

# YULE DIE

By Chris Castro

“Reagan, man. Fucking Reagan. Nothing new there, just changing the face.”

It was weird because we were in a doctors office, more weird because he had mentioned this out of the blue, apropos of nothing, most weird because it was while checking me for hernia.

“If you were a freak or weirdo back then, early 80’s, picture the one-two combination, Reagan closes 80% of the residential mental health facilities and almost at the same damn time, crack hits the streets and it’s like a recipe for psychotic and paranoid schizophrenic breaks and long term mental illness.”

“Why exactly did you bring that up? I’m just getting a physical for a job, man...”

“Was listening to Bad Brains in between patients, trying to put a human face on the healthcare machine, y’know.”

My face scrunched together like I was about to sneeze.

“Uh, it just made me uncomfortable, but I guess that’s human.”

“I had a friend who wanted to sue him back when he was alive. Always lived in cities, said he wanted some PTSD money for seeing, feeling and smelling 20 years worth of homelessness viscerally. Company man, too. Autodesk, maybe.”

“Sue who? Sue Reagan?”

“Yeah, figured it wasn’t feasible or particularly wise to sue the CIA, the ‘crack’ half, as it were.”

“Why didn’t he?”

Now his face wrinkled up, pre-sneeze style, but mockingly..

“My wife called it childish’-s what he claimed.”

“What he claimed. You didn’t believe him?”

“I think he wanted an out that was guilt free and didn’t make him look like a half stepping bitch.”

“That’s pretty real.”

“-this mole is real, how long have you had that bad boy?” he queried as he indicated a fairly large but hardly protuberant mole on my lower left shoulder.

“Ah, Murphy Brown and I go way back, my pediatrician always said to go see somebody if it got tender, changed colors or anything but otherwise I shouldn’t worry? Probably had it since I was 6 or so.”

“Alright, you’re OK.” He paused and snapped off the rubber gloves.

“-I mean, the guy talked about it at parties all the fucking time like he’d filed the paperwork already or some shit. Huh-” He turned and shot the gloves into a bin across the small exam room.

“Years later, I typed up a letter and found some document in the library that that FBI chief Webster had signed, faked it and put it in his mailbox talking about ‘concerns regarding his potential lawsuit’. It was hilarious! He was shitting himself until somebody pointed out the zip code. Same as his.”

“Damn, well worked prank, do all doctors treasure humor like you do?”

“Maybe a couple, but it’s a thankless job sometimes, y’know?”

“Seems like med school would be chock full of pranksters.”

“Well yeah, med school, sure, but nobody who is 44 and trying to make Head Surgeon is wasting time trying to tie their anesthesiologists shoelaces together, though.”

“Such a sad tale you tell, Doctor...I didn’t get your name, what is it?”

“Peccary...or Pecca-rye, no one can definitively tell me how it is supposed to be pronounced.”

“And you ARE a doctor?”

“Hope so, are you a patient?”

He seemed to be wrapping up, winding around to some particularly horrid shade of pun. But he looked at me, his watch, then the ceiling and promptly left the room. I happened to remember, in amongst the past few minutes conversation that he’d started a tirade with the words-

“You’re OK.”

-and took it as a momentary mantra on my way out of the office, then the hospital itself.



I’d driven up to the small clinic in the sparsely populated mountain town months before the tourist season had started in a car whose clutch was slowly dying, and as I pulled out of the parking lot and shifted into 2nd gear a noise like a lawnmower eating a garden gnome caused me to proceed directly to the closest auto shop.

“Gonn-ah need a new clutch...fancy car too. I don’t think I’ve got-ah any for it here.”

“Aright, do you think a couple days or like a week?”

“Oh, I think Larry’ll be coming up dah hill day after tomorrow. This car an ‘01?”

“Yah.”

“I’ll give ‘im a call and he’ll bring a new clutch for ya.”

“Thanks.”

Stuck for the moment. My brother used to live near here and as a result I knew where the best burger place and the cheapest bar were.

Down'n'Out Burger, they had to change their name eventually, of course and The Ugly One. Conveniently only a half mile apart, they fed and 'watered' the resort employee transient and regular transient population of the town.

Thirteen hours later I learned of a moronic town tradition that mocked the paltry amount of natural snow and "winter" it usually endured. I had run into a guy who knew a guy I used to work with down the hill at a bar and grill spot serving tables. We bonded over tales of shitty customers and Dewars neat.

