

HOSPITALITY

ANITA STUBBS

Jack relaxed for the first time in miles. A lonesome stretch of Texas highway lay behind and ahead of him, not another car in sight. Slowing down, he pulled the Ford Mustang to the shoulder of the interstate and, as the engine idled, he casually rolled a joint. After a few minutes, he eased back onto the pavement, traveling at a more leisurely pace. He took another deep drag, held onto it, and then choked on the magic smoke. His rear view vision swarmed with flashing blue lights.

Every nerve in his body screamed, "Run!" He snuffed the weed and floored the accelerator. The Mustang plunged ahead, and the blue lights receded a little. "Faster!" he yelled, as his brain doused his body with adrenaline. The speedometer needle fell out of sight as his eyes scrambled for an exit.

The lights moved closer, and his heart pounded. There had to be an exit. Topping a hill, he saw one. Taking the service road for a short distance, he hung the first left. The patrol car gained on him. He knew there would be others soon, a horde of blue lights sparkling the countryside. He slid into the first road to his right, throwing gravel.

Behind him, a caravan of blue lights advanced. He jammed the accelerator to the floor. A stop sign appeared and he decided to turn right, to circle around, planning to get behind the ridiculous parade tailing him.

Immediately he realized his mistake as another set of blue lights barreled toward him. He gunned the engine, taking another sharp turn. The Mustang fishtailed, and he almost lost control. Before his pursuer could follow, yet another road appeared, and he turned again. Sirens screamed, disturbing anyone's sleep for miles.

The road veered unexpectedly. He had picked up too much speed to negotiate the turn and he saw the steep embankment just as he slammed into it. A massive oak tree plowed through the Mustang, stopping short of the windshield. Jack's senses abandoned him temporarily. Bewildered, he sat behind the wheel rubbing his numb forehead, wondering what the hell had happened.

Then the adrenaline kicked in again. He grabbed the moneybag from the back seat, but the solid earth wall had jammed his door, preventing his escape. Quickly, he threw his body against the opposite door and pulled the handle.

The door swung open and he bolted from the vehicle, losing his footing. He stumbled, almost falling. Blue lights flashed and the sirens deafened him. He lunged, grateful for the night, into a grove of cedar trees. Easing forward, his eyes adjusted quickly to the darkness and, after a short distance, he found himself surrounded by woods. Tangled underbrush grabbed at his feet and ankles. Branches snatched at him, and he felt the scratches stinging his face and arms. Curiously, it seemed his legs had acquired an uncanny knowledge of the place, for they carried him expertly deeper and deeper into the property, distancing him from the sirens and the blinding blue lights.

He heard a dog barking somewhere. He gasped for breath, his lungs burning, but, finding himself in a wide-open field, he pushed onward. Taking advantage of the view offered by the moonlight, he picked up speed. Behind him, the blue lights flashed incessantly. He saw other flashes, amber lights, spreading out from the vehicles in different directions. *Flashlights*. The officers pursued him on foot now, and he raced toward a solid wall of trees

Sliding between the tree trunks, he leaned against one of them. Breathless, his chest heaved and his heart hammered while his eyes searched the darkness ahead of him. Nothing but trees. The barking grew much louder. Suddenly, the ground splashed beneath his feet, and he sunk up to his ankles in mud and water. He trudged through the sludge, cursing the dog he heard plummeting toward him. On the other side of the stream, the animal blocked his path, its white teeth bared menacingly. Man and beast faced one another, each contemplating the other's next move. The dog growled, raising its hackles.

"Hello, Pal." Jack hardly recognized his own voice. "Hey, I'm not gonna hurt you." Incredibly, the growling turned into a whimper, then a friendly whining, as the dog brushed against Jack, offering his head, obviously wanting to be petted. Jack scratched it gently behind an ear, and patted the broad shoulders. "Good doggy, now where do you live? Huh?" Jack looked warily behind him and saw lights bouncing across the opening he had just crossed. "Come on," he whispered hoarsely, clapping his hands quietly. "Let's go!"

