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WORLD OF THE DRONE

By Robert
Abernathy



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Brown John's Body

by

Winston Marks

Erd Neff wanted as little to do with his fellow men as possible. So he lived alone in his big cash-vault. Alone, except for John....

E

rd Neff dropped a thin bundle of currency into the \$100 bill drawer of the flat-top desk and kicked the drawer shut with a dusty boot.

He flicked the drip from his hooked nose, which was chronically irritated by the wheat dust of the warehouse, then he wiped his fingers down the leg of his soiled denims. Across the 12 X 12, windowless room John stirred awake from the noise and began nosing in the debris of his filthy cage.

"Time for supper, John?" Neff tugged at the twine at his belt and examined his \$3 watch. He pinched a dozen grains of wheat from a two-pound coffee can and let them sift through the wires of the cage. John pounced on the grain hungrily.

"Wait a minute! What do you say, dammit?" Neff's hand reached for the marshmallow-toasting fork that hung from a hook on the wall. He touched the points, filed needle sharp. "What do you say?" he repeated, twanging the tines like a tuning fork.

John skittered to the far corner, tearing new holes in the old newspaper with frantic claws. Cowering against the wires he spat half-chewed flecks of wheat trying to say the magic words that would spare him from the fork. "Tinkoo! Tinkoo!" he squeaked, straining to make the two syllables distinct.

Neff hung up the fork, and John turned to lick at the old scabs clotted from earlier jabs, taking sullen inventory to be sure there were no new crimson leaks in his louse-infested hide. Until two months ago, he had been just one more gregarious specimen of *Mammalia Rodentia Simplicidentata Myomorpha Muridae decumanus*. Now he had another name. Like each of his predecessors in

the cage, he was a large, brown rat called John—after Erd Neff's despised and deceased father. Neff named all his rats John.

"Well, don't get fat."

John finished the grain, pawed the air and squeaked, "Mur!"

"More, hey? You talk fine when you're hungry."

"Peef, mur, mur!" John begged. He did well with his vowels, but "I" and "s" sounds were beyond him. He said "f" for "s". "L's" he ignored entirely.

Neff gave him one more wheat head. "Okay, *get fat!*"

He turned to the door, lifted the inside, mechanical latch, shoved with his foot and snatched his revolver from his hip-holster. The vault door opened ponderously revealing an empty warehouse. Neff peeked through the crack between the hinges to clear the area concealed by the door itself.

One hoodlum hopeful had hidden there. Spotting him through the crack, Neff had simply beefed into the foot-thick slab of fireproof steel. Inertial plus surprise had disposed of that one. Neff hadn't even had to shoot.

T

onight there was no one. Funny. The wheat country was getting tame, or else the tin-horns had learned their lesson. It was no secret that Erd Neff never visited the local bank, yet it had been more than six months since anyone tried to hold him up.

The local bank hated him plenty. He was costing them. His five loan offices in the rich wheat county skimmed the cream of the mortgage loan business. Of course, nowadays most people paid off their loans, and the low interest rates he charged to lure the business barely paid expenses. Yet, he still picked up an occasional foreclosure. Farmers still got drunk, divorced, gambled, broke legs or committed suicide once in awhile, and Neff's loan documents were ruthless about extensions of time.

These foreclosed acreages he traded for grain elevators and warehouses when

crops were small and operators were desperate. Then came the bumper years during and after World War II. Wheat on the ground and no place to store it but in Erd Neff's sheds. It wasn't cheap to store with Neff, and he had a virtual monopoly in Ulma County.

Neff swung the great door back into place with its *whoosh—thunk* that sealed in air, sound and nearly a hundred thousand dollars in currency. He levered the bolts into place and spun the expensive combination lock.

The vault, tucked away in the front, left-hand corner of the old frame warehouse expressed Neff's distrust and contempt for mankind. Concrete and steel. Bed, shower, toilet and desk. In this walk-in cash box he was fireproof, bomb-proof, theft-proof and, most important of all, people-proof. There he consorted unmolested with the one mammal on earth he found interesting—John, the brown rat.

He slid the broad warehouse door closed behind him with a cacophony of dry screeches and padlocked it. The dusty street was deserted except for a black sedan which two-wheeled the corner a block away and sped toward him. Neff dropped his pistol back in its holster. "Now, what the hell—?"

He waited on the splintery platform, a huge man, ugly of face, shortlegged and long-bodied with a belly swollen from regular overeating. His shaved head swivelled slowly as the police car leaned into a skid-stop.

