

## PITIFUL

By

Patricia Schultheis

They're gonna pin it on me. Given there's something decidedly hinky about him, Robert would be a more likely candidate, but he's only done time for a little meth, and a DUI, so what's that against my manslaughter?

No, it'll be on me sure as shit.

I'm lookin' at them from the upstairs. Over the weeks, I seen them comin' and goin', the old woman's son and daughter-in-law, and now they're down in the street where her car usually is, and a rookie cop's with 'em, lookin' like he'd wish the whole thing would go away. Sunday morning, end of shift after moppin' up Saturday night's what-have-you, and now he's got this . . . old woman missin'.

Nice old woman, too. Never a word spoken between her and me, but still never that look in her eyes like some of them have sayin' "You're nothin' but a piece of crap." Sometimes a little nod of the head from her, when I drive by and she's goin' up or down those stone steps of hers to the street, bringin' in bags, gettin' her mail, what have you. She's old, but does okay. Slow, not feeble is what I'd tell them if they ask me.

But they won't. For me, it's always those other questions, the ones with answers I might as well sign a confession for and spare everyone the time - Where were you Friday afternoon, Finnerty? Here, where I always am. What do you mean by "always"? I work here, sleep here. I don't have no place else. This your house? It's Shawndee's. She's gonna flip it. I work for her. Who saw you Friday afternoon? The kid, Robert. We both work for Shawndee. When you stabbed your brother-in-law did you mean to kill him, or did you only want to stop him beating your sister? Oh shit, now why'd you have to go and ask me that? How the fuck am I supposed to know? I guess I just wanted to stop him.

The old woman's daughter-in-law glances up this way, but I'm way back from the window, and lookin' through fir branches. Up and down the street, that Sunday quiet, so thick you can't punch your way out. Means, I hear them down there real good.

Robert comes in – the dumb fuck looks ridiculous with his tats. He's had some college and, in my estimation, college and tats don't mix. Goin' to prison doesn't entirely bleach the brains from your eyes, and tats with smarts look phoney. I hope he thinks to put on a shirt if the cop comes.

"What's up?" he says.

I motion him to shut up. He goes to the other window, and at least has enough sense not to show himself. The old woman's daughter-in-law is saying how they've been trying to reach her since Friday night. It's not like her not to return calls. And her car's gone, too. And her cat hadn't been fed – they could tell from the way it threw itself at them as soon as they opened the door. The cop's takin' notes, and makin' reassuring sounds, but I can tell the daughter-in-law's not buyin' it. The son, he's just a big lug who just wants all this drama over. Christ, who wouldn't?

The daughter-in-law waves her arm a little this way, and the cop looks up here. I look over at Robert and can see he's thinkin' what I am: they're talkin' about us. And that ain't good. Let's face it: him and me, we're not exactly walking advertisements for the American dream. The people in this neighborhood, they're probably glad that Shawndee bought this place. A foreclosure, it's like a missing tooth in a pretty smile, so they're probably happy, even if Shawndee is black. But they're smart enough to have me and the kid pegged. After we're done here, none of them are gonna ask us to do their deck or kitchen.

Robert watches for a while and hears what I did: the cop goin' over again how he'll write a report, but the police have to wait twenty-four hours before it's officially a missing persons. I'm thinkin' if the cops comes for Robert, he'll crumple. He only did a year for the DUI and a coupla months for the meth, but he can't take no more. He shoulda stayed in college. I told him that once when he was bein' such a dumb fuck when we were puttin' in the counter.

"Robert," I said, "you shoulda stayed in college." Christ I thought he was going to cry, the way he looked.

"We'll never get the sink to fit," is what he said.

When the cop is through sayin' all he's goin' to about the missin' persons, Robert goes back to his room, and I try to remember Friday.

In the afternoon, I went to the Home Depot for some more dropcloths – I figured we got to cover the counter so's we don't scratch it when we do the sink and I got some touch-up stuff, too, 'cause I know as sure as shit the counter's gonna get scratched, dropcloth or not. So I got the receipt somewheres – I always give the receipts to Shawndee – and it's time marked. So's my butt's covered that much at least.

