

Slippery When Wet

A Tale of Pain, Puking, and a Punchline

By MJ Hajost

"Johnny!"

Gage turned to look over his shoulder as he rounded the corner to check the next row.

"There's nothing down this way! I'm gonna just go check that end office!" His voice was muffled by the air mask he wore, but Roy DeSoto's pointing arm told Johnny where he was headed.

Gage nodded his understanding and continued down the smoky aisle in which he and Roy had been searching. Fighting a fire in a furniture store, he decided as he bent and peered under the bed on his left, was a firefighter's nightmare. So much flammable material, so many places to hide. There was really no way of knowing just how many people might still be inside, though anyone with an ounce of sense surely would have seen and smelled the smoke and headed for the exit. *Well, obviously not everyone has an ounce of sense, 'else we sure wouldn't need to be doing this.*

Johnny came to the end of the aisle, bent low to mark the floor with a large white X, and turned up the next line. The smoke and heat were more intense as he drew closer to the rear of the small showroom, but he somehow felt safer there. There were more firefighters there, and the commotion and effort taking place back there reassured him that he belonged in the inferno.

This aisle was easier to investigate--it contained only dinette sets. Not hard to see anyone who might possibly be hiding out or in trouble. And, by the time he reached the far end, Roy had returned from his inspection of the office and rejoined Johnny in the hunt. There was one more aisle to search before they reached the source of the heat and flames, and Johnny doubted they would find anyone there. He was right.

"There's nobody here!" he shouted to Roy. The other rescue man nodded, and Johnny watched him lift the Handi-Talkie to his mouth. A brief exchange seemed to follow, and though Johnny couldn't hear it for the roar behind him, he suspected that they would be ordered to help on the hose lines. Again he was right.

A half hour later, the flames had finally been doused, and all that remained was the dampening of the hot spots and the clean-up. Johnny paused in his work, releasing the nozzle of the hose he held and abruptly stopping the flow.

"Need a new airtank!" he shouted to the questioning look thrown by his partner.

Roy nodded and went back to work knocking soaked ceiling tiles to the floor. He had replaced his own SCBA already.

Johnny slowly threaded his way around the throng of weary firefighters, stepping over hoses and splashing across soggy carpeting. The smoke thinned out a little nearer the front of the store, so he slid off his helmet and lifted the mask, breathing the slightly acrid air that still hung heavily near the door. The relative coolness in this part of the building chilled the sweat on his face and, tilting his head back, Johnny closed his eyes a moment to savor the sensation.

He didn't realize that he was standing underneath a heavy pool of water that had accumulated on the roof of the store--the result of the efforts from the aerial ladder crew. A pool whose weight, at that moment, finally managed to collapse the supporting structure. Gage never had a chance.

He suddenly found himself awash in sooty, gritty water that soaked him so thoroughly that even the notepad in his shirt pocket became unusable. Johnny jumped back with a cry, slipped on the slick flooring,

and tumbled helplessly against a marble-topped washstand that decorated the nearby living room collection.

The back of his head cracked sharply against the marble. For a split second, all Johnny saw were brilliant fireworks, and then the pain overwhelmed the images. Johnny continued to fall until he found himself lying in a puddle of dirty water, rocking slightly on his airtank. A single, heartfelt epithet escaped his lips.

After a moment, he rolled to the side and pushed himself to his knees, then his feet, his hand gingerly exploring the back of his head. With relief, he discovered no blood, though he suspected there would be a lovely knot forming in due course.

Johnny glanced around, wondering if anyone had seen the mishap, but everyone was either too far away or absorbed in the tasks assigned. He sighed in relief.

Cap would brain me if he knew I'd taken my helmet off. Good thing it's only a bump.

He settled his helmet carefully back in place and continued out to the truck for the replacement oxygen.

It was nearly dinner time by the time the crew returned to the station.

"What're you making for dinner?" Johnny asked with half-hearted interest as Roy backed the squad into the bay.

Roy parked the truck and grinned at his partner. "Does it matter? You didn't get any lunch, so no matter what I cook you'll eat it."

"Don't bet on it," snorted Johnny. "I'm so tired right now, I'd probably fall asleep in my plate."

Roy shrugged. "See? It really doesn't matter what I'm cooking, does it?" Grinning, he climbed out of the truck.

"But I'm starving!" Johnny called after him through the open window on the driver's side of the squad. Instead of following Roy, though, he leaned back in his seat and watched Mike back the engine in. His eyes drifted closed, and he listened with detachment to the crew disembarking from the big truck at his side.

"Hey! Gage!"

