

down in the

revealing all
your dirty
little secrets

dirty

v.014
October '04

ISSN 1554-9623



9 771554 962007



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Scars cover art of Jocelyn, leaning against a column, Urbana, ~1990.

IT DOESN'T MATTER

John Grey

The woman says
I can't understand poetry.
And I reply how
I can't understand women.
I put the poem away.
We kiss.
She'll never read a poem again
but I know how to add
to my confusion.

How Much is that Body in the Window?

Eric Bonholtzer

“Shoplifters Will Be Skinned”. When he saw the sign Jasper couldn’t help but smile, issuing a loud laugh to prove he got the joke. Despite the nonchalance he tried to effect as he entered Mike’s House of Furs, the young activist could barely suppress a shudder at the sight of all the pelts, all the senseless cruelty. He was a bundle of raw nerves, his stomach knotting and clinching. A dual mixture of fear and anticipation coursed through his veins as he thought to himself, he deserves this.

The store was deserted, Jasper the sole customer. In fact, the only other person in the store beside himself was a conservatively dressed salesman with overly stiff posture that led Jasper to much speculation about the guy’s love life. The young activist put on an Oscar caliber performance, searching about for just the right coat as the salesman made his approach. “Name’s Mike, as in Mike’s House of Furs.” He had meaty hands that looked clammy as he extended one in a manner that reminded Jasper for some reason of used cars. “I’m the owner of this place. Anything I can help you with?” Jasper took the hand though declined to introduce himself.

Something didn’t sit right with this man and it was more than just being involved in the propagation of slaughter. Mike had an acute glare about him that seemed to take in more than it seemed even as he spoke genially about offering his help, as if what he was really trying to get across was what can I do to get you out of here the fastest? But Jasper was not going to be deterred and certainly not by this two bit fur peddler.

“I’m just browsing, thanks.” Jasper hoped none of his trepidation shone through in his voice and apparently none had because Mike merely nodded, adding where he could be found if Jasper was in need of any assistance and wandered off to another part of the store..

Liking the situation less and less every second, and feeling that Mike’s intense gaze was boring into him every time he turned around, Jasper quickly snatched five of the most ostentatious and expensive coats that he could find giving intense scrutiny to the price tags. The sooner this was over the better. Each minute he was in here was another chance at discovery. “Could you open up the dressing room?” He did his best to sound casual. He didn’t know if it worked or not.

Mike, on the other hand, seemed at ease, almost as if he were enjoying seeing this young customer so wound up, and he even smiled as he led Jasper to the dressing room. Jasper's fears were allayed slightly, for surely if the owner had any hint of doubt there was no way he would be let alone with a bundle of coats. As Jasper neared the dressing room, his resolve balked, and in a moment of indecision, he returned the five high priced coats to the rack and snatched up three at random in their stead, hoping Mike didn't have a dressing room limit. He reasoned that he would have less attention paid to him if the overcoats weren't of such high value and Mike might check them when he let him in. Besides, a stab at the fur world was a stab at the fur world and price was a secondary factor to getting out without getting caught.

"If you need help, just let me know." Jasper couldn't help but feel the salesman's gaze looking him over. But without incident, the door opened and shut.

Jasper set to work. He withdrew a folding blade, a cheap throw away and slashed the inside liner of a coat, poking the blade through to the fur opening wide gashes as he did so, irreparably desecrating it. On his second coat, Jasper realized just how much fun he was having and engrossed as he was in his work Jasper failed to notice the door handle slowly turning behind him. Only when the latch he had cautiously thrown began to rattle did Jasper realize something was wrong. The young activist cursed vehemently. He was almost done. He just needed a little more time. Mike's voice came from behind the partition, "Everything OK?, you've been in there for quite a while."

"Uh yeah, I'm fine." Jasper worked to cover his tracks. Folding the wrecked coat beneath the viable one, Jasper pulled on his knife, only to find it stuck. Panic clutched him. He just couldn't leave it. It was a throwaway, but it had his fingerprints on it and there was no way Jasper was going to be able to talk his way out of a three inch blade sticking out of one of the coats. He had to get it out. Jasper tried to stall, "Just give me a minute all right." He struggled desperately with the knife. The rattling of the latch didn't stop. Mike was still trying to come in. Jasper knew something was wrong, the shaking growing stronger and the attempt at entry growing more frantic.

"Sir I have to get in there!" came the voice. Then suddenly the knife was free. As fast as he was able, the young activist folded the blade and returned it to his pocket. Breathing a sigh of relief he popped the latch and opened the door a relieved smile on his lips as he snatched up the

coats being careful to sandwich the ruined one between the others.

Already on the tip of the tongue was his excuse, "You know, I like them, but they just really aren't me. I'm sorry for wasting your time..."

He never got the chance to say them, the words dying off as Jasper noticed the long knife in Mike's hands. Jasper trembled, not knowing was going on, his knees weak. This just couldn't be happening. Sure, he'd ruined some furs but it wasn't like he'd killed someone. Mike was looking at Jasper like he had just strangled his children. It just couldn't be happening. He had figured that the absolute worst that would happen if he got caught was a little fine, on the outside maybe probation but certainly not this. This was lunacy.

There was a sardonic mirth in Mike's voice, "Didn't you read the sign?"

Jasper opened his mouth, but no answer came. The knife came down, again and again, savagely. Jasper tried to ward off the blows but they came too fast, too strong. Crimson showered the dressing room.

On the cusp between life and death, as Jasper slowly dimmed he mustered the strength for just one question, it all making sense now, except for one thing, one thing he had to know, "...how'd...you...know...?"

Mike was silent a long time as if deciding whether to not to deign him with an answer. Jasper noted how a thin rivulet of blood, his blood, was wending a narrow path between Mike's eyes, down the bridge of his nose and clinging tenuously to the tip before dripping away. It was singularly the most clear and fascinating thing Jasper had seen all day. Mike smiled, his gaze never faltering, his mind made up. He could give him that at least. "In my store, men don't try on women's furs."

Mike did not live up to his sign's promise. He had bigger plans. Mike respected the fact that when it was all said and done, the young man hadn't whined, hadn't pleaded, he had merely resigned himself and asked a last question. It was an honorable thing. It was something a warrior would do, and Mike felt obligated to pay tribute that. So he preserved the body, stuffing it, making Jasper the ultimate mannequin.

Every so often, Mike would bring him out, to introduce a new fashion; it simply wouldn't do to have him out all the time because someone might recognize him. No Mike saved him for special sales. But every time Mike brought his human mannequin out he couldn't help but smile thinking that a man who "wouldn't be caught dead in fur," had been just that, and he could also not help but think, that in his expert opinion fur never looked better on anyone.

