

THE DEBT



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John Haas

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Cover art by: Miranda

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@mirandamagoo

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Gary's eyes drifted open again. This time it appeared consciousness would stay, at least for a short while. His blurry vision grasped onto things only to lose them a moment later. His arm. An overhead light. Part of the bed. He twisted his head to the left and was rewarded with everything going dull grey.

With maddening slowness his world came back, resolving into the circle of light that surrounded him, followed by a deeper blackness beyond.

He attempted to pull his arms up to his face only to find they wouldn't move. Were they tied down? He looked toward his feet but his somewhat ample belly got in the way as an indistinct, lumpy blur.

"Hello?" He shouted, words leaving his dry mouth as a whisper. He hadn't known how thirsty he was until he tried to speak. "Hello?" He tried again, still with no volume.

The first tendrils of panic seeped into him. He was groggy, couldn't think straight. Was he in a hospital? He could smell that clean, antiseptic odor he associated with hospitals. If he was then why...? Why what? No, he'd lost the thread of thought. Forget it, he'd come back to it.

Something else. A party. Yes, there *had* been a party, for him, and he'd gotten drunk. First week out and he'd gotten drunk. Had there been an accident? Was that why he was here?

Why had he done it? He already knew the answer to that one. He was weak for booze and it was that simple. If there'd been an accident it would be no secret that he had been drinking. Even if he hadn't been behind the wheel he was sunk.

Despair covered him like grave dirt.

So stupid. Gary had sworn those days were in the past but all he needed to break his vow were the guys at his door with armloads of booze. He had every reason in the world to not start drinking again, but he'd done it anyway. He'd made a mess of his life. Again. So soon.

Leaving prison he had thought about getting out of town and starting a new life where no one knew him, but the conditions of his parole wouldn't let him. He should have just—

“Mr. Jones,” a man's voice interrupted making Gary flinch, “happy to see you back with us.” The owner of the voice stepped into the light. The man was tall and slim and wore a white doctor's coat with one nice, expensive gold pen in the left breast pocket.

He knew this man from somewhere. “Where am I?” Gary croaked.

“What was that, Mr. Jones? I'm afraid I didn't quite hear you.”

Gary cleared his throat. His mouth was so dry.

“Where—” he tried again.

The doctor was already nodding. “Yes, I imagine you would have a question or two.”

The man put a straw into Gary's mouth and allowed him a sip of water before pulling it away. Gary wanted to object but still didn't have a voice.

“Not too much.” The doctor said. “Not yet.”

He examined Gary with simple clinical detachment. “You have questions for me, but there will be time for that later. For now let the anaesthetic wear off.”

Gary started to protest but even with the fear and the confusion he felt himself sliding away again.

“Not to worry, Mr. Jones. Nothing will happen without you.” It could have been the comforting line a doctor told a patient, but it was said without a trace of emotion.

Gary watched the doctor fade away. That face. He *knew* that face. It was... What? Older? Yes, but that wasn't all. Tired too. But those eyes hadn't changed.

"Who are you?" Gary managed, his eyes drooping.

"Sleep." The voice said. "We'll talk later."

Gary was gone again.

#

He faded in and out, or at least he thought he did. Somewhere in that time his mind made a connection and he started to dream.

He was back in the courtroom. The rows of seats behind the benches were full, all the way back to the wide double doors. Strangers mostly. All here less for what he had done than because of who his father was. Ironic. After the accident his father wanted nothing to do with him, didn't even show up for the trial. No, his father had to distance himself from his embarrassing liability of a son if he ever hoped of running for mayor.

Not much of a trial anyway. The public defender had explained the evidence against him and suggested if he pled guilty he might get a lighter sentence, especially if Gary showed he was willing to seek help for his drinking. Gary had argued. What if he told his story as sympathetically as possible? It wasn't his fault. The road conditions. His brakes. The other driver.

No. His lawyer explained how that trial would go. Gary would give his sympathetic testimony then the officer who first arrived on the scene would tell how Gary's blood alcohol level was .25—more than three times the legal limit. The paramedics would be next telling how Gary's monster SUV had caved in the side of the other vehicle so it was close to U-shaped; how

Gary had gotten through without a scratch while they needed to amputate the boy's right arm just to get him out of the car; how the boy died calling for his mother before they could get him to the ambulance. If any of the family got on the stand, like the uncle who had been driving, well...

Gary had insisted on a trial anyway.

Nobody likes a lawyer unless they're being defended by one, and most times not even then. The fact that his father was a lawyer hurt him; that his father was a high priced lawyer that defended corporate scumbags and squashed the little man hurt more. Gary being in law school was viewed as following in his old man's footsteps down the road of scumbaggery. None of it bought him an ounce of sympathy.

