

Excerpt from “Skinny”
Dana Donovan ©2006

I took my foot off the gas and coasted to a stop in front of Suidae’s Pump-N-Go, where a neon light in the window boasted cold beer and hot tacos. An old fat man in blue denim coveralls sat out on his porch beneath a flickering bug lamp, laughing with delight at the random zapping of misguided moths. He seemed to barely acknowledge my existence, but I know he saw me, as my headlights swept across him when I pulled in off the road. I looked in my mirror and watched the cop car angle in behind me, his flashing high beams alternating left and right in perfect sequence with his wiper blades. The car door opened, and a dark, cumbersome silhouette approached along side my car. He stopped just behind the driver’s window. From my side view mirror I could see his hand covering a holstered gun.

“Let me see your license and registration,” he said.

My heart was pounding. I couldn’t believe my luck. “Sure.” I reached across the front seat for the glove box.

“Hold it right there!” A sharp beam from his flashlight zeroed in on my hand just as my fingers touched the latch. “Do it nice and slow, ya hear?”

My arm froze. I heard the snap on his holster unbutton. I looked over my shoulder and squinted into the light, which he now directed at my eyes. “I’m going slow,” I said. “See, just reaching for my wallet.”

He shinned the light back on the glove box. I popped it open and removed my wallet. As I riffled through the many compartments stuffed with credit cards, receipts and the every-ready emergency condom, I could hear the officer wheezing and snorting, as though he had just run the three hundred yard dash.

“You okay?” I asked.

He didn’t answer. Probably thought I was just mumbling to myself. He had grown more comfortable with the security issue and moved into full view of my side window. I still had not looked right up at him, but through peripheral vision I could tell he was a large man—very large, and very out of shape. The nametag below his badge said Napoleon, though I doubted he suffered from a Napoleon complex. I extracted my license and registration and held them to the window. He reached in and snatched them from me.

“Beckman, huh?”

“Yes sir. That’s me.”

He trained the flashlight on my license. “Johnny, you know why I pulled you over?”

I thought about it. *Yeah, because you got tired of fucking with me, and like a cat that gets tired of playing with a mouse, now you want to eat me.* I thought it, but I didn't say it. "No, sir, I don't. Was I speeding?"

"Yeah, Johnny, you were speeding, among other things."

He bounced the light off my face and back at my license. "You ain't from around here, are you?"

"Sir, I'm not even sure where here is."

"What's that mean? Is that supposed to be funny?"

"No, not at all. I'm just saying..."

I looked up at him to plead my case of ignorance. It was then that I realized what a pig this guy was. Seriously, I don't just mean really fat, which he was, but I mean pig-like. I think I actually gasped when I looked at his face. He had big round cheeks and little black beady eyes, and a nose that protruded like an accordion and ended flat with two wide pencil holes for nostrils. His ears were floppy and pointy and pink with fine little hairs wrapping around them like cornhusks.

"You're just saying what?"

I shook my head and drew a bead down on my steering wheel. *This isn't happening*, I thought, and I remembered the time I drank too much and came to believe that snakes were hiding in my closets among my shoes. It turned

out they were only shoelaces. I knew I wasn't drinking this time, but I was in a state of excited agitation. The mind can play funny tricks on you when you're under duress, alcohol induced or otherwise. I told myself I would count to three and look up again. If he still looked like a pig, then I would just hold my tongue and act naturally.

“I asked you a question, son.”

“Yes, sir, I know. I'm trying to answer the best I can. You see, I was out camping with some buddies, and I left them because we weren't getting along. Next thing I knew, I made a wrong turn somewhere and—”

I pitched my head back and rolled my eyes up at the officer. I expected I'd see a hard-working cop, a little heavy maybe, one with a five o'clock shadow, for sure, and maybe the usual baggage under the eyes from not sleeping right, because nightshift cops never get to sleep during the days the way dayshift cops sleep at night. I figured the strobe lights from his car might cast some unflattering shadows and accentuate the pockmark acne scars on his cheeks: a testament to his loser high school years before he realized he could get back at every wise ass jock that ever gave him wedgies, and every pom-pom twirling cheerleader that ever snubbed him when asked out on a date. No, I didn't expect a pretty face, just one that looked human.

“And so you thought you'd fuck with me,” he said. “Is that it?”

