

CONTENTS

FULL LENGTH NOVEL

- DESERT CHASE *by Thurber Jensen* 58

SHORT STORIES

- A LITTLE VARIETY *by Richard Hardwick* 1
- THE STRANGLER *by Richard Deming* 8
- FLOWERS FOR BARNEY *by Ovid Demaris* 24
- GIGOLO *by C. B. Gilford* 35
- RIDE A WHITE HORSE *by Lawrence Block* 48
- WAIT FOR DEATH *by Karl Kramer* 113

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FLOWERS FOR BARNEY

BY
OVID
DEMARIS



AT SEVEN o'clock that evening Barney Lester decided not to wait any longer and poured himself a martini. He sat on the tall slim stool before the leather upholstered bar and stared at the delicate crystal glass in his huge soft hand. Slowly, he raised the glass and let the cool liquid trickle down his throat. Then he reached over and refilled it. There was a movie magazine on the counter top and he found himself glaring at the pouting image of Gloria Miles on the cover.

"You bitch," he said aloud. "You're not gonna ditch me now."

The stocky one was really grinning now as Gloria struggled against him. "Crazy, man," he giggled. "This chick's loaded."

Not while you're on top and I'm down and out."

This idea had become obsessive with him in the last few months, possessing every moment of his waking hours. He knew he was losing his hold on her and that his position had now become critical. She had to be made to realize his importance to her. Things had been particularly bad during the past three weeks because Gloria was starring in a major production. It took up all of her time. But Barney knew there was a lot more to it. For one thing, Gloria had grown cold to him a long time ago. They had had separate bedrooms for years, and the only time he saw her was in the evenings when she came home and they had a drink together. The drink routine had become almost a concession on her part, a last remnant of relations, and he knew that when it stopped there would be nothing left for him in that big rambling house.

After the drink, Gloria always retired to her bedroom, where she had her supper brought in and supposedly rehearsed her lines for the next day's shooting.

Rock Taylor, her present leading man, came more and more often in the evenings to rehearse with her, and the two of them would lock themselves up in her bedroom for hours. Barney could hear them laugh at times, and the sound of their voices was like the turning of a knife in his chest. At those times,

he would drink himself into unconsciousness. The next morning they were both gone when he got up and he never really knew whether Rock had spent the night or not.

Barney picked up the magazine and carefully studied the pouting expression. It was the only authentic thing left of the former Edna Nowicki—the sixteen year old girl he had found in a San Diego cannery in 1942. She had traveled a long way and had learned plenty in fifteen years. But the expression still reminded him of the kid with the mouse colored hair and the figure of a Greek goddess. He shook his head sadly. How that expression had irritated him in the old days. It had made her look so stupid and vacuous. He thumbed through the magazine, stopping at the article about her. There were more pictures, but no matter what seductive position she assumed, the pouting expression was there staring out at him. The studio boys had capitalized on that expression, turning it into a high voltage sex message. It wasn't like the old days, when he had associated it with some banal remark or inane question. Yes, he thought, Edna Nowicki, had come a long way.

During moments like these, Barney was perceptive enough to realize his own situation. He knew he wasn't the typical movie colony husband. But what he wouldn't admit to himself was that he was an unemployed ex-pug with badly flat-

tened features and bulging muscles that had turned to mush. His weight had climbed from a hundred and ninety, when he had been in his prime, to over two hundred and forty. The hair on top of his head had completely vanished and what was left at the sides was turning a dirty grey.

In the old days, Barney had supported her with his fists. He had fought semi-finals in the heavy-weight class throughout the Southwest. It was at the peak of his career in 1943, when he was twenty-eight, that the Navy drafted him. That was just seven months after their marriage. As much as Barney had hated abandoning his boxing career, he had hated even more the thought of leaving Edna. She had cried, he remembered, but she had never written him a single line. He lost all track of her for two years, while serving in the South Pacific. Then one day he picked up a magazine and there she was on the cover, pouting at him, her mouse colored hair now platinum blond, her teeth an even white line between full scarlet lips. It was then that he first learned she had changed her name to Gloria Miles. Barney kept the magazine, looking at it every free moment he had. At first he found it exciting to be married to such a luscious doll. But after a while, doubt set in and he began to worry about the photographer. After all, Edna had posed in the nude. Hell, how could a man stand looking at

a body like that without getting ideas and trying something. He wrote to the magazine inquiring about his wife but never received an answer.

