

PENNY INCOMPATIBLE
by Errick A. Nunnally

Penny stepped off the bus onto a street as familiar as her own two feet. Heat bled off the concrete and asphalt, carrying the thick scent of the inner-city, a heady mix of things discarded.

As a child, she'd found many a carcass while playing in abandoned lots or unkempt backyards. She'd imagined that the summer smell was all the dead creatures baking in the sun and felt ashamed. It was the first time such a dark thought passed through her mind. What would her mother think—or Pastor Matthews, for that matter?

Much later, she learned that it was the stench of dogs not walked. Animals leashed to a small plot of land for the entirety of their lives. It was the smell that tingled in her nose when the bus transitioned from north to south in the city. It smelled like home.

In spite of the years and cosmetic changes, the spirit of the neighborhood endured. A possession that began in the 1970s and continued to drive roots deeper every decade. As ever, a circle of wayward boys held court in the light of a twenty-four hour store. She watched one of them pour half a container of juice into the gutter before turning his back to top it off with

something else. There was a time she would have marched right up to the young man and called out his behavior.

Decades before her time, adults called the busses the “jungle line.” A reference she didn’t understand. The neighborhood was a mix of triple- and double-deckers, yards, sidewalks, parks, schools, churches, corner stores and not much else. To her young mind, this part of the city, barely three stories high, hardly seemed like a jungle. Now she understood the bitter shame and recognized that the area had settled well into its defined role.

The square’s location served as a hard stop between two of Boston’s most dichotomous neighborhoods. She remembered that the Jews had lived here before the Blacks arrived. All the triple-deckers had the little mezuzahs nailed into each doorway, all since removed, and defiled. Her older brother had removed the last one in their childhood home, exclaiming when he did, “There’s a paper inside with secret words!” Then he rushed to comb the house for more; finding nothing but the shadows. As the neighborhood suffered the redlining pivot, so went the remnants of one abused culture moving a few rungs above another.

On television and in movies, the death of childhood was often depicted as the burden of heartbreaking responsibility. Penny understood that for the first time when it became clear that she played on the team that carried the impossible fragility of America’s ruling class.

Aching for the weekend, when she could cross the square and take a long walk along River Street to the park, she headed the opposite direction, up the hill. Along the way, she continued to think that maybe putting her bare feet in the sprinklers and sitting for a while was a very good idea.

The few blocks to Farmers Warehouse—Mattapan’s perennial market—were blessedly empty. The market sat right off the square. Everyone’s kids had worked at the store bagging groceries or stocking the shelves or working the register. Even her son had worked there in his early teens, years ago, when he was still fresh and sweet. A small chain bought the store out, but that hadn’t changed the original name in her mind. Or the smell. Because nothing really changed anymore, not since acclimation to the passage of the Civil Rights Act. New buses, repainted trolleys, a different name on a door. . . . The same hardened heart still pumped the soul of its people through the neighborhood and sometimes spilled their blood onto the street.

She stopped at the market once every week after her shift. It was easier in the mornings, just before the commuter hour when the responsible among them took bus and trolley to downtown jobs. The people who were around, however—the ones who floated around the edges of society—they retreated only when the sun was at its highest peak. And even then, not too far into the shadows.

An obese Haitian woman blocked her way into the store. She chatted with a friend several feet away. They spoke in the rapid-fire patois gutted from French by way of the Caribbean slave trade.

Penny didn’t understand a word, it was nothing like the fluid and melodic French she’d experienced in school or heard in movies. This version had the hard edge of raw history carved in every syllable, every phrase. Both women laughed harshly, oblivious to Penny’s presence.

“Excuse me,” she said.

The woman looked at her. “Eh?”

“I just...” she waved a hand toward the store’s entrance, shoulders hunched.

“Ah, okay, fine, fine,” said the woman in heavily accented English. She waved to her friend, tossed a few more incomprehensible words into the air, laughed again, and ambled slowly through the entrance.

