

## *“Hot and Cold”*

*By Ray Dillon*

*“It’s hot as heck out there, folks. If I was you – and thankfully I’m not – I’d stay home and mind my own business in the luxury of American air-conditioning. Haha! That’s all for Ronnie “The No-Bullteller” Johnson, signing off. Catch my show starting one hour eali–“*

“God, I hate that guy,” Brian says as he clicks off the radio knob. For a moment, he just sits in his Ford Granada and the gurgling ‘American air-conditioning,’ preparing himself for the heat. Despite this, the second he opens the car door, the blistering heat scours his skin and the air is knocked out of his lungs by the thick, humid, disgusting Kansas wind. “Jesus, I hate this place.”

Brian makes his way up the street while his mind goes to Debbie. He can’t wait to see her. *Today will be the day*, he thinks; it drives him nuts that some days she’s sure about him and some days she’s ‘confused,’ but after their phone conversation last night, it’s just a matter of making the right gesture.

Up ahead, the high school is getting out and the teenagers (not so much younger than he is – only four years – but already “kids” in his eyes) are burning down the neighborhood streets, escaping from another crummy day with institutionalized education. *Unless she gets stuck grading papers, she should be home soon.*

At the culvert, he cuts into the dry yards and follows it to the duplex. He’s already dripping sweat by the time he gets the door open. The cool air hits him like a wave. Her scent kisses him hello.

He leaves the door ajar to watch for her to walk up, lays the keys on the table with a jingle, and picks the mail off the floor. There’s nothing of real importance (a sports catalogue, stock tips, bills), so he tosses it back down and heads into the kitchen. After retrieving a clean glass from the cupboard he fills up from the fridge’s water dispenser and drinks thirstily until the chilled water stings his brain, then heads back to the sofa, plops down, and makes himself comfortable. He clicks on the TV, savoring the familiar buzz as it comes on, feeling very comfortable and confident, and surfs a bit...

*--and enjoy the brand new chocolate chip blizzard at Cream King--*

*click*

*--man, Brian, dawg, if you thought Brittany was hot before, yo, check her out in this new video. Album drops the 28<sup>th</sup>—*

*click*

*--but later in the week we should see some cooler temperatures heading through southeast Kansas and on up through—*

*click*

*--Brian is a backstabber! He’s been sleepin’ with my wife and my sister, Jerry...*

“God, I hate this show.” He lifts the remote and pauses.

*... Denise, what do you have to say about this?*

*Well, I know I’m hot. Why wouldn’t a man want to be with a-a-all of this?*

*Boo!*

“Retarded...” He holds the remote.

--Jerry! Jerry! Jerry—

*click*

*--only a handful of explorers have navigated their way through the icy waters to the heart of Antarctica to stay at the carved courtesy of the frozen hotel. Seasoned veterans to the glacial continent warn others not to try to venture here without knowledge of...*

Brian checks his watch – 3:19 -- then the clock on the wall – 3:18 – close enough. *Where is she?* he ponders.

He hops up again, stumbling over a man’s shoe, and heads to the kitchen for a refill when he stops at the red blinking ‘new messages’ light of the answering machine. With a blank, cautious expression, he hits the play button.

*BEEP*

*Message 1: June 26, 2006 at 11am : Hi, sweeties, it’s Mom. Would it kill you two to call me? Heaven forbid I ask for a visit, huh? And did you get the steaks I sent? I’ll be darned if I let them go to waste. Alrighty, hons, call me.*

*BEEP*

*Message 2: June 26, 2006 at 3:20 pm: Hi Brian. This is your conscience speaking. Listen up, worm. Planning to surprise Deb when she gets home, huh? How sweet. Does Debbie’s husband know his best friend is trying to have an affair with his wife? I can’t —BEEP*

“Oh, god!” He bounces off the carpet, spilling the ice in his glass as he smacks the delete and stop buttons together and steps away from the machine covering his mouth, eyes about to pop out of his head. “What the hell?” He moves farther away, the ‘new messages’ light is suddenly brighter and redder. *Whose voice was that? No freakin’ way*, he thinks. *Oh, what the hell?* He paces into the living room and looks back at the machine. “No...”

He teeters back over to the machine, hesitates then pushes “Play” again.

*BEEP*

*Message 1: June 26, 2006 at 11am: Hi, sweeties, it—BEEP*

*BEEP*

*Message 2 : June 26, 2006 at 3:20 pm: Hey, Brian, you backstabbing slime! You were his best man, you scum-sack. What are you thinking?*

*BEEP*

*Message 3: June 26, 2006 at 3:20 pm: Brian, seriously. You should be burned alive for even thinking such a thing. You should be strung up! You traitor! You—*

Brian hits the delete button and jumps away towards the back door.

