

*Broke  
Down  
Visions*

by Matt Casey

\*Note: This story takes place  
between Atomic Visions &  
Runaway Visions

This is an original short story and has  
never appeared elsewhere.

Blazing! Adventures Magazine

*Publishers*  
2007

*New York*

**Frank understood Miles had fallen into a trance when the narrow man didn't hold up his side of the conversation. The former-scientist rocked stiffly in the passenger seat as his eyes turned blue. Dust kicked up behind the old wreck as it bumped down the road. The engine ticked, the tires thumped, the breaks squeaked and something, somewhere rattled ominously. Frank couldn't find where that sound was coming from.**

**"How far are we from the next town," Miles asked. His now-brown eyes adjusted to the light.**

**Frank peered through the windshield. A couple of low buildings peaked over the horizon.**

**"Another ten minutes," he said.**

**"You're going to hit a pot-hole," Miles said. "It's going to wreck the car, and you can't avoid it."**

**"I'll see it," Frank said. "Don't worry."**

**Miles pressed his lips into a thin line and stayed quiet. He wrapped one hand around the door handle and grabbed the center console with the other.**

**"What's that about?" Frank asked.**

**Miles stayed quiet. Frank grumbled and stared at the town ahead. The tallest building stood only two stories high-little more than a toilet stop on a long road.**

**Then the car lurched and sent Frank's head into the driver's side window. It cracked, and Frank jerked the wheel as he stomped the breaks. The chassis skidded sideways and a corner of the car dropped. Miles watched a tire skid on the road behind them. Sparks flew as the car ground to a halt.**

**Blood ran from Frank's temple and he looked at Miles.**

**"You okay?" he said.**

**Miles released his death-grip on the console, and left sharp pits where his finger nails dug in.**

**"I told you you couldn't avoid it," Miles said.**

**\*\*\***

**Frank stepped into the back room and found a soggy-bodied man sitting behind a desk. A string tie dangled from his neck. The door clapped shut and the fat man moved his hand to the right corner of his desk.**

**Frank had seen that move before-arrogant men with guns in their top drawers. He stood still, and the man behind the desk oozed back to comfort.**

**"I assume the mechanic showed you in," the fat man said, "and you're in the market for a new car."**

**Frank made a face. Everyone pronounced their Rs too carefully here, like they might get away.**

**"Yeah," Frank said. "I hit a pothole, and your mechanic says the repairs will take too long."**

**The fat man grinned, then suppressed it.**

**"The highway department really should fix that," he said. "Seems to be doing a number to a lot of cars."**

**A silence took the room. Frank eyed the man behind the desk. Familiar pieces clicked together in his head: a wise guy, a gun, a small town and a scam.**

**The fat man cleared his throat.**

**"My name's Earl," Earl said.**

**He rose from the desk and offered his right hand. Frank shook it, but noticed Earl's left hand lingered on that corner.**

**"They call me Britches," Frank said.**

**"Glad to meet you, Britches."**

**\*\*\***

**Earl brought Frank to a lot full of junkers. The rusted-out cars slumped against each other like old men with gin blossoms. Earl leaned on his swank sedan while Frank read price tags attached to grimy windows.**

**"A little expensive," Frank said.**

**Earl smirked-a mouth full of teeth and smugness.**

**"It costs a bit to get them out here," Earl said.**

**Frank grunted. Then he took to the cars. He squeaked doors and kicked tires. Rust and decay everywhere. He grabbed a stick shifter and it snapped off.**

**"Would you like to make a purchase right now?" Earl asked. "We could have you back on the road in an hour."**

**Frank dropped the broken stick. It clattered to the floor.**

**"That's okay," he said. "I could use a couple days break anyway."**

**Earl's face shifted.**

**"You sure?" he said, but it sounded more like "get out of my town."**

**Frank stifled a smile.**

**"Yeah," he said.**

**\*\*\***

**The door swung open and money scattered across the floor. Frank stepped in and stared at Miles, who held a five-dollar-bill folded into a triangle.**

