

BY THE AUTHOR OF *SHAKEN*



BANANA HAMMOCK

A "WRITE YOUR OWN DAMN STORY" ADVENTURE



YOU CONTROL
THE STORY
YOU CONTROL
THE FUN

J. A. KONRATH

a Harry McGlade mystery

BANANA HAMMOCK

A “Write Your Own Damn Story” Harry McGlade Adventure

by J.A. KONRATH

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Edition: January 2011

Author’s Warning

This ebook is filled with raunchy humor, and has something to offend everyone. If you believe there are taboo things that shouldn’t be laughed at or made fun of, stop reading right now and pick up one of my other, less-offensive books. But if you like roasting sacred cows, read on. You’ll probably laugh.

Author’s Note

This is not a single, linear ebook, and should not be read in order.

I repeat: DON’T READ THIS PAGE BY PAGE.

This ebook is meant to be read out of order, depending on the path you, the reader, choose.

Harry McGlade is a continuing character in the Jacqueline “Jack” Daniels series. At the end of each section, you decide where Harry goes, and what he does. By following different paths, you can arrive at many different endings. There are literally hundreds of variations.

You control the character. You control the fun.

Join Harry and a cast of characters pulled from JA Konrath’s and Jack Kilborn’s stories, and push ebook technology to the boundaries of reading enjoyment, or something like that.

Banana Hammock Drink Recipe

2 oz. light rum
1 oz. 99 Bananas Schnapps
1 oz. amaretto
1/2 oz. lime juice
1/2 oz. sweet and sour mix
Shake with ice.

Strain into a chilled cocktail glass.

Garnish with two maraschino cherries and half a peeled banana.

And so it begins...

I was on my Facebook page, racking up some major points in Combville—a game where you used a virtual comb to comb a virtual head of hair, over and over and over again until time and life lost all meaning and you questioned the reason for your birth. Then she walked into my office.

This woman had it all. Legs. Eyes. Elbows. A big head of blond hair that for some reason I wanted to comb. She wore a plain blue dress, and had a white bonnet on her head, which was unusual for Chicago. Actually, it was unusual for pretty much everywhere.

“Are you Harry McGlade? The private investigator?”

I nodded, still tapping the COMB button on my screen. Fifty-six thousand more strokes and I’d get a virtual gold coin. When I earned ten coins, I’d be able to buy a different color comb.

“My name is Lula. Lula Coleslaw. I need your help.”

“Have a seat, Ms. Coleslaw,” I said, pointing to the chair opposite my desk. Then I tore myself away from Facebook. Or at least I pretended to, and kept pressing the button.

She sat down and crossed her legs, in that way women do, with one leg over the other. Her perfume smelled like Crunchberries. She pulled a Kleenex out of her Gucci and dabbed at her Cover Girl eyes, asking me if I could give her a Diet Coke.

“Just get to the point,” I said, indicating the book on my desk, Fair Use of Trademarked Brand Names.

“It’s my husband, Mr. McGlade. I believe he’s having an affair.”

“I see. And you want me to find the floozy and scar her face with acid, make her unappealing to him?”

“What? No! That’s barbaric.”

“Should I scar his face with acid so she won’t love him anymore?”

“I don’t want any acid thrown in anyone’s face. I just want you to follow him and tell me who he’s sleeping with.”

I nodded, closing my desk drawer, the one filled with all the acid bottles. “I charge five hundred a day, plus expenses. Expenses include tolls and parking meters, brunch, Xbox Live games, and air mattresses.”

“Why do I have to pay for air mattresses?”

I shrugged. “Inflation.”

“That’s a lot of money for me, Mr. McGlade. You see, I’m Amish.”

That probably explained the bonnet. And the Kiss Me I’m Amish button she wore. Which was odd, because I thought the Amish didn’t wear buttons.

“Forgive me if this sounds insulting, you loony whackjob, but I wasn’t aware of any Amish settlements in the Chicago metropolitan area.”

“I’m from Indiana. We have a farming community near Gary. I’m a milkmaid.”

I glanced at her hands, trying to imagine her strong, firm, insistent grip, and wondering how she managed to keep her fake nails from falling off.

“A milkmaid? Can you prove it to me? Maybe pretend I have udders?”

“No, I can’t. But did you know that a cow has four stomachs?”

“That’s a lot of tripe,” I declared.

“Yes, it is.”

“If I were to take this case,” I said, “I’d want to be paid in actual cash money. Not three chickens and a handsomely made maplewood dresser.”

“But it’s a really nice dresser. Dovetail joints. Corner blocks.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Mortise and tenon drawer frames?”

“Of course. And lacquered until it shines like a welfare baby’s neglected wet bottom.”

I clucked my tongue. But though I was a sucker for old world craftsmanship, you can’t pay the rent with dovetail joints and a cherrywood inlay. Or can you? I never tried before. I did once try to pay my rent in spareribs, but got in trouble for pushing them under my landlord’s door.

“It’s a tempting offer, sugar lumps. But I’m afraid I only take cold, hard, stiff cash.”

“How about credit cards?” she asked.

“The major ones, and some of the minor ones.”

“Which minor ones?”

“You know. Angler’s Club. The Bank of Murray. Velveesa.”