His lawyer had been right, the prosecution creamed him. At the end of the first day Gary stood before the judge and changed his plea to guilty.

And throughout it all a tall, thin, well-dressed man sat in the first row just behind the prosecutor, staring at Gary. He never showed any emotion and his eyes never wavered. When Gary had his back to the crowd he could feel those eyes boring into him.

#

Gary's eyes shot open. The doctor stood next him.

"I remember you," Gary whispered.

The man nodded. "You killed my son."

Gary shook his head and pulled on his restraints in a surge of panic. He could see them now. Thick brown leather straps at least three inches wide held each of his wrists, another one across his chest and more across his legs by the feel of it.

“I gave you something to force the anaesthetic from your system.” The man glanced at the IV bottle to Gary’s left, its tube winding down to the back of his hand. “You won’t be slipping off again.”

“It was an accident.” Gary blurted his stock excuse. “A stupid accident.”

The doctor contemplated Gary for a moment, eyes boring into him. Gary had the distinct impression the man was peering through him and deep into his soul.

“Stupid? Oh yes, it was very stupid. But an accident? No, Mr. Jones, an accident is when your car slides on the ice. An accident is when your brakes fail. An accident is something out of your control. When you get drunk then drive your car that’s no accident.”

Gary’s eyes slid away from the doctor. He still couldn’t see anything outside of the circle of light.

“Vehicular manslaughter they called it,” the man continued.

Gary shrugged, agreeing with the man. Why not? The verdict was a matter of public record, he couldn’t deny it now. He *had* been drunk and a boy had died in a car crash. All other details were irrelevant.

“Joshua was ten years old, an entire life ahead of him.”

The sadness in the man’s voice made Gary turn back. Tears brimmed the edge of the man’s eyes for a moment, then they were gone.

“I’m sorry.” Gary said.

“Are you?” The man leaned closer, any trace of emotion now gone. “Or are you sorry you got caught? Sorry that you had to go to jail for a short while?”

“Hey, I spent two *years* in prison,” Gary spat out, angry, “two *long* years of my life.”

“Two *long* years? And yet, you still have a lifetime ahead of you, while my son is still dead. You didn’t even serve the full five year sentence.”

“You don’t know what I went through in there, what they did to me.” Gary latched on to the phrase the judge had used when sentencing him. “I paid my debt to society.”

The man stared at him for a moment. “Yes, you’ve paid your debt to society, Mr. Jones—such as it is—but you still owe.”

Gary shook his head.

“Oh yes. You owe a debt to my son and to myself. You—”

“I’m sorry.” Gary blurted, thinking it sounded more genuine this time.

“No, Mr. Jones, you don’t know sorry. Not yet.”

How could he convince this man that he was indeed sorry? Tears welled in his eyes, tears of fear but surely this man would take them as regret.

The man leaned close to Gary’s ear and whispered. “No, Mr. Jones, if you were truly sorry you wouldn’t have gotten drunk with your friends last night.”

Gary couldn’t meet the man’s eyes. He’d had every intention of following the terms of his parole. He wasn’t allowed to enter a bar or have a drink, not even at home but all it took to forget were the guys at his door with some alcohol. He’d tried to keep the drinking moderate, but it had been two years since he’d had a drink. Yeah, he was weak for booze but who kept putting it in front of him?

It wasn’t his fault. None of it. Now he was here. The reality of his situation sunk in. He was trapped and *no one* knew where he was. Gary pulled with frantic strength on the restraints, feeling no give.

“What’s this debt?” Gary asked, hearing and hating the panicky whine in his voice. “I don’t have any money.” Gary would never see another dime of the family money, that message was clear. Still maybe his dad would pay off the ransom when he got the demand. He couldn’t very well abandon his son in a way that would hurt the old political career.

“No money?” The man’s soft voice asked. “Nothing? Not even a secret account?”

Gary’s mouth opened, then snapped shut.

“Have no fear, Mr. Jones. I’m not interested in money.” His lips twitched and for a moment Gary thought the man might smile. It made his insides shrivel.

“I don’t imagine you’re much of a reader of Shakespeare are you?”

“I—what?”

“Shakespeare, Mr. Jones. The bard.”

Gary shook his head. He knew who Shakespeare was but hadn’t read any since high school.

The doctor shook his head too. “No, I’m not surprised. No matter. Only one play concerns us: The Merchant of Venice. Do you know it?”

“Heard of it.”

“Good. Well, most of that story is irrelevant to our situation, but the part with Shylock is quite germane.” The man paused, obviously expecting Gary’s input. When Gary shrugged he sighed and continued. “Shylock was a money lender, what today we would call a loan shark. Antonio and Bassanio, the heroes of the story, go to him because Bassanio needs to borrow money. Now Shylock doesn’t much like Antonio because of some comments he’s made against money lenders.”

