



SIMCOE FURRIERS

by Andrew F. Sullivan

OWEN Frell spent his days surrounded by death. The hides of beavers, bears and a lone wolf were stretched out around him. Dust covered most of the lights in the shop on Simcoe. The windows were still covered in soap scum and the open sign was unlit. Occasionally, it would sputter to life, but the tubes were so jammed with dead flies by now, you could barely make out the letters. Sometimes Owen and Jerry would break down the beasts themselves, but usually the furs arrived on their own, still dripping. It was their job to resurrect the fragments.

There was some amateur taxidermist across town who liked to call the two of them butchers and hacks, but he was the one repurposing pets as

furniture, so what did he know anyway? Owen liked to tell his wife Connie they were creating art. They were recycling and reusing what Mother Nature gave them, taking the corpses of the dead and bringing back some life for thirty bucks an hour. Just like his father had before him within these very walls.

“Now I don’t want a coat or a hat or any of that shit. I just want it made into a rug. Can you handle that, or is Jerry just running his mouth as usual? He said you guys would do it gratis.”

The man in front of Frell was short, but his neck was ringed with wasted muscles. Something was inside him, slowly draining all of the colour from his skin. He was like one of those boxers you see on TV twenty years after their last match, a sneer replaced with drool and drooping eyes. This man’s eyes weren’t blank holes though. His blue pupils combed over everything in the shop, slowly piecing Frell together and pulling him apart. This was a man used to taking an inventory, a man used to disposing of his own waste. The man smacked his hands together and laughed. His hands were filled with fine white scars and misplaced knuckles.

“You can handle this or should I find someone else?”

“It shouldn’t be a problem,” Frell said. Jerry was still hiding in the bathroom.

Two old bearded bikers had carried the corpse through the back door. They brought the head through last. Tufts from the mane caught on the hinges, but they made it fit. The lion lay on the floor before Frell now, its jaws cracked open and its stomach split by some mechanical force. Ribs and tiny shards of glass poked through the skin. Frell stepped on its tail and waited for the creature to roar. The short man popped pills into his mouth and crunched them twice.

“I wanna keep the head, so you’re going to have to put it on ice or something for now. You got a freezer we can use here, or what?”

“Yeah, it has a few beavers in there still, but I think the head will fit.”

The short man nodded and pulled his hat off. Small sprigs of red hair dotted his scalp.

“Alright then. You tell Jerry he can come out of the bathroom. We’re leaving.”

The three men turned and the door slammed shut behind them. Frell sighed and looked down at the body on the floor. The lion’s eyes were still intact. Someone had hit it with a car, but the cold and snow had kept it in

pretty good condition. The rug would probably cover a king-sized bed when it was finished. The tail was longer than Frell's arm. That would be the first thing to go. The whole thing smelled like diesel fuel and expired beef, but he was used to that by now. His father had come home every day with a new batch of blood and fluid on his hands. It was the dust they used to treat the furs that killed him off, the alum salts and soda ash trapped inside his battered lungs. All the sinks were stained a sickly beige in his parents' house.

“You can come out now Jerry, you don't need to keep hiding. We'll get this sorted out.”

From the bathroom, all Frell could hear was Jerry emptying his stomach.



“How do you lose ten thousand playing bingo?”

The lion's corpse had been stripped of its hide. They broke the body down into heavy pieces and stashed them in garbage bags for the incinerator. They shared the facilities with a few other shops in town. Half

of them were breaking by-laws, dumping paint and old toxic cleaners down into the flames until green clouds and bursts of sulphur emerged out into the dark. No one was going to question the chunks of flesh. Most would just assume they skinned another bear.

“You bet high. You gotta take advantage during those lightning rounds. I mean, there are rumours some of the balls are weighted so they fall out faster, but you never know which ones they are and this old biddy, Mrs. Castle, well, she plays like sixteen cards at a time, and she says that its always the eights that get weighted. You know, 58, 68, 18. So you look for a card with those and then you commit to it.”

