

DON'T SWEAT THE SMALL STUFF

ALSO BY DON BRUNS

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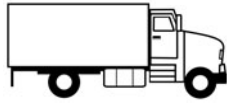
Barbados Heat

Jamaica Blue

ANTHOLOGIES

A Merry Band of Murderers
(editor & contributor)

Death Dines In
(contributor)



DON'T SWEAT THE SMALL STUFF

A NOVEL

DON BRUNS

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FIRST EDITION

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To Tom and Dick Smothers. Your rapport, your sense of timing, your comedy, your entire story inspired me to create Skip and James. Thank you for all the enjoyment you've given millions of people over the years.

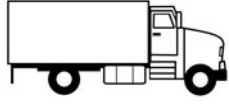
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Don Bruns
Sarasota, Florida

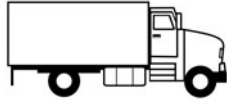
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CHAPTER ONE



I found the article again, the one about the dead body on the carnival ride, and I wished I'd mentioned it to James the first time I saw it. The story was online, on an archived page of the *Miami Herald*. It was one of those stories that tells you something happened, then leaves you up in the air. You never hear the end of the story. We've all seen those. For weeks you search the paper, the Web, and there's never an ending. Never a final summation that tells how it all came out. Well, I found the story after the fact, and in this case, I know exactly "what happened." I was there for the ending. So was James. And Em, Angie, Pugh, and a cast of characters too lengthy to mention here. We now know what happened, how it happened, and why. The story was written by Jonathan King.

RIDER DIES FROM AMUSEMENT RIDE INJURY.

Correspondent Jonathan King

A thirty-two-year-old woman was killed yesterday when her safety bar malfunctioned on a ride at a North Miami

shopping center. The ride, operated by Moe Show Inc. had been inspected by local authorities upon installation Wednesday.

The Cat's Pajamas carnival ride spins at a high rate of speed, investigators said, and Ellen Bernstein of Palm Grove was thrown from her seat. Her body was found in the mechanism below the ride.

I cringed when I read that passage. Her body was found in the mechanism below the ride. I tried not to think about the gears probably chewing her up. I've seen some dead bodies, but that would be just too gruesome.

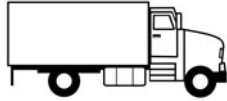
Spokesperson for the Palm Grove Plaza said that Moe Show Inc. was entirely responsible for the rides and safety of all riders.

Owner Moe Bradley stated that all rides were inspected on a regular basis and they were looking into the matter.

No other details are available at this time.

I'd seen the article, eight months ago, but hadn't paid much attention to it. Later, I remembered it, but didn't really think it could impact anything going on in my life. If I'd mentioned it to James, and if I'd said no to James, I could have saved my friend James and me a lot of trouble. But then again, trouble seems to find us no matter what.

CHAPTER TWO



The tartan skirt hit her mid-thigh, and I admired the tanned legs. She sat at the counter, staring straight ahead, a brown mug in front of her. We stood in the doorway surveying the small coffee shop, the counter, and ten tables.

James tapped me on the shoulder. “Got to be her, amigo.”

I nodded. I couldn’t take my eyes off the girl. A tall blonde with shoulder-length hair and a marvelous figure.

“Built like a brick shithouse, Skip.”

Leave it to James to bring it down a notch.

“Was that the description?”

He rolled his eyes. “*Attractive young lady drinking coffee.*” His eyes drifted back to the blonde-haired beauty. “Hey, man, I don’t see another single female in this room, do you?”

Two older gentlemen sat at the table directly inside the door, a chessboard on their table. I couldn’t tell if they were playing chess or just staring at the board. It didn’t seem to matter to either of them.

“I mean, there’s two good-looking women over there,” he pointed to a sofa in the corner, “and two couples in the back

there, but my contact is supposed to be by herself. I only see one lady sitting by herself. The lovely lady at the counter. Tell me I'm wrong, amigo."

"I don't like it, James. What if it's not her?" It wasn't unusual for James to make an honest mistake. It wasn't unusual for James to make a dishonest mistake. You could never tell with James.

