

THE SEVEN MINUTE WINDOW

by Patrick Kendrick

I dab at the bumps of acne on my neck with Clearasil, wondering why I even bother 'cept maybe they'd be worse if I didn't do nothin' at all. I wipe that sleep-cheese out of my eyes and swish some Scope around my mouth to get that dog out of there. I go on out to the living room, find the clicker and snap on Jerry Springer. Wish Marla were still around; she'd be cookin' me up some eggs and bacon right now before headin' off to her cashier job at Wal-Mart. She was a good ol' gal but she did me wrong and she had to go. I feel bad about it now and then, but not that bad.

I poke around in an ashtray that's overflowin' onto a sticky, beer-stained coffee table and find a roach that'll hold me over 'til Cecil gets here. I am out of dope, I mean bone dry, and I'll have people stoppin' by all afternoon lookin' to score and if I can't keep them stocked up on stash then they might just forget about me and look elsewhere. I don't want to lose my *cliente* so I'm hoping Cecil gets his butt over here soon and has somethin' good to show for it. He's always come through before but I get antsy if I don't hear from him for a day or so.

Wish I was mo-bile; this house arrest stuff is for the birds. Runnin' around the house with an anklet on your leg, like a collar on a dog, or somethin'. Still, it beats the daylight's out of bein' in the county stockade. At least I can keep up my trade, get high, and Cecil brings me around a little titty dancer lookin' to make some extra bread now and then. I make sure they don't get too comfortable around here though. I don't need another Marla Jenkins gettin' me all heated up. I got enough holes punched in the walls and doors around here. I mean, she was a good kid and all, considerin' she left home at fifteen when her Dad, a drunk fireman, and her Mom, a drunk hair stylist, had a rough split. Her Mom killed herself and her Dad just went deeper in the bottle so she ended up goin' it alone. I picked her up when she was seventeen, workin' the streets, and I let her stay here but man, she knew how to push my buttons. I got arrested for movin' some hot cars going out of the Port of Miami, bound for South America or some other shit hole place, and as soon as I come home on house arrest, she was up one side of me and down the other. I rearranged her face a little and she moved out. Then, when I heard what she'd been up to, well, let's just say it didn't sit too well with me and that's that. Whatever she got, she had comin' to her.

There's a knock on the door and I'm so sure it's Cecil, I don't even look out the little

peep hole before openin' the door. That's a mistake. The door smashes open and I am knocked across the room by this 250 pound hurricane of a man. He slams me up against the wall and squeezes my neck so hard I feel one of those acnes pop under his hand and I'm sure he's going to strangle me right then but he let's me go and I slide down the wall hawkin' for a gasp of fresh air like an asthmatic snortin' melaleuca blossoms. He flashes me a badge and says we're going to talk. I know cops can get in a lot of trouble for roughing you up while you're on house arrest but I think I'll play it cool and tell my P.O. later cause this dude seems like he's got a real short wick and I don't want to set him off, especially with that roach still smokin' in the ashtray.

This guy looks at me and I can tell he's having a bad day, maybe a bad life. His eyes are red-rimmed black marbles, like he's been peerin' through smoke for about twenty years. There's bags under those eyes and I'm thinkin' he looks like that guy that played the wolfman, Lon Chaney, Jr., or somebody like that, with that thick black hair that's pushed to one side with Brylcream or some other hair grease. His nose has more veins than a Miami street map runnin' through it and he is sweatin' somethin' fierce.

"Let's talk about Marla, Tommy", he says with a gravelly voice just this side of a whisper.

"What about her?" I'm sayin' but I'm thinkin', man, why don't they let this one go? I mean, where do they think this is goin' to go? Should a been a hit and run, case closed, and that's the end of it.

"You know what I'm talking about," he says and gives me another little shake.

"Hey man, I've already talked to you guys about that, I mean, her. I had nothin' to do with her getting killed. It was an accident, man. Some kid probably racin' down one of these side roads after school. She stepped off the bus and got nailed. Maybe the kid didn't even know he hit her."

"You think so? You think this kid was so upset by this *accident* that he decided to back over her with the car again?"

Friggin' medical examiner must have done a second look. Still they didn't have anythin' on me. I say, "I don't know what you're talking about."