She whipped out an Angler’s Club card, a big picture of a walleye on it. Something about this was kind of fishy.

“Hold on a second, babydoll,” I said, holding up my palm. “I haven’t actually taken the case yet. Let me think about this while I comb.”

Should Harry take the case? If so, [click here](#).

If he should keep playing Combville, [click here](#)

We walked out of my office, onto the city street. It was buzzing with electricity, and ComEd was there with a group of technicians and paramedics, trying to protect people from getting shocks and third-degree burns. As we rounded the corner, Lulu gasped at

the sight of her horse and buggy being towed away. I soon saw why it had happened—she'd tried to pay the parking meter with two fresh eggs and a jar of marmalade.

"Amos is going to thrash me for this," Lulu pouted.

"Amos is your husband?"

She nodded. "I have welts on my bare bottom where he's beaten me with a switch."

"I may need to look at those later," I said. "For evidence, or something."

Lulu began to sob, her mascara running. "He's a horrible man, Mr. McGlade. A plain, God-fearing, horrible man. He beats me for the smallest of offenses. Burning down our home. Letting our son drown. Flarching..."

"Flarching?"

"That's farting during sex."

I stared at her. "I don't think that's a real word."

"Give it a month. Someone will upload it to UrbanDictionary.com."

Hmm. Perhaps the Amish were more progressive than I thought.

"So what should we do, Mr. McGlade? Go to the auto pound and pay to get my horse? Or just forget it and get on with this dumb story?"

To get the horse, [click here](#).

To get on with the story, [click here](#).

To check the urban dictionary for *flarch*, [click here](#).

To return to the previous section, [click here](#).

"Will you help me, Mr. McGlade?"

"Hmm?"

Combville had once again captured my attention. Damn these repetitive, boring, addictive Facebook games. Why did I even bother with Facebook? And why did I only have five Facebook friends? And why were they all jerks?

I kept combing.

"Will you help me?" she asked, apparently still in my office.

"What? Oh. No. No I won't. I've got too much to do right now. But check back in a few days."

Sadness fell across her face and she stood up, turning to leave.

"Wait," I said. "Are you on Facebook?"

"No. We shun modern technology, Mr. McGlade. My ereader doesn't even have 3G."

"You mean it's only WiFi?"

She nodded, sadly. I felt for her, but I had to be firm on this. "Sorry, tastycakes. I'm really busy."

"Please, Mr. McGlade. I really need your help."

"Let me think about it again."

Should Harry take the case? If so, [click here](#).

If he should keep playing Combville, [click here](#).

“Will you help me, Mr. McGlade?”

“Hmm? Who are you?”

I’d gotten into a rhythm, tapping the Combville button in time with my heartbeat. It was almost as much fun as combing hair in real life, without all the hard work. Like having to actually lift a real comb.

I’ve always loved hair. Years ago, in a school play, I took the role of Macbeth’s toupee. But it was a bad part.

(Please press the rimshot button on your ereader.)

“I’m Lulu Coleslaw. I—”

“You said that already. I thought you were leaving.”

She turned to leave, giving me a sexy peek at her bloomers as her fifty pound dress twirled.

“Wait,” I said.

“Yes?”

“Are you on Facebook?”

“You asked me that already.”

“What did you say?”

“I said—”

“Nevermind. This is getting repetitive.”

“Please. Will you help me?”

“I haven’t decided yet. Let me think it over.”

Should Harry take the case? If so, [click here](#).

If he should keep playing Combville, [click here](#).

“Mr. McGlade?”

“Hmm? Do I know you?”

“How many times are we going to keep doing this?”

“Doing what?” I asked.

Comb, comb, comb, comb, comb...

“Will you take my case or not?”

“Yes, I’ve got to make a decision, don’t I? You seem to be getting annoyed, doing the same thing again and again. Personally, I think it’s pretty funny.”

“So will you?”

“Will I what?”

“Will you help me, Mr. McGlade?”

“Who are you again?”

“Lulu. Lulu Coleslaw.”

“I think I knew a stripper named Coleslaw. Are you her?”

“Of course not. I’m Amish.”

“Yep, I’ve known a lot of strippers with bad names.”

“Are you going to help me?”

“I don’t know. I’ll have to think this through.”

Should Harry take the case? If so, [click here](#).

If you want to read a list of bad stripper names, [click here](#).

If you believe that you have the power to change fate, [click here](#).

“Hell no, I don’t want to get your damn horse,” I said. “I’m an important man, with important stuff to do, probably.”

I had my iPhone out and was accessing the Combville app.

“But Amos will starve! There’s nothing to eat in an auto pound.”

“Your horse is named Amos?”

She nodded.

“Isn’t your husband named Amos as well?”

“Yes.”

“You don’t think that’s odd?” I asked.

“Not at all. But my brother Amos finds it strange.”

“I promise we’ll get the horse later,” I lied. “Right now we need to go to the costume shop.”

“For what?” Lulu asked.

“For one of those plain black suits and an Abe Lincoln beard.” I winked. “I’m going undercover as an Amish guy.”

To go to the costume shop, [click here](#).

To skip to the end of the story, [click here](#).

To return to the previous section, [click here](#).