ANONYMOUS

Ashok Niyogi

With myopic vision
I see you tree

Weeping willow
With a small Chinese boy's hair-cut
This is not my religion anymore

I started
Without pinning the fundamentals to the ground
My knowledge of history is not strong
I vacillate in the plural
Try to pronounce something profound
And fall flat on the ground
Just as in relations traditionally defined
I play 'roses on the ring'
Not grappling
Not letting it flow by
Like an island in some stream

I duck incredible cruelties
Of ones ostensibly so near
And yet I miss the masochism in the fear
The tightrope walker stumbles and falls
From his chosen degree of difficulty
We politely applaud
And dismiss a lifetime of strife
Disguised as convention
Killing is punishable
But you can twist off my wings

Warmth in breasts metamorphoses into boredom
So visible is the 'ostrich' syndrome
Yet amputation of the rotten parts
Is forbidden in the Holy Scriptures

Cremation is a final act which deprives all
So we closet me with my primal fear
In the mind of your morgues
Wait for the sickly putrid smell to waft through
And formaldehyde from green walls

We find catharsis in good times we had
Anecdotal memories
Of the good man that I used to be
In front seats of cars on our way to groceries
Jalapeno in plastic bags
And me with the sleeping owls

After the thrashing and the lack of breath
After lengthy discourses on the internet
Whispered consultations with psychiatrists and palmists
There is always a 'fall-back'

Infidelity sits pretty on the hangman's noose
Not yet tight around my neck
But ever there
The noose is your necklace
I have to take my medicine like a man
And free myself of these shackles
Take flight to sit with the owls
Mulish in my obituary
I will not be re-punished by me
I will travel baggage-free
Through societal labyrinths
I must never ask or demand only beg
I must teach myself to continuously smile

Sons and daughters march to this charade
So stereotyped
The victim with a halo of good
The aggressor pinned and labeled
While offspring apportion affection meticulously
And admonish me to be happy
To let the stone hop skip and jump

Minor direction change in the wake of waves is acceptable
Ostrich ears cannot hear
Ostriches have terribly organized lives
I must not make a ripple when I drown
And disturb their equilibrium with a frown

But I am this proverbial pain
Rectal piles that keep recurring from near or far
I must take a step forward in evolution
I must learn to chew the cud
Have a routine mundane
Or disappear into a furniture mall

It will not do to be the owl
During the day watching all
Inconveniently hooting after nightfall

Get on with life my dear sir
See the world pulsating
Observe the jelly-like forward movement
Watch octopus tentacles
Pick up a worthy tit-bit of commerce
To be disgorged on the unsuspecting
For hard cash

When the sun sets
On psychiatrists' advise
Let the sun go down
It will inevitably rise
Traverse its course in the sky
And set again
What right has it got to stop forward motion
To hinder me at work and play
Despite minor interruptions
I have served notice
Dead adulterers should not wake me up
Alcoholics must die at some godly hour
In between morning exercises
And my walk with my dogs

Varices of the esophagus
Must not bleed on weekdays or workdays
I will not be strapped to a wheel chair
I will not even push one
So let the world around me
Behave in proper orderly fashion
If I have to hiccup
I will take me to the toilet
And hiccup away

Raindrops splatter
On superheated black rock
Lizards scurry for cover
The man stumbles about
Almost blind for now
Sweat from his eyebrows
Makes rivulets down his upper eyelids
Before acid from his sins
Singes his eyeballs
Protection against the midday sun

Up on the meadow
Stretching into sky
From where this pathway reaches a dead end
Lizards scurry across pine needle slopes
Camouflage to blind the eagle's eye
Pine barks are in jungle uniform
Branches frozen in acrobatic pose
Mimic the sun's trajectory
The root systems of hunchbacks
Are twisted and finally snap dead
Like a pistol shot
Birds hustle
Make a lot of noise
And fly away

Inside the hut it is dark and musty
Clothes on a nail
Dirty blankets in a corner
A cough that will not go away
Light from an oil lamp
Enhancing the gloom
Licks of fire from the wood burning stove
Artfully 'up lighting' a 'girl-woman's' face

I have to have air to breathe
Even with wispy hair plastered across my forehead
Rivers running into my shirt collar
Squelching shoes
A growing wetness around my crotch
Cows flatten themselves against a wall
Their whole bodies exposed to the afternoon rain
Eyes full of dumb pain
From flea-sores
An ant army has curled up with the maggots
Beneath a rotten stump
Soon on the mountain road
There will be fast rivers of rainwater
For ants to swim across

Snakes will try to retrieve homeless eggs
Old sores fester and ooze pus
The mind grows gangrenous
Flowers drool
Like grotesquely made up clowns
Knobby knees make pointed shapes
Through a pair of faded jeans
A tuft of armpit hair peeps through
The rent in my t-shirt
Above the latissimus dorsa
Too pompous for a TV commercial
Yet mountains
Want attention
Will even oblige a camera crew
With a trick or two

No social comment
No lament on ecology
Just shacking up for the night
As disasters dance in tandem

Tomorrow bridges will collapse
Landslides will block approach roads
So many choices taken out of my hands
Now I must but persevere
Make do with potatoes sprouting tender green leaves
And flour layered with mould
The stream leaves in its wake
Garbage from the over-ripe summer
Washed up sanitary napkins abandoned
By the tourist clamor
Office excursions with
A little touching and feeling
And incredibly stupid sexual innuendos
My drinking water is polluted now
Countless deadly microbes swim arrogantly upstream
I will boil my water and measure calories
I will mend the car wiper before I am on my way
If there is sunshine
The crickets will troop out in number
Cows will munch wet hay.

Bittersweet
Almonds agitated
By the death-throes of a Manatee
We will get over our jet lag
And settle down with warts and pimples
Centipedes nibble away under our skin
These low clouds make me cry
Moving in from San Francisco Bay
They are convex with memories
Solitary woman
In tall grass sloping into Lake Herman
Dog poop and blue jay nests
A lone duck protests.

Squeaking tennis shoes on asphalt
The lunge forward into the net
Yellow balls thrown up at the sun
Crack of her baseball bat
A home run
Pool by the swimming pool
Comfort in caressing felt
Wavelets catch afternoon light
Throat tight
Through September
Her Oleander bush marches by
Hummingbirds nest busily.

Those yellow Anacondas and red Pythons
On six-eighty
Convulsively stop and start
Plane headlights over Mission Peak
Emotions tightly parked in overnight lots
Old habits shed like lizard skin
New body suits packed with Alaskan ice
The wise nod their heads thrice
And then it is enemy action on the turnpike
As you go about your daily chores
Playing mind-games with elegies
Picking life-style tips at a convenience store.

