

# The Janitor

by Jack D. Larsen

**Y**ou can buy a pint of friendship for only \$6.99. It's gone as soon as it passes your lips.

Then you're alone again, thinking about the faces. Little children's faces.

Little children's sleeping faces.

I stopped looking after awhile. I used to look because I was afraid of what I'd see in the twisted metal and crumpled plastic, the carved up portrait of a manufactured fibreglass ruin.

The heap of a '96 Honda. Usually there was no blood. Just a trickle this time, running out viscous across the pavement. The Rutherfords. I never found out their real names. They were all named after the streets they were brained in.

The Blackfoots were a posse of nuns. They were the first. One of them had her legs twisted back around her head so her face was halfway up her own ass. No one told me before I got there. It was my first night on the job, and the dispatcher read off the address like bread off a grocery list.

It won't happen much, they said. We were short on guys. It was always a month before winter that business started to pick up. Everyone was getting winter tires and oil changes and owning the streets with confidence in their new bulletproof rides. They were dropping like flies.

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For months not a week went buy where I wasn't towing a scrap heap down the highway to he morgue. A few times I got there before the cops did. The ambulance was there for show.

We have to check for a pulse every time, one of the younger paramedics had said. Even if they are a pretzel or half their head is a quarter mile down he road we have to check.

I drank more before the job.

6.99 is what it costs to fit in. I can sit with strangers. People I'll never know. A few I might know too well. I can sit and not see their veins pulsating, the beat of their heart in their necks. I can sit without watching as they gulp down their cheap beer and watch the muscles and bones in their necks slide up and down. Boiling. Just under their skin. A cheap balloon ready to burst, haphazardly lashing bone and blood and brain together. I can see real people for a moment, and not just bags of meat.

I pay my 6.99 for a pint. The girls don't ask what I want. They know I don't care.

I meet a guy at a bar and for a few minutes we are best pals. He puts his arm around me. I can smell tobacco and rum mingling in his sour mouth, lips dry and cracked from dehydration. He talks about music then he tries to get something out of me. A cigarette or twenty dollars. It isn't about things. It's because he needs to absorb. To feed. To take from others is how he proves he isn't invisible, his only real way of interacting with the world. So I give him five dollars and an hour later, I watch from my porch as he stumbles down the hill with a twelve pack, automated and robotic.

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He drops it and hopelessly paws at cans of light beer in desperation as they tumble just out of reach. He looks up at me and I walk back inside. He doesn't recognize me at all.

Fuck you cocksucker, he shouts as I close the door behind me.

The Fifth Streets were a family with two teenagers. The mother was unbuckled. The two teens were buckled, in the back seat of the fucking car, and they all still managed to shoot out the windshield like a bottle rocket. Cracked their heads on the concrete, died on impact.

The Peigans were three teenagers. Everyone but the driver was wasted. The one in the passenger seat was flailing in rhythm to the music. Blaring music. He knocked the driver in the head and they flipped into a ditch. The music was still playing when I got there. Loud techno shit.

There were two cops a few minutes later. We went over the wreck. One of them had been scalped. His eyebrow ring caught on a gnarled piece of dashboard and ripped his skin all the way back. Another one had lost an ear.

The rookie threw up in the ditch while the older one, a grey British guy poked at the mangled spot where an ear used to be, pounding music still blasting from the crumpled pile.

He's better off if you ask me, he said. At least he can't hear that bloody racket anymore.

We never got more guys. I was the cleanup crew. The janitor. I worked 22 hours straight sometime. Our company was always

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called in to tow wrecks because we had a reputation. If people survived they could call their own towing company. But I could get a mangled shit heap off the road in fifteen minutes when it took some of those other jokers two hours or more.

I didn't look at the bodies much. Not because it disturbed me. I had just seen it all before.

A young kid about twenty was hired to learn the ropes. He had a history of driving catering trucks and cabs.

I worked in security before, he told me, so shit like this doesn't phase me. Once I worked nights at a hospital and had to deliver body bags to the morgue.

Zipped up, black, discreet, faceless. It would have been like a walk in the park. I could only dream of work so laid back and impersonal.

He quit after the first night. A kid about six, a mangled arm hanging on the edge of a smashed window. One long meaty string of skin and tendon was all that was holding it there. There was a little skull ring made of pewter on his middle finger.

I went to lots of different pubs but liked The Lighthouse the best. There was a blonde behind the counter. It was the type of place you walked into and the people there asked, so what's yer story?

It was always on the edge of a fight breaking out. But it was stagnant, brackish. Like the water they generously poured into half empty bottles of rum.

The bartender had nice long little toes. In blue flip flops.

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Soft manicured hands.

What do you want, sweetie?

As long as you paid your 6.99, you were her sweetie. Her darling. I'd heard about her giving a blowjob to one of the pool sharks, but I didn't believe it. She said she had a husband, others said she had a boyfriend. In a place like The Lighthouse you could be anybody you wanted. And everyone else could pretend you were whatever they wanted.

One night, a fight did break out over a game of darts. Some fat fuck in a golf shirt that hung over his gut like a shower curtain slammed a fork into the tattooed hand of some greasy thin looking shark. It lasted half a second or less. There wasn't much blood. Just a sharp howl like a dog as the mutts nipped at one another and went their separate ways. Lone dogs part of no one's pack. The owner said, there's no fuckin' loyalty anymore. And then he went and picked up a tip left on the bar for flip flops, and shoved it into his sweaty pocket.

I hadn't had a fatality to clean up in two weeks. I was sick with a virus. Little pocks on my body. Oozing blisters, ready to burst.

I'll pay you double if you come in for me and clean this one up. You can take tomorrow off and go to the clinic. I need you in today.

A little blue car. Smashed into a ball, cut nearly all the way down the middle by the streetlight it had smashed into. No-one around. I had seen it before; a suicide.

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That night I did something I hadn't in months. I took a peek inside as the cops pulled up.

Amid the clusterfuck was a familiar face. A friend of mine that went way back, a crew dispatcher working for the railroad.

Nate.

I called him Atlas, because he held the weight of the world on his shoulders. Saw him at The Lighthouse occasionally, complaining about anything he could; his job, his wife, the stains on the glass he drank from. But after a few, he was a good guy. Most guys were good guys after they washed their troubles out with a good lager. But he was clearly miserable the rest of the time. And I think he was desperate for a friend. He asked me to come to his place to watch the game and I remember how dejected he looked when I told him I had other things to do. Even though I had nothing to do...

Now he was peaceful. No more complaints. Two rods stuck through him. Still. Eyes closed.

Nate.

I liked him better this way.

**--- END OF SAMPLE ---**

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