

CONVENTION

By Ken Smith

© 2007

Jeff drew the van to a halt beside the disused warehouse, pulling up the hand brake with a squeak and turning off the windscreen wipers. Outside, the rain continued to fall, more a fine drizzle, the clouds scurrying across a clearing sky. He sucked in a deep breath, inhaling a few droplets of misty rain, then popped a cigarette into his mouth and lit it, drawing in a mixture of smoke and cool air. He puffed a perfect smoke ring into the cab.

Drumming his fingers on the metal casing of the van, he walked to the rear, unlocking the back doors and pulling out a large pair of bolt-cutters. Cigarette in mouth, he moved to the warehouse's corrugated-iron door and with a strong squeeze of the cutters set it free. The chunky lock fell to the concrete with a clunk!

After a brief struggle with the rusty bolt, it slid back. Picking up the lock, he tossed both it and the cutters into the rear of the van.

Taking another deep drag on his cigarette, Jeff began to whistle a tune which had been going through his head all evening. He took a can of oil from the toolbox and squeezed a large helping of the slimy liquid onto the bolt's rusting surface. After several strenuous movements it finally freed itself, sliding silently back and forth in its harness.

Releasing a deep sigh Jeff replaced the can back amongst the tools and closed the lid on the box. Silently shutting the van doors, he let the finished cigarette fall to the ground. It gave a simple hiss on meeting the wet surface, and was extinguished. Almost immediately, he pulled another from its pack, placed it between his lips but didn't light it.

Walking back to the warehouse, Jeff gripped his huge hand around the door's handle and began to pull. The hinges shrieked as if in pain as he tried to open it. Gently cursing, he walked back to the van.

Returning to the warehouse door - oil can in hand - he drowned the rusted hinges, relieving them from their metal against metal burden. After several swift movements back and forth, the metal sheet moved without a whisper and he sent the empty can scurrying in clatters across the concrete courtyard.

It was almost dusk when he entered the vast warehouse. "Perfect," he whispered, and walked halfway into the empty shell.

Igniting his cigarette, Jeff glanced up at the broken skylights. A large droplet of water fell from a metal girder high above him, followed by a couple of less forceful droplets, each hitting him square on the forehead. He rubbed the refreshing liquid into his cropped head then glanced at his watch.

"Not much time to prepare," he thought, and began checking the warehouse for useful items.

Almost marching, he skirted a couple of large puddles but sent his boots crashing through others. The empty arena echoed as studs met concrete, accompanied by softer plips and plops as descending water met more water.

Against a paint-peeling wall, Jeff discovered a bank of wooden pallets. Letting his second cigarette fall to the deck, he began pulling them down, skating each into the centre of the arena. A nail caught his camouflaged trousers as he worked. He released a brief curse as he checked for damage to the tough material before continuing.

Six of the wooden pallets he arranged into a stage, stacking them three high beside each other. The remainder he arranged in pairs, one on top of the other, placing them in no particular uniformity before the main platform. It was a strenuous task so he unbuttoned his

combat jacket, allowing air to circulate around his massive frame.

Lighting a third cigarette, he fiddled with the marine name-tags which hung around his thick neck, whilst puffing more circles of smoke into the stale air as he contemplated his next task.

It was becoming almost too dark to work, so he moved back into the courtyard and began unloading his van. Firstly, he took six gas lamps into the warehouse, igniting them and distributing them between the pallets. They flamed into life with a phutt phutt then moved into a strange hiss, filling the place with an eerie atmosphere; their irregular burning sending sinister shadows sliding around the wet and slimy walls - Jeff's own shadow, ten times his formidable size, accompanying them.

Checking his watch for a second time, he began to collect the beer, stacking crates beside the main platform. Freeing the lids on the top two boxes, he pulled out a can and opened it with a click. Foam bubbled from its metal mouth. Jeff quickly placed his own over the opening, sucking almost half the contents into his drying throat.

The alcohol sent an instant buzz to his brain and he released a man-sized burp as it gurgled in his belly. After sinking the remainder of the beer, he cracked open another can and, between gulps, retrieved the remaining items from his van.

Into the cool night air for the final time, Jeff moved his van into a slip road then returned to the relative warmth of the warehouse. Falling to the floor, he sent his powerful body into a session of punishing press-ups, followed by a Karate-like, combat routine.

