

IS TODAY THE DAY?*

A Short Story

By

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I was first offered *The Job* towards the end of my senior year at Purdue University. That was thirty five years ago—1985. I thought it was because I did two internships at Brookhaven National Laboratory working in Applied Physics and Engineering and that I had my senior thesis “*A Look at Optical Molasses and Advanced Laser Cooling Techniques*” being published in *Photonics Spectra* magazine. Later, I realized it was *that*, but also, I had no real family, was physically gifted—I was an all Big 10 wrestler—and passed the medical and some asinine aptitude test for the agency. It was something about having the right interpersonal fit to work at the company and the ability to identify and eliminate hidden biases that may come up and not having them have a profound affect on me. Whatever the fuck that meant.

I could not wait to get into the research lab and start working on President Reagan’s *Star Wars* missile defense program. I later found out that wasn’t happening. What I really qualified for was clandestine ops. Go figure.

It was an agency with a non descript name. The Institute of Advanced Research Projects—IARP. Surprise. It had an acronym. Part of the National Reconnaissance Office. I’d never heard of it but it paid more than double what the senior analyst position at Proctor and Gamble was offering me. So—it was a no brainer—I was in.

This same agency also had me asking myself the same question every day for as long as I worked there.

“Is today the day?”

One day—after a successful mission—over a few beers in Prague with a counterintelligence agent on the books of one of the ‘name’ agencies—she told me that a clandestine operations officer’s life expectancy at IARP was only thirty-one years. How she came up with that, I have no idea—but it stuck with me. Over the next few years I was constantly reminded that she was probably correct and—erring on the side of caution—after about fifty sanctions—that’s what we called them anyway—I did the smart thing. At thirty, I retired to the suburbs. *Now looking back, I understand eliminating human assets is a high risk-high reward game—but I was pretty good at it as evidenced by the fact I’m still walking the earth.*

I now receive a government check, have a nice home and a loving family. And for the past twenty-five or so years I have never asked myself the question I asked every day back when I was working...

“Is today the day?”

Until today.

It was early. At least for me it was early, ten o’clock on a sunny, cloudless, May morning. A wonderful day to walk the dog.

The dog was wearing a bright red, paisley-print, trainman scarf wrapped around his neck—thanks to my wife who tried to prissy up the rugged little hound. Attached to his collar was a bone-shaped plastic doggie bag holder filled with bags—we were ready for battle.

The sweet smell of fresh cedar mulch filled the air and it was driving the dog’s sensitive nose crazy. We were a half-mile from the house heading home when the dog sniffed along the privet hedges that were set back about three feet from the street. The seven-foot tall bushes lined the curb for the next hundred yards and shielded the large McMansion homes from the view of passing motorists. There were no gatehouses, it wasn’t the Hampton’s, but it certainly wasn’t a ghetto. This was upscale suburbia. Home to bankers, lawyers, doctors and... as it turns out... Mafia bosses and retired secret agents. Beautiful, waterfront Long Island.

As Scout nosed around in the hedges looking for a good spot to take care of business, my mind drifted off taking in the scent and view of the blooming pear and cherry trees and the well-groomed lush lawns across the lane.

Something caught my eye up ahead on the left. Oddly, it was a young man that got my attention. He was sitting on the concrete driveway staring out into the street with his knees curled up to his chest.

A good-looking boy, he looked to be in his late teens to early twenties. Shirtless and shoeless, the kid was well-built like a swimmer, suntanned and with beach-boy fresh dirty-blond hair. He had on a pair of what looked like work pants—you know, those Dickies work pants that auto mechanics and hipsters wear. His arms were pulled around his knees and he was just sitting there, rocking back and forth not making a sound. Weird.

Scout and I walk the neighborhood frequently but I did not recall seeing this boy before. I assumed he lived in the home at the end of the driveway or nearby. But then again, I’m up to the 275 Readers so how would I know. Besides, he never looked our way.

The dog finally yelped at me to get going and that was when the young man slowly turned and looked at me.

“G’morning.” I called over and waved.

Not waiting for a response, I was happy to let Scout yank on his leash and lead the way towards home. Then, as if on a delay, the young fellow nodded his head and smiled at me. Actually not a smile, more like a deranged leer. A creepy, fucking psycho stare. I couldn't wait to get past him. What was going on in that head of his?

