

IN EXTREMIS

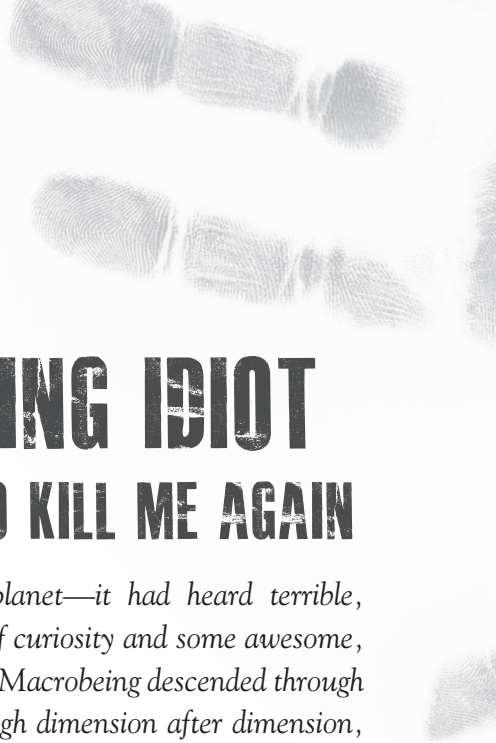
THE MOST EXTREME SHORT STORIES OF
JOHN SHIRLEY

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YOU BLUNDERING IDIOT YOU FUCKING FAILED TO KILL ME AGAIN

The Macrobeing had heard about the planet—it had heard terrible, appalling stories of conditions there. Out of curiosity and some awesome, unimaginable, cosmic variation of pity, the Macrobeing descended through many levels, through layers of laws, through dimension after dimension, down to a mere three dimensions, to see this world for itself. To see if the story was true . . .

Other members of the Macrobeings macroscopic race speculated that there must be some good and sufficient reason this planet was so polluted, so verminous, so pestilential, so dominated by brutality and predation—but the Macrobeing wasn't convinced. It wasn't so sure at all that this horror, the planet Earth, should be allowed to continue. The problem wasn't merely the dominant race: the lower animals, too, lived mostly by preying on one another—actually eating one another!—or by trying to avoid being eaten.

It seemed cruel to allow it to go on.

Samuel Masterson Helleck figured that Stubs Grunauer was the man for the job. Grunauer was bulky and strong and indifferent to the feelings of others out of an innate, happy-go-lucky stupidity, like a rhino stepping heedlessly on a bird, and he'd do anything for money that didn't require real sweat-breaking work, or thinking, and he never thought about consequences so he wouldn't worry about legality. Grunauer had been quite surprised the time he was

arrested for breaking into a supermarket at night and cooking a steak on the concrete floor in the back room—he'd piled up barbecue charcoal. When the cops came in, alerted by several alarms, Grunauer was just sitting there drinking cheap vodka from a bottle—though he could just as easily have taken the good stuff off the shelves—and watching his steak sizzle directly on the coals . . .

“What? I was fucking *hungry*, dude!” he told them.

So Helleck figured that two hundred dollars would be enough to induce Grunauer to kill him—to effectuate his suicide—even though Grunauer was only three days out of jail.

A big man with a slack mouth and perpetual halitosis, his dishwasher-hair cut in the shape of a bowl around his pimply forehead, Grunauer was wearing a black and silver Oakland Raiders shirt, a size too small for him, so that his gut slopped out under it, that drizzly July day in Fremont, California.

“Supposed to be sun out, in July,” Grunauer observed as Helleck came into the weedy, junked-up backyard of Grunauer's white crackerbox house. Actually it was the house of Grunauer's long-suffering mother.

Grunauer was standing there in the drizzle, in his sagging jeans and rotting tennis shoes, gaping up at the sky, a forty of Olde English in his right hand.

“You keep standing like that, Grunauer,” Helleck said, “eventually you're going to drown.”

Grunauer blinked away rain, drank some beer, and looked at Helleck. He didn't seem surprised to see Helleck here, in his backyard, though they hadn't seen each other for seventeen years. Helleck's straw-like hair had receded to just above his ears, marking the passage of years, but Grunauer behaved as if they'd just seen each other at high school that day. “I mean, this fucking rain, man,” Grunauer said. “You bring any beer, Helleck? I'm about out.”

Grunauer had been a linebacker on the school team, Helleck had played tight end. Helleck had left the team because the coach

wouldn't consider him when quarterback opened up—typical, in Helleck's view, of the unfair hands dealt to him by life. The coach was prejudiced against him because of his obvious artistic gifts—jocks always resented a genius—and then girls turned from him because, in all probability, they were intimidated by his spontaneous brilliance. Bosses fired him because his wit was too acerbic, his insight into their foibles too shatteringly incisive.