Clandestine Weston’s Costume Shoppe was located two blocks from my office. It took forty minutes to find a cab. We arrived around four o’clock, which was perfect. Any later and we would have gotten caught in the after-work costume rush. I hated crowds. Especially crowds of people.

Weston, the owner, was dressed as a pirate, complete with an eye patch and a plastic hook for a hand. He wore a Show Me Your Booty button.

“Hello again, Jessica. Returning the costume so soon?” he asked Lulu.

“Don’t mind her, Weston,” I told him. “I need you to make me look like Harrison Ford’s most famous character.”

“The retard from Regarding Henry?”

“No. His other famous character.”

“Ah. The Amish cop from Witness.”

“Nailed it in two, Weston.”

Weston walked past a Star Wars display and over to the Mennonite aisle. Lulu grabbed my shoulders and began to shake me, urgently.

“We need to get out of here,” she said. “Right away.”

“Stop it,” I told her. “I thought you were Amish, not a Shaker.”

I grinned at my clever pun, but Lulu didn’t see the humor.

“I am Amish,” she said. “Why would I lie about that? Do you think I’m lying? What good would it do me to lie?”

“Ease off the throttle, Goldilocks. You’re too high strung. Let me rent this costume, and I’ll blend into your quaint, idyllic community without anyone noticing, and find out who Amos is snogging.”

A moment later, Weston had returned with full Amish regalia for me.

“Pay for it, tootsiepop,” I told Lulu. Then I went into the dressing room, to get dressed. But halfway into putting on my pants, the magic of Combville ensnared me, and half an hour later someone was knocking on the door.

“Mr. McGlade?”

“Call me Sexybeast,” I said. “That was my childhood nickname.”

Actually, my childhood nickname was Bitch Tits. But that made me cry.

“Are you okay in there?”

I finished dressing and opened the door. “I’m fine, baby. I’ve been dressing myself since high school.”

She let out a deep sigh. “I was worried. I thought you figured out I was faking this Amish thing, and had taken off.”

“I figured out no such thing. We ready to rock?”

Lulu nodded. Weston came up to us, grinning. “You look terrific, Harry. Here’s one final touch.

He pinned a button to my coat. It said Amish is as Good as a Mile. Now my disguise was perfect. No one would ever know I was an imposter, living among the God-fearing.

But did I truly know enough about this mysterious and elusive race of prehistoric proto-humans known as the Amish? Was I ready to delve into their strange cult where they worshipped some imaginary savior named Jesus? Perhaps I needed to do some research before diving in.

Should Harry research the Amish? If so, [click here](#).

Should Harry just delve right into the case? If so, [click here](#).

I Googled “Amish” on my iPhone and wound up surfing several Amish porn sites, where I learned that their culture dates back to 1693, they’re pacifists, and that threeways—mostly girl-girl-guy—were common.

After two minutes of exhaustive research, I gave up. Don’t get me wrong. I like pornography as much as the next guy, if the next guy watches porn sixteen hours a day. But I was on a case, and nothing was going to deter me from finding out if Amos Coleslaw was cheating on his wife. So after a brief, forty-minute Combville session, Lulu and I hopped in my car and headed to Indiana.

To continue with the case, [click here](#).

To instead read *Pride and Prejudice with Sexy Vampires*, [click here](#).

The ride to Indiana was uneventful, except for those strange lights in the sky that we saw but really don't remember too well, and somehow we lost six hours and my butt hurts and I've got weird dreamlike memories about being strapped to a table and probed by skinny gray guys with huge black eyes. But other than that, nothing noteworthy happened.

When we arrived in the Amish settlement of Plaintown, I parked next to a Cadillac, put on my straw hat, and went with Lulu to find her husband. The day was sunny, and everywhere I looked there were crops and people tending crops. It seemed like a really croppy way to live.

"So, which one is Amos?" I asked Lulu.

"That's Amos over there." She pointed to a plain looking guy with a beard. I nodded, rolling up my sleeves. I'd been working this case for long enough. It was time to get some answers. Amos would tell me what I wanted to know, even if I had to beat on that pacifist all night and into tomorrow.

"You're sure these guys are pacifists, right?" I asked Lulu.

She shrugged, checking the messages on her cell phone. "I guess. Hit one a few times and see."

I stormed over. Seeing all of this peaceful cooperation and brotherly love was pushing my anger to an all-time high. I walked through the wheat, or the corn, or whatever it was, fists clenched and jaw set.

"Hey! You! With the beard!"

Eight men looked at me.

"I meant the one named Amos!"

"We're all named Amos," one of the Amoses said.

"No," I clarified, "the one wearing black!"

Since they all wore black, they looked at each other, confused.

"The one with the beard wearing black and the straw hat!"

More shrugs and confusion.

"The one pooping in the field!"

My victim said, "That's me." After wiping with a nearby plant, he pulled up his black pants and offered his hand. I didn't take it, because it had crop all over it.

"Can, I help you, Brother?" he asked, polite and peacefullike.

"You and your non-violent stance make me sick," I said. "Who do you think you are, going around, not hitting anybody? Tell me something, braniac, how would we defend this great country of ours if the whole world suddenly turned into pacifists?"

"Your beard is coming off."

"Don't sass me," I said, slapping that non-threatening look right off his face. I braced myself, waiting for him to hit me back. He didn't. But even if he tried to, I wasn't worried. The guy had to be at least ninety years old.