Johnny gasped and jerked, his eyes snapping open.

"You gonna sit there all night?"

Heart pounding, breath coming in short little huffs, Johnny turned. Chet Kelly's leering face grinned a few inches from his own. "Kelly," he hissed through clenched teeth, "get outa my face!"

Chet's grin merely widened. "Sure, thing, Gage. Just doin' what Cap asked--wakin' you up. Time to eat."

"For your information, I wasn't sleeping," muttered Johnny, sitting up slowly and stretching sore muscles.

"No? You've been sittin' in here for half an hour, and your snoring puts a motorcycle to shame."

"Oh, get outa here. I was not snoring!"

"Fraid you were, Pal." Johnny turned to the voice. Hank Stanley smiled at him from the doorway to the locker room. Johnny, for the first time, realized that he was sitting inside his locker. "Your partner insisted

we put a stop to it."

Johnny made a face. "Musta been more tired than I thought," he mumbled. He reached out and pushed Chet out of the way. "Lemme outa my locker, Chet."

"Man, some guys wake up so grumpy," grumbled Chet, turning away and heading back toward the squad room after Stanley, shaking his head sadly.

Johnny ignored him and stepped toward the sink. *Half an hour? I don't even remember going to sleep.* He didn't, for that matter, even remember going into the locker room. He pushed himself up, clutching at the locker door a second as the sudden change in position made him feel lightheaded. He shook his head to clear it, then washed his hands and followed Chet and the captain into the squad room.

The rest of the crew were already seated, spooning healthy portions of Roy's tuna casserole onto their plates, grabbing the biscuits he'd set out and chattering happily. Johnny found an empty chair and dropped bonelessly into it. He accepted the steaming casserole when it came to him, ladling a small amount onto his plate before setting the larger dish back in the center of the table. He crumbled a biscuit over the creamy noodle mixture before pouring himself half a glass of milk.

Johnny stared at the food in front of him a minute.

"What's the matter, Pal, don't you like your partner's cooking?" Hank gave him a sidelong glance as he dipped into his own meal.

Johnny, startled, looked up, his face flushing. He smiled weakly and lifted his fork. "I like his food just fine," he offered, glancing at Roy and shoveling a mouthful of noodles into his mouth. He chewed half an instant, swallowed, and gulped down some milk.

Reassured that his partner did, indeed, have a normal appetite, Roy dropped his gaze back to his own plate.

It was all Johnny could do, however, to keep the food from forcing its way back up. He managed to push the food around his plate enough to make it look as if he'd eaten, and when he judged enough time had passed, he grabbed his plate and glass and carried them to the sink, scraping the remains of his meal into the trash and pouring the unfinished milk down the drain.

"You okay?" Roy asked quietly at his side.

"Me? I'm fine," Johnny replied, half-laughing. "Why?"

"You sure didn't eat much for a guy who was starving forty-five minutes ago."

Johnny shrugged. "Guess I wasn't as hungry as I thought," he muttered, turning away.

Roy watched him disappear into the apparatus bay and shook his head. Some days it was just impossible to get a handle on that partner of his.

The rest of the evening passed quietly--not even the squad received a summons. At some point someone turned on the television, and the men passed the slow hours watching semi-amusing sitcoms and talking derisively to the set. No one noticed when Johnny slipped away to the dorm before nine o'clock.

Roy was, therefore, surprised when he entered the bunk room shortly after ten o'clock and discovered Johnny huddled under the blanket on his bunk, sound asleep. He frowned, remembering the lack of appetite at dinner, then shrugged it off.

He's bound to have an off-day every once in a while.

The blaring of the klaxons and sudden burst of light overhead jolted Johnny from a deep slumber, but he was the last to roll from his bunk and into his turnouts. He moved sluggishly to the apparatus bay after the others. His head felt oddly heavy, a sensation he at first attributed to the sound sleep from which he'd been yanked. By the time he'd rounded the back of the engine, however, he knew there was more to it than that.

As the enormous bay door inched its way up, throwing bright light into a darkened street out front, all Johnny saw were swirling lights against a black background. He grabbed for the side of the squad, and his hand connected with the railing that ran along the top of the side compartments. He staggered the remaining distance to the passenger door of the squad and slid inside, slamming it after him and blinking breathlessly into the night.

Roy handed him the call slip as they pulled out into the darkness. Johnny peered at the paper, trying to bring the letters into focus, and stifled a yawn. "Market Street," he muttered. "Left."

Roy obediently turned in that direction, the engine following.

