

Josh Schiffler had this little problem: himself. You wouldn't know it to see him saunter down the road. He wasn't a bad kid growing up. Far from it. He looked so good, some yesterdays ago, still does today when he dresses up, and that's often in spite of chronic budget problems.

God blessed him with his father's pleasant chiseled face and topped his six-foot two inch lanky frame with a lazy mop of dark auburn hair and green-blue eyes that could charm a rattlesnake. All up, Josh was a tight butt aging teen, the 'boy next door' girls would love to bring home to mother. And a number of them tried.

Josh mostly thinks in simple black and white, reluctant to try a thought too complex in his homely world, afraid that buried somewhere inside might be a rainbow of colors too dazzling for the world, or him, to see.

But the bathroom mirror speaks to him, the shiny friend who lures him, shows his budding coolness as he leaves the shower, the reflective friend who assures him of his manliness, comforts him with lies that his heart and mind are the same as the unblemished vision in the glass, that he wasn't drunk when he wrecked his truck, that he can fit into this good green Earth—and wonders why he can't—no, he daren't wonder about that.

With pleasure he sees himself from neck to toe, and especially where his manhood swells, demanding more attention... the shower was not enough... never is... he succumbs again, then wipes the mirror, but shameful thoughts stick on his face, he has to look away like always, afraid to gaze at those two periscopes to his soul that'd lay bare the naked truth—the whole truth and nothing but—of desires, hates, and lusts, locked deep inside.

His goose had been in the oven for quite some time and the fork the Court stuck in his butt was not enough for him to admit he was cooked and done. Not when he got stopped late last year and greeted the cop with, 'Merry Christmas! What the fuck do *you* want!', or after he lost his license, when he walked down the middle of the street in such a piss-poor way for a Christian boy, staggering, shouting, cursing, and of course got cuffed, then projectile puked on the arresting officer. Not a diplomatic thing to do.

Josh prided that he glided over such road bumps. A suspended driver's license merely meant a thinner wallet when he got behind the wheel, when he had a job to get to in June—his third this year.

By mid-afternoon that Tuesday—the first day he could cope with the rigid work week—his sweaty bare chest was layered with sodden gray-beige dust as he carried another grain sack into the barn at Miller's Red Check Feed Mill. Not his first sack of the day but perhaps his last; and sure not his first or last drink of the day. Sacks or swigs; the choice was easy. Sacks hid the bottle, but nothing hid how the feed barn looked. A Cat 2 hurricane musta sorted and broke the feed sacks. Neatness was a personal thing with Josh, but it didn't apply to work.

"I'm sorry, sir." Josh greeted Mr. Cutler before the elder man was two steps through the door. How he could be sorry but not do a thing about it even puzzled Josh. He couldn't care to do the very least, even if his ass was on the line. Worse, he didn't care that he didn't care.

"I'm a little under the weather. A touch of the flu, I think."

Cutler strode through the mess, the wrinkles on his grizzled face frozen by the heat of anger. He slowly cast his eyes side to side, never wavering from his course straight to Josh who stood slump-shouldered like he never does except when he feels a licking coming, even if no belt is pulled or switch is cut.

An English sparrow somewhere up on an attic beam cut the silence with a chirp. The two men faced an arm's length apart. Josh stared at Cutler's boots, grimy from a day's hard work.

"I knowed you since you were a pup. You're bigger now, but you're not growed up. And I'm right sorry to say that, and glad your Daddy—may God rest his soul—ain't here to hear me say such a thing. It's true, and you know it too, else you wouldn't act this way, like you never did before."

Those words cut deep from a life-long friend who was to the Schiffler boys the next best thing to an uncle, who took Josh in on faith when he'd lost his job last month at Halley's Farm Equipment Repair with a promise that he'd do good like his brother Sam did before him, before Sam left the mill to start up electrical contracting work on his own.

The envelope in Cutler's hand stood out against his grime streaked gray bib overalls like a white flag. "Yes sir. Things do need straightn' up." Josh dreaded all-white battle flags, but Mr. Cutler was not like the others, he was confident the boss had too much to lose and nothing to gain if he were gone.

"Why you're not like your brother vexes me. You never took his lead. He's made something of hisself. Razorback gumption, that's what he has. You can't seem to learn nothin' from your elders can ya? Him or me, we just don't tally up in your book."

