



“Outside the Box”

by

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is excerpted from the
short story collection

SPICY SLIPSTREAM STORIES

edited by Nick Mamatas & Jay Lake
from Lethe Press.

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OUTSIDE THE BOX

Lynne Jamneck

Hollywood.
Circa 2027.

You get the idea. Private dicks—we always need to state a time and place. Somehow it makes us feel tethered. That and the solid butt-end of a polished modified Glock. Still the best damn gun money can buy. Best bang for your buck, if you'll pardon the horrible pun.

I've never been fond of those laser whatchamacalits. Too impersonal. There's something decidedly final about the soot deposit and the burn of a bullet hole.

Not that I had an itchy trigger finger. I know people might tell you different. Mostly they're the ones who have tried to cross me. Technically, I suppose they rub me the wrong way secondhand, through the clients I take on. And I'm choosy about those. Hollywood's a neat little breeding ground, you know?

The lasting rate for a ten-carat celebrity wedding these days is one year. Rarely do they stay alive for longer than that. It's just so much

horse, you know? Ask me. I live in this soulless town. I've seen it all, and then some.

But I ain't complaining. Those hollerin' husbands and cheating chi-chi's make my life easy living. I'd dodge the sticky end of a red-hot laser any day for a genuine hardbox of Marlboros. Filter, not that girlie crap. Nah. See, it's the girlies themselves who tend to be the source of all my troubles.

Broads. But they're never like that, are they? Broad, I mean. Heck no. They're all skinny and bosom-blessed and long and lithe and double trouble on high heels. How is it that I find myself time and again falling over the tips of my magnetboots to please them?

I can spot what you're thinking. That I got a soft spot for the ladies. Aren't you the smart son-of-a-gun. Lookie here—you've gone and won a prize. But the prize ain't worth nothing so I'll just decline on your part. But stick around. Things could get saucy. I got a soft spot for that, too.

My cozy office is on Forty-Fifth and A. In Little Russia. On a clear day I can see the Statue of Liberty from the window behind my desk. Couple of years ago the French almost took it back. They lost the Eiffel in the summer of 2008. The war touched everyone, everywhere.

Yes, of course there are Russians here. I've never seen them drink vodka to an excessive degree. It's hard to get pure spirits these days. The stuff you buy in the shops will rot your guts. Only the rich can afford to get drunk in style these days.

They like to refer to themselves Russian-Americans. And speaking of booze; here, have two fingers of my best scotch. It's the real deal. Only the best for a girlie dick like me. Good stuff, isn't it?

Now listen. I'll tell you the story. S'what you came here for, isn't it? Bit of sleaze?

The name's Fin, by the way. Nothing more. Just Fin. I think I'll stick to that.



It was a crisp day when it started. It never rains anymore. Not the real thing, anyway. Those virtual rainstorms just can't pull it off. Looks fake. Stuff looks more like a saline wash than water. I'm not sure who they think they're kidding.

The air was thin and my bank account thinner. I'd just given myself a special treat, a nice long holiday courtesy of the South African East Coast. Things were real there and cheap. Cheap accommodation and cheaper women and real tobacco.

My guide for the trip was a painted vanilla twist with tortured hair and a lithe, jungle body.

She delivered more than the services I'd initially wanted. With the hyenas screeching in the background and those long legs wrapped around my waist she bled my credit dry. You ever heard of jungle fever? Hell.

Now I needed money again.

So this dame walks through my door. Bangs it shut behind her, making the paint-peeled Venetians shudder.

She's wore a slip of a black number that moved with her skin like it was part of her. Spaghetti straps that railroaded her shoulders and that I immediately envied. To the untrained eye she might have seemed demure. But my experience with dames told me different.

She seemed eager to put some distance between herself and The Corridor.

I pointed to a chair. "Have a seat sweetheart. What's your name?" She didn't look like the average Hollywood madam. The clothes perhaps. But she wasn't gaudy.

She took a seat in the plush leather chair, crossing her long, milky legs demurely. Her cleavage was poetic. "I hate this city. Always feels as if someone's breathing on your heels."

