

Chapter 1 Name Your Poison

By Mark Terry

I put razor to skin. Closed my eyes. Opened them again.

Would I have time?

I stared at my haggard image in the mirror.

Would I have time?

I pressed down with the razor, felt its sharp edge.

From across the hallway: "Aaaaaahhhh...."

"Michael," I muttered, dropping the razor on the bathroom counter next to the bottle of shaving cream. I headed for his room, then detoured into the kitchen. I yanked a bottle from the refrigerator, ran hot water, filled a tall plastic cup and submerged the bottle of Similac in the water.

By now Michael had gone from his, "Hey-Dad!-I'm-awake-and-hungry" cry, to the annoyed and frightened cry that indicated he was getting worried about my lack of a prompt--even immediate--response. If I didn't get into his room and haul him out of his crib PDQ he would advance to full-blown hysteria. The only thing capable of ending full-blown hysteria was time: not Dad's reassuring presence, cuddling or cooing, nor a nice warm bottle of baby formula. Once Michael got going there was no stopping him.

I rushed to his crib.

Too late, I thought. Michael's face was scarlet, his little hands tightened into stubborn knots, face scrunched up into the constipated expression of a rabid shar-pei.

I picked him up and he screamed even louder. "Come on, Michael," I sang. "Let's go get a nice bottle of Sim."

He continued to shriek.

"Yeah, Daddy's here," I said. "Breakfast time. Then we'll take a shower together. Someday, buddy, maybe in eighteen years or so, I'll shave and shower in private. What do you think of that, huh?"

He opened his amazingly blue eyes and hiccuped to a screeching halt. He fixed his four-month-old gaze on me and stopped crying.

Well. Miracle of miracles. My presence didn't ricochet him into an even stronger state of panic. Mark this one down on my calendar. Yes indeed.

I carried him into the kitchen, retrieved the dripping bottle, awkwardly tested it against my forearm--not an easy thing to do while holding a baby--decided it was warm enough, and settled onto the old brown couch, popping the bottle's nipple into Michael's mouth. I relaxed, trying to enjoy this moment, even though I hadn't particularly enjoyed it at midnight, two, four and now six o'clock. Michael was a slow eater and could drag out a bottle for an hour. This left me with about five hours of sleep taken in one-hour increments.

It caught up to me. I nodded off.

I awoke to a knock at the front door. Michael, bottle drained, was staring up at me. I sat him upright to get off the couch and he demonstrated his need to burp by spewing about a gallon of half-digested Similac all over my T-shirt. "Rrrrrr," I said, and carried Michael to the front door.

Mom and Dad stepped through, took one look at me and broke into laughter. "What? What?!" I said.

Dad gestured to his own face. I touched mine. My hand came away covered with shaving cream. Oh. So that was why Michael had stopped crying. "What time is it?" I said, ignoring my foamy face.

"7:20," Dad said. "Uh...you're not ready."

"No," I said, handing Michael to my mother. "He needs to burp."

"Did he spit up on you?"

"Of course," I said.

I shaved and showered at a dead run. The shave wasn't careful enough and the shower wasn't long enough. Sleep had been totally insufficient. Such is life. At least mine. I rushed out, still knotting my tie, kissed Michael, kissed Mom, waved to Dad and raced out the door. Only to return a moment later to retrieve, in order: coffee, briefcase and car keys.

"Have you heard from Ellen?" Mom said.

Count on Mom to bring up a bad subject at exactly the worst time.

"No," I said, and stomped out of the house, muttering, "And I probably never will."

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Forty-five minutes later I pulled into the parking lot of Green Earth Industries, Inc., where I was employed. It was a low-slung, two-story building done in reflective blue glass and preformed

concrete. It was surrounded by mature hardwood trees whose October colors just hinted at the change of weather soon to come. I was a high enough muckety-muck to earn a reserved parking spot, but not high enough to be close to the front door. I parked the Saturn station wagon and strolled toward the entrance, not wanting to act as rushed as I felt. My mind raced through the list of things I had to do today, certain I was forgetting something important like a breakfast meeting with the head of the company. I hoped I hadn't.

Charlie Anderson, the security man at the main entrance, greeted me by name. "Hello, Dr. MacGreggor."

"Charlie, how many times do I have tell you, call me Mac."

"I can read the name on your badge and the name on your parking spot," Charlie said. "And you'd be surprised how strongly some of your co-workers feel about me getting it right."

Charlie was in his fifties, a lean whip of a man with an enviable head of thick white hair. He wore a uniform of black shoes, pants and jacket with a white shirt and dark tie. A patch on the jacket indicated he was security for Green Earth Industries, Inc. "So I go by the book," he said. "Dr. The-o-dore MacGreggor."

"Nobody calls me Theodore," I said.

"Not even your mother?"

"She calls me Teddy."

"Your father?"

"Theo," I said. "Which is acceptable. But Mac is preferred. You know that."

"Running a little late today...Doctor MacGreggor?" He grinned and tapped his blunt finger on the sign-in sheet.

"Have a nice day, Charlie," I said, signing in and slashing my badge through the barcode reader.

"You, too, Doc."

I turned, laughing, as I entered the facility. "Doc's acceptable, too."

