

BUILDING A DEATH RAY IS HARD

by Greg Stolze

Thurber's geiger counter was small—it looked like a wristwatch and could, in fact, tell time. He checked it. Background levels. Exchanging a glance with Martel, they got out of their sedan and knocked on the door of a small brown house in the suburbs which could, in Thurber's opinion, use a new layer of blacktop on the driveway.

A small man, perhaps in his late thirties, answered the door. He had bright brown eyes and thick, black-framed glasses, and he kept the chain on the door. "Hello?"

Thurber badged him. "Hi. Ken Blasco? We're from the EPA. We have a few questions."

"...huh."

"Can we come in?" Martel asked. He hadn't worn a heavy coat, and it was unseasonably cold.

"Well that's the thing, isn't it?" the man replied, with an apologetic grin. "What do I know? That two men claiming to be... what, investigators?"

"Special Agents," Thurber said.

"...from the EPA, well, they've shown up on my doorstep and showed me ID but let's be frank, I couldn't tell a real EPA badge from a forgery. Um..." he stepped back a little, dropping his head and rummaging out his phone. "Let me just look up the EPA phone number and ask, OK?"

Thurber sighed, and Martel looked off to the left. If you knew him as well as Thurber did, you could see he was struggling not to hug himself.

"All right, dialing," the man—Ken Blasco?—said.

"Put it on speaker," Martel suggested.

"Um, OK."

Together, they listened as the options were listed. Thurber got out his own phone, poking and stroking it, then said, "Type in pound, four five five."

"Excuse me?"

"It's... just try that."

In a moment, the phone rang and a woman answered with the word "Jameson."

"Hi, um, is this the, uh, the EPA?" the home owner asked.

"Director Jameson, enforcement," she said impatiently. "How'd you get this extension?"

"It's us, Director," Thurber said, then gave their names. "Home owner wants to confirm we are who we say."

"Is this Kenneth Blasco?" Jameson asked.

"Yes," the man said, swallowing.

"Agents Thurber and Martel are acting under legitimate authority and I strongly recommend you cooperate. Understood.?"

"Uhm..."

"That's the number you looked up," Martel reminded him.

"Sure, yeah, that... that checks out. Thanks! Goodbye! Sorry to have... er, goodbye."

He unlocked the door and ushered them inside. "You want to sit in the living room or, um, dining room for this? Can I offer you coffee or...?"

"Just your time," Thurber said, and tried to smile.

"Sorry about all that, like, *security theater*," Blasco said, perching on the couch. "Wouldn't it be great if you could just *believe* people who said they were from the government? I'd love that. Love it like a handful of candy."

"Uh huh. Is your google login ID '1NightInBlasco'?"

"Yeah, heh, that's me. Like the Murray Head song, do you know it?"

Martel and Thurber just flat-eyed him.

"...I guess you don't," he said, through that sickly smile of his. They'd seated themselves tactically, so that he had to turn his head from one to the other.

"You used that account to register with a service called 'Privacy Grinder,' is that correct?" Thurber asked.

"You see the irony here, right?"

"Please answer the question," Martel replied.

"Am I under arrest?"

"Not yet. Right now, you're just cooperating."

For just a moment, Blasco held Martel's gaze. Then he gave a little laugh and said, "Yes, I did try out that service. I did want to do my web searching a little more, um... with less oversight, let's say."

"Why's that?"

"Again, the irony."

"Irony?" Martel asked.

"I signed up for something to hide my research and, as a consequence it seems, I am being interrogated by the EPA."

"This is not an interrogation," Thurber said.

"Isn't it?"

Thurber gave a little smile. Blascock frowned back.

"I didn't use Privacy Grinder very long, just the trial period. I don't think it did a very good job of protecting me."

"But while you had it, you researched how to buy thorium and radium," Thurber said.

Blascock didn't reply.

"Didn't you?" Thurber prodded.

"I did. Research isn't illegal."

"Then you moved house," Martel said.

"Also not illegal." He leaned back, looking again from one man to the other.

"I'm answering questions, is that it? What is your question?"

"What is your interest in radioactive materials?"

"They're interesting!"

"I don't buy it," Martel said. "You go to *extreme* lengths to do this research in secret, then move house, then cover up the trail between your old home and this one. What were you trying to do? What did you build, Ken?"

Blascock laughed.