Officer Collin Burns got out and stared up at the motionless statue in sweat-dust stained denims. Burns was half Neff's 56 years, tall and thin. He wore gray, a silver star and a big black hat. He said, "I'll take your gun, Erd."

"Now what? I got a permit."

"Not any more. It's revoked."

"For why?"

"There were witnesses this afternoon."

"Witnesses? What in hell are you—oh, no! Not that damned dog?"

"The puppy belonged to a little girl. You can't claim self-defense this time."

"He was coming down here chasing the cats away every day."

"So you shot him, like you did Greeley's collie."

"Cats count for more. You know well as I do, you can't control the rats around a warehouse without cats."

"You've shot five men, too, Erd. Three of them are dead."

"I was cleared, you know damned well! Self-defense."

"You're too handy with that pistol. Anyway, I didn't file this complaint. It was the child's mother, and she made it stick with the chief. Give me the gun, Erd."

"You got a warrant for my arrest?"

"No, but I will have in an hour if you insist."

"I got a perfect right to protect my property."

"Not with a gun. Not any more."

"I just get these punks convinced, and now you want to turn loose on me again. Who put you up to this Collin?"

"You did. When you shot that pup. I'm not here to debate it. You're breaking the law from this minute on if you don't hand over the gun."

"Dammit, Collin, you know how much money I got in there? You know how much I pack around on me sometimes?"

"That's your business. You can use the bank and bonded messengers—they get along with dogs."

"Telling me how to run my business?"

"I'm telling you to give me that gun. You'll get the same police protection as any other citizen."

Neff sneered openly. "I'd a been dead thirty years ago depending on cops."

"I don't doubt that a minute. You're easy to hate, Erd. Are you going to give me that gun?"

"No."

"You like things the hard way, don't you?" Burns got back in the squad car and

drove off. Neff spat a crater in the wheat-littered dust and got into his own car.

T

Two minutes later he turned up Main Street and stopped before city hall. Inside the tiny police station he dropped his pistol on the counter. Bud Ackenbush looked up from his desk. "You could have saved Collin some trouble."

Neff stalked out without a word and crossed the street to the Palace Cafe. He ordered a double-thick steak, fried potatoes and pie. He liked the way the waitresses scrambled for the chance to wait on him. Women didn't like him. He was ugly and smelled of sweat, and on the street women looked the other way when they met him. All but the waitresses at the Palace. When he came in they showed their teeth and tongues and wiggled their hips. He was a 50-cent tipper.

The important thing was it got him his steak, really double thick and double quick. People could be real efficient. Like brown John. Prod 'em where they live and they'll do anything. Even talk to you.

"You look kinda naked tonight, Erd," Gloria kidded.

Neff wiped steak juice from his chin and stared at her breasts. It used to excite him, but now it was just habit. It was better than looking at red-smeared lips that smiled and eyes that didn't, eyes that said, "Don't forget the tip, you filthy bastard!"

Funny. Hang a gun on any other citizen in town and people would stare. Take the gun off of Erd Neff and people make cracks.

He did feel naked.

"I didn't order this damned succotash!"

"It's free with the steak dinner, Erd."

Go ahead, pinch my leg like the harvesting crews do. I'm free with the dinner, too. Like the ketchup. Like the mustard and the salt and pepper and the steak sauce and the sugar and the extra butter if you ask for it, just don't forget the tip.

Clarence Hogan, the fry-cook, came around the counter and leaned on the booth

table beside Gloria. "You don't like succotash? How about some nice peas, Erd?"

Clarence was Gloria's husband.

Pimp!

"Put some ice-cream on my pie," Neff said. He looked up at Clarence. "No, I don't want any goddamned peas!"

They brought his pie and left him alone. He finished it and felt in his pocket for the tip. He changed his mind. To hell with Gloria and her fat leg! The steak was tough.

He paid the check and went out. The sky was pink yet. Later in the week the sunsets would be blood-red, as the great combines increased in number and cruised the rippling ocean of wheat, leaving bristly wakes and a sky-clogging spray of dust.

Neff's busiest season. Damn that dog! Damn Collin Burns!

His hand brushed his leg where the leather holster should be. Damned laws that men made. Laws that acquitted him of homicide and then snatched away his only weapon of self-defense because he shot a yapping dog.

