

BRIAN ALLEN CARR

GERMS FROM BLOOD

Trevor picks a crystal of salt off a pretzel and sets it on his tongue. It dissolves as he clicks his teeth. He drums his fingers on the table and taps his feet on the floor. His face is oily. His jeans are stained. He takes a sip of soda and slurps it, his mouth half open. He swallows. He whistles. He pats his thighs. He takes a mustard packet from the table and tears it open with his teeth. He squirts a mound of mustard onto a napkin. He pulls a piece of pretzel from the knot and mashes it into the yellow blot. He chews the dough. He swallows. He takes another mustard packet, and again opens it with his teeth.

“Aren’t you worried?” Winston asks, wide-eyed.

“Bout what?”

“Germs?”

Winston’s legs are crossed and he’s holding a bottle of water. Trevor looks at the table. He looks at his hands.

“What germs?”

“The mustard,” Winston says, and points to the empty packets.

“I just opened them.”

“With your teeth.”

“Yeah, my teeth, so what?” Trevor takes another piece of pretzel and dips it in the mustard.

“So what?” asks Winston. He points to a man behind the counter. A hefty-lipped slacker with a zit the size of a dime on his chin. “That’s the guy who put those mustards out,” Winston says. “Touched them with his hands.”

Winston and Trevor watch the man behind the counter. He squeezes his lower lip with the thumb and forefinger of his right hand. He breathes deep through his nostrils, and his glasses rise on his face. Trevor picks up one of the empty mustard packets and puts the whole thing in his mouth. He chews it like gum and spits it on the table.

“So fucking what,” he says.

Winston takes a sip of his water. He clears his throat and looks at the packet that lies chewed and covered with spit on the table.

“Disgusting,” Winston says.

“Shit,” says Trevor. “You should have seen what I was doing with my mouth last night.”

Winston’s back is to the door. Trevor has mustard on his chin. The woman they’re supposed to kill is somewhere in the store.

“What do you think she did?” asks Trevor.

“I don’t give a fuck,” Winston whispers. “She could’ve taken the boss’s favorite pair of house slippers, given him the clap, double crossed him for millions. Doesn’t matter.” Winston takes a piece of paper from his shirt pocket.

“She’s pretty,” Trevor says.

“I thought you were into boys.”

“Not all the time,” says Trevor. “Even so, you still know pretty when you see it.” Trevor wipes his face with a napkin.

“Yeah, she’s pretty,” Winston agrees. He takes a pen from behind his ear and begins drawing cubes on the paper. Trevor watches him.

“How long we known each other?” Trevor asks.

The muscles in Winston’s face go slack. He stops drawing and taps the butt of the pen against the table. “Four years,” he says.

Trevor takes a sip of soda. “Exactly,” he says. “Four years.”

Winston blinks. He begins to draw again. “If you knew why’d you ask?”

“I’m making a point.”

“What’s the point?”

“Well for four years, Briggs has been pawning me off on you.”

“Don’t say his name.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s the cardinal fucking rule.”

“Sorry.”

Trevor rolls his eyes.

“Anyway,” he continues. “For four years the boss has been pawning me off on you, and for four years, at every fucking job, you pull out your God damn pen, and start doodling your little fucking ice cubes, and I don’t get it.”

“There’s nothing to get.”

“You got some kind of fetish?”

“No.”

“You got the autism, like Rainman?”

“No.”

“Then what’s the deal?”

Winston puts his pen behind his ear. “They’re not ice cubes.”

“What are they?”

“Cubes.”

“Cubes of what?”

“Cubes of nothing. They’re geometric shapes.”

“I know what a cube is.”

“Then why’d you ask?”

“Cause I’m trying to figure it out.”

“Figure out what?”

“Surely you must realize that it’s odd for a grown man to doodle cubes on scrap paper in public for four years.”

Winston laughs. “I suppose.”

“So?”

“Do you like music?” Winston asks.

“What?”

“Music.”

“What the fuck does music have to do with cubes?”

“Nothing.”

“Then what the hell are you talking about.”

“I’m getting to it.”

“Getting to what?”

Winston flexes his jaw. “God damn it. Just answer the question you dirty little fag.”

“What question?”

Winston’s hand comes down against the table top with a crack. An old Mexican man in a pink guayabera gets up from a nearby seat. He walks away shaking his head.

“Do you like fucking music?”

“No, God damn it.”

“No?” Winston looks puzzled. He leans back in his chair. He puts his hands behind his head. “Who doesn’t like music?”

“Me.”

Winston bites his lower lip. “Well, then,” says Winston. “What is it that you like?”

“Football,” says Trevor.

“Football,” says Winston. He smiles. He nods his head. “Do you follow any particular team?”

