, is associated with. I mean, take foreign immigrants: In the '20's

when it turned out some gangsters were Italian, everyone began to look at all Italians like they were scum.”

Janet came out and straightened a rifle in a dummy’s hands, giving me a seductive sideways smile, “Is it just me, or are open-minded guys hot?”

I gave her a toothy grin. “You’ll find out soon enough.”

She laughed, “Down, boy, down.”

I put on a look of feigned disappointment for a second. “Oh, by the way, I can’t make that auction we were going to go to, I’ve got to help Jason move his stuff into my extra room.”

Janet looked surprised. “Jason from college? I didn’t know he was kicked out of his house.”

“He wasn’t,” I said with a sad grin, “He left ‘cause his neighbors kicked up a storm about his...hobby.”

Janet put on a thoughtful expression, but an intelligent one. “Oh yeah, he does inflate, doesn’t he?” I nodded as I turned to leave. Just then, Janet called to me. “What happens if you neighbors get hot under the collar.” Looking back, I chuckled. “Frankly my dear, I don’t give a damn.”

It was around six when I got back home. I had stopped by the gym to swim the laps I did every week. While in the lobby, I heard some guys talking like bigots about ballooners. I was so distracted, I forgot to change back into my clothes, and went all the way back in nothing but my swim trunks. “Jeez!” I thought as I threw my bag in a chair, “To hear those guys talk, you’d think they were discussing drug dealers!” Disgusted, I shook my head. “I don’t see what the big deal is; ballooning isn’t some addiction, or against any sort of religion. Hasn’t anyone heard the saying ‘don’t judge someone until you’ve walked a mile in their shoes’?”

I mused on that part for a minute. Wandering around the apartment, with a lack of anything else to do, I opened my closet and rummaged around a second. Finally I found it; my scuba tank. I dived occasionally, whenever the opportunity came up actually, and had saved enough money to buy my own tank. For a while, I just stared at the tank, wondering what Jason and his friends saw in their hobby. Glancing around, and seeing that my shades were still down, I shrugged, tentatively put the tank hose in my mouth, and sat down on my couch. Propping my bare feet on the cheap footstool, I reached over and carefully turned the knob a bit. The hiss of air came out of the hose. I could feel the pressure build in my cheeks. I turned the knob just a bit more, and felt the cool air go down my throat and into my stomach. I had heard Jason say something about a “belly connection” that you felt if you got it right, and I had a feeling I just got it. Turning the crank a hair more, I was a bit startled when I saw my own stomach start to

rise up in time with the hissing noise coming from it. Immediately, I turned the crank off. My stomach stopped, just an inch higher than before.

“Oh come on,” something in me said, “stop being a baby.” I exhaled the air, and watched my stomach settle back down to its original size. Thus assured I wouldn’t have any permanent side affects, I took the knob and gave it a healthy twist. The rush was much faster, and I watched my belly swell and stretch in a round shape. I turned the knob off after half a minute. It looked as if I had swallowed a basket ball. My reflection in the T.V. screen looked like I had drained several cases of beer and had a gut because of it. My skin felt like it was being stretched by tickling little feather points. Curiously, I held out my hand and felt my own stomach. I could still feel my brown fur, but a strange feeling like part of me became more sensitive was also there. It actually tickled a bit. Pressing down a bit, my stomach moved like a balloon if you were to press on it.

“Okay,” I thought, gathering my nerve, “time for some gusto.” Grabbing the knob, I slowly turned it three full turns. Even faster the air shot into my gut, making it bloat and swell. It looked like I had swallowed two basket balls, then three, then four. My stomach began to spread outward as well as up, the tickling sensation increasing. Then the air began to spread to other parts of me. I could feel the tickling in my legs all the way down to my toes. My arms began to round out and my fingers puffed up. My chest puffed up just a little. Finally, I reached over with a bloated hand and turned off the air.

I looked down and checked myself out. My belly had swelled and grown so much I couldn’t see over it. It rose up, a huge brown balloon, until it was about a foot away from the ceiling. I felt it with a swollen hand, chuckling at the feeling. The soles of my feet felt like if someone had so much as blown on them, I would have burst out laughing. But the strangest feeling was in my gut. It was a lot like that feeling you get when you ride in an elevator, or go down a steep hill in a car, only much more intense. It made me dizzy for a minute as I pushed myself into a standing position. It was a lot like trying to walk on an air mattress. I managed to keep my balance with some difficulty. Turning around, I managed to see myself in the full length mirror I have in my coat closet. I looked like a Macy’s Day Parade balloon come to life. The sight of myself looking like I should have a gondola strapped under me drove me to hysterics. I threw myself backwards onto the bed, grabbed a pillow, and stuffed it in my mouth to stifle the loud guffaws wanting to erupt from me.

