

—FILTH EATER

by Glen R. Krisch

1.

A polluted rain fell in greasy sheets. Ragman pulled his layers in tighter to keep out the cold, even though he was already soaked through to the slack skin that hung on his bony frame. He wandered the city streets in search of someone who knew his name. He carried a faded picture sealed in a plastic baggie in his pocket—his only connection to his identity. He was pictured with another man, both with big smiles. Someone with a clean, feminine script had written names on the back. Harold and Pete. Neither name triggered recognition for Ragman, but he figured one name had to be his.

He ducked into an alley, leaning on the edge of the building. The wind-blown rain rushed by, but little slapped his bearded face.

Barely audible babble escaped his lips, “The car’s on fire, will you help me?” he offered words, but no one was near enough to hear. He stumbled down the alley into the darkness. Left palm over right, he extended his hands for charity. Like communion.

“When the last wall falls, answers seem more like questions.” He pondered his words, found comfort in his gritty voice.

An after-hours bar disgorged two men into the alley. “Look what we have here, Steve,” the more sober man said to the walking coma victim. It was amazing Steve could stand, let alone walk.

“You’re a joke, right? Standing there... Jesus, like I’m gonna give you my money. My money is earned,” the drunken man said and noticed the cigarette dangling from his lower lip. He flipped it to his free hand and slid Steve off his arm to a pile of plastic milk crates. Steve mumbled something in protest then vomited on the alley floor.

Ragman never flinched. He stared at the drunk as he would observe a baboon at the zoo. They were nose to nose. Ragman’s stench hit the drunk.

“You shit yourself? What’s with you people? Shit yourself, then stand there with a dopey look and extended hand. Here, take this. You don’t even have to pay me back.” The drunk took his half-burned cigarette and snubbed it into Ragman’s palm.

Ragman fell to his knees and stared at his palm. The hot end of the butt had disappeared, buried in the scorched skin. He watched the skin blister and bleed, the black ash forming a crown in the center of his grimy palm. Pain rose from his hand, raced up his arm and fell to the pit of his stomach. There it sat and festered. Ragman

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took the pain and placed it next to the other pains of his life.

The drunken man loomed over him now, his rage rising to the surface. He kicked Ragman in the side of the head, sending him sprawling into a puddle rainbowed with oil. Ragman curled into a ball and took the torment. A boot slammed into his face. A sweaty thumb dug into his eye, forcing the vision from it with a gushing sound. All the pain the drunk ever felt was transferred, blow-by-blow into Ragman. And he accepted the offering. He placed it next to the other pains of his life.

Only when Steve sobered enough to see his friend disfiguring a homeless man with a broken beer bottle did the purge of rage cease. Steve pulled at his friend. They left Ragman in a heap, the rainbowed puddle soaking his clothes, blood-streaked rainwater dripping from his grizzled face.

"I didn't mean it, Steve. I don't know what came over me. Don't tell anybody, will ya?" His bloody hands tugged Steve's arm.

"Come on, we're outta here." Steve pulled his friend down the sidewalk towards home.

2.

Ragman propped himself in the elbow formed by a crumbling brick wall and a dumpster. The sun rose, chasing away the prying night rain. He blinked his damaged eye and saw outlines of movement buried in shadows. Ragged lacerations had dried across his forehead like a crown. Soon his wounds would itch with healing.

3.

His good eye flickered open at a sudden rattling near the dumpster. Time in the alleys made him wary of waking. Nothing moved but the subtle flexing of the muscles surrounding his eye. The dumpster lid slammed shut. Footsteps trailed off down the alley and around a corner. Somewhere close a car alarm blared unanswered, ignored. Ragman closed his eye and retreated into sleep.

4.

When he woke, he stretched his weary limbs. His ribs were grinding on themselves. Two, maybe three, were broken. He held his side, staggered to his feet. It was a warm overcast afternoon, and a desperate hunger rattled his stomach.

The dumpster lid was open at a crooked angle. Ragman craned his neck, trying to see into the dumpster with his good eye, but was only able to distinguish a few soggy boxes from the rest of the contents. Pain throbbed through his wounds as he heaved the lid open. A blanket resting in a heap of spoiled table scraps focused his attention. He struggled to pull himself to the lip of the dumpster before letting his weight fall into the waiting maw. The rotting throw-aways and unwanted broken things of all those living in the surrounding buildings covered Ragman in a slimy skin.

The blanket was faded blue. He didn't know if the stains were new or carried over from the previous owner's carelessness. He touched the soft cotton texture, pushed away the folds and wrinkles. A newborn boy rested within the folds, blue-