“Sure,” says Trevor. “The Houston fucking Oilers.”

“Ah,” says Winston. “Warren Moon.”

“Yeah,” says Trevor. “Warren Moon.”

Winston laughs. “Well,” he says. “What is it that Warren Moon is most famous for?”

“Aside from being black?” asks Trevor.

“Yes,” says Winston. “What’s the best part of his game?”

“Spirals,” says Trevor. He moves his arm in a passing motion. “He throws long, pretty passes.”

Winston nods his head. “Fine,” he says. “And how do you think he got to be such a pretty passer?”

Trevor’s eyes follow a phantom path. “Practice,” he says.

“Exactly,” says Winston. “Controlled, disciplined practice.” Winston smiles. He traces a scratch on the table with his finger. It’s quiet, save for the laughter of a young girl climbing on a shopping cart.

Trevor looks puzzled.

“You draw cubes to learn football?” he asks.

Winston eyes bulge. “No.”

“Huh,” says Trevor. “Well no offense, but I’m further away from understanding. I always just figured you were a touch crazy, but now I’m getting the feeling that it’s full blown.”

The woman to be killed is at the back of a long line of customers funneling toward a checkout. Winston watches her. “Art,” he says, without looking at Trevor. “I’m practicing art.”

Trevor laughs. “You a painter or something?”

“Yeah,” Winston says. “Something.”

Winston and Trevor watch the woman laying her groceries on the counter. She has long brown hair and tanned skin. She moves gently. She smiles at the cashier. She speaks to him. “How’s it going?” Her voice floats across the room.

“Who’s going to do it?” asks Winston.

“Doesn’t make much difference.”

“It makes a lot of difference.”

“Why?”

“So we know procedure.”

“Do you want to?”

“Doesn’t matter what I want,” says Winston. “What did the boss tell you?”

“He didn’t.”

“Shit.”

“Should we call him?”

“Do you have his number?”

“No, thought maybe you did.”

“Uh-uh. When he needs me he calls from a private line.”

“Same.”

“Who did the last one?”

“Last what?”

“What do you think?”

“Last job, or, last job together?”

“Don’t know. Didn’t realize you worked with anyone else.”

“Did a chef with that Rastafarian called Knuckles last Tuesday.”

“I did a stewardess the same day solo.”

“How’d you do it?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“We made it look like the guy slipped on his knife.” Trevor simulates a falling motion, then smiles.

Winston shakes his head. “Who was the man on the last job we did together?”

“Can’t remember.”

“Think.”

“I think that was the junkyard fella. He was under a hood. We brought it down on him.”

“I remember. There was that leashed dog that kept barking.”

Both men are quiet.

“Flip a coin?” Trevor asks.

“Rather not,” says Winston. His water bottle is empty. His paper is covered with cubes.

“What was the time before that?”

Winston frowns and places the paper in his pocket. “Bartender. I pushed him down the basement stairs. He was carrying a case of Bud.”

“Oh, yeah,” Trevor says, nodding. “Guess it’s my turn then.”

The two men stand and walk toward the automatic doors. One man positioned on each side. Winston grabs a Pennysaver from a rack and looks at the cover page. Trevor drops a quarter into a prize redemption game, and moves a dangling claw with a joystick over a reservoir of stuffed animals. Trevor pushes a red button. The claw drops onto the pile. Its flimsy aluminum fingers slip across the back of a fuzzy, pink, stuffed hippopotamus dressed in a blue tuxedo. The animal shifts. The claw catches the corner of the animal’s jacket. It retracts and the hippo rises. The momentum from the shift carries and the animal swings on a pivot as the claw ascends. Trevor holds his breath. He moves the joystick gingerly, and the claw rides on a track towards a bin. Trevor presses the red button again and the doll falls.

“I didn’t think that was possible,” a woman says.

Trevor pulls the hippo from a bank covered by a swinging door. The door flutters on its plastic hinges.

“Me neither,” Trevor says. He turns. It’s their woman. She has a wide, bright smile and her head is tilted. Trevor flashes a silly grin. There is mustard on his face. He offers the woman the doll by shoving it in her direction. “Want it? I don’t much care for stuffed animals.”

“Then why’d you play?” the woman asks. She laughs and brushes past Trevor on her way out the door.

Winston drops the Pennysaver and walks to Trevor. They watch the woman. “Pretty smooth,” says Winston.

Trevor throws the stuffed animal toward a trash can. He misses. They walk out into the sun. Winston takes a pair of sunglasses from his pocket and slips them on. Trevor squints his eyes. They follow the woman on foot through the shady streets. They linger behind tree trunks and at corners so she doesn’t see. Four blocks north. Two blocks east. They take a seat on a wooden bench and

watch the woman climb a flight of stairs to her apartment. The streets are quiet save for an occasional car.