The dog loped away, stopping once to look back. Obviously satisfied that the man followed, the dog ran faster, apparently a destination in mind. "Smart doggy," Jack said under his breath.

They ran indefinitely, deeper and deeper into the woods. The lights and sounds pursuing him disappeared. Abruptly, the trees opened into a tight-knit clearing, large enough to accommodate the sturdy looking cabin situated there as naturally as if it had sprouted from the ground along with the trees. The place appeared deserted, its windows dark. Jack eased around the house in search of a door. The dog loped along beside him. *Man's best friend*. Jack chuckled softly at his change of luck.

He switched the moneybag to his other hand, flexing his fingers, in an effort to ease the stiffness caused by the intense gripping, to circulate the blood flow. He cocked his ear for sounds coming from the house, or from the direction from which he had come. He heard nothing.

As he considered breaking the glass in the door in front of him, it occurred to him that it might not be locked. Turning the knob, it swung open easily. A peculiar musty smell permeated the place, and he assumed the cabin belonged to some outdoorsman who came here to hunt occasionally. But, as quickly as that thought entered his brain, it vanished in the wake of a new one. The dog would not be there if that were the case, and the animal behaved as though he belonged there.

He had only moved a couple of feet into the interior when a hand grabbed him from behind, gripping his right shoulder. Jack's blood gelled.

"I didn't hear no knock, Mister." A woman's voice came not from behind him but from another room, a little to his right.

"Sorry, I didn't know anyone was here." The gargantuan hand squeezed tighter, and Jack winced from the pain, his knees almost buckling.

"Bring him here, Babe. Let me look at him."

The hand released his shoulder, but shoved him forward, once, then twice, pushing him through the darkness. *Snap*, the smell of sulfur, then a light flickered. The yellow-glow of a kerosene lamp brightened the room. Babe's asthmatic breathing followed Jack. The woman peered at him as she rocked in a chair near a window. Babe pushed him toward a wooden bench across from her.

"You lost?" She sounded as if she suffered from a mild case of laryngitis.

"Had car trouble out on the road."

"Road?"

"Other side of the woods."

"How come you didn't go to the highway?"

"Had a run-in with the law." He suspected these people might sympathize with him. They certainly did not appear to be community-minded folk.

"What law?"

"I don't know."

"What for?"

"A little dirty dealin'." He decided to confide in them to a point, but attempted to hide the bag behind his back. "Guess somebody told."

Weirdly, the notion struck him funny, and he snickered. He started laughing, realizing it was most likely nerves. He'd come through quite an ordeal, even for a man whose life was nothing but a string of bad deals, one after the other like a train of empty boxcars. The humorous moment vanished when he got a good look at Babe.

The man towered over Jack a good twelve inches. A silly grin spread all over Babe's boyish face as he reached over and tweaked Jack's right ear. Just pinched it, right above the ear lobe, and grinned broader, exposing ugly crooked teeth. A meaty fore finger slid down to touch the ring in Jack's ear.

"My boy likes baubles." The woman rose from her chair. "What's your poison, whoever you are?" She paused in front of Jack, a woman about sixty he guessed. With her thumb and index finger, she flicked his earring soundly with the tip of her fingernail, clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth, and peered into his face. "Whisky, gin,

or rye?" She danced a little jig, a kind of mountain clogging routine, pulling her dress above her knees. "Tell me your name, or I'll spit in your eye!" She leaned closer, reeking of dirty hair, tobacco, and perspiration.

"Jack, my name's Jack."

"Jack be nimble or Jack Sprat?"

"Jack Rabbit." He figured he'd been truthful enough.

"Smack, Jack, if he moves, Babe." Throwing back her head and raising her hand to her mouth, she whooped like an Indian on the warpath.