After locking his fingers and cracking his knuckles, he slipped another cigarette between his lips. He sat on the stage and lit the cigarette, sucking in soothing quantities of nicotine as he waited. Moments later, the door drew back and three guys entered. Jeff welcomed them in, offering each a can of beer, telling them to help themselves.

Somewhat apprehensively, the guys remained in their own company whilst Jeff began preparing himself on the platform.

As more faces entered, Jeff gave each a similar greeting, and within fifteen minutes some ten bodies had filled the warehouse, dispersing themselves on pallets, and chatting.

After another ten more minutes had passed and no sign of any new arrivals, Jeff raised his body onto the platform and began to address his audience. The group fell silent as his deep voice thundered around them, the occasional word repeated in echoes.

A crushing cheer filled the air when Jeff bellowed, "Tonight we're going to kill some queers!"

His audience remained riveted to his every word as his deep, South African accent echoed about them. Occasionally, they were greeted with shouts of "Kill the queers!"

Whilst bodies moved forward, collecting courage in cans, Jeff glanced at his watch, almost apprehensively, and declared that he had said all that he had to say, having explained how they could recognise queers, where they cruised, what pubs they used and where their campaign of terror would start this night.

Satisfied he had stimulated their hate, Jeff invited any who wished to share stories of their own sadism to speak.

It was the only female who spoke first, explaining to the group how she and her boyfriend and his mates would use her as bait by pretending she was lost or in some danger, inviting the queer to her car where the others would then appear and beat him senseless. Several stories followed, each stirring more passion and hatred, each increasing their eagerness to get on with it.

Jeff continued to allow the stories to flow, he hadn't heard enough and wanted to hear more, wanted to drive them to the point of hysteria.

A body raised itself above the seated audience, standing upon a pallet. Jeff stared down at him as he spoke. It was a gruff, ugly voice filled with the deepest of hatred. The audience became strangely still while he told his tale, constantly wielding a baseball bat as he wallowed in every word.

Halfway through, he pulled a companion to his side and together they began to laugh as they shared the story; the evil audience now cheering and clapping.

“A queer. A black queer,” he excitedly informed, foaming at the mouth. “Smashed to pulp!” he shouted, circling the baseball bat above his head and laughing.

“Killed two birds with one stone,” they both delighted. “A Nigger and a poof!”

The story completed, the audience stood and clapped, tossing finished cans into the air and stamping booted feet.

“Enough!” roared Jeff, silencing them instantly. “Finish the beers and then let’s do it!” He raised his hand in a Nazi salute.

A rapturous applause rang out for their new leader and smacked against the walls as Jeff stepped down from the platform and began to move among them.

Silently he walked between their ranks, absorbing their hatred, absorbing their anger, receiving slaps to his back, high fives and handshakes.

Calmly, he moved himself toward the teller of the last terrifying tale until they were square on. Gripping the guy’s hand like a vice their eyes locked, the storyteller eager but unable to avert his own as Jeff penetrated the other’s soul and savoured his fear.

Jeff knew this guy would love to kill him - kill anybody! He had seen the look many times as a marine. He held his gaze until the guy surrendered with a wry smile, whereupon the guy punched their fists together as if to declare a draw. Jeff locked into those evil eyes a final time before moving over to the door. Momentarily, he

watched as the group gelled, each buzzing with booze and hatred.

Silently, Jeff slipped into the courtyard. Drawing the refreshing air into his lungs, he slid the bolt on the door and locked it. Pulling his last cigarette from the packet, he crunched the empty box in his palm and let it fall to the ground. Solemnly, he walked toward his van.

Removing a black box from his combat jacket, Jeff pulled the aerial out. His thumb covered the red button on the casing as he continued across the courtyard. Without looking back, he pushed it down. A tremendous whoosh filled his ears as flames sucked in air. Glass splintered and shattered about him as it was blown from the skylights and rained hot fragments over his shaven head. Still Jeff didn't look back. His only thoughts, it was too quick, too kind, unlike the death of his black boyfriend, his beautiful body broken and beaten by baseball bats and boots, dying for no other reason but for being gay and black.

Jeff climbed into his van, pulling a picture of his dead boyfriend from the dashboard. A single tear slipped down his cheek. Kissing the picture once, he whispered, "It is done."

Placing his thumb over a second red button, he pushed it down. The van disintegrated.