



# The Blue Ferret

by Mark Wolsky

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Boyd Glummer squinted across the dark alley into Pearson's Pharmacy, he wondered what was taking so long, he wondered if the gun in his pocket would even fire. The grip on the Beretta felt loose, its blue finish pitted and worn, but his work buddy from the tire plant swore by it. Reliable as a rock at an egg farm, Frisvold said. And totally untraceable.

Margie Sorensen sat next to Boyd in the old pickup. She turned to face him, her eyes wide. "It's taking too damn long. Stupid Cy says he's so fast. In and out, he says. Well, those two idiots have been *in* for twenty minutes, but no *out*."

"Quiet, I'm trying to hear," Boyd whispered.

"There's nothing to hear. We haven't even seen them for ten minutes."

"By the pharmacy counter." Boyd pointed to the back of the darkened drugstore. "That looks like Cy." In the shadows, a tall man crouched beneath the service counter, his head down, his arms tugging at something on the floor.

Margie leaned over the dash. "What's he doing? God damn, Cy."

"Looks like Big Verlin went down." Next to Cy, a large man lay flat on his back, his work boots pointing to the ceiling, his round belly arching above the rest of him.

Margie leaned further over the dash. "Why's that fat fuck on the ground?"

Boyd continued to study the shadowy outlines of the two men. "Cy's working hard in there, looks like he's tending to Big Verlin."

"What's to tend to, nobody did nothing to him?"

"Well, something happened to him."

Margie slid back in her seat. "I'm not going to the women's pen over this."

"Women's pen?"

"Don't dismiss me, Glummer. This is how it happens, doing something stupid like this."

"For god's sake--"

"Whoever heard of breaking into a drugstore in some little crap town?" Margie looked down the alley, her eyes darkening. "Let's face it,

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something's very fucking wrong with the four of us."

Boyd leaned forward resting his forearms on the steering wheel. "I can barely make it out, but I think Cy's trying to lift Big Verlin."

"Lift him? Jesus, get in there and help." Margie nudged Boyd with her elbow.

"Easy, I'm the boss on this. We all agreed."

"Fine, that's not my brother-in-law on the floor in there."

Boyd tipped back the last of his coffee. "Then don't worry about him."

"Look, those two already got the cash and a bag of your god damn drugs that we didn't need in the first place. Just get in there and bring them out."

Boyd eased back in his seat. "I'm calling the shots, Margie."

Margie tried eye contact with Boyd but he kept all his attention on the drugstore. Finally, she snapped her fingers and insisted he look at her, insisted he stare into those crazy eyes. "Listen to me, Boyd, flash the lights. Get Cy to come out and tell us what's going on."

Boyd sort of liked the idea but instinctively shot it down with the wave of a hand. He turned away and looked out his side window for a moment. "Suppose I let you have your way on this. Will you then shut up till we get back to Fargo? And I mean really shut up."

Margie nodded then gestured to the light switch on the dash. Boyd used a two-finger grip on the silver knob and in an instant lit up the pharmacy. The headlights caught Cy off guard and he froze in place, one hand still reaching for Verlin.

"Look at him, he thinks he's been electrocuted." Margie huffed through her nostrils. "Think that moron will figure out that means to come?"

Boyd shrugged while glancing down the alley, making damn sure the lights didn't attract any unwanted attention.

An instant after the headlights clicked off Cy sprang back to life, his arms tugging at Verlin again, his knees bending for added leverage. Soon Verlin flopped onto his stomach and Cy fished the big man's wallet from his back pocket.

"What are you doing, Cy?" Margie mumbled to herself.

"There goes that promise to shut up." Boyd shook his head.

"Why are you boss, anyway?"

"Cause I think quick."

"Really? I haven't seen that yet." Margie folded her bony arms across her

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chest.

They watched Cy stuff Verlin's wallet away and step through the splintered back door. He scurried across the alley and slid into the pickup squishing Margie into the middle.

"What the fuck's going on?" Margie frowned at Cy.

Cy kept his head down, his hands on his knees.

"Talk to me, god damn it." Margie poked him in the ribs.

