

JIM STARK

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# *Love is all Around*

**B**ILLY RAY CHARLES WAS NOT HAPPY. ALTHOUGH HE HAD A meal in his stomach and a roof over his head, he was not happy. In fact, Billy Ray Charles had seen much happier days in his life — days like the one on which he'd killed Earl Boggs, Jr.

But then, Earl had been asking for it. He'd made the mistake of pointing out that Billy Ray shared the same name as that blind, nigger piano player. In a magnanimous display of affection for his occasional drinking-and-puking buddy, Billy Ray shot him twice through the chest. Bang bang. What a mess that was. Billy Ray had been happy that day, but today he was not happy.

Perhaps it had something to do with the hat he was currently wearing. Only it wasn't exactly a hat. It was sort of a cap. No, it was more like a beanie. A metal beanie. Well, whatever it was, it was heavy and it made his scalp itch. It had been itching ever since they shaved it several hours ago. He would have scratched it if it weren't for the thick leather straps binding his arms and legs. In fact, when you got right down to it, the entire chair was awfully uncomfortable.

"A real ass grinder," Billy Ray might have said if compelled to speak, which he wasn't. The only thoughts occupying his mind at the moment were that his nose itched and that there was probably a Jew behind the one-way glass, hand on the switch.

Billy Ray scrunched up his haggard face under the maddening itch seizing his nose and a flashbulb exploded in his face. Upon seeing her son's scowling face peering up at her in the next day's newspaper, Billy Ray's mother would remark that her youngest son always was a "mean bastard," but that is neither here nor there. The photo would go on to win a Pulitzer Prize, however.

The facts of the matter were that Billy Ray Charles' nose itched, spots were



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dancing in front of his eyes, and his ass hurt. He opened his mouth to voice an opinion to that effect when his thoughts, confused as they were, shattered and disappeared in a riot of adrenaline inside his body.

Although Billy Ray was unaware of it, his bowels and bladder suddenly gave way in a colorful cascade of piss and shit. Had his neurons stopped ricocheting inside his skull for a moment, he would have been pleasantly grateful that it was someone else's job to clean up the floor, thank you very much.

A spark suddenly appeared at Billy Ray's temple. Then another at his ankle. Tiny puffs of smoke squirted out from under the metal cap — beanie — whatever. Witnesses would later testify that Billy Ray appeared to be, well, cooking. In any event, at 11:04 a.m., the lightly smoking body of Billy Ray Charles was pronounced dead. Many of the assembled witnesses later confessed blackly that the more accurate phrase would have been "well-done." What a mess.

Across the room, Herb Schwartz was frowning.

"Oh, pickles," he said sourly.

He was not happy.

"Current cooks," Herb was explaining. "So it's essential that the system limit the amount of current at all times. Overload a person's body with current — say, more than six amps — and he'll cook like a chicken. Now I'm not saying he felt anything," Herb jerked his thumb toward the attendants scraping Billy Ray Charles' remains from the chair, "but for appearance's sake, it's not the best way to go — for you or the condemned. Have you ever seen a man overcooked? A man whose innards are so electrically scrambled his flesh falls off in your hands?"

He shivered melodramatically. "Brrrrrrr!"

Sid Owens nodded attentively as he scribbled notes in his battered organizer. As warden of the Canyon Cove Correctional Institute for Men in Whitney, Colorado, Sid had finally received an appropriation from the state legislature to overhaul the Cove's execution system, and the mishap of Billy Ray Charles — the most recent in a long, sad comedy of public and publicized screw-ups — had convinced Sid that it was time to change.

"Two thousand volts is usually enough to stop a man's heart," Herb continued, his voice easing into the gentle rhythms of his practiced pitch. "Figure another 400 volts for the fat ones. Tack on an additional 240 to compensate for any voltage loss during the actual execution, and you've got 2,640 volts, which, in my opinion, is the ideal number of volts needed to electrocute a prisoner without causing any unnecessary trauma to the body."

Sid nodded some more and continued scribbling.

"Now then, I've been working on some special modifications which may interest you," Herb said. "You know those awful leather restraints?"

Sid's head registered a barely perceptible nod. He had a report to make to the corrections board, and he wasn't going to blow it by missing anything in Herb's presentation.

