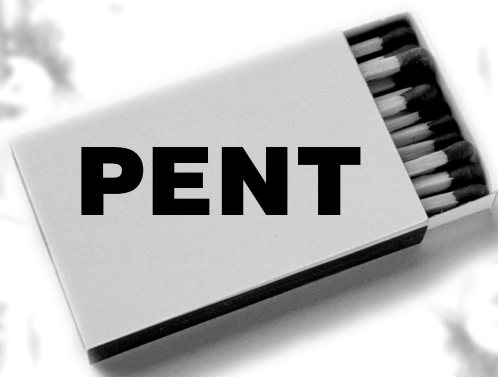
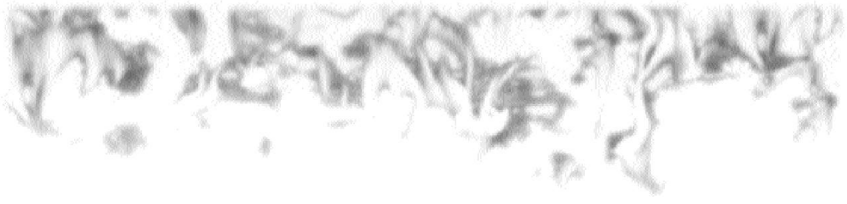


...from scars publications
**matchbook
insert**



Kevin Michael Vance



I see it watching me, watching it. It's everywhere. Eyes like lasers, like blades of light. It encircles me, encompassing, suffocating, blithely playing with the air, my air, like a heavy balloon. Denying me that which it takes for granted.

Inside me, somewhere behind my ribcage, curled sickly between lung and heart, it begins to stir.

I can feel it move.

If I'm careful, if I remain in control... it won't come out.

*

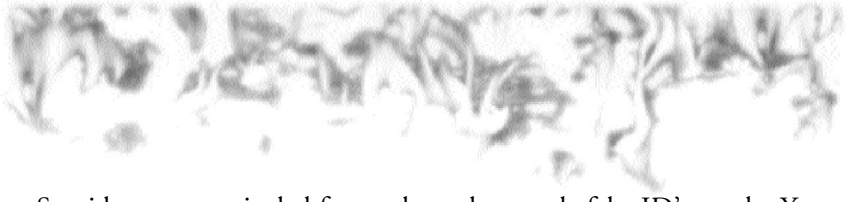
“What's your name?”

She didn't know it, but Devon Jesup hated her. He hated the very thought of her, the very aspect that a person like her could exist in the world.

She reeked of cheap perfume, bean dip, mucus, dirt, and rot, a thousand combinations of filth. Her nails and lips were the color of dark blood. The make-up caked about her eyes made her appear as if she'd been severely beaten. Her bleached blond hair was so violently pulled into a stiff pony-tail it looked as if at any moment her roots might snap, and what remained of her dead hair, would be viciously torn from her scalp. Something designed like a shower curtain thinly draped her wretched frame. A frame dripping with copious amounts of useless, superfluous skin. She waddled dumbly in front of Devon, both of her chins wiggling like a sick scrotum. What he first assumed was a rat but which, upon further furtive inspection, turned out to be a tiny dog, stuck its wet snout out of her huge black purse and sniffed the air. Its big, brown eyes jittering madly like a crack addict.

From somewhere far above, issuing from an integrated Bose speaker, the ripe song “Tequila” sprayed them like damp confetti.





Stupid teenagers giggled fatuously as they made fake ID's on the Xerox Empress Color Copier.

In full-service, a hundred miles away from the self-service area, the Automatic folder set up a counterpoint to the "Tequila" song. Shuck-put... Shuck-put... Shuck-put... Shuck-put...

Xerox and Cannon copiers filled the self-service area with a brazen, harsh, unnatural light, something like funeral pyres.

"Are you listening to me?"

For a few seconds, a few blissful moments of tired life, Devon had forgotten that she was there, and that this, this... travesty, was his world.

"What's your name? Huh? You listening to me?"

She shuffled forward, bridging the undeniable gap between them. Her stench brought forth sudden, stinging tears to the backs of his eyes. Comically, her eyebrows arched as she peered at the white letters embedded in his dark blue nametag pinned awkwardly to his dark blue apron.