Penny followed, teeth grinding. She recalled when the Caribbeans had come—mostly Haitians. They brought their habits and their loud, choppy language. And their smells. The sweat of their food, their music. Their brand of violence. Penny enjoyed curry sometimes, but the rest remained beyond her palette. The grocery store had adjusted to the exploding population, stocking fruits and vegetables she didn’t recognize, and cuts of meat that were junk in her experience. But even the new blood couldn’t change the smell of the market. As if something had died in its walls and kept dying year after year, impervious to efforts of resuscitation. It didn’t bother Penny anymore, not like it did when she was a young girl. Proof that you could get used to anything, given enough time.

It took less than an hour to collect her groceries, pay, and return to the parking lot with her two sacks of food. There were two gypsy cabs there, both drivers she knew; dark skinned men who’d grown up in the neighborhood, same as her. This was a ritual she’d been following for years.

“Good morning, gentlemen.”

The men answered together, a vocal mix of: “G’morning.” and “Miss Luce, how you been?”

“Just fine, Eugene. It’s been a while; maybe...?”

“‘Bout seven months, I guess. Been on a contract job, now I’m back on the hustle.”

“Well, alright, I guess you’re up. Next time, Carl.”

“Mmm-hmm.” Carl nodded and touched his baseball cap, already focused on the next person coming out of the store.

Penny slid her ample backside into the back seat while Eugene held the door. He clambered into the driver’s seat with a grunt and asked over his shoulder, “Remind me your address again, Miss Luce?”

She smiled as she dug her wallet out of her purse and told him. Eugene remained a good man and worked hard to support his family by any means. She’d missed him, a bright and steady spot in the tedious week. It was a short ride, necessitated only because of the grocery bags. She fished for a five dollar bill in the clutter of her wallet.

“How’s that son o’ yours, Miss Luce. You got a son. Right? I remember you tol’ me he was havin’ some problems a ways back.”

She froze, the chill of the past draining, flowing into her stomach, down her back and legs. Right under her fingers, she held an odd memento: Barron’s driver’s license. It was a decent photo of her son and the license itself served as a reminder that he’d had a good heart, once upon a time, that he’d checked off ‘organ donor’ and meant it.

“He...passed away, Eugene.” She swallowed, holding her voice even and tight. “Right about the time you started that contract job.” *His father doesn’t even know.*

“Oh. Oh, Miss Luce, I’m so sorry. I wouldn’t have asked, but—”

“It’s okay, Eugene.” *It’s not okay.* “You didn’t know any better.” *How dare you remind me?*

“Okay. Okay, Miss Luce. I am sorry; you have my condolences, I’m so sorry. That’s a terrible thing to hear”

“Thank you, Eugene.” *It’s a terrible thing to live.*

They passed the next several minutes in silence.

###

Penny was grateful that Eugene helped bring her groceries up the steep bricks of the porch stairs. She tipped him a dollar bill on top of the five. The tedium of putting the goods away were not a fit distraction for her melancholy, however, and she now sat at her small kitchen table out of habit. A half-inch pile of unopened bills awaited, neatly stacked on the counter. All of the surfaces in the small kitchen were clean and orderly. The entire house, in fact, was well kept. Being the only occupant made it easy to keep up with.

The home shared a wall with Mrs. Lorman next door. Her husband, Fred, loved his drink and, considering his pallor and incontinence, Penny suspected he wasn’t long for this world. Fred favored the bottle over much else but his wife and his home. In spite of that, he earned steady disability and social security money. Fran loved him and he loved her back. That was good enough for Penny.

Why were the men who’d been in Penny’s life so different? Liquor had a contrasting effect on her ex-husband, it brought out someone she hadn’t met before—someone who was spiteful and petty, who didn’t seem to love her like the entertaining fellow she’d married, the man she’d had a son with.

And Barron... She knew it was possible for a mother to look at her own son and see a stranger, a man whose visitations brought misery, not joy. She wondered if knowing the relationship between love and hate so intimately had any value.

From under the sink, Penny extracted two items kept in a worn paper bag and placed them on the table. One: a nip of Beefeater gin. (Her ex-husband's favorite.) Two: a small plastic bag, folded to form a square, with dusty remnants inside. (Her son's favorite.) Together, these two things destroyed her family. She took some time to organize and reckon them, to try and understand what their purpose was, or had been.