Suddenly, Scout slowed for another sniff in the hedges. I noticed the angry ridge of hair on the dog's back standing straight up. He turned and howled in the direction of the young man.

The boy was now standing and stretching. All the while he was still grinning at me. Like he recognized me. About an inch or so taller than me at six feet. He had me by at least twenty pounds. But unlike me, his weight was in his shoulders and chest and his muscles rippled in the sunshine. Mine was in a spare tire located at the beltline. And the thirty plus years I had on him made me jealous of his youth. Yet, there was a tinge of recognition on my part. I just couldn't place it.

For some reason, Scout had an issue with him. A bad issue. The dog kept growling toward the boy and pulling on his leash. I had always heard the stories of animals heading for higher ground right before a tsunami comes ashore. I didn't know if it was because their bodies felt differently at that moment or was it their keen sense of hearing that allows them to hear the noises of a storm well before humans can? Or was it their overall sense of knowing?

Who the fuck knows? But Scout was a beagle and he can sense bad shit happening and he was getting me nervous. And I had no business being nervous until what happened next.

As the dog continued to bark—I started to yank his leash to get him to walk toward home—I noticed our beach boy reach around into his waistband and pull out a pistol and point it towards me.

“Oh Christ!” I said under my breath.

He was about a hundred feet away.

He fired three times. It was loud. I hadn't heard that noise in a long time. And that's when I realized that today might be that day.

Obviously, he missed or I wouldn't be telling this story. I stood frozen for a few seconds like a garden statue. He seemed puzzled that I was still standing. He checked the gun—looking at it like the *gun* did something wrong. He stared into the barrel and I was hoping he would blow his brains out right then and there. No such luck.

One positive was the dog had finally shut up and stopped wagging his tail. Shit was getting serious.

Years ago I had gone to one of those Tony Robbins business seminars and they preached, “Fail to plan, plan to fail”. Well, I had a plan and it was to get the hell out of there. Real fast. I had no intention of failing.

“Scout, let’s go,” I yelled and dragged the dog after me as I ran down the hedge lined street. Scout followed but was holding me back as he kept stopping to turn around to bark at the young man. The dog was getting his dander up, gun or no gun. He wasn’t the brightest animal. Between his barking and sniffing, he was going to get us both killed. By now, the young man had started into a trot after us. And I could hear him laughing. Just my luck. A fuckin’ lunatic. Or maybe he was just having fun.

There was no chance we would make it all the way home. I had a gun in the bedroom drawer but that did me no good here. That was almost a half-mile away. We were about thirty yards ahead of him and I thought that once he decided to pick up the pace he would be on us quickly.

I had to think. Quick. And that was tough. I’d been away from this type of thing for too long and it wasn’t like riding a bicycle. The thought process wasn’t the same anymore.

About twenty feet ahead, Scout and I turned into the first driveway on the right, it was the first cut in the hedgerow and we slid behind the bushes and started to run along the property line into another wall of privet hedge blocking our way.

Damn. The dog kept pulling at me to go back out to the street. Mr. Beach Boy would be on us in a minute, so I decided to let the dog go free off the leash. There was no time to think. At least one of us would have a chance. He couldn’t shoot the both of us. Could he?

Breathe.

Speed, strength, and accuracy were not important. Nope. Breathing properly was paramount in these types of situations. An adrenaline dump at this moment would paralyze me with fatigue. I just hoped Scout was doing the same thing and wouldn’t get hurt. And I hoped he would run away. Fast.

As I bent down and released the leash, the dog ran to the opening just as the young man turned in behind the hedges and pointed the gun at me. For the moment, his face scrunched up in a mask of hate replacing his crazy smile. He was about twenty feet away from me.

Scout came to a sliding stop, squatted in front of him and growled. The dog—unlike me—had no fear of guns, just the noise. Myself on the other hand have only seen too well the consequences of staring at the wrong end of a barrel.

“Hey remember me, Mr. T?”

He pushed his right arm out. Turning the pistol to 3:45. Aiming directly at me. Closing his left eye and sighting me up with his right. Just like he must’ve seen on a video game. Everything you could do wrong he was doing, but it didn’t matter—he was dangerous and at this range just pulling the trigger would get him a center mass bull’s-eye in my chest. And if he missed, he would probably still get a partial head shot or even nick me in the balls. I was fucked either way.