Jerry was a kid who stumbled into the shop one day, asking if you could make a hat out of a squirrel. There were always boys like this, ever since Frell's father had opened the store thirty years ago. They all thought they were ready, thought it might make them tough to see how easily the skin can come apart from the flesh, how all the muscles look mechanical once the surface is stripped away. They usually left with their lunch on the floor or their eyes cast down toward their shoes. Some of them even came back as activists, occasionally screaming murderer through the mail slot or egging the windows. They weren't ready for the eyes staring back at them from the table or the smell of the salts and dyes filling up their sinuses.

Jerry stuck it out though, searching for dollars and loose change he could take to his mother who spent fifteen hours a day in the bingo hall. Once she passed from some kind of aneurysm that left her face so twisted she had to have a closed casket, Jerry inherited her seat at the head table. All his friends were seniors now, and they all had a plan for him to make the big bucks, the real score. Everybody knew the bingo halls in Larkhill were crooked. You just had to figure out the system.

You just had to put some money on the line.

“And somehow you end up with ten thousand owing?”

“It gets away from you,” Jerry said. He held a skinning knife in his hand. Frell’s hands had begun to shake lately. Connie noticed it at breakfast one morning. She said it was all those powders they were tossing around in the shop to clean the furs. Frell hadn’t said anything. His wife believed it was the shop that had made him so feeble, the shop that was stealing their future even as it preserved everyone else’s fucking trophies. Connie liked to call it the trophy shop or the morgue. She didn’t drop off his lunch anymore, and there were no notes on the fridge. They were still trying for a kid, but only with all the lights off in the bedroom. Her days at the Henderson law firm downtown were always getting longer, and Frell was

used to watching *Jeopardy* by himself now. He always lost it all on the Daily Doubles.

“And this is supposed to repay the favour?” Frell said. He watched as Jerry stretched the fur out over the custom rack they’d had to build out of spare pieces. The lion’s hide was holding up nicely, but it was going to be a bitch to pick out all the glass from its belly. Frell ran a hand through the fur and pinched a sharp shiny piece between his thick fingers.

“Well, some of it, you know. I still got some other stuff to deal with...”

Frell nodded. Jerry always owed someone. This job was going to come out of his pay.

“But nothing with the little man?”

“Who? Crane? No, he’s just the one everything goes through. And he’s not that little. You’ve seen his hands right? That’s not from fighting, that’s just some weird sickness he’s got in him. I ain’t worried ’bout him. It’s more the two big tunas with him. They got a toolbox for all kinds of... well, they don’t use it for dishwasher repair, you know?”

Frell turned and pulled on his coat. He was tired of the shop. The flies in the open sign had somehow multiplied since the short man had come by

for his visit. The street was usually abandoned except for a comic shop on the corner and the endless line of garbage trucks that passed by on their way to the dump. Their smell wasn't too different from the animals. The short man had been the only customer all week and Frell wasn't even getting paid.

“Remember, Jerry, you owe me on this one.” The soaped glass door slammed shut before Jerry could respond.



Owen Frell let the messages play while he tried to make a sandwich. The ham in the fridge was still good, but he didn't trust the old cheddar Connie had forgotten on the counter. One of the calls was from some old timer expressing his condolences for Frell's old man. He was still out in Winnipeg when they had the funeral, but he'd heard it was the heart. He heard the old man went out in his sleep or something. Frell knew that much was true, but he also knew his father wasn't too peaceful near the end. Something was in his brain, something that left him chewing on pillows and asking

about all the creatures he'd skinned and remade. He wanted to know if they were happy. Frell deleted the message and chose the honey mustard.

Jeopardy was muted in the living room. There were no pickles for the sandwich and the next message was about Connie's credit cards. Frell had cut most of them up, but he was sure she still had one or two kicking around. He had stopped caring. If she wanted to spend it on fancy lunches or those dresses from designers he couldn't name, that was all right with him. She said she wanted to live and if that meant cocktails after work and three-course dinners, so be it. He just wanted to have his fridge stocked. The clock said it was 7:30, but he didn't expect her to come home any time soon. They still tried once or twice a week, but it usually didn't last too long. The sounds they made barely rattled the headboard. No neighbours complained anymore. Frell was getting used to sleeping in his chair. The world didn't seem as overwhelming if he woke up already seated. All he had to do was place his feet firmly on the floor to remind him it was there.