"Come on pard, it's got to be her. So what do I have to lose? I've just got to figure out a unique approach." He stared at her, then turned to me. "I could say, 'You're the most ravishing creature that I've ever seen in my life.'"

I thought for a moment. Then it came to me. "But you'd be plagiarizing Jeff Goldblum in *Life Aquatic*." James knew thousands of movie quotes. But then, I usually figured them out so I guess both of us were full of useless trivial crap.

"Can't pull anything over on you, Skip."

I wasn't exactly proud of that.

James turned and walked to the counter, keeping his eyes on the attractive young lady. I stayed where I was, not knowing what to expect. He stepped up to the condiments basket and I watched him pull out a white sugar packet, look at it, then look down at the girl. She hand-brushed her hair back from her face and sipped coffee from her brown mug, never looking to her right or left. A consummate pro.

James walked back to the doorway. Smiling at me, he waved the sugar packet. "Got a pen, pardner?"

"What are you going to do?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "I've got an idea."

I don't think he had a clue what was going to work.

I fished in my shirt pocket. As a salesman, on the rare occasions I actually convinced a prospect to sign a contract for their home security system, my company required me to carry a pen.

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This one had about twenty seconds on it. I'd actually signed one contract with this pen.

James took the cheap plastic ballpoint pen, studied the tiny white packet, and started crossing out printed words. He held the sugar packet in his hand, letting me watch the process. When he was finished he put *my* pen in *his* pocket and handed me the little sack of sugar.

"James?"

"Read it."

He'd crossed out almost everything on the packet. The name of the company, the copyright and patent information, the nutritional content, the slogan 'Make Life A Little Sweeter' and whatever else had been on the printed package. Two words remained. *Sweet. Sugar.*

I frowned, not having a clue where he was going.

"Hey, I've got to impress her. I've got a lot riding on this."

"And how is this going to impress her?"

"Watch and learn, grasshopper."

James shifted his shoulders, gave a tug to his khaki cargo shorts, pulled down his Banana Republic T-shirt, and strode to the counter. The well-dressed gentleman always gets the lady. But the girl never glanced his way.

I walked closer, not getting dangerously close, but close enough to watch the master at work. I was ready for his defeat and humiliation. After all, this was my best friend, and I wanted to be there for him when he succeeded and when he failed. And this time he was particularly vulnerable.

"Excuse me, miss?"

She deliberately took another sip of her drink, finally glancing at him with some disdain. It was obvious she'd been through this before. I could see the contempt that she had for him.

"You must have dropped your name tag. It has to be yours."

James handed her the packet. She refused it, looking at him with cold eyes cutting into his soul.

“This name tag, ma’am. It has to be yours. The name fits you perfectly. Am I right?”

Again he offered the small packet.

Finally she took it from his fingers. I could see the skepticism on her face, a frown and a curl on her upper lip. She glanced at the sugar packet. Looking up at him, she blinked. Then I could see her mouth the words. *Sweet Sugar*.

I had to give James credit. He stood his ground, smiling and watching her reaction.

The girl looked back at him, a smile turning up the corners of her mouth. Her eyes were bright, and I could see her pearly whites sparkling.

“You—” she took a deep breath. “You are good.” She looked back at the packet, and I could see the twinkle in her eyes. “Oh, you’re good.” Then she laughed out loud. “Where did you get this idea to . . .” pausing, at for loss for words.

“You’re Agent Hot Pants?”

“I am.” I swear she blushed.

“Simply reporting as ordered ma’am.”

“*Yes you are. I swear—listen, I’m not supposed to say this, but you are the best one yet.*”

James turned and winked at me. I decided my consoling services were not required at this point.

“I don’t want to blow this,” my best friend said, “but would it be out of line for me to call you sometime?”

The drop-dead gorgeous female smiled even wider. “Out of line? Yes. Way out of line. In fact, that question should get you disqualified. You know that, right? You could be ruining your chance to get this job.”

James didn’t flinch.

“I think it might be worth it.”

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A coy look on her face. "Oh, do you?"