And then it came to me. Yes, I did remember him.

He was ‘Silicone’ Sal Scarangella’s boy. Salvatore Scarangella was the boss of the Palumbo crime family in New York City. In addition, he owned a legitimate, large, multinational construction business in Manhattan and was a political king maker. Over the years he had been implicated in dozens of crimes but never spent a night in jail. Witnesses always went missing or never complied. On the construction side, nothing went up in the city without “Silicone” Sal getting his piece. Everybody paid tribute if they knew what was good for them.

We were *blessed* with the Scarangella’s living in our neighborhood in one of the palatial waterfront estates a few blocks away. His son, Sal Junior, who was now standing in front of me—about to kill me in fact—was the quintessential fuckup. He’d been arrested about a dozen times. His rap sheet looked like my shopping list to Costco. A little of everything. By the time he became an adult, he’d already been pinched for armed robbery and assault multiple times. I guess he was looking for the trifecta by adding a good old fashioned style homicide to his list. Heir to the throne. What a prize.

I hadn’t seen this kid for quite awhile. It had to be seven years now. His hair was lighter and he must have grown a foot and added fifty pounds of muscle. He wasn’t a kid anymore. But I remembered having a run-in with the elder Scarangella because I called the cops on Junior and his friend when the little snots set old man Mr. Melton’s house on fire. The kids had been vandalizing Melton’s boat that was dry-docked on the side of the house.

I had been walking the dog then as well. Scout was just a pup when I spotted Tommy Higgins and Sal Junior here, running away from Melton’s house. The old wooden boat was in flames. The fire had spread and torched the old man’s house with him in it and burnt it to the ground. Mr. Melton had been taken to the hospital and never recovered. He died a short time later. I’m sure it was from the trauma of what this little ass-wipe did. His father used his high-powered lawyers and influence to label it a terrible accident. The kids were juveniles. But the neighbors knew better. Tommy Higgins had ran away scared shitless when Junior asked him how many could they kill if they burned the whole block down. He left Sal Jr., laughing hysterical, shooting a can of BBQ fluid all over the boat and watching the flames roar and the house catching. This kid was a sociopath, just like his father. The judge sent the boys to a juvie center in Brentwood for three months of counseling. Rumor was he had strangled one of the female counselors before raping her. But I never heard anything more about it. Back then, the fourteen year old Sal Junior had actually threatened me leaving the courthouse. Now, I remember what he said when we both were on the courthouse steps.

“You wait, Mr. T... Your day will come. One day, I’m gonna get you and your whole fuckin family.”

And then his mother slapped him in the face as they were getting in their family limo and said, “Salvatore, watch your mouth.”

I actually found myself amused by his mother's reaction. This little prick had just threatened my life and my family's lives and his mother is annoyed because he used foul language. What a fucked up family. The boy scooted down, got in the car and I never saw him again. Until today. Apparently, the nut doesn't fall far from the tree, and some people never change.

Time froze while I was standing behind the hedges staring at Sal Junior pointing a gun at my chest. Deep down, I thought I would somehow get out of the pickle I was in. But how? Start talking I figured.

"Junior, how are you gonna cover this up? You're an adult now. C'mon, what are you twenty-one now?" I finally said to him.

For some reason, I was calm. It was coming back to me, all those years ago. I was breathing. Slow and steady. My heart rate had blipped up for a second, but now had calmed down.

"Fuck you know. I drop you here, I guarantee I don't spend a day in jail." Junior laughed.

He was probably right—I had nowhere to go. The yard was completely closed in with hedges and I prayed someone in the house had seen us and had called the cops. That was my only hope, but of course, no one was home. There was no car in the driveway, not a curtain or a drape had moved, and no lights were on. No one saw us and no one would see what was about to happen. Damn. This was not how it was supposed to end. He'd get booked, bailed out and his father would spend a bunch of money and grease all the right people just to keep his boy out of jail. And me? I'd be in the ground. I was losing faith.

"You really think you can put me down and get away with it?" I asked.

"Sure. Ain't nobody here but us two... And the dog. Maybe I keep the dog. Kind of like my own pet. Maybe, I even set him on fire, watch him run-around, like Old Man Melton." The sick fuck roared with laughter at himself and looked down at Scout.

