

The Dying of the Light

by Kevin Esser

Kevin Esser (see page 30) projects present trends into an apocalyptic future...

Two WEEKS AFTER my thirteenth birthday, when August was alive with cicadas and birdsong and the lazy dazzle of heat shimmer, I first noticed the man across the street. I knew he lived in the run-down little house on the corner, the house that everyone called "the shack" because of its cracked shingles and broken shutters and sagging, lopsided porch. He had been there almost a month since moving in with his valise and his backpack; I had seen him a few times on his way to the grocery store down the street, always strolling easy and slow with one hand in the pocket of his old grey suit-coat. But he was just a stranger, not worth thinking about.

Until now.

He was in his front yard, wearing brown corduroy pants and what looked to me like an Indian shirt, blue with fancy red and yellow stitching around the shoulders. It was the shirt that caught my attention. I was sitting on the steps of my front porch, killing time until lunch, swatting idly at the mosquitoes trying to dine on my legs. The man was pulling weeds from around his house. I watched him work, not sure why I enjoyed looking at him, not sure what there was about him that held my eyes. His brown hair and beard were streaked with grey; his wire-rimmed glasses were balanced on the tip of his nose. He paused once to push them up; wiped his forehead on the sleeve of his Indian peasant shirt; glanced around. I looked away quickly, embarrassed, then looked back to find the man crossing the street—slowly, hands in his pockets, watching me, smiling. He stopped in front of the porch, close enough for me to see the sweat beaded on his forehead. "I think I'm going to need some help," he said.

I nodded, waiting.

"With my yard," he added—and his voice touched me inside like music—low, calm, mellow. "Do you have a lawn mower?"

"Sure," I said, "we got one."

"I can't pay you much." He paused, his eyes focused hard on my face. "Would you do it for ten dollars?"

"Sure I would." Ten dollars was a sultan's fortune back in 1995, good for a week's supply of soda and bubblegum. "You want me to do it now?"

The man stepped closer, into the shade of the porch roof. "Unless you're busy—with friends or whatever."

"No—I don't got too many friends around here—except for Zachary, and he moved away in June."

"Your name is Sammy, isn't it?"

"How'd you...?"

"I heard your mother calling you for dinner last night. Nothing magical about it. My name's Richard." He put his foot on the bottom step. "I just moved in about three weeks ago."

"I know."

A few minutes later I was pushing the lawn mower around Richard's front yard, wincing every time the blade struck a rock hidden in the tall grass. I took my time, going slowly, trying to do the best possible job. Richard watched me from the doorway, a cup of coffee in one hand, a cigarette in the other, staying inside, out of the sun, until the mower ran out of fuel. I was still only half finished with the job, but already laboring for breath, dripping sweat, exhausted.

"You'd better take a rest," he shouted from the porch. "I'm outa gas."

"You or the mower?"

I laughed, the sun stinging hot against my bare shoulders. "Both, I guess."

"You hungry?"

Yeah, I was. Richard invited me inside for lunch. I hesitated, brushing the grass from my legs, still trying to catch my breath. His invitation was a startling breach of propriety, definitely improper, probably even illegal. I was familiar with the new laws, had heard about them on television and in our Christian Morality class at school, but I didn't really care about all that. I didn't like all the new curfews, the fingerprinting programs, the public dress codes; I didn't like the microfilm ID implant in my upper left molar; I didn't like any of it. So I said, "Yeah, that would be OK," and followed him inside.

We shared a can of vegetable soup and a giant cheese omelette that Richard concocted on the hot plate in the corner of the kitchen. His hand shook slightly as he lifted his fork to his mouth. "I had malaria once," he explained with a smile. "It left me a little shaky."

"Malaria?"

"In Brazil... three years ago. I used to take a lot of trips, before the travel restrictions." He smiled again. "Back in the good old days."

"That musta been kick-ass."

"A lot of fun," he nodded, then paused to light a cigarette. Camel, no filter. "You're an unusual boy, Sammy."

I wondered if that was good or bad. Maybe I was being insulted. All I could do was shrug.

He blew smoke toward the lightbulb above the table. "Aren't you afraid of being caught outside without a shirt? It's a pretty heavy fine, isn't it?"

Again I shrugged. "If I see a cop comin', I just run behind a tree, or I go inside real fast."

"What about your parents? Won't they be angry if they find out you're here with me?"

I didn't want to tell him that my parents were divorced, that my father lived in Chicago, that my mother was an alcoholic who spent all day watching the vid-screen and drinking gin. "They don't care," I said. "They think the new laws are all bullshit, they think people should be able to do what they want."

"Smart parents," he mumbled. The plume of smoke made him squint as he studied my face. "You're quite a handsome boy."

"No, I'm not," I replied quickly, almost frightened by such a reckless compliment. "I'm too skinny, and I hate my hair," brushing my hand across my blond crewcut.

"Slender, not skinny."

I stood up quickly. "I'll finish cutting the lawn now." He was nodding when I left, still holding his cigarette, still watching me with his sad, gentle eyes.

It was late in the afternoon when I finally wrestled the mower through the last tangled patch of briars and weeds. Richard paid me ten dollars, patted my shoulder, thanked me for my help. I went home after that, took a shower. My mother was downstairs in front of the tube, staring at the evening news, no more responsive than a bewigged mannequin. Another gang of molesters had been rounded up and shipped to the Camps in Utah. There were pictures of them on the screen in their grey prison uniforms, their heads shaved, the mark of the serpent branded between their eyes.

