

Liquid Calling
By
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Michael Morzeny put his hands into the pockets of his overcoat and hugged the fabric tighter around his body. The winter wind hurried down Columbus Avenue and the hem of his coat flapped around his knees letting little pockets of cold waft up to invade the warmth his body had spent so much time preparing and storing around his torso.

With a bitter squeeze of his hands, his knuckles now getting cold, Morzeny bowed his square shoulders to the wind and continued walking. At sixty-seven years old the New York winters bothered Morzeny more than he cared to admit. And, although no doctor would agree with him, he was positive that the first faint hints of arthritis tweaking through his hands were made worse by the cold.

At every cross street the setting sun flashed through to the avenue in shades of crisp pink and red. Morzeny didn't want to be working right now. But these outings were the price he paid for having a hybrid job, owning buildings and brokering as many of his own leases as possible.

When he had first come to the city he had been told that he needed a job, not for income, his providers took care of that, but for his own sanity. Something to keep him going. He had asked for something in real estate and had never bothered to wonder what other paths he might have taken. He had always been able to focus to the point of blindness. It helped him in every aspect of his work.

He arrived at the brownstone building housing the apartment he was to show tonight. His building was tucked into a short row of buildings that squatted over the street, their steps reaching towards the curb like stunted growths. More to prove to himself that he could do it than anything else, Morzeny took the front steps two at a time.

Immediately upon passing through the inner door his mood began to improve. The natural warmth of being inside let his hands relax and as he began to mount the steps, one at a time, his mind wandered.

Tonight he would visit with Red. He smiled. Red was the super that ran two of his larger buildings. Red had been with him from the beginning, both of them coming to the city innocent and naïve. Morzeny had looked for something in real estate. Red had followed. It was a strange relationship they had. Although both were roughly the same age Red held a definite sense of superiority over Morzeny. What Red said went. Yet this superiority was seldom used, so that more often than not what came about was that whatever Morzeny did, Red followed.

After this appointment it would be a good night with no work to speak of, nothing but a good bottle of liquor of Red's choosing, a nice warm apartment, and two friends of forty years.

Morzeny laughed as he rounded a landing. He would not stay too late, though. It wasn't that he didn't want to spend time with his friend, but it had been realized a long time ago that these nights where a bottle of something was split were best ended when the bottle was finished. Otherwise Red would be bound to aggravate Morzeny by dragging out his collection of tabloids and ranting about the headlines in them; "Freak Outbreak of Rabies in Downstate New York," "Man Drowned by Own Tap Water," "Too Much Cooking With Aluminum Foil Can Destroy Your Brain."

It was either the newspapers or Monopoly. When drunk enough Red often broke out his battered Monopoly board game and began playing games alone. He would play a few different pieces and go round and round as if he wanted to beat the game itself.

Morzeny ran his hand over the thick uneven paint coating the wooden railing of the stairs. Red could get embarrassing when too drunk, and Morzeny was sure that if he ever had the chance to see himself through sober eyes after a half a bottle of liquor, that sight would be just as embarrassing.

He paused at the next landing. Taking the steps two at a time outside and giving himself no time to rest was now starting to take its toll and his heart rate was starting to increase. It was sad, only two flights up. All the work he put into his body and it still was beginning to fail him. He forced himself to slow down; this wasn't a workout, those were contained to the gym, he didn't need to push himself. At the next landing his smile began to slip away. There was another reason he wouldn't stay late at Red's tonight.

There was Joyce. Morzeny had married Joyce at some point in his past. Looking back it was hard to remember when; she was a part of his life now, like indoor plumbing and the polio vaccine. Romance had not been a part of their relationship, they had married because it seemed like a good idea to both of them. Although this was never spoken aloud it was rather clear that both understood it. From either one of their perspective things just seemed to happen like magic. Joyce bought an apartment for them and furnished it and Morzeny was mystified because he had never agreed to this, but also nonchalant because clearly it had to be done and he didn't particularly care where they lived. Likewise, one day Joyce had come home to find the library converted into a home gym, and she had not cared because the library had always been one of "Michael's rooms," in her mind and, thus, it made no difference to her. Neither one could quite explain the birth of their two children.