**"What are you doing?" Frank said.**

**"I was bored," Miles said. He scrambled to pick up the bills, each creased in the middle.**

**"You were building a house out of money?" Frank said.**

**"Are we leaving now?" Miles asked.**

**Frank shut the door and glanced out the window.**

**"No," he said.**

**Miles stopped mid-scramble. He crunched a wad of bills against his chest.**

**"What?"**

**"Something's going on here," Frank said.**

**Miles dropped cash on the bed and herded it into a pile.**

**"So what," Miles said, "federal agents could be right behind us."**

**Frank shook his head.**

**"They shouldn't figure out those bodies aren't us for a while," he said.**

**"I'd still like to get out of the country," Miles said.**

**Frank turned to the window and stared at hobbled buildings on a flat landscape.**

**"We can spare a couple of days," Frank said.**

**\*\*\***

**Miles pushed into the bar as sweat ran down his neck. The door clapped shut behind him, and he found a stool. He sat. His hands shook. His teeth ground together. The bartender approached, and Miles barely noticed.**

**"What can I get you?" the barman said.**

**Miles wiped his forehead.**

**"Ginger ale," he said.**

**The bartender recoiled, and a man wearing a St. Louis Cardinal's hat leered at Miles.**

**"We only have beer," the barman said. "Or liquor."**

**Miles scanned the bar. He saw taps, bottles, a bartender and the man in the Cardinal's cap shuffling a deck of cards, but no soda fountain, and no cooler.**

**"Beer's good for nerves, right?" Miles said.**

**The Bartender nodded.**

**"I'll take one."**

**The barman filled a glass, and the sound of riffing cards peppered off the walls.**

**"I'll get that beer," said the man in the Cardinal's cap.**

**Miles looked down the bar.**

**"Why would you do that?" Miles said.**

**The man in the cap shuffled once more.**

**"I have to get someone to play cards with me," he said.**

\*\*\*

**Frank drained his second cup of coffee and set it down in a saucer. A waitress saw the empty cup and scuttled away.**

**Her hands shook.**

**Frank tapped a finger on the table. He tapped it again. Then he had a rhythm, and he kept it. Five minutes later, the waitress scurried over, slopped coffee into his cup, and blew away without a word.**

**He dropped his hand, the flag for the greetings he would have offered.**

**The coffee tasted rotten. Frank took a sip and bent his mouth.**

**He watched the waitress visit locals and pour their drinks with a nervous smile and timid hello before retreating behind the counter.**

**Then the door opened, and Miles staggered in. The narrow man wavered down the aisle and slumped into Frank's booth.**

**"You were supposed to be here half an hour ago," Frank said.**

**Miles grinned - big and empty of thought.**

**"Sorry," he said.**

**Liquor rode his breath.**

**"Have you been drinking?" Frank asked.**

**Miles shrunk into his bench and shook his head. Frank squinted, and Miles stilled.**

**"Yeah..." Miles said.**

**Frank shrugged.**

**"Drink some coffee."**

**Miles got a cup of black. Frank got a refill on his, and both ordered burgers.**

**Their food arrived cold before Miles finished his cup, and the pair ate over whispers.**

**"People are afraid here," Frank said. "The last time I saw this, a boss was taking tribute, breaking knees and digging graves. Earl's got some business here."**

**Miles swallowed a meaty chunk and followed it with a swig of coffee.**

**"I know," Miles said. "He's running protection rackets."**

**Frank froze. His eyes bore holes into Miles' head.**

**"Where'd you find that out?"**

**A beef-crumble fell off Miles' lip.**

**"This guy at the bar," Miles said. "We played cards."**

**Frank squinted.**

**"Did he tell you anything else?"**

**Miles wiped his mouth with his arm.**

**"Not really."**

**"How much did you lose?"**

**Miles put the burger down.**

**"I was winning at first," he said, "but I lost \$5 by the end."**

**Frank grinned.**

**"Card shark," he said. "Go play again tomorrow. See what you pick up."**

**\*\*\***

**Frank cracked a bottle of beer and handed it to Miles, who took it with a sloppy nod and swigged. Frank eased into a rickety chair by the motel-room table and pulled a cigarette from his pocket. He lit it while Miles stared at the mouth of the bottle like it might contain all the answers in the universe.**

