

New Fiction by Nathan Nicolau: Returns



Does anyone knock anymore?

Even at a friend's house, an office, or my bedroom, I would knock. No one can be too careful. Everyone was out for you. That was what the news told me. That was what was on my mind when this guy just walked into my new apartment unannounced.

"Hey, Cameron—"

He took one look at me and left. No apology. No explanation. I rushed out the door to find him heading for the stairs at the end of the hall.

"I'm so sorry, I—"

"You don't just walk into someone's place."

"I know, I know."

"You're lucky I don't have a gun."

He shook his head and left. I hope he finds Cameron. Clearly he was willing to die to get to him, unlike me. Maybe it was time for that gun.

My mailbox was surprisingly full today—odd, considering I had just moved in a month ago. Letter by letter, the name 'Cameron' was on each one. He must have forgotten to change his mailing address, or the post office was just taking its sweet time. With the number of problems I've had with the USPS, it would be the latter. I ripped up all the mail and threw it in the garbage.

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It happened again the following week. My mailbox was full of junk mail and notices all addressed to Cameron. Each one got trashed immediately. Not my problem, Cameron. Better change your address before your paycheck hits my mailbox.

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Goddamnit. Again this week. But this time, it was double the amount. Thirty letters. Nearly all of them were collection agencies. Cameron needs to stay on top of these things. It had been two months, and Cameron had yet to knock (or barge through) my door. Imagine having this many debt collectors on your ass. Sad.

After my ritual mail trashing, a nice, expensive dinner awaited me to celebrate having no debt. I worked hard to get where I was, unlike some.

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Whoever this Cameron was, he was on my shitlist.

None of my personal mail was coming through, only Cameron's debt collectors. A sticky note with my name on it next to my mailbox should seal the deal. They can't be that incompetent.

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Tax dollars at work. My mailbox was still overflowing with Cameron's mail.

The post office never answered my calls. A while later, my phone rang, but it wasn't the post office. It was a young-sounding woman.

"Is this Cameron?"

"No."

"Well, I really need to talk to him."

"Okay?"

"Can you put him on the phone?"

"He's not here."

"Do you know how I could reach-?"

I hung up.

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Illegal or not, I was going to open Cameron's mail.

Someone had to tell these senders that they were wasting their paper on me. On my kitchen table were two sorted piles: collections and junk—a total of 23 letters for Cameron.

The first letter in the collections pile was from A&A Solutions seeking payment of a late hospital bill totaling \$309. Beyond all the basic debt-collector jargon, my hawk-like eyes found a phone number. Someone immediately picked up when I called.

"Thank you for calling A&A Solutions. This is Sylvester on a recorded line. What is your account number?"

I told him my name and my situation.

"Hmm, and you are saying that you are not Cameron?"

"Yes."

"And you have no relation to him?"

"No. Please change the mailing address."

"Unfortunately, I cannot do that right now. I will have to put in a ticket for you."

"That's fine."

“Can you confirm that you are not Cameron and that you do not owe \$309?”

What the hell kind of a question was that? “Just do as I say, people.”

He did not like that response.

The next letter was from Beswick Collections, this time for \$712. No one answered, so I left a voicemail making sure to hammer in that there was no Cameron who lived at this address.

Another letter from The Jones Group was demanding \$1,087. It was the same shtick as A&A, but this time it was voice-automated. No one has time for that nonsense. They’re stealing jobs, you know.

The junk mail pile was all pre-approved credit card offers. Some of these offers had high limits, too. Predators, all of them. Cameron’s credit score haunted my dreams that night.

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Cameron’s laziness was pissing me off. I didn’t like the USPS as much as the next guy, but it’s not hard to change an address. I looked up his name online to attempt to contact him. There were a few Facebook profiles, but my account got terminated when COVID hit, so I couldn’t message them.

Beswick called me back. They said nothing. Literally. There was silence on the other line. This level of incompetence was getting too much. Why did I deserve this? I’m a better person than this scumbag Cameron who probably mooches off welfare. No phone number, no new address, and no picture to identify him. Now what?

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The USPS worker approached the apartment’s mailroom. She took out one of her earbuds and listened to my problem: my once-

clean apartment was now infested with Cameron's envelopes and you guys needed to do something about it. She put the earbud right back in her ear and walked off.

We should have defunded them.

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If I mailed a letter to Cameron using my address, would it go to wherever Cameron was?

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My God, it worked.

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Cameron responded a few days later.

Sort of. A small white box greeted me in my mailbox. No return address, but it had a name: Cameron's. Sure enough, it was addressed here but with my name. It was almost strange seeing my name on a piece of mail now. After staring at the package as if it were a foreign language, I opened it to find a clear plastic baggie with a brown wallet inside.

Was I dreaming? Hallucinating? Dead? My finger was on my pulse when looking at the driver's license inside.

It was my name but not my picture. It must've been Cameron. Then again, it could be anyone, but I wanted this to be him. He was so plain looking that he didn't look real, and with all this talk about AI, he could be. Generic short black hair, flawless tanned skin, and that classic get-me-out-of-the-DMV blank stare. His eyes struck me, though. They were so dark they looked soulless. Pure evil. I knew it.

My first instinct was to use this license as target practice at the range, but I needed it as evidence for suing the daylights out of him. The problem was that the address on the

license was mine, which was probably why it was shipped here. It wasn't much, but it was a start.