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My lab and office was toward the back of the building on the main floor. The lab door said GENETIC TOXICOLOGY and my office door stated I was the director. When they monogram your door, it must be true. I punched the four-digit code to get into the lab and stepped through. The lab was broken into three sections: my office, a communal break and office area, and a large open lab with a number of small rooms jutting off it. Green Earth Industries, Inc. was a

biotechnology firm supposedly dedicated to churning out genetically altered products which could be sold to pharmaceutical companies but not harm the environment. We did okay churning out the products, even sold some, but as for harming the environment, I wasn't sure it was really a priority. The bottom line was Show Me The Money.

The lab seemed to be empty. Four rows of black lab benches crowded with thousands of dollars worth of equipment: gas chromatographs, incubators, centrifuges, water baths, computers and Mettler scales. Shelves lined with bottles of chemicals. There was the whir of computer fans, the swoosh of hood filters and the click of tube shakers. But no people.

Since I was an hour late, this didn't make sense. I felt an uneasy twinge along my spine, wondering if I really had forgotten an important meeting.

A big guy in an expensive suit burst into the room. "Mac, what the hell's going on in here?"

"Good morning, Colin," I said. "Your line was supposed to be, '*How are you, Mac?*' Then I say, '*I'm fine. How are you, Colin?*' This is commonly called a conversation."

Dr. Colin Baxter was about two rungs higher on the corporate ladder than me. He was head of Product Development. I was Director of Genetic Toxicology, and in my quality control role, wasn't really under him at all. But, of course, at Green Earth, everything fell under Product Development.

He waved me off as if I were a gnat. "We hear there's some sort of blue flu going on here," he said.

"Blue flu?" I asked.

"Almost your entire lab came in, then went home sick. Complaining they have the flu. Look, Mac, we need that final report on MDT-37. You know we're under fire with the stockholders--"

I held up my hand and looked into one of the tissue culture rooms off the main lab. Sandy Wilcox and Jennifer Fleurs were working in the laminar-flow hoods.

"Some of my employees are still here," I said. "I just got in--"

"We've been trying to get hold of you for the last forty-five minutes," Colin said. He was a large man, six-three, maybe two-eighty. He had the heavy jowls of a walrus and the ruddy complexion of a hypertensive. He regularly joked that he'd slow down "after I recover from my first heart attack." A big, bluff, friendly guy who motivated people by badgering them. He continued. "You're not answering your cell phone, that old lady at your house--"

"My mother, Colin."

"Oh. Sorry. Anyway, if there are serious morale problems in your department, this is the first we've heard of it. And frankly, Mac, the timing's bad. I just talked to you a couple months ago about your attitude--"

"Hang on." I reached into my briefcase and snagged my cellular phone. Quickly checking the power, I saw my battery was dead and dropped it back into my briefcase without comment. "Let me talk to the people who *are* here. Morale isn't bad. Maybe they're really sick."

"Seven people? All calling in sick at the same time? Look, Mac, we need the final tox report on MDT-37 ASAP. We're all counting on you."

I spun on Colin. Ever since MDT-37 had been developed and delivered to my lab for testing, Colin and half the upper echelon at Green Earth had been breathing down my neck. "We've been over this before," I said.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Colin said. He walked into the break room with me right behind him. He picked up a mug at random--it was mine--blew dust out of it and poured himself a cup of coffee, adding three creams and two packets of sugar.

"No yeah, yeah, yeah," I said. "My job is to make sure that the stuff we're selling is methyl-ethyl-goodshit. That's what the pharmaceutical companies want, so they can go into clinical trials without killing their test subjects. If we tell them it's methyl-ethyl-goodshit but deliver methyl-ethyl-badshit, the lawsuit we'll face will be so big you might even have to give up your condo in Key Largo."

"Never happen," he said, taking a big gulp of coffee.

"We're working on it," I said. "It looks pretty good, but that's preliminary. I want it tested not only on rabbits and mice and rats, but on a series of human tissue cultures, especially liver and kidney, as well as brain tissue."

"It's taking too long," he said, swallowing more java.

"My deadline is November 15th," I said. "I'll have the final report to you before then."

Colin's expression shifted, twisted. My mind turned to Colin's jokes about a heart attack. Then I thought maybe I'd been too blunt with him. Sometimes blunt was the only way to communicate with Colin; sometimes, I thought, use of a blunt instrument was the only way to communicate with Colin.

Colin pressed his hand to his stomach, dropped the coffee cup, and staggered out the door. The cup shattered, spilling steaming coffee all over the tile floor. I stared at the mess, then after Colin's retreating form.

Sandy and Jennifer appeared at my side. "Is he sick, too?" Sandy asked.

I looked down at the coffee spill again. "Did you two drink coffee?" I asked.

Sandy, who never seemed to drink anything but bottled water, carrot juice or herbal tea, shook her head. Jennifer, who was six months pregnant, hadn't had coffee since the positive pregnancy test.

"Turn off the coffee maker," I said. "Put a sign on it saying DO NOT TOUCH. I'll be right back."

I ran after Colin. Had someone poisoned my lab? Had someone put poison in the coffee?