The man walked to the edge of the light and reached for something in the darkness. While he talked he wheeled a cart back to the side of Gary's table and stopped where Gary could see it. A thin square of fabric covered odd bumps and lumps on the cart.

"Shylock offers to loan the money to Bassanio and he even does it interest free. There is a catch though. You see, if Bassanio defaults on the loan then Shylock gets a special payment from Antonio."

The man folded back the fabric exposing a full table of gleaming surgical scalpels, saws and utensils that Gary couldn't begin to identify. Terror splashed into Gary's brain.

"Shylock's payment would be a pound of Antonio's flesh."

The man stopped, observing Gary with that same lack of emotion.

"You're not serious." Gary whispered, feeling his voice desert him again. His eyes darted from the doctor to the utensils and back. In a frenzy he pulled on the restraints but only succeeded in emphasising his helplessness.

"Now in the play," the man continued "Shylock would have chosen the pound of flesh but in this case I will allow you to decide; it is, after all, your currency."

The man covered the instruments with the fabric again.

"As an example a hand is about a pound, so is a foot."

"You're out of your mind," Gary said.

The doctor was quiet a long moment, focussing on something beyond Gary. "Perhaps. The loss of a child can do monumental damage to a parent's mind." He turned and headed for the surrounding blackness. "My sanity does not change your situation."

“Wait a god-damn minute.” Gary yelled at the retreating man. “What if I refuse to play your game?”

“Then I will make your choice for you.” The man replied over his shoulder. “You have fifteen minutes, Mr. Jones.”

#

Insane.

The man was out of his friggin’ mind. His kid’s death had sent him over the edge and Gary was stuck in a nightmare, one he couldn’t wake up from. No! No, there was always a way out of things—he just had to think of it. Think! Okay, so he didn’t read Shakespeare for fun, but that didn’t mean he was an idiot. He’d had an education. He had knowledge. He always beat them at the bar when Jeopardy came on.

The bar.

Shit, he sure could use a drink. He *needed* one the way a drowning man needs air. It would settle his nerves, help him think. But that was the whole problem wasn’t it? Not just the drinks from that night when the kid died but the ones from last night that he hadn’t refused. He couldn’t resist, he was too weak. He joined that group in prison, some kind of AA thing, but he’d just gone through the motions to show how repentant he was. It was easy to fake with no alcohol around.

Tears spilled down the side of his face. It wasn’t his fault. None of it. That night. The booze. His car. Not his fault.

He shook off the pity. No time. The doctor would be back in a few minutes. What could he do though?

“Play the game.”

His own voice surprised him as much as finding an idea had started to form. Gary would play the game, but by his own rules.

#

The doctor returned showing no sign of satisfaction but Gary imagined he could feel it. The man had been watching him from the shadows, he was sure of it. Well screw him and his dead kid.

“Have you made a choice, Mr. Jones?”

Gary cleared his throat. “I guess I have.” He forced his eyes to meet the doctor’s. “Before I give you my choice I want to know I’ll be alive after you remove my—” Gary took a deep breath and went on. “After you remove the pound of flesh.”

The man’s mask cracked for a moment, a brief display of surprise.

“Well, yes of course.”

“You promise?”

“I find it interesting that you are willing to accept the promise of a man who has confined you to a hospital bed, a man who *you* said was out of his mind. You put your trust in strange places.”

Gary’s resolve wavered.

“Nevertheless, for what it’s worth,” the man replied “I promise you will be alive after the operation is over. You see, whatever your choice might be I want you to live with it for the rest of your life. Each time you look in the mirror you will think of my son.”

“And you’ll let me go.”

“After your debt has been paid you will be released, yes.”

Gary eyed the room—the darkness, the overhead lights, and the tray of covered surgical tools in particular. His arms were starting to get numb and his back hurt from lying in the same position. He let out a long sigh and kept staring at the tray. “You’re a surgeon?”

“I was.”

“Was?”

“Yes.” His voice was far away. “After Joshua I couldn’t operate anymore. Everyone looked like him, each patient I couldn’t save a vicious reminder and each one I could a slap in the face.”

Gary wondered about his chances.

“Don’t worry, Mr. Jones I still remember how to cut something out of a person’s body.”

“I’m sure you do. One more question.” Gary paused for dramatic effect. He’d steered the doctor to this point and now he had him. He savoured the smug satisfaction of knowing he’d won. “How much does an appendix weigh?”

Gary already knew the answer, a bit of knowledge from some trivia game. He’d gotten the promise from the man knowing that the doctor would be bound by whatever bizarre honour he was following. A ghost of a grin started to cross Gary’s face. He’d won!

