

The Magazine of Terrifying Tales

35c

SHOCK

SEPT.

An Unforgettable
Chiller —

FINAL PERFORMANCE

by Robert Bloch

PLUS:

Roald Dahl.

Ray Bradbury

Maurice Level

Charles Beaumont



SHOCK

Magazine

VOL. 1, NO. 3

SEPTEMBER, 1960

FINAL PERFORMANCE <i>by Robert Bloch</i>	6
THE WITCH <i>by Ralph E. Hayes</i>	18
OPEN HOUSE <i>by Charles Beaumont</i>	25
THE MAN WHO KNEW EVERYTHING <i>by Edward D. Hoch</i>	35
THE SKELETON <i>by Ray Bradbury</i>	41
COLD CASE <i>by Ed Ritter</i>	57
SKIN <i>by Roald Dahl</i>	62
CHANCEYVILLE <i>by John Anthony West</i>	78
JOHNSON LOOKED BACK <i>by Thomas Burke</i>	85
BEAUTIFUL DREAMER <i>by R. A. Lafferty</i>	90
A BOTTOMLESS GRAVE <i>by Ambrose Bierce</i>	97
MOON-FACE <i>by Jack London</i>	104
THE KENNEL <i>by Maurice Level</i>	110
PRISON BALL <i>by John Rublowsky</i>	116
CAT KILLERS <i>by Donald E. Westlake</i>	124

SHOCK MAGAZINE, Vol. 1, No. 3, published bi-monthly by WINSTON PUBLICATIONS INC., 157 West 57th St., N. Y. 19, N. Y. Subscriptions, 1 year (6 issues) \$2.00. Single copy 35c. Application for second class entry pending at the post office at New York, N. Y. and Holyoke, Mass. Characters in this magazine are entirely fictitious. Copyright 1960 by Winston Publications, Inc. Printed in U. S. A. The publisher assumes no responsibility for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts. Skin, copyright 1952 by Roald Dahl; this story originally appeared in the New Yorker Magazine. The Kennel, copyright by Robert M. McBride Co. Open House, copyright 1957 by Charles Beaumont; reprinted by permission of Harold Matson Company.





There's nothing I admire more than a man who is a master of his craft. I knew an undertaker once—lovely fellow—who was without a peer in dressing up a corpse to look handsomer than in life. He once offered to give me a free haircut, and I'd have accepted—except for one thing. I was afraid he didn't know how to cut hair in the back. Heh-heh. But that undertaker was nowhere near as good as Rudolph Bitzner, the character in this grisly masterpiece by one of our favorite macabre authors.

FINAL PERFORMANCE

by ROBERT BLOCH

THE NEON INTESTINES HAD BEEN twisted to form the word *Eat*.

I squinted up at it, the sand stinging my eyes, and shifted my overnight bag to the left hand. As I opened the sagging screen-door a trickle of perspiration ran down my arm.

Two flies accompanied me into

the restaurant. One of them headed for a pile of crullers on the counter and the other alighted on the bald head of an elderly fat man who leaned behind it. The man looked up and the fly buzzed away.

"Evening," he said. "What'll it be?"

"Are you Rudolph?" I asked.

He nodded.

I slid onto a stool. "Fellow named Davis sent me."

"From the garage?"

"That's right—the place up the highway. My car conked out on me coming through the mountains. He had to phone Bakersfield for a new connecting-rod. They're bringing it out first thing tomorrow morning and he figures he can get it installed before evening. But tonight I'm looking for a place to stay. He told me to try here—said you used to run a motel."

"Not any more. Isn't enough traffic along this route."

"I noticed a couple of cabins out in back."

"Closed up." The fat man reached under the counter and came up with a half-empty bottle of beer. He took a long gulp; when he set the bottle down again it was empty. "Look, you could hitch a ride into Bakersfield and come back tomorrow."

"I thought of that, but I hate to leave all my belongings. Everything I own is in that car—guess it broke down because it was overloaded. You see, I'm moving to Hollywood, and I packed all my books and—"

"Hollywood?" The fat man blinked. "You in show biz?"

