

Curbstomped at Hollywood and Vine

C.J. Booth

“Every time he’d do the trick, he’d lose the chicken.”

Harry Bell grabbed a linen napkin from the silver tray his lunch had been served on and stood at the end of the long conference table to demonstrate.

“No look. I’ll show you,” he said.

His eyes glowed, and his smile was so forced his cheeks were quivering, anxious to show Gregory Snider, the producer, that he wasn’t nervous.

“He’d put his cape over the chicken like this.”

Harry took an uneaten roll off his plate, raised it up to show this was to be the chicken. Then he draped his napkin over it. He raised his head quickly, and his eyes flicked to the closed door at other end of the conference room, then he whipped the napkin away. The roll was gone.

Snider said not a word. His expression didn’t change. Only his lips moved a bit as he puffed on his little cigar. It was a girly cigar. Two other writers, when they heard that Harry was to take a meeting with Gregory Snider of GS Films, had warned Harry not to mention the cigar. Try not to even look at it. It was said Snider was sensitive about his little cigars.

Harry shrugged. “Well, he’d say a few magic words or get some schlump from the audience to say them, then just like that, he’d whip his cape away and Bam, the chicken was gone.”

Snider took the cigar away from his lips. “You saying he’s a cockamamie stupid magician and he lost his chicken, the one he made disappear and then he couldn’t find? Is that what you’re telling me? Why’re you telling me this? What’s this got to do with my movie?”

Harry Bell, screenwriter, so new to Hollywood his sandals were still not broken in, attempted to widen his smile. ‘My movie you schmuck,’ he thought. ‘We haven’t signed anything yet.’

Instead he carefully set the napkin down and sat down. “Just a story Mr. Snider. Something funny ‘til they come back.” He glanced at the closed door again. “I wonder what they’re doing.”

The two lawyers, Harry’s Avery Peterson and Snider’s lawyer, Brochman or something like that, had excused themselves after lunch and gone into a backroom.

Snider had replaced the cigar but spoke around it. “Doing their job. Futzing. You know. Details.” The way he said it put the emphasis on the ‘De’.

He took out the cigar and examined the end again. "I guess your guy had to be brought up to speed on some of the verbals we use out here. He's not from around here. Is he?"

Harry started tapping his pencil, then stopped. Since he hadn't really had an attorney, let alone an agent, he had debated hiring an entertainment lawyer here in L.A., one he didn't know, or use an attorney from home. One he vaguely knew and felt he could trust. He'd gone with trust. Now, he was not so sure. The two lawyers had been 'conferring' behind closed doors for nearly a half hour.

"You know," said Harry, "we could be discussing these details out here, amongst all of us."

Snider just stared at him. He was not even close to Harry's idea of a Hollywood producer. He resembled a plumber that once came to Harry's house to ream out a backed up toilet. The guy'd overcharged Harry, but what the hell you gonna do with a bitchin' wife, two kids and one bathroom.

"Might save some time," added Harry. "I mean if we all discussed whatever it is they're discussing." It sounded lame even to him.

Snider grunted. "Got nothing but time. 'Sides. I think my guy didn't want to show your guy's embarrassment in front of you. I don't think your guy knows the verbalizing we use. Probably what they're doing."

He checked his watch.

Harry looked down at the front of his legal pad. He'd written the three items of importance in this deal. Again. And underlined them. Twice. These were the same three things he'd gone over with Avery in the cab from LAX. The same things that he and Snider had discussed over the phone.

One. The deal was 50 against 250; \$50,000 for the option, \$250,000 if Harry's screenplay got picked up in a year. Harry had been unsure about the figures. This was his first screenplay. He'd looked up what other scripters had been able to wrangle, especially with a first sale. The numbers were all over the place and signified that it wasn't always about the numbers. There were other details that were just as important but never saw the public light of day. Still, he thought 50/250 was fair, given the other two items.

Two. Harry's second item required GS Films to buy an option on screenplay number two. Same upfront and same amount if it was picked up. Harry hadn't consulted Avery about this one. In fact, Avery appeared a might confused and uncertain when Harry showed him number two. That gave Harry pause, but he figured Avery just hadn't considered adding this. Harry thought this might be a risk if the first screenplay was actually picked up and put into production, but on the other hand it assured him of two optioned screenplays. Birds in the hand and all that shit.