As he got in his car Collin Burns came out of the station. He tossed Neff's gun through the open window onto the seat. "Here's your property. The Marshal came in, and he changed everybody's mind. It's going to cost you a hundred dollars and a new pup for the little girl, probably. Here's the subpoena. Tuesday at ten."

"I don't get it."

"The Marshal said to let you fight your own battles."

N

eff started the car and let the clutch out. The Marshal knew his way around. The transient harvesting crews were a wild bunch. If word got out that Neff was unarmed, packing thousands of dollars the length of the county, the enforcement people would have a lot of extra work on their hands.

He parked behind the warehouse, next to the railroad tracks.

He came around front, unlocked the big door, pulled it shut behind him and bolted it. The warehouse was jet black now, but he knew every inch of the place. He could fire his pistol almost as accurately at a sound as at a visible target.

He practiced on rats.

Holding a pocket flash, he worked the combination. As the final tumbler fell silently, a faint, raspy screech came to his ears, like a board tearing its rusty nails loose under the persuasion of a wrecking bar. He listened a minute, then he levered the bolts back, stepped into the vault-room, closed the door and shot the mechanical bolts.

Sure. Someone was out there, but they'd get damned tired before morning. He flicked on the light and touched the other wall switch beside it. The powerful blower and sucker fans cleared out the musty air and rat-stink.

John rustled in the cage, blinking at the sudden light. "Hi, Neff! Meat! Meat! Meat!"

Smart little devil! Neff sometimes brought him a scrap from his dinner, but he hadn't thought to tonight. He sucked at his teeth and pulled out a tiny string of steak. "Here. Bite my finger and I'll poke both your eyes out."

John picked the thread of gristle from Neff's finger with his fore-paws and devoured it, trembling with pleasure. Neff lifted the cage. "Okay, now let's have a few tricks."

At once John made for the can of wheat. "Get outta there!" Neff scooped him up and dropped him on the desk, snapping his tail with a forefinger. John whirled, laid his ears back and opened his mouth. At bay, the brown rat, Neff knew, is the most ferocious rodent of the 2000 species, but Neff held his hand out daring John to bite.

Neff knew all about rats. More than anybody in the world knew about rats. When you live among them for three decades you find out about their cunning wariness, fecundity, secretiveness, boldness, omnivorous and voracious appetites. Fools reviled them as predators and scavengers. Neff appreciated them for what they really are: The most adaptable mammal on earth.

John was smart but no smarter than the rest. Neff had proved this by teaching

every rat he captured alive to talk.

Impossible they had told him. Even parrots and parakeets only imitate sounds in their squawking—yes, and pet crows. Animals don't have thinking brains, they said. They react, trial and error, stimulus and response, but they don't *think*.

Neff didn't know about the others, but he knew about rats.

Keep them hungry and lonely for a mate. Hurt them. Torture them. To hell with this reward business. Rats are like men. Mentally lazy. They'll go for bait, sure, but they'll go faster to escape pain—a thousand times faster.

And rats have lived with man from the first. They have a feeling for language like the human brat. Between partitions, inches from a man's head when he lies in bed talking to his wife, under a man's feet while he's eating, over his head in the warehouse rafters while he's working. Always, just inches or feet away from man, running through sewers, hiding in woodpiles, freight-cars, ships, barns, slaughter-house, skulking down black alleys, listening, hiding, stealing, always listening.

Yes, rats know about man, but rats had never known a man like Erd Neff, a man who hated all mankind. A man who chose a rat for a companion in preference to one of his own kind. Rats named John learned about Neff. They learned that his tones and inflections had specific meaning. They learned very fast under the stabbing prod of the marshmallow fork. With just enough food to keep them alive, their blind ferocity changed into painful attention. They learned to squeak and squawk and form the sounds into a pattern with their motile tongues. In weeks and months, they learned what the human brat learned in years.

"Stand up like a goddamned man!"

J

ohn stood up, his tail the third point of the support.

"Say the alphabet."

"Eh—bih—fih—dih—ih—eff—jih—etch—"

Neff lit a cigar and watched the smoke float away from the ceiling blower and vanish into the overhead vent in the far corner. He bobbed one foot in time to the squeaky rhythm of the recitation. He took no exception to John's failure with "I," "s", and "z". The other Johns had been unable to handle them, too.

"Hungrih, Neff. Hungrih!"

The big man picked out three grains of wheat. He noticed the can was almost empty. One by one he handed the kernels to his pet, waiting for John's "Tinkoo!" in between.

"Mur! Mur!"

"Lazy tongue! It's *more*, not mur!"