"I'm a writer."

"Television?"

"Short stories and books."

He blinked again. "That's better. TV is lousy. I can't understand what they think they're doing out there. Now you take a guy like that Ed Sullivan—" He broke off abruptly and stared at me. "Book writer, you say. Ever run into Arnie Pringle?"

"No, I can't say that I have."

"Before your time, I guess. Probably dead by now. He used to write my act."

"You were in show business?"

"Are you kidding? Rudolph the Great. Twenty years top billing, Pantages, Albee, Keith-Orpheum time. Why, I've got three press-books full of—"

I rose from the stool.

"Here, where you going?"

I shrugged. "Sorry, but if I'm hitching a ride into Bakersfield, I'd better get out there on the highway before dark."

"Never mind that. Guess we can fix up a cabin for you. Put some clean sheets on the bed." He swayed along behind the counter and it suddenly occurred to me that he was just a little bit drunk.

"Look, I wouldn't want to put you to any trouble," I told him.

"No trouble. My pleasure." He jerked his head towards the swinging door behind him. "Rosie!" he yelled.

Rosie came into the room.

She was a tall girl, blonde and amply proportioned, her hair done up in a ponytail. She wore a blue, sleeveless smock and her legs

were bare.

"Rosie, this is Mr.—"

"Chatham. Jim Chatham." I nodded at her and she wrinkled up her nose at me. It took a moment before I realized she was smiling.

"Had a little trouble with his car," Rudolph said. "Davis is fixing it up at the crossroads. He needs a place to stay overnight. You think you can find some clean bedclothes for Number One?"

She nodded at him, still looking at me.

"Better take him out with you, let him have a look."

"All right." Her voice was soft, deeper than I'd expected.

"Keys in my desk, right-hand drawer."

"I know. I'll get them."

She turned and left the room. Rudolph reached under the counter into the cooler and brought out another bottle of beer; a full one, this time. "Care for a brew?" he asked.

"Later, perhaps. Let me get settled and then I'll come back for dinner."

"Suit yourself." He bent to open the bottle, then raised it to his lips.

Rosie came back into the room; she carried a bundle of sheets wrapped around a pillow. "All set?" she asked.

I picked up my bag and fol-

lowed her outside. The sun was setting and the desert wind was cool. Joshuas cast their shadows along the path leading to the cabins in the rear, striping the sand and the backs of her bare calves as she walked along before me.

"Here we are." She halted and opened the door of the tiny cabin. The interior of the little shack was dark and stifling hot. She switched on the light. "It'll cool off in a minute with the door open," she said. "I'll make up the bed for you."

I put down the suitcase and slumped into the single chair next to the grey-filmed window. She went to work, bending over the bed. She had fine breasts. As she moved around to tuck in the sheet, her leg brushed mine.

All at once, for no reason at all, my mind was filled with corny dialogue. *What's a nice girl like you doing in such a godforsaken hole? Let me take you away from all this—*

Suddenly I noticed she had stopped working. She stood there with the pillow in her arms, staring at me.

"I heard you talking to him," she said. "About being a writer. What are you going to do out in Hollywood, work for the movies?"

"I doubt it. Probably just keep turning out stories the same as usual. But the climate's better."

"Yes, the climate." She nodded and wrinkled her nose at me.

"Take me with you."

"What?"

"I said, take me with you."

"But Mrs. Rudolph—"

"His *first* name is Rudolph. Rudolph Bitzner."

"Mrs. Bitzner, then—"

"I'm not Mrs. Bitzner, either."

"Oh, I just thought—"

"I know what you thought. Never mind that. Just take me with you. All I'd do is ride along. There wouldn't be any trouble." She let the pillow fall on the bed and moved closer. "I wouldn't be any bother at all. I promise."