The man considered Gary a moment, his eyes wandering up and down. “In a person of normal weight an appendix would weigh about a third of a pound.”

Gary’s stomach dropped and the smugness vanished.

“But,” the doctor continued, “in the morbidly obese it could weigh as much as six. In your case, Mr. Jones, I would guess your appendix could weigh around a pound, maybe a bit more.”

“Okay, fine, that’s my choice then. You can have my appendix. There’s my pound of flesh.”

The doctor was quiet, with a strange expression that Gary imagined to be surprise or respect. Gary had found a way out and all he’d given up was a useless organ.

“My appendix.” He repeated, not attempting to disguise his smile.

#

Gary tried to find ways to distract himself while time crept by. With each minute he became more apprehensive about the coming operation. To Gary’s surprise a nurse came in; preparing the room for the operation, arranging surgical instruments. Didn’t she realize Gary was a prisoner? Did she not understand the insanity going on here?

“Hey,” he whispered, “help me. Please.”

The nurse injected something into the IV line that ran into the back of his hand. She stepped forward and gave the needle in his hand a quick twist.

He hissed with the sudden pain. “What was that for?”

She turned away, but did he see a brief sneer on her face? Maybe. Fuck it. It would all be over soon.

Gary forced himself to lie still and close his eyes. After the operation, he would be on his way, the doctor had promised him. One thing Gary knew was liars. The doctor said he would let Gary go once his debt was paid and that was what would happen.

His debt! Jesus, now he was thinking that way.

When he got out of here he would take some of that money in his Cayman Islands account and get the hell out of the country—should have done it already. He didn't care about his parole agreement. He would go somewhere they would never find him.

Then the room started to swim.

#

“Scalpel.”

A dream.

“Scalpel.” A feminine voice replied.

He heard the scrape of metal utensil against metal tray, then pressure of a sharp knife cutting into the flesh of his lower right abdomen. There wasn't pain, not exactly, but there was a sensation, a feeling.

No. Not a dream. Not a god-damn dream at all.

He tried to talk, tried to open his eyes, tried to tell the doctor that he was still awake and aware of what was going on. He couldn't move, couldn't make a sound.

“Suction.”

“Suction.” The nurse replied.

Gary heard the sucking sound of a vacuum in liquid. *His* liquid.

He was helpless. Panic struck him, taking hold of his senses and scrambling his thoughts. The heart monitor's beeps rose.

“How are his vitals?”

“Within the limits.” The nurse replied again.

Gary couldn't do anything, couldn't think past what was happening to him. Step by step he experienced them going through the operation. He would feel the occasional pressure inside as the doctor moved through his body, isolating his healthy organ and removing it. Gary had never felt so vulnerable in his life.

This wasn't how... This was...

"Suture."

"Suture."

As the sutures tied Gary's flesh closed the world slipped away and he slept.

#

"I was aware of the whole operation. Everything. Every cut. Every sound. Every word said. Everything!" Tears rolled down his face and knew he was hysterical.

"Anaesthesia awareness occurs in less than one percent of all patients. It's quite rare and an interesting study in itself."

Gary looked away from that emotionless face. He had no fascination in the medical side of what had happened. He wanted to run, to get far away from this man and his eyes, from this insanity and from his own memory.

"However, in this case I gave you a muscle relaxant to paralyze you and a pain killer so you wouldn't die."

Gary spun his head back.

"Oh yes, it was intentional, Mr. Jones. I *want* you to remember it. All of it."

The panic in his mind ramped up. He felt violated in a way he never suspected possible.

"Now, I know what you're waiting for." The doctor said.

The wheeled a scale on a table up to Gary's bed and the doctor reached into a metal bin beside it. He pulled out a pinkish bloody mess that could only have been Gary's appendix and put it on the flat tray of the scale.

The urge to run spiked inside Gary's head while the digital display rolled upwards.

"A little over one pound, Mr. Jones."

"Keep the change." Gary muttered, trying to sound in control.

The doctor removed Gary's organ back to the metal bin.

"It's done. My debt to your son has been paid." Gary wanted to add 'you psychotic bastard' but held back—time for that later. With effort he forced his eyes to lock with the other man's. "Now let me out of here."

The doctor shook his head back and forth while holding Gary's gaze.

"You promised," Gary yelled. "You lied."

"No, Mr. Jones. I meant it when I said you would be released after your debt had been paid."

Gary didn't understand in the least.

"Your debt hasn't been paid yet."

Gary's eyes flicked to the now empty scale with a smear of his blood, then back again.

The doctor nodded.

"Yes, that was your debt to my son. If you remember, I also said you had a debt to me."

The room spun and receded.

"You have fifteen minutes to make your decision."