Evening time
The geese fly squawking by
I reach with feeble bloodless hands
To caress their feathers
Sores fester on my instep
Bones creak in my toes
Sprinklers switch on
To wet the lawns
The railroad crossing blinks
Rolling stocks
To take me to sea
I must incinerate trash heaps

Dead leaves this coming fall
Leapfrog over argument
In silence devour the scent
Of frying fish in ground floor kitchens
Rice and lentils
On foothills
My gap-toothed mouth
Mumbling hackneyed rhymes
In weak whitewashed sunlight
Pining for pines

Legions of dead mercenaries
March to the beat of the college band
Volleyball in the sand.

Police brutality Paki bashing
Fairness creams in the commercial break
Afternoon sun on the lake.

Beachside barbeques
In the Mendocino Fracture Zone
Breasts scooped up in ice-cream cones.

Whittled evenings with winter rain
Needles with piercing pain
Unbearable loss or gain.

The marketplace is demand and supply
I must pull up my socks for the mammoth lie
As the sunset prepares to die.

Inwards towards me
Sightings at forty-nine
Pier 39
Vinegar in the wine.

Chipmunks rolling giant pine cones
Wildflowers and buzzing drones
Through wooden window slats
The afternoon moans.

Clothed to kill upon the window-sill
Activity is an act of will
Nostrils flared in missionary zeal.

Harry Houdini unlocks the barn
Souls enmeshed in a filigreed urn
Artists' impressions as ashes churn.

Emotions like madness on railroad tracks
Contrary arguments suffer from parallax
Punctuation with markers from Office Max.

The little wind in the birdbath
Wraps itself around my ankles
Has haunting eyes in an Afghan chador
And thin brown wrists with bangles.

Pupils dilated in gray-blue awe
On my knees from lattice-work to tomb
Supplications to the Womb.

The epiphany of clowns flitting by
In the shadows of wrecks
Slaves throng decks
Of an upscale parking lot.

This parchment has the wherewithal
To document a beggar's call
As we exit the shopping mall.

Serendipity at the Marina stop
Cool and dark inside the antique shop
Martyred skunk on the boardwalk top.

On empty stomach and parched throat
I grope pus-oozing walls for your pin-up note
Pot-bellied priests scurry and idols gloat.

Oxygenation of a flailing corpse
Flimsy coffin drawn by a three-legged horse
The nearby ones look for calories to endorse.

Unrelenting
This heart machine
It will not let me conquer sin.

Ants march in single file
From Lafayette to Livermore
This heat wave across the bay
Gives my potted-plants excessive bile
On today's treadmill I surpass yesterday
As tears whittle my cheek-bones
Valleys and canyons run astray
Into earlobes loaded with dandruff
Deposits of an eroded life
I wade through faded life
On spindly legs in boxer shorts
Pockets full of nutshells and seed husks
Thrown away by hoarding chipmunks
Old male elephants have chipped yellowed tusks
Astray in the ripened corn dandelions sway
Tender tree trunks are gnawed away
Days shorten nights are velvet
The salt flats are a throwback to dinosaur land
The bloodied and potent sickle moon
Will harvest soon.

ADDICTION

G. Allen Wilbanks

Henry sat cross-legged on his tattered stinking mattress in a dark corner of the abandoned warehouse. Sunlight poured through one shattered window that, for some unknown reason, had escaped being boarded up with the rest, but the light did not reach his filthy refuge in the corner. A candle burned next to Henry's makeshift bed providing all the light and heat he needed - or wanted - at the moment.

A large red sign posted on the door out front proclaimed, "Danger: Condemned," but Henry did not care about the sign. Police had raided the building three times in the past month to evict all the homeless and destitute squatters who had chosen to live here. Henry did not care about the police. The warehouse would probably be torn down soon to make room for a new supermarket or multi-level parking garage and any one still living in it might be buried by the bulldozers and wrecking crew, but Henry did not care about that either. Right now, at this moment in time, he only cared about one thing. One all-important event in his life that had taken precedence over every other thing that had ever held any meaning for him.

Henry tied the latex band around his left bicep using his right hand and his teeth. When he had pulled it as tight as it would go and secured it so it would not slip at a crucial moment, he vigorously rubbed the inner curve of his elbow, searching for a suitable vein. Most of the blood vessels in his right arm had become so damaged or weak they no longer showed under the skin or carried enough blood for his needs, and recently his left arm had begun to mimic the same condition of uselessness. Rows of carbon-darkened scars gave mute testimony to years of abuse. A small medical syringe lay on the mattress beside Henry's knee, waiting patiently for him to call upon its services yet again.

After a few moments of searching, Henry found a small vein close to the surface that was still serviceable. He picked up the syringe and checked the contents of its tube. Henry's hand began to shake. A jittery feeling in his guts and a slight feeling of nausea told him he had almost waited too long before preparing his fix this time. Well, he figured it was time to remedy that situation. He raised the needle tip to eye level and depressed the plunger slowly and delicately. An air bubble pumped into his vein might kill him, so he

had to clear the needle of any dangerous air gaps, but he also did not want to waste any of the precious fluid contained within. After flicking the syringe a few times with a his index finger to draw all the air to the top, he pressed carefully until a fat glistening drop of moisture grew at the tip and spilled down the slender length of the needle.

Stroking his left arm with his thumb while cradling the needle between two fingers like a plastic and steel cigarette, he checked once more to be sure he knew exactly where the tiny elusive blood vessel lay hiding. Henry brought the syringe into position and prepared to deliver the one thing in his life that still carried comfort and meaning.

“Wait.”

Henry paused at the verbal intrusion. A shadow moved over him, a deeper blackness enveloping the already dismal corner in which he huddled. The candle flickering on the floor flared into a surprisingly bright white light, then guttered out. No breeze roamed the abandoned building to explain the candle’s behavior; it had simply burned itself out. Trying to blink away the glowing silvery spot the candle had imprinted into his vision, Henry peered myopically around to locate the owner of the voice that had interrupted him.

A few feet away, invading Henry’s self-imposed isolation, stood a man wearing a long, gray winter overcoat with the collar pulled up as if to ward off a chill. The stranger hugged the coat’s fabric around himself as though desperate for warmth, but the air in the warehouse was far from cold. Henry felt the man’s gaze fall on him with an almost physical weight, and though he at first tried to ignore the intrusion, he was finally forced to admit the man was not going to simply go away on his own. He fired an angry glare at the stranger standing over him and opened his mouth to tell him to move along. But the words never came out. As Henry peered more closely at the figure looming above him, he saw that although this intruder resembled a man in general form, it was actually something ... else. A red-scaled reptilian snout protruded over the coat collar, sprouting from a nightmare landscape of grooved and twisted flesh. Four short pointed horns rose from the deformed head in a single row, starting at the center of its forehead and moving backward. And somewhere between the alligator mouth and the horns, floated two sickly-yellow eyes that gazed intently at Henry, seeming to stare right through him into his drug-poisoned, shriveled little heart.

At first Henry tried to convince himself that he had waited too long to fix and he was suffering the first hallucinations of withdrawal. But the

drug never caused him to see things like this before, and he quickly discarded the theory. The creature - imagined or not - spoke again.

