

FICTION

Rick Raphael

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A FILBERT IS A NUT

BY RICK RAPHAEL

That the gentleman in question was a nut was beyond question. He was an institutionalized psychotic. He was nutty enough to think he could make an atom bomb out of modeling clay!

Illustrated by Freas

Miss Abercrombie, the manual therapist patted the old man on the shoulder. "You're doing just fine, Mr. Lieberman. Show it to me when you have finished."

The oldster in the stained convalescent suit gave her a quick, shy smile and went back to his aimless smearing in the finger paints.

Miss Abercrombie smoothed her smock down over trim hips and surveyed the other patients working at the long tables in the hospital's arts and crafts shop. Two muscular and bored attendants in spotless whites, lounged beside the locked door and chatted idly about the Dodgers' prospects for the pennant.

Through the barred windows of the workshop, rolling green hills were seen, their tree-studded flanks making a pleasant setting for the mental institution. The crafts building was a good mile away from the main buildings of the hospital and the hills blocked the view of the austere complex of buildings that housed the main wards.

The therapist strolled down the line of tables, pausing to give a word of advice here, and a suggestion there.

She stopped behind a frowning, intense patient, rapidly shaping blobs of clay into odd-sized strips and forms. As he finished each piece, he carefully placed it into a hollow shell hemisphere of clay.

"And what are we making today, Mr. Funston?" Miss Abercrombie asked.

The flying fingers continued to whip out the bits of shaped clay as the patient ignored the question. He hunched closer to his table as if to draw away from the woman.

"We mustn't be antisocial, Mr. Funston," Miss Abercrombie said lightly, but firmly. "You've been coming along famously and you must remember to answer when someone talks to you. Now what are you making? It looks very complicated." She stared professionally at the maze of clay parts.

Thaddeus Funston continued to mold the clay bits and put them in place.

Without looking up from his bench he muttered a reply.

"Atom bomb."

A puzzled look crossed the therapist's face. "Pardon me, Mr. Funston. I thought you said an 'atom bomb.'"

"Did," Funston murmured.

Safely behind the patient's back, Miss Abercrombie smiled ever so slightly. "Why that's very good, Mr. Funston. That shows real creative thought. I'm very pleased."

She patted him on the shoulder and moved down the line of patients.

A few minutes later, one of the attendants glanced at his watch, stood up and stretched.

"All right, fellows," he called out, "time to go back. Put up your things."

There was a rustle of paint boxes and papers being shuffled and chairs being moved back. A tall, blond patient with a flowing mustache, put one more dab of paint on his canvas and stood back to survey the meaningless smears. He sighed happily and laid down his palette.

At the clay table, Funston feverishly fabricated the last odd-shaped bit of clay and slapped it into place. With a furtive glance around him, he clapped the other half of the clay sphere over the filled hemisphere and then stood up. The patients lined up at the door, waiting for the walk back across the green hills to the main hospital. The attendants made a quick count and then unlocked the door. The group shuffled out into the warm, afternoon sunlight and the door closed behind them.

Miss Abercrombie gazed around the cluttered room and picked up her chart book of patient progress. Moving slowly down the line of benches, she made short, precise notes on the day's work accomplished by each patient.

At the clay table, she carefully lifted the top half of the clay ball and stared thoughtfully at the jumbled maze of clay strips laced through the lower hemisphere. She placed the lid back in place and jotted lengthily in her chart book.

When she had completed her rounds, she slipped out of the smock, tucked the chart book under her arm and left the crafts building for the day.

The late afternoon sun felt warm and comfortable as she walked the mile to the main administration building where her car was parked.

As she drove out of the hospital grounds, Thaddeus Funston stood at the barred window of his locked ward and stared vacantly over the hills towards the craft shop. He stood there unmoving until a ward attendant came and took his arm an hour later to lead him off to the patients' mess hall.

The sun set, darkness fell over the stilled hospital grounds and the ward lights winked out at nine o'clock, leaving just a single light burning in each ward office. A quiet wind sighed over the still-warm hills.

At 3:01 a.m., Thaddeus Funston stirred in his sleep and awakened. He sat up in bed and looked around the dark ward. The quiet breathing and occasional snores of thirty other sleeping patients filled the room. Funston turned to the window and stared out across the black hills that sheltered the deserted crafts building.

He gave a quick cry, shut his eyes and clapped his hands over his face.

The brilliance of a hundred suns glared in the night and threw stark shadows on the walls of the suddenly-illuminated ward.

An instant later, the shattering roar and blast of the explosion struck the hospital buildings in a wave of force and the bursting crash of a thousand windows was lost in the fury of the explosion and the wild screams of the frightened and demented patients.

