

Speak No Evil
By: J. Wint

My name is Peter McHugh, and I own a pet store called *For Pete's Sake!* I thought it was cute, but my Ex-wife hated it, just like she hated the way I smelled when I came home at the end of the day. "*Pete, you smell like a gerbil shit on you!*" she would say. It always made me laugh, but she never could find the humor in it. Isabel hated animals, ever since she was a child. She told me once that their family cat (a white Siamese named Cheesecake) clawed its way through the fabric beneath the sofa. Unfortunately, the poor thing couldn't find its way back out and passed away over the long holiday weekend. When Isabel's family returned next Monday, they couldn't find Cheesecake. Soon, however, the stench of death led them to the source. That was the last pet her family owned. In fact, Isabel refused to have any animals around after that. I always thought it ironic that I, an animal lover, married someone who detested them. But love always finds a way, right? Call me a clandestine, star-crossed, sentimental bastard, but it's what I am, for better or worse.

Speaking of 'for-better-or-worse', Isabel and I took the vows ten years ago. Her smile was something to behold and captivated me right away. But at night she would leave, and I wouldn't see her till morning. This last June, I found out why. Isabel had kept a black book and in it were hundreds of names; mostly men, but a few women. Our conversations quickly became cropped and short, like a bad

haircut, and after the divorce she moved to Wisconsin. We had no children.

The bell on the front door chimed as another customer entered my store. I have all types of interesting people who come to see me; it's one of the most enjoyable things about my job. I can usually guess the type of pet a customer owns. For example, the lady in the corner: a tattoo sleeve and nose ring says she's into exotics, (usually a chinchilla, or a sugar glider). And the guy on aisle two: 5'-6", maybe a buck-thirty, (probably a snake owner, or something big.) Every pet owner is compensating for something.

I looked down at Snowball, a large, pure white tabby, and wondered if I was compensating for something, too. Funny how Snowball had ended up in my store. I was watching the Yankees completely dismantle the Twins when she just waltzed in one snowy night in early spring of '98. She was a night owl, and only came around in the evenings. But most of my customers called her by name now, a reaction that caused Snowball to curl up around their ankles and purr.

The bell over the entry chimed again and I looked up to see a man wearing a sleeveless leather jacket, toting a large glass aquarium. He stumbled drunkenly over to the register and hefted the aquarium onto the scratched plastic laminate countertop.

"Got a prob, Bro," the broad-shouldered man said. The blonde tufts of facial hair rippled along his jaw line as he spoke.

I looked inside the glass aquarium. Scurrying around inside--more like loping around--was the largest guinea pig I had ever seen in my life. "What do you feed it?" I joked.

The furry rascal inside stopped and gave me a meaningful look. I swear it smiled.

“Well, man, that’s the problem. He’s been shittin’ all week, and I can’t get him to keep anythin’ down.”

“Sir--” I began.

“Bro. It’s Kendall. And this is Pop Evil.”

“Excuse me?”

The guinea pig let out a miniscule fart that interrupted the brief silence.

“See what I mean?” Kendall said. “He’s at it again. I don’t know what Evil ate, but he ain’t been normal for the last few weeks. I know he looks like he ain’t starvin’, but he used to eat all the time. Now, it’s like he’s fastin’. When a twenty-six pound guinea pig starts doin’ that, you notice. I spent sixteen-fifty at the grosh on Tuesday just for the smell; potpourri, scented candles, nothing helps. He won’t eat, and he ain’t keepin’ nothin’ down. I don’t even know where it’s all comin’ from, t-be honest.”

“Sir”, I said, pushing the aquarium back across the countertop. “I’m afraid you need a veterinary clinic. There’s one down the street called *One Stop Vets*.”

Kendall looked at his watch. “Bro, work with me on this. I got be at my girl’s in ten minutes. I can’t have this.”

But I was already shaking my head. The last thing I needed before Christmas was a twenty-six pound guinea pig nicknamed Evil with diarrhea. Even though I had nowhere to be, and no family to entertain, I could at least watch a rerun of *Happy Days* with the Fonzie and the Cunningham’s in peace. “Sir... Kendall,” I corrected myself. “I wouldn’t even know what to do with it.”

“You turnin’ me away?”

“Yes,” I said firmly. “I’m sorry, but we’re closing for the holiday.”

I thought that would be it. I had rarely turned customers away; I had a hard time turning anyone away. But maybe if I had, Isabel would never have left me. Maybe now was a good time to start--maybe now was a new start.

Kendall stood rooted. He sighed.

The kid on aisle two (all one hundred and thirty pounds of him) was the last customer to leave the store. The bell jingled as the cold Minnesota wind slammed it shut.

I began to wonder what this guy wanted of me. I was no doctor, and a shitting guinea pig was not my problem. But before I could say another word, Kendall was sliding a one hundred dollar bill across the counter top. He let it sit there beneath his badly manicured index finger. Tapping. Tapping.