**"Why are we here?" Miles said. His words slurred together on a sloppy tongue and the scent of liquor.**

**Frank opened his mouth and let the smoke drift out.**

**"Don't get philosophical on me," he said.**

**"I'm not," Miles said. "Why are we here. You and me-a runaway government scientist and the meat head that's smuggling him out of the country-staying over in a middle-of-nowhere town in Southern Missouri?"**

**Frank sipped his beer.**

**"Don't call me a meat head," Frank said. "Earl's a bad deal, and he needs to get broken."**

**Miles bolted out of his chair.**

**"How many people have you killed?" Miles yelled.**

**Frank shrugged.**

**"None today," he said. "Now sit down and drink up."**

**Miles paced to the wall. He wobbled on the way.**

**"You killed eleven government agents to get me out of the city," Miles said, "why does one hick in one hick-town bother you so much?"**

**Frank threw his bottle across the room. It shattered on the wall.**

**"I never killed but one person that wasn't dirty already," Frank said. He rose from the chair and stood to his full height. Miles stopped pacing.**

**"When you live dirty you have no right to complain when dirty things happen to you," Frank said, "but if you're living clean, you don't deserve a lowlife taking your livelihood and scaring you quiet. That's why it bothers me."**

**Miles got quiet and small, standing in the big man's shadow. Beer oozed down the wall, and an acrid smell floated into the room.**

**"What's that smell?" Miles said.**

**Frank opened a fist and found his cigarette stubbed out and a burn in his palm. He turned dismissively and entered the bathroom.**

**"You're just drunk anyway," he said. "Drink your suds."**

**\*\*\***

**Miles thought someone had fired a shotgun into his head. A scream boiled out of his throat and he clamped his hands on his skull and hoped he could hold his brains in. He found his scalp intact.**

**"Shut up," Frank said.**

**The command cut ribbons through Mile's mind.**

**Frank opened the door, and found Earl on the other side.**

**"Am I interrupting?" Earl said.**

**"What do you want," Frank said.**

**"I came by to tell you the prices on my cars came down a bit," Earl said. "You should come back by the lot."**

**"I'll pass," Frank said.**

**He pushed the door, but Earl's boot held it open.**

**"This is the best deal you'll get," Earl said.**

**"We're enjoying the break," Frank said, "another time."**

**He clapped the door shut.**

**Miles rolled and clutched his head.**

**"It's called a hangover," Frank said.**

**"Not so loud," Miles said.**

**He crawled into a ball in the middle of the bed.**

**Frank ran the tap in the bathroom, and came back with a glass of water. He set it down on the table next to Miles.**

**"Drink this," he said. "Then go back to sleep. Drink two or three more when you wake up, and hang around until you're done peeing."**

**Miles took the glass and sipped. Frank washed up in the sink and pulled on a shirt.**

**"Where are you going?" Miles asked.**

**Frank walked to the window. He pulled a gap in the blind and peered out.**

**"I'm going to go collect more information," Frank said. "We'll compare notes after dinner."**

**\*\*\***

**Frank spent the morning walking from store to store. When he hit the end of the**

**town's two dozen pharmacists, general stores, groceries, and shops, he turned around and went back.**

**He talked to every guy that swaggered or slinked, and told them he was looking for a new boss. A new organization. Was there one in town?**

**They kept their yaps shut. Most of them, but all it takes is one.**

**From there he went to the diner, where he met Miles.**

**Miles spent the day at the bar. He lost \$8 to Jimbo, the guy in the Cardinal's hat, and another \$2 to the bartender.**

**He arrived to dinner late, where he and Frank ate burgers drank coffee and kept quiet.**

**\*\*\***

**Frank looked over his shoulder. He saw an empty street.**

**"What'd you learn?" Frank said.**

**Miles said Jimbo gave him a few crumbs: Earl owned the garage, the dealership and the bar. Everyone else paid tribute.**

