

BLADE MAN

By Edison McDaniels

*What if you were driving a desolate North Dakota highway in a hundred year storm,
and the only other car on the road was ...wrong?*

BLADE MAN

©Edison McDaniels 2013 All rights reserved. No part of this work may be reproduced in any form without prior permission of the author.

This is a fictional work designed for the pleasure and enjoyment of you, constant reader. Please don't support book theft in any form.

Read more about this and other works by Edison McDaniels at www.surgeonwriter.com, where you can also follow **NEUROSURGERY101—TheBlog**, about life's harder or more interesting moments. Not your usual blog about brain surgery, craniotomies, and broken necks.

Edition 2, February 2013

BLADE MAN

There are monsters among us. I mean this quite literally.

When I was a kid, I used to play like I was a werewolf. For a while, on any night with a gibbous moon or better, I roamed the neighborhood backyards and howled for hours. Damn near convinced myself I was the real thing, the half-human hound beast from hell. Sometimes, mostly this was to get back at girls—like the time Sallie Jameston poured water on my crotch and told the other kids I'd peed myself—I perched up on a brick wall and let go with a prime yowler. Got so I could do that so well even the dogs hid. I dunno. I imagined the whole world was full of monsters back then. It was up to me to save us all. A silly notion I suppose. A kid's game.

Or so I thought at the time.

Much later—this had nothing to do with my childhood—I discovered there really are monsters lurking amongst us. I found this out one night in the dark and solitary whiteness of a North Dakota howler. That's what folks up Dakota way call a killer blizzard. Fair warning though: that monster wasn't a werewolf, or anything else conjured from my dreams or the great beyond. That monster was something much worse, the flesh and blood kind. A man as real as me.

And I killed him.

It wasn't the most visceral moment of my life, but it was the most horrible. When I look back on it though, what stands out most is how very easily things could've come out different. But for that North Dakota howler, the grace of God, and maybe a little ingenuity on my part, I could have been the hunted instead of the hunter.

The killed instead of the killer.

Sit a spell at the table here and I'll tell you about it. You might want to get yourself a cup of coffee and maybe a danish too, cause this is gonna take awhile. I'll tell you now I ain't never told this story to no one, but I need to tell it now. I got to get this thing out of me before, well, just before is all. You see, I got the brain cancer now. I dunno. The doctor tells me I ain't long for this earth. He refused to put a number on it, six weeks or three months or a year, but I spent some time with docs when I was younger and I know how to read 'em. And that white coat's eyes weren't telling no pretty story, whatever words came out of his mouth. Besides, I dunno but I can feel the cancer gnawing in me. Like a rat shredding paper it is. Every day I get up, seems like I'm less who I was just the night before. I dunno. Maybe that rat only chews at night. That'd be fitting.

I always did my best work at night.

What I got to say took place a long time ago. A whole lifetime. Not mine you understand (if not, you will). Anyway, it's been three plus decades. The 1970's, what some folks call the disco decade. I can't quite remember the exact year. I use to know it, you can bet your ass on that, but not anymore. It's one of them secrets that belongs now to the ages. The longer a man lives, the more secrets he accumulates. I'll tell you now I have secrets—every man does—and most of them I'll take to my grave. But I've lived a long time and with the brain rat eating away at me, I ain't so sharp anymore. And so some of my secrets I've lost already. It's a sad part of aging—maybe the saddest part of getting old—to admit that.

So it was the time of Saturday night fever and mirror balls. Either Jerry Ford or Jimmy Carter was in the White House that year. I dunno. It wasn't that crook Dick Nixon though. I remember Tricky Dick had already been pardoned when all this happened. And Elvis had left the building I know that. I was in a McDonald's drive thru when that particular little piece of death come over the radio. I had pulled up to the window and just paid when it came on how the king had upchucked in his toilet and probably choked on his own spew. The summer of '75 or '76 I think. Maybe later. I dunno. Look it up if you need to know exact. I do remember I ate my fish sandwich just the same. I ain't no Elvis fan, but after he checked into the heartbreak hotel for that last time, he was all over the damn place. I spent a lot of time in my car back then, and I couldn't hardly turn on the radio without being told I weren't nothing but a hound dog or being asked if'n I was lonesome tonight in that sultry three dollar voice of his.