"Mam?"

"Don't you Mam me."

"All right."

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"Well... what are you going to do?"

"What do you expect me to do?"

"More than you're doin' right now."

"I-- I can't--"

"You know something... you're a bigot."

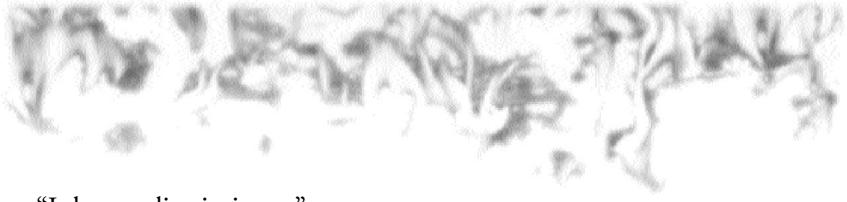
"What!"

"You discriminate against big women."

"Mam?"

"Tell me you don't."





“I do not discriminate.”

“And...”

“And... what?”

“And you don’t discriminate against big women.”

“I don’t discriminate against...”

“Come on, honey.”

Devon swallowed painfully.

“You can do it.”

“Against... big women.”

“See, that wasn’t hard. Was it?”

“Well, I guess not, but I don’t--”

“We’re special.” She said, interrupting Devon.

“I’m sure you are, but I don’t--”

“Ya’ know,” she said, leaning into Devon, readily sharing her sordid secret, “there are plenty men who like big women.”

“I’m sorry?”

“I mean, take me for instance. I ride a motorcycle. I’m a big woman. Big and proud! I got five boy friends right now. Five!”

“I don’t see how that relates to the chair.”

“How many girlfriends you got?”

“What?”

“You heard me. How many?”

“Mam, I’m sorry, but I don’t feel comfortable telling you how many girl friends I may, or may not have.”

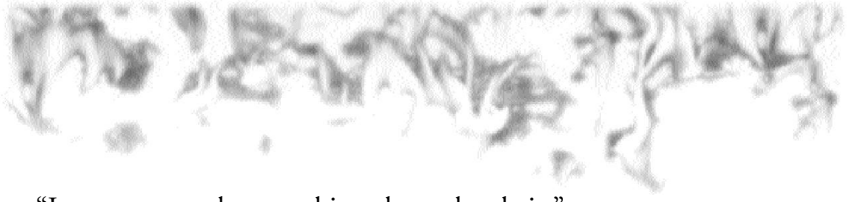
“Well I got me five! Not girl friends mind you. Nuh uh! The queen don’t play that game. But five boys... five fine young boys.”

“Fabulous. Is that everything?”

“Hell no that ain’t everything.”

“Well then help me out here, what do you want?”





“I want you to do something about the chair.”

“Mam, I told you, there’s nothing I can do about the chair.”

“But I’m a big woman. How in this great, green earth am I supposed to get my ass into that little, itty-bitty chair.”

“Those are the only chairs we have.”

“Order more!”

“I told you before, I don’t do the ordering. You’ll have to speak to my manager if you want a chair ordered and specifically designed for you.”

“Well how am I supposed to get into that thing?”

“I don’t know. I don’t make the chairs.”

“Well who does? Who makes the chairs? They should make some chairs for big women... big women who ride bikes.”

What Devon said next wasn’t difficult; more like letting a tablet or two of Alka-Seltzer dissolve in a glass of water, that easy really, all he had to do was drop them in... and watch them fizz.

“Even if your ass was the size of a five year old choir boy you still couldn’t fit in the chair because of your exceptionally large and foul mouth!”

He watched her dumbly stare at him. But it wasn’t because he had commented on the size of her ass. No, those words had never escaped the enclosure of his skull. She stared because she was too stupid to realize that he was powerless to help her.

“I... I’ll see what I can do for you.”

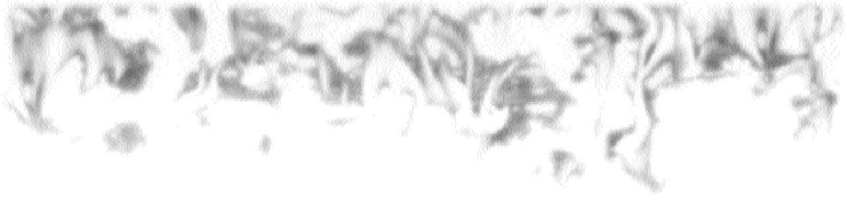
She immediately turned away from Devon, nearly falling onto her miniature dog in the process. Righting her wreck of a body, she thrust her painted face into her purse, and nearly devoured the helpless mutt in wet, red kisses.