Frell got up to delete the message, but another one began to play before he made it to the old machine. Dr. Iverston's office was just calling to let Connie Frell-Duncan know her results were ready. They provided a phone number, but there was no address. Frell pressed the button to save the message, but his hands shook a little. His lungs rattled and he tried not

to hack phlegm up all over the house phone. He refused call waiting and he refused all attempts to address him by mail. He didn't want the world to find him here.

Alex Trebek was still explaining a Daily Double question to his contestants when Frell returned to sit in the dark living room. His hands still smelled like blood, even after washing them twice at the kitchen sink. One of the players decided to bet all he could on the question, but Frell still had the TV on mute. It was something about the space race. He couldn't read the text. Frell stretched out his legs and placed his wide feet on the coffee table. He knew Dr. Iverston was not their family doctor. Frell had never heard of him. The man on the television knew the answer. Frell could see it in his eyes. He imagined it was something about Russians and a dog spat out into the darkness of space. Frell thought it should have been a lion. Maybe someone would have heard it out there in the dark. Someone would have saved it from the cold instead of leaving it to die all by itself. The contestant smiled and Frell knew the game was settled.

Trebek could only shake his head. Wrong.

Frell tried to take another bite of his sandwich, but he couldn't control his hands. He watched it bounce off his chest and land on the floor. The mustard would stain the rug. Connie would leave him. The doctor's

secretary had basically said as much. Frell considered getting up and pulling the sandwich off the floor. He considered driving down to Connie's office and asking her about that doctor and those late nights and why she'd cried so hard at his father's funeral if it was all just for laughs anyway. He considered praying to God for a son or something he could call a legacy—something permanent. Owen Frell considered all things, but instead, turned off the television. The minutes passed and he waited for the door to open. He waited until his eyes closed and in the darkness, he dreamed about a toolbox filled with all his friends and family, each one skinned alive and bleeding slowly. He asked them why nobody warned him about this. He posed the question, but all he got were groans in response. He wanted an answer.

The toolbox closed and swallowed him whole.



They never bothered with security at the shop. The broken windows were a new addition. Someone had painted MURDERERS in red across the glass door. All the hides were covered in bright red splotches. It was dawn. All

the broken glass glowed pink. Three beavers and a wolf hide were ruined by broad splashes of paint. The clients would moan, but they would understand. There were always a few kids in town who decided animals didn't deserve to have their hides ripped off by old men like Owen Frell. They thought those animals could feel and think and believe in all kinds of things like a good diet and proper grooming procedures. They believed in the circle of life and all that good organic shit you had to pay double for at the grocery store. And there were mornings where Frell wanted to agree with those kids, mornings filled with stacks of foxes and the smell of their intestines still full of mice and chicks and baby rabbits.

This wasn't one of those mornings.

“Oh shit, oh shit, you gotta be kidding me,” Jerry moaned. He stalked in circles around the ruined hide of the lion. His eyes were red like he'd been smoking, but it was just tears and a bit of rage pouring down his cheeks. Frell spat on the floor. He still had insurance. This wasn't the end of the world. If the world was going to end, it would have done so last night. It would have exploded from the very centre of his living room and obliterated every living thing in sight.

But he was still here. And so was Jerry.

“You’ll make it up to him in another way, Jerry,” Frell said. “It’s just bingo anyway, it’s not the worst thing in the world. I’m sure he’ll forgive you for this one. We will find another—”

“Another fucking what, Owen? A fucking lion? Are you kidding me? This was my one goddamn chance and then some little shit... you shoulda seen this coming!”

Jerry was dancing around in a circle like he had to piss. His feet bounced up and down. He held a piece of the stretching frame in his hand like a cross.

“I shoulda seen... excuse me?”

“Never fucking mind, alright? You don’t ever listen, do you? I told you we shoulda... Look, Crane isn’t going to forgive anything, alright? He doesn’t do that. It isn’t part of his game. This was like my... fucking Monopoly ‘get out of jail free’ card, alright? Like a one-time pass.”

