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Stop, You're Killing Me!

by

Darius John Granger

As a private eye I get a lot of screwball cases, but nothing to match my own; my wife and kid trying to kill me — and neither aware of it!

IT'S funny how a silly little habit can save your life.

I got into the car that morning and was thinking of nothing in particular — except maybe the cases I hoped to be getting downtown in my one man private dick office. We live at the top of the city's highest hill, my wife and our son Sam, who's seventeen, and myself. At least it's the highest hill in the residential district and the highest one I know of. So out of habit I patted the brakes to test them as the car began to roll down the slight incline of the driveway.

The brakes didn't hold.

Had I started down Jackson Hill, down the long half mile slope which levels off at the busy intersection of MacArthur and Houston Avenues, I'd have streaked through the intersection out of control. I don't know what the odds for sur-

vival are in such a circumstance, but I'd hate to have to test them.

As it was, I shook my head in surprise and pulled the handbrake, bringing the Olds to a stop at the foot of the driveway. I climbed out and bent down to take a look at the right front wheel. In a few seconds I knew what the trouble was. Brake fluid. There wasn't any. But that didn't make sense because I'd had the car — brakes included — overhauled only last week.

Which meant someone had drained the brake fluid from the Olds.

I checked the other front wheel and it was the same. No brake fluid. I sat there in the car for a few minutes smoking a cigaret before I went into the house to call the local service station and have them tow the Olds in.

It was the third time in less than



a month that someone had tried to kill me.

That happens, of course, to private detectives. It isn't only in the movies and the two-bit mystery thrillers that it happens. It happens in real life, too. I know because I've been in the business twenty years. Go downtown some time and look me up; Frank Foley's the name and you'll find me in the Ditmas Building on Pearl Street. Sure it happens to private eyes in real life. They're on a hot case and someone wants them off and because it's known bribes won't do any good, violence, mayhem and murder are tried.

But that didn't fit the situation in this case. There had been three tries on my life. The jets of our gas stove turned on while I was napping over a cup of coffee late of a cold night in the kitchen, with door and windows closed. The pulley of our extension ladder failing to hold while I was up painting the eaves of the house. And now the drained brake fluid.

I was on no important case. All of my work at the moment was routine. They say I am getting old, but don't you believe it. I've got some good cases ahead of me yet. They say I was able to get away with my shady tricks when I was younger but that I'm slip-

ping and can't get away with them now. Don't you believe it. In my business you've always got to get away with them. And when Frank Foley is all washed up, Frank Foley will be the first one to know it.

The situation in this case was worse. The situation in this case was strictly a family affair. All the attempts at my life had been made at home, either by my wife Sue or our boy Sam. Sounds nuts, because we're a pretty happy family usually. But there it was. Either Sue or Sam could have snafu'd the pulley on the extension ladder and either one of them could have turned on the gas jets after I had dozed. As for the drained brake fluid, Sue didn't know a spark plug from the carburetor air intake, but Sam was a hot rod with his own beat-up jalopy and knew as much about cars as anyone since old Henry Ford himself.

I went inside and sat down at the kitchen table. Sam was still lingering over his coffee before heading over to the high school. Sue was doing the dishes and humming. She turned around and said:

"S'matter dear, something wrong with the car?"

"You better ask Sammy," I suggested.

"Sammy? But why?"

"I don't get it, pop," Sammy said still drinking his coffee.

The other two times I had said nothing. Accidents. You don't accuse your own wife and son of trying to kill you unless you're sure. But the drained brake fluid was no accident. I swept Sammy's coffee cup off the table with my right hand and grabbed the front of his shirt. Sue screamed with surprise as I dragged Sammy to his feet.

"You drained out the brake fluid," I said.

"I don't know what you're talking about, pop. What's the matter with you? You'll rip the shirt!"

"Lay off of him for crying out loud, Frank," Sue cried out.

"Lay off of him," I said, repeating her words and imitating her tone. This always exasperated Sue. She put down her dish rag and came over to me and hollered:

"Well, you haven't said what's the matter."

"I said he drained the brake fluid out of the car. I could have killed myself."

"That's ridiculous, Frank, and you know it. Why would Sam do a thing like that?"

"How should I know why he'd do a thing like that?"

"Why don't you let go of him?"

I did so and Sammy slumped down into his chair. "How should I know," I went on, "why either one of you would bolix up the extension ladder or turn on the gas jets right here in the kitchen while I was dozing?"

"What?" Sue gasped. "What did you say?"