With no warning, the dog leaped at him. Good for you, boy.

As Scout jumped, he startled Junior so that he slipped on the wet grass with his bare feet. He fell flat on his ass, dropped the gun, and started to laugh even louder. Lying on the grass trying to catch his breath from the laughter, Junior finally said, "Oh man, Mr. T., I was just fucking with you."

Yea, right. Nice try, I thought. I smirked back at him.

"You should have seen your face, T. That is some funny shit! Ha-ha." The boy stopped laughing when Scout stood his ground growling. I didn't say a word.

“Your dog’s not going to bite me? Is he? Oh wait. I know what he wants.” He tilted his head up while staying on the ground looking at Scout.

Scout was next to Junior, barking right at him, a hound-dog bark not letting up, sniffing at his pants, but not willing to go for the bite. Even the dog had scruples, more than I can say about myself. Junior slowly reached into his pocket and pulled out a beef jerky.

What can I say?—fucking Scout had no scruples after all.

“They say old man Melton died because I scared the shit out of him. How are you doing Mr. T? You’re not saying much. You’re not gonna drop on me. Are you? My old man will have a canary if you do... You know what T? Fuck you. On second thought, because of you I spent three months in that shithole juvie hall in Brentwood. You better run next time you see me. And sleep with your eyes open. I know where you live. Next time I won’t miss, pussy.” He laughed and gave the dog the piece of jerky and Scout scarfed it down.

The boy had meanwhile leaned up on his elbows but pulled his head back while the dog sniffed his hand. No sudden movements lest Scout give him a nip. I was amused that he seemed a bit nervous with the dog and was just frozen to the ground. And he had no concerns with me. He was on the ground and I was upright. I was certainly in a much more dominant position but I guess I kinda looked harmless. Oh well, we’ll see about that.

“Don’t worry, I’m OK. I can handle it,” I said.

I slipped a doggie bag over my hand first and bent down. I picked up the gun as if I had never touched one in my life. Junior lay on his back still laughing to himself as I squatted down next to him.

I could see why he missed those first three shots. That distance, about a hundred feet, is a stretch for a Glock19 to hit something with any accuracy. The kid would have had better luck with a Sig1911—Probably would have put me down. Maybe not. He had zero gun discipline. It’s funny what crosses your mind in times of stress.

“Fucking hysterical, Mr. T. Maybe next time.” he was smiling, like he had me. Like there would be a next time. Not if I had any say in it.

“Quiet, Scout,” I said and the dog sat at the boy’s feet, as he was still prone.

“Hey, Junior, you ever think that today might be that day?”

Maybe it *was* like riding a bicycle. Some skills you never forget.

“ Huh?” was all he could muster.

“Yeah, you’re right. What else could I do? Just an old guy out walking my dog. Do you remember when you said, ‘My day was gonna come?’ Remember that Junior? Over at the courthouse? You were gonna get me and my family. Ah forget it. Here, this is yours.”

I had the bag over my hand, as I do when I pick up Scout’s droppings, and held the Glock with it. I ejected the magazine on the ground. And acted startled as if I did it by accident. Sal Junior smiled over at me. Probably thinking that I thought I was emptying the gun and that I was safe when I gave the gun back to him. I made sure to not rack the slide to eject the one in the chamber. I could see in his smirk that’s what he was thinking and he was probably planning on how he was going to send that one last bullet through my brain once I handed the gun back to him.

Hell, he was a Mafia don’s son. He tried to kill me twice today already. And he threatened my family and said he was going to burn my dog alive... For fuck’s sake. What is wrong with people?

If Scout hadn’t made him slip and drop the gun I would be dead now. And Scout would be smoldering. I would have no one to blame but myself for letting it happen.

I could hear sirens in the distance. I glanced over at the house, and nothing had moved. Someone else had apparently called the cops after hearing the gunshots. Thank God. The cops will be here soon.

Sal Junior moved his arm up to take the gun from me and I placed the barrel against his temple. When he realized what I was doing, I waited an extra second for his hand to grab mine. It was a risk, as he was much stronger than me, but I gambled and as soon as he wrapped my hand, I pulled the trigger. Once. Bang. Now the gun was empty.