“See... see, what did I tell you.” she said to the dog. “They’re all the same.”

He watched her leave.

“Devon? Devon... you okay?”





Laura was nice in an honest, sincere way Devon had no explanation for. She wore her lesbianism not like a badge or a uniform, not like the assembled majority of what might be typically deemed the gay lifestyle, but with a pride that only comes from knowing who you are and what you are doing.

But she didn't know much about Devon.

He grinned sheepishly at her, for she was his only friend and co-worker.

*

Deep inside a sharp pain makes me shudder. I can feel it growing bolder. It's scratching, tentative tears upon the meat of my lungs, just simple probes, finding the weakest parts, the widest gaps... the way out.

It's watching me now.

*

He tried not to think about it, about all the societal and ethical and moral implications. Horrific really, when he thought about what it means and what it represents. It's the simplicity and the mindlessness of the action that was so odious to Devon. But that's what it's come down to. That's what it means.

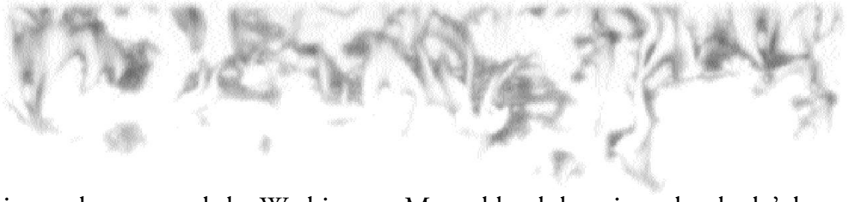
Devon thought to himself, "They can all go to hell".

He tried to laugh. Devon always tried to laugh. When in essence he really wanted to break down, fall to his knees, weep horribly or worse...

It was just like this when the gray-haired, mid-forties man allowed the swinging glass door to shoot forcefully back and nearly slap Devon full in the face.

It wasn't as if Devon was expecting the man to hold the door open for





him as they entered the Washington Mutual bank location; that hadn't been necessary. But at the very least the man, who smelled of Cumin and Cigarettes and whose impressionable son followed him obediently, could have made sure that it didn't hit Devon in the face. A minute earlier Devon had watched them step out of one of those gigantic, tank-like SUV's. He had seen the man tear the small toe-headed boy from a plastic, child safety seat and drag him into the bank.

Devon hadn't been following them. He had simply stepped behind them, the next in line.

And the boy had seen Devon, seen his look of sick loathing, as his inept father let the glass door swing back.

*

Not long now.

I can hear it. Hear it calling to me. Its voice is like razors, like drills, like pain.

*

"Why won't it work?"

"I'm not sure."

"Can't you make it work?"

"I don't think so."

"Why not?"

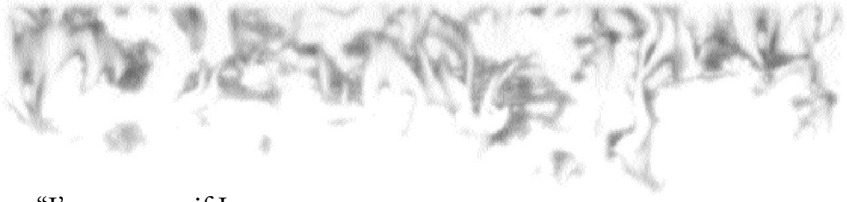
"It appears to be an internal problem."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that this problem is inside the copier."

"So... just make it work."





“I’m not sure if I can.

“Why?”

“I’ll probably have to call a technician.”

“All I want is for you to make it work.”

“I don’t think I can.”

“I came in two weeks ago.”

Devon sighed heavily.

“It was working fine then.”

“Well, a lot can happen in two weeks. These machines get run pretty hard.”

“Two weeks ago it was making beautiful copies.”

“Sorry.”

“Two weeks ago it was working perfectly.”

