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Peep Show

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Peep Show

Joe Maslanka

Jimmy Mitchell carefully dabs his tongue along the Zig-Zag rolling paper holding his last bit of weed. Twisting the ends tight, he pulls it to his lips. The smell of herb fills his small suburban duplex. Sitting at a card table with fold-out-chairs acting as his kitchen-set, he takes a deep draw on the joint. Watching his cat swipe a bottle cap across the yellowed linoleum floor, he holds the smoke in for as long as he can. Exhaling, he tilts his head back, gazing at the marijuana clouds and contemplating another empty day.

With the edge off, he prepares for work. GI-shower, shit, shave, and gargle of Listerine, he moves to the driveway to fire up his '66 VW Beetle. He begins his trek to work. The Bug rambles to a white building with a neon sign sitting remotely just outside the Cherry Hill, New Jersey, limits, discreetly tucked away.

It has been less than two years since Jimmy walked away from a near decade in the Army. He volunteered straight out of high school in '68. His goal was to have made a career in the military, but a tour in Vietnam and several bad decisions had cost him rank. He left with no further ambition to pursue his dream.

With a less-than-stellar military record, no education beyond high school, and home from an unpopular war, there were few employment options. After almost six months of hearing “We’ll call ya,” Jimmy was handed a job at \$4.15 an hour at the ‘Desires & Delights’ Adult Book Store.

“Ah, Jimmy, here to rescue me from this perversion trap,” says the assistant manager, Julio Delacruz. Julio has been at D&D one year longer than Jimmy. The owner, Mel Goldfarb, anointed Julio with fifty cents more per hour and a title. “Got to get us some real J.O.B.s one of these days, Ese, know-what-I-mean?”

“I hear ya, Julio, but this fuck swamp pays the bills for now, brother. I ain’t got the fortitude to face any rejection in the near future. So we’ll just keep ringin’ up the till on these jack-off toys and mags, okay? It would break my heart to know Mel didn’t make his nut for the week.”

“‘Nough to make ya wanna re-up, huh, Jimmy?”

“Don’t know bout dat, dude. I’ll tell ya, I do miss havin’ some fuckin’ structure in my life.”

“Bro, I don’t know why you dropped out, man. Eleven or twelve more years, brother. You’d be set wit dat US Military pension, Ese. Ain’t too late, shit, you ain’t even 30 yet.”

“Julio, too much mierda, baby. You dig?”

“I hear ya, man. Hey, have a good shift.”

“I’ll have a shift, Julio. Good? Uh, we’ll see.”

Jimmy watches Julio walk out the door, listening as his ’71 Chevy Nova revs up and burns rubber into the darkening skies over New Jersey. He looks at the few stragglers thumbing through some of the most perverse material imaginable. Fat women, old women, whips, chains, bondage; all on display. He lets out a deep sigh. He’s becoming numb to all of it, and the numbness sickens him.

“Holy shit, what the fuck am I doing with my life?” He mutters under his breath. This is same question he asks himself the first hour of every shift.

“I’ll take this.” A low voice breaks his thoughts.

“You’ll take this, huh? Anything else, sir, can I interest you in a few tokens for our movie booths?”

With eyes darting about the store, the man says, “No, man, just the magazines.”

Jimmy rings him up, thinking this is just some fucking suburbanite husband, going to jerk off in his car before going home to his family. Jimmy could detect the suburban crowd; they were always nervous. The truck drivers and drunken military walked the aisles with bravado, looking you in the eye, buying whatever they want. Never a trace of guilt. Jimmy has seen porn like this and worse while he was in the Army but working the D&D has made him disgusted with all of it.

A potbellied old trucker walks to the counter. "Give me some tokens."

"Takin' in a show, huh, Pop?"

"Yeah, anything new?"

"Try booth three, man. I believe we reeled up some new ones." Jimmy slides the tokens toward the trucker, revealing the tattoo on his right forearm.

"You a vet?"

"Yeah, Army."

"No shit, me too. Korea, 45th Infantry Division."

"Yeah? I was with the 25th in Vietnam."

"Bet you're happy to be outta that shit hole, huh?"

"Sure. I mean, look at me now, I am on top of the fucking world. Enjoy the movie, man."

The trucker smirks, gathers his tokens, and moves to the booth.

The bell tinkles above the door, letting Jimmy know another patron is entering. "Ah, Jimmy, my favorite clerk. What's the word, soldier-boy?" It's Mel Goldfarb, tall, skinny, balding. He saw the potential of the adult entertainment trade five years ago. Leaving a career in advertising, he became one of Jersey's successful peddlers of smut. Mel is a bit oblivious to all that he actually sells, he just knows it turns a profit.

“Hey, Mel, what’s shakin’?”

“Not the till, kid, it’s dead in here.”