The dog whimpered and jumped back as Junior’s body shook once and went limp. I put the pistol on the ground near his hand as if he dropped it. I pulled his right leg under him as if he fell after blowing his brains out. The cops would find plenty of gunshot residue on Junior’s hand and of course, none of my fingerprints.

I looked along and under the hedges and got an idea. I grabbed a handful of dirt and picked it up with the bag flipping it inside out and tied it up. I put Scout back on the leash, just as the first squad car pulled up.

A couple of neighbors walked over at the same time. Apparently terrified, they didn’t get too close. I was pretty sure no one saw what happened behind the hedges. When the cops came into the yard, the gun was on the ground and I was kneeling along side of Junior holding Scout’s red scarf trying to put the kid’s brains back in his head. It wasn’t working.

The cops shooed me aside, and they felt for a pulse. There was none. I spoke with the neighbors and was sure no one knew what had actually happened. One cop pulled me to the side and asked what had gone on. So I told him. When the detectives arrived I had to go over the story again.

“I was walking my dog, like I have done every day for the past seven years when this kid, who was sitting in the driveway, started popping the gun off into the air. He obviously wasn’t right in the head and as we started to run away he followed after us. My dog was getting agitated, and over behind the bushes there he gave the dog a treat. I guess he knew we were scared shitless, with him waving a gun around like that. He was spinning it around with his fingers. Like he was a gun slinger or something. I don’t know—he looked —not right. He clicked the handle and the clip came out of the bottom. The thing that holds the bullets.

He pointed the gun at me and then the dog and I got mad at him and yelled ‘What the fuck are you doing? Stop fooling around. Someone’s going to get hurt.’

He said, ‘Relax, There’s nothing to be afraid of. Its not loaded. Look.’ And then to show me, he pointed the gun at his head and I yelled again. He was making me very nervous. I know you always treat a gun like its loaded. And I said ‘Stop it!’ and stepped toward him. That’s when he pulled the trigger. For fucks sake, man. Why? It was so stupid. What... What a shame... His family. Oh my God. He was just a kid. He must’ve thought the gun was not loaded. Oh Lord.”

The detective shook his head and looked me over real close. Kind of eyeing me a little funny. Like something wasn’t right here. He looked at Scout, who growled at him. And then at me again. He looked at my hands. And then he saw the bag. I’m pretty sure he figured I hadn’t fired a gun. There was no reason. I was shaking a bit to put it on.

“Did you touch the gun?”

“No sir.”

“Not even curious, you didn’t just touch it? Maybe while you were trying to help him? I’m not going to find any prints of yours on it?”

“Nope.”

“Anybody else see what happened here?” the detective asked.

I nodded to the dog. Scout growled at the detective. He wasn’t saying anything.

“Figures. You do know who this kid is?” the detective asked.

“Of course.”

“It may get ugly for you.”

“Why? I tried to help him. He must have been messed up. Was he on drugs?”

The detective shrugged his shoulders.

“What’s in the bag?”

“Dog shit.”

And he wanted no part of that. Good thing. So here I am standing in front of the detective with the leash in one hand and a bag of dirt and gunpowder residue in the other.

When the Crime Scene Bureau van showed up he told me to finally go home with my dog.

The next day Newsday had the article on page five. Seems the Scarangella boy had grown up into a full blown criminal. After a dozen or so run-ins with the police since he was twelve, he was a known drug user and the story became a byline about the heroin epidemic in suburbia. The story touched on the fact that no family was safe from the grasp of heroin addiction even a Mafia boss’s family wasn’t immune. Actually Newsday played up the irony that the man who was suspected of controlling the majority of heroin distribution in New York would lose his son to a tragedy brought on by the drug. News crews and helicopters swarmed the neighborhood. A reporter called me and asked me some questions. I gave them some bullshit. Another tragic youngster gone. Senseless.

A couple of weeks later a black Benz pulled up in front of the driveway just as I opened the door to take Scout for his morning walk. In the driveway, Sal Scarangella cut a scary, imposing figure standing in front of me in his five thousand dollar suit. He had me by a hundred pounds and for the life of me I don’t know how the fuck he got in and out of that car.

“T” —that’s all he said.

“Yea,” of course I knew why he was here. Even Scout was scared shit of him. Pinned against my leg. I bet Scout was even thinking like me, “Is today the day?”