“Well, it’s not working now.”

“What am I gonna do?”

“Sir, we have seven other machines that you can use.”

“But none of them are as good as this one.”

“Sir, all our copiers are the same make and model.”

“But this one’s newest.”

“Actually, they’ve all been here the same amount of time.”

“But this one’s better.”

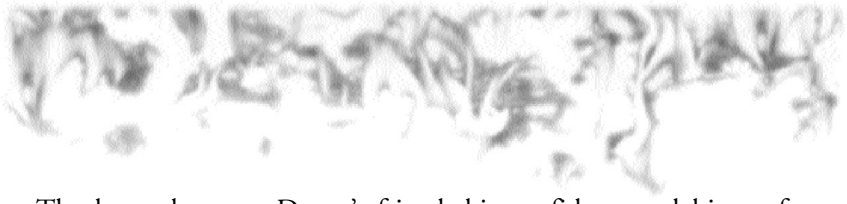
Devon ignored him.

“This one makes the best copies.” The man thrust a blue Bic pen in between his rubbery lips and proceeded to vigorously suck.

“What... am... I... going... to... do...” he said in between lascivious sucks, “without... this... one...?”

*





The heavy bag was Devon's friend, his confidant, and his confessor. Upon its thick black skin he rained punch after punch, kick after kick, elbow after knuckles, knees after feet. It didn't talk back. It didn't degrade or patronize. It didn't cajole, condescend, or grimace. It didn't have eyes to glare at him, or a nose from which it might look down, or a mouth to chastise, or ears with which it might ignore, or fingers to poke and prod. It was innocent, innocent of everything except for his incessant bludgeoning.

He felt the sweat pour over his taunted skin. He could feel blood, surging through his body, a torrent, a flood, a waterfall. His strength lifted him off the ground, bore him upon the wind like pollen, like a mischievous angel or a misunderstood demon. Devon's eyes saw nothing but the bag and his ears heard nothing but the solid THWACK! of thunderous impacts.

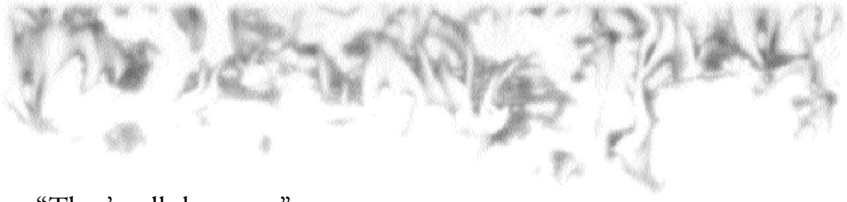
Slowly Devon's strength ebbed. He crouched below the bag, gasping for air. Sudden tears loomed at the corners of his eyes.

Devon never prayed. He had no taste for it. Like broccoli to a five-year old child was the sting of suppliant lips. The idea that there was some omniscient, omnipotent overlord watching him, taking notes, laughing, made him ill. The thought that all those surface dwellers were a divine creation, or even worse, made in a divine image, was to Devon vile and repugnant in the extreme. These things could not be from any benign, all forgiving God. No, the only possible, rational explanation could be that they all came from mud, crawling on hands and knees, dripping with filth. And to mud they shall all return.

But in a manner of speaking, when Devon worked on the heavy bag he was truly praying, worshipping the only religion he knew to exist, the only cause worth fighting for.

Steadily, he returned to his feet, sucked back the tears, and confronted the bag. He was still tired, but images flashed within his brain with staccato, strobe light punctuation.





“They’re all the same.”

He punched the bag and watched it give with a sigh of leather and sand.

“What’s your name?”

Devon launched a swift, forceful sidekick into the black bags mid-section.

“Make it work.”

The kicks and the punches came in a flurry.

*

It takes residence in my groin. Swimming with a shark’s fervor over and under my intestines. It makes me nauseous. It makes me feel dizzy.

It affects me.

*

“Fifty cents!”

“Yes, Mam. Fifty cents.”

“For each print?”

“Yes for each.”

“For each black and white print?”

“Yes.”

“Not color?”

“No, not color.”

“Black and white?”

“Yes. Color’s more.”

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph... that’s expensive!”

“Yes.”

“Why’s it so expensive?”





