

INTERVIEW AND THIRST



MARK
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Thirst

By Mark SaFranko

Leaving his office, Frank Curley felt like he deserved a night on the town. He couldn't really afford one, not with five kids and a wife who wasn't working, but there was nothing wrong with going out for a few pops, was there? After all, how many nights could a man be expected to go back to the same old same old?

In any event, he didn't feel like heading home. His wife, Anne, was displaying menopausal signs, which wasn't exactly a turn-on. It wasn't like her to nitpick and nag, but just this morning before he left the house she'd started in on that damned dented fender again. Frank had stupidly backed their Honda Accord into a trash can a couple of months ago and after promising to have the damage taken care of he still hadn't done a thing about it. But Jesus Christmas, what did she want from him? It wasn't like he sat at home twiddling his thumbs all day long! Being an assistant to the mayor wasn't exactly easy work. By the end of every day he felt like a football that had been kicked around by everyone in town.

And, by the way, why the hell hadn't *she* gotten the car repaired?

At least Anne hadn't put up a stink when he told her that he was meeting Hayden Frye for a beer after work tonight; she'd at least had the sense to let that go. And maybe she couldn't be altogether blamed for her moods. It couldn't be easy looking after five kids who needed and demanded everything from a laundress to a fulltime cook, especially when she was going through the change of life.

And, like she always said, he never lifted a finger to help.

Thirst

At moments like these he wondered why the hell they'd had so many kids. The truth was that despite all the bother and expense, he loved them, every one of them.

It was finally spring. Today was one of the milder days after a brutal and interminable winter, the kind that made you feel happy to be alive. There were smells in the air -- of grass and flowers and awakening earth -- that brought Frank back to his childhood. He looked up into the evening sky as he walked. There was still some light up there, but it was already sprinkled with glitter -- unnamed stars and asteroids and planets. The celestial spectacle, uncommon in the downtown district, which was usually obscured by smog, stirred up some intimation of the eternal in Frank -- he didn't know why, because normally he didn't think about such things, mostly because he didn't have the time. Whenever he thought about death, it made him uncomfortable. Tonight was a little different, though. Tonight he was...resigned, in a beatific mood of acceptance. Some day in the distant future it was going to happen -- he would die. Maybe dying wouldn't be all that terrible. Maybe he'd end up in a better place, who could tell? The world would certainly go on without him.

But for now he wasn't going anywhere. He had a wife, five kids who needed him, an important job to tend to. Hell -- he wasn't going anywhere for a long time.

The Cavalier Club was only a few blocks away. Anne would never have to know that he was out ogling the dancing girls tonight. Besides, it had been Hayden's idea, not his, that the Cavalier should be their first stop, so it wasn't really his fault.

As soon as Frank pushed open the black door of the strip joint, he spotted his friend.

"How the hell did you beat me here?"

Thirst

Hayden raised his glass in a salute. "When it comes to beautiful women, I got my ways."

"Right," nodded Frank. "Meaning you slipped out of the office when nobody was looking."

"There wasn't anybody *to* look. By five-oh-five, you'd think that the Division of Taxation was an Old West ghost town. They take off like rats from a sinking ship."

"If only the mayor's office was the same."

Hayden's chin jutted out. "Check this out."

Frank's eyes had adjusted to the lack of light, and he was beginning to appreciate the Marilyn Monroe lookalike who occupied center position on the small, dingy stage. There was a sultriness in the dancer's features that made something inside him turn soft, even as he watched her pluck green bills from the fingers of the saps sitting directly in front of her.

"You mean to tell me she can't find another job?"

Hayden sighed and shook his head. "She doesn't want another job. She likes the one she's got."

On the other side of the city, the bash was in full swing at the Queer Quarter. The girls -- Stacy, Linda, Ursula, and Jeanette -- had agreed on champagne as the evening's drink of choice. It was Stacy's brainstorm actually, and the others went along with it, as they always did when Stacy pushed an idea, but none of them had the faintest clue who was going to pay for such an extravagance. Stacy knew her friends couldn't afford champagne, but she'd take care of it because she was feeling crazy tonight, like anything could happen. *Anything*.

She kept shooting Ursula meaningful looks, but after five or six glasses of bubbly, Ursula was already blasted and not tuned in to what her lover was trying to wordlessly transmit. On the other hand, to any-

Thirst

thing that Linda and Jeanette said, Ursula threw back her head and cackled like a demented witch.

"And that one over there is *so* fucking *butch*!" squealed Jeanette, nodding at the bartender, who was working the other end and darted a nasty look in the direction of the rowdy group.

"Uh-oh," growled Linda. "She does *not* dig us."

"Don't matter," scoffed Stacy, slamming her glass on the bar. "We're drinking *champagne*. The bitch will keep serving us as long as we're paying."

This made Ursula double with laughter again. Tonight, everything was funny.

Neither Linda nor Jeanette could figure it out. Stacy worked as a forklift driver in a paint factory. Where was she getting the money to stand everyone to the expensive stuff? All of her friends knew that Stacy was crazy, but not usually when it came to money. Maybe she'd robbed her father again? She'd been known to do it when she needed cash. But nobody asked questions.

Just then the sound system cranked up a deranged techno number that rattled the walls. Stacy pulled Ursula onto the floor, and Linda and Jeannette followed. Once they were grooving to the mindless beat, Stacy grabbed her partner and put her lips to her ear.

"I'm thirsty," she hissed. "I need a drink. A *real* drink."

Ursula pulled back and stopped jerking to the music.

"Now? I thought -- How can we...?"

"Not *you*. I need somethin' different, somethin' fresh."

--- END OF SAMPLE ---

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