Helleck could take no more of the world's persecution. He would punish all humanity by withdrawing from it, and afterwards, after his death, his poetry, his lyrics, the acoustic songs he'd put up online, would shine out, would take the world by storm, and he would be appreciated like Van Gogh, like Poe, like Fred Smargenbarger. Well, not many knew about Fred Smargenbarger, but Helleck would never forget his immortal lines:

*I turn to survey the fruit of my squatting—
How my crap shines in the moonlight!*

Smargenbarger was a fellow unsung genius, in Helleck's view.

Helleck looked around the tatty backyard with distaste; saw a dead cat half hidden by a tarp in one corner; also a rusting oil barrel, an old soft-plastic kiddie pool, a rusting tire rim, a rusting wheel barrow, several overgrown piles of bricks.

"Your bricks are missing their brac," said Helleck.

Grunauer just stared at him. What had he expected? Wit was lost on the witless. But that made Grunauer perfect for the job: too stupid to think he might get arrested later if the cops came on him doing the deed.

"Grunauer," Helleck said. "I want to hire you for two hundred dollars."

"To do what?"

"To kill me. And I'll pay you for it."

"Uhhhh . . . 'kay," Grunauer said. "My ma's been getting on me, I don't earn no money. I remember when I forgot to go to school that year, she said, 'You ain't gonna earn no money if you don't go to school.' Only, I never figured out where they paid you at school—"

“Grunauer? Shut up. If you want the two hundred dollars, shut up. Now—here’s one hundred dollars of the money.”

He handed Grunauer five twenties, half of what remained of his final unemployment check. “Here’s the first half. You get the second hundred after . . .”

Grunauer blinked at him. “You give it to me after I kill you?”

“What? No, no, no . . . after I’m dead, look in my wallet, there’s an address where the rest is, under my bed.”

“Wait—who’d you say you wanted me to kill?”

“Me.”

“You? No, but . . . who?”

“Me, you idiot, me! It’s a suicide! I want to be dead! The world doesn’t fucking deserve me! And I don’t think I could bring myself to jump off a building or something—I’d lose my nerve. Someone’s got to *do it to me*.”

Grunauer nodded seven or eight times. Then he nodded three times more. Then twice more. “Kay. You bring, um, a gun?”

“No. I looked into that, and it’s really hard to buy a gun legally, takes weeks. I’ve got to get this done while I’m psyched to do it. And I already sent the letters to the papers and editors and everyone with samples of my poetry and tapes of my songs and stuff. So it’s gotta be done. I tried to buy a gun on the street but I couldn’t find anybody I trusted not to pretend they were gonna sell me a gun and just take the money and not come across with the gun—since, after all, they’d have a gun and I wouldn’t. So we’re gonna do it some other way.”

“How you want me to kill you?”

“Well . . . is that an old kiddie pool, there? One of those little inflatable swimming pools?”

“Yuh. My mum found it on some free stuff heap somewheres.” Grunauer took another long pull of his beer.

“It’s already half full of water—just fill it with the hose there and hold my head down in it.”

“Uh-kay . . . No.”

“What?”

“I don’t mind doin’ the job of killing you but fillin’ it up is *work*, dude.”

“I . . . fuck it, I’ll do it.” Helleck found a hose, turned the water on, filled the blue and yellow plastic kiddie pool. There were pictures of SpongeBob mixed with some kind of dancing grinning starfish around the side. SpongeBob and that starfish would witness his death and rejoice with him. There was a poem in that, somewhere. But the time for all that was past—except for the final poetic statement; his death.

Helleck tossed the hose aside, knelt, and waved Grunauer over. “Okay, come on, hold my head down in here till I drown.”

“Uh-kay, yuh sure. The money’s in your wallet?”

“No, the rest of it’s at my house, the address is in my wallet. Come on, let’s get it done!”

Grunauer finished the Olde English, tossed the bottle aside with a clunk, and sat on Helleck so that his face was smashed down into the water.

Helleck immediately tried to cry out in protest—somehow being crushed by Grunauer’s ass lacked dignity as a way to die—but water filled his mouth and nose and rushed down into his lungs and SpongeBob seemed to dance in front of him, wavering through the lens of the water as he drowned, and he reflected that, after all, drowning is drowning. Fuck, but this really hurt, it hurt in his lungs, he hoped it would be over soon. It really, really hurt. It was too much, it hurt too much, and he started flailing around to break free and—

That moron Grunauer stood up.

Helleck sat up, spewing water, coughing, and heard a woman talking, the bent little white-haired toothless woman in the stained shift who’d let him into the backyard, Grunauer’s mother. “I don’t care what he is paying you, you sure as hell can’t do that here,” she was saying. “Now Stubs git out of here with that, I don’t want to know about it! And leave the money here for me to take care of!”

“Uh-kay Ma.”

“Grunauer,” Helleck managed to say, between gasps, “you idiot! You could have ignored her and finished the job!”