“I don’t know.”

“But don’t you think that’s expensive?”

“I guess so.”

“I mean, for the love of Christ... it’s black and white prints.”

Devon sighed deeply.

“Those are our prices.”

“Jesus... why’s it so expensive?”

“Mam, I don’t make the prices.”

“But Lord...”

“You know, you don’t have to do this.”

“Lord all mighty.”

“You can rent a computer somewhere else... if you want.”

“I know that.”

Devon sighed deeply.

“Don’t you think I know that?”

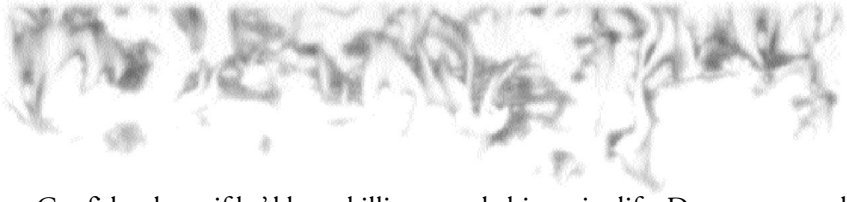
“Sure.”

“It’s just... I’m doing this as a favor to a friend. She recently lost her dog; the dog’s name is Zephyr. Cute little Losa ‘opsa, with a pert nose, and big brown eyes. So I told her I’d make her fliers. Gloria doesn’t know anything about computers. She pumps gas for Texaco. Her family is from down south... kind of white trash really. I work in an office for Tri-Met. Hate the job, though. There are so many... minorities I’ve got to deal with. I mean, I’m not one to put on airs. But those people-,” she leaned in conspiratorially towards Devon and whispered like they were lovers, “--Lord bless and keep them, those people are ‘different’. Know what I mean? I’m just down here on my lunch hour.”

Devon stared at her. She stared at Devon, then turned her attention to the flickering monitor of the PC in front of her.

“I had no idea... it would be so expensive.”





Confidently, as if he'd been killing people his entire life, Devon wrapped his arms around her neck, one in front of her throat the other at the base of her skull. He gripped his forearms tightly, and forced the blade of his right upper wrist, the sharpest part, into the side of her neck, just as he'd been taught in Jujitsu class. She struggled, her fingers clawing at his arms, but her limited strength was no match for his power. In ten seconds he had successfully stopped the blood from reaching her brain and she had passed out. As they fell to the ground, spooning like two intimate partners, he glanced at his digital watch. In less than a minute she would suffer brain death.

"Can't you do anything about the price?" she asked him.

He glanced at her vacantly.

"The price... can you cut me a deal?"

Devon shook his head, clearing the fog, destroying the image.

She took this negatively.

"Lord have mercy..." Her tongue thrust rudely against the side of her mouth and she grimaced. "Merciful Lord."

*

I was happy to finally let it out.

*

It had been a whole half-hour, plenty of time for Devon to justify his increasing annoyance and the rage that was building like a small gas fire in the pit of his bowels, right at the point where it had taken up residency.

However, he hadn't remembered what had first caused him to follow the car. It was as if he had awakened from a nightmare, and there it was, skidding beautifully before him, growling like a predator.





The boy drove a souped-up Honda Civic, a sleek, fluidic marvel of engineering: all glistening black steel, sinuous, sharp fins, and glittering chrome. The muffler sounded like a Harley Davidson motorcycle, rough and belliscose. The boy had neon lights, which were glowing a deep purple, set beneath the driver and passenger car doors. It gave the car a futuristic appearance as if the thin wheels were just for show and it actually levitated above the pavement, skimming silently and seamlessly over the very surface of the earth. Two trumped up teenage girls sat in the front seat playing silly hand games with each other.

The night had been cool and quiet. A portent of things to come, winters unwashed, summers not fed, springs better left alone. The lights from the city denied any view of the stars, and the moon was a weak cut out, a tenuous copy of what a moon should be, or rather, what Devon remembered the moon to be. The Prime Movers song, "Strong as I am", played on his car stereo. He let its rhythms and its melody bathe him in melancholy warmth. The air smelled of yeast and barley.