“Okay,” I thought to myself, “fun’s over. Now, how to get back to normal?” I had tried exhaling during the second inflation just to see if it would work, but there must be some point after which you can’t just burp out the air. I thought hard, trying to remember how Jason did it. Then I recalled how in college one day when it was time to leave for classes, I watched him massage his throat while holding his mouth open to deflate. Raising up a bloated hand, I rubbed underneath my chin. Quickly, the air rushed out like I had created a puncture. All my parts popped back to normal so fast, they left me about a foot off the couch in the air. I dropped back down onto it, somewhat surprised at the speed.

I shook my head in dizziness. I could now understand how some people could find the strange feelings following an inflation attractive. "Still," I thought to myself, putting the tank away, "I don't think I'd want to do that too often." While the unusual feelings had been somewhat fun, There had always been this underlying nervousness. Catching sight of myself back to normal in the mirror, I wondered if I would want to do it again. Only one word came to mind: "Maybe."

I helped Jason get his things, which consisted of three steamer trunks and a surf board, up the fire escape later that night, and showed him around the apartment. He'd been pleased, and I'd managed to pull the wool over the eyes of my landlord, a burly panda, when he asked about all the banging going on. The next day I started my investigation.

My first stop was the victim. They had kept her in a hospital overnight just to be safe. Although they knew that ballooning itself wasn't dangerous, they didn't know what she had been pumped up with. Fortunately, when they deflated her they got several samples of the gas in her stomach and ran some tests on one of them. It turned out she had been pumped up with nothing more than air. The young girl was sitting in her bed when I came in. After introducing myself, I got down to business.

"I was working late," she said, running a hand through her hair, "And decided to take a short cut home through the park. I was just passing by Sea-view point when someone came up from behind me. I didn't see him, and all of a sudden, I felt something jab me in the side, like when the doctor gives me a shot. Suddenly, I was growing bigger and bigger and....." she raised her arms; words failed her. I nodded. "I get it. Tell me, did you see anyone else in the park while you were walking through?" The girl shook her head. Then her eyes widened, "Wait, I think I might have seen another woman.....yes! A badger, wearing a leather jacket and a striped shirt." Thanking her for her time, I made my exit.

My next step was the park itself. The police had cordoned off the area the attack had occurred in to assure that no evidence was lost. I showed them the document the city council had given me, granting me all the authority I needed. I poked around in the bushes, but didn't find anything at first. Then, a metallic flash caught my eye. Putting on a pair of latex gloves, I ran a hand through the grass, and came up with a needle. But not just any needle, this one was the kind that was used to fill things like soccer balls and stuff, but someone had filed the tip so it was razor sharp. I handed it to the officer on the scene, asking him to send me a copy of the lab reports and have it dusted for prints. While I was there, I dropped by the park keeper's office. After giving a description of the second woman, the keeper said that a young badger named Stella Burnthorn did take an evening stroll every few days there.

Ms. Burnthorn wasn't too hard to find, thanks to an amazing device called the phone book. She wasn't at home, but her landlord said she worked at a local pawn shop. It was late afternoon when I walked through the door. The pawn shop was filled with

hundreds of things I would have bet my next paycheck were stolen. Behind the counter, an gangly crocodile had his eyes glued to a small T.V. I gave a small cough to get his attention. He just shifted in his seat. I knocked lightly on the counter. "Just a minute," he said without looking up. I waited about five minutes before my temper gave out. I banged my fist on the counter. The guy looked up at me like I was about to rob the place. "Hey man, be cool!"

"Relax," I grunted, "All I want is to talk to Stella Burnthorn." The croc nodded, and pointed to a back room. There were about ten different stacks of boxes filled with second hand items. In the far back, wearing the same leather jacket that she was described in, was Ms. Burnthorn. I tapped her on the shoulder. "Wot can I do for you, Gov'ner?" she said with a Cockney accent. "Your, Stella Burnthorn, right?" she nodded. I showed her my card. "I'm investigating that incident in the park." She nodded again. "Aye, I've heard about that. Some wank put a poor girl on the wrong end of an air tank."

"That's right. And I understand that you were around there at the same time."

The badger bit at her lower lip. I raised my eyebrow and leaned back, trying not to look intimidating. "Relax, I'm not investigating you, I just want to know what you saw." Ms. Burnthorn, scratched the back of her neck as I pulled out a pocket tape recorder. "Well.....I was taking my evening jaunt, you know? I was walking down the path, and passed that raccoon. I stopped a few meters down to tie my shoe, when I heard a scuffle in the bushes. I turned, and saw this big hulking bloke step out from behind a palm tree. It looked like he had some kind of tank strapped to his back, and before I knew it, he grabbed that poor girl and stuck her with something in his hand. Then there was this wooshin' sound, and she was bloating up like nothing you've ever seen! There wasn't anything I could do, mate!" the badger stressed, "I figured the best thing to do would be to bugger off, 'cause I heard the park patrol guard running across the field, and that big loony had disappeared."