Cy turned and locked eyes with Boyd. "Big Verlin...he's dead. Heart attack. I saw him grab right here," Cy clutched his chest and badly pantomimed a heart attack.

As Cy's words began to sink in, all three of them turned to stare through the plate glass window at Verlin's body growing cold on the floor. Margie kept her eyes on the big man while clearing her throat. "Suppose you tell me how in the fuck that happened?"

Cy turned away and shrugged.

"Talk to me." Margie leaned into his tall frame.

Cy swallowed hard and found Boyd again. "I was getting your pills, Boyd, all of a sudden I heard something hit the floor. It was Verlin."

"Why'd you take his wallet?" Margie said.

"Get rid of his ID."

"You think they need a wallet to figure out who he is?"

"No, but it'll slow them down."

Margie turned to Boyd and rolled her eyes.

"It's not the worst idea I ever heard." Boyd turned back to the drugstore and pursed his lips. "As a matter of fact, long as Verlin's dead I see no reason why we can't pin it on him, too." Boyd pulled the Beretta from his pocket and wiped his prints off the gun with a hanky. He turned to Cy, "Go plant this on him. Make sure he grips the handle a few times. Cops will think he was a small-time burglar, a solo act."

Cy's eyes brightened then dimmed at the sight of the gun. "I don't know, Boyd."

Margie twisted her small frame around to face Boyd. "Tell me you're just trying to act stupid to kind of test us."

Cy stared at the gun on his lap. "I'm pretty sure I shouldn't go back in there."

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“Can it.” Margie scowled at Cy before coming back to Boyd. “How are the cops going to think he’s a solo act? The money’s gone. The drugs are gone.”

Boyd closed his eyes and took a long, deep breath, a weary general on the field of battle.

Margie studied Boyd for a moment. “You’re stalling for time, aren’t you Glummer?”

Boyd lifted his head and gazed across the alley at Verlin’s body. “Suppose,” Boyd started out slow, “another guy came along, just out for a walk, and stumbled upon the situation. Cash and drugs lying there in a dead man’s hand.” Boyd pointed down the alley. “Maybe a getaway car parked nearby.”

Margie bowed her head, her curly locks dangling in every direction. “You’re just making shit up as you go.” She picked at her sweater. “Won’t be long before I’m in the pen fighting my way out of the showers.”

Boyd sat up and cleared his throat. “Just listen. The cops will assume he’s acting alone cause no one in his right mind would leave a man behind -- dead or alive.”

“We’re gonna.”

“Exactly.” Boyd opened his hands and smiled.

Margie squinted at the floor for a moment before giving a little snort. “Okay Cy, go plant the gun on him before our fearless leader comes up with an even stupider plan.”

“Really?” Cy looked to Boyd, then to Margie, then back to Boyd. “This is kinda extreme, isn’t it?”

“Get in there.” Margie glared at Cy until he mumbled under his breath and stepped out of the pickup. He raced his lanky frame across the alley and back into the drugstore.

“Look at him prop that pistol up in old Verlin’s hand. Yeah, this is gonna work. So natural to see a dead guy taking aim at the ceiling.”

“Damn it, Margie, always negative. That’s why you’re...”

“What?”

Boyd ignored her but she kept coming, spinning toward him on her seat. “That’s why I’m what? Alone? Because I could never find another man after you? C’mon, you weren’t that spectacular.”

They watched Cy edge out of the drugstore and head back to the pickup. Margie slipped a piece of Dentyne into her mouth and gave the gum a couple chews. “That rat still telling you what to do?”

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Boyd flashed her a hard look. "It's a ferret, and he never told me what to do. It was a dream, for Chrissakes. Why do you have to twist everything around?"

Margie braced herself as Cy leaped into the pickup again. She shook her head at him, "Nice work. Looks like Verlin died shooting flies on the ceiling."

Cy turned to Boyd. "No way I'm going back in there. Somebody probably already called the sheriff. That's how these little towns are, everybody's got eyes."

"Don't worry, it just looks like he got jumped by the other guy."

Margie tapped her temple. "Oh yeah, the other guy, the burglar-burglar. He's real big in these parts."

"Damn it, Margie," Boyd dropped the clutch and turned down the alley, "nobody ever asks your opinion. Notice that?"