It had only been in recent years that Morzeny had started really wondering about his relationship with Joyce. It had started as a convenience for both of them and they both had stayed out of each other's way. Ten, twenty, thirty years earlier the word "love" would never have entered into the equation for Morzeny. But recently...recently he had started wondering. After all, how long could you live with someone without actually wanting to push them away, how long could you go on waking up next to them every day and going to sleep next to them every night without ever once rejecting that idea before you had to acknowledge that maybe something else was afoot? Forty years of doing anything, even living an illusion, were bound to twist things around so, at the very least, what was illusion and what was real became foggy.

There were signs. Recently the magic of "things just happening" had broken down. Morzeny had slowly had to give up most of the things he loved to keep his body running well. All the foods he enjoyed had faded into memories and along with them his favorite wines had slipped out of his daily routine, then out of his weekly routine. The home gym had appeared. The long hours at work had faded. Everything in the refrigerator was steamed mush or bottled water. There were only two things left, and Morzeny would never give them up, he would hold onto them forever because they were so much a part of him that if they went he wouldn't be entirely sure what it was he was continuing on for. Those two things were the nights drinking with Red, and smoking. Not to say both of those hadn't been cut back drastically, but they were still there.

The subtle shift in his relationship with Joyce, the lack of the magic of nothing, had become apparent with the issue of smoking. They had fought. For the first time ever. She had wanted him to quit for good. And they had fought. Morzeny didn't know what that had been all about. It had happened only a few weeks ago. It was possible that forty years of

pretending had resulted in reality, it was possible love was where you found it, and it was possible she was worried about her financial status now that they were both growing older. Morzeny finished climbing the last flight of stairs and reached his hand into his pocket to feel his pack of cigarettes as he walked along the short hallway.

It didn't seem like she was worried about him for the money. For starters she had her own money, and he had filled out a will and had life insurance. No, Morzeny was sure something had happened, something had shifted, she had actually started caring about him. She wanted him to quit smoking and it was as plain as that.

Morzeny stopped at the third door on the floor, his body looking large under the bulk of his overcoat, his silver hair cropped close to his skull, his knuckled hand rummaging in his pocket for his ring of keys. She wanted him to quit smoking because she cared. The question was, would he quit? Or had the illusion broken down more for her than it had for him. Had he actually grown to love her?

Morzeny found his ring of keys, unlocked the apartment door, and walked inside. A quick glance behind the door, around the one bedroom studio, and into the bathroom showed the apartment was empty.

Morzeny knew he had no chance of renting this apartment. Not during winter. But he had taken this job to keep busy, not for the income, and he felt it was important to remember that.

The problem was that in winter the radiators in Manhattan were used to generate steam heat. Or, more accurately, the pipes were opened that allowed steam generated by the boiler to be piped into apartments to provide heat. The steam ran through the radiator coils, heating the air and condensing into water as it progressed. The water then ran back through the same pipes to the boiler. Normally the steam traveled through the top of the pipe and the water ran along the bottom.

Morzeny walked to the far wall.

But if the pipe wasn't pitched right. If the angle of the pipes wasn't correct or the building had sagged over time altering the original angles.

He ran his hand over the smooth plaster wall.

If water was allowed to pool in a flat spot and the steam built up behind it.

He heard a low knocking coming from the wall. Only a few low pings and then all of a sudden the wall seemed to be alive, like some great giant were standing behind it wailing on the pipes with a true steel hammer swinging with all of his might. Unholy clang after unholy clang rang out as Morzeny took three quick steps back and put his hands over his ears, always caught off guard by the intensity of the sound, always astounded that covering his ears with his hands only served to make his hands vibrate crazily.

Then it was over. The pipe had cleared. The steam was through. And the pipe would slowly begin filling up, water pooling in the low spot until it had to be cleared once more.

He would never rent this apartment. Not in the winter.

Morzeny walked through the basement hallway toward Red's apartment. His overcoat was off now. The winter night was far behind him as was the possible client who had never shown. Red lived in the basement unit of one of the larger buildings that Morzeny owned. Morzeny had offered him other apartments. Red had refused. Red said he wanted to live down in the bowels of the buildings he helped run.

Morzeny knocked on Red's door. He waited briefly. Then he knocked again a few more times. He heard the bolt being drawn back and the door swung open. Red was standing there with his ruddy face and wispy hair. Morzeny smelled alcohol and knew that Red had started without him. He looked past Red into the apartment and saw the small wooden table, looking more like a spool for cable turned on end, on it was a bottle of liquor sitting next to a bottle of water. He smiled and started forward when Red held a hand up.