“Heroin?” it asked. The mouth only moved slightly to speak the word, but the movement revealed needle-sharp teeth lining its entire length.

“Huh?” Henry replied, too dumbstruck to coordinate brain and mouth any more effectively.

“In the syringe. It’s heroin, isn’t it? Horse. Smack. Shit. The big ‘H.’”

“Uh, yeah.” Henry remained too shocked to be properly frightened, but he could feel the first stirrings of panic building in him. Or perhaps it was just his growing need for the drug reminding him time was limited.

“Do you like it? The drug, I mean,” asked the creature solicitously.

“I don’t understand,” said Henry. The question surprised him, but not as much as the fact this thing from a bad dream could talk to him at all.

“Do you like the heroin?” it repeated.

“Uh, I guess so.”

“Do you really? Does it make you feel good still? Or does it just keep you from feeling sick?”

Henry thought seriously about the question for a moment. “It used to make me feel good. Now, I guess... I... I...”

“...Just don’t want to feel bad. Is that right?”

“Yeah.”

The creature nodded and actually managed to push its features into a sympathetic expression. “I thought so. You’ve been using the stuff a long time, I gather. And I bet it has cost you quite a lot over the years. Maybe your job. A house and car. Perhaps even a family.”

“Yeah. Hey, who... what are you?” The fear, previously suppressed by Henry’s confusion, began to manifest. His voice cracked as he forced himself to ask, “What do you want? Are you going to hurt me?”

“No, no, no. I am not going to hurt you.” The creature laughed lightly in his throat. Henry did not find the sound pleasant or reassuring. “And as for what I am. Well, what do you think I am?”

“A monster?” Henry asked.

“No, not a monster. Merely a demon. And not a very powerful one at that. But I’m here to offer you something that I think you will like. How would you like to be able to throw that drug away? How would you like to never have to use the stuff again? You could be free of it forever with no withdrawal and no unpleasant cravings. Doesn’t that sound like something you would want?”

Henry glanced at the syringe still in his hand, then stared suspicious-

ly back at the self-proclaimed demon. “How can you do that?”

“It doesn’t matter how. The important thing is I can do it, and all you have to do is say that you want it.” The demon smiled, perhaps trying to be pleasant, but the toothy leer only made Henry flinch.

“What will it cost me?”

The demon shook his head slowly, looking slightly disappointed. “Come, come. You’re not stupid. I think you know very well what it would cost you.”

“My soul.”

“Yes. Your soul. The drug has taken your life away and I will give it back to you. But in return I will take your soul. I think that is more than a fair exchange. You can go on and get a new job. Get a new home, make new friends. I am offering quite a lot for a damaged soul that will probably fall into my hands in the end anyway. Don’t you think so?”

Henry did think so. Heroin had made his life a living Hell on Earth, and he had no reason to believe that after he died he wouldn’t be in for more of the same. But then again, if this demon were trying to buy his soul, maybe there was a chance he could still salvage it. Maybe the only reason he was being offered a trade was that the demon believed he might get away from him.

A second thought percolated to the surface of Henry’s muddled brain. This whole conversation could be some sort of trick. Maybe if he refused the deal, the demon would simply kill him and take his soul anyway. Maybe the creature was playing some sick game to pass a little time before he finished off his newest victim. Henry swallowed thickly before speaking. “If I tell you no, will you leave me alone. Or are you going to kill me anyway? Henry stared at the demon’s polished black boots, afraid to meet it’s eyes. He knew immediately how stupid the question was, but he still wanted to hear the answer.

“I’ll leave of course.” The creature said with the utmost sincerity in its voice and demeanor. If it had a heart, it probably would have crossed it. “I would love to just take your soul with me now, but I can only take what is freely given. I can’t even snatch the lint out of your pocket without your permission. Truly an unfortunate circumstance, but there are rules to be followed.” The demon paused, waiting until Henry looked up to meet its gaze. “So what’s it going to be?”

“No,” said Henry finally. “I don’t think I want your deal. Maybe I can quit the stuff by myself and maybe I can’t. But if I take your trade I know for a fact I’m going to Hell. I’d rather be a junkie with the tiniest chance

of still going to Heaven than straight and already damned.”

Henry lifted the needle once more to stab it into his arm.

“Wait.”

Henry looked up again, needle poised.

“Maybe there is some middle ground here,” continued the demon. “Maybe I can help you quit. You will still go through withdrawal. It’ll be painful, but you will eventually be clean and it won’t cost you your soul.”

“Why would you want to do that?” Henry’s eyes narrowed as he tried to find the trap in the demon’s offer.

“It would be my good deed for the day,” said the demon laughing unconvincingly.

“Demons don’t do good deeds,” said Henry. He placed the needle tip to his arm.

“Wait, dammit!” screamed the demon. Henry stared up in shock at the angry explosion. The creature took a step toward him and held out a viciously clawed hand, palm up. “Give me the syringe,” it hissed.

“No.” Henry recoiled from the hand and cradled the dope-filled needle against his chest. “I need this. Go away, please. Just leave me alone.”

“Okay, okay.” The demon backed away again holding both hands up in a placating gesture, the smile that wasn’t a smile back on its face. “I’m sorry if I scared you. Here’s my last offer: I’m going to cure you at no cost. You get straight and you keep your soul. No catch.”

Henry stared in amazement. The demon’s smile faltered slightly, and a haze of desperation seemed to grow around the creature. Henry could have sworn those monstrous red hands were shaking just the tiniest bit. As the demon once more moved close, Henry held his ground. He did not shy away even as the monster laid one clawed hand on the top of his head. He felt an odd wrenching sensation move through his body, not painful, but disturbing. The feeling, although intense, passed quickly except for a slight residual tingling in his extremities. Henry soon felt normal again. In fact, he felt better than normal. He felt good. And, not good as in drugged and comfortably high, but good as in clean and healthy.

The craving and need for the poisons that had controlled his life for so long were gone. The idea of injecting any more toxins into his body now repulsed him. For the first time in his life he looked at a needle full of heroin and did not want it. He stood up and, without a second thought, he dropped the syringe onto the dirty mattress and turned his back to it. He felt absolutely wonderful.

“Thank you,” he told the demon sincerely.

But the creature did not answer him. Instead, it dived past him and scooped up the fallen needle. Tearing the sleeve of its coat in its haste to bare a scaly red arm, the demon stabbed the needle deep into its flesh and depressed the plunger, driving the liquid contents into its body.

Henry walked away, out into the bright daylight, thinking about all the horrible and bizarre things he had done in his life just to feed his addiction; while behind him a large, red demon slumped onto a tattered, stinking mattress with a soft sigh of relief.