I looked at him.

“Take the C-note, Bro,” Kendall said. It sounded more like a threat than a plea.

“Make it two,” I said calmly.

He opened his wallet without a second thought and slapped a second bill down hard. It was 4:03 p.m. on Christmas Eve and I had just made more in two minutes than I’d made all week.

I took the money. “What are the conditions?”

“Simple,” Kendall replied as he slid his snakeskin wallet back into his sleeveless leather jacket. “You hold onto Evil for me until Monday. Clean up after him, wipe his ass, hell, give him a diaper if it helps.”

I guessed that I could handle that. I’d dealt with Isabel for ten years, *for Pete’s sake!* “What if he, well... doesn’t make it?”

Kendall sniggered. “Evil? He’ll be fine.”

I picked up the aquarium in both arms and nearly dropped it. Pop Evil, or ‘Evil’, as Kendall had called him, looked at me. It was the first time I had ever felt uncomfortable around an animal. “Why are you so insistent on leaving him with me?”

“Just take the money, Bro, and don’t ask questions. K?” He turned to leave, kicked his boots on the door threshold and paused. “Somethin’ else on your mind?”

In fact there was. “Why is he called Pop Evil?”

“It’s a long story. A very long story...” He smiled.

Something told me that there was probably a large amount of narcotics involved in that story. I let it drop.

“Monday, Pete. See ya then.” And he was gone, the doorbell jingling as a gust slammed it shut. Pop Evil farted.

“Did I even tell him my name?” I asked aloud.

It’s on the front of your store, dumbass!

I looked at the guinea pig. Did he just read my thoughts?

The fat animal looked at me with red eyes. Its black curly tufts were slightly greasy, like the film on a crow’s feathers, and its hair seemed thin, too sparse. Proportionally, it was wider than it was long, reminding me of an over-inflated football. Someone might think it was cute, obviously Kendall. To me, it wasn’t.

The heater kicked off, causing me to jump. I looked at the waggy-cat clock on the wall and shook my head. Maybe Isabel had been right; the smell of gerbil shit over the years was finally starting to get to me.

I hefted the aquarium again and headed for the back to get my coat, Snowball scampering off into the dark. Near the back of the store was my office, which I

affectionately referred to as 'solitary confinement'. There was no second emergency exit since building codes back when this store was built weren't as stringent as today's. I thought about leaving Pop back here (the nickname sounded better than 'Evil'). I'd have to run the heater at the store over the weekend anyway for Snowball and the other critters. But then I decided that I could hang out with Pop at home for the holiday, scented candles or not. What the hell? I had nothing to do and there was one hell of a winter storm on the way. And, Kendall had paid me \$200.

I set the aquarium down and went to grab my coat, checked on a few animals, fed the hermit crabs--god how I hated hermit crabs... maybe because they reminded me of myself--and shut the main lights off. The fluorescent glow from the fish tanks on aisle three lit the store in a faint glimmer that reflected off of the cheap vinyl tile. The store wasn't much, but it was all mine.

When I got back to Pop's aquarium, it was teetering on the edge of the shelf, about to fall onto the floor. The guinea pig was gone.

"*Shit!*" I whispered. There was a pile of exactly that on the polished vinyl floor. It smelled like hell. The first description that came to mind was tar mixed with vegetable oil, and the consistency was no better. It oozed and ran. I nearly puked.

I stood and grabbed the paper towel roll (extra strength Brawny, off course) and spun promptly half of the roll out. I used the two-inch-thick mitten of paper to scoop the pile into the trash and threw the bag in the corner, finally taking a breath. Kendall had been right, what had that thing been eating?

My store wasn't big, but it was big enough for a twenty-six pound guinea pig to hide out in. But I had no patience for it tonight and looked at my watch. What if someone came in and the damn thing scampered outside? I walked hurriedly over

to the front door and bolted the deadbolt with a resounding click.

The amount of glass in this part of town was limited, to reduce the amount of break-ins. Still, I had installed a large steel grated door after the second break-in. Several juveniles--who had later been caught and spent sixteen months in a detention center--had stolen all of my ferrets. Why they had wanted them, I had no idea. Regardless, I had elected to install the metal security grate. I decided to go ahead and lock it, too, just in case it took a while to locate the furry rodent.

I pulled the security door down, the iron grating squeaking and groaning in displeasure. I bent down and locked it. That's when the smell hit me. I turned, slipped in a pile of crap, and hit the back of my head on the iron grate. The last thing I remember was a pair of red, beady eyes staring at me. I swear they seemed to smile.

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Christmas morning: 1:16 a.m.

My blurred vision focused in. Then it focused out again.