“You telling me that’s how it happened with my boy?” he said. Grimacing in obvious pain, he stared straight at me. As if he was reading me.

“Absolutely, I’m real sorry Sal.” I really wanted to call him Silicone Sal but thought better of it. “I wish I could’ve done more. I remember when he was a kid and he got in that trouble with that Tommy Higgins. They were just kids. Like we were. Sal Junior seemed like a good one though. Tragic. Again, my condolences to you and your wife. It must be hard.”

“Thanks T. But I’m a little puzzled. And this has nothing to do with anything. You’re still a young guy. How do you live here? It’s pretty expensive. You ever have a job? The neighbors. They see you every day. Walking the dog. Nobody knows what you do.”

“I’m retired.”

“Retired from what?” he was grilling me, the mook. And asking around. So I gave him the line.

“The government.”

“Government? You telling me you with the Fibbies?” he asked.

“It’s not what you think. I was with the IRS.” And with that—the questions stopped. They always did. Guys like Scarangella would eat a Fed for breakfast, but an IRS agent sent shivers down their spine. My actual past life and the agency I retired from didn’t exist but the checks still came from Treasury. Scarangella could check all day long and he’d never find anything. Suddenly, the subject changed and so did his tone.

“Hmmp. Fucking drugs. I told him to stay away from that shit. And the fucking guns. What was he playing with that shit for? Stupid... Fucking kid had a future. I came by to look you in the eye to thank you. You were there with my boy.”

Whew, that’s a relief. It certainly beats sleeping with the fishes.

“There is no need for that,” I said. “Anybody would have done what I did.”

Actually, I wasn’t so sure about that but we’ll leave it out there.

“No. Thank you. You are a good man and I just needed to know you really tried to help my boy. You know. With what went on in the past. My wife, she’s very upset, and very forgiving. Me not so. But she knows you were there with him at the end. And she’s grateful for that. She thinks you are a nice, understanding man. The memories are going to kill her here. Driving past the spot where my boy died.” He filled up with tears.

“We’ve decided we will be moving soon. Taking my wife up to the summer place in Connecticut.”

“Oh man, you will be missed.” I said.

Sort of like polio, I thought.

‘Silicone’ Sal Scarangella wrapped his arms around my shoulders and I swore he was going to crush me. He was weeping when he kissed me on the cheek. Does that mean he is going to kill me? I sure hope not. When he finally let me breathe again, I said—

“Hey Sal, you know, life is short and some days I just wake up and think—Hey, is today the day? You know what I mean?”

Sal looked at me sideways and paused for a second thinking about what I said and what I meant.

“Yea, I know what you mean T., Yeah—Is today the day? Fuckin A.”

And with that, I never saw Silicone Sal Scarangella again.

The Scarangella's moved to Greenwich, Connecticut and the rumor was that Sal would say to his wife every morning since the death of his son, "You know what, Hon, been thinking about this since Junior's gone. Something somebody said to me and now I find myself wondering every day— Is Today the Day?"

Three months later a car bomb blew out the bottom of a black S Class Mercedes Benz in the Greenwich Connecticut Railroad Station killing its three occupants—Crime boss Sal Scarangella, and two known associates, John Napolitano, President of the NYC Steamfitters Union and Gale Sullivan, Scarangella's personal attorney. I was just getting on the Throggs Neck Bridge, making a call to an office in Washington D.C., when the device I planted under the car went off.

After the kid's *tragic accident*, IARP got wind that Justice had wiretaps on Scarangella. Worried that one of their retired agents would be outed, they decided it was a good time to get rid of the Mob boss. It would serve a dual purpose. Protect me— Scarangella had been overheard talking to someone about taking care of a *personal* thing for him—I guess he didn't believe me and it sounded like *I was that personal thing*. Also it would disrupt the applecart. Cut off the head of the snake or some bullshit like that. The Five Families would all point fingers at one another. The rats would start fleeing the ship.

Of course, I got roped into it, even though I was retired. Why not? It was personal for me now. No other police or federal agency could ever know. But that was it. I was done. I did negotiate a nice pension boost.

I don't wonder anymore whether or not today is the day. It don't matter.

But for Sal Scarangella, today ended up being that day.

THE END