In those days I made a pretty good living as a traveling salesman. I didn't do door to door exactly, not in the regular sense of it anyway. I went hospital to hospital. That was before computers and cell phones and that damned innernet thing. I dunno but back then, a man could be a man and make an honest day's pay and look another man in the face and shake his hand. You ask me that's the only way to do business. A man knows who he's dealing with when he can look 'im in the face. It's the eyes that tell. The eyes tell everything if you're prepared to see 'em.

What did I sell you ask? I was what we used to call a blade man. Scalpels. Not the arts and crafts pansy ass blades either. Those don't hardly deserve to be called blades. I sold surgical blades, knives with attitude you might say. The kind a surgeon might use to crack a chest or maybe cut out a diseased stomach. Or maybe do a appy, like I had when I was twelve. The brain rat ain't got that memory yet. I dunno. Back then, I liked to think the surgeons couldn't do their job unless I did mine. We were a team. I was their front man and they were sorta dependent on me, counting on me. I guess you'd say I was their go to guy.

You see, there ain't just one kind of scalpel. I suppose nowadays there's hundreds of types, I dunno, but back then there was maybe fifty. The key to selling scalpels is the same as the key to selling anything. Know thy product. That's business 101. I knew my scalpels all right. Some were curved, some hooked, others long and pointed. The #11 is like that, a sort of right triangular blade with a straight edge that converged to a point. You could do some damage with that blade if you weren't careful. Poke a eye out easy. Docs use it to puncture things. It's not for cutting really.

The most common scalpel I sold was the #10, a no nonsense heavy duty incising knife,

designed to cut deep and broad. A single swipe with that baby and you could open a belly to the guts. The blade of the #10 forms a gentle outward curve, like a pregnant belly, that carries the cutting blade along that curved edge. Only about an inch long and, of course, very sharp. Like most of my blades, I sold it in two styles: stand alone blade or already attached to a handle (a little shorter than a pencil). Of course the blade itself ain't much good without a handle, like holding a razor blade I guess, so I sold the handles separately too. By the way, #10 is the Hollywood blade. What I mean is if'n you see a scalpel in the movies, it's almost always #10. Makes it easy for them I suppose, but looks kinda ridiculous to those of us in the profession. I dunno. It was stupid to see Dr. Welby taking out an appendix with a #10. #15 (shorter, more refined) would do the job lots cleaner. A #10 for something like that--overkill. But TV surgeons ain't the real McCoy so I guess it don't matter. Still, I can't watch TV doctor shows 'cause of it. Irks me I guess. Irks all of us in the profession.

I sold blades other than #11 and #10 of course. Every variety out there at the time. #15, #3, #12 to name a few. I carried samples of all these as I went about my rounds (I sound like a surgeon when I say it that way, eh?) and damn well could have sold you a case of scalpels if I'd have run into you back then. At the top of my game, I could have sold scalpels to a kindergarten teacher and convinced her to pass them out to her class along with milk and cookies. Come to think of it, I once met a kindergarten teacher, but his is one of them stories I'll take with me to my grave.

I used to test those blades some. Second rule of business is to try your product yourself. I can attest to their usability. The feel of the blade in hand, the weight of it, the feedback you'd feel as it cut. All of these intangibles were top notch in my scalpels. And don't forget sharpness. Yes sir, I never tried a single blade what wasn't sharp enough to cut right down to bone if'n you needed to. But a scalpel has to take a light touch too. Maybe you only want to open the skin and no more, leave the layers beneath intact. Maybe you're smoothing wrinkles on a little old Beverly Hills grandma. We had blades for that too. Blades for every part and layer the body makes in fact, in all manner of sizes and shapes like I said.

One more thing. Blades themselves are made of steel. I use to always refer to it as 'surgical steel' in my presentation, but only because that sounded good. I dunno. Scientific and official like. To be honest, I never knew the difference between surgical steel and turd steel. But it sounds good, don't it? Reassuring too. Who wants to get cut with something made of Chinese steel? Third rule of business, you gotta sound good. Nobody buys nothing if you don't give 'em a reason and sound good doing it.