"They're great at keeping an inmate in the chair, sure, but they're a real pain in the ass when trying to get them out. I mean, take the case of that poor schmuck. You've got two hundred pounds of smoking, shit-smeared meat, and you want to get it out of there in a hurry, right? Well, I've been experimenting with seatbelts like the kind they've got on airplanes. Nylon, with quick-release latches. That way, you can have the guy on the way to the morgue in far less time. And hey, nylon is washable, you know what I mean?"

Sid's head bobbed appreciatively.

Herb was hunched over the Cove's electric chair, a salted drop of sweat hanging from his nose. The chair was partially dismantled, pieces strewn about the empty room along with the disgorged contents of Herb's many tool and electrical kits. Brightly colored lengths of electrical wire stretched across the floor in all directions like a spaghetti rainbow. A small portable television set flickered a few feet away.

Sid had managed to procure five thousand dollars for repairs to the Cove's electrical chair, and had hired Herb J. Schwartz & Associates, Inc. ("Execution Equipment and Support," his card read) to handle the job. Except Herb was, by all appearances, a one-man operation, so Sid couldn't figure out who the "associates" were. Probably some kind of tax write-off, he assumed. The scheduled execution of Vern Faubus was to take place in three weeks and Sid needed a flawless display of Capital Punishment At Work if he was going to get any more money for additional prison projects like the rec-room and gym. No more screw-ups.

As he made his way down the bland institutional sterility of the prison's hallways on his way to the execution chamber, the odd, lilting strains of Herb's voice wafted through the cement corridor.

*How will you make it on your own*

*This world is awfully big*

*Girl, this time you're all alone*

*But it's time you started living*

*Time you let someone else do some giving —*

Herb's voice broke off abruptly as Sid strode into the room.

"Hiya, Sid. How's it look?"

"Er, fine. Are you still on schedule for the Faubus date?"

Herb looked briefly hurt.

"Sir, you wound me! I'm making some minor modifications to be sure, but you have my word that this delicate piece of machinery will be fully opera-

tional in time for Mr. Faubus.”

Sid heaved a nervous sigh and slid an antacid into his mouth. It made him edgy when Herb spoke so pretentiously.

“Good, good.” A pause. “What kind of modifications?”

“Well,” Herb began, his features beaming with enthusiasm, “we both agree that ol’ Sparky here needs a new wiring job. But — his finger stabbed the air — you might not be aware that this backrest is terribly uncomfortable, if I may say so, and after that unpleasantness with Mr. Charles, I think it would be wise to install a drip pan underneath, to catch any ...”

He frowned, searching for the right word.

“Waste products,” he said at last.

Sid rubbed his chin, as he often did in moments of reflection, such as this one.

“Uh ... okay. Go ahead. Nothing fancy, just enough to get the job done. We gotta stay within the budget, remember?”

“Yes, yes,” Herb said impatiently. “Say, Sid, did you have a chance to think about what I asked you?” Herb nodded at the TV set.

Puzzled, Sid rubbed his chin harder.

“Oh. Yeah. I don’t think the Partridge Family played their own instruments. The Monkees, either.”

Herb thought about this.

“Damn. I thought so, too. I guess I’ve just been afraid to admit it.”

Sid gave Herb a worried look. The kind of look your mother would give you if you had a temperature — say, 100 degrees.

“Well, uh, just hang in there, buddy.” He paused. The silence stretched out uncomfortably.

“Uh, listen, I gotta get back to the office. Paperwork.” Sid turned to leave.

“Hey, tell me something,” Herb said.

Sid stopped mid-stride and raised his eyebrows.

“How can they call it ‘fancy ketchup’ when it comes in those little plastic packets?” Herb asked. “What’s fancy about that? Is it the same stuff they use in restaurants or something?”

Sid’s look became even more worried. 101 degrees with a rash, let’s say. Herb continued.

“And which is it — ketchup or catsup? Are we talking about different recipes? You know, the government oughta step in and decide once and for all. No, wait, the people oughta decide. We should vote on it and then stick to it.” He paused, thinking.

“Hey, you know people in the government. Maybe you can get this thing started,” he gushed.

“Gosh, Herb, I guess I never really thought about it,” Sid said carefully

while trying to regain his composure. "I'll, uh, I'll make some calls and see what I can do. How's that?"

"Well ... all right." Herb gave Sid a dejected glance and then returned to his task. Sid strode out of the room. Quickly.