**"I think he works with Earl, but doesn't like him," Miles added.**

**"Good," Frank said.**

**Frank explained what he thought was going on. Earl had gotten tired of bleeding everyone in town dry, so he started a scam: Dig a hole in the highway, wait for cars to wreck, then sell the survivors a junker at a painful price.**

**"Jimbo just takes his piece in poker money while the suckers are in town," Frank said.**

**He estimated Earl's forces at 30 men. He figured most of them for being loyal only because there was no other team to play for. Earl wouldn't allow expansion clubs in his town.**

**"So what now," Miles said.**

**"Now, we sleep," Frank said. "Tomorrow, we take Earl."**

\*\*\*

**Miles was half awake when the vision came. His body seized, and his eyes turned ice blue.**

**A moment later, his body relaxed.**

**"Frank," he said.**

**Frank snored in the other bed.**

**Miles perched on the edge of his bed and reached toward Frank's shoulder. He thought better of it and laid back down. A grin crossed his mouth in the dark. Soon after, sleep took him.**

\*\*\*

**Miles woke to Frank washing his face in the bathroom sink.**

**"Frank," Miles said, "what's your plan."**

**Frank shut off the tap, toweled off his face and stepped out of the bathroom.**

**"It's pretty loose," he said. "Kill Earl. Leave town."**

**"Can we try something else," Miles said. "I have a hunch."**

**"A hunch?"**

**"A hunch."**

**Frank sniffed and drew a cigarette from his pocket. He plugged it in his mouth, put a flame to the end and took a slow, contemplative drag.**

**"Sure," Frank said. "If it doesn't work, there's always my plan."**

**Frank puffed again, and blew smoke.**

**"So what's the plan," he said.**

\*\*\*

**Frank stepped out of the hotel room, loose, casual. He found Earl waiting in the parking lot, and a pair of bruisers waited with him.**

**"You can leave easy, or you can leave hard," Earl said, "but you leave today."**

**Miles slipped out the door after Frank. Frank closed it, then pulled the glowing butt from his mouth and glanced at it before dropping it on the pavement and stomping it out.**

**"Come meet us at the bar," Frank said. "We have a proposal."**

**\*\*\***

**"Poker?" Earl said.**

**He sat across from Frank in the darkened bar. The bruisers stood behind Earl. Miles stood behind Frank. Frank lit a butt.**

**"Yeah," he said.**

**Frank exhaled a blue cloud.**

**"I don't really play..." Earl said.**

**"Have Jimbo play," Miles said. "He's your guy."**

**One of the bruisers shrugged. Earl shot him a look. The bruiser turned stoic, and Earl turned back to Frank.**

**"If Jimbo wins, you give me your money and take a car?" Earl said. "And If Miles win, I match your money and give you a car."**

**Frank stubbed out his cigarette.**

**"Either way, we leave today," Frank said.**

**Earl chewed the thought. He quirked his lip in an approximation of a shrug.**

**"Call Jimbo," he said.**

**\*\*\***

**Jimbo arrived, and Frank laid out the rules. Jimbo and Miles would play five**

**card draw. Each would take turns dealing. Blinds wouldn't change, and the last man with chips won.**

**"You sure on this?" Jimbo said.**

**"Shut up, Jimbo," Earl said. "Just take their money and get them out of my town."**

**Jimbo asked again, with his eyes. Miles nodded.**

**"Okay," he said. A thread of pity ran through his voice.**

**\*\*\***

**An hour into the game, Jimbo's pile had gotten bigger, but not much. Miles picked up his cards and checked. Jimbo raised the minimum and Miles folded. He fumbled his cards and his hand—a pair of jacks—fell face up.**

**Earl glanced at Frank.**

**"What's your boy doing?" he said.**

**"Playing poker," Frank said.**

**\*\*\***

**Thirty minutes later, Miles still hadn't played many hands. Jimbo raked in more small bets, and the balance continued to drift.**