Education Bureaucrats (7)

for Maxine

by Michael Ceraolo

It was a few weeks before school began,
and,
despite having had the summer off,
the dedicated paper shufflers
were already in mid-season form,
having sent her a schedule without a lunch session,
then
refusing to return repeated calls
attempting to correct their error,
probably
because they were inundated with indications of their inefficacy
Either that,
or
they had not forgotten to schedule themselves lunch

Sweet Wife

Philip Beloin Jr.

It's a private investigator's bread and butter: is the wife cheating? She's a platinum blonde with perfect measurements and not an iota of fat on that gorgeous body. But how smart is she? Her husband thinks something's up.

I tail her to work where she is an assistant manager at a supermarket. Through the front window I can see her moving from register to register. She's efficient, but it's her looks that are noticed; silvery hair and a confident strut on finely honed legs bared to the thigh. Most of the male shoppers, even the older guys-vets on Viagra I heard someone once-undress her with their eyes. I can tell from my vantage point in the parking lot. I know human nature. I'm a trained detective, aster all.

Do I wait here? Or go inside for a closer look? She might disappear for a quickie with the butcher, or jump that high school kid bagging the groceries. No, it's too risky. I'll stay in the car.

Which proves wise. She doesn't leave her post in front until her scheduled lunch break. I'm told she gets an hour - rank has its privileges- and it's back on the tail, as she drives through the plaza and across the street to a hot dog joint with good food but high prices. She's with a female co-worker and I think for a second-lesbians?-but no, I dismiss it is too easy a solution. The husband is convinced she's cuckolding him. He's a quiet man, but prone to violent outbursts. I'll have to be careful with what I find out.

Both women order platters-my mark goes for a chili cheese dog. While she's waiting, she gabs with the counter help, a gentleman about my age, but taller, probably the manager or even the owner. It looks like they're flirting, I see her head rolling back in a laugh, but then their trays come and both women sit in a corner booth. I'm getting hungry myself, and I've had what she's having,so I order the same using the drive-thru. I pull into a convenience store nearby and eat with my eyes on the restaurant.

Nothing happens at lunch or for the rest of her shift, and I follow her home lazily. I drive past and go to my office. There's paperwork and billing to be done, which I finish quickly-efficiently is the proper term- and go home myself.

I expect my wife to be there, preparing dinner, but she's not. There's

a note, her friend Jane is in the hospital with sharp abdominal pains. That's just like my wife-she's always there for others. She'll be back "when she can."

I heat up the frozen meal, and have a beer while watching a ball game. At ten I go to bed myself.

Sometime later my wife slips in bed next to me.

"How's Jane?" I ask softly.

"I woke you," she says.

"I couldn't sleep,"

"They removed her appendix. She should recover."

"You could have called."

"I forgot with all that was going on." I reach over and kiss her cheek.

"I'm tired, hon," she says.

I sigh. "Yeah, okay."

The next day I'm back at the supermarket. She has a later shift, though it doesn't change her work attitude. She hits the hot dog place for lunch again, chatting with the same manager. She's supposed to work till ten this evening, but I see her heading for the doors an hour earlier than that. Once outside, she hurries to her car, and off she goes at a good clip. I have no trouble following her, though, keeping at least a car between us. I have to run an extremely yellow light to maintain my tail, but all in all our trek from one end of town to the other is without incident.

I can't say I'm surprised when she pulls into the motel at the town line. Her husband had his suspicions after all. The motel has no pool, but he sign poking up like an oversized phallus brags of waterbeds, hot tubs, and adult movies.

She drives past the office and around a curve where there are more rooms, these facing a thick line of woods. I park and get out, running by the side of the building, to peer in back. She's out of her car. And I can't help but notice how beautiful her legs are and how shiny her silvery hair is.

She is greeted at a room door by someone I've been before. It's the gentleman from the hot dog restaurant. But is he really a gentleman or just some piece of scum? She jumps into his awaiting arms and their lusty almost excites me.

I don't stick around to see the motel door close. I've done my job. The husband was on the money. Personally, I'm surprised by who she was with, but the outcome, when you do this line of work enough, is never much in doubt.

I skip the office and go home to an empty house and a message on the machine. My wife is with Jane again-complications from the surgery. There's some chicken-cooked before she went to work-in the fridge. I avail myself to this along with two beers during the ball game.

I go to bed alone once more.

It's after midnight when my wife comes to bed. But I haven't slept at all.

"Sorry, I'm so late," she whispers.

I've been waiting for her. I move fast, straddling her mid-section. For a moment she thinks I'm getting frisky, but when I clasp my hands around her throat she begins to buck in panic. I weigh much more and holding her down is easy. She tries to reach my backside with those incredible legs, but she hasn't the angle to kick me off. I grip tighter and she struggles and this nonsense goes on for a good minute or two before the life drains from her eyes, which are hidden behind streaks of the most gorgeous platinum blonde hair I've ever seen.

Goodbye sweet wife.

Fish

Alexandria Rand

It's a pretty miraculous thing, I suppose, making the transition from being a fish to being a human being. The first thing I should do is go about explaining how I made the transition, the second thing, attempting to explain why. It has been so long since I made the decision to change and since I have actually assumed the role of a human that it may be hard to explain.

Before my role in human civilization, I was a beta -- otherwise known as a Japanese fighting fish. Although we generally have a beautiful purple-

blue hue, most people familiar with different species of fish thought of us as more expensive goldfish. I was kept in a round bowl, about eight inches wide at it's longest point (in human terms, that would be living in quarters about 25 feet at the widest point). It may seem large enough to live, but keep in mind that as humans, you not only have the choice of a larger home, but you are also able to leave your living quarters at any point in time. I did not have that luxury. In fact, what I had was a very small glass apartment, not well kept by my owners (and I at that point was unable to care for it myself). I had a view of the outside world, but it was a distorted view. And I thought I could never experience that world first-hand.

Previous to living anywhere else, before I was purchased, I resided in a very small bowl - no longer than three inches at the widest point. Living in what humans would consider an eight foot square, I had difficulty moving. I even had a hard time breathing. Needless to say from then on I felt I needed more space, I needed to be on my own. No matter what, that was what I needed.

I lived in the said bowl alone. There was one plastic tree in the center of my quarters -- some algae grew on it, but that was all I had for plant life in my space. The bottom of my quarters was filled with small rocks and clear marbles. It was uneventful.

Once they put another beta in my quarters with me -- wait, I must correct myself. I thought they put another beta there with me. I must explain, but please do not laugh: I only came to learn at a later point, a point after I was a human, that my owner had actually placed my quarters next to a mirror. I thought another fish was there with me, following my every motion, getting angry when I got angry, never leaving me alone, always taking the same moves as I did. I raced back and forth across my quarters, always staring at the "other" fish, always prepared to fight it. But I never did.