Her tongue found the sharp edge where a tooth had been splintered in a struggle with her adult son. She placed the things back into the bag, rolled it up, and paused in tucking the package into its home under the sink. Her hesitation gave her some hope, a moment where letting go of these remnants might be the path to release. Instead of the garbage, she finished putting them back under the pipes, behind a worn, plastic basket of cleaning goods.

Everything happens for a reason. Right? She thought to herself.

Penny's eyes wandered the kitchen and dragged to a stop on the fridge. The padlock was undone, as it had been for the last several months. It dangled, useless.

How long had it been since the funeral? Not even a year yet.

She needed to get around to taking all of that hardware off, to putting a close to that chapter of her life. Normal people didn't need to lock up their food. Maybe next weekend she'd go shopping, replace some of the furniture that had been stolen and sacrificed to her son's addiction. Get a few plants to add some life back to the house. She could see the living room from where

she sat, the cable wires sticking out of the floor where the television used to be. She hadn't been able to watch her soaps for some time and was having difficulty finding the desire. Fran kept her up-to-date on the stories, however, and Penny enjoyed the company. The visits harkened back to better times.

She sighed and put the items away to get ready for bed. It had taken several months to acclimate to sleeping during the day and she knew it was critical to maintain a ritual in order for sleep to come. She ate a snack and moved upstairs where she bathed, brushed, and read. Years ago, the addition of sun-blocking blinds made the final transition to the night shift possible. That and the central air. The AC unit, bolted into the wall, had been a prudent investment. Silence, darkness, the white noise of conditioned air. It all played a role in lulling her to sleep, but this morning it seemed to take longer than expected.

As she entered the twilight zone of subconscious thought, the moment when one feels they are floating and at peace with the world, as their limbs become buoyant, there came a rap at the door.

She snapped awake and listened. Waiting. Penny thought it might have been a bird or squirrel making its way. Then the knock again. A familiar pattern, a kind of riff on "Shave and a Haircut." The knock her son had always used like a passcode on her door until he'd stopped bothering to knock.

The bedroom faced the backyard—one of the reasons Penny liked the home. It helped keep peace in what was too often a rowdy neighborhood. She couldn't see out front. The vertical window in the stairwell faced the side of the house and featured opaque, colored panes.

She snapped her covers back, shoved her feet into slippers and paused. Something was urging caution. A sixth sense whistled warnings from somewhere far away. She opened the nightstand drawer and reached all the way into the back, behind a flap of wood. Her hand touched cool metal. The revolver her ex-husband had left behind, his last attempt at concern before leaving. She'd never fired it, didn't even know what caliber it was, but she knew which end sent the problems out. Holding the smooth wood of the grip made her feel stronger than she was. Penny shuffled out of the bedroom and down the stairs, pistol held low at her side as if she were in danger of being seen with it. At the door, she left the security brace in place and flipped the cover on the peephole out of the way.

No one.

She shifted her attention to the window, checking the blinds first to be sure they offered no view from outside to inside before parting them. She thought she saw a glimpse of a retreating figure.

There's no one here.

Penny's mind ground out any dark thoughts and she concluded: "I must've been dreaming."

After checking all the shades and locks, she stopped and stared at the pistol in her hand, feeling foolish. She took it back upstairs and jammed it back into the drawer of the nightstand. It took another hour or so before she drifted off to sleep.

###

Penny dreams of her son, when he was five or six—the last few years when a child still loves with ferocity, before the cynicisms of life begin to chip away at that surety.

He sees that she's sad and wants to comfort her in the awkward way that children do, having only been comforted all their lives and never much needing to reciprocate. He picks at his chest; she can see that he has a zipper there, right down the middle.

A little boy with a zipper in the center of his chest, she thinks aghast, my boy, my sweet little boy. How strange.