**The bruisers sat at the end of the bar and tapped their fingers. Frank stepped behind and grabbed a glass.**

**"What are you doing," Earl said.**

**Frank put a glass under a tap and poured.**

**"Your boys look bored," he said.**

**"I didn't say you could go back there," Earl said.**

**Frank shut off the tap and put the now-full glass on the bar. He grabbed a second.**

**"Relax," he said. "Loser pays."**

**\*\*\***

**The bruisers drained their first beer. Then their second while Miles' mound of cash shrunk. Frank sat at the end of the bar smoking a cigarette, and the only sound in the room was Jimbo shuffling the cards.**

**"I have to hit the can," Earl said.**

**He pushed through into the bathroom. Jimbo leaned in to Miles.**

**"Are you crazy?" he asked.**

**"I could be crazy," Miles said.**

**Jimbo dealt the cards.**

**"If you expect me to throw this, you're wrong," Jimbo said. "If you win fair, that's fine, but I've seen harder marks than you in bingo parlors."**

**Miles looked at his cards. The toilet flushed in the bathroom.**

**"If you have some way to get out," Jimbo said, "use it."**

**The bathroom door slapped against the wall and Earl stomped out.**

**"I know what I'm doing," Miles said.**

**He pushed his cards into the middle of the table.**

**"I fold," Miles said.**

**\*\*\***

**The bruisers drained another beer and started on their fourth. Miles dealt and looked at his cards.**

**Frank heard Miles' breath catch. The big man stubbed out his cigarette and hulked over to the table.**

**"I raise," Miles said. He pushed bills into the center of the table.**

**Jimbo looked at his cards.**

**"Call," he said.**

**Jimbo tossed three cards. Miles tossed two, then dealt their replacements.**

**"I raise again," Miles said.**

**Jimbo tossed his cards.**

**"All yours," he said.**

**Miles' jaw dropped.**

**"What?" He said.**

**"I fold," Jimbo said. "It's your pot."**

**Frank wiped his mouth. Earl watched him.**

**"Mind if they take a break," Frank said.**

**Earl leaned on the bar. Smoke hung in the air behind him.**

**"Why?" he said.**

**"They've been playing for two hours," Frank said.**

**Earl grinned.**

**"I wouldn't try running if I were you," Earl said.**

**Frank put his hand on Miles' shoulder.**

**"Come outside," he said.**

**Miles gathered the cards on the table.**

**"Okay," Miles said. "I'll be out in a second."**

**He tapped the deck on the table. The sound shot through the room. He set it down and began to stand, but Jimbo grabbed his wrist.**

**"Run," Jimbo whispered.**

**\*\*\***

**Frank stood outside smoking a cigarette at record speed when the door closed behind Miles. It was just about noon. Frank noticed men in shadows - troops lined up to prevent an escape.**