Devon's own vehicle was a piece-of-shit Mitsubishi, Mirage. A travesty in comparison to the racer he surreptitiously followed. Its clutch stuck continuously, the gears ground like early morning coffee beans, and he was emasculated, owing to the fact that his car, a thing that he had surnamed "the Nerf-mobile", had no horn. But that night Devon's shit-car was a snow-white rocket, guiding him towards forces unknown and things, as of yet, unseen.

Devon watched the boy closely as they drove. He couldn't have been more than twenty-one at the most.

"Old enough to know better," Devon thought to himself.

In the half-hour it took Devon to come to a strange, inexplicable decision, he had seen the boy make one illegal left turn after another. Five times the boy blew through red lights, and eight different times Devon witnessed





him ignore stop signs completely. The boy flew through residential areas without a care in the world, heedless of his speed and recklessness. The three of them were passing something between them that looked like a bottle of some sort or another. The girls appeared to be popping some kind of pill. Devon assumed they weren't vitamins.

The three of them, giddy in their youth, couldn't have been more unaware of Devon's presence.

The boy swung carelessly into a plaid pantry, nearly toppling two spiked-up, skater punks exiting the compact parking lot. The car came to a jittery and sudden stop, skewed in a way so that it took up two parking spaces. The Honda coughed once, twice, then died completely. One of the girls let out a shrill giggle. The bleach blond boy, red Oakland A's baseball cap tilted at an incongruous angle, baggy Nike athletic pants strategically pulled down to his knees, opened his door and leapt out of the vehicle.

Devon pulled in beside them.

He watched the boy make some indecipherable gesticulation towards the girls. This elicited raucous boo's and hisses from their side of the car. And then he proceeded to walk away, heading west down Belmont.

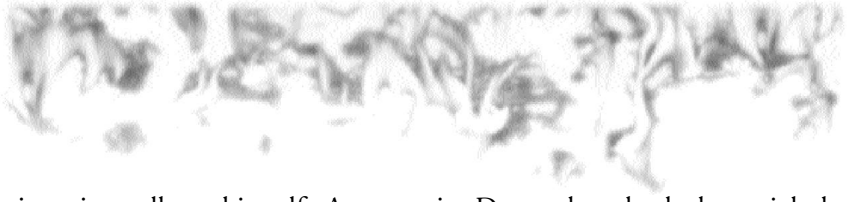
Devon glanced over at the girls. One of them reached across the other and cranked up the volume on the stereo. Devon recognized Limp Bizkit. They both began to move and groove to the turgid rhythm of, "break stuff". One sucked upon a lollipop, while the other contentedly ruminated a large wad of bright purple bubble gum.

Peering into his rear view mirror, Devon saw the boy move past the corner of a tan colored apartment building and disappear.

Without really knowing how or why, Devon found that he had exited his own vehicle and was following the boy down Belmont.

Devon's black combat boots sounded sonorous to his ears as he slinked from shadow to shadow. But the boy ahead of him appeared to be talking,





quite animatedly, to himself. At one point Devon thought the boy might be doing an impromptu rap.

It was midnight, poetically perfect. Belmont was unusually quiet. Random Tri-met busses begrudgingly shared the one way road with a surprisingly small amount of cars and SUV's. Being that it was mainly a residential area the majority of the homes were dark and shuttered. Streetlights flickered in the gloom.

"What..." Devon's voice whispered in his mind. "What... the hell am I doing?"

On twenty-fifth and Belmont the boy took a sharp right, directly in front of an edgy video store named Carla's and a Cap'n Suds laundry facility. The boy walked a few feet up the slight hill took a second sudden right, and jogged, tugging on his loosed pants, through a small apartment parking lot.

Devon stopped at the bottom of the hill. The boy had once again vanished, this time up a short flight of brown, metal stairs.

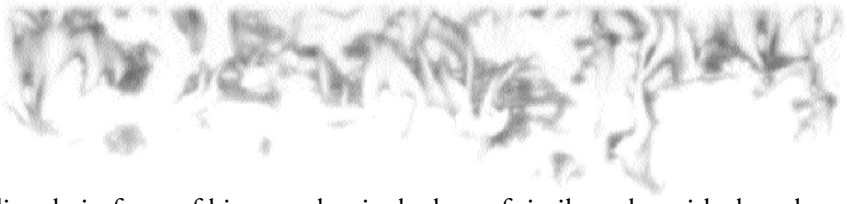
Devon gazed up at the moon. A sudden wind tugged at his short hair and shirt collar. It brought with it the smell of baking bread. To his left a dog barked in the distance. To his right a light inside a small curbside apartment flicked on and then off. In front of him lay a passed out Indian mumbling incoherently. And behind his back, Devon could still hear the shrieking of the two girls in the Honda.