In the shower upstairs, I let myself think about Richard, let myself remember the feel of his hand on my shoulder. The memory of him made me hard. But even then I didn't touch myself. I knew it was a sin. An especially bad sin. Only later, when I was in my bedroom and saw myself naked in the mirror (slender, he had said, not skinny—slender and handsome, actually handsome), only then did I surrender—on the bed, eyes shut and legs spread, a shaft of evening sunlight warm against my face, the mattress squeaking softly with each rapid stroke of my hand.

I saw Richard again the next day—and every day after that. Sometimes I did odd jobs for him around the yard (trimming bushes, yanking dandelions, watering his scraggy tomato plants); at other times we went into the house to talk or read comics or listen to the radio. I discovered by and by that Richard had once been a teacher (before the massive School Purges of the early '90s had barred men from the classroom), but that he now lived on food stamps and a part-time job. We always sat together on the couch when we talked. I was vaguely uncomfortable with him at first—uncomfortable with my own feelings, uncomfortable with the way he watched

me—but that discomfort vanished gradually as August melted into September. I began to think of him as my best friend, my only friend. Every day after school I went to his house. My mother complained now and then about my dangerous routine, but I ignored her, more contemptuous than ever of the laws that made my happiness a crime. Being with Richard was the best part of my life. I loved listening to his voice whenever he read me a story; loved nestling against him, safe beneath his arm as he petted my hair; loved it when he paused between pages to kiss my cheek—hoping, always hoping, that he noticed the erection in my gym shorts. I even stopped wearing underpants after a while, just to let my boner push out a little farther—trying to draw Richard's attention, eagerly inviting his touch. But he wasn't about to venture too far, too fast. I couldn't understand that then. I do now.

Late in September—sweaty from lawn-mowing and more impatient than ever for something I couldn't name—I asked

Richard if I might take a bath in his tub. He shrugged at first, sitting at the kitchen table with his usual cup of coffee and cigarette. Then he smiled. "You could go home and take a shower there."

"Yeah," I said, "but I wanna wash now—right now." "Can't wait, hah?"

"Nope."

"Well, then, be my guest. Is it all right if I help?"

I nodded, suddenly unsure of my plan. "I guess I should take off my clothes."

"That would be a good start," Richard laughed. He stood up and closed the outside door, then went into the living-room and pulled the curtains shut. I followed him in, sat on the couch, tugged off my sneakers, my socks. Bits of grass fell from my legs onto the carpet. Still wearing my red gym shorts, I walked quickly to the bathroom. Richard was already there, filling the tub with warm water. He glanced up when I came in. I wanted to take off my shorts, wanted to let Richard see my body, wanted him to touch me. But my shyness held me motionless in the middle of the room. Richard smiled, picked a blade of grass from my hair. "You certainly do need a bath, Sammy." He crouched in front of me and brushed the grass from my legs. There was no way he could miss the lump in my shorts. I hooked my thumbs beneath the elastic waistband. "I'll take these off now," I murmured. Richard stayed on one knee, staring, waiting. I pulled down my shorts, stepped out, tossed them to the floor. My penis stood out twitching in front of Richard's face. He reached out almost timidly and touched the reddened knob, squeezed it gently, ran one finger down to my balls, then back up. "Very large and very beautiful," he said softly. I could feel his other hand on my ass. He interrupted himself to turn off the water splashing into the tub, then stood up quickly and led me by the hand into the bedroom.

By the time I returned for my bath, the water was cold.

That was the first time. And the last. When I came home from school the following day, Richard was gone. Taken away by the police. I never found out who turned him in. Maybe my mother,

maybe one of the neighbors. I still don't know. Of course I refused to testify against him. But it didn't matter. He was convicted anyway on charges of immoral association with a minor. They probably ended up shipping him to one of the Camps out west—his head shaved to the skin, his forehead branded with the coiled serpent.

They couldn't leave me at home after that. I was sent to a juvenile detention center. I remember the rancid food, the beatings, the terror at night when the lights went out and the guards came prowling for boy-meat. I was raped every night the first week; then I was left in peace, just long enough to heal and regain my strength, when the midnight assaults began again. After the first year I no longer felt the fear or the pain.

Once you're in you're in forever, moving from Camp to Camp until your insides are empty and cold. A boy who has been touched by a man can no longer be trusted on the outside. I've been an inmate for over twenty years. The Morality Laws have become much harsher since my days with Richard. I hear stories from the new prisoners, stories about the world I can barely remember. They say that boys can no longer be seen in public without full robes; the display of bare limbs is forbidden. Lascivious ogling of a minor is a misdemeanor; physical contact of any kind is a felony. Last year they started liquidating the most serious offenders. The executions are televised every Saturday night after the evening news. I wonder sometimes if Richard is still alive. Probably not.

There's one more thing I hear from the outside—odd tales of vagabond children, gangs of enfants sauvages who roam the forests and the deserts and the deepest urban ghettos, wild boys going naked as a sign of defiance, marking their territory with splashes of semen and piss. Long hair braided with feathers; arms and legs painted with berry juice and dried blood. Masturbation is their primal sacrament. They respect no laws of man.

Maybe the boy-gangs are real; maybe not. I stare out the window at night and dream of them. I would feel better about myself, and about Richard, if I knew they were out there. Tribes of adolescent warriors smelling of dirt and sex and pubic sweat. Cunning as wolves in the moonlight. Free.