"Do you want to know why I used all that privacy crap? Because I don't want to get advertised at every... *fffucking*... time I click a link on the internet. Single man my age, it's all 'incontinence solutions' and porn. The porn ads, Jesus, they read like they're written by AI trained on lists of dirty words, they don't even have titles it's just 'Teen MILF Creampie!' So yeah. I don't like it. I don't want pervert algorithm advertisers to know my business."

"That business being the acquisition of nuclear materials?"

"What nuclear materials? I don't have *any*. I did some research, that's all. I'm sorry, am I keeping you from something?" he asked Thurber, who looked up from his wrist. Still just normal background radiation, though maybe on the high end of that.

"You have my full attention, I promise," Thurber said. "What about moving house with no forwarding address?"

Blascock opened his mouth, then closed it and looked away. "Let me guess, you talked to the new house buyers, and *they* told you I didn't leave an address. I did, *actually*, have my post forwarded at the Post Office. Do... do you guys not talk to one another?" He ran a hand through his short hair, frowned at it, then dusted it off outside the sofa arm. "I didn't tell the buyers my new address because when my brother-in-law did that, they were calling him every other weekend asking about the water heater and the furnace, accusing him of selling them a money pit, complaining and complaining until one day they dropped in unannounced. Rather than go through the hassle of a restraining order, I thought I'd just make a clean break, in case my buyers turned out to be jerks. Surprise! They did! On the day of closing they gouged me for a two hundred dollar cleanup fee because I'd had the effrontery to leave extra construction materials in the garage in case they needed to match a cracked tile or something. Oh, and some boxes. Two hundred dollars! For boxes!"

Thurber and Martel impassively sat and let him compose himself.

"Why'd you move in the first place?" Thurber asked.

"My wife died."

"Oh."

"You can *confirm* that, I'm sure. Our marriage license is a, what, a public record I suppose? And her obituary is, you can find that."

"My condolences," Martel said.

"*Don't.*"

It was just one word, but Blascock's diction and appearance somehow made Thurber's hand move closer to his shoulder holster without his conscious mind's involvement at all.

The silence between the three men felt like a standoff, now.

"So the thorium," Martel finally said.

Blascock looked away.

"I wrote a short story," he said.

"Excuse me?"

"OK, hold on." He stood, crossed to a crowded bookshelf and returned with a paperback entitled *The Radioactive Boy Scout*.

"You read this? You'd love it, the EPA are the heroes."

"Ah," Thurber said. "The David Hahn case. If you've read it, I'm sure you understand our concerns."

"I mean, I guess? I read the book, I came up with an idea."

"We were told you're a shipping manager at Mosedemo Industries," Martel said.

"That's my job, but I was an English major. I can write stories. No one can stop me."

"Can I see it?" Martel asked.

Blascock blinked.

"...sure."

In just a few minutes, he had a laptop propped on his dining room table. Thurber and Martel sat side by side and started reading.

Building a Death Ray is Hard

by Ricardo Montessor

The promise of a death ray is a seductive one—an invisible beam that sickens and ultimately kills, silent, and detectable only by uncommon equipment. Who among us hasn't wanted that power, like a samurai of old Japan, the power to give life or death over the smallest of insults?

"'Ricardo Montessor'?" Martel asked.

"If your last name was 'Blascock,' wouldn't you be tempted by a pen name?"

"Names are names," Thurber murmured, and continued to read.

Such a device exists, outside the realm of science fiction. It's not fantasy to imagine a magic wand that you discretely point at your enemy, your obstacle, your annoyance, and without them realizing it, you shear apart their organelles and DNA strands into something wicked and strange. Something cancerous, unfelt and deadly.

The device you want for these darksome purposes is called a "neutron source" and can be made safely from thick lead pipe and simply from elements smashed together in aluminum foil. They combine in the darkness, angrily shedding particles that rattle around in the heavy lead until you open one end and aim it, letting them scream out in a beam, too small to be seen, tinier than a nerve cell, carrying enough energy to take apart the building blocks of life even though they're too slight to be felt.

"Huh," Martel said.

"What?" Blascock said.

"Nothing."

"It's extremely unsettling to have your work read right in front of your eyes, you know."

"I bet," Thurber murmured, but didn't shift his gaze from the screen.