"So it's called 'Yule Die'!"

"WHAT?!" I responded more loudly than soberly.

"Like, 'you'll die' but Y-U-L-E because Christmas!"

"That's fucking hilarious. What do you have to do?"

"Basically you spend the whole night without shelter in that one lakeside park down the road. The whole first week of December these dumb fucks go out and do it. If you give up you gotta go buy beer for everyone else, too."

"That sounds really fucking stupid, honestly."

"I KNOW! I was just yelling at somebody about this earlier this week, you gotta have a screw loose to put yourself through that. Plenty of people must, given that shit continues still. Whew! Fuck man, where'd you say you were stayin at?"

"Pine Cone Motel, like a mile that way." I pointed a direction I thought was west.

"Nah man, that way." He pointed back the other way, which did look more familiar.

"Fuckin did not need that last whiskey. Good looking out."

"Shit, the park is halfway to where you're at and there's likely to be some prime dipshit material building a fire in preparation for a round of 'Yule Die', I'll fuckin go with you to see if I know anybody there to rag on em."

Walking there we each semi-silently pondered how well we might fare if we were to take part, it didn't feel that cold, really, and I had 4 layers on and a hat but no gloves.



“I bet the drunkest people quit first or fall asleep and make it the whole night.”

“You can’t fall asleep, you gotta write a postcard to Santa every hour, that’s where the real comedy is. Miss writing a postcard or don’t have all six of them when 7 AM rolls around and you’re DQ’ed...not that it matters at that point. You just wanna go the fuck to sleep.”

“Has anybody actually died?”

“Somebody got frostbitten toes and a couple had to be cut off like 5 years ago, but nah, no fatalities. There’s a couple dishers I used to work with who used to do it that’re EMT’s now so they roll by every couple hours and make sure nobody’s passed out under a bush or on top of a picnic table anywhere nearby...hah, they call themselves the Laters.”

I gave a puzzled look, nodded a moment then continued on.

“Hnhh, that’s pretty cool of the-OH SHIT! The Yule Die Laters...fucking brilliant.”

“Somebody probably saved their dumb asses when they were a kid so they’re paying it back, nice of them for sure, though!”

We rounded a bend in the road and the vista of the lakeside park revealed itself, usually more picturesque when it’s either snowing or sunny out, it sat, looking a bit like a grade school playground ten seconds after the end of recess bell rang. Tinny music sounded from

somebody's phone as we continued walking. A couple people who looked way too young to be endangering themselves for little or no reason ran around pelting each other with grimy snowballs while others conversated around the picnic benches, either conserving energy or simply not as drunk as the younger ones.

"What's goin on, puto!?!"

My recently acquired acquaintance was addressed before we got within 20 feet of the picnic benches, one of the posse of snowball fighters had spotted him and made a beeline towards him.

"Oh shit, what's good Beto?"

"Nada, man, some bullshit uh, what happened with Lettie, yeah, you hear?"

"Nah, what hap-oh hey, this is my friend, what'd you say your name was again, sorry man, I'm faded."

"Dean. No worries man, James and...Beto, right?"

"Yeah, that's me, you from around here?"

"No, got stranded when my car died, just came up for a physical for a job at the resort."

"Ah damn, that sucks, well glad you got to check out our silly ass tradition here. Beers are over there."



Beto turned towards the fire and the circle of people around it, pointing towards the far side where there was a small folding table set up and a few coolers around it.

"EY LORENA! THIS IS DEAN, GET HIM A BEER UH?"

"EY BETO, SHUT THE FUCK UP AND GET IT YOURSELF, COPS'LL COME OUT IF YOU YELL LIKE THAT."

Beto turned towards me, chuckled and hit my shoulder.

“Don’t worry, that’s my sister, she’s a bitch.”

“I will not worry then, I guess.”

The majority of the night passed similarly, introductions over and over, the smell of campfire, yelling and beer all set with the backdrop of being either freezing or way too hot from sitting right in front of the fire.

Beto and his sister had gotten into what was a kinda minor fight for them according to James and Lorena had chased him with scissors around the park for about two minutes.

“Jesus, running with scissors on ice. Professional level terrible idea.”

“Oh my god, it doesn’t even touch some of the shit those two have gotten into. Beto isn’t at the restaurant anymore, kind of a relief, really.”