Three. Harry Bell was to be listed as an Associate Producer. Harry had no idea what an Associate Producer might have to do besides drinking champagne at the opening of the film, but he'd seen other authors garner the same credit

so he figured, what the hell. It was a throwaway demand. Not a deal breaker. Harry just thought it would be fun.

“Nervous kid?” asked Snider, still managing to speak around his cigar.

“What? No! Just doodling.” Harry did a few more underlines.

“Let me see what you got there. Is it good?” asked Snider, his eyes like laser slits.

“Huh? No, it’s okay. It’s just a . . . you know.” Harry ripped the sheet off the pad and balled it up. He tossed it into the waste basket. Snider followed the path of the paper ball. Harry watched him and wondered if Snider would get up and retrieve it. But he remained sitting and puffing.

“Should I be?” asked Harry, smiling again.

“What?”

“Nervous. Should I be nervous?” He gave a little laugh. It came out high and forced.

To Harry’s surprise, Snider took the cigar out of his mouth and affected a look of concern. He seemed to think about what he was to say before he spoke.

“Don’t know kid. Your guy’s been in there a while with my guys.” He shrugged as if to say, sorry for the ineptness of your lawyer. Sorry.

“Guys?” asked Harry. “You have ‘guys’ in there? I thought it was just your ‘guy’. Singular.”

“Was. But, they’ve probably moved on to foreign rights and ancillary sales, you know, DVDs and that kinda shit.” Snider shrugged as if he was an innocent newbie in the whole process. “Once they go into other stuff they bring in the guys that specialize in that stuff, you know.” Again, he shrugged and replaced his cigar.

Before Harry could say anything else, Snider leaned forward and in a subdued tone said, “I envy you.” Then he sat back.

“You what? Envy me?”

Snider nodded sagely.

“Why?”

Snider spread his hands out in supplication. “You got a guy, one guy, who can handle all that shit, rights and crap, ancillary sales, you know. I gotta pay a whole stable full of expensive guys to protect my rights in these things, then, I gotta pay more guys to explain it to me so I know I’m not getting ripped off, you know.”

He sat back, pointed his cigar at Harry. “You’re smart. With one guy.”

Snider actually winked at him.

Harry felt the blood drain from his face. He felt his throat close up and breathing became difficult for a moment. But, maybe it wasn’t so bad. Maybe what they were going over was just standard lawyer crap that most any lawyer would understand. Maybe Snider was just a dummy about the minutiae of

deals. Maybe he needed everything explained to him like a little kid. That was it. Maybe he, Harry, was smart by having only one guy. Maybe it was a good idea to pay the \$442 for Avery's flight out from Iowa, even though it put another load on the VISA balance. Maybe so. But, it didn't feel that way. Suddenly, even though he knew he was in downtown L.A., in California, a state of the United States, somehow he felt as if he had been transported into a strange and unfamiliar land.

Nothing here was the same. When he'd been sitting in front of his computer at home in Iowa, pounding out the first book and then the screenplay, he'd imagined L.A. as just a faster paced version of Des Moines or Minneapolis. But now, here, sitting here, he wasn't feeling that way at all. He'd assumed that fair was fair. Iowa fairness extended to California. We all want to be fair, don't we?

Suddenly, there was another thought that gripped him. There was a scene in *Saving Private Ryan* so personally painful to him, he'd not been able to watch the film a second time. In the scene, a G.I. creeps up the stairs in a bombed out building, or a German soldier creeps up the stairs, he can't remember. Anyway, they run into each other and fight, hand to hand. The German gains the upper hand. It is certain the German is ready to thrust a knife into the G.I., when the G.I. says, 'Okay, okay, enough, that's enough, okay.' As if they're just friends having a tussle in the backyard. The dialogue may be all wrong, but the feeling that struck Harry was that one of the two didn't understand that this was for keeps. This was life or death. The German knew it. He'd kept his face passive as he did what he had to do and pushed the knife into the G.I.'s stomach. Face passive. Knife thrust into stomach.