He grasps the slide and begins to tug. She reaches for him, afraid of what happens next if he manages to undo himself. She can't reach him, the air is like mud, it pulls at her, drags on her limbs. The sound of the teeth sliding through the catch are loud, becoming louder. *Clack, clack, clack.* The interlocking strips rumble like gears in a giant clock. She reaches and he unzips until there's nothing but red, a ragged hole in his skinny chest, her baby's chest.

He's empty, no one should be empty...

His father is there, at a distance, just out of reach. Always gone and never at hand. He holds a plastic white chest with a red top. She sees there's a red medical cross on the front and he tries to say something, but no sound comes out.

She's still reaching for her boy...

###

At the beginning of her shift the next evening, Penny could still hear the zipper. It was an added drag to the night while caring for the less savory needs of patients in rehab. They existed in a half-life between hospital and home. Too ill to be on their own and not incapacitated enough to remain at the hospital. Some of them had colostomy systems or oxygen tanks. They needed

assistance using the toilet, their soiled sheets needed to be changed, they needed to be bathed, and their medicines delivered.

There were three other women on her team and there should have been six. They were supposed to be thankful that budget shortfalls hadn't affected their already low pay, but what they were was numb. Penny could no longer easily count the years she'd worked as a nurse-assistant and bills never went away. Only people did that.

As she put the finishing touches to a set of linens, there was a commotion at the front desk, the sound of raised voices. Her first instinct was to focus on her job, let the appropriate personnel handle the irate patient. The voice however, was that of a young man, not a sickly old one. She straightened her whites and poked her head into the hallway.

Penny could just make out the back of the intruder, his curly brown hair touching the collar of his grey jacket.

Shirley, the receptionist, was at least two decades younger than Penny and Haitian. In Penny's experience, the younger ones were easier to deal with.

She repeated herself in a firmer tone. "*Sir*. We do not allow unannounced visits. You can leave a message, if you like, but you need to leave."

"I need to *speak* with her!"

"You need to stop shouting like that and you need to *leave*."

Penny knew that tone. Shirley had already called security, most likely. It might take a minute for Dennis to get here if he were on the other side of the grounds, but he'd come at full speed and

bring the hammer down. Dennis was a large man, past his prime, but imposing, and he took his job seriously.

The young fellow cursed and slammed his hands on the desk. When he turned, his back faced Penny, then she caught a glimpse of his profile as he stormed into the stairwell: he was white, with the shadow of stubble on his cheeks and chin.

She stepped into the hallway, striding quickly towards the desk. The elevator doors opened and Dennis stepped out, his bald head gleaming in the harsh light. He wore a crisp white shirt with a badge above the chest pocket and a radio clipped to an epaulet.

“Miss Shirley, you okay?”

“I’m fine, Dennis. He went down the stairs; white guy, brown curly hair, grey jacket, jeans, needs a shave.”

Dennis nodded curtly and took pursuit, slamming the door to the stairs open and talking into his radio.

“My God, Shirley, I heard that man yelling down the hall. At first I thought he was a patient...” Penny said.

Melina joined them from the opposite hallway, carrying a stack of trays. “What is going on down here, was that a patient?” She had a thick, Dominican accent. Squat and strong-willed, she made a good nurse.

Penny pointed at the door to the stairs. “There was a young man shouting at Shirley, he ran down the stairs.”

Melina looked at Shirley and asked, “Are you okay, Shirley?”

“I’m fine—”

“Praise the Lord for that!” She crossed herself and looked up. “These people around here...”

“Ain’t that the truth!” Penny turned to the receptionist. “What did he want, Shirley?”

“Well...”

Melina lit up. “Oh, no, please, *God*, tell me he was not a pervert?”

Penny turned wide eyes and raised eyebrows to Melina before leaning forward on the desk.

“Was he trying to get dirty with you?”

“Good Lord, no! He was just—he was asking...”

“What is it, Shirley, what’d he want?” Penny asked.

“C’mon, Shirley, spill, girl,” Melina said in a flat tone.

“Well, it’s not a ‘what,’ it was a ‘who.’ He was asking for you, Penny.”

Melina’s mouth formed an ‘O’ and her eyebrows tried to escape into her hairline. “Who was that white boy, Penny?”

