

PINHEAD

by William Trent Pancoast

It had only been two weeks since Pinhead and his family had left West Virginia when his dad was killed on the picket line at American Rubber in Oakridge. Ironically, it was Pinhead himself who had helped open the gate to allow the strikers access to the plant. One of the pickets, a friend of his dad from down home, had backed his pickup truck to the fence and attached a chain to the rear bumper hitch. All 60 pounds of the eight year old Pinhead was squeezed under the chain link fence with the other end of the chain, which he dragged the ten feet to the gate. In the dawn light, the guards had not seen him drop the chain loop over the slide lock on the gate. Then as Pinhead scrambled for the fence, the truck revved and tires squealed as the gate was forced open. The lock mechanism flipped into the air and sailed backwards into the group of pickets where it caught his dad in the temple.

That was the end of the strike right there. Everyone stood around the downed man waiting for the ambulance to arrive. No more rocks were thrown. The jack rocks and ball bats were carefully tucked back into car trunks as if they were tools being put away at the end of a day's work. By the time the ambulance arrived, the plant's top management had joined the strikers in their little group and ordered the guards to fetch coffee and donuts for everyone. And then they all went inside and figured out a way to agree on a new contract.

Pinhead was thinking of that morning now as he loaded the quarter panel in the huge hem die. He cycled the press with the palm buttons just as the afternoon break whistle blew, and laid his oily gloves on the press bed. He looked at the pile of books he was reading right now--"Sons and Lovers," "The Tin Drum," and "The Idiot," then grabbed the Dostoyevsky novel and started up the aisle to the break area. He had gotten the job here at the GM stamping plant through the union a year earlier, just out of high school. All the union guys knew what had happened to Pinhead's dad a decade earlier and made sure the young man had a job.

Pinhead was named “Pinhead” because he always carried a stack of books with him everywhere he went. His real last name was Pinwed. After his father's death, his mother had urged all the five kids to get an education—it was the only way out of poverty she could see for them. Reading became Pinhead's mission in life. His goal was to read every book in the grade school library. And he did that. In high school, he set the same goal for himself, reading 2 books a day. He would stay up late at night, take books to the bathroom or cafeteria, and carry them on his paper route after school. He was always bent over a book. His eyes became sunken with dark pouches beneath, and he was not aware of the clothes he put on each morning—he didn't know what color they were and did not notice if they were clean or dirty. As long as he had his eyes fixed on the pages, he was satisfied. He became well read in the classics, especially the modern, and was an expert on the novel of the nineteenth and twentieth century. Pinhead became a subject of ridicule among his schoolmates for his ever-present stack of books and his unkempt appearance.

And that was just fine with him. He grew up needing an enemy, his class warfare instincts kindled by the death of his father in the labor dispute and bolstered by the readings of Steinbeck, Lawrence, Sinclair and others, and the college-bound students who were particularly bothered by Pinhead—they instinctively knew that he would be better educated than them—were seen as a good enough enemy by him. They ridiculed him on a daily basis, nicknaming him “Pinhead,” tripped him on the stairwells, but stayed their distance since his only method of fighting back had become spitting. He was extremely accurate and more than once had ruined a preppie's day by planting a yellow mucous hocker on a Gant shirt. He would have loved to fight them and hurt them physically, but the year after his father's death he had nearly died of botulism—his mother's treasured pressure canner had disappeared during one of the many moves the family made from neighborhood to neighborhood in Oakridge, and she had had to rely on hot water bath canning for

their food needs—and the severe illness, coupled with the poor nutrition his family experienced, had left him small and weak.

Today as he clutched the paperback volume of “The Idiot,” he was angry. The job had been a real break for him and his family. He was already eyeing a little bungalow in Oakridge for his mother and his younger siblings. He had money in his pocket and was going to look at a 1967, orange Camaro after work. He had spent the day thinking about the fast car, with its 327 engine and big, rear tires and that had set him back in his reading—he should have been on track to finish another novel by bedtime tonight but was way behind schedule. And then he had wondered if he would spend so much time driving the new car if he bought it that he would neglect his reading—he wanted to have all of Dostoyevsky's books finished in another week and then get started on Tolstoy.

But the real reason he was angry was because he was being labeled a queer. He wasn't queer. He had been having sex with the neighbor girl for years and sort of had his eye on a friend of his sister. But what had happened is that he was called to take his physical for the military and, not wanting anything to do with Vietnam, had told the doctor that he was queer. Shoot—he didn't care what people thought of him—his name was “Pinhead” after all, and he was used to ridicule as a daily routine. But he hadn't counted on another fellow from the plant being there for a physical the same day. Now the word had spread, and he paid attention to how the other men looked at him. Pinhead was sure that everybody thought he was queer.

It hadn't been difficult to persuade the military that they really would not want him—his ruffled, unhealthy appearance would have been enough, but he didn't want to take any chances because of his mother and the kids, so he made up the story about being queer to make sure they didn't want him.

He fingered his copy of “The Idiot” and held it up to look at it as he approached the break area. He had only read a hundred pages and the book was disconcerting to him because he was an idiot, too. He was a “pinhead” and never knew how to act about anything.

When he was waiting for the machine to fill his paper cup with the foamy, watered-down coffee, he heard it: "Pinhead." He looked around to see who had said it. He thought that once out of high school no one would know that he was Pinhead. But there sat one of the preppy guys from high school. "Hey, Pinhead," the other called, not in an unfriendly manner, but Pinhead reacted.

He spat quickly, the spit was seeming to float across the break area, suspended, and he wanted to reach out and grab it back, and then the spittle settled onto the shirt sleeve of the other young man.

Ah Jeez, Pinhead said to himself as he retreated from the break area, leaving his coffee in the machine, clutching his book tightly. "Fucking queer," he heard from behind him and then there was laughter. He walked slowly back to his job, opened his dad's old lunch bucket, felt underneath the paperwork from the realtor, found the blotter of acid, put it in his mouth, sat down on the metal stool, opened "The Idiot," and began reading.