Once I was kept in an aquarium for a short period of time. It was a ten-gallon tank, and I was placed in there with other fish of varying species, mostly smaller. I was the only beta there. There were different colored rocks, and there were more plastic plants. And one of the outside walls was colored a bright shade of blue - I later came to discover that it was paper behind the glass wall. Beyond the other fish, there was no substantial difference in my quarters.

But my interactions with the other fish is what made the time there more interesting. I wanted to be alone most of the time -- that is the way I felt the most comfortable. I felt the other fish didn't look like me, and I often felt that they were specifically out to hamper me from any happi-

ness. You have to understand that we are by nature very predatorial -- we want our space, we want dominance over others, we want others to fear us. It is survival of the fittest when it comes to our lives. Eat or be eaten.

I stayed to myself most of the time in the aquarium; I occasionally made shows of strength to gain respect from the other fish. It made getting food from the top of the tank easier when no one tempted to fight me for the food. It was lonely, I suppose, but I survived -- and I did so with better luck than most of the others there.

Then one day it appeared. First closed off to the rest of us by some sort of plastic for a while, then eventually the plastic walls were taken away and it was there. Another beta was suddenly in my space. My space. This was my home, I had proven myself there. I was the only fish of my kind there, and now there was this other fish I would have to prove myself to. Eat or be eaten. I had to make sure -- and make sure right away -- that this other fish would never be a problem for me.

But the thing was, I knew that the other fish had no right to be there. I didn't know how they got there, what those plastic walls were, or why they were there. But I had to stop them. This fish was suddenly my worst enemy.

It didn't take long before we fought. It was a difficult battle, all of the other fish got out of the way, and we darted from one end of the aquarium to the other. It wasn't long until I was given the opportunity to strike. I killed the other beta, its blood flowing into my air. Everyone there was breathing the blood of my victory.

Almost immediately I was removed from the aquarium and placed in my other dwelling -- the bowl. From then on I knew there had to be a way to get out of those quarters, no matter what I had to do.

I looked around at the owner; I saw them walking around the tank. I knew that they did not breathe water, and this confused me, but I learned that the first thing I had to do was learn to breathe what they did.

It didn't take much time before I was constantly trying to lift my head up out of the bowl for as long as I could. I would manage to stay there usually because I was holding my breath. But then, one time, I went up to the top in the morning, they way I usually did, and without even thinking about it, I just started to breathe. I was able to keep my full head up out of the water for as long as I wanted and listen to what was going on outside my living quarters.

Everything sounded so different. There were so many sharp noises. They hurt me to listen to them. Looking back, I now understand that the water in my tank muffled any outside noises. But beyond that, no one in my liv-

ing quarters made noise -- no one bumped into things, no one screamed or made noises. But at the time, all these noises were extremely loud.

I then knew I had to keep my head above water as much as possible and try to make sense of the sounds I continually heard. I came to discover what humans refer to as language only through listening to the repeated use of these loud sounds.

When I learned I had to breathe, I did. When I understood that I had to figure out their language, I did. It took so long, but I began to understand what they said. Then I had to learn to speak. I tried to practice under the water, in my dwelling, but it was so hard to hear in my quarters that I never knew if I was doing it correctly. Furthermore, I had become so accustomed to breathing air instead of water that I began to have difficulty breathing in my old home. This filled me with an intense fear. If I continue on with this experiment, I thought, will my own home become uninhabitable to me? Will I die here because I learned too much?

I decided that I had no choice and that I had to ask my owner for help. I had to hope that my ability to produce sounds -- and the correct ones, at that -- would be enough to let them know that I am in trouble. Furthermore, I had to hope that my owner would actually want to help me. Maybe they wouldn't want me invading their space. Eat or be eaten.

But I had to take the chance. One morning, before I received my daily food, I pulled the upper half of my body from the tank. My owner wasn't coming yet, so I went back down and jumped up again. Still nothing. I kept jumping, until I jumped out of the tank completely. I landed on the table, fell to the floor, coughing. I screamed.

The next thing I remember (and you have to forgive me, because my memory is weak here, and this was seven years ago) is being in a hospital. I didn't know what it was then, of course, and it frightened me. Doctors kept me in place and began to study me. They sent me to schools. And to this day I am still learning.

I have discovered one thing about humans during my life as one. With all the new space I have available to me, with all of the other opportunities I have, I see that people still fight each other for their space. They kill. They steal. They do not breathe in the blood, but it is all around them. And I still find myself doing it as well, fighting others to stay alive.

The Kitchen

Kerry McDonald

A girl on the stairs
watches the man
press the blade
to the woman's throat.
A soft rain falls,
like chestnut hair on linoleum.
A teakettle screams
like the woman's eyes.
A screen door bangs.
The smell
of just-baked bread.

The Nursery

Kerry McDonald

When she was born
a man was standing at the nursery,
smiling.
He would bide his time.
She would remember him, always,
drunk and dangerous.
And come to know
the smell of his skin
in a room closed-up.

THE MARK

Lana Gjovig

“So much for the element of surprise,” Jack muttered as he ejected the cartridge. He chambered another round hoping he had enough time for a second shot before his mark found cover on the quiet street. As he was aiming, Jack noted that the mark didn’t appear to be moving any faster than a brisk walk. This surprised the assassin, as he had hit the mailbox behind the mark. No one could mistake what had just happened; there was a hole the size of a fist punched through the metal can, and the air reverberated with the soft ‘chong’ sound the bullet had made.

Moving the rifle barrel along the victim’s trail, he sighted another shot while trying to ignore the queasy feeling that had struck him. The assassin held his breath and squeezed the trigger, firing another round. It missed as well; a puff of smoke wafted up from behind the mark where the bullet hit the sidewalk.

“What the fuck?” the assassin said under his breath, looking up from his scope. “I had him dead in my...”

His last words drained from him as he saw his target swivel on a heel and look straight at him. Jack dropped behind his cover on the building top, letting the edge of concrete conceal him. It was hard to remain in place for a ten count, but his will remained firm for the short duration. When he reached ten, he popped his head back up for a quick look.

The mark was still looking at him. At least...it *seemed* it was right at him. The man’s unnerving gaze didn’t stray for a second. “The hell he can...” Jack muttered, ejecting the spent shell and chambering another round. “No way, uh uh. Nope.”

As the assassin watched, the mark raised his hand. The index finger was extended; it pointed dead at him. That was all Jack needed. He dropped behind cover again, and crawled a few feet towards the center of the roof. Grabbing the rifle case, he got to his feet, crouching. He made his way to the fire escape before straightening so that the mark—*Michael, his name is Michael*—wouldn’t see which direction he fled. Jack jumped down to the fire escape, and raced down the stairs. His car was waiting. He unlocked it, and threw the case in the back. The rifle went on the front seat, and he covered it with his trench coat.

