

## The Basement

(A Short Story by T. U.-P.)

A crowd gathered around the show window of Radio City Electronics was there to watch the numerous television screens projecting the six o'clock news. Outside, it's another sweltering dog day of summer weekend night with some of the folks fanning themselves to displace the hot stagnant heat wave air from their sweaty brows.

*“An investigation has been initiated into the illicit activities of a Caucasian male known by security authorities as ‘Joey Riviera’. He was seized at 1am this morning by Riverton County Police outside the Up Late Adult Video Store and charged with possession of child pornography. It is still unclear whether Riviera—a customer of the video store in question—is directly involved in the disappearances of Riverton County minors.”*

“Are you going to tell us where you were heading early this morning when we picked you up?” A dark-complexioned police deputy asks the short and stubby suspect held in the custody interrogation room.

“I was heading home. Is there some kind of problem sir?” The man answers back, profusely sweating from both the sweltering heat and an ensuing bout of heightened anxiety.

“Are you going to tell us your real address, Mr. Riviera? This ID is fake sir.” The officer continues, with an even more assertive tone.

“These days, I’m living in a trailer by the pier. This address I used here on this identification is now outdated.” The man replies with a high pitched and guttural voice.

“We have in your possession a disk with several minutes of footage of under-aged minors, far too young to consent to such abusive acts of a sexual nature. Are you going to tell us where Clarabelle is?” A second officer states, hovering over the seated suspect on the opposite side of the questioning table.

“I didn’t touch the disk! I must have borrowed the wrong title. I’m sure this can be sorted out. All I did was carry a DVD case without knowing this was inside!” The spectacled suspect with hair down the back of his neck hollers back at the police detectives.

“We’ve looked through some of the video in your possession and noticed a minor who matches the description of a missing girl from Essex County named Clarabelle. Are you going to tell us where she is?” The second officer shouts, in an attempt to intimidate the already rattled suspect.

“I know nothing about the child you speak of! I’ve never watched this tape before! You must have the wrong person!”

“We found a cannabis wrapper in your jacket pocket. Do you like to get under-aged children high sir?”

“In my jacket pocket? This is for my joint pain! It’s medicinal marijuana. I don’t share it with anyone but myself!”

After Joey Riviera’s outburst, the two police detectives leave the suspect and converse with one another more privately in a hallway outside the interrogation room. One officer says to the other: “Let’s check the listing for ‘Fine Herb Cannabis’. It might give us a lead on a proper home address.”

“I’ll also check whether the story about the joint pain checks out for the product ‘Ultra CBD’ which he hopefully purchased with a debit or credit account.” The second detective states to his partner before shuffling out of the station to follow up on more leads.

Fine Herb Cannabis was one of a myriad of new mushrooming dispensaries finding a niche during the recent legalization boom. While older shops selling primarily tools of the trade and pot accessories existed in Riverton, the tacky Rastafarian esthetic with its jagged edged leaf symbols had now given way to a more polished and sophisticated look of trending luxury. Detective Herbert Hunterton exits his undercover vehicle after stationing it on the corner of Main and Forty-third street, and makes his way in. Upon entering the boutique, the detective eyes the immaculately tidy storefront with its pastel white décor and its long u-shaped counter space, configured to exhibit a multitude of different smoke and comestible products.

“Good day Sir! Welcome to Fine Herb Cannabis! Can I assist you in finding what you’re looking for this afternoon?” A clerk with slick dark hair and a bow-tied uniform asks politely.

“Sure. I’d like to look into one of your products. It’s called ‘Ultra CBD’. Do you carry such a product in Riverton?” The detective enquires.

“Yes. All of our stores across The Horseshoe carry it. However, it’s not our most popular product. This one does have THC in it as well, so you do get a bit of a high from it. Here it is.” The clerk says, reaching for a small wrapped cylinder resting on a shelf behind the counter. The detective opens his hand to hold the product, noticing three small green and fuzzy spheres within the clear cylinder and a transparent wrapper matching the one found through Joey Riviera’s custody search.

“Does this work on joint pain?” Detective Hunterton asks.

“It has many medicinal properties. You might get mild relief from it if you struggle with arthritis, but I would recommend something without THC if it’s pain relief you’re looking for.” The clerk says with a tone of expertise.

“I’m just going to be honest with you. I’m a detective from Riverton County Police. I’m here today to look into a lead that sent me here to your one Riverton location. Do you have a listing for customers that may have purchased ‘Ultra CBD’ in the last week or two?” The detective asks with more authority.