"We have sprung a leak," Red said. Morzeny sagged.

"Now," Red went on, walking with a slight wobble back into the apartment, the liquor inside of him placing odd emphases on his words, "I believe you are supposed to—"

"I'll handle it," Morzeny said, interrupting to save Red the time and effort needed to explain that he was drunk. Morzeny's voice was calm and accepting, all complaining and cursing about his ruined night had come and gone inside his head in a matter of seconds. He was back at work now. "Just give me the name and address."

Leaks were the worst.

Morzeny had changed. His overcoat wasn't suitable to this work. He didn't go so far as to borrow a pair of Red's overalls, though. He felt they made him look more like a train conductor than a repairman.

He stepped out of the elevator into the long hallway of a large apartment building. His tools swung against his hips as he moved. He looked first one way, then the other, the hallway stretching out in one long line of identical doors, overhead fluorescent lights and softly patterned carpet. The hallway was empty. The building was asleep. He glanced down at the paper in his hand and then began to move.

He stopped in front of an apartment door and rang the bell. Rather quickly there was some noise from within. The person on the other side hadn't been sleeping.

Morzeny looked tired under the humming lights above him. "Mister," he glanced down at the slip of paper, "Hume?" There was no sound from behind the door. "Mr. Hume, is there a problem with your water? There have been some problems in the building and I need to check some of your pipes." It was late. But Morzeny had to get inside. Leaks were the worst. Now he looked tired and old under the lights. The sound of a chain being unlatched and a bolt sliding came from the door. It opened.

"There's a leak?" Mr. Hume asked. He was an angular man, his long face making him look almost emaciated, all bones and skin.

"Right over your head, actually," Morzeny said.

Hume opened the door and Morzeny stepped inside. The entrance hallway was dark; ten yards ahead there was a turn with light coming from around the corner, most likely the master bedroom was that way. Directly ahead, where the hallway turned, was a door, most likely the bathroom. As his eyes adjusted Morzeny could tell there was an opening to the left. Living room and kitchen. "Could we get some light?" he asked.

Hume looked him over carefully. Morzeny knew it was never comfortable letting a stranger into your home. He did his best to look non-threatening. Hume nodded and began turning on light switches as he walked down the hallway. Morzeny quickly gathered that his original guesses to the layout were right. He glanced in each room, eyes scanning the walls and corners, smiling at Hume, trying not to be obtrusive but needing to make sure the leak was not spreading. "We'll be done in a second," Morzeny said reassuringly. "I need to look

at all the rooms, no telling where it might come through. Then of course I'll want to look at your kitchen and bathroom."

Mr. Hume hovered over Morzeny as he examined every room. Then Morzeny repeated, "Just the pipes left."

Mr. Hume's eyes took one last run over this sixty-seven year old man who had been forced to come into his apartment in the middle of the night, who was only trying to do his job. He sighed, then smiled for the first time, "Of course." He turned around and began to lead Morzeny down the hall. Mr. Hume was finally relaxed. Morzeny had been waiting for this.

In one fluid motion his hand slid into his tool belt and came out holding a modified syringe, he took one, two, three quick steps, closing the distance between him and Mr. Hume and his other hand came up and slipped into Mr. Hume's hair, yanking it, wanting to startle him. Mr. Hume did the only thing anyone could do in that position: act surprised and let his head be pulled back to avoid the pain of his hair being pulled. With the same fluidity Morzeny's hand brought the modified syringe up and with a pop the injection went into Hume's neck and then Morzeny was stepping back. The whole thing had taken four seconds.

Morzeny reached a hand to his wristwatch and pressed a button, starting a timer.

Morzeny was completely in control and needed to maintain that. This was what his training had taught him. The surprise would do a lot to subdue the victim, as well as the shock of having a foreign substance suddenly injected into their body. And a proper first appraisal of the subject was important. But the control had to be maintained.

