

HAPPY BIRTHDAY

by: Kyle Kofoid

It was a gorgeous evening along the river in St. Louis. It was late summer and the baseball season was winding down. There was a large crowd of young families enjoying a game at Busch Stadium. Laclede's Landing was teeming with tourists visiting restaurants and microbreweries. Some visitors were enjoying the evening in carriages drawn by horses. The downtown sports bars were filled with white-collar men and women ending the workweek with a beer. The riverboats also were busy draining the pockets of retirees. The local clubs were filling with young people enjoying live music.

And in one small strip bar along the river, a small group of young graduate students were celebrating the coming-of-age of one of their own. On this day, Brady Elmwood was 21 years of age. Brady was young for a graduate student, but he had accomplished everything in life earlier than most others. He was an exceptionally bright and gifted, but unassuming young man. On this night, though, he was center of attention for his group of friends.

Entering the strip club, Brady felt a little out of place. This was not the type of place he frequented, preferring instead the ambiance of coffee houses. He certainly appreciated an attractive woman, but Brady tended to have his thoughts on the woman most dear to him, his grandmother who had raised him from an infant.

Still, he was here tonight to enjoy the companionship of his colleagues and looked forward to setting aside the distractions of life for a few short hours. Brady was mildly surprised to see familiar faces in the crowded club:

"Hey Willie! Good seein' you!"

But soon Brady was whisked away by his friends to a table near the stage and glasses were being filled by a pitcher of St. Louis-brewed beer. As his friends whooped and hollered at the show on stage, Brady sipped his beer, not sure what effect the alcohol might have on him.

Brady enjoyed the spectacle of his friends, but he couldn't help but notice two men wearing well-tailored suits sitting in a darkened corner of the club. One was middle-aged and graying, the other young and obviously very healthy and fit. They didn't exactly stand out in the crowd, but Brady's attention was drawn to them. The men were deep in conversation and seemed oblivious to the music, lights, and dancing.

When the next dancer strolled out onto the stage, Brady's musings were interrupted. With long brown hair and dark skin, the woman would have caught the eye of any man present. However, most striking was her western, cowgirl outfit. The woman introduced as Patty sported cowboy boots and hat, very high-cut shorts, a western vest, and two shiny, silver revolvers hanging from a belt around her swaying hips. As her right eye sparkled and darted around the crowd, her left was covered in a decorative eye patch. Patty cut a very impressive image upon the stage.

As she approached the front of the stage, hips swinging, a loud roar of hoots and hollers erupted from the men. Brady found the whole scene quite bemusing.

Suddenly, Brady sat upright in his chair. A thought had flashed in his mind that had very much drawn his attention. Since adolescence, Brady had the uncanny ability to overhear thoughts of the individuals around him. For the most part, Brady avoided listening, and the background chatter was much like the conversations of those at other tables in a restaurant. One was aware of the conversations, but not really

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attentive to them. Occasionally, though, a thought would grab his attention like hearing one's name spoken in a conversation across the room. Brady watched the dancer more closely and was convinced he had overheard correctly. The way her right eye danced around the crowd made it clear that she was indeed seeking a clear shot at someone present that evening. Something about Patty's face was tickling Brady's consciousness. In the span of a heartbeat, he mentally skimmed through his memory. Like a large warehouse filled with filing cabinets, Brady's photographic memory stored and cataloged all of his life experiences. Finally, he came upon the new magazine article he had been searching for.

"Of course!" he thought. "She's one of those S.L.U.T.s!"

At the speed of thought, Brady had assessed the situation. The dancer was better-known as Cow Patty, a horrific murderer and member of the enigmatic terrorist organization known as S.L.U.T.s, Superhuman Lustful Underground Terrorists.

Elmwood, now concerned for the safety of his friends and his fellow revelers, issued forth from his mind a tiny tendril of mental energy toward Patty. As the dancer pulled out the silver revolvers spinning in her fingers, the lights of the disco ball danced and sparkled. At light speed, Brady had gently probed and scanned the thoughts of the vile seductress. Cow Patty planned a much greater show than her languid movements might suggest. Her revolvers were real, loaded with "cop-killers," and she was looking for a target.

Brady Elmwood's mind was racing now, and his temples began to throb. Again he sent forward his thoughts and swept through the minds of the room until he locked in on his quarry. It was the young man sitting in the darkened corner. The man had obviously been trained to resist mental probing, but Brady had already found what he was seeking. The circumstances surrounding him had become vividly clear.

The young man in the corner was Strikeforce Operative Watkins. Watkins was meeting with the United States Attorney for United States District of Missouri to discuss a closed hearing in federal court on Monday. Watkins was going to provide testimony on HUMINT (human intelligence) in order to secure an indictment. In the brief nanosecond of contact, Elmwood could ascertain no further information, but it was apparent that Cow Patty had no intention of allowing that testimony to be presented. It was also clear that Watkins was unaware of the danger.

Since the vivacious Patty had strolled onto the stage, mere seconds had passed. Yet Brady was certain that she would act soon. At that moment, one of his classmates began to stuff a dollar bill in Patty's belt; simultaneously and without cognizant effort, Brady Elmwood unleashed the pent-up power within him.

Cow Patty's head snapped back as she experienced an explosion of white light within her mind. She half-staggered a step, and her dazzling revolver exploded. Behind the U.S. Attorney, a neon beer sign shattered from the impact of the bullet. With lightning reflexes, the Strikeforce Operative dove and rolled, dragging the U.S. Attorney to safety behind a table and raising to a crouch with his gun drawn.

"What the fuck was that?" the terrorist exclaimed as she quickly recovered from the blast. Not wasting a step, she dove off the stage and squeezed another round from her gun. The operative half-turned, and the bullet plowed into the table harmlessly.

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As the one-eyed vixen streaked by his table, Brady – drawing on his years of boxing training – lashed out with his left fist and caught the woman under her jaw. Patty crumpled to the floor, momentarily dazed. The lapse was more than sufficient time for agent Watkins to disarm and restrain the would-be assassin.

Brady Elmwood was in no mood to answer questions; his head was pounding with a dreadful migraine. He hurriedly shepherded his friends together and out onto the city street. As they strolled along, Brady contemplated his abilities and potential for the first time. If he learned to harness and control those powers, Elmwood could become a force for good.

His friends, commenting on his left hook and exhibition of heroism, interrupted his thoughts. Brady paused on the sidewalk for a moment and looked at his friends.

“Didn’t you guys know that my parents were shot down by a radioactive spider and that I have committed my life to stamping out crime?” he asked.

His friends froze, eyes wide and jaws slacked. “Did Brady just try to make a joke?” the oldest classmate asked another student. “The universe just ain’t right tonight.”

Half-smiling, Brady and his friends continued down the street. Maybe it was just a bad joke, but Brady also sensed that there was a role for him to play in the cosmic battle of good versus evil. On deeper reflection, Brady also realized he better keep lots of Excedrin on hand.