Penny didn’t hear her colleague, she’d retreated into her memories from yesterday. The restless sleep, the nightmare, the knock on the door that she’d chalked up to her imagination. She felt an urgent need to lock the doors, to huddle behind the desk. Who was this man, how had he found her? She began to shiver, not hearing her colleagues asking if she were all right. The spell broke when Mr. Shatain stepped out of the elevator.

“I just heard from Dennis. Everyone all right?”

Everyone looked at Penny.

Shatain seemed lost for a few moments until he focused on her. “Penny?”

Shirley piped up, “That man was here asking for Penny.”

“Oh, dear... Penny?”

“I’m fine.” Her own voice sounded muffled and distant to her. She repeated herself, willing strength into the words and meeting Mr. Shatain’s eyes. “I’m fine.”

“Are you sure?”

Penny slipped into habit, put one hand on her hip, and narrowed her eyes. She didn’t need the help of *this* man. He may not have been the source of any of her woes—past or present—but he represented the thorn in their collective sides because he was management. That he was white only exacerbated the feeling.

“Fine, fine.” He threw his hands up. “Let’s all get back to it then.”

The brief incident had put a mark on the shift. Already, she was behind schedule, there were many more tasks to attend to and enough misery to fuel the rest of the night.

With little over an hour left in her shift, she had two important chores. One was to ensure that Mr. Lenun had taken his meds. He was a tall, pale man with a sheen of jaundice to his light skin.

“Mr. Lenun? Mr. Lenun, sir? I have your medication here? Mr. Lenun?” She touched his shoulder gently and there was no response. His chest moved up and down, so that was a good sign. His mouth slurped open and he began to snore.

“Mr. Lenun?” She gave him a firmer shake and his eyes snapped open. He stared at the ceiling, pupils wide in the low light as his yellow eyes swam slowly toward her. For a moment, it seemed as if she’d woken a demon. The way he looked through her, like she wasn’t real or

entirely there. There was nothing in his eyes, no fear just an emptiness. If there were any emotions there, they were all projected through Penny.

A sense that she was immaterial, a ghost, crept up from her bowels and filled her breast. Dread flowed from what appeared to be the waking dead. The feeling passed as quickly as it came.

His speech slurred and vibrated with age in an attempt at firmness. “Who’re you, what d’you want?”

“I’m Penny, Mr. Lenun, one of the nurses here. We met yesterday. You’ve been here for two days, and it’s time to take your medication.”

He growled in response, dragging out the ‘ah’ sound from the back of his throat. Contempt. Penny wheeled his table into place, put the medication on it and poured him a small cup of water.

“I need you to take this before I can leave you for the night.”

She stood her ground. There were thousands of Mr. Lenuns—most of them black men—and Penny had met them all. His alcoholism had led to a malfunction of his liver, which led to a build-up of pneumonia in his blood and it had begun affecting his brain. It was the kind of precipitating turn of events that might lead someone to make a correction in their life. It was certainly embarrassing enough to have been hallucinating in front of one’s home so badly that neighbors called the police.

She shook her head, a slight motion, only to herself, and clamped her lips shut. There would be nothing gained by commenting on his situation.

He grumbled and hissed again while slowly levering himself up. “Least you’re American. Y’know? Seems like ain’t many got these jobs no more—you know what I’m saying.”

Penny waited while he swallowed the pills. Water dribbled down his chin.

“Happy?” He snarled at the last swallow.

“Ecstatic.” She cleared the table and said, “Good night, Mr. Lenun.”

“Ain’t no such thing here, y’all keep wakin’ me up.” He turned on the light and reached for an aging paperback and his glasses on the nightstand.

Penny tried deep breaths to relieve the agitation from her body. Tension pulled at her back and legs. She dropped the paper trash into a pail and slammed her hand into the sanitizer dispenser on the wall outside.

One more task and it would be time to clock out. Mrs. Blackthorne needed her bag changed. Routine stuff: snap off, empty, clean up, replace. Penny entered the darkened room and pulled the curtain. When she flicked on the light, Mrs. Blackthorne lurched in her bed.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, Mrs. Blackthorne, I didn’t mean to startle you; I need to change your bag.”