#

Gary stared at nothing in particular, numb, unbelieving. He had to do it again. Minutes ago he had been confident, smug even, that he had beaten the doctor at his own game. Now he wasted several minutes in denial, panic threatening to engulf him. He needed to calm down.

He needed to tell the doctor the truth.

No! Absolutely not.

That helped him get a grip. He still couldn't focus on a choice but the panic receded.

Breathe in. Breathe out. Focus on something else.

Gary tried to get into a more comfortable position but was stopped by the restraints again and that tiny thing was one thing too much. He screamed into the room, partly for release and partly to hear his own voice. For the next few minutes Gary screamed and cried and begged. A sutured wound on his lower stomach said he had earned the right.

But if he didn't stop, that crazy bastard would come back and...

Gary spent more time forcing himself to calm down. He thought about good things like parties and girls and food and alcohol; pushing shadowed, grisly thoughts of operations out of his mind. Once he could focus without bringing the panic back he began to catalogue his body, starting at his head and working his way down considering each part in turn.

"I'm sure you have given it a good deal of thought, Mr Jones," the doctor said emerging from the darkness.

Gary jumped as much as the restraints allowed.

"Before you tell me your choice let me point out that your gall bladder, spleen, adenoids, tonsils and wisdom teeth together do not add up to a pound. Also, that second kidney of yours only weighs about a third of a pound."

“No. No, no, no. That wasn’t fifteen minutes.” He hated the pleading sound of his voice.

Losing control by himself was one thing, but in front of this man...

The doctor gazed at Gary with his usual lack of emotion.

“I need more time. Please. Just a few minutes.”

“If you don’t have a choice—”

“No, I do. I do.”

The doctor waited. Gary struggled to think of something, anything. His mind was frozen in a loop that kept returning to his foot, a choice he didn’t want to make.

“Very well, Mr. Jones.” The doctor headed for the darkness.

Gary had no doubt that the doctor was serious about making the decision for him. “No wait, please... I...”

The doctor had reached the light’s edge when Gary’s mind flipped over in one amazing moment of clarity, like flicking the switch in an unlit room. He had his answer.

And, Jesus Christ, it was so obvious.

“Can you do liposuction?” He blurted as the dimness swallowed the doctor.

Gary kept his eyes on the spot where the tall man had disappeared. For long eternal moments nothing happened then the man stepped back into view. He paused a moment before coming closer.

Liposuction *was* so obvious. It should have been his first choice. He berated himself for being so stupid and almost missing it a second time. The only excuse he had was that he never gave any thought to being overweight, it was just a part of him.

The doctor's eyes strolled to Gary's gut. A stomach that came from a love of food and beer. Even in prison he'd been able to get food when he wanted it, working on kitchen duty where the inmates got extras.

"Yes, Mr. Jones, I would be able to perform that procedure." The doctor's face didn't change. "You offer your fat as payment?"

"I do," Gary said, his smug confidence reclaimed. He'd foxed the man at his own game a second time.

#

As the last time he was aware of all that went on around him. The sounds of the doctor and nurse preparing for the operation worried him. He had no idea what to expect though he imagined liposuction as a vacuum. Even awake it shouldn't be *that* traumatic.

"Scalpel."

"Scalpel." The nurse replied.

The pressure of a knife cutting through the skin on one side of his body and travelling in a horizontal arc to the opposite side.

What the hell?

The incision slanted upward and made its way back across his body, this time above the belly-button.

His skin was lifted.

"Suction." The doctor said.

"Suction."

No. No, no, no, no, no.

Over the next few hours Gary's skin and fat were pulled and lifted, a scalpel inserted underneath to detach the flesh from the abdominal wall.

He wanted to scream, to move, but he couldn't do anything except listen, and think. The worst moment was feeling the wide section of flesh pulled away from him and deposited into a container with a horrible, wet splat that would echo inside his head forever. Two edges of skin that had never met before were pulled together.

"Suture."

"Suture." The nurse repeated as Gary was finally allowed to slip away.

#

His dreams weaved in and out of the vague memories of the night that had changed his life, what details he remembered anyway. Him and Scotty getting in his car, laughing about something. A blur of headlights. His hands shooting up to grab the panic bar above the door. Scott lying on the ground and closing his eyes. Gary drifting around the accident listening to, but not quite hearing, the screams.

#

Awareness came back. Gary's eyes fluttered open to take in the now familiar ring of light and the doctor. He had a curious feeling of emptiness. Lifting his head to look down shot a vicious blast of pain through his mid-section. In that brief glimpse he saw he was thinner. A wide bandage spread from one hip to the other across his lower stomach, below where his belly-button should have been.

"That wasn't liposuction." Gary said.

"No, Mr. Jones, it was not."

“You said you would do lipo.”