“It’s early. The pervs will be out soon enough.”

“Easy with the perv shit, they’re customers. They are what allows me to pay you. You dig?” Jimmy just stares at Mel, a smile of sarcasm pulling at his lips. “Now, come on, push the products, know the products, entice your customers. We got new movies in. Sell, baby, sell. I am outta here. Gonna take the wife to a show. Ciao.”

“Hey, does the wife know how you make your bucks?”

“She knows the large house she lives in and the big rock on her finger. She don’t ask questions.” Mel saunters out of his shop, pulling away in his brand-new Cadillac.

Mel equally sickens and impresses Jimmy. Even in his mid-fifties, Mel is a torpedo of ambition. Jimmy struggles to remember when he last felt ambition; boot camp? Maybe. He knows he did things in the war that made him proud and made him ill. He never talks about either. Just keeps it all tucked inside, trying to focus only on the good things. Structure. Purpose. The times he really knew he was making a difference. The good memories are growing more difficult to sustain. He pulls a box of Marlboros from his shirt pocket, shakes one out and lights up. He releases a cloud of smoke like he’s exhaling memories. The cigarette pulls him back into the moment. He looks out the window as an old Lincoln pulls into the lot. A bunch of kids spills out.

“Ah, shit,” Jimmy says, watching them mob to the front door. Five of them; all but one look old enough to come in. They hold their IDs up to Jimmy’s face. The youngest looking one tries to blend in to get past Jimmy.

“Hey, you?”

“Yes, Sir?”

“Sir? Kid, I was enlisted, I am no fucking sir.”

“Uh, sorry.” The blonde, skinny kid sheepishly answers.

“No need to apologize, just show me your ID,” Jimmy demands.

“Oh, uh, I forgot to grab my wallet when my friends picked me up.”

“Come on, kid. Just shoot straight wit old Jimmy. You ain’t old enough to be in here, are ya?”

“No, I am not.”

“What the fuck do you want to be in here for? What do you want to look at this shit for? You should be at a football game, or a good movie, on a date and shit. Whatcha hangin’ out with these goofballs for? Just gonna get you in trouble, ya hear me?”

“Hey, I don’t need a lecture, mister. One of them’s my brother, the rest are his friends. Ain’t got no date tonight. Just hangin’ with them. Okay? I’ll wait outside. Sorry.”

“Wait.” Jimmy looks the kid in the eye. A little more than 10 years separates him from this kid. He yearns to have those years back. “Let me ask ya something. You really want to see this shit, huh?”

“I guess.”

Jimmy reaches into the tray below the counter. Grabbing two tokens, he slaps them on the counter. “I’ll tell you what, kid. I am going to do you a favor. Take these two tokens, follow me.” Jimmy leads the young man to booth number two. He opens the wooden door and has the kid sit on the booth bench. A roll of toilet paper hangs to the left, a trash can sits to the right.

“Sit down, kid. Put those tokens in that slot.” The whirring sound of the film reel starts. The kid looks straight into a brightening screen. A pony stands in a field, a naked woman

approaching the animal from the right of the screen. “You watch this, kid. Then come see me before you leave.”

Jimmy returns to the counter, throwing an eye at the young crew preoccupied and giggling over at the magazine rack. Jimmy waits. It’s not long. He watches the door creak open on booth two. Out comes the kid, his face tightened, head shaking. He walks to the counter.

“You like that shit, kid?”

“That was disgusting, man. Why’d you have me look at that?”

“I did you a favor, kid. Stay out of these fucking places, go do something good with your life, tell your brother to leave you home next time. Nobody needs this shit.”

The kid just stands at the counter with a look of dismay that tells Jimmy he has done his job, something good. The kid runs outside to the Lincoln. His brother and the rest follow. Jimmy fires up another Marlboro. He hasn’t felt this good in some time. He saved a kid, just like he did in the jungle.

“All right, closing time, boys,” Jimmy yells to the straggling suburbanites, the lonely truckers, the full-scale perverts, the geeks and dreads that meander the aisles.

“Closing time? It’s only 1AM, you got a couple more hours,” yells a voice from the book rack.

“Yeah? Not tonight, dude. We got inventory tonight. Now get the fuck out, I got shit to do.”

“Some customer service, jack off, I’ll tell the manager.”

“Oh, tell him, please. If I get fired that would break my heart. Get the fuck out.”

With the last patron pulling away, Jimmy locks the front door and walks to the stock room. He fires up another Marlboro. Walking quietly out of the stockroom, he locks the front door and walks slowly to his car.

With his car facing the road he watches his rear-view mirror until he sees smoke and flame billowing from the back of the D&D. He turns the key on the Beetle and cranks up his radio, Thin Lizzy belts out '*The Boys Are Back In Town.*' He pulls away with a renewed sense of purpose.