"You heard right, mom," Sammy said, staring at me as if I'd just escaped from the twentieth century equivalent of bedlam.

"Frank, you've been working too hard," Sue said. "Why don't you take a vacation? We could go off to —"

"Oh, to hell with a vacation," I said, but I was simmering down. They both looked so completely innocent, it kind of stopped me. Add to that fact that my family had no reason in the world for trying to kill me, and I was almost inclined to believe them.

Except that you couldn't change the facts. You couldn't change what had happened.

I turned around without saying anything and headed for the door. "Why don't you drop in on Doc Mundin on the way to work?" Sue suggested.

I slammed the door and went out to the wife's car and got in and drove downtown. All the way down, you could have threaded a needle with the line my lips made.

THERE was one customer in my waiting room when I reached the office. I offered him a curt nod and went by the inner door. "Be right with you." I mumbled. He didn't respond. He was a short, chunky man with hips as wide as his shoulders and a flabby, loose-jowled face but a chest like a barrel. I gave him a double take when he failed to respond. I said, "Well, do you want to see a private detective or don't you?"

"I want to see you," he said.

Somehow, I didn't like the way he said it, but let it ride. "Be right with you," I told him as I unlocked the inner door and moved through the sanctum sanctorum, such as it is. I smoked a cigarette halfway down before I pressed the buzzer to admit him.

He came in with the bouncy stride to which chunky fat men are prone. He looked straight at me and smiled as if he had known me for years. "I'm glad to see you're still alive, Mr. Foley," he said.

I stood up. "Would you say that again please?" I asked him.

"I'm glad to see you're still alive."

"Just what the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Well, let me see. By this time your wife and son would have

tried three times to kill you. That being the—"

I was around the desk before he could finish. I grabbed him much harder than I had grabbed Sammy. Something—probably the lining of his jacket—ripped. "You'd better explain that," I suggested.

"There's hardly anything to explain. Your wife tried to kill you by almost cutting through the pulley rope of your extension ladder, but you got off with a strained ankle. She tried to kill again by leaving the gas jets on one night in the kitchen. But you awoke in time. Your son tried to kill you this morning by draining the brake fluid from your car. There now. Does that bring us up to date?"

I was so shocked I let go of him. I sat down and lit another cigarette with what remained of the first. I watched him brush himself off and settle himself in the client chair.

"I can't blame you for behaving like that," he said.

"What the devil have you been doing, living in our attic and spying on me?"

"Dear me, no. But you see, I know. I know all about you, Mr. Foley. I have to know."

"You have to?"

"Now that you have avoided

death the first three times, I'm going to hire you."

"To hire me? What for?"

I must have sounded so amazed that my visitor said: "You do hire yourself out as a private detective? Don't you? That is your function, isn't it?"

"Yeah, but —"

"But how did I know? That's a long story. Too long and too involved for you and probably you wouldn't believe it anyhow. Look, Mr. Foley. I would like to hire you. I am an inventor. Your job will be to protect me and my invention against harm — for as long as necessary. Perhaps the rest of my life?"

"The rest of your life!"

"Oh, that isn't very long. You see, I die of a heart attack in 1959."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said. "You mean, your doctor told you you only have three more years to live?"

"My doctor?" the chunky fat man said. "Dear me, no. My great great great grandchild told me. And he, of course, knows."

"Your great great great great grandchild," I said.

"Yes, of course. Naturally the dear boy — if you can call a man your own age a boy — is very upset. He's marooned here, you see."

"This — uh — great great great

great grandson is your own age, you say?"

"Perhaps a little older. I never asked him."

"But he won't be born for a hundred years!" I gasped. There was a silence. Then I smiled at my visitor. I had to smile. He was pulling my leg. He did it the best, the soberest way possible — but he was pulling my leg. There would be a place for him on TV, I thought, and said so.

"But I'm not joking," he insisted. "Everything I told you is true, Mr. Foley. Here is what I want you to do. For as long as necessary, perhaps until my death in 1959, I want you to protect me and my invention. I'll pay you a hundred dollars a week for as long as I live, plus expenses."

A hundred and expenses was more than I averaged, but I didn't say that. I said, "What do I have to protect you against?"

"Why, didn't I say? My great great —"

"Great great," I said for him, "grandson. Look, jack. You're talking in riddles. Why don't you spit straight out whatever you want to say? Your great great great great grandson can't possibly want to harm you because, damn it, he hasn't been born yet. Which leaves us where?"