The guy takes a gun from his belt. He's not aimin' it but waves it in my general direction. Okay, I'm scared, I'll admit it, but this guy's a cop. He ain't goin' to kill me, right? He's just tryin' to do his job and I can bluff it up as good as the next guy.

“You killed her, Tommy. I already know. I just want to hear you ‘fess up before I splatter you all over the wall.”

I find my self smilin’, kind of like one of those little dogs that rolls over and pees up its belly when a big dog runs up on it. He’s bluffin’, or he wouldn’t be playing it so tough.

“What the hell are you talking about? I’m on house arrest, man. I can’t get fifty feet from here without this ankle bracelet starting to chirp and tellin’ every cop in the county I’m steppin’ out. I even tried it once. I walked down the road to the neighbors house to borrow a beer and when I got back every cop in the world came down on me. You can even check on that, man. See? You don’t know what you’re sayin’.” It sounds like I’m pleadin’ a little but I know these cops. You got to play up to their egos, act scare’t then they’ll leave you alone.

“Yeah? Well, bright-boy, I did check on that. And you know what I found out? I found out that it takes the signal from your anklet about seven minutes to get all the way out to Colorado where the company that monitors these anklets is. Then they have to look up the police agency that’s looking after you. Then they have to report that somebody has flown the coop and that they should send someone out to investigate. Dispatch has to put the call out and then the closest available police unit has to respond. At the very least, you have *seven minutes* to commit a murder. By the time the whole scenario plays out, you might have as much as fifteen, maybe twenty minutes to do your business.”

I try to laugh but it sounds like somebody kicked me in the gut. I say, “Sounds like science fiction to me. I wouldn’t know about any of that...”

He pulls the hammer back. “You did know about that. I checked with your pal, Cecil, who by the way, won’t be stopping by today with his little package for you. You see, I had a chat with Cecil. He’s *resting* in the canal down the road. Boy, did he sing after I popped a cap into his shin. Anyway, he told me that you knew about the seven minute window. He’s the one that told you about it while you were serving time together in the stockade.”

“I still don’t know what...”

“Shut up! Where was I? Oh, yeah. He also said he’s the one that told you Marla was pregnant. That she got hooked up with his buddy Tyrone, while you were waiting for your court date.”

“She was a trashy, little...”

“Only what Cecil did not tell you, was that *he* was the father, not Tyrone.”

This hits me hard because I figured Cecil to be a bud.

“That son of a....”

“So, you did know she was pregnant?”

I’d given myself away but I’m thinkin’ I can recover. “Yeah, I knew she was pregnant, but it didn’t mean nothin’ to me.”

“Stop. Just stop. It *did* mean something to you. I saw the look on your face just now. It meant enough for you to beat her up. The cops know about it. She did a report but didn’t want to press charges. You know what else you don’t know?”

I feel like I’m startin’ to lose it when he adds the final touch.

“I’ve been bluffing. Seeing if I could get you T-eeed off enough to admit you killed her. But the truth is, that baby was yours. It wasn’t Cecil’s or Tyrone’s, or anyone else’s. It was yours. What do you think about that?”

I break down cryin’ like a baby. God knows, I did love that girl. I had no idea she was carryin’ my baby. Cecil told me she was pregnant and that she was leavin’ me for some other guy. “Oh, my God what have I done!”

“You killed the only son, or daughter you might have had. That’s what you’ve done. You admit it?”

“Yes, “ I blubber, like a kid who’s had his bike stolen. “I killed her. Cecil left his car over here one day. I ran over to where she got off the bus, it’s only two minutes away. She turned just before I hit her. I...I think she ...saw me, just before...you know...I hit her. Then I backed over her to make sure she was gone. I was, really, really mad. You gotta understand. I got back here, back in the house before the ankle bracelet even went off.”

He doesn’t say anythin’ for a few minutes and let’s me bawl it out and for that I’m grateful. “I’m sorry, I say. I’ll...I’ll go with you. What department did you say you’re with?”

“I didn’t,” he says, throwin’ me the badge he flashed at me when he came in. He places the barrel, cold and hard, up against my head as I stare at the badge through eyes filled with tears. It’s a fire department badge and I’m confused at first. I see the picture ID next to the badge and it says: *Cyle Jenkins: Okeechobee County Fire Department*. Then it hits me and I know I’m not goin’ anywhere.