

Hobo Junction

by sean m. poole

From the mouths of madmen comes wisdom not found in the hallowed halls of academia.

Transients twisted with the weight of the world sag their slow-foot way through truck stops, train yards, bus stations. Professors with tenure in the school of the streets.

Class is in.

"How much is stuff worth? Stuff man! Bling! Cargo! STUFF! What's it worth to you? It ain't worth a shit, man! Clean clothes! Comfortable shoes! A ride! Those things are important! But they're only stuff. And a man's got to decide himself when his ass is worth more than any old stuff. Comes down to values. What you'll do with ten dollars. What you'll do for ten dollars. See what I'm saying?"

The crusty old philosopher paused, stared into the fire. Flames danced inside a rusted fifty-five gallon drum. A few dozen men and women milled around the camp.

Overhead, traffic roared, a distant crashing sound like ocean waves. Beyond the overpasses the spires of the downtown skyscrapers split the horizon, standing out against the darkening sky in stark relief.

Down in the mean canyons underneath the freeways a gang of crackheads, a gaggle of whores and three pierced, tattooed, steroid-charged punks listened to the old timer. Their interest encouraged him to continue.

"Look at all those cars up on the freeway. Those people see us they get scared. Not because we're different from them. Because we're the same. We're them without all the crap they use to lull themselves into complacency."

"What the fuck you babbling about, Pops?"

"Say what?"

The old timer seemed startled at the interruption.

One of the punks stepped closer to the old transient. The punk was well muscled, buzz-cut, with the requisite metal jewelry stapled into strategic facial areas.

"I said quit runnin' your fuckin' mouth, Pops!"

The old man no longer seemed startled. He lit a cigarette replying as he exhaled.

Smoke billowed from his lips.

"I ain't your Pops, asshole. Coulda been, though, if I'd have ever fucked a cunt ugly enough to birth your miserable ass!"

The whores and junkies, who didn't really know the old hobo but had seen him around the junction for a while, burst out laughing.

The metal-head kid shook with adrenalized anger.

"Fuck you bitch! I'll cut your ass!"

He brandished a knife advancing on the old man.

The old timer was calm, both hands in his coat pockets, cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth.

"You'd best back off boy."

"Bring it you old cocksucker!"

The first shot came as the punk tensed to lunge.

The old hobo spoke as he fired the second shot.

"Come and get it, Junior..."

The kid stopped up short as if he'd run into an invisible wall, eyes and mouth opened wide in a carp-like expression of shock.

The old man fired again. A neat little crater opened between the eyes. They rolled up into their sockets. The back of the punk's head exploded in a crimson shower of bone, blood, and brains, sputtering as it sprayed the fire.

A hooker screamed. A junky dropped a crackpipe. It shattered.

The punk's body shuddered, knees buckling. It dropped on its ass, falling backwards, hitting but not overturning the fifty-five gallon drum.

The old hobo shifted the cigarette in his lips, taking a deep drag. He looked at the smoking hole in his weathered overcoat, the barrel of the .45 automatic poking out, delicate tendrils of blue smoke wafting like weightless tears from its cold black eye.

The group of people around the fire grew. The denizens of hobo junction gathered to see what the commotion was. The dead metal-head's buddies beat feet at the sound of the first shot, never looked back. The old hobo flicked his cigarette into the burning drum.

"Anybody know this asshole?"

Shirley, the hooker who had screamed, knelt by the corpse.

"All this shit in his face. It's the same metal-head prick had a date with Toni then stomped her and ripped her off."

Another hooker bent down. Angel looked closely at the dead punk.

"See his titty! Toni said he had a tattoo around his nipple like an eyeball."

Angel was tall, skinny, with hard, dark, junky eyes, a gleaming gold front tooth.

"It's the same dude. Fucking asshole!"

She rummaged through his pockets.

One of the crackheads, Dr. Budro, a once handsome Jamaican man with a wild mane of dreadlocks, leaned over the body. He whistled softly.

"Two in the chest and one between the eyes! Hey Butch Cassidy! You some fuckin' good shot, man!"

"Fuck you, Doc."

The old man put the pistol in the pocket of his vintage fatigues.

The fat Latina hooker they called Gypsy spoke.

"This metal-head pendejo was fucking people up. He broke Toni's arm. He was gonna cut the Professor."

Dr. Budro rolled his eyes.

"Who?"

"Him."

She pointed at the old timer.

"I call him Professor 'cuz he always talkin' like he be teaching college or somethin'."

A pair of crackheads began removing the corpse's Doc Martins. Angel had cleaned out the pockets. Two men moved in from the shadows, pulled the rings from the lifeless fingers.

"I hate men with jewelry in their damn face!"

Angel ripped the ring from the dead punk's nose. Viciously she tore the remaining rings and studs from the face.

Others fell on the corpse now, pulling off the clothes, gouging, punching, kicking. A sickening frenzy of anger, looting, mutilation.

The old hobo lit a cigarette, faded wordlessly into the night.

Time to go. Practice what you preach, Pops! A man can always find another coat.

An old man in baggy blue pants and a clean woolen work shirt makes his way along chilly late night streets. Wearing army surplus boots he carries a pear-shaped soft leather backpack containing the sum total of his worldly goods, his stuff.

The downtown bus station is just a short walk from hobo junction.

Class dismissed.