"You have been injected," Morzeny said, his voice commanding, "with a viral zoonotic disease. Don't bother fighting. Don't bother struggling. The first wave of paralysis will make this impossible at any rate." Morzeny watched Hume's body struggle to remain standing in the hallway almost as if his words were causing it to happen instead of the injection itself. "Following the first slight paralysis comes pain as the nerve endings begin to come back to life and the muscles overcompensate after being shut down," and Hume was no longer slouching against the wall because his muscles weren't working correctly, he was slouching against the wall because the pain was making it difficult to stand. His hand slid along the drywall, his feet stumbling forward, a gasp then a groan as he fell to his knees. "The first wave of paralysis and pain is the shortest. They get worse. More intense." Mr. Hume turned and the relief on his face made it obvious that the first wave had passed. Then came the anger, quite on cue. Here was where Morzeny's training was important. With another victim he might have applied handcuffs during the first wave, but he liked to test himself and he was sure he had Hume read correctly.

"Stop," Morzeny ordered, and Mr. Hume stopped as told, the anger becoming confusion. "I will repeat: it only gets worse. And attacking me will only guarantee that you will never receive the antidote." There was no antidote. This was a lie. But Morzeny had learned in his training that the idea of an antidote could be helpful.

Now Hume's face crumbled in fear, his brain racing back over and over the last few minutes, the discomfort of paralysis, the wracking pain, like every one of his muscles were being ripped apart by claws, and now a strange and suddenly overwhelming thirst. Hume almost broke right then but something inside of him came alive and Morzeny could tell that he would resist for awhile. Hume wouldn't get physical, Morzeny could see that, but prying information out of him would be more difficult than Morzeny had hoped at first.

Morzeny sighed. He looked at his wristwatch. Ten seconds. "I will repeat myself in more common terms." He walked over to Hume who was crumbling against the wall. Morzeny got in close, made sure his eye contact was strong. "Now listen hard and see if this makes

sense. You have been injected with a weaponized strain of rabies. This only gets worse. You will tell me everything you know about poisoned drinking water and you will tell me the name of everyone you might have told.” He looked at his watch as the sound of Hume twitching and gasping filled the hall. Good. He had the timing of the waves now. But it was still going to be a long night. His knees were beginning to hurt as he crouched next to Hume and he softly cursed himself for not performing the injection in a room where he might have found a seat instead of here in the empty hallway. Going to get a chair now would seem weak. He looked up and saw that Hume was in the middle of wave two and was, obviously, in no way paying attention to him. Morzeny let his face fall, the dread of the next few hours playing over it.

Leaks were the worst.

Three hours later Morzeny was on the phone in Hume’s kitchen. His voice was softer, more scared, one would never match the voice to the silver haired gentlemen it was coming from.

“Because Mr. Hume said you were the only person I could trust,” Morzeny was saying. A slight waver, perfectly pitched gave the impression that he was barely holding in his terror. “No, we can’t meet there,” Morzeny went on. “Because I don’t trust you, that’s why.” Morzeny rested his hand on Hume’s counter, his fingers tapping as he waited. “Mr. Smith? Mr. Smith I will not meet there. No. *No.*” The voice of Mr. Smith resumed, slowly being guided towards the options Morzeny had decided were acceptable before he had even placed the call. “You want me to pick a place? But I wouldn’t even know where—” More talking. Morzeny waited. “Okay, okay. I think I know a place. But I don’t like this.” More talking. Then Morzeny gave an address. Then he hung up.

He walked into the hallway and looked down at Hume’s body sprawled out on the cheap parquet floor. Two buttons had popped on his shirt at one point when he had begun ripping at his clothes during one of the waves. The drywall around the body was cracked, small impressions forced into it. At one point Hume’s back had arched hard enough to drive a hole in the wall with the back of his head. On the floor was an overturned glass of water, brought over from the sink by Morzeny as an offering to combat the inevitable parching thirst. Hume had spilled the water all over his own face when a wave had hit right after he had earned the water. He had been so close, yet unable to actually force his muscles to deliver the water to his mouth. The water mixed with the saliva that usually ran down the victim’s face towards the end when swallowing became either difficult or impossible.

Morzeny walked through the apartment shutting out the lights. He walked past Hume’s body down the hall towards the door. He took one look back, then turned off the last light and stepped out into the long hallway of apartment doorways.

Morzeny stood in the empty apartment, waiting. His overcoat was folded neatly on the small counter in the kitchenette. He flexed his hands, testing them for any pain. He walked into the bathroom and looked himself over one more time, making sure nothing on his person could possibly hint at the last few hours spent with Hume.