November that year was damn cold and already you could tell it was gonna be a rip snorter of a winter. Back then I was driving a Chevy suburban between Fargo and parts west. Jamestown, Bismarck, and Minot mostly. Sometimes I hauled up to Grand Forks. Sold scalpels to just about every doc in between too. Every little nowhere town wants their own doc you know, weren't no different back then. Seems like a town getting a doc is akin to arriving in this world. Don't make no sense but that's how it is. And that's how it was. I dunno. And whatever else those docs needed, they had to have their scalpels. Even a general practice man has warts and the odd lump to cut out. And of course there's the vets and dentists. Foot docs too. I also visited lots of funeral homes. I was on a first name with about every mortician in the state. Most folks don't

know it, but there's lots of cutting and mending what goes on behind the coffin, so to speak (you want Uncle Gus to look good, even after he went through the windshield, right?). It was all enough to keep me on the road 100% most months. Truth is, I didn't have nothing special keeping me at home so the road was as good a place as anywhere.

Highway 94 is a straight shot right across the innards of North Dakota, something like four hundred miles, straight as a Jew man's pecker, and not a goddamn thing to break the monotony anywhere. Well, there is Wanger's just outside of Fargo and thank God for that. I stopped there more than a few times to choke the chicken when it looked like I might have the blue balls otherwise. I wasn't a regular mind you, but I had some times there.

Highway 94 was a regular run for me, a milk run most times, but not that night. No, that night turned into a real blow, a howler as bad as any I ever saw. I wouldn't doubt but folks in the Dakotas still talk about that storm, though I moved to California not long after it. After the blow they said it was a fifty year storm, some even said a hundred. But that was later and I'm getting ahead of myself cause it didn't begin that way. If it had, I mighta thought twice about going out and maybe none of this would have happened.

I dunno. That ain't exactly true. I had pressing business in Bismarck and might have chanced it anyway.

There were only a few other cars on the road when I first set out that day, and they thinned down quickly. I guess the folks on the radio scared 'em off. 94 became something like a ghost town by early evening. That was okay with me. I ain't one for crowds. My usual practice was to leave in the early evening to make it to Bismarck around ten or so. Fargo to Bismarck is two hundred miles and took four to five hours on a good day, twice that in the dead of winter with ice and snow on the roads. I mentioned before I'm a night owl, and I don't mind telling I liked to arrive in Bismarck after dark. It's just how I've always rolled. I'd take care of whatever business I had going that night, get a few hours of sleep, and call on my clients first thing the next morning.

Well, leaving out of Fargo that day I did have the itch. I pulled off the interstate when I saw the sign: Wanger's 24 hour adult peeps and bookstore. Seems like they don't have so many of those around anymore, maybe because of the innernet, but back then they was a Godsend to a traveling man. Given the choice I'll take a partner any day, but pulling your pud has its place. Anyway, I parked and went in. There was a new girl working behind the counter. A pretty thing what couldn't have been twenty but musta been twenty-one to work there. She was thin and had a ring in her nose, blue hair I remember. I guess they call that punkish now. Pretty but a tramp I thought. I dunno. She was nice enough. Didn't give me no 'dirty old man' evil eye when I asked for quarters. Some of 'em do you know. Some get real prissy, like they would give you a sermon given half the chance. What the hell's a girl like that doing in an adult bookstore in the first place? I dunno. I prefer a guy behind the counter. Guys understand that sort of thing. At least the ones working peep shows do.

Well, I went behind the curtain and found a booth and did my part for the sperm of America campaign and zipped up. Didn't take ten minutes.

Only one other booth was occupied when I came out back of the curtain. I could tell 'cause above each door was two little signs: 'Vacant' and 'In Use.' The appropriate one used to light up. All but one read 'Vacant.'

I mention that only because earlier, as I was walking up to the front door of the bookstore, I had seen another car roll in. It was a woody station wagon with a trailer attached, though I didn't pay it no mind then. I never did see the driver. Not then. I dunno. I guess he must have been in that booth pounding his pecker when I finished up.

I winked at Little Miss Blue Hair (she was watching the news on an old black and white portable and never looked up) and was about to leave when my eye fell on a roll of nylon rope. It was florescent pink and labeled 'bondage rope' and had a picture of a devoted couple on the label. The woman was laying on her stomach with her neck extended and her head pulled up and her back arched. She was hog-tied and had a look on her face what woulda given a dead man a hard-on. The man standing over him, a real Mr. America type, had his foot on her back and was clearly in charge. I thought the picture was amateurish horse shit, but you had to give 'em credit for the look on her face, which was almost poetic and alone probably sold a lot of rope.