The German understood. The G.I. did not.

Harry looked at Snider. His face was passive.

Snider understood.

Harry had a terrible feeling that he, Harry, did not.

Again his throat constricted, and he reached for the water that was left over from the lunch. The glass still had bits of something floating in it, but Harry didn't care. He gulped it down. He tried to do it with some nonchalance, but he realized he couldn't be nonchalant and his hand actually trembled a bit as he set the glass back down. And Snider was watching him and surely noticed the trembling.

Harry looked away, studied the frosted glass wall that screened the conference room of Bekins, Brochman and Schmidt, a firm specializing in the Laws of Entertainment. He could see the BBS initials etched into the glass. They glowed because there was a light at the bottom of the glass that shone upward and illuminated the etching. Secretaries and various legal grunts scurried past the glass.

He knew it then. Could feel it. He was in deep shit. Unless Avery was a legal genius who knew more than Harry was now giving him credit for, Harry

would drown. He studied the doors and tried to remember the way to the front door. If he left now, maybe he could start over with better representation. With stinging sweat running from his armpits and coursing down his body, he started to get up.

Without warning, the far door opened. Harry sat down quickly. If he had been looking at Snider instead of the door, he would've seen Snider staring at him and silently laughing around his thin cigar.

For a few seconds, no one emerged from the far room, then out paraded three of Snider's guys. They were all casually dressed, tan slacks, polo shirts, one had sandals on. Granted, Harry could tell, they were all very expensive slacks, shirts and sandals and they looked it compared to Avery's cheaper pinstripe suit, which may as well have had 'New to L.A.' emblazoned on the front of his suit coat with a 'Kick Me' sign on the back.

Harry shook off the feeling. He was just being paranoid. Still, he searched Avery's face as he emerged from the back room for signs that they were not on the Titanic after all. That they were on somewhat of an equal footing with the gang of three.

Shit, he hated lawyers. This was not a new feeling. He never went in for lawyer bashing and lawyer jokes, though he enjoyed them. But the problem with lawyers was you only got involved with them when you were either contemplating all the bad shit that could happen to you and you were fashioning a will or something, or the bad shit had already happened to you and they were going to be the only ones to extricate you from the mess you made of your life.

Either way, it was future bad or current bad. Why couldn't he just write some good stories everyone wanted to read and buy and have everybody be fair about it. He, Harry, wasn't out to screw anybody. He was just looking for fair. Was that too much to ask?

Evidently.

Avery went to Harry's side of the table and set down the papers and then announced, "I have to go to the bathroom."

Oh Christ, Harry thought. He saw there was a small line of sweat on Avery's upper lip, and his Adam's apple worked up and down as if trying to generate some much needed spit. A few shocks of Avery's hair were bowing down in uncomprehending defeat.

Harry tried to catch Avery's eye, but instead Avery looked up at the three other attorneys.

"Where are your facilities?"

Harry wanted to cry. Facilities? Who calls them facilities? He was almost surprised Avery didn't raise his hand and ask to go weewee.

But the shortest of the three was embarrassingly courteous and volunteered to show him. It was spoken as a victor to the vanquished, with all pretense aside, because it was obvious who had won.

Oh, hell, Harry thought. My attorney is running to the bathroom to evacuate his bowels and he left me here with this. Harry looked down. His sweating fingers had left marks on the facing page of the document, which seemed to approach an inch in depth. What the hell?

Entering the conference room while Avery and the short guy were going out, were two secretaries who, now that the men were out of the backroom and needed the space, began clearing the lunch trays.

As they were leaving, one of the attorneys mouthed a ‘Thank you’ to each of them. He smiled too. Very white California teeth offset with just the right amount of tan. With a practiced move, he slid a copy of the document in front of Snider. And he nodded at Snider. It was a dance they all had done before.

Oh hell, he nodded. Harry pretended not to see but began turning the pages of the document in front of him absently.

“Give me a pen, somebody,” Snider said. He held the cigar in one hand while he flipped to the last page. A pen was proffered, Snider took it and with a loud scrawl signed his name, then wrote his name, then entered his title. He put the pen down, closed the document without reading any of it, replaced his cigar and smiled at Harry.