I stood up, but I didn't reach for her. I didn't have to reach for her, because she came right into my arms, and she said, "Please, please, say you'll take me, you've got to, you don't know what it's like all alone out here, you don't know what he's like, he's crazy—"

She had this trick of talking without opening her mouth, keeping her lips puckered up waiting to be kissed, and she wrinkled her nose and I could see the tiny freckles on the bridge, and her skin was marble-cool in all this heat. And it's one thing to sit back and make sophisticated remarks about cheap waitresses named Rosie (*Rosie, for God's sake!*) and another thing entirely to feel a waiting, willing woman stirring hard against you and whispering, "Please . . . p r o m i s e me you will . . . I'll do anything . . ."

So I opened my mouth to answer, then let it remain open in bewilderment as she stepped back quickly and picked up the pillow again. Then I heard him scuffling along the path and understood.

"Rosie!" he yelled. "You almost finished? Customers!"

"Be right in," she called.

I stepped over to the doorway and waved at Rudolph.

"Everything all right?" he asked.

"Everything's fine."

"Come and eat, then. You can wash up inside."

I glanced back at Rosie. She was bending over the bed and she didn't look at me. But she whispered, "I'll see you later. Wait for me."

That's what kept me going through the long evening.

I followed Rudolph, and I cleaned myself up a bit in the filthy washroom, and I shared a steak and french fries with the two flies and their cousins. The customers were in and out for the next couple of hours, and there was no chance to talk to Rudolph or even catch a glimpse of Rosie out in back. Then, finally, it was nine o'clock and the place was empty again. Rudolph yawned and walked over to the door, switching off the *Eat* sign.

"This concludes the evening's performance," he said. "Thanks

for the use of the hall." He went over to the swinging door. "You fixing yourself something?" he yelled.

"Yes, just a hamburger. How about you?" Rosie asked.

"Never mind. I'll have myself another beer." He looked at me. "You ready for one now?"

I shook my head and stood up. "No, thanks. It's about time I turned in."

"What's your hurry? Stick around, we'll go in back and chew the fat a while. To hell with the beer—I've got some hard stuff there."

"Well, I—"

"Come on. Got some things that might interest you. Man doesn't get much chance to talk to anybody halfway intelligent around here."

"All right."

He ran his wrist across the gray stubble around his mouth. "Tell you what, I'll check the register first. You go right on back, through that door at the end. I'll be along."

So I went back, into the little room on the side of the restaurant which served as a parlor. I saw the overstuffed couch and the easy chair and the desk, the lamp, the TV set, but I didn't do any more than glance at them.

Because I was staring at the walls—the walls of another world.

It was the world of the Twenties and the early Thirties; a world that belonged to the half-forgotten faces which peered out at me from a thousand photographs reaching from floor to ceiling. Some of the pictures had peeled and faded, just as my memories had peeled and faded in the long years since early childhood. But I could still remember the familiar countenances and I had at least heard of most of the names scrawled in autograph-fashion beneath the unfamiliar ones. I moved around the room, moved around the mementos of what had once been a world called Vaudeville

Here was a skinny, gangling kid called Milton Berle, and a buxom young woman named Sophie Tucker. Here was a youthful Bert Wheeler holding an apple and a smiling Joe Cook holding an Indian club and explaining why he would not imitate the Four Hawaiians. There was an entire section of faces in burnt cork—Cantor, Jolson, Lou Holtz in the pre-Sam Lapidus days, Frank Tinney (way before my time) and one mournfully humorous countenance which needed no spurious blackface; the signature read, "*To Rudolph from Bert Williams.*"

And there were the teams and the acts—Moran and Mack, Gallagher and Shean, Cross and Dunn, Phil Baker and Ben Bernie,

Smith and Dale (Dr. Kronkheit, I presume?) and a surprisingly handsome young couple who signed themselves "*George and Gracie*." And there was an incredible Jimmy Durante—with hair—and Clayton and Jackson.

"See? It's like I told you, I knew 'em all." Rudolph had come up behind me, carrying a bottle and glasses. "Here, let me fix you a snort and I'll show you my press-books."

He made me a drink, but he didn't get around to the press-books. Instead he sprawled out on the sofa, uncorked the bottle again, and uncorked himself.