"They say about the weather?" I asked.

She didn't look at me. "Blizzard warning."

I had been preoccupied that afternoon and realized now I had neglected to pick up a rope. Ain't no sense in going out in a blizzard without a rope. I had put a bag of sand in the back, as well as extra wiper fluid and a second jacket. Also a flashlight and signal flares. And my sample cases of course. Couldn't leave without those. But I had completely blown it as far as the rope was concerned. Pissed me off too. I dunno. I picked up the bondage rope and scanned the package (the words this time). *One half inch diameter. Okay. Soft against the skin, like you won't find in a hardware store.* I didn't care about that. *Cotton.* Two hundred feet the package said. Barely enough. I could have bought two, except they only had one. When I asked Little Miss Blue Hair about another, she helpfully informed me that what they had on the shelves was what they had in stock.

It looked like the real thing. I thought it would probably work. In truth, I doubted I would need it anyway, but better safe than sorry. I bought the pink florescent rope and as I was paying for it, I heard the other driver come out of his booth. He never stepped out from behind the curtain and into the main store though, not while I was there.

"How come you guys are still open?" I asked.

"We ain't," Little Miss Blue Hair said. "We just closed. You and him," she pointed back of the curtain, "the last customers. Have a nice day mister."

I nodded and left. Later, when I was bored and had nothing better to think about, I realized she hadn't wished me safe travels. *Fuck you too*, I thought.

At first it seemed like it was gonna be the usual milk run. I've already said it was cold, sub-zero I recall, with only a few flakes in the air. Normally sub-zero's too cold to snow much, but that ain't always the case in the frozen north. And sometimes, if there's enough fresh snow on the ground, it don't even matter whether or not it's snowing. North Dakota is flat you see, and there ain't hardly a tree to break the wind rushing across those plains. When that wind starts to blowing and all that snow starts to flying, well, things get white in a hurry. I mean white out blizzard blind, what North Dakotans call a howler. I spent the night at grandpappy's place once in a blizzard when I was about ten or eleven. Before the appy anyway. I got lost in the blow going ten feet from the outhouse to the back door. When I stepped out to take a crap, it had been

snowing but relatively clear. My grandpappy came looking for me when I didn't come back. He found me curled fetal at the base of a tree where there was a tire swing I'd played on a hundred times. But I couldn't see the house and was completely disoriented. He himself never would have got us back to the house, except he had tied a rope around his waste. I never forgot that lesson.

That night turned into a real howler, but again I'm getting ahead of myself.

An item on the radio caught my attention as I left out of Wanger's parking lot. It was the third or fourth story on the local news and a bit covered in static. The reporter noted a young waitress, I thought I heard her name as Ronnie or Veronica somebody, had gone missing a few days before, apparently without a trace. Worked at a local diner I guess. I filed the info away in whatever part of the mind those sorts of things go. I frequented a lot of diners in my travels—as a rule, single men in the traveling salesman profession aren't too handy in the kitchen—and I thought maybe it could be I'd crossed paths with this Veronica/Ronnie girl in the past. I made a mental note to check on it.

I made a quick detour to pick up a sample case I had left in storage and I guess it must have been about 8:30 pm I finally came into Toe, one of them one stop hayseed towns that seemed to fill in the Dakotas like a boil on the ass in those years. You know the kinda place: a shit house diner like as not to give you ptomaine poisoning; a flea bag motel or two, usually with a flickering neon sign where the rooms are sold by the hour as well as the night; sometimes a Esso station where you might be able to grab a Cola and a pack of cigs. The Esso station was closed already when I pulled off 94. On account of the weather I found out from Doris when I ordered my eggs at Morty's. I'd stopped at that grease trap maybe a dozen times over the years, always had a ham steak and eggs fried hard. I always did like eggs but can't stand runny yokes. I dunno. Gives me the willies looking at 'em.