It was a tag-you’re-it smile. Harry’s turn to put his balls on the line and sign. Snider picked up the pen and rolled it across the table. It ended up where it needed to be, right next to Harry’s hand. Snider wanted to see that Harry had the same confidence in his attorney as Snider had in his three.

But Snider’s guys had nodded to him. Harry’s guy had run to the bathroom.

Harry pretended to study the document, randomly turning a page, then flipping back as if he didn’t understand something. In reality, he saw nothing and read not a word. He was stalling, willing Avery to return.

Harry heard Snider shift in his chair and smack a few times on his tiny cigar. The two remaining attorneys stood silently behind Snider. They appeared to be friendly poster boys for California laid-back. If they had a pressing tee time, they didn’t show it.

The frosted glass doors parted and Avery swept in followed by his escort.

Harry smiled at Avery trying to show that this was a better deal than they had hoped for. But it was a smile that used only two of the thirty four muscles required for a decent smile.

Avery looked somewhat refreshed and immediately smiled at the trio behind Snider. “Just need to confer with my client for a minute.”

Each of the three gave Avery a nod, a wink and a wave of ‘sure-no-problem’.

Harry stood and Avery guided him to a far windowsill, set the document on the sill and turned to a random section. They kept their backs to the rest of the room.

“Avery,” hissed Harry, “what the hell is going on? We’re good aren’t we?”

Avery pointed to some paragraph on a page about halfway through the document.

“What?” asked Harry trying to read what Avery was pointing at.

“Nothing,” said Avery, his voice calm. Too calm.

“What are you pointing at?” asked Harry.

“Nothing! Just listen. Things have changed a bit.”

“Avery, look. I can give up the Associate Producer thing. It’s okay.”

Avery looked at Harry with a confused look. Harry knew right then they had lost that item a long time ago. They would now be discussing the tattered remains of what Harry had believed to be so secure an hour ago when he first bit into his vegetarian lunch with a side of risotto, complemented with a light, California Chablis.

“Avery,” Harry said, working to keep his lunch down, “tell me we still have a deal. Tell me those guys didn’t screw up everything that Snider and I had discussed. Goddamn lawyers.” Ignoring the fact that Avery was of *that* species, or maybe acknowledging that Avery was actually of a different, better race in the same species.

Avery put his hand on Harry’s arm. That scared Harry more than anything else. What was he doing? Bracing me for the bad news?

“There is a deal, Harry. It’s just a different deal. A much different deal than you and Mr. Snider discussed, evidently. It seems he instructed his attorneys to change it after he found out this was your first book and your first screenplay.”

“He knew that already,” Harry said, trying not to whine. “He knew it!”

“Whatever. That’s the excuse he’s giving for changing it up.”

“What about my three points? The three things we talked about on the plane. You know. What I wanted?”

Avery looked at Harry. His face softened a bit. “Gone.”

“Gone?”

“All three. None exist anymore,” Avery said. He sounded empathetic.

“Gone?” Harry repeated, trying to understand why the hell they were all still in this frosted glass room. What the hell were they still doing here if it was all gone.

“Harry, you remember the fourth point you told me you wanted?” Avery asked, staring intently at Harry. “You remember?”

“What?” Harry reached out to steady himself on the sill.

“The thing you wanted above all else?”

“I—”

“You said above all else you wanted to come away with a deal. That’s what you said was most important. Well, we have a deal. Not as good as you had

hoped for. Not as good as you and Snider had discussed, but it's a deal, Harry. A deal."

Harry stretched his neck out and looked to the ceiling, then back at Avery. Maybe all isn't lost.

"Okay, what is it?"

Avery turned to a page he had flagged with a little yellow plastic sticky. He pointed to a paragraph.

"He'll pay you outright for the script. \$8,500."

Harry looked up at Avery. "And?"

Avery looked uncomfortable. "And, nothing really. No advance option against the thing getting made, no ancillary sales, no option on any future work. Just an outright sale for all the rights. Well, and—"

Harry smiled. He knew it! There was an 'And'.

Avery continued, "And I did get them to throw in our airfare back to Iowa. Another \$1,340. They want to fly us back in first class."