Frell shook his head and sat down on a stool. The paint made everything look new.

“I can’t stay here, Owen. He’s going to come here and he’s going to see this shit...”

“And what?” Frell said. He was still surveying the damage. At least they hadn’t attacked the electrical or the water main. He coughed twice before he saw the heavy wood swinging toward his face. Jerry was weeping now, but he didn’t stop swinging until Frell was laid out on the floor.

Frell could hear Jerry fumbling around his body, searching for the keys. The pain was in his head, but it was more like a tide than a wave. It was pulling him back and forth, clutching his tongue so he couldn’t speak. Frell wanted to tell the kid about his own father and how the man had tried to outrun a life of dealing in hides and roadkill. He had tried all those medicines you see at 4:00 AM on the Shopping Network and stuff some old psychic downtown had offered him for fifty bucks a gram. He had gone through the last three years of his life running from whatever was slowing his heart, whatever dust had gathered around his lungs and his arteries, clutching at them like manacles. Physiotherapy, acupuncture—all of those treatments were just distractions. None of them slowed the world down.

Frell heard Jerry pulling at the office door. He heard him cursing Frell, the bingo hall and that godforsaken lion. He heard the safe crack open and all Frell wanted to tell Jerry was that you cannot run forever. You cannot keep up that pace.

On his way out the door, Jerry paused for a second over Frell's body. Frell tried to stretch out his lips to form a word before Jerry's boot connected with his head. Frell's body slumped back down amongst the spoiled hides. In the fading darkness, he did not hear Jerry drive away.



Owen Frell pulled the lion's head out of the freezer. Its blank eyes didn't judge him. He ran his hands along its sharp teeth, feeling the cool touch of the gums against his fingers. Some of the back teeth were beginning to go black. The tongue was rough against his thumb. The short man would be back soon for his lion. He would find the hide torn and ripped and stained with bright red paint, tiny flaps of skin scattered around the shop. Jerry was gone by now, his notes and all the cash from the safe tucked under the seat of his mother's Monte Carlo, headed towards Atlantic City or some backwoods town where no one had ever heard of high stakes bingo. Connie wasn't answering her phone and the thing in her belly, or whatever it was, wasn't going to call him Dad.

Owen Frell carried the lion's head over to his work table, still splattered with bright red house paint. The lion wasn't here to judge him. It didn't ask him to stop by the store for more milk, or to make an appointment with the fertility doctor. It didn't ask him if furriers were trapped in a dying trade, if they were soon to join the cobblers and the butchers and the knife sharpeners and all those fishermen out in Newfoundland on the unemployment line. The lion just gazed out from frozen eyes and accepted everything as it was, everything as it would be.

Owen Frell placed his head inside the lion's massive jaws. He laid his unshaven cheek against its sandy tongue and listened to the echo of his breathing. Eventually, the short man would arrive with a toolbox and some pliers. He would want to know where Jerry went and about what had happened to his rug. Owen Frell didn't know how to answer those kinds of questions. He just wanted to rest. The lion's mouth was cool and quiet. The short man could bring his tools and his giants and all their heavy hammers to break the tiny bones inside Frell's feet—it didn't really matter now. There was no one left to carry on his name, to strip the foxes and raccoons brought in by farmers and teenagers with too much time on their hands. There was no one left to make something out of all these mutilated bodies, to reclaim them from roadkill incinerators and hackneyed taxidermists. All

those glowing coats would go to waste. Frell sighed and felt the powder rattle around inside his lungs. His father said it wasn't the lungs that took you though—it was the heart. It slowed you down. Made you shake worse than DTs toward the end. All the damage centered there eventually, a whole life coalescing inside hardened arteries. Frell wrapped his arms around the lion's head and closed his eyes. He waited.

The lion refused to bite.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andrew F. Sullivan is the author of the novel *WASTE* (Dzanc Books, March 2016) and the short story collection *All We Want is Everything* (ARP Books, 2013), a Globe & Mail Best Book. His short stories have appeared in places like *Hazlitt*, *The New Quarterly*, *Little Brother* and *Grain*. Sullivan no longer works in a warehouse. Twitter:

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