Jack needed an exit plan, immediately. He wondered if the pair, obviously deranged, could be dangerous. He shifted a little on the bench and Babe edged closer. Finding a crumpled pack of cigarettes in his shirt pocket, Jack shook one out. "You got a light?"

Babe stared at him like a brainless bull. Jack felt around inside his pants pocket for matches, knowing he had left them in the Mustang. He placed the cigarette between his lips and stared at Babe. The man's colossal shoulders shook with silent laughter. Jack decided Babe must be mute, for he had not uttered a word.

The woman returned, proffering a drink. "A cup of hospitality, for that bag in your hand," she bargained.

He dropped the unlit cigarette into his shirt pocket. Taking the goblet, he tightened his hold on the moneybag. She winked slyly in his general direction.

The scent of whisky came from the glass and it smelled like good whisky, too. The old woman raised her own goblet to his and clicked it.

"Drink up, Jack-o-lantern, mornin's comin'."

Jack wanted the drink. Against the advice of every rational cell in his brain, he wanted it. Needed it. A tremor shook his hand slightly as he raised the liquor to his lips. It tasted good burning its way into his stomach. The next mouthful tasted better. The woman rocked in her chair holding her drink between both hands. Babe and his mother watched Jack drain his goblet.

He woke up in total darkness. Paralyzed, he thought he was dead. He opened his mouth as far as the tight fabric covering his head allowed, and screamed. He screamed over and over, terrified.

After a while, exhausted by his fear, he realized he was wrapped from the top of his head to the tip of his toes. He examined the fabric stretched over his face with his tongue. It felt like a bed sheet. He tried to bite the cloth, to tear it with his teeth, but it was too tight. He lay on a semi-hard surface and concentrated on the echo of his own breathing, knowing that it was the most important sound in the world.

The scent of urine assaulted his nostrils and he discovered that he was soaked in it. He assumed it was his own. He attempted to roll over only to find the space too narrow, the

walls too close. He lay there flopping from side to side, desperately groping for comprehension. There was a strange softness to the solid floor, and to the walls encasing him. Jack sniffed a familiar scent and sickened by its horrible revelation, gagged from nausea. The smell of freshly turned soil overpowered him and he understood. He was lying in his own grave.

The worse kind of fear seeped through him like ice water into every pore and his heart clamored inside his shrouded chest. Terror forced him to try to sit up, but found his shoulders wedged too tightly. His brain urged him to keep pounding his shoulders against the walls, to attempt to raise his body into a sitting position. He knew he could either try, or lie there and die. With a surge of energy, he believed he could do it, that he could knock away enough dirt if he pushed long enough. If he could sit, he might be able to raise himself to a squat, then to stand.

Every muscle in his body strained to assist him in the effort. Gradually he raised his shoulders a little higher, as he kept pounding, up and down, up and down, in agonizing partial sit-ups. His stomach muscles knotted and his lungs felt like they might explode. Still he pushed his shoulders forward, each time feeling the dirt shift a little. He had no idea how long his body performed the rigorous task. His shoulders grew numb, and the back of his neck ached. Still he pressed forward. Back, forward, back, like a mechanical wedge, pushing, pushing.

If not for his breathing, the grunting of his labor, there would be no sound. The death-like silence motivated him. The sound generated by his continuous, excruciating effort sustained his fragile grip on sanity. Otherwise, awareness of the life-robbing silence of this grave would kill him. Pure supernatural instinct empowered him, turning his body into a constantly moving survival machine.

Finally, his shoulders sprang forward, meeting no resistance. Elated he sat upright. Then the pointlessness of his futile achievement crushed all hope. It would be physically impossible to stand, arms and legs bound as they were. He repelled the crouching certainty of his own death by pushing against the binding that pinned both arms to his sides. Regardless of the amount of force applied, he could not move them. He tried to separate his feet. They remained tightly bound as though his legs were one single limb.

