



THE AUTONOMOUS ZONE

Hollis sat cross-legged in the middle of the field and watched Murch dig at the edge. A kerosene lantern and a half moon in the cloudless sky lit the weedy little clearing. Mesquite trees and cactus were beyond.

Murch was big and hulking but shorter than when he first arrived. Standing a foot deep in the hole cut him down to average height. A mound of dirt was beside the hole.

“Damn this stinks,” he grumbled. He tossed a shovelful of dirt and scowled at Hollis. “Too bad you can’t help.”

Hollis shrugged an apology with his right shoulder. His left arm was in a sling. He’d separated the shoulder in the oil fields when he was young, and cool weather could make it hurt. It ached a little that afternoon so he rigged the sling. He was glad he had. Murch assumed the arm was broken and Hollis didn’t correct him.

Murch reached down for the bottle of vodka that was near the hole. He took a swig, savored it, then returned to work.

Hollis looked around at the field. A couple dozen fist-sized rocks were scattered among the weeds. A hunk of turquoise was to one side of him and some red jasper to the other. He’d graduated from college with a degree in geology and then traveled the world working for the petroleum industry. Later, when he married Hope and they had Carrie, he began bringing rocks home from his trips. Carrie loved having colorful little bits of the faraway places her dad visited.

Carrie. Hollis sneaked a look at the house.

The lights were visible through the brush. Carrie was in the storm cellar and Hollis was glad she was. She was thirteen and pretty. No telling what Murch would do if he knew she was there.

Murch had shown up about an hour after dark. Hollis and Carrie heard him yelp when the trip-wired cactus swept across the path that led from the front gate to the house. The cactus was Hollis' intruder alert system. There was time to hide Carrie in the cellar, but just barely. Hollis finished pulling the living room rug back into place two seconds before Murch appeared at a window. He stood in the square of light for a moment, then he broke the glass with the barrel of a pistol. He stuck the gun through and ordered Hollis to lie face down on the floor.

When Murch was inside he asked who else was there.

"No one," Hollis said. "I'm alone."

"Guns."

Hollis pointed to the closet where he kept his rifle and shotgun. Murch broke them down and threw the parts out the window. Then he moved around the living room looking through doors. He poked his head into the bathroom, then Hollis' room, then Carrie's.

"This is a kid's room. You ain't alone."

"My daughter's not here. She's staying with friends."

Murch nosed around some more, and when he was finally satisfied that nobody else was in the house he sat in Hollis' easy chair. He laid his pistol on the little table beside it and began picking cactus thorns out of his shins. While he worked he said, "I had a hell of a time findin' this place, but I know it'll be worth it. I'm here for your treasure, Hollis."

"Treasure? I don't. . . How'd you know my name?"

“My cellmate told me all about you. You can call me Murch.”

Hollis was still on the floor. His shoulder began to throb and he said he needed to stand. Murch told him he could, but warned against making any sudden moves. Hollis got to his feet. As he massaged his shoulder Murch said, “Now, what were you gonna tell me about the treasure?”

“Nothing. I don’t have any.”

“You got gold coins buried in the ground.”

“No I don’t. I used to have some old silver coins, junk silver, but I traded those off. Look at this house. Do you really think I have money?”

Murch looked around and said, “Maybe the place ain’t much, but the rich get rich by pinchin’ pennies. You got money all right.”

Hollis did have gold there. He thought of his wedding band, and Hope’s, hers with a small diamond in it. And there were the diamond earrings she inherited from an aunt. He’d hid those things away and nobody knew about them, not even Carrie. He planned to surprise her with them someday.

Murch finished with the thorns and picked up the pistol. He wagged it at Hollis.

“You got treasure, mister, and you’re gonna show me where you buried it.”

The pistol was a semiauto, a nine-millimeter Hollis thought. Murch stuffed it in the front waistband of his pants when they went out to dig. Hollis led him to the field, then he acted unsure. He said he couldn’t remember which rock marked the treasure. “I buried it a long time ago and put the rocks here to confuse people. I never thought I’d confuse myself.” He pointed to a cluster of crystals and said, “There. Under that quartz. A couple of feet down.”

Murch told him to back off and sit where he could keep an eye on him. Hollis sat and Murch

went to work with the shovel they'd brought along. He made some noise while he dug, but otherwise the soft-lit night was silent.

