

ROAD KILL

Joe Haldeman

Joe Haldeman has an abiding passion for telescopes and astronomical equipment—he's one of the few guys who can talk about Nagler eyepieces, splitting double stars, and Schmidt-Cassegrain versus Maksutov-Cassegrain.

His fiction is pretty damned fancy, too—if, for instance, you haven't read "Forever War" and "Forever Peace," both of which won Hugo and Nebula Awards, it's time you bought a telescope and forget about reading—you're no good at it anyway!

Joe has compressed an entire movie into a few pages—no mean feat.

Hunter is a serial murderer with an interesting specialty. He goes after solitary joggers and bicyclists on lonely country roads. He doesn't just run them down or shoot them from the car. He abducts them and slowly tortures them on videotape. Sometimes we see him at home, while he goes through his videotape collection and the rest of his rigid daily routine.

He's a big man, over three hundred pounds, most of it fat. His arms and hands are very strong, though; he works out with dumbbells and GripMasters. He lives on pizza and fried chicken and beer, and every day scarfs down three Big Macs, two large shakes, and a pint of Jim Beam, for lunch. On special days he likes to cook at home.

He lives in a single-wide trailer on an isolated lot in a pine forest in Georgia. His house creaks and sways when he walks through it. The power goes out all the time, but that's all right; he has a big Honda generator that switches on automatically. He needs it not just for his videotapes, but for the two big top-loading freezers full of his victims' remains, cut into steaks and chops and stew meat. The livers are carefully sliced, the slices separated with waxed paper. He doesn't like kidneys. The thymus glands, sweetbreads, are collected in a plastic bag until he has enough for a meal.

Sometimes he brings the victims home, but usually he videotapes them out in the woods, and when they are dead, or almost dead, he field-dresses them like deer. He prides himself on having provided the police with a useless clue; he's never actually been a hunter. He learned how to do it from a video.

Hunter is on the prowl. He parks his special van on a dirt road and labors a couple of hundred yards uphill to a place he's scouted out earlier: part of a jogging trail that offers him ample cover but also an adequate line of sight in both directions. He carefully sets up the monofilament line that he will use to trip his victim, and hides, waiting.

He's delusionary in a remarkably consistent and detailed way. He believes himself to be a S'kang, an alien soldier marooned on this miserable backward planet. Ugly and squat here, he is a model of male attractiveness on his high-gravity homeworld. But at least here he is immensely strong, and there are plenty of humans, who look and taste like the cattle back home. Here comes one now.

The attack is so swift and brutal that it lends some credence to the idea of his not being human. A teenage boy runs up and falls face-first on the paved path when Hunter yanks the line. He rises to his knees and Hunter swats him into unconsciousness with a casual backhand. He drags the boy down to a prepared tree beside his van, silences and secures him with duct tape. He hangs him upside down and slices off his running clothes with a razor-keen filleting knife. Then he sets up a camcorder and revives the boy with ammonia. He makes a few ornamental cuts, talking to the boy until he faints dead away. To his chagrin, the weakling can't be revived; he's had a heart attack. So he works for speed rather than esthetics, and a few minutes later sorts through the pile of organs and throws the edible parts along with the gutted corpse into the big cooler in the back of his van, and heads for home, two states east.

Spencer was badly wounded by a mine in the last minutes of Desert Storm, and spent more than a year recovering the use of his legs. He left the Army with a 75 percent VA disability, which, along with the GI Bill and a generous gift from his father, allowed him to finish pre-law and law school.

But when he joined his father's New York law firm as an intern, it was a disaster. Fifty percent of his disability was posttraumatic stress disorder, and the pressures of the city kept him jumpy all the time. He also didn't like the feeling that he got from the other members of the firm—that he wouldn't have a job if he weren't the boss's son. He suspected it was true and found a position as a junior partner in a small-town Florida law firm, and against his father's wishes, left the big city, and winter, with relief.

It went well for a year. He liked the little town of Flagler Beach. He was usually inside only half the day, helping prepare briefs; the rest of the time he was doing footwork, going out and interviewing respondents and occasionally doing repossessions, one of the firm's sidelines. Not just cars and boats, but sometimes children who legally belonged with the other parent. For this, the firm got him a private investigator license and a concealed-weapon permit. Half the men in Florida have guns, they told him; more than half of the ones who break the law do.

He tried to be good-natured about Spencer-for-hire jokes.

Carrying a gun again gave him mixed feelings. It was undeniably a comfort, but the associations with combat made him nervous. He was never called upon to use it, except on the first of every month, when he took it down to the target range and dutifully ran a couple of boxes of ammunition through it. It was a snub-nosed .357 Magnum, not very accurate beyond the length of a room. He also had an Army .45, like the one he had carried in Desert Storm, but that size cannon is hard to conceal in light summer clothes.

