

Manimal

by Jed de Sousa

Hughes slept more soundly than he ever had before. It didn't matter that it was against a cold metal dumpster in weather that was only slightly above freezing. The best part of this sleep was that it was in freedom, not that perpetual half-state where you have to constantly watch your back or spend the time in the darkness massaging your bruises. Sure, a bed right now would have been nice, but Hughes spent years thinking about trading his cot for an hour in the sun outside the walls.

The fifty dollars that they gave him before they let him go was just about gone. It paid for a little warmth, in the form of some cheap wine and a carton of smokes. The buzz had worn off a couple of hours ago, and now Hughes just felt anxious. Is this what he spent his time dreaming about in prison?

Some kids in a pickup cruised slowly across the alley's opening, taking only brief notice of Hughes, one of them throwing an empty beer bottle in his direction. The glass shattered as the boy's laughter could be heard trailing off into the distance. Hughes rose to his feet, anticipating trouble but finding none. The street was silent again.

Traffic lights flickered from red to green to yellow and back again. Hughes walked toward them, mesmerized by the effect the flashing had on his brain. A nervous twitch caused him to stop in his tracks and rub his face. The long, slow peel of his palms against the stubble of his face gave him pause to regain his perspective, to observe his "territory." A crunch came from his feet, where he stepped on shards of broken beer bottle. He looked down; he looked up. He saw an old familiar target.

Hughes made fists and closed his eyes, fighting off the memories. When he opened his eyes again, he was stooped to the ground, picking up a long length of broken glass. His appointment with the woman waiting at the bus stop across the street was now made.

It was no act as Hughes weaved along the concrete. His head was not on straight, but it didn't have to be in order for him to perform. The adrenaline began to pump through his veins, clearing his mind and allowing him to focus on the woman. Hands in his coat pockets, his gait quickened. The fingers of his right hand clenched tighter around the piece of glass, so much so that he could feel the slick wetness of blood – his own blood – painting his weapon.

The old feelings resurfaced. His mind tapped out a tempo in his head to match his heartbeat. Drunkenness turned into a hunger for power, and Hughes' power over this victim was exercised in the space of time it took to drag her off the bench and into the bushes nearby.

Hughes knocked over a trashcan, the sound of which roused the barking of some dogs in the still night air. Hovering over her, his programming for carnage took over. Hughes satisfied his animal instinct for the price of one human life. He felt the rush and began to howl, mimicking the dogs, and laughed as he shuffled down a side street. Tonight, Hughes felt the most free he had in years.