“Help me!” Her eyes were wild and she struggled to sit up, her bony fingers trembled. “I need to go to the toilet.”

“Can it wait a moment, we need to—”

“I need to go now. *Please*, help me.”

“Mrs. Blackthorne, please sit back, I have to change that bag—”

Mrs. Blackthorne lurched up and her bag swung from beneath the Johnny she wore. It looked like a gigantic, swollen tick with its head buried in her side. Penny felt an edge of panic.

When the hell had it been changed last?

The old woman convulsed and Penny cursed herself for not recognizing the signs. She lunged for a bedpan as Mrs. Blackthorne vomited. A surge of green with pink and orange bits bubbled out of the patient's mouth, down the front of her Johnny.

A hot glob of the expulsion splashed on Penny's hand, but she managed to catch the rest in the pan. She placed a reassuring, clean hand on the woman's back as the patient gasped and heaved for air. That was when the colostomy bag burst and its contents splashed over the side of the bed, onto her legs and feet. The smell alone was an eye-watering assault, impossible to ignore. The warm, syrupy contents were worse. Liquified shit splattered all over her pant legs and filled her shoes. Penny choked back her revulsion and went to work.

Even after a committed rinse in the deep sink, she still commuted home in shoes that reeked and squelched with every step as the sun rose.

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She stood in the shower, waiting for the hot water to run out. Penny had bagged and disposed of the soiled shoes and pants as soon as she got home, never wanting to see them again.

She swallowed her anger again, vowing to address the issue, in as calm a manner as possible, of whomever had failed to change that poor woman's bag. Later. It was a later thing. Right now, she needed to let it go and relax. If she didn't, there'd be screaming, emotions flung at the walls and into the empty house. And Fran might hear and become worried.

Her back and feet ached, it hurt to blink. Penny needed sleep to come without hesitation to clear the night's experiences away. Her exhaustion wailed that it didn't matter, that it was temporary. Another night would come, another shift.

In bed, she stared at the ceiling, and the air conditioner hummed in the background. Penny couldn't sleep. Conditions were perfect. Everything was in its place and the neighborhood was silent. Still, she stared at the swirls of stucco on the ceiling, waiting.

There was a knock at the door, the same pattern as before, the one her son used—*had* used. Penny felt cold, a creeping numbness from her legs to the top of her head.

It couldn't be...

The knock again, but more urgent. She pushed the covers back and shoved her feet into slippers before pulling a housecoat on over her nightgown. The air had an ethereal quality to it and her mouth felt dry, tasteless. Nothing felt right and she reached for reassurance. The weight of the pistol pulled on her palm. For a moment, Penny thought she understood why so many young men insisted on carrying one, the heft of it was an unspoken promise.

The carpeted stairs stretched beneath her feet, sunlight splashing in all the colors from the window. She crept down the stairs until she could see down the hall to the front door. This time, there was a shadow, someone waited. A few more steps and she was in front of the door, only a few feet to the door.

She eased her way to the door, resisting any sort of confrontation. When Penny eased the peephole cover back, it creaked at the last, a betrayal.

“Are you there, is that you? I need to talk to you.”

Penny pressed her eye to the hole. It was the young man from the hospital. He was fish-belly pale, red rimmed his eyes and lips, and the tips of his ears. The brown curls that looked attractive at a distance were dry and wan, too long for his face, unkempt. He glistened in the reflected sunlight, a sheen of sweat covered his face and neck, interrupted only by the hair on his face. His eyes wouldn't focus, they darted from side to side with minute movements.

She backed away from the door, unable to reconcile who she'd expected to see and the person who was there. The twisting tension in her chest wouldn't let up as Penny struggled to find her voice, gasping out at the last: "Who are you, what do you want?"

"I have—I need to speak with you, I need to know what's happening."

"With *what*?" She heard the tension in her own voice and tried to dial it down. "Why me?"

She watched as he clutched the sides of his head and took a deep **breath**. Then he looked into the peephole.

"Are you watching me, can you see?" He spoke through clenched teeth.