Cy kept an eye on Pearson's as they drove away. "We're doing the right thing, right Boyd?"

"Verlin would have wanted us to get something out of this whole mess." Boyd kept his headlights off and his eyes peeled down the empty streets.

Margie cleared her throat. "Being that Big Verlin's your wife's brother won't she be curious about what happened to him? He's hard to miss."

"She wouldn't recognize him at this point."

"She's that bad?" Margie said.

"Nothing they can do now."

Margie looked down, her expression growing serious.

"Boyd," Cy broke the silence, "you gotta--"

"Can't you see we're having a conversation?" Margie stared at Cy until he looked away.

"I know but...you gotta stop the truck." Cy spun forward and scrunched down in his seat.

Boyd hit the breaks and turned just in time to witness Verlin's enormous frame hobbling after them in the dark alley. Like a trundling ape on the jungle floor, the big man waddled from side to side, his head drooping forward.

"Okay boss," Margie folded her hands, "let's see you think quick."

"Damn it, stop testing me." Boyd glanced back again, his eyes riveted on Verlin's large frame looming closer and closer.

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Margie slapped the dash of the pickup, "C'mon Boyd, just back the fuck up and pick up the dead guy." Margie turned and scowled at Cy. "Let me guess, you never got around to checking his pulse?"

"Boyd, it wasn't my fault. He grabbed his chest and fell over dead." Cy glanced at Margie. "And you said yourself he was a fat fuck. I'm no doctor, you fall down like that you're dead in my eyes."

Boyd backed down the alley until Verlin's face lit up in his break lights. The big man looked pale, his chin shiny from spittle. His large hands gripped the top of the tailgate, and after steadying himself, he gazed up at the night sky. It soothed him and a moment later he lowered himself to his knees, dropping out of sight except for the large hands which continued to grip the truck. Soon, a soft laughter drifted up from the tailgate.

"That's really creepy," Cy whispered.

"Go help his fat ass into the back," Margie nodded to Cy.

"Boyd, no way I'm gonna--"

"It'll only take a sec," Boyd said. "Just lift him in back."

Cy cursed under his breath and climbed out of the pickup. He approached Verlin in a defensive stance, hands out, knees slightly bent. After an awkward standoff, Cy dropped the tailgate and gestured for Verlin to climb into the truck bed. The big man rolled into the back as Cy slammed the tailgate behind him and jogged back to the passenger door. He yanked on the handle a few times before noticing the door had been locked.

"Ride in back, keep an eye on him," Margie shouted through the glass.

Cy took a step back then raced around to Boyd's window. "Why is she giving orders?"

"Why am I giving orders?" Margie leaned across the seat and shouted in a hoarse whisper. "You forget I own the truck, dumb ass? You forget I put up the seed money?"

"Both of you, shut up." Boyd cracked his window and whispered to Cy. "Ride with him in case he gets another attack. Just until we get back home then I'll run him by the urgent care."

Cy shook his head as he pulled himself into the truck bed with Verlin. Boyd dropped the clutch and as they started rolling, Verlin climbed to his knees and pulled his face to the back window of the cab. He rapped hard on the window, so hard Margie let out a squeak. He blinked several times at Boyd then muttered, "What happened?"

Boyd caught a glimpse of Verlin then made a hard right, sending the big man sprawling back into the truck bed. Boyd whisked the Chevy down a couple of darkened streets, pulled onto the highway and headed back to Fargo. After a few minutes, he noticed Verlin staring up at the night sky again, his eyes fixing on something. What, Boyd wondered? What does he

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see up there?

“You didn't let on Jan was getting bad.” Margie rested her head on the back of the seat.

“If I don't talk about it, it's like it's not happening.”

“So the pills, they weren't exactly for you?” Margie tried at a little smile.

“Pain pills. They keep her comfortable but the doctor wants to cut back. She's got days to live and he's worried about addiction.”

Margie sighed as she stared out at the passing telephone poles and plowed fields.

“Funny thing, she was getting better, putting on a few pounds. Trudy's going around saying, my daughter beat cancer. But then something bad showed up on the scan. I go to the doctor and he offers me a seat in his office. He leans back in his chair and explains about the cancer, technical stuff, then finishes by telling me Jan should get her affairs in order.”