I slapped him again.

"That's for beating your wife, you peaceful old man. Shame on you for picking on someone who can't defend themselves."

"My wife is dead, Brother."

This made my fury even fiercer. “You killed her? You heartless, God-fearing man of the earth!”

“Say, Brother, what’s going on here?”

I looked around, and saw the Amish had surrounded me. I don’t scare easily, except during scary movies and lightning storms and being in rooms with too many minorities. Diversity was another way of saying put your wallet in your front pocket. But being surrounded by pacifists made my heart turn into ice.

Well, actually, my heart didn’t really turn into ice. If it did, I’d be dead. Then I couldn’t be telling you this story in the first person.

“Back off! Everyone! This man here cheated on his dead wife, who hired me.”

I pointed at Lulu, but she’d vanished.

“What did you do with her body, you gray-bearded bastard!” I slapped him again.

“See here, Brother,” said one of the younger, healthier-looking Amish. He seemed about my age and height, so I backed away from him.

“Keep your distance,” I warned him. “I’m not looking for a fair fight.”

“There must be some misunderstanding. Why don’t we go inside and discuss this over some apple pie?”

I laughed. “You think you can bribe me with three slices of pie with homemade ice cream on top? Who do you think I am? Some sort of pie lover?”

Should Harry accept the pie? If so, [click here](#).

Should Harry keep beating defenseless Amish ass? If so, [click here](#).

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.

A sexy vampire wife!

However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighborhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters.

“My dear Mr. Bennet,” said his lady to him one day, “have you heard that Netherfield Park is let at last?”

Mr. Bennet—who was a SEXY VAMPIRE!—bit her on the neck and bled that nosy bitch dry. Then she became a vampire, and they had hot vampire sex, sucking each other in ways that made them both go, “Oooooo, that’s nice.” They even installed a mirror above the bed. But that didn’t really do much.

Then the sun came up and they both caught on fire turned to dust.

The End

To go back to the Harry McGlade story, [click here](#).

To read *The Ugly Duckling Does Meth*, [click here](#).

It was so beautiful out on the country, it was summer—the wheat fields were golden, the oats were green, and down among the green meadows the hay was stacked, and so was the farmer’s daughter, Roxy, whose breasts were the size of country hams, but without the brown sugar glaze. There Roxy sulked about in her shiny pleather jacket and torn black fishnets, scowling a lot, fiddling with one of the five piercings in her right eyebrow. Roxy was a Goth, and had so many piercings that magnets would leap off the refrigerator and stick to her face when she walked past, which made her scowl even more. Yes, it was indeed lovely out there in the country, but to Roxy it might as well have been a diaper landfill, judging by the unhappy expression on her face.

Roxy was a meth dealer.

In the midst of the sunshine there stood an old manor house that had a deep moat around it. From the walls of the manor right down to the water’s edge great burdock leaves grew, and there were some so tall that little children could stand upright beneath the biggest of them, though none of them knew what the word “burdock” meant and had to look it up in the ereader dictionary, just like you’re about to do. In this wilderness of leaves, which was as dense as the forests itself, denser even than a Mongoloid child dropped down a flight of stairs, a duck sat on her nest, hatching her ducklings. She was becoming somewhat weary, because the welfare check hadn’t come yet, and she needed a snort of ice soon or she was going to chew off her own face.

Then, Roxy hooked her up, and so began a downward spiral that soon had her giving handjob for fifty cents down at the old folks’ home, losing her teeth, and eventually overdosing and dying in an alley, rotting in a pool of her own feces. Seventeen elderly men came to her funeral, which was actually quite nice. They served little cakes.

The End

To go back to the Harry McGlade story, [click here](#).

To read *Huckleberry Finn: The Director’s Cut*, [click here](#).

You don’t know about me without you have read a book by the name of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*; but that ain’t no matter. That book was made by Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly. There was things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth. That is nothing. I never seen anybody but lied one time or another, without it was Aunt Polly, or the widow, or maybe Mary. Aunt Polly—Tom’s Aunt Polly, she is—and Mary, and the Widow Douglas is all told about in that book, which is mostly a true book, with some stretchers, as I said before.

Now the way that the book winds up is this: Tom and me found the money that the robbers hid in the cave. Then we got rip-roarin’ drunk and blew the cash on whores. Tom’s was so old her hips crackled like fried pig skins, and mine had sores on her

feminine parts that smelled like rotten chicken feet. Now I got me some sores too, 'ceptin' they're on my slappin' stick, which bleeds when I pee. Hurts, too. Like someone is shoving a maple branch up the piss hole and twistin' it hard.

Then some men came and hung Miss Watson's slave, Jim.

Also, my Pap raped me in the bum.

The End

To go back to the Harry McGlade story, [click here](#).

To read the *Book of Genesis with Zombies*, [click here](#).

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be zombies: and there were zombies. And the zombies spread across the land, riding around on dinosaurs, eating people and turning them into more zombies. And then the dinosaurs also became zombies. And then Cain slew Able, and ate him, and they both ate Moses, which angered the Lord, because there was no eating on the Sabbath.

And on the seventh day, God rested. And He hasn't been back to work since.