By the time he was separated from the service, Edna (or rather Gloria Miles as she was then known) was already an aspiring starlet with one of the biggest studios in Hollywood. Barney found her and moved in. That had been ten years ago, and Barney had not done a lick of work in all that time. Meanwhile, Gloria's career spiraled right to the top. She was now one of the big-ten box office attractions.

Barney glanced at his watch and scowled. It was seven-thirty and still no Gloria. Suddenly, he pitched the magazine across the room and nearly fell off his stool. What a bitch she was. He drained another martini and angrily wiped his lips with the back of his hand.

He had to think of something quick or he would be out on the street. But what? What could he possibly do that would make her want him again?

Then he heard the front door open and close and he grew tense. He wanted to turn and watch her entrance. See the famous hips undulate, the full breasts swing freely under the tight cashmere sweater. But instead he refilled his glass and stared at it, fine beads of perspiration breaking out on top of his bald head.

"Pour me one, darling," she said.

coming up behind him. "I really need it. I'm bushed."

"What kept you?" he asked, reaching over for the pitcher, trying to control the edge in his voice.

"Oh, another stupid story conference," she said, taking the drink from him and climbing up on a stool, carefully crossing her shapely legs. "My God, that jackass Nelson gave me the most hideous dialogue. Makes me sound absolutely sterile."

"Ain't that what you're supposed to be?"

"My God, don't be silly. I could never be sterile."

"Listen," Barney said, ashamed of the whine in his voice. "How about the two of us having dinner together tonight? You know, like old times."

"That would be divine," she said, her pink tongue darting out to sample the drink, the pouting expression suddenly and terrifically seductive. "But I can't, darling. Rock is coming over to rehearse."

"Again. That guy is here every night."

"But I've got to rehearse, darling. They depend on me at the studio."

"Damn it, I know. But what about me. What the hell am I? A damned houseboy?"

"Don't shout," she said, slowly sipping the drink. "You know I've got to rehearse."

"I know, but can't you give me a break once in a while?"

"Are you complaining?"

"Well, damn it, why can't you

think of me once in a while. I'm human, too, you know."

"Don't be silly," she laughed.

"Who's being silly. I'm just asking for my wife to have dinner with me. Hell, you'd think I was asking you to go to bed, or something."

"Now, you are silly."

"Yeah, I guess so," he admitted. "That would be pretty silly for your husband to take you to bed."

"I don't like the sound of that crack," she said, tossing her head back, the pouting expression freezing on her face. "If you don't like it around here, you know what you can do."

"Oh, no," he said. "It's not gonna be that easy. I'm not leaving ever. You want to get rid of me you'll have to take it to court. Maybe, I can give your loving public something to think about. You can bet your million dollar fanny on that."

"Don't be too sure of yourself. I might just do that little thing one of these days."

"You do and you'll be sorry," he whined, knowing that the argument was getting out of hand, the fear almost a sickness in the pit of his stomach.

She studied him calmly. "Why don't you go out and work. You've been free loading off me for ten years."

"Free loading, am I? How about the years you free loaded off me. How about all those allotment checks and not even a lousy post-

card to say how-do-you-do or kiss-my-you-know-what."

She slipped off the stool and stood looking at him, her eyes half veiled by the mascaraed lids. "You're a no good son-of-a-bitch," she said, turning on her heels and marching out of the room.

Barney stayed on the bar stool for a while, trying to control the anger boiling inside of him. Suddenly, he slammed his fist against the bartop, wincing with the pain. "You bitch!" he cried to the empty room. Then he jumped off the stool and ran out of the house. He knew he had to get out or he would kill her.

As soon as Barney drove the Cadillac out of the garage, he felt better. He would go to some quiet bar somewhere and think. There had to be an answer somewhere.

He drove down Sunset all the way to Hollywood. It felt good riding with all the windows open, the soft evening air brushing against his hot perspiring face. He had almost forgotten about the quarrel when he caught the swift blur of motion to his left. Then he heard the sudden shrill yell of brakes and the rending cry of ripping steel, and felt the jarring impact of collision as the big Cad skidded out of control, bouncing to a stop against the curb. The impact sent Barney sliding across the seat and he lay now with his head against the right hand door. The fear that he had felt at the moment

of contact was quickly replaced by anger when he found that he was unharmed.