Penny didn't answer, but put her forehead on the door and just watched. The man unbuttoned the top of his shirt. She could see the beginnings of a scar. As he unbuttoned, more of it could be seen. Puckered and freshly healed, the scar of a heart surgery.

Fear thumped in her ears. The entanglement of terror and love tore through her chest, the foulest struggle. He was gone, her boy was gone, and she was relieved that his suffering had ended, that his body, at least, had done some good at the last, had given someone else life.

Relieved? Am I relieved, is that what I feel? Because his suffering ended? Or mine? Her tongue found the chipped tooth again, a sharp reminder of times that should have been well past.

“They cut me. They cut me from neck to navel and they put it in. It burns, I can feel—I can feel a pull. I don’t understand, I *need* to understand, I need...something.”

Penny gave in to frustration. “You need *what*? What do you want from me?”

“I gave up. My feelings—I expected to die. Now I have this heart, it was supposed to be a second chance, but it *hurts*. Every beat, I can hear it, feel it.” His face compressed in pain and he ground his fingers into his chest before cupping his ears and pushing his hands roughly through his hair.

She almost dropped the **gun**, then almost hit herself in the face with it as she recoiled, to press her hands to her mouth and stifle the cry. She couldn’t see him now, only hear him.

“His name—his name was something with a ‘B.’ Right? ‘Brian’ or ‘Barry’ or something. And... And he needed you for something. Needed something from you to fix, for you to fix... Fix it—it’s all I can hear. *Please.*”

Penny watched her left hand float up to the security bar and push it out of the way.

This can’t be, this can’t be...

She saw her fingers undo the **first bolt and the second**. Her right hand dangled by her side, keeping the gun slightly behind her leg.

He’s dead, my son is dead, he’s gone, Barron is gone. He did some good in the end, he gave his healthy heart, it was his final act. He can’t be here, he can’t...

Her fingers closed around the knob and twisted until the door swung open and she could see him through the screen, see his eyes pleading. And she could smell him, the scent of her boy in his last days. So notable, the stink of addiction, of self-neglect, but still her son.

“You.” He touched a finger to the corner of his mouth, a move so familiar, so ingrained in her memory that she knew what came next: he rubbed his earlobe. Reflexive, ingrained since childhood, a gesture she’d seen her son do countless times while growing up.

She could see him push aside common sense and basic human love, steeling himself to give in to compulsion. An intimidating posture, desperation, primal needs taking over.

“You have the things I need, you can help me, give them to me. You can make it stop. You need to save me—*give me what I need!*” He grabbed the handle on the **screen door** and gave it a violent pull. It wouldn’t open, she’d locked it, of course. Old habits died the hardest.

The visitor pushed hard on the screen and the metal threads **popped** out of the frame. Her throat constricted and her voice could barely be heard over the **rattling** door. Penny sounded as if she were being **strangled**, she felt as if familiar hands held her neck again.

Anger colored her words, desperation flowed. “You shouldn’t be here. Not anymore, not again.” Then a rabid thought lanced through her mind, driving her body: *This is a chance to end it all for good.*

Words weren’t going to fix this, it was never going to end until one of them was dead.

She **shot** him through the screen door. The explosion slammed in her ears, loud and sharp like a hammer to a marble table. The stranger’s eyes widened in shock and red blossomed on his chest. She **pulled the trigger again and again**, each recoil sent a tremor up her wrist, but she was too numb to feel it. Penny emptied the weapon into the befouled organ in his chest as he toppled backwards down the stairs, tumbling to a rag-doll heap on the cracked concrete below.

Her thoughts died into a flattened sine wave. The neighborhood remained silent, too quiet as she shut the door and set all the locks back in place. Someone else could make the necessary phone calls; she was too tired. The gun. She shoved it back into the drawer after the long walk back to her bed. She wanted to cry, knew it was the logical thing to do, but she had nothing left.

So tired.

Penny just wanted to get some sleep, to rest before her next shift. Everything kept coming back, around and around, it never ended. It was important to be ready for tomorrow. And it was so quiet, so peaceful.

She fell asleep before the covers reached her chin.