Slowly, as if he wasn't accustomed to its weight, Devon grinned.

Without a sound, Devon slipped across the parking lot, and shot up the staircase.

He stopped just short of the landing, crouching low and feral, and peered out across a thin hallway. Three brick-colored doors, with numbers and peep holes on the outside, interspersed by approximately five feet of cream-colored wall space, lined the right wall. To Devon's immediate left was a metal grating oddly designed to resemble tropical plants. Twenty feet





directly in front of him stood a single door of similar color with the others. At the front of this was nailed the number ten in faded, golden numerals. Set above this door was a wan, electric light, which flickered weakly.

The door opened, and the boy came out.

Devon stepped silently onto the landing.

The boy was smoking a slender, white cigarette.

Devon began to make his way down the hallway.

Adjusting his hat, the boy turned his back on Devon, completely oblivious of his presence, and rifled through a large key ring, which was attached to his voluminous pants by a skull encrusted, silver chain.

Devon could not remove the grin from his face. And at that point, he hadn't wanted to. He came up to the boy, and stopped a foot away from him.

The boy locked the door to room ten, and turned around.

"Shit! Fuck!" shrieked the boy as he finally saw Devon. "What... what the holy fuck!"

Devon grinned at the boy. He could see that his first guess might have been off by a few years, the boy could be as young as eighteen.

"Wha' you wan'?"

Devon felt it move.

"Yo! I aksed you a question, cracker. Wha' you think you doin' sneakin' up on me?"

Devon grinned.

"You know who I am? Grinnin' freak..." The boy murmured these last words, his eyes grimly taking in the sight of Devon.

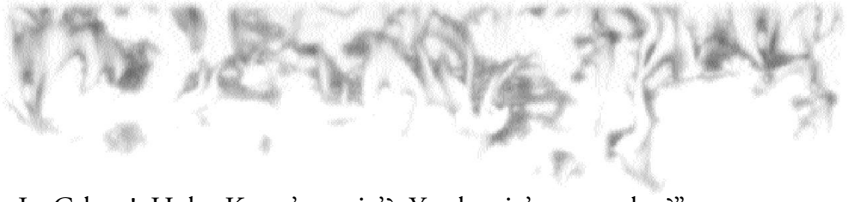
"No."

"Well you better know, before I fuck you up, boy!"

Devon grinned.

"Yo! Wha' is this? Huh?" The boy hitched himself up in front of Devon, almost as if he was adjusting imaginary armor. "You crazy, or some'in'? Loco





in La Cabela! Huh. Know'm sayin'? You hearin' me, cracker?"

"What's your name?" Devon asked him quietly.

"Wha'?"

"I said, what is your name?"

The boy couldn't tell; his fear was too strong, but Devon had sidled a few inches closer, his movements as imperceptible as the rotation of the planet.

"Wha' you wanna know my name fo'? Are you high, or some'in?" The boy pranced like a silly, contrived cartoon.

Devon shrugged, and inched closer. "Not high. Just curious."

"Well, give it up! Why you here? Answer me before I fuck's you up!"

"I just thought it might be nice."

"Fuck! Wha' are you talkin' about?"

"Your name."

Sweat had begun to slip past the boy's red baseball cap. "Wha' about my name."

"Thought it might be nice, knowing your name." Devon's movements were as subtle as serpents.

"How is knowin' my name... goin' ta be nice? Man, you trippin'!" The boy pulled the cigarette from his lips and held it out in front of him like a knife.

"Well," Devon said, all the while moving closer. "You're my first. It would be nice to know the name of my first."

"First wha', ass hole? Fuckin' cracker!"