He sat up and threw the door open, bounding out of the car. The Mercury stood diagonally across the boulevard and Barney noticed that water was dripping out of the radiator. "The stupid sonofabitch," he thought. "Must have gone through a stop signal."

Two teen-agers stood in front of the Mercury, examining the damage to the radiator when Barney got there.

"Who the hell was driving this heap?" Barney demanded, spinning one of the boys around with a huge hand.

"Hey, what's with you, man?" the boy asked, grinning foolishly.

"You hit my car," Barney shouted, the grin increasing his irritation.

"Cool down, man. You're gonna bust a valve," the other one said, turning around to face Barney. He also was grinning.

"What's with this square, man," the first one asked, ignoring Barney. "Man, he blows too much."

"Yeah, man. He's nowhere," the other one agreed, grinning at Barney.

"One more crack and I'm gonna lay you out," Barney threatened, lowering his voice. A crowd was gathering and Barney looked around quickly, hoping he could get a witness. "Anybody see the accident?" he called out, but no one answered. They just pushed

up closer for a better look at the damaged automobiles.

Barney turned his attention back to the two boys. They stood slightly apart, grinning at him, completely at ease, not at all frightened by the threat. One of them was tall with very long arms and narrow shoulders. The other was average height and stocky. They both wore their hair long in ducktail fashion. Barney looked at them more closely now noting the tight fitting levis, the heavy clod hopper boots, the blue T-shirts and wide leather belts. They were a type you read about in the newspaper every day. The hopped up kids with the cut-down jalopies and the strong arm approach, usually with a six-inch blade tucked securely in a willing hand.

Barney decided to change his tactics. He went around to the back of the Mercury to see what street they had come out of. "Hey," he called. "There's a stop sign on that street. Didn't you see it?"

"I don't see no sign, man," the tall one said, walking up to Barney.

"Well, there's one there," Barney said.

"That's crazy, man," the stocky one laughed.

"Let me see your driver's license?" Barney said, holding out his hand.

"Screw . . ." the tall one started to say but then he spotted the traffic cop approaching. "Play it cool, man," he warned, his voice low and threatening. "Real cool."

From then on the policeman took over and the tall kid produced his driver's license. He didn't have insurance and the policeman explained about the financial responsibility law, telling him that unless he was able to pay for the damage to Barney's car he would lose his driver's license and his car would be impounded.

They listened, still grinning, and never spoke a word until the policeman had left. Then they walked across the street and stood grinning at Barney's car.

"Man, dig that square job."

"Yeah, man. That's the squarest."

"Well, what about it?" Barney asked. "Are you gonna pay for this damage?"

"Look, man. Let me tell you something," the tall one said. "I don't dig this jazz, man. That financial jazz is nowhere, man. Nowhere."

"I don't give a damn what you dig," Barney said, getting angry again. "I want to know if you're gonna pay. Yes or no."

The stocky one shook his head sadly. "Man, you are square."

"Look," Barney said. "I've got your license number and your name and address. I'll let the state take care of it if that's the way you want it."

"I've got your name and address, too, man. Remember that, man."

And they both turned around and dragged their heavy boots across the street to their own car,

which was still blocking traffic. They slouched into it and slowly drove across the street to a nearby service station. Barney examined the Caddy. The rear fender and part of the trunk were damaged. Gloria would blow her top. Damn-it, things like that were always happening to him. If there was one jerk in all of California without insurance, he was sure to hit Barney.

Barney kicked the rear tire angrily and got back into the car and drove off. Now he really needed that drink. Those little punks had upset him and he didn't know why. They were just a couple of punk kids. He could have cleaned up the street with them. And yet he wondered about it. There was something about them that was frightening. A sort of reckless viciousness that you couldn't help feeling when you stood next to them.

There was a small neighborhood type bar a couple of blocks south of Sunset and Barney drove over there. The place was almost empty when he went in and he decided to sit at a booth. He had to have some peace and quiet to think this thing out. The waitress brought him a double scotch and soda and he sat back and lighted a cigarette. Now, what the hell could he do about Gloria. What could he do to convince her he was more of a man than that prissy Rock Taylor. He had four drinks and still no idea came to him. It was with the fifth drink that he struck paydirt. It was

so simple, he wanted to laugh. Why hadn't he thought about it before. It was perfect.