“No, I said I *could*. The operation *I* performed is called abdominoplasty. A tummy tuck in layman’s terms.”

“But, why—”

“Mr. Jones, I said you could choose the pound of flesh to pay with, I never said you could choose how I would collect it.”

A chill crept through Gary’s soul.

“I removed as much fat as possible from your body,” The doctor said, reaching outside Gary’s point of view. “Now, let’s see how much all of that fat weighed.”

The cart rolled into Gary’s line of sight and he clenched his eyes. “Please.”

“Very well, Mr. Jones,” the doctor said “let’s just say you gave more than enough.”

Gary expected a trick, but when he opened his eyes there was only the doctor in front of him. “Okay. I’ve paid my debt to your son, and now I’ve paid my debt to you.”

The doctor made no movement.

“Look, I’m sorry for what happened okay!” Gary was surprised to find it was true.

“You’ve taught me a lesson. I’m sorry. Just, please let me go.”

The doctor’s head gave an almost imperceptible shake.

“I promise I won’t tell anyone about this. Please.”

“In time, Mr. Jones.”

“You promised.”

“Yes, as soon as your debt is paid.”

Gary's skin crawled and the hairs on his arms stood up in abject fear. He started to sob.

"My debt..."

The doctor beckoned and the nurse came into the light to stand beside the man. She looked Gary in the face and he saw it. Where the doctor had an emotionless, piercing stare she had deep pools of soul-scorching hate. Her expression would have made him recoil if he could move.

"She—"

"Is my wife, Joshua's mother."

Gary looked at the nurse, at her hateful glare, the tears in her eyes.

"You probably don't recognize her. She couldn't bear to be at your trial."

Gary's eyes travelled from one to the other and back again.

"You will next pay your debt to her."

"My debt—"

"Is not yet paid, Mr. Jones."

"No." Gary shook his head. "No! You took more than a pound when you took my fat, you took extra."

"Yes, Mr. Jones. That was your debt to me and it's been paid, overpaid as you've stated. Your debt to my wife must be paid separately."

Gary shot a look of blistering hatred at the doctor and lay his head back, staring at the ceiling. After a moment he realized the two hadn't moved. Gary turned back to them.

"My wife wants to choose which body part to take."

No. That loathing in her eyes... she would take his head.

“It is her right, as a mother.” The doctor explained.

“Please, no.”

“No,” the doctor agreed. “I convinced her there was more justice in you choosing.

However, if you can’t come up with a choice—”

“I’ll take your arm.” The woman completed. “The right one. From your shoulder.”

#

Gary was out of options. He was out of hope, out of luck and very soon out of time.

“Relax. Breathe in and out slowly.”

He closed his eyes and searched for a calm he wasn’t sure was there. Bit by bit he backed away from the edge of panic. He didn’t think about doctors, operations, organs or debts. No, that wasn’t true. He did think of one debt. Scotty owed him huge. He would be visiting good old Scotty Everhart and his dad after getting out of here. Right after he visited the cops.

“Enough. Come back to that later.”

He kept his focus on the nothing occupying his mind, pushing the calm until he knew he had a firm grasp of it.

Now, think.

Starting at the feet he worked his way up. He could give part of his stomach or intestine but that seemed more horrible than what *she* wanted. Gary went through all of the needless and extra body parts several times. Together they wouldn’t add up to a pound, just as the doctor had said.

I removed as much fat as possible from your body.

Now Gary knew why. The doctor didn't want Gary using the fat to pay again. All that fat! He could have paid a hundred debts with what he had given. Gary could feel the flabby skin rubbing painfully, which was the point he was sure. His thighs. His chest. His ass. The doctor had done his job well. Gary was awake and aware. No weakness or nausea. No light-headedness. He was as fit as he had been last night, or close enough at least.

He wished he *could* pass out. Despair threatened to drag him down again and steal his fifteen minutes.

God damn it. Scotty should be on this table!

The doctor had come back into the circle of light at some point and stood next to the head of the bed. He couldn't have been there long.

"Mr. Jones." Not a question or a command, but a statement with an expectation of a response.

Gary thought about it. Did he tell this man the truth? No! he had spent two years in prison and kept his mouth shut with worse things happening to him. He wouldn't throw it all away now. Without that money... His eyes flicked away from the doctor then back again. What other options did he have? He had run out of body parts to give away. He had to make a choice and right now or that crazy bitch would take his arm.

The doctor turned away.

"No, wait."

His voice was so low he was sure for a moment that it was only in his head but the doctor stopped.

"Wait." Gary repeated.

The doctor's calm, unwavering eyes wore Gary down. "God damn it," he yelled, "you could at least show some joy at this revenge of yours. Wring your hands. Let out a mad cackle. Anything."