It was over in an instant, and a stunned moment later, recessed ceiling lights began flashing on throughout the big institution.

Beyond the again-silent hills, a great pillar of smoke, topped by a small mushroom-shaped cloud, rose above the gaping hole that had been the arts and crafts building.

Thaddeus Funston took his hands from his face and lay back in his bed with a small, secret smile on his lips. Attendants and nurses scurried through the hospital, seeing how many had been injured in the explosion.

None had. The hills had absorbed most of the shock and apart from a welter of broken glass, the damage had been surprisingly slight.

The roar and flash of the explosion had lighted and rocked the surrounding countryside. Soon firemen and civil defense disaster units from a half-dozen neighboring communities had gathered at the still-smoking hole that marked the site of the vanished crafts building.

Within fifteen minutes, the disaster-trained crews had detected heavy radiation emanating from the crater and there was a scurry of men and equipment back to a safe distance, a few hundred yards away.

At 5:30 a.m., a plane landed at a nearby airfield and a platoon of Atomic Energy Commission experts, military intelligence men, four FBI agents and an Army full colonel disembarked.

At 5:45 a.m. a cordon was thrown around both the hospital and the blast crater.

In Ward 4-C, Thaddeus Funston slept peacefully and happily.

"It's impossible and unbelievable," Colonel Thomas Thurgood said for the fifteenth time, later that morning, as he looked around the group of experts gathered in the tent erected on the hill overlooking the crater. "How can an atom bomb go off in a nut house?"

"It apparently was a very small bomb, colonel," one of the haggard AEC men offered timidly. "Not over three kilotons."

"I don't care if it was the size of a peanut," Thurgood screamed. "How did it get here?"

A military intelligence agent spoke up. "If we knew, sir, we wouldn't be standing around here. We don't know, but the fact remains that it WAS an atomic explosion."

Thurgood turned wearily to the small, white-haired man at his side.

"Let's go over it once more, Dr. Crane. Are you sure you knew everything that was in that building?" Thurgood swept his hand in the general direction of the blast crater.

"Colonel, I've told you a dozen times," the hospital administrator said with exasperation, "this was our manual therapy room. We gave our patients art work. It was a means of getting out of their systems, through the use of their hands, some of the frustrations and problems that led them to this hospital. They worked with oil and water paints and clay. If you can make an atomic bomb from vermilion pigments, then Madame Curie was a misguided scrubwoman."

"All I know is that you say this was a crafts building. O.K. So it was," Thurgood sighed. "I also know that an atomic explosion at 3:02 this morning blew it to hell and gone.

"And I've got to find out how it happened."

Thurgood slumped into a field chair and gazed tiredly up at the little doctor.

"Where's that girl you said was in charge of this place?"

"We've already called for Miss Abercrombie and she's on her way here now," the doctor snapped.

Outside the tent, a small army of military men and AEC technicians moved around the perimeter of the crater, scintillators in hand, examining every tiny scrap that might have been a part of the building at one time.

A jeep raced down the road from the hospital and drew up in front of the tent. An armed MP helped Miss Abercrombie from the vehicle.

She walked to the edge of the hill and looked down with a stunned expression.

"He did make an atom bomb," she cried.

Colonel Thurgood, who had snapped from his chair at her words, leaped forward to catch her as she collapsed in a faint.

At 4:00 p.m., the argument was still raging in the long, narrow staff room of the hospital administration building.

Colonel Thurgood, looking more like a patient every minute, sat on the edge of his chair at the head of a long table and pounded with his fist on the wooden surface, making Miss Abercrombie's chart book bounce with every beat.

"It's ridiculous," Thurgood roared. "We'll all be the laughingstocks of the world if this ever gets out. An atomic bomb made out of clay. You are all nuts. You're in the right place, but count me out."

At his left, Miss Abercrombie cringed deeper into her chair at the broadside. Down both sides of the long table, psychiatrists, physicists, strategists and radiologists sat in various stages of nerve-shattered weariness.

"Miss Abercrombie," one of the physicists spoke up gently, "you say that after the patients had departed the building, you looked again at Funston's work?"

The therapist nodded unhappily.

"And you say that, to the best of your knowledge," the physicist continued, "there was nothing inside the ball but other pieces of clay."

"I'm positive that's all there was in it," Miss Abercrombie cried.

There was a renewed buzz of conversation at the table and the senior AEC man present got heads together with the senior intelligence man. They conferred briefly and then the intelligence officer spoke.

"That seems to settle it, colonel. We've got to give this Funston another chance to repeat his bomb. But this time under our supervision."

Thurgood leaped to his feet, his face purpling.