I grinned. "Someone always is."

She saw the way my eyes hovered below her sculpted collarbone. "My eyes girlie—they're up here?" She had a dark eyebrow cocked to

good effect. I felt like a naughty boy. I'm not dead, after all. Very much alive, thank you.

"I'm Fin."

"Ah. Fin, then. Thought I heard a trace of mick in that accent."

"And do you have a name, Miss...?"

"Stella. Stella will do fine."

"What can I do for you?"

"You kill people, right?"

My lip twitched. "Careful, missy. No more crazy statements or you'll be going back out the door into The Corridor."

"My mistake. Sometimes I forget."

"Yes. Everything has ears."

So. "I need your help."

Now that's more like it. Classic. To the point. Makes your heart weepy and your knees weak.

"What's the skinny?"

"Someone stole something that belongs to me."

"And you want to bump them for that?"

"Maybe."

Fair enough. "What exactly is it you lost? And before you answer that—I assume you have money?"

She slid one hand below her dress and produced a wad of purple from a practical black garter. Dumped it on the table.

"British pound. Excellent."

"Of course. The dollar's worth now't."

I smiled a cutthroat and leaned back in my chair. "What can I find for you?"

Stella remained serious but nonetheless planted a stiletto heel on my desk. "My dreams, darlin'."



Stella was a child of the last suburbans.

Around the short end of fifteen years ago, the white picket fence cult finally—reluctantly—gave up the ghost. Somewhere between the

abolishment of backyards and the acceptance of real artificial pets the notion of 2.5-children families mercifully fizzled like a soda pop past its expiry date.

Children today, they don't dream. Hollow notes, that's what they like to listen to. Kill themselves on the freeway.

Dreams—real dreams—are a precious commodity. There's speculation that it's because of all the technology. That somehow it denies the subconscious. Don't ask me, I ain't no scientist. All I know is I'm here. But all that white noise... Can't be good. Fact is, we got positronic playwrights that would put Shakespeare to shame and I don't know if that's such a good thing. Some days I think our death warrant was signed in ones and zeroes.

Take those McCallister Boxes. You've heard of those, right? Of course you have, they're all over the Vid Visions. Another one of those essential one-third-through-the-21st Century-accessories.

Think back—remember iPods? Your granny's favorite bygone memory. Have you seen the one they have on display in the California Institute of Media? Pretty in pink. Bulky but sorta cute.

The McCallister Box did for DataTek what Windows did for Microsoft back in the days when things like tedious operating systems still existed.

When you buy one, by default it's about the size of a standard paperback. Can you believe *those* are still around? Anyway, I digress. The handy thing with the McCallister's is that every time you pay for an upgrade (minimum fee of course) you can make the box go bigger or smaller. And you can pretty much store anything in it depending on what sort of upgrade you go for. Blow it up, drive your Podcycle in there and fold it down to fit into the palm of your hand. Clever little gadget. It breaks down the molecules of whatever's inside, stores the pattern in its memory banks and puts it together again when you open it. Or some such. In a flash! That was the marketing campaign's tag line, by the way.

Just about everyone above and below the age of five had one. They were like fancy dustbins. One day we're gonna wake up and find out we've locked the world away in a collection of expensive cubes. It's not just Hollywood's crazy.

I don't, by the way, have one. But Stella locked her dreams in one of them McCallisters and sure as salamander, it went and got nicked. Silly girl.



There are a lot of first-rate gin joints in Little Russia. *Rasputin's Couch*, however, was no joint. It was a *jazz club*, one of the highest order. Sure, the name didn't fit. So what.

When the taxi stopped at the front entrance I was surprised not to see Michael the Meathead checking the door. Did I forget to mention him? Don't worry. You'll learn soon enough.

Instead, some other Bruno in a monkey suit stood like an immovable boulder in front of the black-and-white glass doors. The important thing was that he let me inside without a glitch. Must be a new guy. The dope even smiled at me. It helped that I looked sharp: black suit, tailored. Wide brim hat to hide my eyes if I so wished.

I slipped the goon at the door my last fifty. His grin revealed a ruby tooth. He'd fit right in here.