With difficulty, he inhaled, trying to suck in enough air to fill his tortured lungs. The atmosphere seemed tight, compacted. *Could air solidify?* "Noooooooooo!" He expelled the words with all the strength he could muster, only to have them fall back over him like chunks of marshmallow, tumbling through the black velvet atmosphere. He jerked his head from side to side, and heard sinew, tendons, something grinding painfully inside his neck. Alarmed at first, then grateful for it, he welcomed it. Pain was better than feeling nothing. Pain was life! He worked his neck faster. Growing dizzy and faint, he almost fell backward. His brain screamed at him. *Stand! Stand! Stand!*

Jack verbalized the command. "Stand! Stand! Stand! Stand you bastard, STAND!" It became a chant, and with each syllable, he willed his body forward. "Stand! Forward! Stand! Forward!" Relentlessly, the ritual continued, until, unexplainably, he bounded forward, willing his legs to bend. Miraculously, he heard a snapping sound around his knees, then the sound of fabric ripping. His legs bent!

He fell backward again, and then threw himself forward, his body one unified muscle pulling his feet into position. He bounced into a squat. The close walls now served a need. They became his support system. He pushed himself into a standing position, thankful for the closeness; he leaned against one side and rested. He stretched his shoulders and neck until the top of his head bumped something hard. Sounded like wood. *A board?*

He choked on dryness as thirst overwhelmed him, and licked his dry lips, attempting to swallow. The strenuous workout produced no sweat. His body was bone dry and the dampness of the urine, gone. He wondered how much time had passed, but refused to dwell on the temporal, the rational. Reason did not exist in the dark hole of Jack's predicament. No cause for sanity now. Intelligence was not his friend, not any more. Only an animal's instincts could survive the reality now.

He began to jump, banging his head against the wooden barrier. His head pounded, and what little sense remained inside his deranged mind warned him that he would soon lose consciousness if he continued. Dizzy, he felt himself slipping, falling forward, and he pressed into a wall until he regained his balance.

Again, he pounded against the door, certain it would open if he hammered it long enough. He felt warmth trickling over his scalp. The sensation tickled, and the aggravating need to scratch the itching overcame him. He rubbed his head back and forth, twisting as far as possible from one side to the other, managing to rub the back of his head against a wall. This newfound activity took his mind off pounding the door. Some time later, the continuous rubbing produced another sensation. He felt the dirt wall, not through the fabric, but against his bare head!

Frantically, bobbing his head up and down, and then in side ways circular motions, he twisted faster, shredding the fabric against the sandpaper effects of the wall. He kept maneuvering his head, managing to tear the fabric more and more. Finally, he had worn an opening large enough. Leaning against the wall one more time, he shoved his neck and head upward, through the fabric. He noticed a throbbing tenderness in his right ear lobe, and understood why the earring had not snagged on the sheet. *My boy likes baubles.*

Although he still faced nothing but the same encompassing darkness, he had never experienced such hopefulness, such victory. *Yes!* He shouted the word repeatedly. Renewed faith sparked another idea. Somehow, if he could manage to knock dirt from the walls, he could accumulate a pile on the floor, a pile high enough to elevate him, to enable him to push his head against the door.

He began the same sideways circular motions with his knees. This task, much less strenuous than the head twisting and rolling, went faster. The dirt fell away. He jumped, and felt the piles accumulating on both sides of his feet. He figured out a method for maneuvering the dirt towards the center of the floor, and soon he felt himself rising, the mound growing, becoming more solid each time he jumped. When he could no longer jump without bending his head, he balanced himself on it, stretching to his fullest height. His head pressed firmly against the wood.

His hands! He could free his hands! He should have thought of it sooner! He began manipulating his right hand first, back and forth against the wall, rubbing, twisting. He

envisioned miniscule bits of glass and gravel inside the sandy loam and worked faster. Another thought processed itself. The door could not be solid, for even in his near delirious state, realization nudged the notion that he could not breathe without air, and he certainly would have depleted all of it by now.