I tried to sit up but slid back down the metal security gate. I knew right away that something was wrong. I had tasted blood once when I was a kid. Jimmy Council had decked me when I was in the fifth grade. It was for no good reason (although later I think it was because of Jenny Goodson). The taste of blood has a sweet, metallic flavor to it; iron, I'm told. I had a good deal of it in the back of my throat; enough to make me sick to my stomach.

I dropped to my knees and vomited right there on the front door. When I tried to wipe my lips, my fingers brushed against my teeth. My lips were missing.

There was a sudden ringing inside my head, like I had been hit by a playground

ball, one of the big, red bouncy kind. My hand went immediately to my face to verify what my brain was telling me wasn't possible. But the gaping void there was undeniable. When I tried to scream, nothing came out but a muffled choke. My tongue was gone, too.

The electric shock that I felt shot up my arm and my heart rate must have tripled in the matter of a few seconds. My index finger kept moving in-and-out of my mouth in disbelief, as if it had a mind of its own. When I finally caught a glimpse of myself in the storefront, I threw up again. In the falling snow outside, I saw the reflection of my face and there was no mistake. This was no dream.

A smell drifted past my nostrils as I tried to scream again and I turned slowly.

Pop was looking at me down aisle two. It stood on its two hind legs and twittered its whiskers at me.

"Cute, huh?"

"Wha-ha-uck!" I tried to scream. The hair on my arms stood up.

I fumbled for the keys in pocket.

Pop pulled at something below the cat food aisle with his front paw. The unmistakable sound of keys jingled over the humming of the fish tanks.

I wiped blood and vomit from my chin (there was nothing there to hold the drool in), and tried not to pass out. No way was this happening!

I suddenly grew incensed, and made a threatening gesture forwards. Pop turned, pulling the keys with him and darted down the aisle with a soft, runny fart. I gave chase, not believing that a guinea pig so large could move so fast. Pop shot swiftly down aisle two, which I knew by heart--a male and female gecko, (2) border collies, (4) cockatoos and (1) ball python, all making a ruckus. I dove face first

after Pop, right into a large fifty gallon fish tank and shattered it with my outstretched hand. Shards of glass slid into my palm with ease and the salt water stung almost instantly. Several rare and exotic fish flooded through the void and poured onto the vinyl floor, flopping and gasping for air.

Despite the deep gash to my hand, I searched for Pop. But the black greasy tufts of its hair had vanished under one of the counters with only the soft jingle of the keys being dragged along the floor.

I was locked inside my own store with an obese guinea pig named Pop Evil. I felt embarrassed. Should I call for help? And how would I explain? I felt at the mutilated remains of my lips and tongue and pulled my fingers back. They were caked with blood and mucus.

I pushed away from the shattered fish tank, skating and sliding across the glass and water. I slammed up against the counter in my solitary confinement office and ripped the receiver from the base, praying that the storm hadn't knocked out the phone lines. There was a dial tone. I quickly dialed 9-1-1.

"Hello, 9-1-1," a woman answered from beyond. She didn't sound happy.

"...eed, ell," I slobbered all over myself. So that's what a lower lip was for? I mused, realizing that I couldn't properly pronounce several letters of the alphabet, including P or F. What a bitch.

There was a moment of silence from the other end. "Son, are your parents around?"

"'hat?" I asked.

She spoke slowly. "Your... parents?"

The lady must have thought I was a mentally challenged child. "Ni, hoo don'

under'and. 'eed 'ell!" A large glob of spit hit the receiver.

"I don't know what the problem is, but I'm sending a cruiser out to this address."

Thank god! Finally something.

"The storm may take them a while; there've been several accidents on the roads. Sit tight."

I tried not to say anything more, even after I kept the lady on the phone for another five minutes. She finally hung up after my voice went hoarse from humming 'Yankey Doodle' eight times in a row. With no dial tone, I hung the phone up and starting pacing the office when I heard the sound of keys being dragged across the floor. I froze instantly. Somewhere between aisle three and four, Pop was lurking.

I suddenly began to laugh. It was a low, gurgling sound (probably from the amount of blood I had swallowed while Pop had been gnawing on my tongue). I was being stalked by a guinea pig! I thought, how ridiculous--

"Hunted, actually..."

I stopped laughing. Isabel had been right all along; smelling all that gerbil shit over the years had made me crazy.

"Maybe you've been coo-coo all along?"

"et the 'uck out!" I screamed, slamming my bloody palms to my forehead.

"Cute, huh?"

I began to tiptoe out of my office, crouching and kneeling to look under the counters.

"Give my keys 'ack, 'astard!" I hissed.

There was no answer.

I continued to sift up and down each aisle, searching for a hint of greasy black tufts. I was envisioning myself grabbing the thing by the scruff of its neck when a shadow darted across my path. I leapt for it and lodged my forehead squarely on the edge of the iguana cage. The cast iron angle left a long red gash across my noggin and that was the last thing I remembered.

To Be Continued...