There was another Yule Die festivity James informed me of as it got later, the number of people running around the park had slowly diminished and fires were stoked as the interminable three to five AM hours loomed.

“White Elephant Dawn...pretty self explanatory. Do you have any random shit in your pockets? I think I have a couple things to contribute so if not it’s chill.”

“Hah, chill” I deadpanned as I rubbed my hands together and shook them in the cold.

“Exactly.”

I rifled pockets and found four throat lozenges, a condom of questionable age and two probably dead AA batteries. Turning to James I proffered the contents of my pockets, he took one look and started cracking up.

“Holy shit, wait til I show you what I got.”

He rummaged in his backpack for a few seconds bringing out out a travel sized Old Spice deodorant and a smallish plastic bong of the type referred to in colleges around the country as “a light saber.”

“Ok I just grabbed these randomly but I think we got two complete gifts here, the bong, of course, then a travel care package with the throat lozenges, condom and mini Old Spice deodorant!”

“Deal.”

“Now just the slow, tortuous wait for the sun to rise so we can fucking go to sleep already.”

“Woohoo.” I managed weakly.

“What time is it anyways?”

“5:16.”

“Fuck, it’s always around now that I think, I’m for sure not doing this shit next year. Sun won’t be up til almost 7 too.”

“I am definitely with you. I don’t feel I’m missing out if I don’t adopt this particular tradition.”

An hour and a half later we sat around, yawning sleepily in a rough half circle.

“Alright it goes around once for everybody to pick and once to steal. You can’t play unless you have all of your postcards to Santa, motherfuckers, so bring ‘em up here.”

James whispered out of the side of his hand that the woman orchestrating the White Elephant Dawn was the sous.

“As if that wasn’t evident.”

“-psh. I got that vibe.”

“Hey James, tell me your friends name, then tell him to shut the fuck up about my vibe.”

A chorus of “OooooOOOO’s” rang out.

“James, my name is Dean and the only vibe I’m talking about was the strong take charge one from this direction.” I gestured accordingly.

“Dean, my name is Ella and your flattery is acceptable to me.”

Ella looked at me briefly then turned back to the semi-circle and slapped Beto’s errant hand away from one of the gift bags he was trying to peek into.

“NO PEEKING, FUCKER!”

“Ow, damn! ARIGHT!”

“Alright, let’s get going with this shit. I need to get some goddamn sleep. Everybody put in their gift if they haven’t. I’ve got the spinner here so we’ll figure out who goes first.”



Ella pulled out a board game spinner from the depths of an oversized purse so inlaid with metal it seemed designed to crush skulls. Setting it down roughly in the middle of the group she flicked it expertly, the hand on the spinner blurring into invisibility briefly.

“Oh shit, there you go Lorena, get some.”

“Ok, I’m gonna take this bag since it feels heavy and hopefully doesn’t suck.”

Lorena selected a blue gift bag with green tissue paper and emptied its contents onto the ski jacket she was sitting on, revealing a wrapped Hennessy 1738 box.

“FUCK YES, somebody’s got good taste!” Lorena exclaimed, moving to open the box her face fell.

“UGH, never mind, I hate this stupid ass game.”

Beto replied “What is it, you gotta show us!”

Lorena upended the box to reveal a large plastic bottle of rubbing alcohol. The circle fell into rather uproarious laughter, maybe simply going overboard in order to wake ourselves up. Beto was literally rolling on the patchy snow, loudly guffawing.

“Oh fuck, that was fucking great. Almost as good as my MJ Specials, I hope you get those, Dean, very useful items.”

Lorena rolled her eyes and the game continued, consistent disappointment the overarching theme. I did actually end up getting Beto’s MJ Specials after someone stole my homemade beanie in the second round. Unwrapping the rectangular box to find only a seemingly normal box of disposable kitchen gloves, I raised an eyebrow and Beto opined,

“Open ‘em dammit!”

“Seriously, why would I need some of these thin ass gloves right now? Got a fish you caught needs deboning?”

I pulled out a wad of four or five gloves, separating two from the bunch before realizing what exactly Beto had been on about, every pair had been turned into half gloves, the box somehow refilled and sealed without a trace, a truly masterful job at doing something entirely pointless. The circle still had enough energy even at this early hour to convulse in hilarity as I put on the pair of fingerless latex gloves and grinned like a dumbass and Beto yelped out.

“HEEE HEE!”