"I do."

"I'm serious. You understand this could cost you the job?"

My roommate nodded, his confidence never waning.

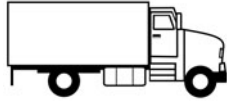
The smile remained on her face. "But," she hesitated, looking right into James's eyes, "if you'll give me your pen, I'll write down my number. That's what you want, right?"

He nodded.

"On the sugar packet." I saw her jot down the number.

That was the last I ever saw of my pen.

CHAPTER THREE



“I got the job, pard.” He was sprawled out on our worn cloth couch, drinking one of my Yuengling beers. “She gave me the highest rating of anyone in the group.”

“Heck of a way to interview for a job, James.” I closed the door and threw the mail on the kitchen counter.

“Hey, they wanted creative, they got creative. I just try to give ’em what they want.”

An *Ellen* rerun was on the tube and she was bopping up the steps to her audience. He was watching it without really paying attention.

“Got a date with her tonight. I’m not supposed to say anything. She’s afraid they’d have grounds to fire her.”

“And you might not even get a chance to start your new job.” I walked ten steps to our refrigerator and grabbed the last beer.

Nodding, James sipped his beer. “Need the job, Skip. Got to buy us a new truck.”

The last one had been blown up when I tossed a bomb meant for us into a parking lot. I’d saved both of our lives, but his

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beat-up, run-down box truck had been parked in that very same parking lot. It's a long story, but James's old box truck was history, and he was determined to replace it with another truck. Not a new truck. There was no way he could afford new, but a used truck that we could put a couple thousand miles on. James had decided that we would make our fortune in the spy business—private detectives—and part of the business had us driving the box truck around Miami soliciting private eye work, disguising the truck as a plumber's vehicle, a carpenter's transportation, a pool maintenance truck, or whatever struck his fancy.

Prying off the bottle top, I took a long pull. It had been a tough day, and I'd made four calls, none of them amounting to anything. You spend two hours in someone's home, explaining all of the details and benefits of your home security system, and at the end of the pitch, just as *you're* asking for the order, *they* ask for their free gift and open the door for you, suggesting that you leave. So I gave them the cheap wine glasses and left. I hoped the glasses broke the first time they washed them. There were days when the job just wasn't worth it. There were weeks—months—when it wasn't worth it.

"So I start next week."

"And you're still going to work at Cap'n Crab?" James was a line cook for the fast food restaurant in Carol City, and I didn't think they could exist without him.

"I am. For a while. Either this new job, or our P.I. firm will kick in soon, Skip, and I'll say adios to C.C."

I secretly wished him the best, but I was afraid it wasn't going to happen any time soon.

"Speaking of the P.I. business, what's in the mail?"

We'd filled out the forms: citizenship, education and all of that. Then, we'd lied. Well, Jody, our private eye connection in Delray Beach, Florida, lied for us. He had gone on record saying that we'd worked for two years as his apprentices. So we suppos-

edly knew all the rules. Right. I'm not certain that Jody knew all the rules. We'd never worked for Jody in our lives, but we had purchased some surveillance stuff from him. It didn't matter. According to the rules regarding a P.I. license, we should have qualified. But so far, no confirmation.

I picked up the flyers, past-due notices, and bills, and sorted through them. "They're going to shut off the cable in a week if we don't pay."

"Yeah, yeah." James watched the TV and took another swallow of my beer.

"And what's this? I thought you paid the electric bill last month."

"I thought I did too. You gave me half?"

"I did." I gave him a stern look. "You know I did."

"Oh, we decided to use that to buy—"

"No, *you* decided to use that to buy an alternator for the truck." The truck that we no longer had. The truck that had been destroyed in the fire. In the explosion. "Why didn't you return it?"

"Got it on eBay, amigo. Saved some serious money. And you can't return eBay stuff. Can you?"

"You never told me *we* saved some money." I seemed to remember my share being full price.

"Oh. Well, it makes no diff. We're gonna be rollin' in the money soon, Skip. Trust me."