Avery closed the papers. A pen appeared in his hand. "Deal's void if you walk out of here. Sign it or don't, Harry. It's the best we're going to get."

Harry held on to the sill and stared out the window. Suddenly he felt dirty. Suddenly he wanted to throw up the lunch that he had been served with all of them knowing the original deal was kaput. Played. That's what he was. Just goddamn played. He was done when he discussed the terms over the phone with Snider. When you assume, you make an ass...

He looked at Avery and wondered if the man had done the best he could or did he revert to the lawyerly penchant for compromise and let Harry come away with jackshit.

Avery seemed to sense what Harry was thinking. "Harry, it's a buyer's market out here." He said it as if they were at a flea market in Morocco or somewhere haggling over a piece of jewelry.

But this is what I sweated two years for, Harry wanted to say. Two years! Not a piece of jewelry.

"Sign it Harry. And let's go home," Avery said with kindness.

Harry kept his back to the room and willed tears not to flow. Two goddamn years. He took the pen and waited for Avery to turn to the last page. Harry signed his name, wrote his name and above the 'Title' line almost wrote 'Screwed Author', but instead, left it blank.

The good byes were a blur for Harry. He remembered Avery saying he was going down to get a cab and Harry could follow. Not any of the three BBS attorneys offered to get him a cab. All four silently walked to the elevator. All shook hands, smiled and waved.

Harry felt bitter as he watched the cache of lawyers enjoying each other's company. Once again the distaste he had for the whole profession rose in his

throat. He wondered if there was a way to negotiate the rest of his life without having to go through attorney torture again. He doubted it. And that just made him sad and tired.

Snider was by Harry's side and speaking, but Harry wasn't noticing or listening until Snider said something that caught his attention.

"I know where the chicken went."

Harry, bruised and violated but with a newborn cynicism, replied. "Yeah, where?"

"You know, I saw you scoop the roll with the napkin. You folded the napkin so it had a pocket. You took the napkin away and you took the roll with it. I wasn't sure until you set the napkin down. You did it very carefully, as if it had something in it."

Snider said no more.

The elevator dinged and they both got on.

"Yeah? What about the chicken?" Harry found himself holding onto the elevator's wall for support.

Snider laughed and pressed the button for the main floor. He said nothing else on the ride down.

Finally as the doors opened Harry could take it any longer. Totally defeated, believing it could get no worse, he asked Snider, now his enemy in so many ways, "What about the chicken? Where'd the chicken go? You say you know where the chicken went. So, where'd it go?"

They both exited the elevator, looking to everyone who wanted to take the time to look as two businessmen who have just completed a fair business deal. An Iowa business deal. A fair deal to both sides. Must be fair, both sides had lawyers. Both had representation.

The fat producer turned to Harry and stood before him. He took his fresh cigar out of his mouth and used his fingers holding the cigar to poke Harry in the chest.

The German thrust the knife into the G.I.'s stomach.

"You. Just. Don't. Get. It. Do you?" sneered Snider.

Harry, pushed backwards from the fingers in his chest, frantically tried to get it. Frantically tried. But couldn't.

Snider saw the loss in Harry's eyes.

He kept his fingers in Harry's chest as he gave him the answer. "The chicken is gone," he said with quiet intensity. "Chicken's gone."

There was a slight glimmer of empathy in Snider's eyes. Maybe, Harry believed, Snider was remembering his own first, innocent days in L.A. Maybe. Or maybe Harry was just hoping that's what he saw. Hoping that there was a semblance of humanity here. Hoping that there was some hope for human connection in the future.

But if it had been there in Snider's look, it vanished quickly.

The man replaced the cigar and walked out of the building.

Harry followed slowly and made it to one of the matching concrete planters that flanked either side of the building before he vomited into one of them.

Not one of the passersby gave him a second glance. Their first glance said it all—just another screenwriter vomiting his future away into the gladiolas.

Welcome to L.A. Thanks for coming out.

C. J. Booth worked in broadcasting, film and video production before moving to fiction. His novel *Olive Park* recently won Best Mystery 2012 at the Global E-Book Awards. He is currently working on his second novel, *Crimson Park*, as well as the *Olive Park* screenplay.