*Hey, where the hell do you think you’re going?* The answering machine continues.

Brian hits it again.

*Think Deb’s husband knows what his best friend is up to, Brian? You want to know what else her husband doesn’t know? What he’ll do to you when he finds out!*

*BEEP*

*BEEP*

*BEEP*

“Shut up!” Brian screams and yanks on the answering machine, throwing it to the ground and cracking it.

He races to the back door.

*Oh, you’re not going anywhere, pal.* The answering machine demands in its cold, familiar, electronic voice. *I said, FREEZE!*

With his hand centimeters from the knob, Brian feels his body go numb with cold. He tries to look down at his hand, but can’t move his neck. He maneuvers his eyes as far as they’ll go and notices the glimmer of light reflecting off the skin of his arm. It looks like glass – no, *ice*. And it’s growing!

“O, Gah!” His muffled voice tries to scream, but it’s frozen, too. He shifts his weight, crunching inside the thick ice forming over his body; it seems to contract against the struggle, threatening to break his bones. The neck of his shirt tears as the ice expands. The tips of his flat-soled shoes are all that can move. He shimmies towards the handle, seeing the heat rising outside. His fingers, now a claw, grind against the door, unable to maneuver. *No!* Brian screams in his head, then remembers the front door he left ajar.

The answering machine starts again and Brian groans only to hurt his throat with the crystal air.

*BEEP*

*Hi, sweetheart. It’s Rick. Meeting was canceled so I’m on my way home. Got a commission today, too. Why don’t we go out for dinner tonight? Or maybe call up Brian and go for a movie. Maybe both. My treat. Alrighty, I’ll see you soon. Love you.*

*BEEP*

“Unngn!” Brian moans and pivots to see the black answering machine on the floor. It sits at the end of the hall like a scarlet-eyed guard dog. He scoots forward, ready for its teeth to come out and attack.

Brian has never had frostbite, but he’s sure that’s what he feels in now. The ice is starting to burn. His eyelids are frosted open and stinging as if acid was being poured on them.

He scuttles down the hall for at least a decade trying to keep a burning eye on the machine. Just as he gets around the corner and sees the freedom of the front door, the answering machine snaps at him and he jumps, allowing the cord to shoot around his foot. He tips forward, grasps for something, anything, flexes his shoe-covered toes, and falls hard like a slain giant or a severed tree into the edge of the coffee table; his forehead collides with the wood taking a chunk out of it, and the ice, and possibly his skull. He expects blood to pour over his eyes, but none comes.

The TV clicks and passes through channels. He rocks to get off of his face, and finds he was lying on the remote. It stops on a channel...

*--and, for a short time only, Don Madden Cars of Oakdale is willing to throw in a Vacationing Cheaters Cooler and three free bags of ice to any adulterers who purchase one of our select line of cars. So, head on down. That means, you, Brian!*

He pulls his weight around, relieving the pressure from his arm, which he's sure is broken now, to see himself on the screen dressed in full salesman garb and standing in a car lot.

*Yes, you, you idiot. Oh, and loooooook who we have here, folks! The little missus is on her way up the drive. It'll be quite a pickle for Rick to find you both here together, wouldn't you say?*

"Unng! Neddle! Helk!" Brian shouts out to Debbie as she peers in the door. Her face loses its blood as she sees him lying on the floor ... encased in ice. She doesn't move. "Helk!" he repeats.

Pulling free of her shock, she looks back to the driveway, then comes in, closes the door, and backs up against it.

"What the hell, Brian?" is all she can think to say.

"Uh don no! Helk! Eh hurrs!" He screams as best he can.

She tries sitting him up, but his rigid weight revokes that idea.

"You've got to get out of here, Brian. Rick will be home and, and – what the hell?!"

"Owsigh! Hod! Neld ice!" He wants so badly to tell her not to go near the answering machine, but can't.

She flings the door open and pulls on him by the shirt, which rips more. She grabs under his shoulder, yanks, and he moves, but barely. She grabs a jacket to shield her hands and switches to pushing his feet. With a couple of heaves, she forces him to the door, just as the neighbor in the other side of the duplex comes out. She jumps in front of the door and tries to hide Brian with her legs. Being in the perfect position, he catches a glimpse up her skirt and the ice on his eyes tightens, forcing out a muffled scream.

"Is everything alright in there, Deb? There's been all sorts of racket today," her elderly neighbor says, giving her a suspicious glare.

"Oh, yeah. Everything's fine here, Cathy. Uh, Rick and I were just having a little tiff. It's over now." She fakes a smile.

"Well, that's good to hear. I guess I'm off to the store, then." She gives her another look, tries to look past her feet then turns down the sidewalk to her car.