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My phone was about to go into the toilet. People kept calling me, but not just any people—the truest scum of the earth. They didn't care if I was Cameron or not. It was all about their money. How could they sleep like babies at night pestering me like this?

My phone rang again while cleaning my bathroom, sending me into another blind rage until noticing the caller ID didn't have a random string of numbers this time. It was someone I actually knew. For once in my miserable life, getting a call from my doctor's office made me ecstatic.

"Hello!"

From the silence on the other end, my readiness probably shocked the man on the phone. He asked if a certain person was there, and by God, he called me by my real name. Finally. After hearing the dreaded C name for so long, someone finally said my name.

"Yes, this is him."

"Good afternoon, this is Dr. Cameron—"

My phone made a satisfying *plop* as it hit the water. Flush. Flush. Flush. My phone's life blinked away and I was thinking about doing the same at this point. The news he was about to give me could make me end up like my phone, but I shouldn't care if Cameron wasn't going to either.

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Even though my parents told me to do it daily, I prayed for the first time today.

"The world is giving me your battles. Your sins. I'm dying for you, Cameron. All I ask is that you return the favor now."

I was becoming his Christ. Every day, every waking moment, the letters wouldn't stop. The calls kept doubling. His name was everywhere around me. Others deserved this torture. Why me? This couldn't be hell; my family were God-fearing people.

"Why, Cameron? Why?" The makeshift altar on my kitchen table didn't respond. His driver's license was face-up on a stacked throne of his letters, totaling at least hundreds. The blank expression on his face mocked me from beyond the grave. His eyes now looked pitch black. Cameron was Satan himself, but why target me? At least I wasn't a baby murderer.

A knock on the door interrupted my prayer. At least someone had that decency. A flurry of papers shot through the door as I opened it. A lady in a tan blazer and bun was there one second and then gone the next. My trembling legs chased after her.

"Tell me who the hell you are before I call the police!"

"I'm legally allowed to serve. Please reply to your court summons in 20 days, sir."

"You must be looking for Cameron, right? That's not me. Please, you need to understand."

"It's not that I don't trust you, it's just that—"

The next moment, my hands were cuffed. Typically I support the police, but those bootlickers tried to lecture me on how no one should hit a lady doing her job. I wouldn't say another word without a lawyer; good Americans like me knew their rights.

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The United States government was setting me up, plain and

simple.

Cameron was an experimental psy-op devised by the CIA and ATF to drive me insane. The government was just waiting for me to crack, to see how far they could push a man. It worked. Now that they had proved their experiment a success, they would practice it on a large scale next. Every single person in America was going to have their own Cameron and be driven insane to the point of reckless violence like me. Civil War II was looming, and I had to stop it. I would not wish this upon my worst enemies, not even the political ones.

Some would listen to this and reject it as a brain-dead conspiracy theory. How else could people explain my situation, then? From a good neighbor to sitting in a cold holding cell in less than three months. Explain that! This was a planned, coordinated attack. I may not have proof, but it will come after my inevitable release. I planned to leak the government's plan to the media, but they were in on this, too. They always were. I had to move out of this beautiful country, my home—a country that was worth having people die for. I had to pick a new home soon before getting put on a No-Flight list. Even North Korea didn't sound half bad.

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Thanks to my lawyer, I was able to make bail. Maybe this country wasn't so bad after all.

My apartment was wiped clean when my shaky hands opened the front door. My furniture, appliances, and altar were all gone. None of that bothered me one bit, though. What bothered me was the man standing in the living room with his back turned to me. He gave me a quick glance. It was him, that bastard.

"Are you Cameron?"

"Have we met before?"

"Can I see your driver's license?"

"Are you a cop or something?"

He pulled out his license. I swiped it from him and burst out laughing. It had Cameron's name but my picture.

"CIA or ATF?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Who put you up to this?"

"Let me see *your* license."

I yanked out my wallet, but it wasn't mine. It was the one that got mailed here. Cameron's? Who knew at this point? It was the only thing in my pocket. He looked at my license and scowled.

"You need to learn how to change your address, asshole. Look at this," he yelled. A kitchen drawer flew open and out came dozens of letters for Cameron, Cameron, and Cameron. My name. My identity. My new life.

"*You* need to pay *your* debt and stop getting things *you* can't afford. Collectors keep calling me asking for Cameron, Cameron, Cameron. You're what's wrong with this country. Why should good people like me take the hit for people like you? And what the hell are you thinking? You don't just walk into someone's place!"

He moved his hand carefully to his side but stopped when he saw my body sink to the carpeted floor. I then did the very thing a man shouldn't do, according to my dad: cry. He put his hand on my back as I put mine on his. It just felt right to do. Our touches felt lovingly like two souls becoming one. Someone might walk in and think we were lovers, which I wouldn't be caught dead doing, but so be it. When our eyes met, he didn't have that demonic gaze. They were full of life

in front of me, not a blank expression on a piece of plastic. We smiled at each other.

“We need to defund the USPS, don’t we?”

Finally, someone who understood. We carried ourselves out to the hallway. Our bodies tumbled and hit the stone-cold pavement. Speckles of blood painted the grey canvas. Our soulless eyes met. We had a good belly laugh about the gun he was reaching for on his side and my hands wrapped around his throat.

“Does anyone knock anymore?”