

Contagious Blinking

by Augend Crusoe

The door chirps and today's strangest customer so far crosses the threshold, looking somewhat insecure. But then, most bums do when they enter a place where they clearly don't belong.

His few paying customers, mainly truckers with short, heavy hands, turn their heads around to see the newcomer but soon they return their gazes on the more interesting flies on the wall. Avoid eye contact.

Jimmy himself hesitates. Should he preempt any attempt by the bum, or not acknowledge his presence at all, as if he didn't even exist? He pulls on his wispy goatee and shifts his weight a few times from one foot to the other. That doesn't help. It rarely does, to be honest. Not that Jimmy has to do it often: he never has much trouble in his quiet café. He is tall and reasonably well built for his twenty something years, and knows how to handle himself to look even bigger. He hates his curly red hair though, which makes him look like a kid, but there's nothing he can do about it. He hates it, cause it makes women call him cute. Not very manly, cute, is it? Just like his last name, Poepjes.

The bum on the other hand is wearing what used to be a grey suit, now more of a spot-the-original-color puzzle game than a real piece of clothing. A three-day stubble shades his otherwise unimpressive features. His hair is a silent witness of what must have been a rough day, not two single hairs point in the same direction. Although he can't really smell it, Johnny knows he stinks. There's something weird about him, but he just can't quite figure out what. Something to do with his eyes.

The bum moves forward. He limps slightly, and makes strange noises. A wet sock slapping against the tiled floor. He's missing his

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right shoe, but somehow manages to walk straight, and heads for the restroom.

"Sir." All the weight-shifting stopped, Jimmy is putting on his best show as he leans forward, his arms wide spread and knuckles squarely on the counter. "Sir, bathrooms are for customers only."

"I'm just using the phone." he replies, without breaking stride. Jimmy goes back to weight-shifting, not sure how to handle this. What harm can he do if he's just using the phone? But he's upsetting the other customers with his stinky clothes and messy hair. He drills through the back of the bum's skull with his eyes, trying to read his mind. Are you a trouble maker, buddy?

One of the truckers stands up and Jimmy's attention is temporarily drawn from the telephone to the counter. A quick expert look evaluates the tip, enough for a nod to the man leaving.

"Goddammit!" The bum slams down the phone. Collecting the cash with his right hand, Jimmy moves swiftly behind the counter and reaches the bum as he starts dialing again. He knew this guy was trouble.

"Sir, I need you to leave now." The bum is within arm's reach, he fights the urge to grab him by the remainders of his suit and throw him straight out through the window. The smell is now all too noticeable.

"I'm not a bum," he says, in a slightly shivering voice. "My car broke down and I don't have any change. I'm trying to call my wife. It's been a bad day."

I bet it was, and it's not over yet. Jimmy is getting irritated, but he doesn't show it. "There's a gas station a block down the street. Try there." he says, in his flattest voice possible.

"Come on, man. It's cold. I lost a shoe, for chrissake." He points down to his wet sock, but Jimmy doesn't buy it. He's seen his kind before. He utters an equally flat "I'm sorry." that manages to convey all his lack of compassion.

"Fuck you. I need to make this call." The bum picks up the phone and starts dialing. There's no more weight-shifting this time, Jimmy's had it. He steps forward, and on a second thought, rather than grabbing the sleazy suit, he shoves the bum into the wall. There's nothing flat about his push, and he feels a weird tingling sensation right behind his own eyes as he touches the bum. The guy drops the phone, and hits the wall hard. He turns around, and, Jimmy knows it, he's gonna throw a punch. I'm ready for you, buddy.

Jimmy's never seen such black, empty eyes. He's paralyzed. He knows the punch is coming, yet he can't move, he can't make a sound. He can't even blink. He's staring into the bum's eyes, and everything turns to slow motion. And those eyes ... they grow wider and wider, and black as the blackest night when your eyes are squeezed so hard they hurt. And then some. His own eyes feel like empty wells. And then, those eyes, those wide and black eyes ... they blink.

To say that Jimmy is utterly confused would be a crass understatement. He is bewildered. If before he couldn't move, now he can't even think anymore. The bum is gone. Gone! Instead of seeing stars, Jimmy stares at the empty wall. His brain screams and twists, and then screams some more. It's maybe a dream? But no, he can still smell the bum. Which means he's breathing. He can move again. He can talk. He can blink and --