I don't know how long he rambled on about the old days and the old ways; about the Six Brown Brothers and Herman Timberg and Walter C. Kelly and Chic Sale. At another time, under other circumstances, I might have hung on to his every word. But right now I was hanging on to other words. "*I'll see you later. Wait for me.*"

So I really didn't listen to him; to Rudolph the Great who used to do Orpheum Time until vaudeville died and then wandered out here into the desert to do a twenty-year layoff as Rudolph Bitzner. *T w e n t y* years—why, Rosie couldn't be much over twenty herself! And here was this fat old man wheezing away on the couch, drinking out of the bottle now and slobbering. He was getting

ready to pass out; he had to pass out soon, he *had* to—

"Have 'nother drink?" He sat up, blinking at the bottle. "Oh, 's empty, well whaddya know?"

"That's all right," I told him. "I've had enough."

"Well, I haven'. Got more 'round here someplace. Rosie!" He yelled her name, then lowered his voice as he turned to me. "She's out front, told her to clean up the joint. Won't come near me when I'm drinking, anyhow, you know?" He chuckled. "Don't matter—I locked the door before I came back. Got the key ri' here, so she can't get away. Never get away, not from me."

He swayed to his feet. "Know what you're thinkin'—just an old lush, tha's all, just an old lush. But wait 'til I show you the press-books. Then you'll see who I was. Who I *am*." He stumbled back against the sofa. "Rudolph the Great. Tha's me. Keep in practice. Jus' as good as I ever was. Better. Why I could go on Sullivan's show nex' week—"

Then the color drained from his face and he fell back on the couch. I never did get to see those press-books. By the time I put his feet up on the sofa he'd started to snore.

I took the keys from his pocket and went back into the restaurant. She was waiting for me in the dark. And we went out through the dark to my cabin, and she

clung to me in the dark and that's the one thing I want to remember, *have* to remember now.

Afterwards she told me about herself. She'd been ten when she'd come to Rudolph—her parents stopped by on their way to Texas and dropped her off while they filled a Fair date. They were a couple of ex-vaudevillians themselves; the Flying Keenos. They knew Rudolph from the old days and they accepted his suggestion to leave her in his care while they traveled on, because they were down on their luck.

"Only they never came back," she said. "They never came back. And he tried to find them, he wrote to *Billboard* and everything, but they just disappeared. So I stayed on. Rudolph—he wasn't so bad then, you know. I mean, he didn't drink so much or anything. He sent me to school on the bus, bought me clothes and things. Treated me just like he was my father—until I was sixteen."

She started to cry, very softly. "He isn't even in love with me, not really. It's because of living out here all alone on this crazy desert, and knowing he's getting old. Before it started he used to talk about making a comeback on TV. He said it was just like vaudeville, he'd always known there'd be a revival. Then, that summer when I was sixteen, he

decided the time was right and he took me with him out to L.A. He went around and saw some agents, had a few auditions. I never did find out what really happened. But when we came back here in the fall, he started to drink right away, and that's when—"

That's when she tried to sneak off, and he caught her, and he closed up the motel so she couldn't see anyone or attempt to hitch a ride. He kept her inside the restaurant, didn't even allow her to go up to the crossroads for supplies, wouldn't let anyone come near her.

There were times when she thought of running away in the night, but something always stopped her. She realized she owed him something for all the years he'd taken care of her, and he needed her now. He was just an old man, not quite right in the head, and he seldom bothered her any more. Most nights he just drank and passed out. She'd resigned herself to putting up with it until this evening. Then, when she saw me—

"I know. You figured you *could* get a ride, and maybe I'd even take care of you out on the Coast for a week or so, long enough for you to find a job. That's it, isn't it?"

"No!" She dug her nails into my arms. "Maybe I *did* think something like that, at first. But

not *now*. Believe me, not *now*."

I believed her. I believed her voice and I believed her body; even though it was incredible that I should be lying here in the desert night with this stranger whom I'd known forever.

"It's all right," I said. "We'll go away. But I'd feel better if we told him. Maybe if I talked things over with him, explained, I could make him understand."