I didn't. I tossed the bartender school application to him, along with the going-out-of-business flyer from the adult novelty shop on Third Street. Ready Teddy's was closing. Even the adult entertainment business was having hard times. Where would you get your next vibrator, your blow-up doll, sex swing, or glide gel?

"Nothing again, right?"

And there it was. The letter we'd been waiting for. As crazy

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as the idea was, I got a jolt when I saw the return address: Florida Department of Agriculture. Don't ask why the Department of Agriculture. This is Florida. They just do things a little differently here. The D.O.A. is the one that licenses private investigators. So I was excited. But then, maybe it was a rejection. The way our lives were going, it had to be a rejection. Had to be.

Ignoring James, I tore open the envelope.

Dear Mr. Moore and Mr. Leser: The spelling of James's name had been massacred. It is our privilege to tell you that your application for a P.I. license for More or Less Investigations has been approved.

We had no business being approved. I knew it, but I'm not sure my roommate had a clue. "We're in business, James."

"No."

"Yes."

"Skip. We're official. Damn. Buddy, pal, you and me—the state of Florida recognizes us as crime fighters." He jumped off the couch, drained the bottle of beer, and took five giant steps to the refrigerator. Our apartment is very, very small. You can pretty much go anywhere in just a few steps.

I watched him, smiling, knowing what was coming next.

"Where the hell is the rest of the beer?"

"Well, it was your turn to buy." Two times ago.

"We need to celebrate." He grabbed my car keys from the counter. "Come on, Skip, let's go get a drink. We're P.I.s, right?"

I had to admit it. We were.

CHAPTER FOUR



I listened to James go on and on about his date with Agent Hot Pants, then dropped him off at this ten-story modern Miami office building on Biscayne Boulevard the next morning, ten a.m. sharp. He wanted to make a good first impression with the new boss. It was probably the last time he'd be on time. I drove back into Carol City and halfheartedly called on three leads. All of them lived in small rundown cement-block houses.

I knew they didn't need security systems. I'm sure they knew they didn't need security systems. Two of them weren't even home. They were the losers. No cheap wine glasses for them.

James was done at one p.m. Three hours for orientation, and I picked him up right outside the building.

"Gonna be a snap, Skip."

Everything with James was a snap. Seriously, things came easily to him. "Explain exactly what it is you're doing."

"Okay. This guy who set up the Agent Hot Pants interview. His name is Moe Bradley. Moe Bradley and his two sisters own four traveling carnivals. You know them. The kind that play county fairs, mall openings, that kind of stuff."

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I nodded my head. The name Moe Bradley rang a bell, but I couldn't place it. "And what do you know about carnivals?"

"Stay with me, brother. Moe and the two ladies own these four carnivals, and they need someone to market them."

"Market them?" I hated carnivals. And I hated carnies. Carnies are the guys who run the rides, the ones who hand you the baseball and dare you to knock over the milk bottles. Carnies sell you the waffle cones that are fried in ten-day-old grease, and they're the ones who leave you hanging at the top of the Ferris wheel while they take a smoke break. That's what a carnie is. I suppose some of them were all right, but my father had always warned me about these traveling bums. They were gypsies who would just as soon shoot you as look at you. They'd steal a woman's purse and her baby and never think anything of it. That's what my alcoholic father said.

On second thought, maybe he didn't know so much.

"Let's say that one of the carnivals is playing in Jacksonville. I get on the Web and find a chain of grocery stores up there. Then I call those stores and offer them free kids' tickets for the rides on Tuesday. They're the good guys, giving away free tickets for all the kiddies."

"Okay." I pulled the ugly yellow Ford Taurus away from the curb and headed back toward the highway. "You give away free tickets. How does that make anyone any money?"

"Amigo," I could hear the change in his voice, "you're not going to do a drive-by at Em's place? This is more serious than I thought." Looking at me with squinted eyes, he motioned back over his shoulder toward Bayshore, where Emily's condo looked out over the water at South Beach.

I shook my head. "No."

Emily often played "She loves me, she loves me not." I'd saved her life and she pledged undying love. Then she had second thoughts. This time she was going through one of those

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