

Chicago

by John Linwood Grant

It's a long way from New York to Seattle on foot.

Maybe I hadn't appreciated quite how big America was. I'd never been across it before, only seen the coasts. Not that it mattered, because I wanted to be forgotten for a while. No record of where I'd been or where I was going, no trail of hire-cars receipts or plane tickets. All I wanted was the road, and an endless list of small, forgettable towns...

1975 was the year. It was also about the number of miles I had yet to cover. West, always heading west. I only dipped into cities when I had to. In Cleveland I followed my usual fall-back routine. It's pretty simple. You go somewhere bad, the worst part of town you can find, and you wait around at night until the food looks you up itself. Muggers, rapists, strung-out junkies who can hardly hold the knife steady. Any will do.

I struck lucky on the first night with a couple of low-lives who were ready to cut me up first and check my wallet later.

"You're dead, man." said the short one, a moustache like a crayon line across his upper lip. He was sweating badly, and stank, but I didn't usually care about the wrapping. I smiled.

"Funny you should say that."

His companion stared at me for a moment, then backed away slowly. "I gotta bad feelin', Huey."

Huey was too far gone to listen. He skittered in close, a stolen scalpel in his left hand. I could see the track-marks down his arms, some of the sites already going bad. If I'd fed more recently, I would have walked away myself, and I amended my earlier observation. He was going to taste as bad as he smelled.

One move, and moustache-boy was on his knees, scalpel forgotten. The streetlight showed that I was still smiling, and the other guy ran for it. I let him. One was enough. I would have been doing Cleveland a favour by draining him, going right to the bottom of the bottle, but I'd avoided that path for a long time. I slammed him unconscious instead, and placed my hand on his forehead.

I could smell the hepatitis and septicaemia in him, along with heroin, barbiturates and a few prescription drugs. None of them would affect me, so I concentrated, and called him to me. The essence was there, underneath the crap, and it would keep me going for a week or two at least.

I left him weak but alive. God, or Fate, or whatever would take over once I'd gone. Maybe his mate would come back and ring 999. Sorry, 911. Or maybe he'd finish the job off. It wasn't my problem.

Cleveland saw me through Fremont and Defiance, even through a town called Hicksville, which amused me. The folk seemed nice enough, though. I had a few beers and let them be. I didn't interfere again until I reached Chicago, where I met my first genuine Stars-and-Stripes revenant for a long time.

Ella was one of the lost ones. If you can have any sympathy at all for our kind, edimmu, whatever

you call us, then she deserved it.

I found her shivering and desperate on a back-street, waiting for a clean, all-American husband to come driving slowly past and wave a handful of dollars at her. I'd seen it too many times.

"Hey, little kitten." they would call. "Daddy needs some lovin'."

Daddy, of course, had a decent woman at home, two kids and a cheerful scamp of a dog in the yard. He raised funds for the party and went to church nice and scrubbed up every Sunday...

At least I knew what I was.

I took her arm before the next car rolled past, and pulled her into the shadows. It was instinctive - she emanated loneliness, a hopeless kind of longing. There was no doubt that she was one of those who have no clue as to what to do, where else to go. Most of them fade away over the years, becoming shadows of sorrow, the saddest things.

Even as she struggled against me, I cursed myself, knowing that I should have walked on and left her alone. She fought, but not well or with any enthusiasm.

"I don't have what you're after, believe me." I murmured.

Her little eyes widened. She must have been about sixteen when she was unborn, brought back into the world looking as wretched as she obviously felt. This close I caught the scent of her hunger properly. She needed what the clean men gave her. Desire, disgust, even their self-loathing, if they had any. Those base feelings that set their loins pumping in filthy alleys. She didn't want those things, but she had to have them.

She vomited, spattering my boots. She must have tried to eat normal food earlier that day.

"Why? Why me?" It was a desperate cry.

I'd had a long time to find the answer to that question. Every one of us who could still form a coherent sentence had a different theory. Some said it was God's roll of the dice, a second chance. But it wasn't. I'd been back too long, even then, and I knew the score. We were talking retribution, rejection, or a plan so far beyond our understanding that it made no sense.

"You'll never know." I said, giving it to her straight. Maybe that was hard, but I didn't have a good lie to hand. "Something bad happened, and now you're what you are."

A priest once told me that the Lord was patient. Watching the girl, I was inclined to feel that He was rather more vindictive than patient. What could she have done to end up like this at sixteen, seventeen years old, working the cold streets of Chicago?

I would never know that either. None of us remember what has made us this way, what sequence of lies, murders or betrayals has made us what we are.

"I'm Ella." she said, when the heaving had stopped. "Are you... like me?"

That was a difficult one.

"Yes." I said, to save a long conversation. "But I'm passing through."

“Can I come with you? I could... you could, y’know, do me, if you want to. I could help you...”

It was an unappealing offer. I knew that it came from desperation, and I knew that whether we “did it” or not, I wouldn’t be able to help her. Some of us are stuck, and Ella was one of those. The feeling was unmistakable now.

“I doubt it.” I said.

“Please.”

She argued with me for half an hour. She so wanted out of what she’d become, where she was, and she thought that it would be too cruel of me to speak to her and then to walk away. She was wrong.

The real cruelty came at the end, when I gave in.

I told her I was heading west and she could tag along for a while. In the early hours of the morning we headed out of Chicago. I was aiming for a lot of little places with ville in their names, places which called themselves towns and cities but had only a few thousand people in them. Most edimmu would avoid such limited feeding grounds, and I’d decided that Ella was already one more than I wanted to meet.

Two hours out of Chicago, and it began. Ella kept turning, staring back at the city. She stumbled, used my arm to get herself up again. It was nine, ten in the morning.

“I feel... sorta sick.”

Traffic was sporadic, local trucks mainly. We were walking alongside a minor road, Illinois dust clinging to us. I thought that I might get some new boots in the next town. These ones were running out of heel.

“You will.”

Another mile went by. She was stumbling all the time now, and looking back as if something was following her.

“P’haps I need a drink...”

I paused, looked around at the open fields.

“It won’t help. You belong back there, where I found you.”

She had courage. Or she was stubborn. I don’t know. I stood and watched as she tried to carry on, a small, thin figure in sixties clothes struggling along a seventies road. Ten years too late for Ella. She wasn’t the first who’d tried to break out. It never worked. Somewhere near where I’d found her there would be a grave, the epicentre of that sad little earthquake that had brought Ella back. It might have marble over it, might be a scratch of dirt in a disused car park. It would still be her grave, and it intended to hold her close.

When she was crying dry tears and clawing at the badly metallated surface, I joined her, squatting down on the balls of my feet.

“Something happened in Chicago.” I said. “You died, Ella. It owns you, or you own it. Some of us can’t ever leave where it happened. We’re bound, trapped.”

“You’re not.” she said with a whimper.

“Cities and places don’t trap me. Doesn’t make it any better.”

“Seems better.” Now she was really sixteen again, full of injustice and resentment.

“It isn’t.” I straightened up. “If you head back to Chicago, it’ll get easier. I’m sorry.”

“I hate you!” she shrieked.

“You’re not alone.”

There wasn’t any point in waiting.

I headed west, and knew that Ella would go home, however reluctantly. Or maybe she would dig her nails into the road and stay there until she starved, lost any remaining sense of who or what she was. That might be a mercy.

But the odds were on her being back in Chicago by nightfall, her sandals scuffing the kerbside as the big, low cars went by, waiting for the one that slowed down.

Hey, little kitten...

c. John Linwood Grant 2015