"Oh no—you can't do that! He's crazy jealous, I didn't want to tell you, but one time he caught this truck driver talking to me outside, just talking is all, and he took after him with that big butcher-knife. He would have killed him if he caught him, I know he would! And he beat me up so that I couldn't even get out of bed for three days. No, he mustn't even suspect. Tomorrow afternoon, when the car is fixed—"

We made our simple plans. The restaurant was closed on Sundays, and it would be better if I didn't attempt to take a meal there—just went straight to the garage and saw to it that Davis got the car fixed as soon as possible. Meanwhile, Rosie would have her suitcase packed and ready. She'd encourage Rudolph to drink—not that he generally needed any encouragement from her. Maybe he'd even pass out. If not, she'd go so far as to cut the phone wire, if necessary; just so she could slip out to me with the assurance of

getting a head start.

So we talked it all over, calmly and sensibly, and she slipped out of the cabin, and I lay there and tried to sleep. It was almost dawn when I closed my eyes, and the bats were out, flying against the gaudy desert sunrise.

I slept for a long time. When I left the cabin and cut across to the highway, it was almost two o'clock. I walked the mile to the crossroads garage and found Davis working with the car up on the rack. We talked for a while, but I didn't listen to what he said, or to what I said, either. From time to time somebody drove up for gas and Davis would have to stop and give them service. The car wasn't ready until a little after five; it was already getting dark.

I paid him and drove off. The motor hummed smoothly, but I almost stripped gears as I shifted. I was nervous, that's all; just nervous. I didn't feel any guilt and I didn't feel any fear. Certainly I didn't feel any horror.

That came later.

That came when I parked in the deepening shadows on the side of the darkened restaurant and went up to the door.

This was it. If something had gone wrong—

But nothing could go wrong. I squared my shoulders and took a deep breath, then rattled the door—

knob. That was the signal; she'd be waiting to hear me.

Nothing happened. A few flies buzzed against the glass, awaiting entry. I rattled the door again, softly. It was locked.

Then the figure emerged from the back room.

I recognized Rudolph.

He moved briskly; there was no shuffle in his gait, and no stagger, either. His face was gray and puffy, but his red-rimmed eyes weren't blinking. He stooped and unlocked the door, motioning for me to come inside.

"Good afternoon," I said. There was nothing else I *could* say, not yet, not until I knew what had happened.

He nodded, moving behind me to lock the door again. I could hear the click of the key and I didn't bother to look around.

That's when the horror came.

Horror is something cold and sharp, biting against the back of your neck.

"Let's go into the other room," Rudolph said. "Rosie has something to say to you."

"What have you done to her?"

"Nothing. She just wants to talk to you. You'll see."

We went down the aisle past the counter, the flies buzzing in our wake. Then we were in the back room and they were all waiting for me there—George and

Gracie, Frank Tinney, Lou Holtz. They were all staring, as I stared, at the open suitcase on the floor. It's contents had been scattered in a torn heap; for a moment, in the dim light, I thought it was Rosie lying there.

But no, Rosie was sitting on the sofa and she was looking at the suitcase too. She didn't say a word when I came in because there was nothing to say, now.

I could feel Rudolph's breath on my neck, right behind me. And I could feel the coldness too, the sharpness, the horror. All at once it went away. I heard the knife clatter to the floor.

"You can thank her for that," Rudolph murmured. "I could have killed you, you know. I wanted to kill you. But she talked me out of it. And now she has something to say to you. Go ahead, Rosie, tell him."

He left me standing there in the doorway and walked over to where Rosie was sitting. He slid down on the sofa beside her and put his arm around her, smiling. Rosie looked up, then, but she didn't smile.

The shadows crept across the walls, across the faces of Williams and Bernie and Jolson; across his face and hers. But I wasn't watching the shadows, I was listening to the girl.

"You see how it happened," she murmured. "He walked in while I was packing. He found out."

"All right," I said. "So he found out. I wanted to tell him in the first place. And now that he knows, he can let us go."