“Naw, she hides the TV remote if I don’t do what she says.”

“Oh for Christ’s—alright, come on, let’s go somewhere else.”

Helleck’s lungs still burned as they walked out through the gate, past the yammering old lady, neither one of them taking in what she was saying, then down the street two blocks to the railroad tracks that ran through a district of mostly abandoned warehouses. They crossed the gravel strip to the tracks and then Grunauer got an inspired look on his face and pointed. “Huh look, there’s a big piece—a metal like a crowbar kinda thing—them railroad guys musta lost it there. I could use that to bash you in! Put your head on the railroad tracks!”

Helleck grimaced—but then shrugged and said, “Why not—it sounds quick. Just get it done fast, okay?”

“Yuh.”

Helleck lay down on the gravel, head on the railing, right side down, and began singing one of his songs.

*“I don’t care If you don’t know it
I know I’m a genius and the world doesn’t deserve me
I know it because the rats tell it to the cockroaches who told it to me
So fuck you all, fuck you all, fuck you all, fuck you all . . .”*

He broke off and looked sidelong up at Grunauer who was towering over him, a smelly silhouette. “Grunauer—what are you waiting for?”

“I was listening to your song!”

“Just tell people you heard it at the end and how great you thought it was—now do it! Break my skull!”

“Uh-kay.”

Helleck closed his eyes, half inclined to run—but it was too late, he heard a whipping sound of something coming through the air, and then—*crack*. Tremendous pain in his left ear. This is it! The end!

Tremendous pain, waves of pain, on the left side of his head . . .

That didn’t stop. Just . . . that one crack and then . . .

He opened his eyes. “Grunauer—shit that hurts!—why’d you stop?”

Grunauer’s voice sounded distorted through all the blood pooling in his ear. “Yuh ain’t dead yet?”

“No!”

“My arm hurts—that thing’s heavy!”

“So?” Helleck felt dizzy, removed, dreamlike. “You only hit me once! Now bust my fuckin’ skull!”

“Uh-kay.”

Crack. Another blazing pain this time on the side of his head above his ear.

“Shit! Ow! Can’t you hit straight! Kill me!”

“I want some more beer, dude!”

“Get it later! Come on, I paid you—make like Nike and just fucking do it! “

“I just . . . it’s fucked up Helleck . . . I don’t like breaking open heads . . . it makes my stomach hurt! I like *stabbing* okay . . . couldn’t I stab you some?”

“What? With what? Ow, my fucking head . . .”

“There’s a big old rusty nail lying over here . . . on this wood thing . . . useta be old Gunky’s shack . . .”

“Whatever, just get it fucking done! I can’t stand this! End it! Stab me—here, I’m turning on my back, stab me in the chest, stab me now, stab me in the fucking chest RIGHT FUCKING NOW!”

“I didn’t pick up the nail yet.”

“You . . . moron!”

“Wait, I got it now . . . I got it . . . Oh, let me put down this other thing . . . okay . . . hey, there’s old Gunky down there, waving! Maybe he’s got some wine! When I was a kid he gave me wine if I let him play with my peter! Do you think he’s got some wine, Helleck?”

“WILL YOU FUCKING KILL ME YOU CRETIN?”

“I don’t like to be called names. But, whatever, dude. Uh-kay. I’m kneeling down here . . . Ow—kneeling here on these rocks hurts my knees, dude!”

“My fucking skull is cracked! You don’t think that hurts? Just do the job! FUUUUUUUCK! NOW! STAB ME IN THE HEART RIGHT FUCKING NOW!”

“Uh-kay.”

Grunauer took the long rusty nail in his hand the way a man holds an ice pick, and stabbed down—right into Helleck’s breastbone.

“EEEEEE-YOWWWWW that fucking hurts! You dumbass dick-licking shithead—that’s not my heart!”

“I thought your heart was right there in the middle, ain’t that where a heart is, dude? We always put our hands over that spot when we was in grade school and they made us do the Pledge of Allegiance—”

“No, *fuc*—get it out, it’s fucking killing me! I mean it’s not killing me, it’s hurting me! Pry it out . . .”

“It’s stuck . . .”

“OWWWWWWWW!” Helleck reached up and pried the nail out of his breastbone himself and handed the nail up to Grunauer. “Now here! Stab it in my heart—my heart is right over here! See where I’m pointing? It’s right—*FUCKING OW!* What are you doing, you stabbed me in the hand!”

“You said to stab where you were pointing and your hand was there and—”

“No, under my hand!”

“I can’t get under your hand because it’s in the way—and now your hand is nailed to your chest! It looks really cool! But it’s stuck on your chest! The nail went right through and—”

“AUUUGH!” And Helleck pulled the nail out of his hand, and chest, and—his uninjured hand trembling so much he could barely hold onto the nail—he handed it again to Grunauer. “Will you just get it over with! Stab in that same hole but deeper, between the ribs, right into my heart!”