Then the Jews killed Jesus, and seized control of the media and the banks.

Also, the earth is only five thousand years old.

To go back to the Harry McGlade story, [click here](#).

To file a formal complaint about this ebook, [click here](#).

To quit this case and have Harry take a different case about private schools, [click here](#).

Bored with the Amish, I put that case on hold and went back to my office to take a new case.

"Cute kid," I said.

The kid looked like a large pink watermelon with buck teeth and bug eyes. If I hadn't already known it was a girl, I couldn't have guessed from the picture. What was that medical name for children with a overdeveloped heads? Balloonheadism? Bigheaditis? Melonoma? Freak?

"She takes after her mother."

Yeeech. My fertile mind produced an image of a naked Mrs. Potatohead, unhooking her bra. I shook away the thought and handed the picture back to the proud Papa.

"Where is Mom, by the way?"

Mr. Morribund leaned close enough for me to smell his lunch—tuna fish on rye with a side order of whiskey. He was a thin guy with big eyes who wore an off-the-rack suit with a gold Save The Dolphins tie tack.

"Emily doesn't know I'm here, Mr. McGlade. She's at home with little Rosemary. Since we received the news she's been... upset."

“I sympathize. Getting into the right pre-school can mean the difference between summa cum laude at Harvard and offering mouth sex in back alley Dumpsters for crack money. I should know. I’ve seen it.”

“You’ve seen mouth sex in back alley Dumpsters?”

I nodded my head in what I hoped what looked like a sad way. “It isn’t pretty, Mr. Morribund. Not to look at, or to smell. But I don’t understand how you expect me to get little Rotisserie—”

“It’s Rosemary.”

“—little Rosemary into this school if they already turned down your application. Are you looking for strong-arm work?”

“No, nothing like that.”

I frowned. I liked strong-arm work. It was one of the perks of being a private eye. That and breaking and entering.

“What then? Breaking and entering? Some stealing, maybe?”

I liked stealing.

Morribund swallowed, his Adam’s apple wiggling in his thin neck. If he were any skinnier he wouldn’t have a profile.

“The Salieri Academy is the premier pre-school in the nation, Mr. McGlade. They have a waiting list of thousands, and to even have a chance at attending you have to fill out the application five years before your child is conceived.”

“That’s a long time to wait for nookie.” But then, if I were married to Mrs. Potatohead, I wouldn’t mind the wait.

“It’s the reason we took so long to have Rosemary. We paid the application fee, and were all but assured entrance. But three days after Rosemary was born, our application was denied.”

“Did they give a reason?” Other than the fact that your kid looks like an albino warthog who has been snacking on an air compressor?

“No. The application says they reserve the right to deny admittance at their discretion, and still keep the fee.”

“How much was the fee?”

“Ten thousand dollars.”

Ouch. You could rent a lot of naughty videos for that kind of money. And you’d need to, because those things get boring after the third or fourth viewing.

“So what’s the deal? You want me to shake the guy down for the money.”

He shook his head. “Nothing of the sort. I’m not a violent man.”

“Spell it out, Mr. Morribund. What exactly do you want me to do? Burn down the school?”

I liked arson.

“Goodness, no. The Salieri School is run by a man named Michael Sousse.”

“And you want me to kidnap his pet dog and take pictures of me throwing it off a tall building, using my zoom lens to capture its final barks of terror as it takes the express lane to Pancakeville? Because that’s where I draw the line, Mr. Morribund. I may be a thug, a thief, and an arsonist, but I won’t harm any innocent animals unless there’s a bonus involved.”

Morribund raised an eyebrow. “You’d do that to a dog? The Internet said you love animals.”

“I do love animals. Grilled, fried, and broiled. Or stuffed with cheese. I’d eat any animal if it had enough cheese on top. It wouldn’t even have to be dead first.”

“Oh.”

Morribund made a face, and I could tell he was thinking through things. I glanced again at his Save the Dolphins tie tack and realized I might have been a little hasty with my meat-lovers rant.

“I had a dog once,” I said.

“Really?”

“Never tried to eat him. Not once.”

I mimed crossing my heart. Morribund stared at me.

“This all seems terribly familiar,” he said.

“Did you read Jack Daniels Stories by J.A. Konrath? This was one of the many hilarious cases in that excellent collection. Only \$2.99 at Smashwords. Do you have an ereader? All smart, attractive, successful people have ereaders. So perhaps you don’t have one.”

“You sound like a shill for Smashwords.”

I picked up my Leonard Riggio Rocks My World coffee mug and took a sip of cold joe. “I don’t shill for any corporations. Even corporations as efficient, inexpensive, and customer friendly as BarnesAndNoble.com. You can get seventeen J.A. Konrath ebooks for under three bucks each. But we’re getting a bit off track here.”

When Morribund spoke again, his voice was lower, softer.

“Headmaster Sousse, he’s a terrible man. A hunter. Gets his jollies shooting poor little innocent animals. His office is strewn with so-called hunting trophies. It’s disgusting.”

“Sounds awful,” I said, stifling a yawn.

“Mr. McGlade,” he leaned in closer, giving me more tuna and bourbon. “I want you to find out something about Sousse. Something that I could use to convince him to accept our application.”

I scratched my unshaven chin. Or maybe it was my unshaved chin. I get those words confused.