Hollis studied the brush encircling them. A few of the mesquites had grown fairly tall, but most were stunted and gnarled. They looked like goblins bent to some dark task. So did Murch as he worked.

He was more than knee-deep in the hole when he straightened up and yelled. "Damn it! There's nothin' here!" He glared at Hollis. "You lied to me!"

"I didn't lie. It's been years since I've been in this field. I thought it was under the quartz."

Murch considered, then he climbed out of the hole, dropped the shovel and picked up the bottle of vodka. He sat on the pile of fresh-dug dirt. He drank, adjusted the pistol that was still in his waistband and said, "Man this place smells."

Hollis almost said, "That's because you're sitting on a pile of crap," but he held his tongue. The field had served as a bathroom before he built a working commode into the house. He and Carrie used toilet rings over postholes for months. He would cap each hole with dirt when it was full and mark its place with one of the rocks.

That seemed so long ago, the toilet rings. It had been four years since he and Carrie left Houston. His wife died from a Covid shot, then he lost his job when Joe Biden shut down the oil pipelines, and suddenly he was an unemployed widower with a nine-year-old daughter to take care of. On top of everything else America's cities were reeling from Marxist riots, so he decided to relocate with Carrie to his property in the remote hill country of central Texas.

He and his brother-in-law had bought the land years before. The parcel was a little over thirty acres and they used it for deer hunting a couple times a year. Hollis liked the area because it was

an igneous upthrust in the sedimentary sameness of the state. Three years after they bought the place his brother-in-law needed money, so he sold his half to Hollis.

Living there full-time was rough at first. The only building on the property was an old hunter's cabin. It was just a small shell of rusted tin, but the north wall blocked the winter wind and there was a wood stove for heat and cooking. Hollis did what he could to make camping out fun for Carrie. They studied a survivalist manual and pieced together a rainwater collection system embellished with whirligigs and teeter-totters. They also got really good at making traps and snares. The rabbits they caught helped save a few dollars on food.

Hollis didn't have much money after they moved, so he worked up a budget that cut away all but the essentials—food and toiletries, clothes for Carrie as she grew, and books for her home schooling. Beyond that everything went into the house.

He spent the bulk of his savings putting in a power pole and replacing the rain barrels with a well and pump. Then he began bartering for building materials. Before they left Houston he rented a storage unit for their belongings. On a trip back he traded a jet ski and some other things to a former neighbor for an old trailer and a load of salvaged lumber. After he unloaded the lumber where he planned to build the house, he made another trip to pick up the rest of their things. They had no use for most of the stuff, so he traded it to their new neighbors. It was a slow process because the county was so sparsely populated, but over time he was able to swap for some old windows, doors and used appliances. He bought nails and bags of cement at a feed store that was about ten miles away.

The house came together slowly. He situated it in the middle of the acreage so they'd have

plenty of buffer from whatever was going on in the outside world. Carrie was his tool fetcher and ladder holder, and she helped design the place. Her main architectural contribution was an overly large bathroom. She'd been a good sport about going without one for so long, so Hollis built the bath exactly the way she wanted. The first time they flushed the commode she clapped her hands and said, "Goodbye Potty Field!"

Hollis shifted position on the ground and smiled, remembering. He and Carrie had been on the property for nearly a year when one evening she asked what a potty field was. She was reading a novel by Victor Hugo and said it mentioned one. She showed Hollis in the book, and he saw that she'd misread. He said, "No, sweetie, that's 'pot-ter's field.' It's a cemetery for poor people." Carrie was embarrassed at her mistake, but then the next day she grabbed a roll of toilet paper and said she was off to Potty Field.

Hollis chuckled.

"You laughin' at me?" Murch growled.

Hollis snapped out of his thoughts and saw Murch still sitting on the pile of dirt. A glint of reflected lantern light showed that the bottle he held was half empty.

He'd found the liquor before they left the house. Hollis didn't drink but kept a fifth of vodka for emergencies—as an anaesthetic if they should ever need it for tooth extraction, for minor surgeries and so on.

"I'm not laughing at you," he told Murch. "It's. . . it's just pain." He adjusted his sling.

Murch grunted and took a drink.

Hollis wondered how dangerous Murch really was.