"Are you crazy?" he screamed. "You want to get us all thrown into this filbert factory? Do you know what the newspapers would do to us if they ever got wind of the fact, that for one, tiny fraction of a second, anyone of us here entertained the notion that a paranoid idiot with the IQ of an ape could make an atomic bomb out of kid's modeling clay?"

"They'd crucify us, that's what they'd do!"

At 8:30 that night, Thaddeus Funston, swathed in an Army officer's greatcoat that concealed the strait jacket binding him and with an officer's cap jammed far down over his face, was hustled out of a small side door of the hospital and into a waiting staff car. A few minutes later, the car pulled into the flying field at the nearby community and drove directly to the military transport plane that stood at the end of the runway with propellers turning.

Two military policemen and a brace of staff psychiatrists sworn to secrecy under the National Atomic Secrets Act, bundled Thaddeus aboard the plane. They plopped him into a seat directly in front of Miss Abercrombie and with a roar, the plane raced down the runway and into the night skies.

The plane landed the next morning at the AEC's atomic testing grounds in the Nevada desert and two hours later, in a small hot, wooden shack miles up the barren desert wastelands, a cluster of scientists and military men huddled around a small wooden table.

There was nothing on the table but a bowl of water and a great lump of modeling clay. While the psychiatrists were taking the strait jacket off Thaddeus in the staff car outside, Colonel Thurgood spoke to the weary Miss Abercrombie.

"Now you're positive this is just about the same amount and the same kind of clay he used before?"

"I brought it along from the same batch we had in the store room at the hospital," she replied, "and it's the same amount."

Thurgood signaled to the doctors and they entered the shack with Thaddeus Funston between them. The colonel nudged Miss Abercrombie.

She smiled at Funston.

"Now isn't this nice, Mr. Funston," she said. "These nice men have brought us way out here just to see you make another atom bomb like the one you made for me yesterday."

A flicker of interest lightened Thaddeus' face. He looked around the shack and then spotted the clay on the table. Without hesitation, he walked to the table and sat down. His fingers began working the damp clay, making first the hollow, half-round shell while the nation's top atomic scientists watched in fascination.

His busy fingers flew through the clay, shaping odd, flat bits and clay parts that were dropped almost aimlessly into the open hemisphere in front of him.

Miss Abercrombie stood at his shoulder as Thaddeus hunched over the table just as he had done the previous day. From time to time she glanced at her watch. The maze of clay strips grew and as Funston finished shaping the other half hemisphere of clay, she broke the tense silence.

"Time to go back now, Mr. Funston. You can work some more tomorrow." She looked at the men and nodded her head.

The two psychiatrists went to Thaddeus' side as he put the upper lid of clay carefully in place. Funston stood up and the doctors escorted him from the shack.

There was a moment of hushed silence and then pandemonium burst. The experts converged on the clay ball, instruments blossoming from nowhere and cameras clicking.

For two hours they studied and gently probed the mass of child's clay and photographed it from every angle.

Then they left for the concrete observatory bunker, several miles down range where Thaddeus and the psychiatrists waited inside a ring of stony-faced military policemen.

"I told you this whole thing was asinine," Thurgood snarled as the scientific teams trooped into the bunker.

Thaddeus Funston stared out over the heads of the MPs through the open door, looking uprange over the heat-shimmering desert. He gave a sudden cry, shut his eyes and clapped his hands over his face.

A brilliance a hundred times brighter than the glaring Nevada sun lit the dim interior of the bunker and the pneumatically-operated door slammed shut just before the wave of the blast hit the structure.



Six hours and a jet plane trip later, Thaddeus, once again in his strait jacket, sat between his armed escorts in a small room in the Pentagon. Through the window he could see the hurried bustle of traffic over the Potomac and beyond, the domed roof of the Capitol.

In the conference room next door, the joint chiefs of staff were closeted with a gray-faced and bone-weary Colonel Thurgood and his baker's dozen of AEC brains. Scraps of the hot and scornful talk drifted across a half-opened transom into the room where Thaddeus Funston sat in a neatly-tied bundle.

In the conference room, a red-faced, four-star general cast a chilling glance at the rumpled figure of Colonel Thurgood.

"I've listened to some silly stories in my life, colonel," the general said coldly, "but this takes the cake. You come in here with an insane asylum inmate in a strait jacket and you have the colossal gall to sit there and tell me that this poor soul has made not one, but two atomic devices out of modeling clay and then has detonated them."

The general paused.

"Why don't you just tell me, colonel, that he can also make spaceships out of sponge rubber?" the general added bitingly.

In the next room, Thaddeus Funston stared out over the sweeping panorama of the Washington landscape. He stared hard.

In the distance, a white cloud began billowing up from the base of the Washington Monument, and with an ear-shattering, glass-splintering roar, the great shaft rose majestically from its base and vanished into space on a tail of flame.

THE END