“I understand. You want me to dig up some dirt. Something you can use to blackmail Sousse and get Rheumatism—”

“Rosemary.”

“—into his school. Well, you’re in luck, Mr. Morribund, because I’m very good at this kind of thing. And even if I don’t find anything incriminating in his past, I can make stuff up.”

“What do you mean?”

“I can take pictures of him in the shower, and then Photoshop in the Vienna Boy’s Choir washing his back. Or I can make it look like he’s pooping on the floor of the White House. Or being intimate with a camel. Or eating a nun. Or...”

“I don’t want the sordid details, Mr. McGlade. I simply want some kind of leverage. How much will something like that cost?”

I leaned back in my chair and put my hands behind my head, showing off my shoulder holster beneath my jacket. I always let them see the gun before I discussed my fees. It dissuaded haggling.

“I get four hundred a day. Three days minimum, in advance. Plus expenses. I may need to bring in a computer expert to do the Photoshop stuff. He’s really good.”

I took a pic out of my desk drawer and tossed it to him. Morribund flinched. I smiled at his reaction.

“Looks real, doesn’t it?”

“This is fake?”

“Not a single baby harp seal was harmed.”

“Really?”

“Well actually, they were all clubbed to death and skinned. But the laughing guy in the parka wasn’t really there. We Photoshopped him into the scene. That’s the beauty and magic of jpeg manipulation. Look at this one.” I threw another photo onto his lap. “Check out that bloody discharge. And those pustules. Don’t they look real? It’s like they’re going to burst all over your hands.”

Morribund frowned. “I’ve seen enough.”

“Want to see one with my head on Brad Pitt’s body with Ron Jeremy’s junk?”

“I really don’t.”

“How about one of a raccoon driving a motorcycle? He’s wearing sunglasses and flipping the bird.”

Morribund stood up.

“I’m sure you’ll come up with something satisfactory. When can you get started?”

I fished an appointment book out of my top drawer. It was from 1996, and only contained doodles of naked butts. I pretended to scrutinize it.

“You’re in luck,” I said, pulling out a pen. I drew another butt. A big one, that took up the entire third week of September. “I can start as soon as your check clears.”

“I don’t trust checks.”

“Credit card?”

“I dislike the high interest rates. How about cash?”

“Cash works for me.”

After he handed it over I got his phone number, he found his own way to the door, and I did the Money Dance around my office, making happy noises and shaking my booty.

Things had been slow around the agency lately, due to my lack of renewing my Yellow Pages ad. I didn’t get many referrals, because I charged too much and wasn’t good at my job. Luckily, Morribund had found me through my Internet site. The same computer geek who did my Photoshop work was also the webmaster of my homepage. Google “Chicago cheating spouse sex pictures” and I was the fourth listing. If you Google “naked rhino make-over” I was number two. I still didn’t understand the whole keyword thing. That’s probably why Morribund thought I was an animal lover.

A quick check of my watch told me I wasn’t wearing one, so I looked at the display on my cell phone. Almost two in the afternoon. Time to get started.

I booted up the computer to search for the Salieri School and Christopher Sousse. But instead, I wound up on YouTube, and watched videos of a monkey in a funny hat, a fat woman falling down the stairs, and a Charlie Brown cartoon that someone dubbed over with the voice track to Goodfellas.

After wasting almost an hour, I went to MySpace and read all of my messages from all of my friends, all of whom seemed to work in the paid escort industry.

After that, I checked my eBay bids, my Hotmail account, and added a new entry to my blog about the high cost of parking in the city.

After that, porn.

Finally, I located the Salieri School's website, found their phone number, and dialed.

"Salieri Academy for Exceptionally Gifted Four-Year-Olds, where children are our future and should be heavily invested in, this is Miss Janice, may I help you?"

Miss Janice had a voice like a hot oil massage, deep and sensual and full of petroleum.

"My name is McGlade. Harrison Harold McGlade. I'd like to enroll my son Stimey into your school."

"I'm sorry sir, there's a minimum five year waiting period to get accepted into the Salieri academy. How old is your son now?"

"He's seven."

"We only accept four-year-olds."

"He's got the mind of a four-year-old. Retard. Mom dropped him down an escalator, he fell for forty minutes. Very sad. All someone had to do was hit the off switch."

"I don't understand."

"Why? You a retard too?"

"Mr. McGlade..."

"I'm willing to pay money, Miss Janice. Big money. I'll triple your enrollment fee."

"I'm sorry."

"Okay, I'll double it."

"I don't think that..."

"Look, honey, is Mikey there? He assured me I'd be treated better than this."

"You know Mr. Sousse?"

"Yeah. We played water polo together in college. I saved his horse from drowning."

"Perhaps I should put you through to him."

"Don't bother. I'll be there in an hour with a suitcase full of cash. I won't bring Stimey, because he's with his tutor tonight, learning how to chew. Keep the light on for me."

I hung up, feeling smug. I hadn't shared this with Morribung, but this case really hit home for me. Years ago, when I was a toddler, I'd been forced to drop out of pre-school because I kept biting and hitting the other children. The unfairness of it, being discriminated against because I was a bully, still haunted me to this day.