The buzzer sounded. Morzeny pushed the button, spoke into the intercom, heard Smith’s voice answering back and let him in.

Morzeny decided to continue acting afraid. The choice of this apartment was starting to seem like a mistake, it had been on his mind since he had been here earlier in the evening, but he should have realized that an empty apartment raised warning flags. He could tell the truth; that might work. He was in real estate, this was an apartment he showed often, he knew it was empty, he knew there was no connection, he knew it was safe. That might work.

And when he was gone there were hundreds of brokers he let show this apartment. Any link to him and a random freak death from rabies was...well the freak rabies death usually threw most investigations off. That and the pain were the main reasons the shot had been developed.

There was a knock at the door. Morzeny reminded himself that he was acting scared then noticed that the chain was undone. He cursed himself for missing that and silently slid it into place. The knock came again.

“Smith?” Morzeny shouted through the door. He looked through the peephole and was surprised to see that Smith was young, maybe in his mid-twenties, with scraggly blond hair. As Morzeny watched, Smith’s head swiveled nervously to look up and down the short hallway before he answered.

“Yeah, it’s me, you going to let me in?”

Morzeny smiled. Hume had only given up this one name and Smith was clearly going to be an easy project. His night with Red was done, but at least Joyce would have no reason to notice anything strange when he got home unless he reeked of smoke, in which case another bizarre fight might break out.

Morzeny held off a few moments longer, then unchained and unlocked the door noisily. Smith came in with a thick coat in his hand. A green hooded sweatshirt remained underneath. “Look,” Smith started.

Morzeny closed the door and locked it.

Smith looked around at the empty apartment, obviously confused but not alarmed. Morzeny was tired; his arthritis was starting to hurt again and his knuckles were beginning to warm with itching pain. He didn’t want to wait any longer.

One hand dipped into his pocket, the other reached up and grabbed Smith’s long blond hair. The modified syringe went up and the injection went in and it was a smoother transfer than Morzeny had had in recent memory and he relaxed knowing he had made the right choice.

Smith spun around and backed up, one hand slapping to his neck, rubbing, fingernails scratching and Morzeny knew the fear that was growing nicely inside the young man’s head.

“You have been injected,” Morzeny said, glancing down at his wristwatch as he turned his back on Smith and walked over to the closet where he had placed a folding chair earlier. “With a viral zoo—” there was a soft pinging behind the far wall, a soft tap tapping and then suddenly the wall exploded with sound, catching Morzeny by surprise. He swore as he always did, the pounding of iron ringing out, he was sure he saw dust fleck off the wall, and there was another sound, and then more banging and then it was over, always over as suddenly as it had started.

He lowered his hands from his ears where they had moved instinctively, only his left arm was already lowered and there was the disgusting feeling of warm liquid all down it. The sleeve of his shirt was sticking to him and he looked at Smith to see him collapsed, spasming on the ground, suffering through the first wave and, there, by Smith’s outstretched hand, of course, was the gun. Morzeny swore.

The pain was coming to Morzeny now, stinging and ragged, the awful feeling of realizing that one's flesh is torn. Across the room Smith was stretched out, the heels of his worn sneakers tapping on the floor spasmodically as his body jittered through the pain.

Morzeny reached a hand across to his injured arm, braced himself as best he could, and began ripping his sleeve off in strips. He listened to the pattering of Smith's shoes, slowing in pace but growing in strength and he knew the first wave was ending. The warm liquid of his own blood started pooling in Morzeny's hand and he did something he would never have expected himself to do: he began to grey out. The borders of his vision began pressing in and things became distorted. From somewhere far away he heard Smith's shoes slow further in their tapping.

Now things were getting serious.

Morzeny's tunnel vision started fading and things became more solid. Some deep part of his mind knew that Smith was also fighting to come back from a similar place and he knew the first thing Smith would see was the gun inches from his hand. Morzeny forced himself to take reeling steps, he bit down on his tongue, began jabbering nonsense, doing anything to shake the feeling that he was hovering just on the edge of a nice deep sleep. Something gave out and Morzeny realized he was falling to his knees, the feeling of them clumping onto the floor sent a ripple of pain deep through his body.