That flash of reason boosted his optimism! He moved his hand against the wall faster, the friction burning his skin. *Good!* He worked harder, harder. Time had no meaning, he did not know if he remained completely conscious as he worked, so involuntary his actions became. At some point, he felt coolness against his hand, soothing the burning, and he knew the fabric had shredded. Another fear surfaced. What if his arms were bound with something other than the sheet? Not rope. He certainly would have felt its bulkiness against the wall. *Tape?*

He began rubbing against the wall, rolling the frayed fabric back a little each time. His little finger wiggled free. With it he worked the material away from the next finger, then the next, stretching, struggling to free his thumb until at last his entire right hand ripped through the sheet. Right arm strained forward, his hand pushing against the fabric while he willed away any further constraints. He forced his hand, his arm upward, aiming for a *nazi* salute. It worked, splitting the sheet in one long rip! His right arm flew to the ceiling and his fingers scrambled, moving his hand over the rough board like a blind spider.

He felt cracks in it. He felt a loose knothole and poked at it. It wiggled. He poked again, and again. His finger shot through it, and he felt a crisp breeze. A gut feeling told him to pull his finger back. The dimmest possible ray of light about the size of a small egg poured through the opening. Definitely not daylight, but more like the pale light of the moon trying to filter through thin clouds.

He worked on his left hand; he would need both of them to force open the door, which seemed to press down solidly. *Could something be sitting on it?* Then, the worst fear of all—could Babe be standing on it? His left hand moved faster, adrenalin pumped. He needed water. His hand rubbed and twisted, feeling the anticipated burning followed by the glorious coolness. Finally, the cold dirt touched his skin. Again, his fingers did their job. Working like a miniature expert team of rescuers, they ripped and tore, rolled and stretched, slipping the fabric away. His hand popped free. Again, the arm strained, stretching and tearing the cotton.

Both hands against the ceiling, he pushed, jamming his feet into the dirt mound. Ducking his head forward as much as possible, he stood to his fullest, and heaved with the combined force of every muscle. He heard the creaking, and a slight giving away of the wood, just as he heard breathing on the other side. A familiar sound. Then the light disappeared from the knothole.

Jack moved his hand over the wood and jerked back in shock when he brushed something wet protruding through the hole. The breathing changed to whining, then a friendly whimper. *The dog!* Its nose sniffed Jack's hand. Jack prayed the dog was alone.

He ripped the sheet slowly away from his body, inch by inch due to his limited arm movements. Knowledge that he wore no clothing had oddly escaped him until now. He moved downward, bending at last to free his feet. Nothing more than the sheet had bound him, wrapping him like a full body tourniquet. He stood completely nude. The

light returned. The dog scratched the wood, fast excited scratching signaling Jack to hurry! The scratching intensified, the whining now replaced by heavy panting.

Jack strained harder against the barrier, his muscles bulging. He felt the door budge slightly, then saw the outline of a heavy pipe bolting it. Dry sobs shook his body. The scratching above him persisted.

The knothole! Energized again, he crooked his fingers through the hole and pulled with superhuman strength. The board splintered and he tore back a large section of it. Loose dirt poured over him. With both hands, he gripped the edge of another board and pulled. Then again, and again, until he had torn an opening large enough. The dog looked down at him, tail wagging.

Rubbing sand from his eyes, Jack began wildly kicking dirt from the walls, chunks of it. Building steps, he climbed higher, kicking, then climbing until, incredibly, he pulled himself from the grave. Furtively, on all fours, he scrambled away from the ghastly hole into a clump of leafless trees.

Disoriented, and completely drained, on the verge of collapse, he forced himself upright to stand beside the dog just as a door closed nearby. Horrified, Jack turned toward the sound, and then he heard something else much closer. Raspy breathing and shuffling noises behind him!

One last burst of adrenalin gushed from his brain. *Run! Ruuuunnn!* Jack ran, his bare feet scarcely touching the fallen leaves glistening in the moonlight. Fleeing naked into the frigid night, he followed the dog.