And then I remember the God damned raspberries. A God damned bowl of raspberries on the counter when I got back.

“Robert,” I said, “what the fuck's this? I told you to clean this place up; we're trampin' this sawdust shit all over the place. Shawndee comes by, she'll throw a hissyfit. She ain't payin' you to pick God damned raspberries.”

“If Shawndee paid us decently, we'd be able to buy raspberries,” is what he said, which I thought was low since Shawndee has given me and him a chance when a lotta people wouldn't give us yesterday's turd. Robert can do that sometimes. Out of the blue comes something cold that don't match his skinny, girly wrists and the pile of books by his mattress.

He explained how the berries were practically falling from the bushes, they were so ripe. And how he used to pick them summers when his mother sent him to his grandmother's in New Jersey. But, still, I didn't appreciate him goofin' off with Shawndee liable to drop in anytime. And the coldness of his remark, I didn't go for that neither.

Down below, the neighbor across from the old woman's house has joined the others. “I saw her putting out her trash, Thursday,” she tells the cop and he writes it down, but not like it's real important. Then his walkie-talkie goes off on his shoulder, and he talks into it. Then he says somethin' to all of them and starts toward his vehicle. They're smart people, I bet every one of them has some college, but when that cop pulls away they look like kids abandoned on the side of the road.

I go by Robert's room, and it ain't natural, what I see. He's down on his knees, arms outstretched, hands turned up like he's tryin' to show how bald naked empty they are. And I think, Why's he got to pray like a fuckin' maniac if he ain't got somethin' God awful to pray about.

He looks up at me. “She gave me twenty dollars.”

“What?”

“That woman in that house,” he says, “she gave me twenty dollars.”

“When?”

He stands up. “Friday.”

“Oh, shit. Whaddya mean, she gave you twenty dollars? I thought you were pickin’ fuckin’ raspberries.”

“The property line isn’t clear. I didn’t know if the bushes were in back of her house or here, so I asked her if she’d mind if I picked them.”

“Shit, Robert, you mean you were actually in her house?”

“Yeah, when you were at Home Depot. I mean I didn’t want to pick the berries if they were hers, you know.”

“Shit.”

He’s rubbin’ his hands on his thighs, like my brother Kyle used to when he was tryin’ to explain some fuck up to our old man. And now I’m rememberin’ how the kid’s hands were all red when I came back with the dropcloths, and how I just thought that was from the fuckin’ raspberries. But now I don’t know. I mean red is red.

“I asked her about the berries, and she said sure. So I was pickin’ them out back of her place,” he says, “and then she was bringing in her trashcans. I would have gotten them for her, but I didn’t know she was going for them. Anyway, she’d brought them all the way around to the back herself, but one of them lost its lid and rolled under a table on her patio. Well, how was she going to bend down and get it? I mean she moves so stiffly. So I got it. And then when she opened her door, her cat got out, and I caught it for her. And she gave me twenty dollars.”

I thought the scratches on his arms came from the damned berries, but now I’m thinkin’ maybe the cat. Maybe somethin’ else. Christ.

“I thought that was a lot, twenty dollars, but I didn’t want to argue.” He reaches for a shirt near the foot of his mattress and says, “Listen, I feel like I need to get to a meeting. I really need to get to a meeting.”

I know he wants me to drive him, but I'm thinkin', What the fuck, he's got twenty dollars, let him call a damn cab. I don't need this.

"I've really got to. There's one down in Agape House on 25th Street."

I cut him off with "I know where Agape House is, Robert." I say it to let him know that I appreciate he feels the need for a meetin'. Feels it as bad as I feel the need to piss after my second cup of coffee. And I say it to let him know, too, that I want to let him stew.

Those meetins' never did me much good – not that anything could – but I respect them for what they did for Kyle. Kyle swore by them. "Saved my life," is what he used to tell me. "Saved my life." But I don't tell Robert none of this. First the raspberries, and now the twenty dollars and him needin' a meetin' makes me think how he's complicating my life.

When I figure he's stewed enough I say "Agape House. Twenty-fifth Street. What the shit." And take out my keys.