“I see... Well... If you’re police, I suppose this information wouldn’t contravene our policies for customer confidentiality. Wait one second officer...” The clerk says, rushing off toward the back end of the store. After waiting with product in hand, the detective notices the clerk leaving the storefront to enter a back room located behind a dark curtain. Instead of waiting for him to re-emerge, he places the cylinder on the counter and follows his trail toward the back of the shop, and enters the mysterious back chamber by parting the curtain and ducking inside. Upon entering, his nostrils catch the acrid scent of filtered marijuana wafting in the stagnant air.

“Sir! This is our VIP room! Staff and special customers only!” The same clerk hollers from the center of the spacious and covert product sampling annex. Peering into the smoke-filled den, Detective Hunterton looks up and notices a series of Chinese lanterns tethered to the low ceiling to light up a lounge area punctuated with customers lying down atop large, slender bean bags. Three attendants shuffle about to cater to the whims of the hazy customers, who are ready to pay a premium in order to sample the products offered in-house.

“It’s OK... I’m police! Can you please take me to your office! I need to check a transaction record from within the last two weeks for an unidentified customer.”

“The manager’s office is right this way!” A female attendant says loudly to carry her pitch over the noisy din of the back room.

“I’m not a by-law officer, but I can call one if everyone doesn’t cooperate. I’m investigating a customer. I need a full transaction list of all customers from the last two weeks.”

After those loud words are uttered by the undercover officer, a man in a three-piece suit pokes his head out of the office to the right and says: “No problem officer. We don’t want any trouble here. Come into my office and I’ll show you the listing you’re seeking on my desktop computer.”

Officer Hunterton then glances once more at the four corners of the cannabis den with its dazed clientele and diligent attendants and follows the manager into his office.

“I’m looking for a particular transaction for a male customer who purchased ‘Ultra CBD’ within the last two weeks.”

“No worries officer. I have a listing here for that product and only three purchases have been made in that time period.” The manager responds after quickly typing a search into the inventory sale database.

“Can you give me a printout of those three transactions?” Hunterton enquires as his eyes scan the data marked in green lettering on the black screen of the desktop computer.

“Here you are. Hope this is helpful officer.” The manager says, handing a couple of sheets of paper to the detective before wiping off the sweat on his brow. After exiting

the back room by parting the same dark curtain, the police detective makes his way out onto the main street to find his vehicle. After opening the car door and sitting back in the driver's seat he pauses for a short moment to look at the sheets of paper with the listing for three different customer transactions. He then picks up his mobile phone and calls his partner.

"Ray, I want you to check out the license and registration for a Mr. Gustave Follano, spelled F-O-L-L-A-N-O. I have two other listings but I have a strange feeling this could be the address we're looking for."

"Sure, I check the ministry of transportation records right away." Officer Ray Winethrop replies.

"Can you send me the driver's license photo, date of birth and mailing address? I think this may match up with our man Riviera."

"No problem. Here we are. F-O-L-L-A-N-O, G-U-S-T-A-V-E. He looks slightly older with these glasses a slight bald spot but it's looking like our man!"

"I've got a visual now on my screen. This is definitely Mr. Joey Riviera! I'm heading over to Palmerley Blvd. right away." Detective Hunterton says, turning on the ignition of his undercover vehicle. After pulling out of a tight parking spot, Detective Hunterton sets his course for the northern suburb part of town. After driving along the Morgan Expressway, he exits the highway with the sun descending on a charcoal blue horizon. After cutting through a suburban residential area, he reaches Palmerley Blvd. Soon after, he stations his car with an optimal view of the address and its two-car parking garage. After waiting patiently for about half an hour, a familiar undercover sedan pulls up close-by as only a narrow band of sunlight is left to peak over the western sky. Soon after, the sound of a car door closes and Officer Winethrop knocks on the passenger window, opens the door and sits down next to his partner.

"Let's wait here for a while. See if there's any activity. If anyone comes to the door, we move in on im'!" Hunterton says to his partner.

"Good idea. Riviera's buddy 'Babyface' could be in the area. If we see him, we should seize him and go for keys to explore the homestead." Winethrop replies. After about an hour, with the street slumbering under a darkening blanket of early evening twilight, a stout looking figure passes by the vehicle occupied by the two undercover police officers. Officer Winethrop nudges his partner in the driver's seat who is dozing off. Detective Hunterton suddenly tenses into full alert, awakened by his partner's elbow. Catching a quick look at the nightly figure, the moonlight reveals the striking, and pale-cheeked countenance of the notorious 'Babyface', in a way reminiscent of Harry Lime in the climactic scene of Carol Reed's "The Third Man".

