

WILD

by Eric Boyd

Most days you just couldn't win, and the constant nag from the fact that it really was all a game was your only comfort.

I was at the unemployment office again. The gal at the counter'd seen me enough to know when the printer was out of ink so she could walk away. Very perceptive, she was.

Another girl came up behind the glass. "Name?" she asked.

"Fredrick Anderson," I said defeatedly. I knew how this would play out, so why even bother sounding hopeful?

"Your account number?"

I gave it.

"Your Social Security card?"

I opened up my wallet, took the card out and laid everything on the counter. They usually ask for an ID at some point so I just kept it all there. She eyed the SS card quickly went back to looking at her screen.

"Okayyyy. Let. Me. Seeee..." she said. Ever notice how they manage that while they're looking for something? To both shorten and extend the words they speak? The first and last words in a sentence are always longer. They sound like broken tape players half the time, but it was like life: you were getting ready, getting born, for a while, and then later on, at the end, you died for what felt like eternity. Your actual life was abbreviated in between.

There was a water fountain to my left. I got a drink and came back. To nothing. What I mean is, the counter was empty. My wallet, the SS card. All of it. Luckily there was no money in there; if there had been I wouldn't be at the unemployment office anyhow.

"Buddy," I said to a sleepy guard at the door.

"Eh?"

"You see where my shit went?"

"Bathroom's over there," he yawned, pointing lazily in what was the wrong direction anyway.

"Great. Thank you, sir," I said.

Something finally came up on the computer. "Allright then Mr. Anderson. Nope. Sorry. No luck today; your checks still haven't processed. Sorrry." And she turned away. I watched her turn the corner. I stayed there. She came back less than ten seconds later, saw me, then snapped her finger like she'd forgotten more nothing to do back behind the corner.

"You done?" the security guard asked. Now he was awake.

I left.

I'd come back tomorrow, I thought. What the fuck else was there to do? Work had closed. Everything was ready to close. Except me. I was wide open, waiting for something to happen when nothing ever would. Money, a break, a choice. Anything. How had I gotten a job anyway? I know why, because the manager was a felon, too. He didn't give a shit. Probably why the place closed. I'd never get unemployment pay, either. They knew something I didn't. Everyone seemed to. It'd probably all get garnished for unpaid court costs or my defaulted school loans, anyway. It's hard to pay all those bills in jail, but nobody cares. You rot for a while, then you get out and everyone expects you to go back to it like normal. Even my mother didn't understand why I couldn't get people to call me back. It was all a game.

On my way out of the office, I saw a hobo getting booted from a guy across the street at an old, unused parking garage. Two other guys stood over the hobo, watching. My bus stopped over there, so I had to do it.

"Hey!" I shouted as I crossed the street. "What's the problem?"

"This," he said with a kick, "fucker... He stole my *Wild I*."

"Yeah," one of them said.

"That's right," the third nodded.

"Well leave him the hell alone. He's beat. You won. Good job."

"What's it to you, fucker?" the first guy said, turning toward me.

I looked at the hobo behind him. Pitiful. He coughed up some snotty blood. Then I saw it. There, in his hand: my fucking wallet. The social security card was sticking out for christ's sake. I waved

aside the stomper and grabbed my stuff. "Not nothing to me. Go ahead."

I walked away and they moved over him like a tide.

Waiting for the bus, I figured I'd at least done the hobo one small favor. If he'd have stolen my identity he'd have had parole, probation, and Goodwill charity workers up his ass for the next few years. He was better off. It was all just a game, I reminded myself. Some people play better than others, but we're all losing.