Him and me don't work regular hours, 'cause we stay here, so for us Sunday's just another day. We work probably more than the forty hours a week Shawndee pays us for, but we sorta spread it out. We was set to tackle the sink today 'cause once we get that we can stop trippin' over it on the kitchen floor. But what the hell, now the kid's got to get to fuckin' Agape House.

When I back my truck out, the old woman's front door's open. Her son and daughter-in-law are on the porch like people after a funeral who don't want to go in and feel that hole someone's left behind. The daughter-in-law is givin' the son shit like women do when they've got themselves worked up, and I think maybe that's good, because maybe the two of them won't notice Robert and me leavin'. But when I get to the corner, in the mirror I see them both lookin' at us like they never seen a nine-year-old truck before.

I don't tell Robert this because I can see that he's all hinky, the way he's rubbin' his hands on his thighs. Scratches run up and down the inside of his arms, too, which, if I was a TV dick, would mean they ain't defensive. But to a real-life Baltimore dick, a fine point like that don't mean shit. It occurs to me that I don't know much about Robert.

For a coupla weeks we were in a halfway house, which, for most guys, means you're as good as halfway back to jail, but then Shawndee came and hired me 'cause when I was in I did a cousin of hers a favor there. And I sorta brought Robert along because he's got that look that Kyle had sayin' he's just tryin' to get

a grip one minute to the next . . . that's how deep he's into his pain . . . one minute to the next.

I'm takin' quick looks up side streets for the old woman's black Honda, but don't see nothin' so, to break the quiet I say, "Robert, how come you call yourself Robert?"

"Probably because my name is Robert."

"Robert, didn't your mother ever tell you nobody loves a smartass?"

"No . . . bo . . . dy . . . loves . . . a . . . smart . . . ass. That's seven syllables."

"So?"

"So, you have to be at least a little bit sober to string together seven syllables."

So maybe that explains why his coldness comes out the blue, a boozier for a mother. I don't say nothin', but I'm thinkin' how in my family the boozier was the father. And, of course, then, Kyle. Me, too, I guess, but not like Kyle. But I don't tell the kid none of this, 'cause that would bring him and me closer, and in light of the old woman, I can't risk it.

What I say is, "I meant why Robert. You could be Bob, or Bobby, or even Robby, which is a good thing you aint, 'cause no kid ever lived past kindergarten as Robby."

He's lookin' up and down the streets, too. Maybe a good sign, because if he knew somethin' about the old woman's car, he wouldna be lookin' for it. On the other hand, maybe he's just lookin' because it's Sunday and so fuckin' quiet that just seein' people goin' about their normal business makes you feel not so alone.

"There were a lot of us, so we always just had the names we got," he says.

"George was George. Kathleen was Kathleen. Susan was Susan. Even James was James, not Jimmy."

"So you were what, then? The youngest?"

"No, Kenneth was."

"Somehow I had you pegged for the youngest."

"I was."

“You just said Kenneth was.”

“He was. Kenneth was my twin. But I was born first, so he was youngest. But then Kenneth died. So after that, I was.”

I don't got nothin' to say to that, so I keep quiet. When I pull up to Agape House, he reaches in his pocket and hands me a twenty.

“For the gas,” he says. And I think it must be the twenty from the old woman, but I take it, with the thought in my mind that if he wants to get rid of it, what better way than to palm it off on me. But I need gas, so what can I do? I get a few gallons and break the twenty that way, then find a diner that's got an egg sandwich for three bucks, leavin' me just enough change for coffee and a little tip if the waitress is into gumballs.

I need to think. Old as she is, the old woman still looks with it. Dresses nice. Gives me that nod to let me know she knows I'm stayin' next door. I seen her usin' a cell phone once when she was gettin' in her car. So either her phone's off or she's not answerin'. Or can't.

The thing that grips my gut is that Robert was probably the last person to see her. If him and me was normal, by which I mean if our last address wasn't a halfway house, I woulda told him to go over there and tell the son and daughter-in-law about how the old woman was when he got the fuckin' berries. But we ain't normal.