"Take Montana...." Johnny stopped. The road in front of him had begun to blur, the white lane markers diverging into two sets of smudges along the pavement. "Roy..." he began but darkness rushed up before he could finish.

Roy turned as Johnny's deadweight fell against his arm, jerking the wheel to keep them in their lane. "Johnny!" His annoyance shifted abruptly to surprise, and then to concern.

Johnny's head lay canted against Roy's leg, eyes closed in what could only be total insensibility.

"What the--?" Roy reached out and grabbed the microphone. "Engine 51, this is Squad 51. Johnny's down--he's passed out on me here. I'm gonna have to pull over."

"10-4, Squad 51." Captain Stanley's voice sounded puzzled. Ahead, the squad was slowing and pulling over. Stoker steered around it, and Stanley caught the sight of Gage's slumped form and Roy's hand still on the mike as the big rig flew past. Roy's words floated over the open channel as he reported the Code I, announced the squad's unavailability for the originally assigned run, and requested an ambulance.

"I wonder what that was all about?" Stanley asked of no one in particular.

Roy slid out of the driver's seat and trotted around the front of the squad to the passenger side. He grabbed a blanket pack from a rear compartment and spread the yellow covering on the grassy verge next to the curb. Pulling open the door on his partner's side of the vehicle, tugged Johnny's senseless form toward him, and hefted him from the cab. "Geez, for a skinny guy you're damn heavy, Johnny," he complained as he settled his partner as carefully as he could on the ground. He jumped back up and began to pull the equipment from the side niches.

Johnny groaned and slowly opened his eyes. He stared blankly up, groaned again, and tried to push himself upright. Dropping once more to Johnny's side, Roy pressed him back.

"No, Johnny, just lie still. Don't try to get up."

"Wha' happened?" asked the paramedic, closing his eyes and bringing a hand to his face.

"You tell me," Roy suggested as he wrapped the BP cuff around his partner's arm. "You passed out."

Johnny blinked. "Passed out?"

"Yeah," Roy agreed. "Dropped like a rock. You feel sick or dizzy?" Roy had completed his BP check and was busy counting Johnny's respirations.

Johnny thought. "A little dizzy," he admitted. "Oh..."

Roy looked at him sharply.

"Roy...I'm gonna be sick...." Johnny vaulted upward and spun sideways, spewing onto the grass on which he lay what little he'd eaten for dinner. His stomach heaved again; Roy kept a steady pressure on John's forehead as he gagged.

"You're not warm," Roy murmured as he lay Johnny back. "Any stomach ache, headache?"

Johnny's mind flashed to the marble table at the furniture store. "Headache," he finally agreed.

"Headache?" Roy repeated, squatting back on his haunches and reaching for the biophone.

Johnny nodded slightly, lifting a hand to his forehead and closing his eyes and swallowing. He took a steady breath and let it out all at once. "I...I hit my head at that fire today."

"When was this?" Roy demanded. *Johnny, what on earth made you forget to tell me about that?*

Johnny opened his eyes halfway and blinked at his partner. "I was on my way out for a fresh tank," he began. "I stopped to take a breather near the entrance of that store..."

"That's where you got doused," Roy nodded. "I remember."

Johnny made a face. "Yeah, well, I slipped on the soggy carpet and whacked my head on a table..."

Roy stared at him. "And you didn't think it a good idea to report this?"

Johnny shrugged miserably. "Well, I didn't get knocked out.... I just figured I'd have a bump on my head and everything'd be all right...."

Roy merely shook his head and began to report to the hospital.

Johnny closed his eyes and lay still, the stench of his vomit filling his nostrils and threatening to gag him yet again.

"10-4, Rampart." Roy set down the handset and turned to Johnny. "Rampart wants to see you," he said, reaching around the downed paramedic for the drug box. "And they want an IV in."

Ten minutes later, Johnny was being bundled into the ambulance. Roy climbed in alongside the stretcher and settled himself alongside.

"You doin' okay?" he asked as the ambulance pulled away, siren blaring in the silence of the early hour.

"Feelin' a little stupid," Johnny mumbled.

"Well, don't worry too much about it. They won't give you a hard time at Rampart."

"...not worried about Rampart," Johnny grumbled. "It's Kelly I'm worried about."

Roy grinned in the darkness of the ambulance. *Somehow, I don't think Chet is the only person you're gonna hear from.*

"Johnny? Stay with me here."

Johnny lifted heavy eyelids and squinted into the bright overhead lights. He lifted his free hand to shield his eyes. "Huh?"

"Johnny, do you remember what happened?" Brackett peered at him anxiously.