He fell face down and knew he had banged his wounded arm because the tunnel vision came again, but he also knew he had the gun in his fingertips, he could feel it from far away, like through a tank of water in the next room. He slowly backed away, everything still off kilter, until he felt the far wall firmly against his back, then he let his knees completely give out and slid his back down the wall until he was sitting. He took the strips of his shirt and did the best he could tying his arm up. When that was done he held the gun loosely in his lap and looked over at Smith. The boy was lying where he had fallen, not having bothered to get up. Morzeny knew the look in his face. Smith was hoping that if he just rested up a little bit, if he just lay still, then he wouldn't have to face anything like the pain of the last few minutes again.

Morzeny smiled weakly. "You have been injected with a viral zoonotic disease. Don't bother fighting. Don't bother struggling."

"Too late," Smith said, and Morzeny was damned if Smith wasn't managing a smile too.

"Are you planning on dying anytime soon?" Smith asked.

"I could ask you the same thing."

Waves five and six had come and gone and Morzeny had been amazed at Smith's resilience. Part of this was the simple strength of youth, but Smith was holding on quite well despite that. Morzeny might have misjudged this one.

"I could scream you know," Smith said.

"You have my blessing," Morzeny answered.

Smith rolled over onto his back and now the last few hours showed themselves, in the heavy way his eyelids wanted to sink down, in the way he had to swallow two or three times before he even had the strength to lick his lips, in the focus needed just to fill his lungs up with air, and then...nothing. Smith's chest slowly fell. "I take it barely having the strength or saliva to speak is part of this wonderful drug you've given me?" he asked, his voice cracking.

"That is one of the side effects, yes." Morzeny looked over at the kitchenette. "I could pour you a glass of water, maybe?"

Smith's face convulsed into what would clearly have been a laugh if fear and pain weren't distorting it. This turned into a slow steady breathing with glassy eyes staring up.

"I get this job," Smith began speaking quietly, as if he were holding a fascinating one-sided conversation with the ceiling, "it's at a small paper in the city, and I'm excited. I know it's going to be a crap job. I know I'm going to be doing grunt work and checking facts, and this turns out to be true. Plus, you know, I'm rewriting articles by some of the more lazy journalists for no credit, or doing research for some of the slimier editors for, again, no credit. And I've got this boss, who's a nice enough guy, short and balding and has god-awful bad breath and he seems to think he's going to teach me all these lessons. All he really does is, generally speaking, make my day more hectic, but at least he's trying. Although it really seems he's more worried about seeming like the lesson teaching type of guy than about actually teaching me anything worthwhile. But he gets on this, 'A good journalist checks into every lead,' kick earlier last week and then, in the name of the almighty element of teaching, he hands me over to this guy named Hume."

Morzeny watched, listening, his hand moving to his arm, feeling the bandage there, knowing it was getting wet, knowing it needed changing, knowing it wasn't going to make any difference, knowing that at least two major arteries were cut, knowing that he had to make sure Smith died and that Red would take care of wrapping up his mistakes, knowing above all else that listening to Smith was so much better than focusing on the pain.

Smith stared at the ceiling, his eyes blinked a few times, lost in his own story. He took a short breath that drew his chest up fully. Morzeny watched this, like a patron at an art museum. Morzeny knew full well how difficult long bouts of talking were even after wave three had passed. Smith was moving into wave seven. "So I go to see Hume," Smith continued, his deep breath passing out of him in hitching spasms before he regained control. "I mean, what am I going to do? Right? I'm a nobody and this is the first thing they've given me that isn't basically a coffee run or slave labor. So I get to Hume and I proceed like I'm a real journalist and he's a real story. And he gets going and I know, I mean I know *immediately*, that not only is this guy completely insane, but that perhaps this isn't even a sign of faith from my short balding boss with bad breath, this might actually be a practical joke, it might even be a punishment of some sort. Because this Hume guy, he can't be telling the truth. Because he's some middleweight research guy at some big aluminum foil factory and he's stumbled onto something. Because he's talking to me about, get this," Smith turned his head slowly where he lay to catch Morzeny's eye, "you're really going to laugh, he's talking to me about how the fluoride that the government puts into tap water is actually poison, real conspiracy theory shit, you know? It's a slow process, that much he'll grant me, but it has something to do with how fluoride is a byproduct of removing aluminum from naturally mined bauxite, and how fluoride is topical, you know, it's supposed to be smeared on the teeth, not ingested, and how when it's ingested, you know, because it comes from aluminum to start with that it...hell I don't remember what happens exactly, he had drawings and models of molecules and all sorts of shit, but the end result was a buildup of aluminum in the brain cells." Smith's head was still rolled over on its side, his eyes still fixed on Morzeny's. "Does that ring any bells? Aluminum buildup in the brain cells?"

