

PUSHING DOGS (PART THREE)  
by Richard S. Crawford

"You don't act like you're worried," Nigel said.

Thelma shrugged. "Why should I be?"

"Well, it seems like he's been beating you all day. Every time you make a bet with someone, Hank's there to make sure it goes against you."

"True, isn't it?"

"Even when you bet me that I couldn't make that one guy scream on the Ferris wheel, Hank climbed into the guy's car and started punching him. Remember that?"

Thelma scoffed. "Of course I remember that. I was there, wasn't I?"

Nigel nodded. "The point is, Hank's got you beat."

"No he hasn't."

"You got something special planned? Some secret bet that you know he can't sabotage?"

"Maybe. I don't know. Hard to tell."

"You could tell me, you know. We've always been good friends."

"Bullshit. You've always been the easy mark, and I've always been the one who takes money away from you."

"Maybe that's because I've been letting you."

"Why would you do that?"

"Well maybe," Nigel said, stammering just a little, "it's because I'm in love with you."

The two of them stared at each other in silence for a few seconds; then, simultaneously, they burst into peals of loud laughter.

"I would never have thought to bet on your acting skills," Thelma said, wiping her eyes. "You had me going for a second there."

"Yeah, that was good, wasn't it? Anyway, like I said, you can tell me if you've got some secret plan to beat Hank at some point."

Thelma shook her head. "Nah. I like you Nigel, but you're a sucker, so I can't trust that you won't give anything away to Hank if he threatened you."

"So you do have something!"

"I didn't say that." Thelma lit a cigarette and blew smoke into Nigel's face. "I gotta get back to my cart, there's turkeys piling up."

"See ya," Nigel grunted.

# # #

So the day went. Every time Thelma made a bet with someone, Hank was right there to sabotage it and make sure it went bad for her.

Hank approached her at five in the evening. "Ready to give in? You must have lost a lot of money today, and you're going to owe me even more tomorrow." His grin was a mile wide, and looked like it would split his head wide open. He was positively drooling with glee.

"We've still got an hour to go before the fair closes," Thelma replied.

Hank shook his head sadly. "It was nice knowing you," he said as he shuffled away.

# # #

She was waiting at her apartment already when Hank showed up. He didn't even knock; he just twisted on the doorknob like he knew it would be open, and stepped on it. His eyes widened when he saw her sitting in her easy chair, as though he was genuinely surprised to see her there.

"What are you doing here?" he asked her.

"Just waiting for you." Thelma took a long drag on her cigarette. "You're early."

Hank checked his watch. "Well, let's get busy. You got the money you owe me?"

Thelma couldn't stop herself grinning. "How much do you figure I owe you?"

"Well, I said a hundred dollars, didn't I?"

"So you did."

"Plus you bet that amount if you could place a bet that I couldn't sabotage. So I figure that's two hundred dollars."

"That's some fucked up logic there, Hank."

"Best kind."

"You sure?"

Hank snorted. "You got the money or not?"

"You sure it's two hundred dollars I owe you? I could have sworn it was more."

"Hey, I'm doing you a favor here."

"I know you are, and I appreciate it. Well, okay, then." Thelma took one last long

drag on her cigarette, crushed it out in her ashtray, and then folded her hands in her lap.

Hank stood in front of her, nostrils flaring. "Well?"

"I'm waiting for you to pay up."

"What?"

"Hank, I don't think you understand here."

"I understand. You owe me money. I watched you place at least a dozen bets today and you lost all of them."

"Correction. You sabotaged them all."

"So? I couldn't let you win, could I?"

"So... You would say you had to sabotage them all?"

"Yeah. I'd say that."

"Then pay up."

"Why?"

"Did you forget the bet that you and I made?"

"Which bet?"

Thelma grinned. Maybe her logic was sound, maybe it wasn't. But Hank had just expressed a preference for fucked up logic and he wasn't all that smart to begin with.

"I bet that I could place at least one bet today that you wouldn't be able to sabotage."

"And I sabotaged them all."

"Except the bet that we made. You couldn't sabotage it because you had to sabotage all the other bets."

Hank's considerable eyebrows furrowed. "What?"

"Okay, I made a bunch of bets today, right?"

"Right."

"And you said you'd sabotage them all."

"Right."

"But you couldn't sabotage the bet we'd made that you'd sabotage all of the bets, because then you'd lose the bet. Get it?"

Hank hesitated. "I... I think so."

Thelma nodded. "Good. So pay up."

"What if I don't feel like it?"

"You want me to spread the word that you welsh on your bets?"

"You tricked me."

"So what? Pay up."

For a moment, Thelma thought that Hank would be able to come up with a counter argument. Or maybe he'd see a hole in her logic. Or maybe he'd just not pay up because he was a thick-headed idiot who was just too stupid to even think about falling for twisted logic. She could see the conflict behind his eyes, in the way he worked his jaw and the way he wrung his hands. But when she saw the twitch in his left eye, she knew she'd won. He only twitched like that when he knew he'd been beat. She hadn't seen it very often, just enough to know the sign.

"Right," Hank said at last. He took his bill clip out of his pocket and pulled out two crisp hundred-dollar bills. "Here," he said, handing them over.

Thelma grabbed the two bills. She had to tug them hard to get them out of his hand. But he eventually relinquished them, and Thelma put them into her purse.

"Pleasure doing business with you," she told him.

Hank said nothing. He simply turned and left the apartment. He closed the door behind him, which Thelma thought was particularly thoughtful.

She sighed, leaned back in the chair and lit another cigarette. She could probably have gotten more money out of him, she thought, but she'd been pushing it as it was. Any more money and he would have started thinking too carefully about what she was saying. And she couldn't have allowed that.

Well, tomorrow it was back to the usual. Pushing dogs. Making bets. Arguing with customers. Maybe shooting the shit with Maureen.

Maybe tomorrow, though, she could make a change. Figure out a way to get off the circuit, get a steady job, maybe settle down a bit.

Maybe.

But she wouldn't place odds on it.

THE END