Quickly he stood up and staggered out of the bar. He had the address on a small slip of paper in his coat pocket. The house was on the East side of the river and in the middle of the industrial district. Barney parked the Cad in front of the house and lighted another cigarette. He had to be careful now.

It was three o'clock when the Mercury drove up and parked in front of him. The tall one was alone now and he came up to the Cad, leaning forward, resting his elbows against the door, grinning.

"Hey, man, what gives?"

"I've got a proposition for you," Barney said, offering him a cigarette. He took the cigarette and waited for Barney to light it.

"Go on, man. Blow."

Barney hesitated a moment as he stared at the grinning face. Maybe the idea wasn't good as he had thought.

"Hey, man, get with the jazz."

"Well," Barney said. "I'm married to Gloria Miles."

"Crazy!"

"But I am. All I want you and your buddy to do is play a little joke for me and I'll forget all about the accident."

"Blow, man."

"Look, there's a character by the name of Rock Taylor who hangs around the house all the time. I just

want you guys to spook him. You know, make believe you're gonna rob the place and scare the hell out of him. Then I'll get into action and scare you guys off. See what I mean?"

"Crazy."

"Well, what do you say. I'll forget all about the accident. There must be at least three hundred dollars worth of damage to my car."

"You're on, man."

Barney smiled. It had been easier than he had thought.

It was eight days later before Barney put the plan into operation. He had waited for the exact moment. The servants were out and Rock Taylor was in the bedroom with Gloria.

At a quarter to ten that night, Barney knocked on Gloria's bedroom and requested that they both come into the living room. He had something he wanted to discuss, he said. Something of great importance to all concerned.

In the living room, Barney went to the bar and slowly mixed himself a drink. Rock Taylor slouched in a chair, his chin resting against tightly clenched fists. Gloria sat on the arm of his chair.

"Can I fix you something?" Barney asked, trying to keep his voice natural.

"Never mind that," Gloria said. "What's on your mind? We've got a lot of work to do tonight."

"I'll bet you have," Barney said,

turning around to face them.

Gloria threw Taylor a quick glance and stood up. "I've taken all I'm going to take from you," she said, slowly walking up to him. "You can get the hell out of this house. Understand! Get out and stay out!"

"I'm not going anywhere," Barney said. "I'm your husband, remember?"

"You're nothing," she said. "A big fat zero."

"Getting pretty brave, ain't you?"

"I'm not afraid of you anymore," she said. "There's nothing you can do to me now."

"Oh, yeah. Think you're too big to get hurt?"

"You bet your filthy hide. You can't touch me."

"You're bluffing," he said, suddenly worried. What if those punks didn't show up. He'd really be in a mess.

"Go on and tell your little stories."

"Yeah. How about Q.T. Magazine. They'll jump at the chance."

Taylor raised his head and glared at Barney. "You miserable bastard," he said.

"You shut up," Barney shouted. "Before I bust you one."

Taylor smiled tightly and started to get up when the front door flew open and the two teen-age punks came into the room, grinning, six-inch blades held menacingly before them.

"Greetings, cats," the tall one shouted as they crossed the room.

Barney smiled inwardly. Now we'll see how tough Taylor really is, he thought.

"Hey, man! Dig that crazy chick," the stocky one cried, running up and grabbing Gloria by the arm.

"She's a gasser," the tall one agreed.

"Don't you touch me," Gloria cried, trying to break the hold.

Rock Taylor tried to get out of the chair, but the tall one pressed the knife against his chest, pushing him back into the chair.

"Keep cool, man," he grinned.

The stocky one was really grinning now as Gloria struggled against him. "Crazy, man," he giggled. "This chick's loaded."

"You leave her alone," Barney ordered, stepping toward the stocky one.

"Get back there, pop," the stocky one said, pressing the knife blade against Gloria's side. "On the sofa, man."

Barney scowled and slowly went to the sofa and sat down.

"How about a ball, man," the stocky one said, pulling at Gloria's sweater, his hand brushing roughly against her breasts. "This chick's the most." And he pressed the knife into her side until she screamed with the pain.