Vern Faubus' Big Day arrived. On most people's Big Days, they'd dress up in something nice like a suit. Vern, however, had to content himself with the standard prison blues. Prison blues. Now there's a funny phrase.

*Got them ol' prison blues*

*Got them mean ol' prison blues*

*Gonna fry in the electric chair today*

*Lord, I got the blues*

Vern Faubus had been an eccentric fixture at the Cove for nearly 12 years, having been convicted of the rape and murder of two student nurses who had the sorry luck of sleeping with their windows unlocked one warm May night.

Vern had loudly proclaimed his innocence during his stay in Colorado's concrete Hilton, maintaining that he'd been framed by a nebulous organization known simply as "the Association." When confronted with the niggling evidence of a pair of bloody panties found in Vern's shitpile pickup truck, he declared that Colorado's Finest were not above planting evidence on an "undesirable," in Vern's words, which was unusual, since Vern's words were generally of the two-or three-syllable variety.

So despite the well-intentioned explanations of his innocence, Vern was sentenced to die. Do Not Pass Go, Do Not Collect \$200, Go Directly to Ol' Sparky. Unbeknownst to Vern was that he was to be the first test-pilot on the Cove's New and Improved electric chair, courtesy of Herb J. Schwartz & Associates, Inc. and a few thousand dollars of the state's money.

Vern had to admit the chair was more comfy than he'd expected. A padded seat and a backrest with a slight arch. He was melancholy for the loss of his hair, though — a luxurious black mane he dutifully combed every morning. After much protestation, he was allowed to keep his second most prized possession, however — his nattily-trimmed beard. So there sat Vern in The Chair and atop his bald, slightly misshapen scalp, sat the metal beanie, under which a large electrode was fastened to Vern's mostly empty head.

Reporters, relatives and other members of the prison proletariat milled about the room excitedly. Vern's mother was inspired to announce how "regal" her son looked, in spite of his bald head and the fact that electrodes were clamped to his ankles and temples. Cinched across his midriff, however, was a brand-new nylon seat-belt, courtesy of an obscure, bankrupt American airline.

Sid paced nervously back and forth, chewing an antacid. Herb, wearing a wide smile, reclined comfortably in one of the chamber's viewing chairs, con-

tentedly humming the "Jeopardy" theme as the minutes ticked by. He had thoughtfully brought along a stack of Herb J. Schwartz & Associates, Inc. brochures, in case anyone asked.

As the Big Moment approached, Vern fidgeted in the chair, as though he had something on his mind, however unlikely the idea seemed. Sid solemnly asked him if he had any last words.

Vern cocked his head to one side and thought. It took him a minute, but eventually he was able to dredge something up from the folds of his gray matter.

"I didn't do it," he announced with a defiant nod of his head.

Sid rolled his eyes.

"And, oh yeah, go Broncos!" Vern added, smiling stupidly.

Sid glanced at the executioner's booth and pulled an imaginary switch in the air.

A moment passed. Another.

A hum filled the room, and Vern's previously broad smile slipped away as his nerves started a furious tango under his skin.

From across the room, Herb's eyes widened.

Sid chewed another antacid.

Vern's beard caught fire.

"Oh, pickles," Herb exclaimed tiredly.

"JESUS H. CHRIST ON A POPSICLE STICK!" Sid shouted.

Vern burned.

Unfortunately, the Canyon Cove Correctional Institute for Men was ill-prepared to deal with the combustion of inmates, spontaneous or otherwise, which might go a great length in explaining why the flames on Vern's face were put out with a fire extinguisher, much to the horror of the assembled crowd. In fact, Vern's mother was forced to amend her "regal" remark, and instead was heard to exclaim, "Oh, I don't like that one bit."

Meanwhile, Sid was frantically ducking a phalanx of reporters, retreating down a corridor screeching "No comment! No comment!" to the advancing mutant horde. He could already feel the hard mahogany of the Colorado grand jury's witness chair under his ass.

In the death chamber, two of the Cove's execution attendants busied themselves with the removal of Vern Faubus' foam-covered form. He was, mercifully, dead. As they worked, both men made mental notes to speak with the union rep in the morning. This shit definitely wasn't in the job description.

Herb made some notes on a soiled electrical schematic and some puzzled looks on his face. He was not happy. Again.