I hit the computer again and prowled the Internet for dirt on Sousse. Nothing jumped out at me, other than a minor news article a few weeks back about one of his teachers being dismissed for reasons unknown. According to the story, Sousse was deeply embarrassed by the incident and refused to comment.

Then I surfed for Morribund and his wife and kid, and found zilch.

Then I surfed for naked pictures of Catherine Zeta Jones until it was time for me to keep my appointment.

But first, I needed to gear up.

I wound my spy tie around my neck, careful with the wires. Concealed in the tie clip was a digital camera, a unidirectional microphone, and a 20 gigabyte mp3 player loaded with bootleg Tori Amos concerts. It weighed about two pounds, and hurt my

back to wear. But it would be my best chance at clandestinely snapping a few photos of Mr. Sousse during our meeting—photos I could later retouch so it looked like he was molesting a pile of dirty laundry.

People would pay a lot of money to keep their dirty laundry out of the news.

Forty minutes later I was pulling into a handicapped parking spot in front of the Salieri Academy on Irving Park Road. Last year, I'd bought a handicapped parking sticker from a one-legged man in line at the DMV. It only cost me ten dollars. He had demanded five hundred, but I simply grabbed the sticker and strolled away at a leisurely pace. Guy shouldn't be driving with only one leg anyway.

The Academy was a large, ivy-covered brick building, four stories high, in the middle of a residential area. As I was reaching for the front door it began to open. A woman exited, holding the hand of a small boy. She was smartly dressed in skirt and blazer, high heels, long brown hair, maybe in her mid-thirties. The boy looked like a honey-baked ham stuffed into a school uniform, right down to the bright pink face and greasy complexion. When God was dishing out the ugly, this kid got seconds.

I played it smooth. "Wouldn't let you in, huh?"

"Excuse me?"

I pointed my chin at the child.

"Wilbur, here. All he's missing is the curly tail. The Academy won't take fatties, right?"

The boy squinted up at me.

"Mother, is this stupid man insinuating that I have piggish attributes?"

I made a face. "Who are you calling stupid? And what does insinuating mean?"

"Just ignore him, Jasper. We can't be bothered by plebeians."

"Hey lady, I'm 100% American."

"You're 100% ignoramus."

"What do dinosaurs have to do with this?"

She ushered the little porker past me—no doubt off to build a house of straw—and I slipped through the doorway and into the lobby. There were busts of dead white guys on marble pedestals all around the room, and the artwork adorning the walls was so ugly it had to be expensive. I crossed the carpeted floor to the welcoming desk, set on a riser so the secretary looked down on everyone. This particular secretary was smoking hot, with big sensuous lips and a top drawer pulled all the way out. Also, large breasts.

"May I help you, Sir?"

Her voice was sultry, but her smile hinted that help was the last thing she wanted to give me. I got that look a lot, from people who thought they were superior somehow due to their looks, education, wealth, or upbringing. It never failed to unimpress me.

"I called earlier, Miss Janice. I'm here to see Mikey."

Her smile dropped a fraction. "I informed Mr. Sousse that you were coming, and he regrets to inform you that—"

"Cork up that gas leak, sweetheart. I'm really a private detective. I'd like a chance to talk with Mr. Sousse about some embarrassing facts I've uncovered about one of your teachers here," I said, referring to that incident I'd Googled. "Of course, if he doesn't want to talk with me, he can hear about it on the ten o'clock news. But I doubt it will do much for enrollment, especially after that last unfortunate episode."

Miss Janice played it coy. “Whom on our staff are you referring to?”

“Are you Mr. Sousse? I can avert my eyes if you want to lift your skirt and check.”

She blushed, then picked up the phone. I gave her a placating smile similar to the one she greeted me with.

“Do you have ID?” she asked, still holding the receiver.

I flashed my PI license. She did some whispering, then hung up.

“Mr. Sousse will see you now.”

“How lucky for me.”

She stared. I stared back.

“You gonna tell me where his office is, or should I just wander around, yelling his name?”

She frowned. “Room 315. The elevator is down the hall, on the left.”

I hated to leave with an attractive woman annoyed with me, so I decided to disarm her with wit.

“You know, my father was an elevator operator. His career had a lot of ups and downs.”

Miss Janice kept frowning.

“He hated how people used to push his buttons,” I said.

No response at all.

“Then, one day, he got the shaft.”

She crossed her arms. “That’s not funny.”

“You’re telling me. He fell six floors to his death.”

Her frown deepened.

“Tell me, do they have heat on your planet?” I asked.

“Mr. Sousse is expecting you.”

I nodded, my work here done. Then it was into the elevator and up to the third floor.

Sousse’s office was decorated in 1960’s Norman Bates, with low lighting that threw shadows on the stuffed owls and bear heads and antlers hanging on the walls. Sousse, a stern-looking man with glasses and a bald head, sat behind a desk the size of a small car shaped like a desk, and he was sneering at me when I entered.

“Miss Janice said you’re a private investigator.” His nostrils flared. “I don’t care for that profession.”

“Don’t take it literally. I’m not here to investigate your privates. I just need to ask you a few questions.”

A stuffed duck—of all things—was propped on his desktop, making it impossible for me to get a clear shot of his face with my cleverly concealed camera tie. I moved a few steps to the left.

“Which of my staff are you inquiring about?”