Rasputin's was the sort of place you'd expect in Manhattan Stead, not Little Russia. That's what made it so special. Gin joints were nice, but class—class soothed the soul. And if there was one thing the goons in this part of the city liked more than cush, it was class.

The bar was solid polished oak. Expensive amber scotch glowed on the glass shelves behind it.

The floor was packed. Some souls were having dinner; others talked low and laughed knowingly at jokes while the jazz band for the evening jammed onstage. *Witchcraft*, I think it was. One of those old-style numbers.

I sat down at the bar with the rest of the boozehounds and ordered a scotch. The barman's lips splayed in a tight smile. It wasn't friendly.

Thus I wasn't surprised when, on my way to the bathroom, I was skillfully intercepted by Meathead Number One. Michael. He dragged me through the service entrance at the back and into the alley.

Something hissed at us, then scampered across the lid of a dustbin, disappearing into the dark. Weak light bled from the streetlight ten, fifteen meters away at the top corner of the street.

The Meathead's aftershave wafted sharply up my nostrils. "What you doing in Mr. Ferguson's club, Fin?" He gave me a once over, and I saw his eyes lingering near my chest. "Pretty girl like you, Fin... I always said you'd be off better in a can house."

I did my best not to wince as his chunky fingers squeezed into the flesh of my arm. "When did he decide to swap 'Knuckles' for 'Ferguson'? Almost makes him sound legit."

He squeezed harder. I grit my teeth.

"Fin, you know Mr. Ferguson doesn't like you coming into his space."

"What can I do Mickey? I gotta earn a living, just like you."

For a moment he almost seemed to consider it. It passed soon enough. His grip on my arm tightened to the point of a vicious, burning sting. The bastard was going to leave a mark.

"Get outta here, Fin," he growled into my face. *Breath mints, creep.* He reeked of stale cigars and fresh meat. There was a reason for the moniker, see. "Whatever you lost, it ain't here, you get me?"

"Says you. Picked up any more of those McCallister Boxes lately, Mickey?"

This time I did wince. "Fin. You *make* me hurt you." It came then, the punch. Clever punk that he was he didn't go near my face. Instead he planted his jackhammer fist in my stomach. One solid thump was more than enough.

My knees buckled and I felt the cold, hard kiss of concrete. The last thing I heard was Meathead's laugh and then clawing nausea and the welcome sublime embrace of unconsciousness.



Me, I'm a tough girl. In this stinking city you have to be.

It took me well over two hours to get home. No cabbie would even look at me. I cursed every time one of them hovered low before shooting past. I had the distinct feeling that Frankie had a hand in that. 'Mr. Ferguson' my ass.

Home, of course, was also my office. There was a bed. It collapsed out of the wall, for convenience. Where I worked I slept, and the other way around, too.

My gut was busted. Couldn't touch it, could hardly move. There hadn't even been time for me to use my gun. That bastard Michael.

I had a craving for orange juice. Something about being defeated reminded me of citrus. Bitter and somehow sweet and the same time.

A brisk knock on my office door sounded on as the bed crashed to the floor.

"What do you want?"

The door opened. I knew it would be her.

"Oh, *Fin*. Thank heavens I found you."

"Don't get all torn up, lady. It wouldn't be the first time." I sat down on the unmade bed with as much dignity as I could muster.

"You look kinda handsome in a suit."

"Well I feel kinda like crap, so please, if you don't mind..."

She stayed at the door. "Anything you need?"

I looked at her then. A RoBoHopper zoomed past the window, its yellow and green construction lights flashing.

"Orange juice."

She smiled and left. Whatever. At least she'd already paid me.

I must have dozed off because when I opened my eyes, Stella was sitting next to me on the bed. Strange enough—I felt heaps better. Maybe this was a new chapter. Or the unexpected influence of a dame. She had a glass of orange juice in her hand, freshly squeezed by the looks of it. Nice. Even though I don't like pulp. The bed was still uncomfortable. Too many busted springs in all the wrong places.

"Have a sip."