Even with the boozier mother, I think Robert grew up decent enough that when someone's missin' you tell what you know. But whatever he learned in college, he learned more in jail, 'cause he knew right off not to volunteer nothin'.

Now with me, it's different. I don't know if any Finnerty was ever normal. Even in kindergarten, all us Finnertys knew you don't say nothin' to cops unless they lay out a deal. Except maybe Kyle. I think that's what our old man meant when he useda' beat him, yellin' how Kyle was outta step with the rest of us.

Maybe that's where he shoulda' stayed, Kyle, . . . outta step. 'Cause when he finally did get in step, when he finally does what the old man always did, and starts wailin' back, really givin' it to the old man, what does the old man do? Draws his gun. None of Kyle's AA meetins could save him then.

Suddenly, I feel like talkin' to Shawndee. She gave me a cell phone, but there's no messages. And I don't wanta ring her. For her, Sunday's a whole-day church thing. She's got some fierce faith, that woman.

“Work hard, and the Lord will work hard within you,” is what she says.

First time I heard that, I said, “Shit, Shawndee, sounds like fuckin’ ‘Alien’ to me.”

Shawndee got pissed.

I finish my coffee and when I get back to Agape House the meetin’s broke up – people with their coffee, that pukey come-to-Jesus look in their eyes. Robert gives me a little smile, but I just nod toward the door. I don’t want him thinkin’ he’s goin’ to rope me back in.

In the truck, he’s quiet, and I don’t know if it’s because he was hopin’ I’d say how much I missed those fuckin’ meetins. Or if he’s got somethin’ else on his mind.

The old woman’s house dates to the horse and buggy days, so it don’t have a garage. She’s got to park on the street, and when we turn the corner her car’s still gone. Her son’s car is where it was this mornin’. But not hers. Robert starts rubbin’ his palms on his thighs again.

It occurs to me, that instead of sittin’ on my ass with an egg sandwich, I shoulda’ come back here and gone through his stuff. Those books of his and what have you . . . just to protect myself. Hinky people take stuff. They can’t help it, the dumb fucks. They’ve got what’s known as a compulsion. When I was in prison there was a guy, been in for twenty-two already and had eighty-five more to go. What a sick fuck . . . took shoes. Always the left. And only open toes. If a woman wore closed toes with him, she was as safe as Baby Jesus with St. Christopher. But open toes meant she had ta’ turn on her porchlight before leavin’.

Now, the house we’re workin’ on was built later, so it’s got a garage and when I pull up the drive, there’s Shawndee’s Escalade – makin’ a shitload of money outta other people’s foreclosed misery, Shawndee is. She’s sittin’ on the back porch, eatin’ Robert’s raspberries right outta the bowl. A big woman, she does somethin’ with her hair to make it gold, and it fits her head like an old timey beach cap. Not a lotta women have faces that can carry that look off, but Shawndee does.

“I see you got the counter done. Looks great,” she says.

“Yeah, ’bout the sink,” I say.

“Yeah, about that.”

Right from the beginning, the sink's been a problem, 'cause Shawndee hunts the salvage depots, and this sink she found is an old timey porcelain one. And double. So it weighs as much as a big old tombstone. I mean I can't figure out how to lift it off the floor much less drop it in the hole in the counter, which is granite, which has been known to chip despite bein' hard as rock.

She asks where the raspberries came from, and Robert tells her, but nothin' about the old woman. Nothin' at all about that, I notice. The three of us go in and stare at the sink on the floor.

Then Robert says he's got an idea. So I watch him set two low sawhorses about four feet away from the sink and gets a coupla two-by-fours and put one on each side of the sink.

"It's about weight distribution," he says, "or leverage . . . I don't know. I never was that good at science. But if we can keep these two-by-fours under the lip of the sink we should be able to lift it onto the sawhorses."

"Well, that'll be a start," Shawndee says. She puts the raspberries on the counter.

I don't say nothin'. The sink's about six feet away from where Robert's set his fuckin' sawhorses, so I start draggin' it across the floor. Like I say, it's fuckin' heavy, but if Robert's got to show off his leverage shit, then I at least gotta show my muscle.