As his part of the story opens, after the horrific scene with Hunter, he has just married Arlene, the firm's beautiful secretary, and the boss is talking about promoting him to junior partner in a year or so. His mother gives him a hundred grand as a wedding gift. He can't believe his luck.

It was about to change.

The boss has sent him to the university at Gainesville for a few days of research, and when he comes back, the firm's office has a FOR lease sign on it. Stunned, he returns to his new house and finds that his new wife has left with the new car. There are annulment papers on the kitchen table. Their joint bank account is cleaned. All their credit cards have been maxed for cash. The mortgage payment is due, and he has less than a hundred dollars in his wallet.

The two disasters are not unrelated. She's gone to Mexico with his boss, and all the firm's assets.

He calls his parents, but their unlisted number has been changed. In the waiting mail, he finds a note from his mother saying that Dad was furious about the unauthorized \$100,000 wedding gift. He'll get over it, though. Ron Spencer is not so sure.

He sells his old pickup truck to the guy who comes to repossess the furniture. He pawns his good bicycle and the .357, keeping his rusty beach bike and the .45. He has enough money to renew his P.I. license, so he rents a one-room office with a fold-out couch and an answering machine. He has some cards printed up and takes out an ad in the weekly advertiser.

He's been bicycling an hour or so a day, both as therapy for his legs and because it cuts down on his smoking. Now, with lots of time on his hands and no money for cigarettes, he starts bicycling constantly. Maybe he can break a bad habit, and a good thing will come out of this.

Every day he starts out at first light and makes a long loop down past Daytona Beach, coming back in the evening to check his silent answering machine. But staying on the bike does keep him from smoking, and the sixty and seventy-mile rides tire him out so much he sleeps whenever he's not riding.

Daytona has a bad crime rate, and so Ron carries the .45, not in a conspicuous holster, but in an innocuous zipper bag in his front basket. The two big rear baskets, he fills up with aluminum cans that people have tossed from cars. It amuses him to help beautify the environment while making nearly enough to pay for the day's lunch break.

But it's the rusty bike full of aluminum cans, old clothes, and a couple of

days' worth of bread that puts him on a path toward Hunter.

A Daytona cop busts him for vagrancy and finds the .45, and, of course, it was on a day when Ron had left his wallet home. No money and no permit. There's a reporter at the station when he tells his story, though, and after the police have verified that he is who he is, the reporter asks if he'd trade an interview for a steak. Ron figures a human interest story couldn't hurt business, so he goes along with it.

He doesn't think the story that appears on Sunday is very good; it makes him look kind of pathetic. But it does produce a client. A man makes a phone call, no details, and an hour later shows up at the little office in a new Jaguar convertible.

The man's in his sixties: lean, athletic, gruff. He gets right to the point:

Gerald Kellerman's son was a victim of Hunter. All they ever found were his entrails and genitals. And his bicycle. He had just started a coast-to-coast bicycle trek. It ended in a lonely swamp north of Tallahassee.

It's been two years, and the cops have gotten nowhere. Kellerman wants to hire Ron, who is about his son's age and build, to get on his bicycle and act as a decoy. And when the bastard shows up, use the .45 on him.

It doesn't sound too appealing. It's unlikely that Ron will run into the monster, since he's ranged all over the south, victims in Louisiana and Alabama, as well as Florida, and even if he did, Ron couldn't imagine a scenario where the man revealed that he was Hunter under circumstances where Ron could draw his weapon and plug him.

He explains this to Kellerman, who says yeah, he had that figured out already, but here's the deal: I'll give you a hundred grand to do it for one year. Ten percent up front as a retainer, plus a credit card to pick up all your road expenses. You pedal along like a camper, but take it easy; eat in restaurants, stay in motels. See the country, make a nest egg. Does it beat pickin' up cans alongside the road? If you do catch the bastard, dead or alive, it's another hundred grand.

Ron thinks the man is crazy, but then the government has certified *him* as 50 percent crazy, so he says okay, if you throw in an extra thousand for a new bike and supplies. The man takes out his wallet and counts out ten hundred-dollar bills. Get your bike, he says; my lawyer will come by

tomorrow with a contract.

So the odyssey begins. Ron pedals cautiously through the rural South, with his New York accent and shiny new bike, finding a land that is about equal parts Southern charm and *Deliverance* menace. Meanwhile, the nameless killer cruises country roads in his panel van with the big cooler in back.

Hunter is returning to his trailer in the dead of night, complaining to himself about the heat on this accursed planet and panting in its thin oxygen as he drags the body to his kitchen worktable. The walls are covered with *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* posters; brick-and-board bookshelves are full of science fiction paperbacks and videotapes. So he's either an alien with a jones for sci-fi or a human geek with a really severe personality problem.