"Yeah...." Johnny's voice was thick. "Bumped my head...." He turned his head a little. "...on a table..."

Brackett pressed his lips together. Johnny went on.

"...passed out in the squad.... don't remember that.... just the throwing up part...."

Brackett relaxed. "Okay, Johnny, the x-rays ought to be back soon. Try to stay awake, okay?"

"Doc, can I have some water or something? I'm thirsty...."

"Well, let's wait and see what the x-rays show first."

Johnny made a face but didn't reply. He closed his eyes and settled himself more comfortably on the exam table.

"Johnny--" Brackett began.

"I'm not sleeping, Doc, just keeping that light outta my eyes."

Brackett smiled in spite of himself. He turned as the door of the treatment room bumped open and the portable x-ray machine rolled in. He ordered what he wanted from the technician, then turned back to Johnny. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

"I'm not goin' anywhere," Johnny replied sleepily.

"Just see to it that you don't," retorted the doctor as he departed.

"DeSoto?"

Roy turned from the desk where he had just lifted the phone. The tall, dark-haired trooper striding toward him handed him a key ring. Roy replaced the receiver and pocketed the keys. "Thanks." He allowed his eyes to drop briefly to the policeman's nametag. "S. Ganan," it read. *Steve*, Roy recalled. They'd worked the odd auto accident now and then. Steve had responded with the ambulance.

"I parked the squad near the receiving doors," said the man, blue eyes gazing steadily from beneath heavy brows. "How's your partner?"

Roy shrugged. "They're waiting for the x-rays to come back," he reported, "but Brackett thinks it's a concussion."

"If you don't mind my asking, what happened?" The undamaged squad had puzzled the policeman all the way in.

Roy's face crinkled in amusement. "Well, if you knew my partner, you wouldn't have to ask," he began.

Steve's eyebrow lifted. "He's a klutz?"

"Let's just say accidents have a tendency to find him before he goes looking for them."

The eyebrow returned to its normal position. "So where did this 'accident' find him?"

"At a fire earlier today--Johnny hit his head on a table, he says." Roy shook his head in resignation. "I don't know why I'm always caught by surprise when something like this happens."

"Optimism?"

Roy grinned. "Must be it."

"Well, good luck then." Ganan smiled and sketched a wave as he turned away.

"Thanks for bringing the squad in for me," Roy called after him.

"No problem," replied Ganan, turning back for a minute, "so long as you and your partner don't make a habit of it." He grinned and disappeared around the corner.

Roy turned back to the phone, once more lifting the receiver to complete his phone call to the station. *Well, I'M not planning on making a habit of it...Johnny I'm not so sure about.*

"You know, you really ought to just sign a lease."

"Very funny." Johnny grimaced at his partner from his position on the examining table.

"Don't complain. You get a nice warm bed, uninterrupted sleep, and all the attention you want from women."

Johnny cracked an eye and peered at his partner, faint hope crossing his face. After a moment he said, "Think they'll send me a pretty nurse this time?"

"With your luck, Johnny, any pretty nurses they send you will be married."

Johnny sighed. "Yeah..." he said dispiritedly.

The door opened and two orderlies stepped in with a gurney.

"Looks like your ride is here," Roy said, turning back to Johnny. "Listen, I'm gonna head back to the station. I'll come by tomorrow and give you a lift back to your car when Brackett says you're free to go."

Johnny nodded. "Okay. Thanks, Roy."

Roy paused in the doorway, a smile on his face. "Night." The door closed softly behind him.

Johnny looked up at the orderlies. "I can get on it by myself," he assured them, sitting up and swinging his legs over the edge of the examining table.

"Yeah," replied one of the orderlies, catching John as he toppled forward, "I know you can, but they told me I'm supposed to do all the work anyhow." He grinned widely as he and his partner settled the slightly dazed paramedic onto the gurney. "Sides, they warned me about you. Said you'd try to do everything on your own and to make sure you behaved yourself like a good boy."

Johnny glared at him through slitted eyelids. "Good thing for you I've decided to follow doctor's orders."

The orderly laughed and, pulling open the door, led the way out of the examining room.

"How's John?"

Roy wasn't surprised to see Hank Stanley waiting in his office doorway for his return.

"He's okay, Cap," Roy replied, shutting the squad door quietly behind him. "Brackett wants to keep him there for a while, make sure he's okay."

"Concussion?"

Roy nodded around a wide yawn. "Guess he whacked his head on a table at that fire this afternoon. He didn't think it was anything to worry about."

Stanley shook his head, annoyance plain on his face. Roy forestalled any rebuke on his partner.