At once my mouth fell slack. I took a breath and almost forgot to let it out. He snorted through his pig nose and laughed, and then his piggy ears stood erect like a pissed off Doberman's. He looked down at me as though I had just called his mother a whore. His eyes hooded over and sunk deep within their sockets like little bits of glimmering black coal.

"I wasn't trying to fuck with you. Honest, I only wanted to—"

"Silence!" he shouted, loud enough to scare the old man under the bug light back into the store. He turned the flashlight back on my face. "You know what your problem is, boy?"

By now, I was shaking so hard I could not answer him verbally.

"Your problem is you're too skinny. You know that?"

"Skinny?" I said, or I thought it. I'm not sure which.

"I'm gonna have to take you in. Get out of the car."

"Take me in for speeding? Can't you just give me a ticket?"

He pulled his gun from his holster and pointed it at my head. I couldn't see the bullet down the barrel, but I could see the blunt ends of the others peeking out of their cylinders, waiting their turn.

I opened the door and stepped out.

"I ain't arresting you for speeding. I told you. I'm bringing you in for being too skinny."

“What? You’re kidding, right?”

He grabbed my shirt collar and spun me around, splaying me facedown on the hood of my car. Then he kicked my feet apart and cuffed my hands behind my back.

“Does it look like I’m kidding?”

From the corner of my eye, I saw another police cruiser pull up behind us. An officer stepped out and approached. He was pretty fat, not as fat as the one cuffing me, but no slouch either. He gave a nod with his chin up.

“Whaddaya got, Gip? Another skinny.”

“Yeah, Fritch, another out-of-towner. Go figure, right? Why don’t you check his vehicle? Make sure he ain’t carrying.”

“I have no weapons,” I said. “I only shoot with a camera.”

“We ain’t talking about weapons,” said the new arrival. He walked up behind me and leaned over the hood. I felt his thick wet nose against the back of my neck. He snorted all around my ear and cheek, and along my shoulder like an excited puppy. It kind of tickled at first, but then I got an image in my mind of a hog routing for truffles in a mossy meadow and it grossed me out.

“He’s clean,” he said, and then he walked around to the driver’s side door and began searching under the seats and in the glove box. When he finished that, he popped the trunk and tossed its contents out onto the road.

“What’s he looking for, narcotics?”

Napoleon finished patting me down. He grabbed the back of my collar, pulled me up and spun me around. We were looking face to face now, and in my wildest dreams I could not have imagined a more homely man. I still hesitate to tell you that he looked just like a pig, (I mean just like one) but he did. And now that I could see his partner better, I have to tell you that the bacon didn’t fall far from the sow in that town.

“He ain’t looking for no narcotics,” said Napoleon, “but he is looking for pills.”

“You mean like steroids?”

He laughed and snorted. “I mean diet pills.”

“What?”

“I got nothing,” said Fritch. He slammed the trunk closed without putting the spare tire or the bumper jack back in. “You can take him.”

“Take me? Take me where? I didn’t do anything!”

Napoleon reached into the car and gave the horn a little toot-toot. The old man tripping on the bug light came out of the store and waved.

“She’s all yours,” Fritch hollered.

They escorted me to Napoleon’s cruiser and sat me down in the back seat. Then they shut the door, and for a while the two of them stood outside talking. I watched the old man through the side window as he hurried his fat ass across the macadam and got into my car.

“Hey, where’s he going!” I shouted.

Napoleon and Fritch kept right on talking. One of them said something funny and both broke out in a fit of pig snorting and grunting. They slapped their knees and each other’s backs, and then looked at me as though I were the brunt of the joke.

The old man started my car and pulled it up to the gas pumps. I saw him get out and walk around to the back, but a parked truck blocked my view from what he was doing. A minute later he got back in and drove it around the back of the store. I heard Napoleon say goodbye to Fritch and then he squeezed back into the front seat of the cruiser.

“Hey,” I said. “What’s the old man doing with my car? Why did he take it behind the store?”

Napoleon readjusted his rearview mirror to see me better, (God forbid he try to turn around in his seat to do it). He didn’t answer me, though. He dropped the car into gear and pulled out onto the road. I turned around to

look out the back window and saw a sudden burst of orange and red flames explode over the roof of the store. It lit up the night sky like a roman candle, before settling down to just an obvious source of something burning in the distance.

“Was that my car?”

I saw Napoleon chuckle to himself, and then he looked up into the mirror. His eyes were still squinting. He shook his head, as if my asking was a silly question. I supposed it was.