I couldn't help but notice the short slip of her patterned summer dress and the curve of her shapely legs between the folds. She took the juice away when I reached for it and took my empty hand instead. I

gave her a careful but perceptive smile. My insides may be busted but I ain't no fool. This was the way I chose it to go.

"That box of yours is causing me a lot of trouble, Stella."

She swung her legs across my lap and pushed me onto my back.

I played it cool. "What is it you do anyway? All that dough you flashed in here earlier must come from somewhere."

"I sing. For Mr. Ferguson's trouble boys down at the *Rasputin* every Friday night."

I stiffened beneath her. "You're a canary for Frankie Knuckles?"

Her fingers traced the cotton of my buttoned shirt.

"I have to make a living, Fin. You understand that. Don't you?"

"And that's all you do? Sing?" Her body felt cool on top of mine. She was careful to avoid the bruises. I'd just about forgotten about them. She did something else, though.

A fat slap of a sting across my cheek that felt very real and stung badly. "That'll teach you to question a woman's virtue."

Dreams are perfect. The right tone, an even balance of whisper, a persistent touch. And Stella... Stella was a dream to the tee. Like sleazy yellow neon lights outside my window instead of noisy RoBoHoppers or 1-2-3 traffic lights as a replacement for those annoying flyover signals. Stella was everything that's good in my book. Made a girl feel good. Made a woman feel real.

"Just so's we're clear," I said before her lips touched mine. "There's no deduction for services already rendered. Or those to come."

She gave me that innocent look because she knew I'd like it. What a kitten. What a *doll*.

By the time we were done her dress was on the floor and I'd lost nothing except for the buttons on the neck of my shirt. Like I said—I'm tough. I got to keep up appearances.

But I was also afraid that Stella now had me exactly where she wanted. I'd *have* to find that damn box, rain or shine. Private dicks, you know. We get caught up with the girlies.



I even went to knock on that crazy girl's door on Papaya Lane, three blocks up the hill from where Stella stayed. I'd heard of her, and when I started my enquiry about who else except Knuckles might be interested in someone else's dreams, I was referred to her.

She was nuts. Whack job. Fruit of the loom if ever there was one. But she knew things. The crazy ones always did.

I waited probably a full two minutes for her to open the door. I knew she was in there because I could hear someone scuffling with something heavy. Something was momentarily dragged across the floor before she finally flung open the door.

Her pale face stared out at me. She looked like she'd just woken up from a deep sleep. Eyes that looked like trapped ice. Long, jet hair that looked as if it had been painted onto her scalp and combed to precision down her back. Full lips. Blood red. Had she not been kookoo I could have fallen for her.

"What?" The word was like a blade.

"I need information. I have cash."

Her eyes flashed. "What if I need something else than cash, you gender-boy bimbo?"

"Uh—"

"Save it." She flung the door in my face.

I stood there hoping she would come back. She did, thank Bogart. When she opened the door again there was a big, blue heavy-looking mantle hanging off her scrawny shoulders. I wondered if she was a day older than twenty.

She saw me looking at the blue thing and sneered. "I don't like the sun."

Nevermind the fact that the sun hadn't shone properly in years. Crazy skirt.

"Stop staring and come in." She closed the door. "Give me the money."

"How much?"

She gave me a wide grin. Her teeth were remarkably clean. I don't know what else I'd expected.

"You're looking for something, aren't you?"

"How did you know?"

"Don't ask stupid questions. Everybody's looking." And then she coughed violently and I would have sworn she was at least a hundred years old.

I thrust a hand in my jacket and held out a fifty. She sneered and spat on the floor. I managed another fifty. Then another, which seemed to calm her down. She ushered me to a rickety chair, sat down herself and lit a cigarette with a steady hand. "What's her name?"

"I beg yours?"

"The one you've come here for."

I didn't see any harm in a first name. Besides, a hundred and fifty should cover confidentiality. "Stella."

She dragged hard on the cigarette. "You're doing her, aren't you?"

"Excuse me?"

"You know. A bit of the old in and out. Getting a belly full of marrow pudding. Hippity dippity. Putting the candle in the pumpkin..."

