

Under My Skin

by Charles Huschle

It's crazy, but all I could think about was my bellybutton (was there any lint in it?) when I met Jezebel at the Lonely Code bar on 8th. I drink alone, that's the way I like it, and I'm never in a bar to pick up people, neither men nor women, and I enjoy occasional repartee with the bartender, male or female, and the waitress, who is always offering me gifts of olives and nuts and the night's special, and these people are anything but insufferable: I think they dig my dumbness: the clipped concise witticisms I exchange, and my laconic way. I kind of bet they think I was once a cowboy, or a Navy SEAL; a veteran at the very least, of a foreign war. But no one's nosy enough to ask me where I've been nor what I do nor why I'm here: that's part of our code. It holds us apart and sometimes I like it, and sometimes I don't, but it serves us.

And here was Jezebel and she wasn't listening. "This entire empty bar, 'course I'm going to sit with you," she says. "What do you think, cowboy? Order me a boilermaker?" I must have given her some sort of look, because right away then her eyebrows blow skyward and she's examining her mirrored self behind the bar, ducking her head left and right, pursing her lips: she flips a lock of that bright red hair over her right green eye and grins. "No bullshit here," she declares: and pulls a 20 from her purse, lays it on the bar, whistles for her drink.

Story of my life: I was ready for a nightcap and she was just beginning her night. I wondered whether she's eaten dinner; I worry I'm unwashed and have lint in my navel or between my toes. I imagine pouring olive oil for her, and she dipping her fingers in it and licking them off. She's wearing a bracelet made of thorns and pinpricks of blood drip on the glass bar. When her drink comes, she toasts me, and I get this comfortable feeling. Maybe we'll talk all night; maybe not. I like the blood on her wrists and her red hair. Some would have called her brassy, but not me.