"You know," Shawndee says, "when I was waiting for you two, I saw that son of the woman next door goin' into the woods behind her house. I thought maybe he was looking for her cat."

I keep draggin' the sink, and tell her about the old woman missin', and havin' to wait twenty-four hours for a missin' persons. And Robert, he don't add so much as a single word. What's more, I don't know if Shawndee's buyin' any of it 'cause she's real good at hearin' what you're not sayin'.

When I get the sink by the sawhorses, Robert and me grab the two-by-fours at either end and inch sideways with the sink suspended, and set the two-by-fours down on the sawhorses with the sink still hangin' from them.

"Well, at least it's off the floor," says Shawndee. She's got a palmful of raspberries and is poppin' them into her mouth like they was popcorn. I can see by the way she's lookin' out the window over the counter hole where the sink's supposed to go, she's thinkin' it ain't a good thing about the old woman.

She's got that cousin gonna' be in until he's too old to walk let alone run, and the check kitin' thing of her own. Long time ago, but still. Robert starts fussin' with two higher sawhorses, puttin' them between the low ones with the sink and the counter.

"We'll lift it again," he says. "At least it will be parallel with the hole." Which it will, for all the good that will do, 'cause we'll still have to get it up and onto the counter and drop it in, which I don't have a clue how to do, and I don't think he does neither.

Shawndee doesn't pay no attention to that, instead, she picks up the bowl and lifts it over her head a little, so she sees underneath. "Royal Dalton," she says, "this bowl is Royal Dalton."

She looks at me cause she knows there was nothin' in this house to eat outta except paper plates and fried chicken buckets, let alone Royal fuckin' Dalton. And I'm thinkin' what the fuck . . . the kid took the fuckin' bowl.

"You never said nothin' about a fuckin' bowl, Robert," I say.

"You never asked."

"Don't you be a fuckin' smartass with me." And I step to him.

He laughs a little like it's no big deal how he's steppin' away. "I was using a bucket from the Colonel for the berries. I didn't have anything else, but when I got the woman's cat, she let me have the bowl. She said how some of the Colonel's spices probably seeped into the bucket and how they'd ruin the berries, so she let me take the bowl."

"The shit she let you," I say.

"She did let me have it. She said I could bring it back whenever."

"Is that all of it, Robert? Because I swear to God."

"Well, she kept some for herself."

"Some what?" Shawndee says real cool.

Robert turns to her. "Raspberries. More like I offered. I mean the bushes are on her property. Some at least."

He's sayin' this like he's done somethin' good. Like he's some nine-year-old little kid who's tellin' the social worker at the hospital where his baby brother is havin' his stomach pumped out and how he was babysittin' and couldn't figure out what to do 'cause the little brother wouldn't stop cryin', so he gave him some of their father's booze, which really put the kid to sleep.

And I'm thinkin' that Robert's shitty nine-year-old attitude don't jibe with him bein' savvy enough to hold back. It's like he's two people. College and tats. Readin' up in his room all the time and boozin' himself blind. Two people, and I'm not sure I like either one.

He stands between the two-by-fours with the sink. "Ready?"

I wanna smack him, but I get the other end and lift and together we maneuver the sink onto the higher sawhorses, but that's as far as we can go, because we don't have a clue how to get any closer to settin' it in the hole.

And none of us wants to think about that 'cause that would mean we'd have to think about how the sink fittin' or not fittin' is nothin' compared to the old woman missin'. The three of us in that kitchen with whatever we're not sayin' hangin' like a big old cloud about to burst.

Robert rubs his palms on his thighs again and then says he's goin' upstairs. Shawndee and me don't even spare him a look. She puts the bowl of berries in the refrigerator.

"Whadda ya think?" I ask her.

"What I think," she says, "is that I've got two joints in my handbag. And and half a pound prime in my glove compartment, and I sure as hell would have left all that home if I'd known that all this shit was goin' on." She starts goin' through her phone. I ask if she's tryin' to call her cousin. Not him directly, of course, but whoever can get word to him.

"What I'm looking for," she says so patient it hurts, "is a prayer app."