"Okay, I think I figured it out," he said. He was standing in front of Sid's desk, upon which rested a plaque reading "Chief Screw," which no one but Sid found very funny.

"This is not a problem. Definitely not a problem," Herb said reassuringly.

"I think it's these damn mail-order parts." He held up a melted electrical resistor for Sid's weary inspection.

"That does it for me. Back to Radio Shack for Herb J. Schwartz & Associates."

Sid sighed. He was good at it. He looked at his desk calendar. Thrill-killer Chester Figowitz had an appointment with ol' Sparky in six weeks. With a sheer force of will, Sid resisted the urge to reach for an antacid.

"Okay, listen," he began. "I need the chair operational in five weeks, Herb. No screw-ups." Sid rubbed his chin. It was one of those moments. "You would not believe the shitstorm that has come down since the Faubus incident. I, me personally, cannot afford another botched execution. I want to know you understand this. Do you understand this?"

Sid leaned forward, which was his way of emphasizing a point. He didn't know if it worked or not, but figured what the hell.

"Oh, yeah. No problem. I've got the blueprint right here," Herb beamed. He waved the tattered schematic in the general vicinity of Sid's face. "I'll need to make a trip to the Shack, but the whole project shouldn't take more than a few weeks. Three, tops. Of course, you might want to replace some of the burned parts of the chair, and the parts damaged by the fire extinguisher." Herb rocked back and forth on his heels.

"What? Oh. Yes. Yes, okay." Sid felt the muscles criss-crossing his skull begin to tighten.

"Keep me posted," he grunted, turning his attention to an ivory blizzard of paperwork on his desk.

Herb smiled, then turned to leave. He paused.

"Hey, do you believe in an afterlife?" he asked.

Sid blinked, surprised at the question.

"Yeah. Yeah, I do," he said finally.

"What's it like?" Herb pressed.

Sid frowned in a moment of philosophical contemplation. "Well, I'd like to think it's like a huge library, the greatest library ever created, with beautiful furniture and decorations, lots of light and tranquility, and all around you are books about the universe — everything, past present and future," he said. "The whole history of the world right there for you to browse through for eternity. Everything that has ever happened and everything that ever will, forever." Sid was smiling.

"What about you?" he asked.

Herb snorted. "Well, hell, I was just hoping I'd still be able to catch ESPN. That's all I'd want."

"You don't say," Sid replied, suddenly feeling very tired.

"Didn't I? Just now?" Herb asked.

Time passed. Sid knew this was so because the gags on his "Far Side" desk calendar changed. Sid liked the ones with cows. Cows were good. Cows were funny. The ones with ducks weren't as funny, but they had their moments.

One afternoon, weeks before the Figowitz execution, and against most of his instincts, Sid picked up the day's third cup of coffee and decided to check on Herb's progress.

He found Herb underneath the chair, his head buried under the immense wooden seat which was now covered with an orange nylon cushion. Frayed electrical wires splayed out around Herb's supine form. He was singing, oblivious to Sid's presence.

*Love is all around, no need to waste it*

*You could have the town, why don't you take it*

*You might just make it after all*

*You might just make it after alllll*

Sid cleared his throat. It had been sore for a while.

"Oh, hey. How's it going?" he shouted amiably.

Herb's muffled greeting drifted up from the floor.

Curious, Sid crouched down to see beneath the chair, tilting his styrofoam cup inadvertently. A thin stream of java spilled to the floor, spattering on the wires.

A spark burst above the puddle with an angry pop. Then another. Another. Suddenly, a spectacular chorus of sparks exploded like fireworks in the stillness of the room.

Under the chair, Herb grimaced as a deadly wallop of current surged down his spine. His legs stiffened, then jittered madly, the heels of his loafers tap-tap-tapping on the concrete floor in time to an insane, private rhythm.

"Oh, pickles," he groaned through gritted teeth, though Sid, his mouth agape, could not hear.

The room lights went out with a loud *tink!* Herb's legs ceased their electric boogaloo and lay still. An odd smell hung in the air. It was faintly like fried chicken.

It occurred to Sid then that perhaps Chester Figowitz would have to wait.

Herb J. Schwartz & Associates, Inc. landed in bankruptcy court soon after. No associates were ever located.

Herb Schwartz was not happy. He was dead.