They drove in silence, the high beams lighting up the blacktop in front of them. Soon the centerline begins to mesmerize Boyd, the endless white stripes pulling him deeper to a woman...

lying on a bed, her head propped, her eyes just two black holes. The features of her fragmented face shift, then shift again. Eventually the fragments lock into place and Jan's face looks almost human. A sense of fear builds deep inside him. He grips the door frame of the little bedroom as the trailer house rocks from side to side. He looks down and at his feet stands the ferret, its yellowed eyes gazing upward. The ferret preens its bluish fur, then slings its head back in a great thrust and exposes a row of glistening teeth.

Jan shrieks from across the room. He rushes to her as she begins to rise from the bed. He reaches to pull her down but she passes right through him. The smell of burnt ash fills his nostrils. Her arms float at her side as she lifts higher, her crucifix dangling backwards from her neck. She floats to the ceiling and transforms into a dazzling swirl of particles. The particles spin and dance across the ceiling until they slip through a seam in the plaster and disappear.

The room is cold now, and still.

You hear me?

“Boyd, I said did you hear me?” Margie squeezed Boyd's shoulder.

Boyd cleared his throat but did not answer. He kept a steady hand on the steering wheel as they barreled down the highway.

“I'm talking and you're not even listening.”

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“Sorry...I was thinking.”

“Me too.” Margie shifted toward Boyd. “Thinking about something I never told you.”

“Must have had a good reason not to.”

“I’ll just lay it out.”

“Don’t have to, Margie.”

“I broke up with you not because of another guy like I told you back then. It was how you looked at Jan. You two had the right sparks at the right time. That’s what love is. Timing. Forget all the other bullshit.”

Boyd wheeled the pickup down the highway off ramp in silence. As they turned onto a frontage road, Margie glanced back at Verlin. The big man continued to gaze up at the night sky. “So what’re you going to tell Big Verlin about leaving him behind?”

“Nothing.”

Margie cackled as she turned back in her seat and gave Boyd a soft punch on the leg. “I’m glad you told me all this cause everything makes sense now. The drugstore, the pills.”

“Had no choice, she needed them.”

Margie smiled at Boyd. “You were on top a few years ago with that foreman job at the tire plant. You were a good man, never flaunting your success. No difference now, you’re still a good man.”

Boyd cut the pickup’s speed as he merged onto Main Avenue and made his way into the city.

“Another thing,” Margie smiled at Boyd, “I know how strapped you are so keep all the money from tonight. I’ll break it to the boys.”

Boyd let the silence fill the cab for a few blocks. “What’re you going tell them?”

Margie looked down the dark street as the pickup came to a stop in front of Vista Trailer Park, a little smile crawling across her face. “Nothing.”

Verlin rolled out of the truck bed and rubbed the small of his back. He looked at Boyd with unfocused eyes and said, “That’s the last time I go anywhere with you.” He then turned his back on Boyd and padded off toward a cluster of small trailer houses at the edge of the park.

Margie and Cy dropped Boyd in front of Trudy’s doublewide and drove off. Boyd watched their tail lights disappear around a corner then reached into his bag and fished out the pain pills. He opened a bottle and spilled two capsules into his hand. He examined the blue ovals by the moonlight before

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popping them into his mouth.

Inside the darkened trailer, he felt his way to the living room and sat down on the recliner. He slumped deep into the cushion and listened to the night wind bracing against the side of the mobile home.

He closed his eyes and drifted deeper, but the ferret did not come. A moment later the lights flicked on and Trudy stood in the hallway, her hands in the pockets of her robe, her face lined with exhaustion. "My baby's gone," she said.

Boyd turned to the bay window. He looked up at the night sky and said, "I know."

Trudy watched him for a moment then shuffled down the hall in her slippers. "Someone's on the way," she said. "I'll make coffee."

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**Mark Wolsky** is a fiction writer from Los Angeles. His short story, "Winter's Coming," was published in *Our Stories Magazine* and received a Pushcart Prize nomination. Having grown up in the Dakotas, he often uses his experiences of life in the rural towns and cities of the prairie in his work.

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