"Cap, I wouldn't have thought anything of it, either. He didn't lose consciousness at the time, no dizziness or anything. He just thought it would wind up with a nasty bump and nothing else."

Stanley pursed his lips and remained silent, displeasure still apparent on his face.

"Yeah, I'll remind him in the morning," Roy sighed resignedly and turned away.

"And I'll remind him again when he returns to work," the Cap added pointedly to Roy's retreating back.

Johnny strolled into the squad room, whistling contentedly, if a bit tunelessly.

"Mornin', John," smiled Roy, looking up from his perusal of the newspaper long enough to make sure it was his partner to whom he was addressing his greeting. His eyes almost immediately returned to the page in front of him.

"Mornin', Roy!" Johnny's cheerful voice rang happily across the squad room as he made for the coffee. He poured himself a healthy portion and spun back toward the table and the plate of doughnuts in the middle.

"You're too chipper for your own good, Gage," muttered Chet Kelly, walking into the room with half-opened eyes and tossing a large manila envelope onto the table. He stepped around Johnny and headed for the coffeepot. "That's for you, Cap says," he added, jerking his thumb at the envelope.

"Me?" Johnny sat down and slid the envelope in front of him. "What is it?"

"Johnny, do I look like the sort of person who reads another person's mail?" sniffed Chet.

Johnny threw him his patient look. "Now, Chet, I didn't say you read it," he explained calmly as he unfastened the clasp and slip the papers out. "I just wondered what it was."

"Well, how'm I supposed to know?" Chet began, breaking off at the sight of Johnny's face.

"Oh, this is real funny, Chet, real funny," growled Johnny, clutching the papers in one hand and lifting his head to Chet, all good humor vanished from his countenance.

Chet's hand splayed against his chest. "Me?" he demanded. "What'd I do?"

Johnny had turned away from him and was now staring at his partner. "Look what he did now," he ordered, shoving the papers across the table.

"Hey, Gage, I don't know what you're talking about," protested Chet, striding to the table to peer over Roy's shoulder at the mysterious papers.

"Oh, come on, Chet, I wasn't born yesterday!"

Roy had begun to chuckle quietly. Chet, reading the top page, roared.

"What's all the commotion?" Hank Stanley stood in the doorway, smiling pleasantly at the crew.

"Nothin'," scowled Johnny.

"Here, Cap, someone gave this to Johnny." Chet tossed the papers toward Stanley.

Stanley snatched them from Johnny who had made a grab for them.

"Just someone's idea of a joke!" grumbled Johnny, glaring again at Chet.

Stanley glanced down. "Joke? This isn't any joke, Pal." He smiled benignly and handed the papers calmly back to Johnny. "I want you to study these pages and commit them to memory. If you can't do that, I want to you to tape them to the inside of your helmet where you'll see them every time you put it on."

"But, Cap--"

"No 'buts', Pal." He patted Johnny on the shoulder. "I'm just tryin' to help you protect yourself, that's all." He looked up. "Any coffee?" He left John's side in favor of caffeine.

Johnny looked up at Roy's mirthful face and scowled once more.

"You'd better get studying, Johnny," Roy laughed, pointing at the papers, "if you don't want to get caught uncovered when our first call comes in."

Johnny pouted a moment longer, then suddenly sat up. "Hey!" he shouted. "You know, maybe this isn't such a bad idea after all! Hey, Cap," he went on, turning toward the hapless Stanley, "you know what we oughta do? We oughta print up hundreds of these and hand 'em out to new recruits...."

"Gage, you dope!" Stanley yanked the papers from Johnny's hand. He looked at the others. "Roll call in five minutes." He stalked out of the room, crumpling the papers as he went.

Johnny turned surprised eyes to the others and shrugged. "I don't know," he said, tilting his head, "maybe some of these new guys DO need a manual on how to properly wear a helmet..."

His voice lifted to call after his rapidly departing crew members.

"There's a lot to know about wearing a helmet...I should know..."

He jumped up and followed them into the apparatus bay.

Author's note: Whatever you do, do NOT discuss story titles when you have food or drink in front of you:

Cece: ROTFL!! Pringles are all over the desk right now!

Theresa: Ummmm... somehow 'slippery' and 'puking' don't sound too appealing in close proximity. Thank heavens I finished my cup of yogurt before we started this discussion!

Cece: I'm still trying (not very hard) to get the image of a slippery Johnny out of my mind.

Linda: ROFL, everyone is eating but me!!

Thanks for all the help, anyway, folks. You, too, Melissa Happy Pasture. You have no idea what you missed, which is, perhaps, a very good thing.