"Yes, alright, thank you. I get the drift."

"You dicks. Always have to give 'er one, don't you? Have your way with a cliché why don't you."

"Look, I gave you money for information. Not to tell me something I already know."

"Fine. What's my name?"

"What?"

She leaned forward, trailing thick cigarette smoke in my face. "What's. My. Name?"

This wasn't making any sense. But that was normal. "I have no idea."

"Of course you don't. Just the way I like it."

"I don't think anyone knows," I added, exasperated. Her reply was merely a sublime smile. Her skin was starting to look as pale as her teeth.

"That girl, Stella. Be wary. She wants you back."

"Look, I didn't come here to get advice on my love life. Do you know anyone who trades in dreams?"

"Plenty. Everywhere." She gave me a look I almost thought conveyed respect. "Why you think no-one dream no more? They're sick of being exploited."

"I think you need to give me my money back."

She hissed at me then. Like the death throes of a garroted snake. I could have sworn all of her hair stood right on end for a second. Something bubbled on the stove behind her. It smelled rotten. Cripes, what if the witch was poisoning me!

Her hand was warm as her fingers circled around my wrist. "Go to the docks. Where they used to catch the fish but is dark now."

"You mean Ward's Quay?"

Her face went blank then, her eyes looked past me. "Go away. I need to feed."

I waved a hand in front of her eyes, but they were as vacant as Michael the Meathead's brain. Great. A hundred and fifty for zilch.

I left the house and was glad to be out of there. That woman gave me a serious case of the willies. The same way the eye of a dead carp does when it follows you around the fresh produce section.



I didn't have to wait long until dark. I dipped the bill at a local gin joint and was ready to hit the skids.

Ward's Quay wasn't the sort of place you went to willingly. Ten years ago it was a prime spot for the trawlers to go out from. Even the locals stood at the edge and caught cob like it was going outta style.

Now, pretty much everything in that spot's dead. Funny thing is, no-one really knows what the beef was with Ward's. Some say toxic spill. Others blame the red tide. The Aldermen didn't like to talk about it. They grew quiet and changed the topic whenever some soul had the cojones to mention it.

So Ward's Quay had become the sort of place you visited when you needed junk, and by that I don't mean the dustbin kind. Or was told to do so by a mad serpent of a woman.

The lights that once illuminated the quay had long been bashed in. I stepped on something and it crunched. Felt for my piece and was reassured by its weight.

If I was supposed to find something here I didn't see it. The smell here was strong though. Puke. Urine. Maybe both.

I was about to hoof it on outta there when my eye caught the glint of something in the water. Sometimes, when you're lucky and you're walking on of the other quays at night, the fish will come up close to breaking the surface. The lights will catch the scales on them just so.

But there was no light here and certainly no fish. Unless the water knew something I didn't. Sometimes things around here changed so quickly it felt like parts of it never existed.

I looked around. Maybe someone with a torch. There was no one. I stepped closer to the edge.

The water gloop-glooped against the side of the secluded wharf. It was dark. I saw no fish.

But there was the glint again.

Wait a minute. What did I care? It was not like I was going to hop into the freezing water and risk my head for what could be nothing more than an old penny.

Then someone else made the decision for me. I remember feeling the pain then the numb on the back of my head, and then just briefly the cold shock of the water as my feet tottered over the edge of the pier. I fell into the water back first with a heavy slap. On the edge of the pier above me on the pier, a dark, congealing shadow, unreal and unknown like a subliminal thought....



The nameless words of Stella's song drifted like a summer breeze. Languid and lazy, they reminded me of the words to an old Oscar Hammerstein tune.

Her fingers were light trails on my forehead, gently touching. From the bed I could see the season blossoming outside the window. The sun was shining and the bleakness had disappeared and my heart was light and I sang with her. I sang with Stella because she had

rescued me and put me back where I belonged. I had been foolish to think I could make my own way in her world.

And Stella would love me always. Sometimes she lived through me, too.

The touch of her fingers, immaculate as she sang to me and soothed my fears and closed the box and returned me to the place I belonged.