"Did you see much of the girl's attacker?" I asked.

"Well, he had on a pair of red shorts, black sneakers, and oh yeah! His back was gray, a dull granite gray. He wodden' wearin' no shirt, so that must have been his skin color. He was also stooped over, since I couldn't see his head."

I nodded, shutting off the recorder. "Well I think that's about it. If you think of anything else, call my number; it's on the card." Tipping my hat, I headed for the door.

The stairs up to my apartment creaked as I made my way home. I ran the evidence over in my mind; I definitely had some things to go on. Whoever did this had enough understanding of air tanks to make some kind of weapon out of one. But somehow I didn't think I was a balloonier. I hadn't met too many of them, aside from Jason and some of his friends, but my general impression was that most of them didn't try to advertise their hobby; it was one of those things that you keep under your hat. The police lab had e-mailed me a copy of their tests on the needle; no prints and only some heavy oxidation to the needle tip. Shrugging, I planned to work on it in the morning.

My front door was unlocked when I got there. Cautiously, I pulled out my revolver. Sliding along the wall, I spun around the corner into the apartment. Jason hit the floor. "Hold your fire, man!" I holstered my gun. "Sorry, Jason. That's a bit of a reflex I picked up." The blue dragon got up and dusted himself off. "Well, no harm done. Sorry about leaving the door open, I just got back from getting some chow." He jerked his thumb over his shoulder at the two Chinese takeout bags sitting on my table. "Great, I'm starved." I said, grabbing a drink out of the fridge. Jason always has had a habit of overdoing things, and had gotten enough food to make an eight course dinner. "Oh well, that just means leftovers," I thought, dropping down in a chair and flicking on the television. I fished a box of lo mein out of the bag, while Jason pulled out a container of sweet and sour chicken. I slurped down some mouthfuls with the chopsticks provided. Jason, meanwhile, had abandoned the chopsticks and had just buried his snout in the box, inhaling the food.

I arched one eyebrow at him. "Should I get you a feed bag like they put on horses?" I smirked. He looked up at me. "Dude, don't tell me you've gotten uptight since college." I gave him a mischievous grin, grabbed the box of lo mein, tilted my head back, and threw it at my face. The blue dragon stared at me with wide eyes as a ball of noodles, pork, and sauce splattered across my face, only part of it getting in my mouth. Swallowing, I looked at Jason, who was on the verge of busting a gut. "Now that," I said with the silliest grin I could get, "is what I call fast food." He couldn't hold it anymore. Jason fell face forward into his own food, howling at the top of his lungs. I myself couldn't help throw back my head and giggle like a maniac. "I take it back, man," Jason said, wiping sauce off his nose, "You're crazier than you were in college!"

I was wiping the sauce off my own nose when the anchorman on the news broke the transition of my favorite situation comedy. "We interrupt this broadcast with a news bulletin. Late this evening a young woman was assaulted in the downtown area at about seven." I stared at the screen, apprehension filling my head. "Oh no, don't tell me....." I moaned. But there wasn't any stopping it. "...Reports say that the young woman had become the second victim in a short period of the crime of what newspapers are starting to dub 'serial inflations'. The young woman, a twenty-two year old badger, was walking home tonight, " the screen filled with what I had feared the most. "This amateur video was shot by a man out of his third-story window of the crime."

Stella Burnthorn had been walking down the street, a shadowy figure following her. She reached the corner, then a hand shot out of the shadows just out of the range of the light coming from the street lamp. She looked down as her stomach began to push out from under her shirt, rising faster than baking bread. She clamped her hands to her sides as she bloated and grew, her jacket pushed off from the pressure. Her boots also popped off as her feet and legs swelled. She stopped just about when her belly was the size of an armored car. Even as shocked as I was, I saw the figure moving through the shadows in the doorways along the street. Just like Stella had described, it was a large, hulking figure. But as he turned the corner, I saw that he wasn't hunched over like she had thought; his head didn't come over his shoulders.

I clenched my eyes shut in frustration. “Ah crud,” Jason and I said at the same time.

“At the scene,” the anchorman continued, “vocal demonstrators began to make speeches about the people known as ‘ballooners’, even as members of the same group assisted the victim to deflate.”

“Well,” I sighed, not relishing the thought of the call I would probably get from the city council in the morning, “This case had gone from hot to boiling.”

TO BE CONTINUED.....