"Oh, but you're wrong. He doesn't want to harm me specifically. He merely wants to stop me from completing my invention. When he discovered I was going to hire you to protect me he decided to kill you as a warning to me. He tried three times and missed three times so I know you're pretty resourceful, Mr. Foley. I'd feel that my invention and I are safe in your hands."

"First you say my family's trying to kill me, then you say your four times grandson. Well, which is it?"

"Both. That is, my relative employs mental suggestion on your relatives, using them as agents. They have no reason to kill you, do they?"

"No," I admitted.

"There. Then obviously it must be my — umm, four times grandson, as you say. Will you take the job?"

"I don't know yet," I said. "I'll admit it, jack. I don't know if you're crazy or I'm crazy."

"Why does either one of us have to be crazy? Can't you simply protect me and my invention and —"

"What kind of invention is it?" I asked.

"I thought you would get around to that."

"Well, what is it?"

"I had wanted to wait until it was finished so I could show you. One doesn't simply talk about an invention like mine and expect to be believed."

When I'm puzzled I become arrogant. I guess you call it bluster and often it can see you through pretty rough spots. So despite the offer of a hundred dollars a week plus expenses I said, "Either you tell me all about it, or we forget you ever came here. Understand?"

"I suppose so," he admitted. "Very well, then —"

"Just a minute. You haven't even told me your name."

"It's Haney. Angus W. Haney, Mr. Foley."

"Now what about the invention?"

"It's almost finished," Angus W. Haney said. "At the moment I can't prove to you that it works. Unless you believe my great great great great grandson really is what I say he is."

"Whoever heard of a —"

"That is crucial, Mr. Foley. Because if you believe he is what I say he is, then you know my invention will be a success. You see, what I am in the process of inventing is a time machine."

THAT was enough for one day and I guess Angus W. Haney

knew it was enough. He gave me his card and told me to call him and I said that I would. After he had left, I got out the office bottle — which that winter was bourbon — and poured myself a good hard slug which went down smoothly. It's a hoax, I kept telling myself. It has to be a hoax.

But was it? I guess I wasn't entirely convinced, because Angus Haney had said that his four times grandson was using my Sue and Sammy — via mental suggestion — to kill me. And that being the case, I decided against going home that night. What the hell, a guy couldn't take chances, not in my business. You learned to be careful or else you left the business in a hurry or they carried you out. So, I'd wait and see.

I called up home and made some kind of excuse, then took a room downtown in the Hazel Arms Hotel. I checked in, showered, and went outside for a good meal. When I returned to the Hazel Arms it was early so I killed some time at the bar, then went out and took in a movie.

At ten o'clock that evening I went upstairs to turn in. Kind of an early hour for a private eye, I know, but I was bushed and I guess I'm not as young as I used to be. I shut the door behind me and was about to turn on the

light when a voice said:

"After you turn it on just walk to the bed and sit down, please. I'm holding a gun on you."

I touched the light switch and the room was bathed in light and I saw him. He was a middle aged fellow, but trim and well-preserved with dark piercing eyes and hair graying at the temples. He said, "I suppose you know who I am."

I sat down on the bed, shaking my head. He was seated across the room from me in a wing chair, holding a .38 Banker's Special very steadily in his right hand, the muzzle pointing at me.

"No," I said. "Who are you?"

"I am Angus Haney's great great great grandson."

By then I didn't even blink. I merely said, "Go on, I'm listening."

"I tried to have you killed as a warning to my relation, Mr. Foley. You see, I don't want to kill him. I can't predict what might happen if I kill him. It's never been done before, killing an ancestor. I might disrupt the whole family line. For example, I might never be born. We couldn't possibly have that, could we?"

"Not if you say we couldn't. What do you want, jack? To kill me?"

"If I had wanted that I could merely pull the trigger, couldn't

I?"

"Yeah."

"I'm afraid trying to kill you was a mistake. Angus is determined to go on with his invention anyway. But if I can convince you not to take his proposition, perhaps I'll be able to destroy his time machine before he has time to hire another guard."

"But why do you want to destroy it?"

"Because I'm trapped here in your primitive age. Because I'll never get back to my own time, that's why."

"I don't get you."

"Look. My ancestor Angus Haney invents a time machine. It can travel toward in time, but not back. In my own day I invent a machine based to a large extent on Angus' earlier machine. It can travel back in time, but not forward. I come here, visiting your mid-twentieth century, thinking I can return to my own day in Angus' machine."

"Then why don't you want it built?"

"Because Angus explained to me that I was wrong. The machines are slightly different. I can travel on my own, but not his. He can travel on his own, but not mine. Result, I'm trapped here. Unless —"

"Unless what?"