(He reads other things besides science fiction. In particular, he's made an extensive study of serial killers, so that he knows what the police and FBI will expect him to do. He's much more clever than they, of course.)

He strikes three times. The last one is particularly horrible, a trick he got from a book about the Inquisition. He's stopped a young female jogger, punched her senseless, and driven her deep into an abandoned turpentine forest. He ties her to a tree, naked, her wrists and crossed ankles duct-taped to tree limbs and trunk in a crucifixion pose, and when she wakes up he takes a scalpel and makes a small incision in her lower abdomen. He carefully slices through the layers of muscle and the tough peritoneum, and eases out a couple of inches of gut. Then he goes back to the van to fetch a cage that holds a whining, starving mongrel. He records her begging and hysteria for a while and then holds the cage up to her abdomen and opens it. The dog snatches its food and runs away, unraveling her.

He follows the dog to where it sits feasting and clubs it to death. Then he returns and videotapes the woman's face, staring at what has happened, until the life leaves her eyes.

For the first time, he leaves all the body there. The scene has a kind of

perfect terrible beauty. His freezers are full anyhow, and he wants to see what the newspapers will say.

He always alternates boy, girl, boy, girl. Who will be the lucky boy?

Ron Spencer has fallen into a routine that is not unpleasant. He pedals thirty to fifty miles a day, stopping in motels when he can, campgrounds otherwise. He stays in touch with Kellerman by cellular phone, calling every day at five. He doesn't dare forget to call: if Kellerman hasn't heard from him by 5:30, he'll call the state and local police and FBI. There's a signal generator under his bicycle seat that will lead them straight to him, and presumably Hunter or some other foul player.

For the past several weeks, he hasn't been riding alone. He met an attractive woman a few years his senior who was also biking coast-to-coast, and they hit it off. When she asked whether they could ride together for a while, he considered refusing, or saying yes and pretending to be just another biker, but then after some awkwardness he explained to her the odd and probably dangerous quest he was on. He doesn't want to endanger her. She counters that she would be in a lot more danger alone.

In fact, she's the first sole female rider he's seen on the road, with all the media play about Hunter. At first, he even suspects her of being the killer.

Their relationship is friendly but platonic. Linda's not looking for a man, she says. That's okay with Ron, still hurting from his own betrayal. He doesn't need a relationship, though he wouldn't turn down some friendly sex; Linda implies that she's lesbian but deflects any direct queries.

Linda's a good bicyclist, but Ron is a lot better. He pokes along with her most of the time, but periodically says bye and sprints ahead for a mile or two, getting some real exercise. It also gives them each a few minutes of privacy for "using the bushes."

This afternoon, Hunter is using a ploy that has worked in the past, pretending to be fixing a tire. He's so huge and obviously helpless that people will stop and offer aid.

Ron is cranking along, sprinting about a mile ahead of Linda, and almost stops, but then decides to play it safe. He doesn't *really* want to confront Hunter, and this guy looks like one of the two suspects. (The FBI is looking for the Thin Man and the Fat Man, from two possible eyewitnesses.) As he passes, though, Hunter jams a tire iron into his front wheel spokes. Ron cartwheels and is knocked unconscious, his helmet shattered.

Hunter finds the gun and P.I. license and gets suspicious. Instead of killing him, he ties and gags him and throws him and his bike into the back of the van, and drives back to Georgia.

But Linda has come around a distant curve just in time to see the huge man tossing Ron's bike into the van. She's can't see the license number, but can tell from the peach color that it's from Georgia, and she can describe the van. She pedals like mad; it's at least an hour to the next small town.

Safe in his isolation, Hunter manacles Ron and tries to find out what's going on. He inspects the bicycle and finds the bug, which he triumphantly smashes in front of Ron.

In the process of wheedling and posturing and torturing, he reveals his True Identity. He shows Ron the freezers full of food and cooks him up a nice chop.

While all this is going on, Linda is trying to make some cracker police officer take her seriously. She tries to reach Kellerman, but he has an unlisted number. The FBI puts her on hold.

Of course once the tension is stretched to the breaking point, the cops come boiling out of the woods. Hunter is so huge he absorbs about twenty bullets before he falls down dead.

Epilogue

The coroner of Illsworth County, Georgia, has done hundreds of autopsies, but never one of such a huge person, and he's not looking forward to it. Mountains of messy fat to slice through before you get to the organs. But he prepares the body and makes his first incision. Then he staggers back, dropping the scalpel.

Inside, there's no fat, and not a single organ he can identify. Some of them are shiny metal.

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