The problem is, the elements aren't easy to get. You might get them gray-market from China if you know what to order, but how to guarantee the quality? You used to be able to get radium from clocks, americium from smoke detectors, thorium from the lighting cores of camping lanterns. But radium clocks have been off the market for half a century, those camping lanterns for decades, and smoke detectors now use tiny amounts. So you have to haunt estate sales, abandoned buildings, resale lots, auctions from foreclosed storage units.

It's not easy when you're angry and want your redress right away. Indeed, the death ray game isn't quick even when you finally assemble it. If you want to point and see someone drop, you don't want a death ray, you want a gun—legal in all fifty states, sold everywhere, and with nearly half the government devoted to making sure you can get it without hassle, no matter how many schoolchildren needed thoughts and prayers this month. The cops, though, are pretty good at tracking this bullet back to that gun barrel. At least, that's what they claim.

But exposing your unsuspecting victim to the gradual, directed poison of a death ray has its own satisfactions, if you're patient. People for whom watching a slow, painful linger towards the grave is a drawback aren't cut out for the vengeance game. Nobody who'd be upset over the tears of children watching the hair loss and withering of a cancer-infected parent need apply, thanks. This is for the ruthless. If you would secretly smile hearing your target's wife wail "Why him?" then yes. If you would enjoy the secret of knowing exactly why, then start sourcing radium clocks.

"Hm," Martel said, when he reached the end.

"So what did you think?" Blasco asked automatically.

"The second amendment carping seemed gratuitous."

Blasco's face did something, a movement like forcing a snarl into a smile-shaped mold. "Well, it's rough. Perhaps there's a reason I haven't had much success with publishing."

"So you read a book and started writing something like it?" Thurber asked.

"It's the Sue Grafton problem... are you familiar with her? Mystery writer, very famous, successful... thought of the perfect way to murder someone and didn't have any enemies. So she wrote a novel. But that one was a bestseller."

"Hmph." Thurber looked at his watch. "We won't take up any more of your time, then."

Back in the car, Martel grumbled. "That really felt like something," he said.

“A weird dude, to be sure, but there’s no law against weird,” Thurber replied.
“No radiation, no crime.”

“All that paranoia about whether we *really* were agents. Like, who would pretend to be an EPA investigator and not FBI or whatever?”

Thurber just shrugged. “What d’you like for lunch?”

Two years passed.

Jameson got promoted and Thurber moved into her position. Martel moved to a training position after his divorce.

Three more years went by. Martel had a health scare, retired from law enforcement and opened the bike shop he’d always wanted. Jameson moved into private sector consulting, but kept in touch with her old colleague Director Thurber, who testified in front of Congress with sufficient composure and intensity to, he felt, shift the needle a little about giving environmental law some teeth, even when enforcement might slightly inconvenience industry.

Director Thurber was at his desk, five years and two months after interviewing Blasco, going through the morning mail, which included an invitation to Martel’s remarriage—he and his ex were giving it another try. So he was smiling a little when he saw a radiation notice with a familiar address.

He couldn’t immediately place it, and it wasn’t an old file from his field days. This was new. A hard radiation source had been found in a residence, a lead pipe neutron gun, hidden in a wall, aimed up at the master bedroom.

He frowned. This kind of do-it-yourself nuclear poisoning was extremely, extremely rare. The home owners had both died of cancer—stomach for him, uterine for her. The only reason anyone had checked for rads was their son was a nuclear medicine technician. He remembered the mom complaining about film getting exposed, no matter what kind of camera she got, and brought in his work dosimeter. But by then it was too late.

Thurber sat and frowned, then started searching his old files for the address, and as soon as it came up, he felt that small “ah ha” sensation, the feeling of details clicking into place.

The address was where Ken Blasco had lived.

The house he’d sold to “jerks” who “gouged him” over some boxes. That was where two people had died from Ken Blasco’s perfect Sue Grafton murder method.

Thurber had already started the request for a search warrant when he got the news that Ken Blasco was also dead.

Two years previous. In his case, leukemia.

Thurber sat with it a long time. He authorized the cleanup and thought about cancelling the investigation. What good would it do to learn more? All the principals were dead, and revealing that he and Martel had bungled the investigation wouldn't help anybody.

He wondered if Blascock had ever gotten published. He couldn't find anything under that name.

But when he saw that Ricardo Montessor had self-published "Me and the Cancer Gun," he decided he had to find Blascock's source. Maybe someone else was using it.

Maybe the dead man had built more than one death ray.