John dropped to all fours and retreated. Usually Neff slapped him in the belly when he used that tone. But Neff was bemused tonight. He kept listening for sounds, sounds that he knew could never penetrate the thick walls.

They were out there, he was sure. Another damned fool or two, flashing a light around, trying to figure out something. Neff remembered one pair who had even tried nitroglycerin. He saw the burns on the outside of the door the next morning.

Amateurs! Nobody knew for sure just how much money Neff kept in the old desk, and big-time pros wouldn't tackle a job like this without a pretty fair notion of the loot. For all they knew, maybe he mailed it to an out-of-town bank.

"Okay, fetch the pencil."

John jumped from the desk and moved toward the open door of the shower-stall where Neff had thrown the pencil stub. He paused by the wheat can, then scurried on to get the pencil. He climbed Neff's leg and dropped the pencil into the open palm.

"Smart punks up at State College. So you can't teach a rat anything but mazes and how to go nuts from electric shocks, eh? Wouldn't they be surprised to meet you, John?"

"Hungrih!"

"You're always hungry!"

"Meat! Meat!"

"Yeah. You can sound your "e's" real good when you say, 'meat.' Some day I'll cut off your tail and feed it to you." He laughed, grabbed John by the coarse hair of his back and slipped him back under the cage.

Then he undressed down to his underwear, turned out the light and lay on the narrow iron bed. John rustled in his cage for a minute, then there was only the faint hum of the blower and sucker motors in the ventilating system. The incoming and outgoing air was baffled and trapped to kill sounds, and spring-loaded sliding doors poised to jam shut and seal off the room if anyone tampered with the exterior grilles in the roof.

The fans hummed softly and Erd Neff slept.

Sleck-thud, sleek-thud!

H

e was awake pawing the wall for the light switch, but even as his hand found it, and his eyes discovered the closed ventilator doors, a reddish vapor sank over his body. A single gasp and Neff was clawing his throat. Sharp, brown-tasting, acid-burning, eye-searing, nose-stinging!

He fell to his knees and clawed to the far corner, fighting for air, but the acrid stink stained his throat and nose. His eyes kept burning. The whole room must be full!

The door-lever! No, that's what they wanted. Blind! Gun's no good now. God, for a breath of air! Damned tears! Can't open my eyes! Air! *Got to have it!*

His throat refused to open. The stink, a little like iodine, a lot like a hospital smell but a million times stronger—raked at the tender tissues of his throat. Icepicks stabbed from his soft palate, up into his brain, his temples. He swayed against the door, caught the lever and heaved convulsively. The door fell away slowly. He stumbled forward, gashing his knee against the sharp jamb.

A light struck redly through his clenched, tear-soaked eye-lids.

"That did it. Get the gun!" The voice was high, almost girlish. A young boy?

A slightly heavier voice said, "Got it. Keep an eye on him while I find out why the fan stopped working."

"He's going no place. You were right. That bromine stuff really did the business. Lookit his face. Sure it won't kill him?"

"Don't care if it does now. We got the door open."

"What is this bromine, anyhow? Boy it sure stinks!"

"It's a chemical element like chlorine, only it's a liquid. It fumes if you don't keep it covered with water, and the fumes really get you. They used it in gas bombs in the war."

"That was chlorine."

"They used bromine, too. I read it."

"Air!" Neff rasped.

"Help yourself if you call this stinkin' stuff in your warehouse air."

From the vault the deadened voice came. "This must be the switch. The other switch is for the lights."

"Look out! When you turn it on don't get dosed yourself."

"I only dumped a few drops in. There. It'll blow out in a few—pew, let me outta here. That stuff does—God, it's worse than the dose I got in the chem lab!" The voice grew, coughing and cursing. "Better wait a minute or two. How's our big brave dog-killer doing?"

On his hands and knees, Neff was on the verge of passing out, but doggedly he tried to place the voices. Highschool kids? *Bromine*. Sounded like a chemical they might filch from the highschool laboratory.

A kick in the ribs reminded him he was still helpless. "All right, get back in there." They aimed him through the vault door and kept kicking him until he went. They hauled him up into his chair. He tried to strike out blindly, but his chest was full of licking flames that spread pain out to his shoulders.

Now rope whipped around his feet, hands, chest and neck, jerking his body hard against the castered desk-chair and cramping his head back. "Tie him good. No way to lock him in with this door."

Neff opened his eyes. The boys were wet blurs rummaging through his desk. "Look! Just look at that! We can't carry all that."