Taylor's face had turned a deathly white, his eyes never leaving Gloria. "What do you guys want?"

"A ball, man. A ball."

"Look. I've got seven hundred

dollars on me. You can have all of it if you promise to leave Miss Miles alone."

The tall one laughed and held out his hand. Taylor quickly took out his wallet and handed him all his money. "Crazy," he said, flashing the money to the stocky one before slipping it into his pocket.

"Okay, chick," the stocky one said. "Skin down."

Taylor looked wildly around the room. "You said you were gonna leave her alone."

"Shut up," the tall one said, feigning a pass with his knife.

"That's enough," Barney shouted, standing up. "You punks get the hell out of here."

"Man," the tall one said. "You better sit down."

"Skin," the stocky one repeated, roughly pulling her sweater over her head. She wore nothing under the sweater and Barney gasped when he saw the rich fullness of her breasts, reminded once more of their startling beauty.

"Okay, chick," the tall one said. "Skin the skirt."

She tried to pull away and the stocky one brought the knife to rest against one of her breasts. "Skin," he said. "It's a sharp blade."

She started to cry then, her lower lip trembling, the blue mascara running down her cheeks.

"Listen, man," the tall one said. "I've got the craziest yet. These two cats make love in the movies; so, now, how about the real thing."

"Crazy."

"Okay, man," the tall one said to Taylor. "Skin down."

"You're insane," Taylor whispered hoarsely, the muscles around his jawline tightly drawn.

The tall one brought the knife to rest just under his chin. "Skin, man. Skin!"

Taylor stood up and he looked like he was about to cry. "I gave you my money," he whined. "What more do you want?"

"Skin," the tall one repeated, suddenly running the knife against the side of Taylor's face, drawing blood. Taylor screamed, his hands frantically going up to his face.

"You've disfigured me," he sobbed, his fingers tremblingly tracing the knife cut.

Barney was worried now. This was not what he had wanted. The punks seemed to be hopped up or something. He'd have to do something and do it quick before they went completely crazy.

"Okay, you punks. I'm gonna take you right now," he said, standing up.

"Man, you crazy? You want this chick to swallow this blade? Do you, man?" Gloria screamed as he pressed the blade against the soft white skin of her stomach, just above the waistband of her skirt. "All the way, man," the stocky one threatened.

Barney stopped and stared at him. He knew the punk meant every word he said. "You boys are way

out of line," he said, slowly stepping toward the stocky one. "You know that, don't you. You guys are headed right for the gas chamber."

"Stow the gas, man," the stocky one said, still grinning, the knife pressed deeper into her stomach, the other hand just under her breast. Gloria stared at Barney, close to hysteria.

"What are you guys?" Barney asked. "Hopped up?"

"Yeah, man. It's the living end."

"Look," Barney said, trying to be reasonable. "You've had your fun. Now beat it."

The stocky one shook his head sadly. "Man, you are square."

"Let's get on with the ball, man," the tall one said.

"I'm for that, man," the stocky one said, pulling at her skirt. "Skin chick. Let's go."

"You, too, square," the tall one said, running the knife against the front of Taylor's shirt. Taylor started unbuttoning the shirt, his fingers nervously struggling with the buttons.

It was then that Barney jumped the stocky one, his huge hand slapping against his chest, knocking him sideways. Barney spun around to face the tall one, but he was too late. He felt the hot piercing plunge of the switchblade sink into his guts, feeling every sensation of it as the tall one pulled on it, cutting upward as it came out. Barney gasped, his eyes going wild with fear as he stared at the grinning

face. Then anger surged through him and he lashed out with his foot in a last murderous burst of energy, his big size twelve shoe striking the tall one in the groin, smashing cartilage and vessels in its wake. The tall one crumbled into a heap on the floor. Then Barney felt the hot bite of another blade driven into his back, and he whirled around, swinging wildly with his big arms, feeling the impact against his wrist as it crashed against the stocky one's jaw, sending him sprawling across the room.

For a moment, Barney stood weaving, his hands clutching his bleeding stomach, then slowly he sank to the floor, dead.

Gloria cried when the police questioned her. She just couldn't say enough good things about her dear departed husband. Barney was buried in Forest Lawn and Gloria placed flowers at his graveside every weekend for three whole weeks. Then she married Rock Taylor and they went to Europe for two weeks to forget.