Morzeny smiled. "Alzheimer's."

"Alzheimer's," Smith repeated. He waited a few seconds. "So what do you think? Hume was crazy, right?" Smith paused to muster a swallow. "Because he started talking about this huge conspiracy and how he was in danger. But that's just crazy, right?"

Morzeny still wore his smile. He slowly, as if it were coated in lead, lifted the hand attached to his wounded arm and looked down at his watch. His smile faded. He sighed. Then he said something he had never said to a victim before. "I'm sorry."

"Shit," Smith said and closed his eyes as his head returned to neutral position. He started taking short deep breaths, his mouth slightly open and Morzeny knew what he was doing, knew the attempts at bracing one's self that the brain went through and then Smith's back arched and his mouth opened wider and a dry scream made it halfway out before freezing on his lips. When his heels started tapping on the floor Morzeny looked away. With his good hand Morzeny took a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket and labored one out without getting blood on it. He held the cigarette between his fingers and stared at it without lighting it. While he stared he focused on his arm.

Eventually the tapping subsided and heavy mouth breathing took over as Smith came back and his body calmed down.

"Why," Smith croaked, and Morzeny looked over at him again, one eyebrow raised. "Why is what I don't understand. Was there that much money in aluminum? It doesn't make sense. I mean, I get it, you've got a great product and the only problem is all this fluoride left over from the manufacturing process so you find a mass market for your byproduct, you give it to the government, and the kiddies get shiny white teeth and everybody wins and you sweep the whole early onset of dementia for the entire population under the rug, but was there really *that* much money in aluminum? How could there be that much money in a product that didn't exist yet? Did you just take a gamble, force this all through based on visions of meatball sandwiches all across the land wrapped in foil? Or are you just the muscle and you just cash your paycheck and forget about it?"

Morzeny rolled his cigarette slowly between his thumb and first finger. His arm was settling into a slow, deep, throb. Had he not been trained for this he knew he'd be going to pieces. "You're not what you appear to be," Morzeny said.

"I'm not what I appear to be?" Smith said, gritting his teeth with the effort of talking louder than a whisper.

"Your dirty sweatshirt, your stupid haircut, your head bobbing walk, your annoying teenager attitude, it's all an act, isn't it?"

Smith's eyes glared hard for a second, then his head rolled back, away from Morzeny, and Morzeny knew he had finally figured Smith out.

"I prefer to be underestimated," Smith said.

"Yah," Morzeny said. "Forty-odd years doing this and some little kid with a superiority complex undoes me. Congratulations."

Morzeny held the cigarette under his nose and breathed in the sweet reek of tobacco. "Your argument is sound, but your basic assumptions are off. I never said I worked for any aluminum company, and I never said the Alzheimer's was a side effect."

"That doesn't make sense. If it's not a side effect...I mean...so...what? It was the intended effect? You're poisoning everyone who lives anywhere near any major city. Why the *hell* would you—"

"Sevodnya horoshiy den' umeret," Morzeny said, the corners of his mouth puckering up slightly causing a smile that seemed playful. It faded as soon as he struggled to shift positions.

Smith's face relaxed. He thought things over. "Forty years," he said softly.

"Forty-*odd* years," Morzeny corrected.

"Putting you here at the outset of the Cold War."

"Yah."

“To fluoridate our water supply.”

“Well it wasn’t *me* so much, I was just shipped over to protect the initial investments. In truth, everything simply started falling into place. Other things we were doing began feeding it. Do you know what caused the first major need for aluminum?”

Smith squinted his eyes into closing and groaned. “Yeah,” and now Smith started to see. “It was stronger and lighter than anything else out there. That was why it was so useful during the space race.”