"What'd you used to do? Before this, I mean."

"Before I started stealin'?"

"No, I. . ." Murch didn't seem offended, so

Hollis said, "Yes. Before you started stealing."

"I worked lousy jobs, that's what. Never even made enough to buy a car."

"Where are you from?"

"From all over. I spent some time on the West Coast before I came here. When I was in jail in Dayton I. . . Forget it."

Hollis sensed that Murch wanted to talk. He'd been pretty quiet and businesslike so far, but the liquor seemed to be loosening him up.

"Go on," Hollis said. "Why'd you go to the West Coast?"

"Because California made it legal to shoplift. I heard about it in Dayton, so after they let me out I hitched to Frisco. And it was true about the shopliftin'. You could take nine hundred and fifty bucks worth of stuff out of the stores. I took watches and jewelry mostly, sold some to tourists and hocked the rest." Murch chuckled and took a drink. "Those were good times, man. Just walk right out of the stores without payin'. Like money from heaven."

Hollis remembered reading about California passing a proposition that legalized shoplifting. And then the mayors and city councils in the state's leftist-run cities ordered police to stop responding to property crimes. Then came the calls to defund the police.

As if reading his mind Murch said, "We should defund all the cops. They're never there when you need them anyway, bunch'a donut eaters." He'd turned serious. He stood up, adjusted his pistol and kept his hand on it. "Enough yappin'. You got one more chance to tell me where the treasure is. Tell me, or I do somethin' that hurts."

"Well, like I said, it's been a long time." Hollis looked around. "I. . . I think it's over there, under that piece of cinnabar."

"No thinkin' about it. You better be right this

time.”

“It’s under the cinnabar.”

Murch retrieved the shovel from where he’d dropped it and went to the rock. He kicked it aside, set the bottle on the ground and began digging. A couple inches down he said, “Damn. This one’s gonna stink too.”

Hollis wondered again how dangerous Murch was. He didn’t believe that anyone was all bad, and the man deserved a chance.

“So, is stealing the worst thing you’ve ever done?”

Murch surprised Hollis by throwing his head back and laughing. He seemed to howl at the moon. He laughed until he choked, then he picked up the bottle and threw his head back again to drink.

“Yeah, m-m-man,” he said, sputtering back to normal after the liquor went down. “Stealin’ the worst thing I ever done. Unless you count lightin’ up cops with Molotov cocktails.” He set the bottle down and returned to work. He talked while he dug. “I only chucked a few of them, the cocktails. Too much jail time if you get caught. So I switched to canned goods. I must’ve chucked a whole store full of soup at riot police. See, if they bust you at a protest, they can’t say you got a weapon if all you’re holdin’ is a can of food. But chicken noodles ain’t just for lunch anymore.”

“It sounds like you’ve been to quite a few protests.”

“Sure. I spent a lot of time in Seattle in 2020. I hitched back and forth between there and Portland. The summer of 2020 was like one long party. I was in Portland for that first autonomous zone, the one they called CHAZ. We drove the police out of the East Precinct, then we had almost a month of doin’ whatever the hell we wanted. No cops, we took whatever we wanted from the stores, slept

wherever we wanted. That autonomous zone, that was nice. A place where nobody could tell you what to do. You ran your own damn life there, until they shut it down.”

“What’d you do then?”

“Got the hell out of Portland. The pigs had it in for us for makin’ them look bad, so I went back to Seattle for a while. Then I drifted south. Boosted cars, done some cash registers. The Covid masks made it easy. I thought fer sure there’d be some good times here in Texas, but I don’t know. . . There ain’t much energy here. I checked out Dallas, Austin, Houston, then I ran into some trouble.”

Murch paused in his digging. He was sunk to the middle of his calves in the hole. He leaned on the shovel and said, “I was stuck in a town called Sugarland and needed money, so I went in to hit the register in a convenience store. But I got sidetracked by a sweet young thing wearin’ tight shorts. You should’ve seen her ass. It was like she was beggin’ for it. So I backed her up against the frozen foods and was just goin’ to work on her, when the clerk stuck a gun in my ear. And two of the customers drew down on me. One of them was an old man with a walker. I mean, who the hell carries a .357 in the tote bag on his walker?”