I don't say nothin' to that. I just start spreadin' the dropcloth over the counter, 'cause at least that's somethin' to do. Shawndee looks at her phone, then closes her eyes. And her lips start movin', her body rockin' like some invisible arms wrapped around her are swayin' her back and forth.

I don't tell her what I see comin' this way. The old woman's son through the trees, I don't tell her that.

The time before the son's here feels like right after I stabbed my brother-in-law and my sister Kyrstal called the police. But they ain't here yet. You know what's comin' but still you got this little time when you're still in your old, normal life, and you want to do somethin' important, but can't think what. This feels like that.

"Hi," the son says through the screen. He's a tall guy with a full head of clean hair he'll probably take to his grave and he's wearin' fuckin' Bermuda shorts. Shawndee asks him in.

He takes one step inside, then says, "Are you Robert?"

"Me?" I say. "No . . . no. Robert's upstairs. You want him?" The words comin' out fast, 'cause I need to get as far away from "Robert" as I can.

"Yeah," he says, so Shawndee goes and calls up the stairs, and the guy keeps on, "My mother, you probably heard about the police being here this morning. My wife had me call them . . . we hadn't heard from my mother since Thursday, so we . . . my wife . . . were worried." Shawndee comes back, and I hear Robert comin' down. "She's eighty-five," the guy says, "and let me put it this way – sometimes my mother's not the most thoughtful person in the world. She insists on living alone in this big house by herself. We've tried talking her out of it, but she can be a little stubborn. Anyway, she's in the hospital, St. Joseph's. My wife called all around, but not St. Joseph's. Not there, for some reason."

Robert comes in and the guy says Hi, then says, "It's her blood pressure. It got so high, her doctor put her in the hospital. Know what she said when my wife asked why she didn't call sooner? She said she didn't want to worry us. Can you believe it?" The son shakes his head . . . "didn't want to worry us."

He looks like he can't decide whether to cry or smash somethin'. "Anyway," he says, lookin' at Robert, "she wants you to feed Pitiful."

"Who?" I say.

"Pitiful," Robert says. "Pitiful's her cat."

And I can feel a warm rush of relief comin's off of Shawndee, but I almost want to smack Robert for keepin' Pitiful back. But I want some of that relief for myself, so I don't say nothin' and the son takes out a key and says how if Robert could come over, he'll show him where the fuckin' cat's food is and how she likes her box emptied every day.

So him and Robert go back to the old woman's house, and now it's my turn to shake my head. "Pitiful," I say, "can you believe it?"

Shawndee laughs a little in that warm way of hers, then says, "In the glove compartment, there's a birthday present for you."

"My birthday ain't for two months."

"You tend to be a little premature, Finnerty," she says and opens up her phone, probably lookin for a Thank-You-Jesus app, so I go out alone and next to the bag of reefer is a fifth of my guy Jack. Shawndee's even put in a plastic cup. She knows I don't like drinkin' in the house, not with Robert tryin' to get himself straight, goin' to meetins and what have you. Just like she knows that what I do or don't do for Robert is because he reminds me of Kyle. I drink, wait for Jack to do his thing and think how some day, I'm goin' to tell her the particulars of how I killed my brother-in-law.

Her reefer already lit, she settles into the Escalade and puts her hand on my thigh. Soon I know I'm gonna have to tell her those particulars – every fuckin' one of how I had no choice but to stab my fuckin' brother-in-law. How else was I gonna get him to stop wailin' on Krystal just because she bought a two thousand dollar tombstone with angels and shit for Kyle? What else could I do? I had no choice. No fuckin' choice whatsoever.

But now's not the time to tell that. I let Shawndee's hand on my thigh seep in. I let that seep in, and feel the warm of her hand mingle with the warm of my friend Jack, and say, "Sure's been some fucked-up Sunday."

"Pitiful." She laughs in that low way of hers. She shakes her head a little. "Just God-awful pitiful."

---

Patricia Schultheis' short stories have appeared in *The Sycamore Review*, *Left Curve*, *The Potomac Review*, *Passages North*, and *The Dalhousie Review*.

[AQR 2013AQR Vol. 30, No. 1 & 2, Spring/Summer 2013 Author IndexFictionPatricia Schultheis](#)