There ain't much dusk in a Dakota winter day and what dusk there had been had long passed by the time I arrived at Morty's. Damn near a ghost town the place was, only two cars in the lot aside from my own. I had followed the Lincoln town car for maybe a dozen miles earlier in the evening. A round-faced kid in the backseat had spent the time giving me the finger every few minutes. After awhile it got on my nerves and I was tempted to sell him a scalpel. I thought it would be a #23, a hook blade that would make slitting his own throat easy. I'd use a #10 if I was doing it for him.

The other car was an old woody station wagon pulling a flat bed trailer. The same one I had seen at the peep store. A layer of snow covered the car and trailer both, like they had been sitting outside for some time. A well-used four wheel ATV was chained in the bed of the trailer, alongside a large roll of carpet or canvas. I noted it only in passing and didn't take a good look at it. That was a mistake, but how was I to know that then.

I ate my ham and hard over eggs pretty much in silence, except when I asked Doris whether she thought the weather was gonna break bad. She had lived about them parts for over half a century and I figured she was as good as any of the weather folks I had been listening to on the radio all evening. "Yeah, gonna be a real rip snorter, a howler no doubt 'bout that. How far you got to go?" she asked.

"Bismarck."

"That's a 100 miles. I wouldn't do it tonight. Ain't a chance you'll get through. Storm's coming all right. Be here within the hour I'm guessing. I'd think on turning around. Might be

able to out run it back to Fargo. But heading west? Wouldn't do it unless you got a death wish. Nobody else would be out on a night like this. I doubt even the state patrol will be out."

The town car folks heard her talking I suppose, cause when they pulled out not long after, they did turn back towards Fargo. But not me. I didn't have no death wish of course, but Fargo was a hundred miles in the wrong direction. "I suppose I could stay the night in the motel."

"State condemned that old wreck last week. Part of the roof caved in the first storm of the season," Doris said.

"No shit. Any other place in town?"

"You could stay over with old Henry I suppose. He's a bit particular, and ain't much for strangers, but you don't mind his farting all night and pay him enough he'll be willing to take you in. Not happy, but willing. Only game in town just now."

With that rousing endorsement, better to face death I thought but didn't say. I wasn't convinced I couldn't make it the hundred miles to Bismarck and my business there was important. Doris was just a waitress after all. The last weatherman on the radio had said it might be another two, maybe three hours, before the real storm hit. I'd been in big storms before, had always been able to handle it. I finished my eggs and watched the round-faced boy and his folks walk out to the town car. Sure enough, the boy gave me the finger first chance he got. I dunno what's wrong with some people.

The only other patron left in the diner was a middle-aged man and I took him to be Mr. Woody, the driver of the station wagon. I had sat with my back to his seat, so I really never got a good look at him, except to say he was largish. He never took his jacket off that I saw though, so his size could have been an illusion. He could have been forty or forty-five I thought, my age, but that was a very rough guess. I did notice he looked like a working man, calloused hands and all. I saw this as he retrieved his wallet. I saw one other thing too, but it was quick as he walked past me. He was ugly, had something wrong with his face. I only got a quick glance though, so it was mostly a gestalt just then.

It didn't become a fact until later.

+++++

Well, gentle reader, thanks for reading. That's the first 4,000 words of BLADE MAN. If you liked what you read, there's another 12,000 words (the entire novella is 16,000 words) for your immediate reading available at Amazon for the Kindle for just \$1.49!

Own it today. Right now. Right this very moment.

And check out my website, www.surgeonwriter.com for a few other interesting things to read, including **NEUROSURGERY101—TheBlog**. Damn interesting. It's about life and some of its harder or more interesting moments. It's a blog for the lay person—sometimes about medicine, sometimes not—but always about life and how it is and isn't being lived. Suffice it to say, it's not your usual blog about brain surgery, craniotomies, or broken necks.

NEUROSURGERY101—TheBlog. Damn interesting. Read it at www.surgeonwriter.com today.

And don't forget to check out my other stories, including the novel NOT ONE AMONG THEM WHOLE—A magnificently harrowing trip through the bloody horrors of the battle of Gettysburg. A group of surgeons struggle amid the chaos and carnage of a battlefield hospital in

this epic tale of human grist under the grindstone of the American Civil War. Stunningly intense, engaging, heart-breaking—and absolutely fantastic.

<<<<>>>>