"Revenge, Mr. Jones? Revenge?" His lips twitched. "This isn't revenge, this is justice."
"Now, your choice?"

Gary muttered something.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Jones?"

"I said," Gary cleared his throat and met the doctor's eyes, "my foot. Take my left foot."

Gary twisted away, examining the other side of the bed. When he looked back the doctor was gone.

#

His mind floated in and out of the here and now, something which he was grateful for. He was aware of the doctor and his wife prepping him for the operation but kept his eyes closed and ignored them. He wouldn't give them any more satisfaction than he had to. The IV moved as they added something. Would they make him live through this operation too?

Screw it. It was worth it. He thought about the money and the secret he had carried the last three years.

Scotty had been driving Gary's SUV when they sailed through the red light at 100 mph and into the side of the other car.

The next day Scotty's dad—the mayor—and their lawyer met with Gary at the jail. The lawyer slid a piece of paper with a long number written on it and a dollar sign at the front to Gary.

“That will be deposited to a Cayman Islands account in your name after the trial,” the lawyer told him. “If you ever tell a soul what really happened we will take back every cent.”

Scotty’s dad had bigger goals than being mayor. You could get into the White House if your son had been a passenger in an unfortunate accident but not if he had been the driver.

“Scott was asleep in the car the whole time and had no knowledge of what happened. Right, Gary?” the lawyer said.

Gary agreed to the deal before the lawyer had finished talking. That money would mean no more jumping to his father’s cracked whip, no more pretending he wanted to be a lawyer. It didn’t matter what the punishment was. They couldn’t skin him alive.

Skin!

It came to him just like that. All of the flabby, painful skin the doctor had left behind, surely that would add up to a pound.

Gary tried to open his eyes.

#

As he swam out of the anaesthetic Gary became aware that he could still feel his left foot. He *had* told them about the skin in time. A strange happiness filled him and he felt like laughing. He’d beat them, stopped them at removing unnecessary parts and he would keep the money too. He moved his legs and was rewarded with a blinding blast of pain that tried to knock him out again. When his vision cleared Gary could see his right foot sloped up to where his toes poked against the inside of the sheet. On the left, no slope. Nothing.

Vague memories swirled. An operation. The sound of a saw— and that’s where his mind cut off the memory, refusing to go further.

He tried to lift his leg but the pain and nausea that slammed into him made him pass out instantly.

#

“Mr. Jones.”

A voice from a long way off.

“Wake up, Mr. Jones.”

Just a few more minutes.

A hard slap across his face and his eyes rolled behind the lids

Huh? What?

Another slap from the other side and his eyes opened. They refused to focus for a long moment but then locked in on the face of the nurse. She stood over him, a vague satisfaction in her eyes, hand drawn upwards. The doctor shook his head and the hand dropped.

“Good. You’re awake,” the doctor said.

He pulled the sheet back from Gary’s left foot—from the place it used to be—and inspected Gary’s stump. With a nod of satisfaction he dropped the sheet again. Behind Gary the nurse added something to his IV.

“Just an anti-biotic, Mr. Jones.” The man said.

“It’s over,” Gary muttered to the man. “It’s paid.”

Father, mother and son, all paid. Now all he wanted to do was sleep, to forget that he’d come up with the right decision too late. He didn’t care about any of it. The kid. Scotty. The doctor. The money.

Nothing mattered.

The man looked at Gary with a stony silence that pulled him back from the abyss. Gary's eyes focussed and sleep fled.

"It's done," he repeated.

The man raised his right hand and a light went on in the dark. An observation room with three young men who stood, watching.

Creeping horror swam through his body at the sight of the three. They stood so still they could have been mannequins.

"These are Joshua's brothers."

"No," Gary whisper-pleaded. "No, please no."

The doctor moved toward that one lighted room.

"No, listen. Please."

The doctor kept walking.

"I wasn't driving that night," Gary blurted in a rush. "I didn't kill your son. It was Scotty. Scott Everhart. He was the driver."

The man stopped, listening to the panicked ramblings until Gary was finished. "I know, Mr. Jones."

"What?"

The doctor turned back and examined Gary with quiet menace. "Mr. Everhart has paid his debt."

"But he... No!" Gary screamed. "Why? If you already knew then why? Why are you doing this?"

“Why, Mr. Jones? Because of you, my son’s killer went unpunished. Do I need a better reason?” With that the doctor walked out of the light. “I’ll be back for your three choices.”

“No! I didn’t do it! It wasn’t me!”

Gary’s head sank back against the bed and he looked around him. His mouth hung open as a brain freezing, testicle shrivelling realization came to him. There was enough room in the darkness for five more observation rooms.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Haas John Haas is an award-winning Canadian author living in the nation’s capital of Ottawa, Ontario. He grew up in Montreal, Quebec and also lived for many years in Calgary, Alberta.