"Unless I can prevent Angus from completing his machine. If it's destroyed, my own machine would have been impossible because, as I have said, most of my work is based on Angus'. You'll help me?"

"No," I said. "Why should I?"

"Because I cannot stand living in your barbarous age. Because I want to return home to the world I understand."

"Hell," I said, "Angus is as good as my client right now."

"I will give you," the well-preserved middle aged man said, "ten thousand dollars to help me destroy Angus Haney's time machine."

"And win or lose you won't have my family try to kill me any more?"

"Win or lose," he said.

Great-great — I got to call him that because I never learned his name—waited for my answer while I did some of the fast thinking a private dick has to do every working day of his life. When opportunity knocks, a private dick can't pass it up. He won't keep his shingle up long if he does because the work isn't exactly steady. This, obviously, was opportunity. Ten thousand bucks worth. And ten G's in one lump sum looked a lot better than Angus Haney's indefinite hundred a week.

Did that mean I was turning

on Angus Haney? Well, it's a cinch I wouldn't have been booted out of the fraternity of private eyes for it because despite what you read to the contrary in the two-bit shamus books — of noble impulses and motives pure as chivalry — a private eye is for number one and that's the end of it.

"Mister," I said, "you have got yourself a deal. When do I start?"

"You know where Angus Haney lives?"

"He gave me his card."

"Tomorrow. Tommorrow morning. He's working late tonight so he'll sleep late tomorrow. He's putting the finishing touches tonight on the first time machine ever built. In the morning, we destroy it. All right?"

"For ten thousand bucks," I said, "I'd destroy the Taj Mahal."

IT was a cold clear morning. I didn't call home because I couldn't face the wife and kid, not for a while. I had accused them of trying to kill me and it was true enough but they had no recollection of it. I still had the wife's car with me, but she could pick up mine at the service station on her own way to work.

I was too excited to eat breakfast. It isn't every morning you start out to earn ten thousand dollars.

I drove across town to the address on Angus Haney's card. Great-great was already waiting for me, and pacing the sidewalk impatiently. The frown lifted when he saw me and you could actually see him relax down to the tips of his toes.

"I can take care of the machine," he said. "You watch for Angus. If Angus tries to stop me, you take care of Angus All right?"

I nodded and we went around the side of the house, where Angus Haney had planted rhododendron and azaleas. Me, I don't care much for plants — I only know the names because my wife makes such a fuss about them.

"In the cellar," Great-great whispered. "I have a key."

"How did you get a key?"

"In my own time this house is preserved as a museum. I simply made a key from the restored model."

In silence we approached the cellar door. A look at my wristwatch told me it was seven-thirty. If Angus Haney had worked late last night he would probably still be asleep. The job would be a lead-pipe cinch.

I watched my companion slip a key into the lock. In a moment, the door stood ajar and I was peering down a steep flight of bare wood steps. Nodding at each other,

we began to go down.

We stopped short at the foot of the staircase. There was someone down there.

"I thought you said he'd be sleeping," I protested, barely forming the words with my lips.

"I'm sure he's asleep — but I didn't know he'd sleep down in the cellar. Apparently he didn't want to leave the machine even for a minute."

Faint light entered the cellar through the small high windows. At first I saw nothing but the usual clutter of basement junk, but then in the far corner beyond the water tank I saw something which didn't belong. Make that two things. First, there was a man asleep on a cot. Second, there was this machine.

For all I know of gadgets, it could have been a super-powered ham radio set. But a ham doesn't come complete with a glass enclosed compartment big enough for a man.

We stalked across the floor, Great-great pausing to pick something up. It was a length of steel pipe and with it he wouldn't have much trouble demolishing Angus Haney's untried time machine.

This was it. This was my big day. Ten thousand bucks for almost nothing. I looked at the plump man sleeping on the cot in

front of his invention. I felt no remorse. His adversary had made a better offer, so what the hell could he expect?

All at once, things happened fast. Great-great stumbled over something and went reeling across the room. He was so surprised that he shouted, "But it doesn't belong there! I couldn't have tripped over it! It isn't in the restoration, I tell you."

I didn't have time to point out that the restoration might not be quite accurate. Because the commotion woke up Angus Haney.

He came springing off the cot — fully awake and alarmed in the split-second it took to open his eyes.

"You'll have to kill me first!" he cried, moving in front of the machine and preparing to defend it like a mother lion defends her cubs.

My companion ignored him, trying to work around behind him toward the time machine. I advanced straight for Angus Haney.

