

Face to Face

by Mathew Paust

Jasper Mundaigh's face froze, so still I thought for an instant he had died of shock. The effect was doubly strange, for along with his fixed expression the authority of its perpetual fuck-you nuance was gone. The face had become a chilling death mask. An unpleasant odor made itself known as if to affirm this impression. The stasis seemed to last longer than I know it must have, as if time itself had halted between pulses in my wrist where it rested on the edge of Mundaigh's kitchen table. I became aware of the next heartbeat when I saw his eyes roll toward me from the photo in his hand and heard one word come up from his throat, muffled by the depth of its formation. I understood the sound, though, as I'd half expected it when handing him the photo: "Woody."

"Did you ever meet him, Jay?"

He turned his attention back to the photo, staring at it for a long moment before dropping it and brushing it away with the back of his hand. Animation had begun returning to his face as he nodded slowly. "Once. At the beginning." He looked up at me. The fuck-you smirk was back.

"His voice was the strangest part, Mr. Stone. High-pitched and soft. Gentle, like a mother's. He seemed fragile, as if he were the victim, not me. He pleaded with me to tell him where Darla had gone. Begged me. If I had known I'd have told him right then, except for one thing. There was something supremely confident and cruel in his eyes. I'm not sure what it was exactly, the way they reflected the light maybe, but I could see it there, and that cruelty made everything else a mockery. His voice, his words, his daintiness. The effect was hypnotic. I felt like a fly in the web of a skinny, delicate little spider that was savoring my helplessness before it feasted on me." He nodded toward the photo. "Those eyes. Those are his eyes." With a violent shudder, he reached across the table and slapped the image unto the floor.