I was already moving before I finished my last sentence; crossing the room in two strides and scooping up the big, broad-bladed butcher knife from the floor.

"Look," I said. "I've got the knife now. He can't hurt us and he'd better not try. We can walk out of here whenever we please."

She sat there, turning her head to stare at the knife. And he stared too, tightened his arm around her and stared and smiled while she said, "No. I've changed my mind. I'm not going with you."

"But I don't understand—"

"We talked it all over before you came. I can't go. He needs me so. It's right that I should stay, I belong with him. Can't you see that?"

I shook my head. There was something wrong with her words, something wrong with the way she stared and he smiled. And all at once it came to me as I looked into his fat face off in the shadows. "Maybe I can see," I said. "Rudolph the Great. You were a hypnotist, weren't you? That's the answer, isn't it? You've hypnotized her, that's what you've done—"

He started to laugh.

"You're wrong, Mister," he said. "Tell him how wrong he is, darling."

And then she was laughing, too, in a high, hysterical titter. But there was no laughter in her face, and her words, when they came, were soft and sombre.

"He's no hypnotist. I know what I'm doing, believe me. I'm telling you to get out. Just get out, do you hear me? Go away and don't come back. I don't want to go to the Coast with you. I don't want you pawing me in some dirty cabin. I know what you are. You're a—"

She began to curse me then; the filth and the foulness poured out of her mouth and she bobbed her head at me in rage, while he just sat there and smiled.

Finally she was finished. "All right," he said. "Have you heard enough?"

"I've heard enough," I said. "I'll go." And I dropped the knife again. It rolled across the floor and a thin ray of light from the dying sunset streaked the dulled and darkened blade.

I turned to go and neither of them rose. They just sat there, arms entwined, and stared at me. The shadows blotted out their faces, then pursued me all the way down the hall.

The car stood waiting for me in the twilight. I climbed in, switched on the ignition, pulled away. I must have driven two or three miles before I remembered to turn on my lights. I was in a daze. There was nothing but the

shadows, the strange shadows. Shadows in the room, on their faces, on the dulled and darkened knife. *The dulled and darkened knife—*

Then it hit me, and I speeded up. I found a phone just ahead in a filling-station outside Pono, and put in my call.

The state troopers arrived in fifteen minutes, and I told my story as we roared back to the restaurant in their patrol car.

"He must have done *something* to her,' I said. "That knife-blade was dark with dried blood."

"We'll see," the sergeant told me.

But at first we didn't see, because Rudolph must have heard us coming, and that's when he used the knife on himself. We found it sticking out of his chest there on the floor in the back room, and he was quite dead.

Rosie still sat there on the sofa, staring at us. It was the sergeant who discovered she'd been strangled.

"Must have happened a couple of hours ago," he told me. "The body's getting stiff."

"Strangled? A couple of hours? But I was just here, we were talking—"

"See for yourself."

I walked over and touched her shoulder. She was stiff and cold and there were purple marks on her neck. Suddenly she toppled forward, and that's when I saw

how the knife had been used—saw the huge, foot-long gash extending from the back of her neck down across the shoulders. The wound was incredibly deep; I couldn't understand why. Not even when the sergeant called my attention to the blood on Rudolph's right hand.

It wasn't until I saw the press-books that I really knew. Yes, we found his press-books and I finally saw them there at the last; finally found out what must have happened in his dark room, in his dark mind, when he walked in and discovered her getting ready to leave.

That's when he'd strangled her, of course, strangled her to death in a crazy rage. But he was sane enough to realize I'd be coming by to get her, and that he'd have to find a way to get rid of me.

So he used the knife, then, and cut the hole; cut it wide and deep. Wide and deep enough so that she could bow and nod and turn her head when he had his hand behind her. Of course I'd heard her talking to me, but the press-books explained all that.

He wasn't lying about his notices; they were raves.

And he wasn't lying about hypnotism, either. Rudolph the Great hadn't been a hypnotist. He was just one of the best damned ventriloquists in the business... ■ ■