He picked up the bottle, drained it and tossed it into the goblin trees. “Anyway,” he said, returning to his digging, “when the police got there the woman said she had to get back to her kid with her milk, then she kicked me in the balls. I wanted to press charges but ever’body just laughed.”

Hollis thought of Carrie and was glad she was hidden away from Murch. At least he hoped she was still hidden away. She’d never been in the cellar so long before. He was pretty sure she understood the seriousness of the situation and would stay put, but maybe she wouldn’t.

Murch continued to talk while he dug, and

his speech began to slur. The liquor was catching up with him. "So I spent nine months in Sugarland's lockup. That was a backwards place. The yokels in jail there weren't into social justice. You people are screwed up down here, the way you think."

"What do you mean?" Hollis asked, though his mind was still on Carrie. He had to decide what to do before Murch found out about her. But he wanted to be fair. "What's so screwed up about the way we think?"

"Well, almost all the guys in jail there, in Sugarland, said they deserved their sentences. That's screwed up. I tried to tell them they were the real victims, not the people they robbed and beat up, but they were too stupid to see it. So I quit tryin' to educate them and just did my time. But some good came out of it because I found out about you and your treas. . . Aargh!!!"

Murch turned toward Hollis holding the shovel one-handed, like an axe. "It ain't here! You done it to me again!" He jumped out of the hole and laid his free hand on the butt of his pistol. He didn't draw but he was considering.

Hollis thought of Carrie again. He needed to survive the encounter with Murch, for her sake, but he still owed the man the benefit of a doubt. Surely he had some redeeming qualities.

"Did you know it was wrong?" he asked in the face of Murch's anger. He was counting on the liquor having a sedative effect. "What you did to the woman in the store. Do you know it was wrong?"

Murch went from threatening to amused. He snorted, deflating, and said, "Right and wrong have changed, baby! Ain't you heard about the Great Reset? They're resetting the government, the law, all that stuff. Hell no I wasn't wrong. And I bet you'd've done the same thing if you was me. She said she had a kid but you couldn't tell it from

that ass.”

Hollis finally made up his mind about Murch.

“Okay. I’ll tell you where the treasure is.”

Murch seemed skeptical. He lifted an eyebrow and drummed his fingers on the pistol’s handle.

“Seriously,” Hollis said. “I’ll show you where the treasure is now.” He shrugged his good shoulder. “I know when I’m beat.”

Murch smiled. “That’s more like it.” He patted the gun. “This hog leg kicks more when she’s quiet, don’t she? Where’s the treasure?”

Hollis pointed to the far side of the clearing. “It’s over there, by those trees. Under a piece of obsidian.”

“A piece of what?”

“Black rock. Like glass.”

Murch said he couldn’t see it. He picked up the lantern and started off, staggering slightly, then he stopped and said, “You come with me, so you don’t run off.” Hollis got to his feet and followed.

Murch walked with the shovel in one hand and the lantern extended in the other. “I see it,” he said after a few steps. The rock was between a couple of twisted mesquites. Murch set the lantern down and told Hollis to sit. Hollis lowered himself to the ground.

“I hope this one won’t stink like the others,” Murch said as he prepared to dig.

“It won’t. Can I say something before you start?”

Murch eyed him with suspicion. “You tryin’ to stall? Because the treasure better be here. I ain’t kiddin’.”

“I’m not trying to stall. I just want to say you shouldn’t have done that to the woman in the store. And I think you’re too hard on the police. Without them, we’re on our own.”

“Yeah, but that’s the way it’s s’posed to be. Ever’ man for himself, like in the autonomous zone. You know what I mean?”

“I know what you mean. Unfortunately.”

Murch drove the blade of the shovel into the ground, and the mesquites to his sides untwisted with a whooshing sound. Hollis covered his eyes against the flying dirt and debris. When he looked again he saw that the two halves of his bedframe trap had snapped shut. The insides of the jaws bristled with wooden spikes, and three or four had gone completely through Murch’s chest. He stood pinned. His mouth opened once, twice, and then he died.

Hollis decided to bury him out in the brush. He’d tell Carrie that the bad man went away, then after she was in bed he’d dig the grave. It would take all night with the sore shoulder. He’d mark the spot with a piece of pyrite. Murch would finally get the gold he came for, but it would be fool’s gold.