After what seems like forever, the car is out of site and Deb gives Brian another ferocious shove, launching him out the door, onto the small cement porch with a clatter. He glides down the stairs, off the sidewalk, and only stops the momentum when he hits the dry grass. The sun blares into his wide-open eyes, but already he feels much warmer.

"Oh, god, now what do we do? What do we do?" Her sentences run together and she looks at him for answers.

"Dry aherr," he tries, but her face just shows confusion. "Ahderr!"

She gets it that time and runs back inside.

Brian lies there, soaking up the heat, feeling it start to melt already. He's in more pain than he's ever experienced in his life, but all he can think about is getting away from this house before Rick gets home. *What the hell is this?* He thinks.

Deb comes bolting back out the door with a pan of water spilling everywhere and dumps it on his legs. It immediately loosens his icy restraints. She runs back

in for more as he starts wiggling around, feeling little bits of ice breaking free from his ankles.

*This can't be happening.* But, he figures it's a little late to be skeptical. *What did I do to deserve this?*

Suddenly an angry, fat cat comes out from around the porch.

"Heya, jackass. Still don't get it do you?" It's his voice again, coming from the cat.

He realizes that now; it has been his own voice the whole time. *It just sounds different, like hearing yourself in a recording. I've got to be going crazy.*

"You brought this on yourself." The cat with his voice turns and with a little wiggle of his tail, releases a spray of his territorial scent all over Brian's head.

"Ohh, Gah!" Brian moans in misery.

Deb rushes out the door again with a new pan of steaming water and a screwdriver.

"Shoo!" She screams at the cat which bolts off as she dumps the water on Brian's legs, tosses the pan, and begins whacking away at the ice with the screwdriver. After a few good jabs, it plunges through the softened ice and into Brian's thigh. He screams and flops once like a dying fish. Blood pours from the wound.

"Oh, god, Brian, I'm so sorry," then: "Oh, crap, there's Rick!" She stands up and looks down at the corner nearest the school seeing her husband's black Pontiac round the corner.

She does a double take at Brian, then down to the ditch.

"Ung, Waid, Deb," Brian starts, but with a grunt, Deb gets under him like a lineman, kicks against the wall of the house, and shoves him over the hill.

Brian's world flips until it becomes a blur. He feels his wrist pop and more ice gives way. He picks up speed and crashes into the concrete gutter of the culvert, smacking his head, and what feels like every other body part. His being sears with pain, but he finds he's able to move a little and his eyes finally blink shut, flaking ice off onto the culvert. He lies there for a moment, watching the ice melt into the pores of the concrete and allowing the air that was knocked out of him to return. For the first time in his life, he's thankful for that thick-as-oatmeal air. He hears Rick's car turn off and the door open and shut.

"Hi, hon," comes Rick's voice. "Hey, what's all this?"

"Oh, flowers? That's so sweet," replies Deb, then: "Oh, I was, uh, watering a, uh, seed I planted. Heh."

"A bit much don't you think?" His voice has a smile in it. Brian can hear them kiss hello. "Woo! Let's get out of this heat."

Brian turns his battered body around, gazes out of the culvert and up the steep hill. He rubs his stinging and watering eyes and sees Rick and Deb walking back into the house. He groans as he breaks and shakes off the remaining ice and stretches out his sore muscles. He pushes himself up with his left hand, favoring his severely injured right, and sits down, keeping a painful eye on the house. He looks down at the shards of melting ice in the spot where he had lain and shakes his head.

"What the hell?"

He limps up the steep embankment, balancing his stiff legs with his functional hand, his clothing still crusty with ice. The world rocks around him as he makes his way to the window of the duplex. Up on his toes he peers in and sees Rick, his best friend, a slate of solace, slowly and quietly dancing with his wife to the music; their silent personal tune. They share a sweet kiss, he apologizes for taking his stress out on her lately, and they kiss again. He sees them for the first time without jealousy and envy.

“Let me take you to dinner...” Rick starts, but Brian moves away from the widow and lets his friend’s private words fade out. He walks back along the culvert to the other side of the block, finding new wounds with each step, and realizes something:

“I deserve this, don’t I?” he speaks to himself. “God ... what’s wrong with me. I could have...” but his words fade out, too.

Brian walks down the simmering street towards the sun and his old car. He opens the door with a groan and lets the oven-like air from inside wrap around him. He carefully fits himself in the seat, turns the ignition, clicks the radio back on, and tunes it in.

*--a grand sale on cordless phones with answering machines--*

*--low-pressure system moving in from the Rockies--*

*--Ahh... See that? Now don’t you feel better? Get your refreshment with one of the assorted flavors from the local Ice Wizard--*

*--Now, here’s a cool little diddy to bring you out of the heat...*

And with that, Brian pulled away from the curb and went home.

The End.

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