**"I'd give even odds we get out of town if we run now," Frank said, "but we'd**

**leave a few bodies."**

**"No," Miles said.**

**Frank dropped the cigarette in the dirt and stomped it out. He pulled another from his pocket.**

**"Still worried about blood on your hands?" Frank said.**

**"No," Miles said. "Well, yes, but... the vision."**

**Frank lit his cigarette and snapped the lighter shut.**

**"And what if it was wrong," he said.**

**"None have been wrong yet," Miles said.**

**"That was the hand, wasn't it," Frank said**

**Miles dropped his head.**

**"It looked like it," he said.**

**"Was it the hand or wasn't it?" Frank said.**

**"It must not have been," Miles said.**

**Frank pulled a long drag off his cigarette, and blew a slow ribbon into the air.**

**"It's your call," Frank said, "but plan B's looking better all the time."**

**Miles sucked a decisive breath.**

**"Let me play," he said.**

**\*\*\***

**Miles and Jimbo resumed play. Frank offered the bruisers another beer.**

**"No," Earl said. "They're drinking coffee now."**

**Frank returned a glass to the rack, and returned to the end of the bar. Earl joined him.**

**"Surprised you didn't run," Earl said. "I figured you had even odds of knocking out my men and stealing a car."**

**Frank didn't respond. He stared stone-cold at Miles, Jimbo and their game of poker..**

**Earl leaned in.**

**"But you did come back, didn't you," he said. "You know something I don't, don't you."**

**Frank cracked his mouth just enough to talk.**

**"Maybe," he said.**

**\*\*\***

**Earl sat on a chair close to the table now. He watched every deal, every movement of Miles' hands.**

**"He trick dealing?" He asked.**

**Jimbo shook his head.**

**Earl watched Miles fold two more hands. The fat man crossed his arms across his chest and kept his eyes on Miles' fingers.**

**"Is he pocketing cards for later?" Earl asked.**

**Jimbo stopped.**

**"He's clumsy," he said. "I'd see that."**

**"Count the deck," Earl said.**

**Jimbo stared at Earl.**

**"You know I'd see if he was holding," Jimbo said.**

**"Just count it."**

**Jimbo gathered the cards together, and started peeling them off the top of the deck. He counted. Fast.**

**Then Miles seized. His eyes flashed blue. He shuttered and shook the table.**

**Frank bolted off his stool, and the bruisers turned from the bar.**

**"What's going on," Earl said.**

**"He gets attacks," Frank said. A hint of panic rode on the lowest levels of his voice.**

**Earl stared at the shuttering man.**

**"What's wrong with his eyes," Earl said.**

**Frank cracked his mouth to speak, but nothing came out.**

**Then Miles' eyes turned back to brown and the shuttering stopped.**

**"The soldiers use babies as target practice," Miles said.**

**The room froze as the narrow man heaved a breath.**

**"Babies," he whispered.**

**"What's he talking about," Earl said.**

**Frank shook his head just enough to look rattled.**

**"They're part of his attacks," he said. "He has hallucinations." Frank sounded cool to the casual listener, but Earl wasn't a casual listener.**

**"I see," Earl said.**

**\*\*\***

**A round of beers later, play resumed. Jimbo found the deck complete and dealt the next hand. Miles folded. Then he took the deck and dealt the next hand.**

**His breath caught when he looked at his cards. Jimbo's eyes shot to his opponent's face, then to Frank.**

**Frank pulled a chair up to the table across from Earl.**

**"Check," Jimbo said.**

**"Raise," Miles said. He pushed a clump of bills into the middle.**

**Jimbo squared his cards. He tapped them on the table and eyed Miles. Then he fanned them and looked at them again.**

**"Re-raise," Jimbo said.**

**Miles grabbed all his money and started pushing it in, then stopped. He pulled the green back, peeled his hands away and laid them flat.**

**"Call," he said.**

**Jimbo took one card. Miles too two. They examined their new hands.**

**"Raise," Jimbo said.**

**"All in," Miles said.**

**Jimbo leaned back He slid his cards together and placed them on the table. He tapped a finger on the brim of his Cardinal's hat.**

**"You've played conservative all day," he said. "You've got something. The question is, do I have you beat."**

**"Do you?" Frank said.**

**Jimbo looked at him, then back at Miles. He struck the table with his cards, and the sound snapped through the room like a decision made.**

**"I think I do," Jimbo said. "Call."**

**Miles revealed a full house-kings over nines. Jimbo pounded his fist and swore.**

**"I win?" Miles said.**

**Jimbo cursed again.**

**"Yeah," he said. "You get the pot. Let me figure out how much I owe you."**

**\*\*\***

**Jimbo counted the money. It put Miles ahead about 60/40.**

**Frank got up and walked behind the bar.**

**"Any more beers," Frank asked.**

**Everyone said no, and Jimbo dealt.**

**The catch in Miles' breath was louder this time.**

**Earl got up and walked behind the small man.**

**"Raise," Miles said.**

**Earl pursed his lips and looked at Frank. His right hand drifted around his back.**

**Jimbo watched the room.**

**"I don't think you hit twice," Jimbo said.**

**He pushed a matching pile of money into the center.**

**Jimbo took two. Miles took three.**

**"All in," Miles said.**

**Earl's hand disappeared further behind his gut. Jimbo checked his cards  
"Call," he said.**

**Miles turned over another full house. The curse hadn't even passed from Jimbo's lips before Earl had his gun out and pointed at Miles.**