Since his early days he’s enjoyed writing and telling stories. Over the years he’s found ways to incorporate that into whatever else he’s been doing, and there has been a long list of jobs.

When not writing or working John loves to be with his two wonderful sons, doing all kinds of family stuff. He enjoys collecting action figures, reading comic book collections, as well as all things science-fiction, fantasy or horror related. Once an active gamer, these days he saves gaming (video and board games) for family time with his boys.

You can find John on Facebook, Instagram and X to get updates on his most recent work.

BOOKS BY THIS AUTHOR

The Relucant Barbarian Series

The Relucant Barbarian Series

Arthur Jenkins would have been happy to live his life the way it was until he finally died, but the angel in his office has different ideas. He's there to grant a wish Arthur made as a kid, and it's a doozy. It's also a wish he doesn't want in the slightest. After all, what grown man would want to be a barbarian hero? Seriously! Whether he wants it or not, Arthur is getting that wish granted. Angels have quotas too, you know. Join Arthur, Dead Mike and Valeria the Paladin on a quest across the land, having unwanted adventures while looking for a comfy place to sit.

The Wayward Spider

All Spider wants is to seek his fortune as a thief. Is that too much to ask? Must be, since a break in gone wrong leaves him babysitting a powerful magic-user with sporadic control over his spells, and even less of a grip on functioning in society. And that's just where it starts. Each misadventure takes Spider further from his goals, but he's about to learn that sometimes we get what we need instead of what we want.

Werewolves, cults, ghosts and gods. This one has it all. Join a moody thief, a caster of chaos magic and a hulking behemoth as circumstances throw them from one quest to another. And just why is that ancient cult chasing them?

The Unavoidable Quests

Saving the multiverse is hard work. Even harder when that task is forced on two groups of heroes who have just met, neither of which really wants the job. Heck, each group isn't even sure how much they like their new companions, except for Dead Mike and Graves, of course. They're sure they hate each other. Join them and other old friends Arthur, Spider, Nila, Valeria, Amp and many others on a hilarious adventure to save reality that just may kill them all in the process... if they don't kill each other first.

Book of Ancient Evil Series

Cults of Death and Madness (Volume 1)

The first in a new Lovecraftian trilogy, "a frightening Victorian adventure of ancient idols, blood-sacrifice cults, and Elder Gods" (Hellnotes).

1878—Doctor Archibald Shaw arrives in India with lofty intentions. He wants to make a difference in the world. As a young doctor and new officer in Her Majesty's British army, he wants nothing more than to help the local people while distinguishing himself in Queen Victoria's foreign service.

In short order, though, Shaw finds his basic concept of the world turned upside down. It begins with an ugly idol, and an evil from the dawn of time waiting to return to this world. This elder god still sleeps . . . but fitfully, and a cult long thought destroyed has come back to awaken it. They will kill anyone who gets in their way. Everything Shaw once believed true dissolves around him, and he grasps at straws to keep his own sanity—including the desperate friendship of one young orphan boy. Will it be enough to keep him alive? Shaw begins to realize that the fate of all humanity rests in his hands.

Book of Death and Madness (Volume 2)

Monsters. Madness. Visions. 1885. Doctor Archibald Shaw and his young friend Singh arrive in England, one month behind the dangerous cult leader, Ananya. They must find her, and soon. Ananya holds a book of untold evil, brought with her from India. A book which could spell doom for all of humanity. Shaw and Singh are not alone in their search for Ananya and the book. Others want the volume for their own and will stop at nothing to get it. Meanwhile in London's east end, monsters roam the shadows and people are disappearing. Is this also Ananya's doing? Or do these monsters search for her as well? The world becomes even more nightmarish for Shaw and Singh. The elder god Cthulhu still sleeps, but for how much longer? Shaw fears what he sees in his dreams, and fears what actions he will need to take. How deep into a world of evil can one man slip? To save the world, can he do any less?

Prophets of Death and Madness (Volume 3) will be released in October 2024.

Stay Out!

On the outskirts of sleepy town Pine Bluff stands a crumbling abandoned house. It has been empty for decades, since our grandparents were children. Something unspeakable happened here, something so horrific that an entire town agreed to never speak of it again, and forget the house even existed.

This house is abandoned, but not empty.

Wandering the hallways and rooms is an echo of that atrocity from years ago. A memory. It is waiting and it is angry.

It will rain down its terrible vengeance on anyone naive enough to enter.

Five teenage friends arrive with the intention of doing just that. It's an adventure, a way to prove themselves, a way to renew their friendships. For one it is all about a cruel prank.

Not all of them will escape.