"Get one of those burlap sacks out there. By the door."

Footsteps went and returned. "Now, just the small bills. Up to twenty. No, Jerry, leave the big stuff alone. Who'd take one from a kid?"

"Okay, let's make tracks."

"Wait!" Neff said desperately. "My legs and hands. You've cut off the circulation!"

S

Something hard like the barrel of a gun rapped down on the top of his head. "I ought to blow your dirty brains out. Killing my little sister's dog, damn you. Damn you, I think I will kill you. Damn you, damn you!" the voice crested.

"Wait a minute Jerry," the other voice cut in. "I got a better idea. Here. Look at this."

Short silence. "Yeah! Yeah, that's just dandy. Look how thin he is. That's just what the doctor ordered. Okay, the top's loose. Stand by the door and don't let him get by you. Wait. Got your flash? Good! In the dark. That's real good. Which switch is it?"

"Throw them both."

"Okay. Flash it over here. Look out, here I come!"

"Hurry up! Look at that hungry, black-eyed little devil. That ought to fix up the son-of-a—" ...*Thunk!* The compression rammed heavily into Neff's ears. The bolts shot solidly into place from the outside, and the combination knob rang faintly as it was spun. Silence.

They'd go out the same way they came in and tack the board back in place. How long before anybody would miss him? Twenty-four hours? Hell, no. Nobody would bust a gut worrying that soon. Two days? Some weeks he was gone

several days making the rounds of his loan offices.

A week? Maybe. Girls at the Palace would get suspicious. Tell Collin Burns.

But a week! They'd cut off the blower when they threw both switches. No ventilation. No air.

Neff strained at the ropes. His legs were pulled under the seat so tightly that his feet were turning numb. Hands were tingling, too. Dirty little sadists. Turning John loose thinking—

He *had* to get loose. Less than one day's air, then—

"John!" Thank God John wasn't an ordinary rat.

"John, come over to me. These ropes. Chew them, John. Come on, John. Come on, boy."

No sound at first, then a faint motion in the old newspapers.

"John, say the alphabet!"

"Eh—bih——"

"That's right. Go on!"

"Fih——jih——" The squeaking stopped.

"Come over to me, John. Come to me, boy."

He held his breath. The beating of his heart was so loud he couldn't be sure that John was moving. The silence was long. Even the rat was blind in this blackness. He must be patient.

Sweat began oozing and trickling down his face, his armpits, his back—even his left leg. No, wait! That wasn't sweat!

T

he throbbing in his legs was greatest at his left knee. The trickle was blood from the gash. It ran freely, now, the ropes backing up arterial pressure. Never mind

that!

"John!"

The coffee can tipped over, and the racket made Neff start against his bonds. The rope sawed his Adam's apple.

Crunch!

"Leave that damned wheat alone, John. Come over to me, boy. I'll give you a whole bag full when you chew off these ropes. Hear that, John? And a chicken foot. I'll bring you a whole chicken. A live one. I'll tie her down so she won't peck you. That's what I'll do, John."

He was breathing heavily now. "Do you get me, John? Would you like a live chicken?"

"Yeff."

The crunching resumed for a minute then stopped. Neff remembered, there had been only a dozen or so grains of wheat left. John would still be hungry. The thought of a chicken should do it. If not, he could threaten him.

Neff waited. Relax! There was all night to work this out.

Finally, he felt something at his ankles. "That's the boy, John. Up here and down my arms. They're behind me. Get the rope off my hands first. Come on boy."

It was John, all right. Neff could feel the little claws coming up his left leg.

"Come on, hurry up, John. Tell you what. I'll bring you a nice, fat female, just like yourself. A live one. You can live in the cage togeth—John, don't stop there!"

The claws had paused near his knee and were clinging to the blood-soaked cloth.

"No, no, John! Don't! I'll stick you with the fork. I'll stick you—I'll kill you! John, we got to get out of here or we'll both die. Die, do you hear! We'll suffocate! Don't do that. Stop. Stop or I'll—"

Neff's threats beat hard into the rat's brain, and now as the slanting incisors tore at the cloth and chewed the luscious, blood-smothered, hot meat, Neff's screams sent tremors through the skinny, voracious body, and the tail tucked down. The words made John nervous, but it was dark. And there was food, such wonderful

food, so much food!

They were harsh words, terrible, screaming words: but words are words and food is food, and after all—

John was only a rat.

THE END

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