“That’s confidential.”

“If you can’t tell me who we’re discussing, why is it you wanted to see me?”

“That’s confidential too.”

I shifted right, touched the tie bar, heard the shutter click. But the lighting was pretty low.

“I don’t understand how I’m supposed to—”

“Does this office have better lights?” I interrupted. “I’m having trouble seeing you. I’m getting older, and got cadillacs in my eyes.”

“Cadillacs?”
I squinted. “Who said that?”
“Do you mean cataracts?”
“I don’t like your tone,” I said, intentionally pointing at a moose head.
Sousse sighed, all drama queen, and switched on the overhead track lighting.
Click click went my little camera.
“Did you hear something?” he asked.
I snapped a few more pics, getting him with his mouth open. My tech geek should be able to Photoshop that into something particularly rude.
“Does your tie have a camera in it?” he asked.
I reflexively covered up the tie and hit the button for the mp3 player. Tori Amos began to sing about her mother being a cornflake girl in that whiney, petulant way that made her a superstar. I fussed with the controls, and only succeeded in turning up the volume.
Sousse folded his arms.
“I think this interview is over.”
“Fine,” I said, loud to be heard over Tori. “But you’ll be hearing from me and Morribund again.”
“Who?”
“Don’t play coy. People like you disgust me, Mr. Sousse. Sure, I’m a carnivore. But I don’t get my jollies hunting down ducks and mooses and deers and squirrels.” I pointed to a squirrel hanging on the wall, dressed up in a little cowboy outfit. “What kind of maniac hunts squirrels?”
“I’m not a hunter, you idiot. I abhor hunting. I’m a taxidermist.”
“Well, then I’m sure the IRS would love to hear about your little operation. You better hope you have a good accountant and that your taxidermist is in perfect order.”
I spun on my heels and got out of there.
Mission accomplished. I should have felt happy, but something was nagging at me. Several somethings, in fact.
On my way through the lobby, I stopped by Miss Janice’s desk again.
“When Sousse fired that teacher a few weeks ago, what was the reason?”
“That’s none of your business, Mr. McGlade.”
“Some sex thing?”
“Certainly not!”
“Inappropriate behavior?”
“I won’t say another word.”
“Fine. If you want me to pick you up later and take you to dinner, stay silent.”
“I’d rather be burned alive.”
“We can do that after we’ve eaten.”
“No. I think you’re annoying and repulsive.”
“How about a few drinks? The more you drink, the less repulsive I get.”
She folded her arms and her voice went from sultry to frosty. “Employees of the Salieri Academy don’t drink, Mr. McGlade.”
“I understand. How about we take a handful of pills and smoke a bowl?”
“I’m calling security.”
“No need. I’m outtie. Catch you later, sweetheart.”

I winked, then headed back to my office. When I arrived, I spend a good half hour on the Internet, digging deeper into the Salieri story, using a reverse phone directory to track a number, and looking up the words insinuating, plebian, ignoramous, and taxidermist. Then I gave Morribund a call and told him I had something for him.

An hour later he showed up, looking expectant to the point of jubilation. Jubilation is another word I looked up.

“Did you get the pictures, Mr. McGlade?”

“I got them.”

“You’re fast.”

“I know. Ask my last girlfriend.”

We stared at each other for a few seconds.

“So, are you going to give them to me?”

“No, Mr. Morribund. I’m not.”

He leaned in closer, the whiskey coming off him like cologne. “Why? You want more money?”

“I’ll take all the money you give me, but I’m not going to give you the photos.”

“Why not?”

I smiled. It was time for the big revealing expositional moment.

“There are a lot of things I hate, Mr. Morribund. Like public toilets. And the Red Sox. And massage girls who make you pay extra for happy endings. But the thing I hate the most is being lied to by a client.”

“Me? Lie to you? What are you talking about?”

“You don’t want to get your daughter into the Salieri Academy. You don’t even have a daughter.”

His eyes narrowed.

“You’re insane. Why would you think such a thing?”

“When I went to the Academy, I ran into some kid in a Salieri uniform, and he was uglier than a hatful of dingle-berries with hair on them. If he got in, then the school had no restrictions according to looks. Isn’t that right, Mr. Morribund? Or should I use your real name... Nathan Tribble?”

He sighed, knowing he was beaten. “How did you figure it out?”

“You didn’t pay me with a check or credit card, because you didn’t have any in the name you gave me. But you did give me your real phone number, and I looked it up in the Internet. I also found out you once worked at the Salieri Academy. Fired a few weeks ago. For drinking, I assume.”

“It never affected my job! I was the best instructor that stupid school ever had!”

I didn’t care about debating him, because I wasn’t done with my brilliant explanation yet.

“You came to me because you found me on the Internet and thought I liked dogs. That’s why you wore that Save the Dolphins tie tack. You said Sousse was a hunter, to make me dislike him so I’d go along with your blackmail scheme.”

“Enough. We’ve established I was lying.”

But I still had more exposing to expose, so I went on.

“Sousse isn’t a hunter, Tribble. He’s a taxidermist. And you’re no animal lover either. You can’t be pro-dolphin and also eat tuna. Tuna fisherman catch and kill dolphins all the time. But your breath smelled of tuna during our last meeting.”