"Be sensible, jack," I said, "and you won't get hurt. I'm bigger than you are and I know how to fight. I don't want to hurt you, but —"

HE turned away from me, though, and lunged at Great-great. I dove at him in a street clothes version of the flying

tackle and we went down together. Angus Haney was stronger than I had expected. Or maybe it wasn't that. Maybe he was fighting with desperation. Because the machine meant everything to him.

Well, the ten grand wasn't exactly chicken feed to me, either. If Angus was going to fight back, I had to play rough. I clubbed him across the mouth with my right fist and his lips became a bloody smear, but he kept kicking and twisting and writhing to get at his relative, who stood poised now over the time machine with the length of steel pipe.

"Don't!" Angus Haney screamed, and rolled clear of me. He was on his feet in an instant and wrestling to get the pipe from my companion.

"If I destroy it, you fool," the man who hadn't been born yet said, "I won't build my own version of it and won't be trapped back here in your twentieth century. You can't stop me."

But Angus, who outweighed his antagonist, had other ideas. In the brief time it took me to climb to my feet and reach them, the metal pipe went clattering away across the floor and Angus was wrestling his relative away from the time machine. I grabbed Angus' shoulder and swung him

around and hit him. He dropped like a stone and, with a whoop of triumph, my companion scrambled after the heavy metal pipe.

Angus was down but not out. I'll have to say this for him; he had guts. He was on his feet again before Great-great could reach the machine.

I'll never forget that scene. For a moment time seemed to be suspended. Great-great stood poised with the metal pipe at the top of its arc, ready to bring it down with crushing force on the delicate control bank of the machine. Angus seemed to stop in mid-air as he leaped for the pipe. Immediately behind him was the glass-enclosed booth of the machine. Or—and this is important—it was glass-enclosed on three sides. The fourth side was nothing but air.

I caught Angus around the waist and pulled him back. We stumbled away from the machine and then back toward it. Suddenly Angus went limp. It was the oldest trick in the book, but I fell for it. I relaxed my hold on him and, as soon as I did, he became a fury. Something struck the side of my head and the next thing I knew I was staggering toward the time machine.

Just as Great-great brought the heavy metal pipe down.

I staggered inside the glass-en-

closed booth.

There was a loud crashing sound.

And then — unexpectedly — a faint hum — a sudden blurry curtain before my eyes — a rolling seething, billowing mist of white — and a moment of exquisite pain

And Angus Haney's voice from a million miles away: "You're destroying it"

Then blackness like the gulf between the stars.

Or between the centuries.

WELL, that's the story. I'm telling you everything so you'll understand. I am not — repeat, not — crazy. I'm as sane as you are. Of course my emotional responses to your mental tests are different: I'm from the twentieth century.

I know I can't get back. I know a little more ought to be said about my story. Angus failed to stop Great-great, who completely demolished his machine.

How do I know?

Because you never even heard of a successful experiment in time travel here in the twenty-first century. Simple, isn't it.

I wish I knew Great-great's name. If I knew his name and could find him, he'd confirm my story. I know what you're think-

ing. Believe me, I am not a paranoid. I

What's that? His name's Haney, just like Angus Haney? That figures, I guess. George Haney. Well, truck him in for crying out loud. He'll confirm everything I say —

Here he is now. "Well, Jack am I glad to see you! They think I'm crazy. They're trying to tell me there's no such thing as time travel, but I ought to know. I come from the past. And you ought to know, because you went back there to destroy Angus Haney's prototype of a time machine so you wouldn't build one yourself, based on it, and be trapped back in my century. Right? Incidentally, Jack, you can forget all about the ten grand, just as long as you get me out of here and convince them I'm not crazy."

He stares at me. He's Great-great, all right. He frowns and says, "I could not possibly be interested. I never saw you before in my life. And obviously, there is no such thing as time travel." He shakes his head sadly and starts to leave.

"Wait!" I cry. "You don't understand. I understand now. Of course you wouldn't know. You wouldn't remember. Because if you destroyed Angus Haney's time machine there wouldn't be any

such thing as time travel and you wouldn't have built your own machine. So you forgot. The episode sort of never existed for you."

"I'm terribly sorry I can't help you, fellow." A genuine look of sympathy in his eyes.

"There's no such thing as time travel. For everybody but me.

I'm the one guy who proved time travel was possible — before the first and only time machine was destroyed."

He leaves. The head medics confer. I know what they're saying. I'm nuts. Time travel is impossible so I must be nuts.

But we know better, don't we?