Josh glared at Cutler.

"I didn't mean to preach at ya." Cutler answered the youthful scowl.

A fist clenched. Knuckles whitened. "But you did, sir."

"I tried to help ya." The old man shook his head.

"Nothin' seems to work."

"Yes sir, I appreciate the job." Josh mumbled, then bit his lip and hung his head. "I didn't always treat you right."

"You don't do good by yourself either." Cutler reached over and pulled a bottle from behind a sack, "Your hobby gots in the way of work. What's this potion done to you and Jennifer?"

He dares spout off about my fiancée! I know how to keep a girl and treat her right. She's mine and we'll marry, that much I know for sure. I'm proud to tell and know so well she wants me to touch her hair like she does mine and take away my feelings I'll explode, like when my arms and legs might come unglued and my head spins crazy—like right this minute!

Their feet shuffled in solo dances on the dirty floor like they both had to piss. They were more like lovers in the intermission of a quarrel than a boss and a hired hand. In the momentary silence the bird above them chirped, happy there was a mess it could help clean up. The sparrow didn't give a hoot about their struggles.

Cutler thrust his fingers into Josh's chest. The envelope pierced his heart. Both felt the pain.

"I'm sorry. Real sorry, Josh. You're paid through today, plus a little more. I did the best I could."

Cutler knew the family didn't have all that much, after those rough times on the farm that took John Schiffler to the grave and still haunts his wife and boys and forced them from farm to town. Their Mom was no saint, no miracle worker, but she did her best to keep food on the table and clothes on their backs. But they weren't poor white trash. Not then. Not now.

"I hated to see your brother leave. It ain't the same for you... wish it was."

Cutler set his jaw so not to lose more to sentimental remembrance. He tore his gaze from the young red-streaked eyes, engorged and boiling with frustration, too painful was the sight of the son of his long gone best friend—the man he promised to do the best for his wife and his young boys.

"There ain't no more than this!" In a flash, Cutler went from sad to sore. Anger bubbled and blew like a shaken soda can. "Such as it is, take it and git out!"

"Please, Mr. Cutler, sir, I promise. I won't drink again. Never again."

Cutler grabbed Josh's hand... their paws cold and clammy on the crumpled check.

"That's what you said last time, son. Now don't hurt me no more than this already. Git your things—no one else's, mind you—take your mama's car and clear out."

Young fingers dug older's in a final good-bye, but not without the precious paper wad Josh yanked free as he plucked the bottle from Cutler's other hand. Josh glanced down at what he held: money in one, booze in the other, one his freedom, the other his completeness.

For the moment. The only moment that mattered.

Stay or flee, both torn between. With good-byes said their feet stayed stuck on the grimy concrete, glued by a hundred thoughts that plagued their minds but could not clear their throats, all made worse by their sorrowful gaze locked in spite of themselves.

Both knew Josh played all his cards except the Joker, that his hand was as empty as his soul.

Josh tore himself away, humiliated, eyes pregnant wet with a birth-stripe oozing down his dusty cheek like some damned sissy girl, boots flailing, skidding on the floor, fingers clawing at the door he leapt through, feet

digging dirt as he plunged past shiny tricked out trucks, hands yanking open the door of Mom's old Ford sedan with its crinkled paint and dented bumper and poor worn tires that kicked up sheets of dust when he slammed it into Drive and left his final calling card, a long stripe of black on the hot macadam road, the only evidence he'd been there. The feed mill now forever thrust into his past. Tears leaked and streaked his face, blurred his eyes, and weighted his right foot heavy against the worn half-bent pedal. A few fingers gripped the wheel, others clutched and jammed the bottle against lips that sucked its pungent fuel, propelling boy and machine down the two-lane winding road at ever increasing speed—to hell with signs, fuck all of them colored things, and the red one too at Farm Road 93—and fuck the noise behind, the flashing lights, and to hell with the curve that shouldn't be. The one Josh entered but never finished.

Smoke and vapor wrapped him tight. Josh knew he'd gone to Hell. And knew damned well it was his rightful place. A Hell complete with cops. One gripped his hair, another his arm.

“Holy shit! Not again.”

Josh pounded his head against the steering wheel before they glued his wrists with plastic bands.