

REFLECTION

by Mark Kilfoil

"Place your bets, place your bets! Put the money down, see the wheel spin, win big or go home!" The attendant at the roulette wheel spun the practiced patter easily, smiling wide. The smile was as plastic as the wheel, the patter as regular as its spin, the attendant as perfectly organized as the table, all carefully and pleasingly arranged colours, nothing out of place.

Tony threw a couple of chips down on black. "Thank you, sir!" the attendant quipped with false sincerity.

"Fuck you," Tony answered. "Shut up and spin the goddamn wheel." It was just as automatic a response as the attendant's. Tony couldn't be bothered with real malice, couldn't be bothered

with politeness either, but his default tone was set to "fuck you" after years of having to put forward an aggressive face to get what he wanted.

The wheel spun. The attendant continued his patter. Why did he bother? Tony wondered about that, realized that the patter wasn't for him. The attendant had his money already, was just trying to set up the next suckers, the next fools, the next spin...

"A winner on black!" called the attendant, who put down more chips beside where Tony had placed his.

Well, fuck-a-duck, thought Tony. He pocketed the chips. Always quit while your ahead, he thought. Never risk more than you are willing to lose. Play it safe. Take no chances, make no deals you can't back out of.

Well, all but the last he'd been able to do. Now here he was, sweating in some two-bit casino in the backwater behind shit and nowhere, waiting for the bad side of his deal to stop fucking around at the table nearby.

The woman -- girl, really -- was sitting in with some pretty big players tonight, a bunker full of grey-haired, not-with-the-old-bag-wife-tonight, out-of-town suits, businessmen trading a lifetime of hard work for a few minutes of random chance. They played Blackjack -- a loser's game, if Tony had ever

seen one -- but he figured none of them really looked at the cards. They were all looking at her. That bitch.

Oh, she looked innocent enough: high society heels showing off slender, tanned legs; tight ass and solid breasts cocooned in a glimmering dress that probably cost more than Tony's car; delicately piled hair, styled and run through by some prissy bastard with a thousand dollar comb; bronze skin unblemished and nearly glowing; a perfectly manufactured smile made out of pure gold-dust and rainbows and promises of sweaty sex and mind-blowing experiences.

He didn't know what he hated most: her perfect body or her perfect mind..

She looked innocent, but she was a killer. Smart enough to never have blood on her hands, but ruthless enough to be there every time there was blood to be spilled. She didn't have reasons -- nothing she would explain to Tony, or even be able to explain to him, a simple mook -- and she didn't have morals. She didn't even subscribe to the pleasure principle, didn't seem to enjoy anything.

The kills were surgical, but random. A high-society broad that cheated with the mayor in one city, a back road, broken-down, half-Mexican, no-hablas-English maid from a half-dead, flea-bitten, shit-stain of a motel the next.

But she never did the killing herself. Oh, no: that was Tony's job. He was her hands, she was the brain. He was the workhorse, she held the reins. She said shit and he said "how deep?"

How did this all start? Wasn't I normal, once? These thoughts drifted in to Tony like weak breezes promising relief from the pounding heat but which vanished in an instant, as if never there, leaving you feeling hotter than before. His name was Tony, and he killed people, for Her. What else was there to know?

Tony? That's not right.. My name's Anthony. He froze in his tracks, the room buzzing around him but dimmed to his perception, like he'd been on a three-week bender and they were nothing more than his extremely efficient hallucinations.

I work at.. I kill people!

No, that's not right. I don't kill anybody! I'm a nice guy! I take my trash out every Thursday, just like Judy asks and...

Who the fuck is Judy?

White picket fences in a row of pre-fab, colour-coordinated, one-story, garage-on-the-side houses. Station-wagon that ate gas like hotdogs, but who cares because gas is cheap. Two kids, boy and a girl, same age but for a year. Big panting golden long-haired dog with smiling teeth to fetch the paper and--

Gnaw off your leg. Kick the fucker to the curb. Tie him on a chain and starve him until little flecks of foam form at the corners of his mouth. Feed the neighbour to him, piece by piece, chop off a living limb, tie it off so the fucker won't bleed to death, make him watch while the dog chews on it. Don't feed the neighbour for a week, but feed the neighbour to the dog for a week. Then, when the neighbour is starving, feed the dog in parts to the neighbour. Dog and man, best friends in a cycle of consumption, until finally oblivion comes for one. The dog or the man first? Whichever dies last gets a last meal.

Not right! Not me! Tony -- Anthony screamed in his head, put his hands to his ears to block out the sounds of man and dog both grinding their desperate teeth on leg bones of the other.

Not me! I didn't do this!

I did do this!

I didn't do this!

She did this! Not me, never me, but Her, she feeds off me feeding off her! We live, symbiote and host -- which is which? -- my pain she eats and her joy I eat, but her joy comes from my pain, cannot escape, locked in a spiral, not a circle, infinite spiral, unending twisting of mind and soul and --

Come here, Tony. Her voice. Acid. Ice. Flame. Needles. Drought, but her voice promised water. Tony stumbled, Anthony

stood. Divided I stand, united we fell, lurching without control but in control just not his control but Her control need to kill that part of me that listens but if I hear Her am I that part?

Walls of humans surrounded him, indifferent, uncaring, surrounded by themselves, saw him but stopped looking so he disappeared, unimportant but for the siren call of Her.

Suddenly, brought back to reality, Tony felt the hard chips in his pocket, in his suit that was new and tight in all the right places. The woman at the table stood.

"My butler, Tony, will drive you back to my place," She said. You will die, she left unsaid. "Make yourself a drink." Kiss your ass goodbye. She was smiling, but the man didn't see her teeth, her distended jaw. Anthony saw it, but Tony refused. "I'll be along shortly." I'll consume you later.

An instant later, no time passed, but the man was inside the trap. Anthony experienced nothing, Tony saw everything, too much. They were at an apartment, a compartment looking like a living space, but really a dying space. Nothing unusual here except that everything was usual but it wasn't real. A real drink? A real meal? Was this one to be poked and prodded, or stabbed and burned? Beheaded quickly, or cut through slowly by piano wire? Hung by his feet as acid slowly washed over him, or hung by his hands until single drops of water flopped for years and caved a

hole in his skull, a trepanning by decades. What time frame, his death? What method?

Would he be deprived of sanity first? Or have his skin flayed off weekly, allowed to grow back, to be removed again, in long bloody noodle strips that others would be made to eat like pasta, but denied cheese or tomato sauce?

Or was he to be kept of sane mind and insane body? Made to doubt his own sensation, made to think that hot was cold and cold was wet and water rained out of candle flames, not induced from mental trickery but simple and persistent deception of the body, a betrayal of everything that the victim, the target, the penitent made the world with, his mind slowly forced to isolate itself from existence until nothing remained but itself: I think therefore I am, but nothing else can be true, so nothing exists, but how can I exist?

Why am I doing this? I'm a good Catholic boy, I'll be absolved of my sins. Anthony again, insisting that something was wrong, that Tony wasn't there, therefore Anthony wasn't there, but if they weren't there who THE HELL WAS THIS SCREAMING MAN WITH MY FACE..

A moment of reflection appeared in a moment of reflection: Tony caught a glimpse of Anthony lurking behind the mirror beyond the bar in the other dimension, and he looked confused, this

Anthony, to see Tony on the other side, and then he realized...

Hell is other people. Especially when they are you.