“Once that got flowing then it was easy enough to push to create a larger market for the stuff and then... truthfully it all started to gain momentum far beyond what we expected. All we had to do was prod a little bit and then keep everything hidden. My personal favorite addition was the study we leaked stating that you needed to drink eight glasses of water a day. Eight!” Morzeny laughed. “Well, by that point it was obvious that once the first generation of purely fluoridated children began to grow up...” he stopped talking and put his cigarette down onto his lap before gingerly shifting positions.

“And, presto,” Smith finished, “in sixty short years you have a generation destroyed by dementia.” Smith shook his head. “Seems like an asininely roundabout way to attack your enemy.”

Morzeny nibbled lightly at a hangnail. “It was argued that it was no more roundabout than an extended arms race.” He glanced at his watch. “I’m sorry again.” This time, when the tapping started, Morzeny allowed himself the luxury of closing his eyes, of letting his head loll onto his shoulder. The tapping stopped. Surely that was it. Morzeny had seen the insides of numerous bodies that had gone through what Smith’s was going through. Surely wave eight was the end and Morzeny could just slip off into sleep and not worry about outlasting this kid anymore. But Morzeny could hear the breathing, hard and hitching, slowly coming down again. And then Smith was speaking.

“This is such a stupid way to die.”

“They are all pretty stupid, Smith.”

Smith thought for awhile. Morzeny glanced up to the window, then down at his lap. He picked up his cigarette again.

“I never got to see the Grand Canyon,” Smith said.

“No?” Morzeny asked, surprised. “Why not? It’s wonderful.”

Smith’s head turned on its side to stare at Morzeny. He was covered in sweat, not the cool clear sweat of a hard day’s work, but the yellow tacky sweat of a fever dream, yet Smith still managed to compose a glare for Morzeny. Morzeny shook him off. “What were you waiting for?”

“It isn’t that easy for some of us.”

“I became a trained killer. How much harder could it have been for you?”

“You took this job because you wanted to see the Grand Canyon?”

Morzeny shrugged. “Hoover Dam, too. And some other things. It seemed like the best way to get out of Russia at the time.”

Smith’s face didn’t react. “But you kill people. You killed *me*.”

“Yah,” Morzeny conceded.

“Seems unfair.”

“Nothing fair about it,” Morzeny conceded again. “But what’s the difference? You get caught up in a world’s worth of history that you don’t understand or a drunk driver hops the curb where you happen to be standing or some cells in your body betray you and begin to eat you from the inside. You’re under the impression it matters which it is?”

“Yes it matters.”

“What you do with everything up until is what matters, Smith. How you go is irrelevant.”

“That’s just wrong.”

Morzeny took another whiff of his unlit cigarette. He looked up at the window and thought he could see gray beginning to creep into the sky. It was hard to tell with the light from the apartment reflecting in the window. Then he had a thought.

“It’s not wrong. It’s very right. You know what you’ve been doing, Smith? You have been lying in a comfortable bed, but you’ve been tossing and turning *all* night long, absolutely unable to sleep well because all you can do is worry about what sound the alarm clock is going to make when it inevitably goes off.”

There was no response.

“No?”

Morzeny squinted and looked over. Smith’s mouth was half open but his chest was no longer moving and the tilt to his head had no life. It was tilted only because of gravity.

“Anyway,” Morzeny said, very dizzy now, “it’s the trip that’s important.”

He looked away from Smith. He looked down at the still unlit cigarette in his hand. He slid his thumb up its length, then pressed down and snapped it in half. He ran the paper firmly between his fingers, spreading tobacco flecks all over himself. He licked his lips ruefully as he dusted the flecks off of his shirt, purely out of habit. Then he closed his eyes and let his head loll again, only this time he didn’t bother trying to wake up.

There was a humming behind the far wall, this time as a different set of pipes came into use. Mrs. Habbris in 5B was turning on her shower. In 6A the Powells were filling their coffee machine from the tap. Mr. Werner in 2B turned on his bathroom sink and splashed water on his face before starting to brush his teeth. All across the city people were waking up and doing more of the same, showers and sinks opening up for a brand new day.

About the Author:

Joseph Devon was born in New Jersey. He grew up and began to write books. For a longer version of this story be sure and visit him online. You can always find news about his latest books, recent short fiction and all things Joseph Devon at www.JosephDevon.com. You can also buy a hard copy of what you just read. Drop by, you'll be glad you did.



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