"If he goes up the walkway to number 126, let's seize him and cuff him!" Officer Winethrop says in a low whisper.

“Let’s wait until he reaches the front porch.” Detective Hunteerton says in a hushed voice. As the suspect casually shuffles up the walkway passing through two conical coniferous plants, the two officers exit the undercover police sedan and rush toward the man closing in on the doorway of 126 Palmerley Boulevard.

“Sir! You are under police investigation for collaboration with child sex-offender Joey Riviera! Please remain where you are!” Officer Winethrop hollers as he jogs toward the suspect.

“‘Babyface’, you’re coming with us!” Detective Hunteerton says aloud, tailing his partner with a set of handcuffs. As Winethrop makes his approach, he grabs one of the suspect’s arms and twists him around while his partner catches up and applies the steel rings to both of his wrists while keeping the head pointing downwards and the arms submissively behind the back. After shouting more commands at the suspected felon, Winethrop checks Babyface’s pockets and finds a wallet and a very large set of keys. After removing these from his possession, Hunteerton leads the cuffed perpetrator into the back seat of the undercover vehicle while his partner checks the keys for a way into the suspicious homestead. After nervously fiddling through the set of keys, Winethrop notices a bronze-coloured key that has a piece of white tape marked “Palmer” at the extremity opposite its tip. Instead of knocking or ringing the doorbell to the darkened home, he inserts the key in the lock and twists it to the right. Noticing that the key is the right fit, he manages a full one and a half turns and rotates the doorknob to finally gain access to the stark residence.

“This is the police! Is anyone in here?” Officer Winethrop hollers. Not hearing any answer, he starts to look around the main floor with his gun still in its holster. He enters a darkened den with a sofa and a few generic landscape paintings on the wall. Passing through the den into a small kitchenette, he notices a small staircase next to the refrigerator that leads into a basement area.

“I’m coming downstairs! Anyone there?” He shouts loudly once again. Listening intently, the police officer picks up the sound of a faint tapping coming from the level below. Determined to find the source of this faintest of noise, he pulls his handgun out of its holster and cautiously descends down the somber steps. After moving down a set of over 30 steps, he reaches a second set of steps that takes him down even further. Finally touching down on the basement floor, the tapping sound persists, now louder than before. Instead of turning the light on, Winethrop grabs his flashlight with his free left hand and shines it toward the source of the tapping. Under the focused beam of light, he suddenly spots a washer and dryer. However, upon inspecting the appliance from its right side, a small crack in the wall just behind comes into sight where the tapping seems the loudest. Placing his hand into the crack, the wall starts to shift as he applies pressure, revealing a hinged door to a secret chamber. Shining his flashlight into widened crack in the wall, Winethrop suddenly spots two small feet kicking the wall at the far end of the hidden chamber and making the same familiar tapping noise. As

he points his flashlight higher up, a tiny child, seated on a chair with his arms tied with rope and a gag in his mouth appears.

“Let’s get you out of here you poor little fellow!” The police officer says aloud, moving toward the child to help deliver him from his captive state. After untying the gag, the young boy gasps and says: “Thank you officer...”

“What’s your name son?” Winethrop asks in a calming voice.

“I’m Thomas... Thank God someone found me...” The boy says faintly.

Officer Winethrop then calls his partner on his mobile phone.

“I’ve found a kid in the basement. He’s responsive but was tied up and down here for a long while.”

“I’ve called for back-up. I figured something must have been going on in there. We’re going to turn this place upside down.” Hunterton shouts back.

After fully untying Thomas, Officer Winethrop carries the boy up the stairs and out of the front door. Upon reaching the front porch, five fully-marked Riverton County police cars with their flashing lights greet the boy and his esteemed rescuer. Hunterton, who is close-by on the walkway, signals to one of the dispatches to head to the station with the cuffed perpetrator ‘Babyface’ in the rear seat.

“What a mess this night was. Thank God some of the mess got cleared up.” Hunterton says to his partner.

“I’m done for the night. I’ll have a look at the evidence tomorrow... After a long sleep-in.” Winethrop tells his partner before heading toward his vehicle and far away from the latest crime scene and all of its nightly activity.

[The End]