“Right there? Uh-kay!”

Grunauer stabbed but the nail glanced off a rib, cracking it.

“ARGH FUCKING OW FUCKING SHIT FUCKING PISS THAT FUCKING HURTS!”

“You said, you SAID right there, Helleck!”

“But I said between the ribs, you can see where the ribs are—”

“But it’s all slippy like with blood and I can’t aim with all that blood!”

“Try fucking AGAIN!”

“Uh-kay.”

Grunauer clamped his tongue between his crusty teeth, closed one eye, and, aiming carefully, he stabbed down. But the nail only stuck out under his fist an inch or so and it didn’t quite go deep enough to penetrate Helleck’s heart—it just *scratched* the outside of his heart painfully.

“EEEEH YOW! You fucking idiot!”

Invisible and all-encompassing, vast but subtle, the Macrobeing had surveyed most of the planet Earth, had paused in several places—Darfur, parts of India, parts of Florida, a concentration camp in North Korea, hundreds of thousands of old people’s homes and hospices . . . and was still uncertain. On the one hand, Earth seemed to cry out for a compassionate veterinary “putting down—but on the other hand it seemed to the Macrobeing that though indeed these creatures lived, at best, lives of quiet existential confusion and misery, and at worst lived with great suffering, there were also positive, redemptive feelings and events and ideas, and maybe this world should be allowed to go on so that these creatures could evolve . . .

And then it noticed a spike of suffering in a part of “California” called “Fremont” and it glanced down to see Grunauer trying to kill Helleck—all the time Helleck begging him to do it—and the Macrobeing watched them in sickened fascination for a while . . .

“You have to . . . to . . . to . . .”

“To what, Helleck?”

“Stuh . . . stuh . . . stuh . . .”

“I don’t know whatcha saying, yuh not talking English—”

“STAB ME! STAB ME IN THE HEART YOU IDIOT! PUSH IT IN and . . . OH FUCK . . .” Helleck had to pause to turn over and vomit up his meager breakfast. This took a while. Finally he flopped onto his back with a groan. “Push the nail in and then hammer it in my heart with that crowbar . . .”

“Uh-kay.”

Grunauer shoved the nail in, then got the bar of iron, and started to hammer at the nail with it—but he aimed badly, and the nail went to the side and jammed in the tissue under Helleck’s pectoral, over the heart . . .

“YAHHHHHH! That hurts! YOU MISSED, you fucking MORON you!”

“Helleck—a train’s coming! You could jump in front of it!”

“No . . . no . . . can’t do it myself—you . . . you . . . you got to throw me in front of it! Pick me up! I’m small, you’re strong—pick me up—”

“Uh-kay.”

Grunauer picked Helleck up in his arms and moved back from the tracks and waited and in a moment the freight train came barreling along, screaming with its horn, and Grunauer got close to the train and tossed Helleck between two freight cars—

Only he did it clumsily and Helleck didn’t quite go in, but got stuck with his arm between the car and the metal wheel and was dragged along. His backbone curled, his arm twisted right off with a pop, and then the train was gone and Helleck was left there in a bloody wrenched semi-human pile next to the tracks, groaning and alive . . .

“Helleck—you ain’t dead . . . dude?”

“No you BLUNDERING IDIOT, you failed to kill me AGAIN!” Helleck cried, though it was difficult to see where his mouth was in the knotted-up wreckage of him.

“Uh-kay. Sorry. Hey I guess that’s half of the killin’ anyway. You can keep the other half of the money. I got to go, my mom was gonna make me something to eat.”

“What? You FUCKER! Stay here and kill me! Just get a big rock or jump up on my head or—”

“I can’t, I think the police is coming—”

“You’d better fucking kill me or I’ll tell them you hurt me without being paid to. Now dammit, KILL ME!”

“No, well, uh . . . I dunno . . . ’zactly . . . what should I do?”

Watching Helleck and Grunauer, the Macrobeing had had enough. These two seemed to sum up this world, in a general way they were the final straw, the turning point. The Macrobeing made up its mind, pity got the best of it. The Macrobeing decided to put this planet out of its misery.

So the vast amorphous creature stretched out its energy field, and encompassed the planet Earth, enclosed it like a small animal in a man’s fist, and squeezed, just enough . . .

And in just under ninety-three seconds the entire Earth was wiped clean of life. Painlessly and entirely. It was all gone, even plants, even micro-organisms. The Macrobeing liked to be thorough. Since there were no micro-organisms left after it was done, there was no decay, and all the organisms in the world simply stopped moving and stopped living and sometime later each one fell into a nice dry heap of dust.

Afterwards, Macrobeings would sometimes visit the lifeless planet, simply because it was so very peaceful there . . .