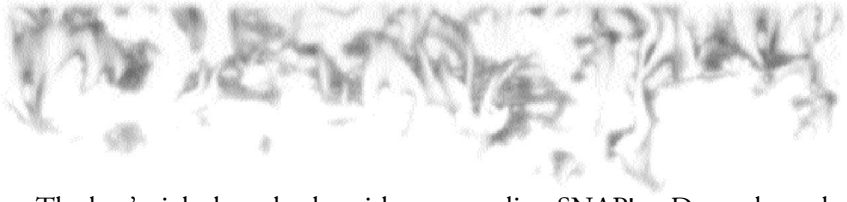
"Well... honestly?" Devon grinned. "The first person I ever killed."

In a fast second the boy's eyes had sobered and swelled inside their sockets.

Devon was on him before the boy even had time to gasp.

It was easier than Devon had first assumed. There were no emotions, at least back then. Just a shivering, orgasmic sense of release, of finally letting loose of that thing which had been holding him back, holding him down, holding him hostage.





The boy's right knee broke with a resounding SNAP! as Devon brought the flat of his left foot solidly against it's side. With a barely audible scream, the boy fell to his right side.

Devon remained in the moment. Focused as he had always been while on the punching bag, centered, his mind concentrated on the feeling that this had been inevitable, irrevocable, preordained.

A white tooth clattered quietly to the concrete floor of the hallway, like a fumbled Altoid. Red blood splattered the wall, and spilled in copious pitchers from the boy's nose and mouth, as it connected solidly with Devon's fist.

Music filled Devon's ears, echoing throughout his brain. The rhythm of Poledouris and Nine-Inch Nails coupled like ugly pornography, like filthy deeds, giving fuel to his heart, giving meat to his mind.

In a sick explosion the boy's right eye burst behind the hammer of Devon's left elbow. Remnants of his shattered cornea and torn iris trickled from his socket like colored egg whites.

The boy let loose a wordless scream, racked with pain and horror.

Devon rose from where he had been crouched above the boy pummeling him and began to crush his skull into the concrete with his boots.

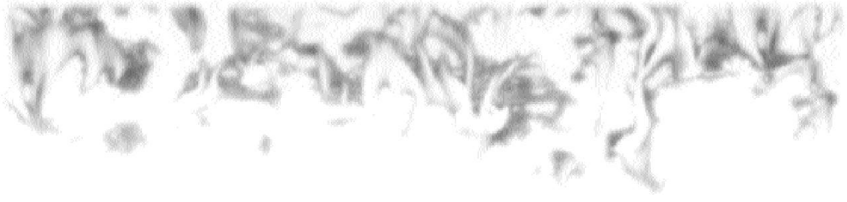
He didn't see the door to room 9 open suddenly and then just as suddenly close. He didn't hear the muted murmurs from room 7, one whole story below them. He didn't hear the girl's laughter filter from room 5, or the boys languid, mindless, gurgles.

All that Devon heard was music, sweet, pounding, thundering, rage-filled music; coursing through his body as much as his mind, spiraling like whiskey-spiked blood, shooting like illegal fireworks, energizing him with malevolent intent and violent design.

When he stepped back from the body- for it could no longer be described as a boy- gasping for air; Devon was coated in a bright spatter of red.

Behind the sticky red mask, which painted his face, Devon grinned.





*

I am it. And it... it is me.

We are together in the world. Two made one. In dying I was reborn. And in giving it birth, I let myself perish.

It was easy.

I remember now, the two girls, one sucking on a lollipop the other blowing, bright purple bubbles. They stared at me as I passed them. As I calmly removed the keys from my pants pocket and opened the “Nerf-mobile’s” driver side door.

They had just as much trouble believing it as I did, maybe more so. But the evidence was there. Hanging off my shirt, and stuck to my knuckles like strawberry syrup.

I smelled it. It smelled like rust. I tasted it, licking it off my knuckles. It tasted like steak, seasoned and rare.

I grinned easily.

However, I don’t think the girls liked it. I don’t think they had the capacity to appreciate what had happened. The change I had undergone. My metamorphose, if you will.

Maybe they screamed because I looked the way that I looked. Maybe they screamed because the drugs, those little pills I had seen them popping, were just at that moment kicking in. Then again... maybe they screamed because on top of my head I wore a red Oakland A’s baseball cap.

What did it matter really? They screamed all the same.

Thinking about it never fails to bring a smile to my face.



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