He started the car, then slammed it into reverse. He came out on the

other side of the block, away from where the mark had been walking. After wheeling the car around and putting it in drive, Jack forced himself to go slow, despite the urge to put the pedal down. That'd be a stupid way to screw up, getting busted by the cops for speeding. He flipped his lights on, and cruised down the street. The radio was tuned into a metal station. Harsh, heavy lyrics erupted from the speakers, "...*running...and when I find you, find you ...*" Jack snapped it off with a savage jerk, bathing the car in silence.

"Easy," he mumbled. "Keep 'er easy. Nice and narrow, straight as an arrow." He laughed to himself at the nonsense rhyme. His trembling hands had difficulty keeping the wheel straight. The incident had disturbed him more than he thought; he never got the shakes. Ever.

It wasn't just that the mark didn't run for cover at the first shot. There was something else wrong. The second shot; it should have hit him. Nah, I just missed, that's all. But why was his mind coming back to it, again and again? It was a constant loop in his mental theatre.

Jack turned the car around the corner, and drove down the rest of the block to the red light. He stopped, drumming his fingers on the wheel of the sedan. As the red light stretched on and on, he grew more anxious. *Did he see my face?* Jack thought. *Would he be able to pick me out of a line up? Man, I should have never taken this job from Vinnie...*

Vinnie—Vincent Torelli to give his full name—was an agent of sorts for the local 'family'. Jack had taken jobs from him before; the pay was excellent, but the risks were high. He'd only come back to Vinnie because he blew the last chunk of change he had at the tracks. So, it was time to be working again. This job had come up suddenly, Vinnie said, and needed Jack's professional touch. The mark, a guy by the name of Michael Rechts, was some sort of high business, low profile dude. A big shot wanted him dead and soon. The price? A cool half million. With money like that, Jack could lay low for a while. He could take a vacation, in case there was any backlash that Vinnie didn't tell him about. No small fry shelled out a five hundred G's for a hit; this was big time business.

Given that it was such a huge step up, Jack expected bodyguards, security systems, and all sorts of trouble locating his mark. That wasn't the case, and thinking on it now made his unease grow. It was too easy to find him. He'd asked around, dropped a few bribes, and got a favorite restaurant in almost no time at all. He'd scouted the place out, and found a great spot across the street to get a perfect shot. It was a fair bit risky of course, to sit in one place day after day waiting for the mark to show,

chancing that the locals might notice his presence...but it wasn't risky enough. It wasn't equal to the pay.

As Jack was musing, the light turned green. He pulled ahead slowly, looking around at the dead streets, waiting for the first siren to show. This was a good part of town, and the call-time of the cops was short; another risk, yet not enough to set his mind at ease. "Man," he muttered to himself as he passed by block after block, "where are the fuckin' cops?" Their no-show was grating on his nerves.

Another red light loomed ahead, and he pulled the car up to the line. As it idled there, he glanced around. Nothing. The streets were empty. It was a rude slap on the face, startling him: *it was only midnight and the streets were empty*. That wasn't possible in LA, not when he could count on both hands the number of bars and restaurants within his line of sight. People should be moving around, bar-hopping, or going to their cars. Something. But the streets were dead quiet; not a soul moved around him.

Risking being pulled over by the police, Jack went through the red light and sped up. He just wanted *out* of this area, this city, this dead zone. He had never felt so alone before; he hadn't realized how much he relied on people until they were gone...and he didn't even *like* people. He killed them; they were just a fat paycheck to him. Well, with the exception of that first one...

...his hands squeezed her throat tighter and tighter; her face was turning an alarming dark color, but this only served to further his excitement. He was about to let her go just moments prior, if she'd only kept her big mouth shut. He hated that about Felicia; she'd never be quiet, even when it was in her best interest to do so. The boy thought back to all the times when she'd berate him for being late to pick her up, for the way he dressed, for not remembering their six month anniversary...for all those and a thousand different things. She'd broken it off with him last week, but he had to see her one last time, to know why. She said she just didn't love him anymore, and he could accept that. He had reached forward, and was turning the key in the ignition when she added in that snide voice of hers, "Besides, Billy Larson has a bigger dick than you." At that, he'd stopped and looked at her. Something in his face must have given away his intent as her smirk faded, then fled her face to be completely replaced with fear. She fumbled the door open, and raced out into the night, but he'd caught her easily enough, beating her first, then wrapping his hands around her slender neck. It wasn't that he'd planned to kill her, but he had come prepared. Her grave was dug, the sod on top set aside under a plastic tarp, and they were out in the wilderness that surrounded their Illinois town. He was sure that no one

saw her get into his car, and even if they did, it was perfectly normal enough; they said they'd still be friends, after all. No one would ever find her body. He'd dug the grave deep and true; no wild animals would dig her up. He squeezed tighter and tighter as her hands beat at his face ineffectually. Surprising to him, he had a boner; he could feel it throb in his jeans. Finally, it was done, and the bitch would talk no more. He held her throat for another couple minutes—just to make sure—then he lifted her up, and carried her to the grave he'd oh so carefully prepared...

...and Jack blinked awake from the vivid daydream. He found himself parked on the side of the street; he didn't recognize the neighborhood. *What made me think of that?* Jack shrugged, trying to cast off the last remnants of the dream, and bent to start the car. That was when he spotted him: Michael. The mark was standing in front of the car, as if Jack had rolled it to a stop just before hitting him.

"What the fuck...?" he asked, not believing it, though he saw the mark standing nice as you please with his own two eyes.

As Jack stared at him, Michael smiled. It wasn't a friendly smile this one, oh no. It was cold, and calculating. It was the smile Jack himself had probably given some of his victims over the years. One that said *I'm going to enjoy this*. Jack fumbled for the door, his heart beating at a frantic pace. The mark didn't move a muscle. He just stood there and smiled, eyes gleaming with a preternatural glow in the moonlight.

The assassin flung open the car door, and heaved himself out. Everything seemed unreal to him, except his fear. And Michael, of course. Michael was real, utterly real...and crazy. Jack saw that now. He was sent after a crazy man, a sociopath maybe. Like Bundy or Gein. Except did Michael enjoy killing women?

Oh, no, no, my friends. No, Michael enjoyed killing men. *Maybe he fucks them...after*, Jack thought as his mind raced, caught in the light of Michael's eyes like a deer in the headlights of a car. *Sure, I bet he does. Turns them over when they're still warm and fucks 'em*. Wasn't there a joke about that, somewhere? Wasn't there a...

