

# Coffee-Stained Fangs

## (excerpt)

by Chris Miller

*(excerpt from the novella "Coffee-Stained Fangs")*

My species identity crisis does not entail changing into a werewolf or some other mythic beast in any cool way: it's nowhere near as glamorous as Hollywood's idiotic portrayal of lycanthropy. This is just pathetic, and bound to end in a fizzle, rather than a big-bang dramatic ending in the middle of a busy intersection with terrified women donned in furs and jewels, men in fedoras and oversized suits firing away at me with their zip guns, laying waste to this misunderstood beast. No, it won't end like that.

This story will conclude with loneliness and the yawn of unresolved and deeply buried angst to haunt me for my remaining years.

And, unlike the movies, it's a sure thing that I won't get the girl, or any girl. I won't even get the bitch (let me clarify that I am using the accepted description of female dog and not human, though I do know some real bitches all around, so please disclaim that previous disclaimer).

I'm not dog-like in any sexy manner, like a Wolf Man who kills livestock and lurks in the shadows on the outer fringes of society, mouth bloodied at the tips, and waking up as a fully functioning human naked in some field. Instead, I lurk among rows of cubicles during acceptable business hours, illuminated by pasty fluorescent lights, studying wiper blade cutaways, preparing sales presentations for buying groups from large retail chains, meetings that include endless rows of starched oxfords, tailored dress pants and well-shone shoes.

The hum of the lights, computers and copiers fill the air and envelop us all like an auditory coffin in this acceptable lair of politically correct evil. The loud typing of keyboards are taps from

the fingernails of drones, oblivious to the racket they're making; these are the nails to this coffin. I was, until recently, a corporate man in every dreary regard, buttoned up in every way, but that buttoned-up shirt has filled with coarse fur, a thicket so dense there's nary a nipple in sight, which is probably preferable.

And I'm half-assed even as a dog, more physically incomplete than when I was a fully functional human. In every single way my dog-ness is deficient — from the dull fangs and hairy back, to a craving for items that emit horrendous smells, the more rancid, the more enticing. In fact, my mouth is at the moment filled with the taste of the spoiled chicken bone I found in the street and began to gnaw before I even realized what I was doing. Hell, I would even take the Teen Wolf-style werewolf at this point, shooting hoops like a champ and surfing on the tops of vans driven by a cool and popular friend named Styles. Not this. No Styles for me. But I do have Admiral.

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As homesick as I am, I couldn't even return home if I wanted; I'm a fugitive, fervently pursued by the authorities. I sit in silence in my car, still idling, by the way, watching the railroad tracks, paranoid as the tips of my teeth grind against each other: crrck, crrck. The eyeless, toothless brick building behind me gapes with awe at what it's become, at all who flagrantly disregard it. To add to this ridiculous cliché, a lake laps the shore to my right. My dilapidated car wheezes like an asthmatic in the winter chill. This entire neighborhood has been forgotten by anyone with any sort of social or financial influence. There's a static crackle on the radio: some newscaster is discussing how this January day is unseasonably warm in the Southern states; and to counteract any happy thoughts this unseasonable warmth may elicit, the radio newsman quickly mentions the 50 people killed by tornadoes yesterday.

The twisters ripped through trailer parks like mad kids kicking over anthills, the random mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, flicked from the earth as if they were unsuspecting ants. But these were people who died before I realized they even existed, so, to me, they never did.

My teeth are continuously grinding and I can't stop: upper and lower sharp little triangles rubbing together like one of those tribal medicine bowls, I can't remember what they're called at the moment — hippies use them, that I do know. And I would most definitely bite a hippie right now, on sheer principle, if not anything else.

A warrant has been issued for my capture, not by the local police, but by animal control. However, even with its lack of pillows, threat of violence, and horribly monotonous card games, county jail would be a step up from the pound. I welcome jail, even embrace it, but they won't have me. What should have been an assault in the human judicial system was instead classified as a dog bite, therefore I'm subject to being "put down," as they say in the back rooms of these murder chambers they call the county pound. I know from firsthand experience that the county pound is a fate much worse than jail. I'm only a week out of the animal joint, in fact, and I'm still plagued by the bloodcurdling bays of animal loneliness in my sleep, and I can still smell the combination of shit, peppermint and despair. I still have that dry pasty taste in my mouth from the gruel they try to pass off as food, a lack of flavor that should be a criminal offense, and a taste I can only imagine resembles rotten socks. I'm sure Admiral could better define the taste if he could speak. If I could just lean over and ask him, maybe he'd tell me. It's incredibly frustrating to know that while I'm becoming a dog, I still can't communicate with them. The only reactions I've gotten so far are stifled hostility and rear-end sniffs from a dog that, to this point, had been a pet and now he's my only link to the outside world.

Also at the pound, the stakes are much higher when one is involved in an inmate scuffle; at least humans know when to stop, when the weak open hand is raised, a bloodied white flag. Fighting dogs (and they're in abundance at the pound) will continue shredding a body until it is well beyond dead, so blind to the notion that they're ending another life they will not unclamp their vise-like jaws at any cost. This scares me as I slip into the same mindset somehow, one that's probably just as capable as that sort of primal rage. I've heard stories of pit bulls whose heads had to be sawed off

in order to unlock their firm grasp from some unlucky sucker's arm. In much the same way humans are slaves to self-fulfillment and conspicuous consumption, dogs are slaves to raw instinct, traits I have begun to see in myself. The unnamed red hostility that fills my eyes. The Urge.

Aside from the underpinnings of disgust I harbor for people, I also feel a crippling sense of fear. Not of them, but of what I may do to them. I knew it was only a matter of time before someone got seriously hurt, not just emotionally, but in a shaking-hands-with-three-fingers, the-local-news-has-just-aired-a-feelgood-special-about-how-I've-overcome-my-disfigurement sort of injury. An epic injury that becomes your identity. Like Johnny Nubs for Hands.

Knowing that I'm capable of such savagery, while also knowing that I can do absolutely nothing to quell the blinding rage that cowers somewhere inside, can leave any sane person searching for the nearest exhaust pipe to suckle. At this point I'll admit this is a bleak assessment of a story with no chance of a happy ending. I'm just semi-relieved Act Three has yet to occur, that I may get an intermission if God is at all kind. We still sit quietly in Act Two, Admiral and I, by the river, in the abandoned parking lot, car idling patiently, water lapping the shore.

I'd give anything right now to go to a moderately priced restaurant and have a civilized meal with any person, even my ex-girlfriend. But I have to face the fact that my new ilk eats small animals and pisses on anything resembling a ninety-degree angle.

The humans I would consider friends have dwindled to negative numbers, and even the acquaintance group is growing smaller by the hour.