**"What are you doing," Jimbo said. "He won square."**

**Earl snarled.**

**"No he didn't," Earl said. "He cheated."**

**The bruisers rose with the tilt of drunks, but their shoulders bulged with street-fighter strength.**

**"He didn't cheat," Jimbo said. "I watched him."**

**"He knew those hands," Earl said. "That attack. I think he... I think he."**

**"Earl!" Frank yelled.**

**The fat man's attention snapped to the bar. The glass smashed against his face. He squeezed the trigger in shock and pain. The blast rumbled like a bomb, and wood splintered in the floor.**

**Frank stood at the bar, with another mug poised to throw.**

**The bruisers turned to him**

**"Don't," Frank said. "I've killed tougher men than you two."**

**They didn't listen. One lunged forward. Frank threw. When the bruiser fell, glass jutted out of his face. The second bruiser backed off.**

**Frank grabbed another glass and rounded the bar. Earl wailed. A shard of glass impaled his eye, and ragged cuts shredded his cheek.**

**"I'll kill you for this," Earl said. The gun lay near his right hand.**

**"Quiet," Frank said. "Here's how this is gonna work."**

**Frank explained how Earl was going to hand over the pile of money and the keys to a junker.**

**"And when we're gone, you're going to lighten up on the people in this town," Frank said. "We'll be back to check up on you."**

**The wounded bruiser rose. He snarled in pain as blood dripped off a ragged piece of skin hanging from his jaw.**

**Frank regarded the bleeding, angry threat and Earl wrapped his fingers around the gun.**

**"Frank!" Miles yelled.**

**He kicked Earl's arm, and the gun fired. Frank heard the bullet hum over his shoulder.**

**He grabbed Earl's forearm. The bruisers could hear the snap, and they heard the pops when Frank tore the gun out of the fat man's hand, but Earl's screams covered what came after.**

**Frank picked Earl up by the neck and raised him toward the ceiling.**

**"I was giving you an out," Frank said. His voice came out somewhere between a bark and growl. "You were going to get out of this weakened, but intact."**

**"Now..." Frank said.**

**He squeezed his fingers tighter. Earl's screams turned to squeaks. His right forearm and fingers hung limp at awkward angles.**

**"Now..." Frank said.**

**Then Earl was quiet. The last sound he made was the thump when he hit the floor.**

**"You killed the boss," the unwounded bruiser said.**

**Frank pointed a rifle-straight arm at him.**

**"You'll be next if you don't shut up!" He barked.**

**For a moment, Frank's breathing rose above all other sounds in the room. The breathes came hard and mean. They slowed, and hushed until Frank pulled a cigarette from his pocket. He plugged it in his mouth and raised his lighter. The flint's spark sounded like stones in an avalanche.**

**After a puff, he turned to Jimbo, who sat silent and stunned at the table.**

**"Now," Frank said, "let's talk about your new administration."**

**\*\*\***

**Jimbo waived at Earl's sedan leaving town. The two bruisers stood with him. A**

**daze held all three as the car drifted toward the horizon. Then it disappeared, leaving only a trail of dust that would drift away long before the effect the sedan's passengers left on the town.**

**"You ready to be boss?" the unwounded bruiser said.**

**Jimbo turned to him, the dust already fading behind him.**

**"Are you ready to be a lieutenant?"**

**\*\*\***

**Miles didn't notice Frank's hand drifting over the plush interior. He was too busy leafing through rubber-band bound stacks of bills.**

**"How'd we do?" Frank said.**

**"I'm still counting," Miles said, "but I think Jimbo threw us a bonus."**

**Frank's mouth cracked just enough to indicate a smile.**

**"Good job," Frank said.**

**The End**