...*feeling that you'd get*, Jack mused to himself, knowing which women liked it rough, and which didn't. Most of them didn't, of course. That was to be expected. But some did, and he looked for those, seeking them out with a sixth sense only he possessed. Most whores didn't like it rough-and-tumble; they were paid professionals. Jack could respect and understand that; getting the crap beat out of them while they fucked was bad for business. No, most of them who liked it rough were the quiet ones. They were the ones who read books about bondage,

who looked up pictures of women being abused on the ‘net, and fingered themselves to it, too afraid to go out and find a real man. That was ok too; Jack would find them. Just as he’d found Felicia so many years ago. Normally, he’d find them in their homes, late at night, reading some sort of romance novel, the kinds where the heroine might act strong, but would crumple like a tissue in the masculine hero’s arms. Sometimes, he’d find them on the streets, and end up pulling them into an alley for a quickie. His latest one was in the trunk of his car, tied up and gagged with duct tape. He would take her home, to his basement, and help her play out her fantasies. Oh, yes he would. It’d start slow, and build up. He’d never let her see his face, of course, just on the off chance his sense was wrong. It wasn’t so far. He was hard just thinking about what he’d do to her. It was the vulnerability in her eyes, he thought. He never got this hard unless he was whacking someone. Oh, this one will be fun, he thought...

...screaming his head off, running down the street. Just as she had run. She and so many others, boiling up to the top of his mind, like corpses clawing their way out of stinking, putrid graves. He could taste bile in the back of his throat. *What am I doing?* His panic-ridden mind allowed for no other questions; he was jumping over a chain link fence, then racing down an alley as that thought came to him. It clanged in his head, thrumming in time to his heart. *What am I doing? What am I doing? What in the fuck am I doing?* He hit a trash can with his knee, knocking it over as he risked a glance behind him. At the mouth of the alley, he was there. The mark. Looking at him with those awful, knowing eyes.

Another scream ripped itself from his throat, and he redoubled his efforts. A stitch was growing in his side painfully. The alley zigged. He followed it, skidding around the corner. It was a dead end. *Can’t be...can’t “...be happening...”* he said. The assassin turned, and there was the mark. Jack backed up, terror gripping him ever tighter. He pulled a 9 mm pistol from his shoulder holster as his back hit the wall of the alley. He pointed it at the mark; his hands were shaking. It was all he could do to hold onto the gun.

The mark’s eyes were still glowing, even though the moon had slipped behind a cloud. With every step, he grew larger and larger in Jack’s sight, until he was the assassin’s whole world. It was unreal...and if insanity had come at this point, Jack would have welcomed it. He remained fully cognizant. The madness that he yearned for so that he could make sense of this unreality stayed stubbornly out of reach. Through this horrible ordeal, he was scared—almost to the point of pissing himself—and his mind was caught in a mental loop, struggling to free itself from a deadly trap...and he was sane. Utterly, completely, coldly sane.

“Shoot!” Jack screamed. “I’ll shoot! Kill you! Don’t! Don’t...! Don’t...”

“...come any closer,” she said, words and hands trembling in fear. “I’ll cut you, I really will. Just...just let me go, and I won’t say anything...” Jack smiled from behind his leather mask. This one was picked up off the streets. It was his latest impulse, and one that was very bad: picking up runaways in broad daylight. He couldn’t let them go, of course, because they’d seen his face, his normal looking, almost-handsome, concerned face. If they didn’t get in, that was fine; there’d be another. This one was a little spitfire, though, and he was almost sorry to have to kill her. But she’d seen his face. She was trying to act tough, even though she was crying already. He’d barely touched her so far. A few smacks and that was it. Just to...warm her up. Nothing compared to what was next. He came in quickly, startling her into a cry of outrage. Without any real effort, he wrested the knife from her, and tossed it aside. She wept, a torrent of tears cascading down her face that looked so much like Felicia’s...he bent to kiss that face and...

...cringed away. He was still holding his gun, but it was pressed up against his temple now. He jerked it away with a loud cry, tears welling in his eyes. “I didn’t mean it,” he whispered, the words forced from him, “I didn’t mean it... I didn’t mean any of it! I couldn’t help myself, I couldn’t stop, I...I...” His breath hitched and he hiccuped noisily, then shouted, “I couldn’t stop myself they needed to die because they were all like her and they w-wuh-wanted it I know they did!”

The mark started to walk towards him, as quiet as a cat.

Jack raised the gun, trying to see through his tears. The mark was twenty feet away, then ten, then he was right before Jack, standing there with his eyes burning. The assassin put the muzzle flat against the mark’s chest and fired, three times. The recoil made the gun jump in his hand. One shot went into the breastbone, the next into Michael’s throat, and the last into his face.

The bullets passed right through, leaving no wounds. The mark’s skin was whole, unblemished, pure.

Michael stepped back and cocked his head, as if considering this turn of events as the assassin knelt on the ground. “You know what to do,” the mark said, his voice sad and exultant at the same time. Jack nodded, the last of his mental defenses broken down. *I don’t want to do this*, he thought in desperation. Yet he was unable to stop himself; his hand raised of its own volition. He put the gun to his temple, its grip slick from his sweat. Jack’s last sight was moonlight shining uninterrupted on the floor of the

alley as the moon glided free of the constraining clouds. *He's got no shad*—was the last thought he'd ever have in this world. He pulled the trigger.

Michael, standing in the assassin's living room, looked at the corpse for a long time after that. The man was overdue for death by years. Through a trick of fate and the Devil's own luck, he had escaped his execution for his girlfriend's murder. That was remedied now. He wouldn't torment women any longer. The people he killed as an assassin did not bother the man standing beside the corpse; in a strange way Jack had been helping to rid the world of people who needed to be gone. The deaths of innocents, however, could not be abided, and would never be tolerated.

The man's suicide would be a footnote in the newspapers. "He was such a quiet man," his neighbors would say. "Kept to himself." None of them would know the truth of the matter, but that was alright. Some people—people who were sensitive to this sort of thing—might dream about it, perhaps. For the most part, Jack's death would pass unnoticed. It was just another cog in the mysterious workings of the universe; a part of God's unknowable plan.

He turned his eyes to the ceiling, as if checking for cracks in the plaster. "Where next?" he asked of no one. After a few moments, Michael nodded. He turned and started walking away, melting into the ether between the worlds. This was a faster way to travel than the earthly, mundane means. His next mark was a man who had killed his family, slaughtering them with savage joy. He was running around unchecked in the wilderness of Colorado, luring hapless campers to play parts in his murderous drama. A lost soul that needed to be removed from this world.

There was so *much* to do now, in these times. Things had been simpler back in the day. One warning was all it took, millenia ago. In this age of skeptics and unbelievers, a...*personal* touch was needed.

He sighed as his body became corporeal again in an abandoned camping site.

Further up the road was the cave in which the killer—*Franklin, his name is Franklin*—lived and slept. Michael began walking. *So much work to be done....*

down in the dirt

revealing all
your dirty
little secrets

Down in the Dirt
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- **Down in the Dirt** is published by **Scars Publications and Design**, 829 Brian Court, Gurnee, IL 60031-3155 USA; attn: Alexandria Rand. Contact us via snail-mail or e-mail (AlexRand@scars.tv) for subscription rates or prices for annual collection books.
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ISSN 1554-9623



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