Winston looks at his watch. Trevor's gaze is trained on her apartment door.

"Do you like this job?" Trevor asks Winston.

Winston looks at him. He looks across the street. "Nerves?"

"Nah."

"Emotions?"

"Uh-uh."

"What?"

Trevor rubs his palms together. He keeps his eyes on the apartment. "The art is all," he says.

"Oh," says Winston. "A hobby."

Trevor looks at Winston's hands. Winston is wearing a pair of black leather gloves.

"I thought I was doing it," Trevor says.

"You are," says Winston. "I'm just particular about what I touch."

Trevor laughs. His teeth are yellow. His laughter fades.

"What's so funny?" asks Winston.

Trevor looks at his hands. "Would you rather be doing art?" Trevor asks.

"Than what?"

"Than this."

"Maybe," says Winston. "I'm not sure."

Trevor shows his hands to Winston. He puts them close to his face, and Winston leans back. "In a few minutes I'm gonna go across that street, and climb them stairs and kill that woman," Trevor says. "With these." Trevor moves his hands closer to Winston's face, and Winston moves further back. "And when I'm doing it, there won't be anywhere I'd rather be."

"Good for you," Winston says.

"It is good," says Trevor. "I'm exactly what I want to be."

Winston nods his head. A black Lincoln drives slowly by. Both men watch it pass.

"It's a good enough job," says Winston.

Trevor snorts.

"What?" asks Winston.

The door to the apartment opens slightly, then closes. An orange tabby cat springs down the stairs and through the yard adjacent to the complex.

“You still engaged?” asks Trevor.

“I am,” says Winston.

Trevor spits on the ground. “And how much money did you clear last year?” Trevor asks.

“About thirty-six thousand,” Winston says.

Trevor nods. “Not bad.”

“It’s a living.”

“What do you tell her?”

“What do you mean?”

“When you bring home the money, without going to work. You draw a pretty decent cube, but I’m sure you can’t convince her that you sell those scraps of paper.”

Winston laughs. “No, she knows I haven’t made money off it yet.”

“So what does she think?”

Winston touches his face with his black gloves. He breathes deep. “She thinks I sell insurance,” he says.

A woman with a stroller walks down the sidewalk past the men. Trevor nods his head at her, and she smiles. Then he looks at Winston. “What, like life insurance?”

Both men laugh.

“Jesus, no,” says Winston. “Bankruptcy.”

The men are still laughing.

“Wait,” says Trevor. “Wouldn’t you make more?”

Winston shakes his head. His body rises and falls with his laughter. His face has turned flush. After a few seconds he takes a deep breath. “Ah,” he says. “She thinks I’m no good at it.”

“Why?”

“She says I’m not suited.”

“How so?”

“On account of the art,” says Winston. “She says artists can’t be salesmen.”

Winston breathes deep through his nose. Trevor punches his shoulder lightly.

“You ready?” Trevor asks.

“For what?” asks Winston. “I’m just along for the show.”

Trevor makes to stand, but the Lincoln is back and moving slower.

“Same one as earlier,” Trevor says.

“Maybe we should sit tight a bit.”

Trevor takes a menthol cigarette from his pocket and places it between his lips. He lights it and inhales deeply. He blows smoke toward the street. Winston rubs his thumbs against his forefingers. The leather gloves squeak.

“What about you?” asks Winston.

“What about what?” says Trevor.

“You with anyone?”

“Oh,” says Trevor. “No, I don’t do that.”

“Do what?”

“Stay with someone,” says Trevor. “I keep things casual.”

“I see,” says Winston.

“It gets lonely,” says Trevor, “But it’s worth it.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I mean there was a fella once,” says Trevor. “But it didn’t work out.”

“Why?”

“I told him what I do,” Trevor says.

“What you *do*, do?” asks Winston.

“Yep,” says Trevor.

“How’d he take it?”

“Not well.”

“What happened?”

Trevor drops his cigarette on the cement and mashes it with his heel. He looks at Winston. “We’re not together anymore,” Trevor says.

Winston nods.

“Listen,” says Trevor. “I think that car was a coincidence, and I don’t really feel like waiting around any longer.”

“Okay,” says Winston. “You make the call.”

Trevor nods. He stands and walks. Winston follows him across the street and through the yard. They climb the stairs slowly. The soles of their shoes scrape against the cement steps. They come to the door, and Trevor raises his fist. He brings his knuckles down hard, so there is one solid knock. Trevor lets his hands fall to his sides. The door opens. The woman smiles. There is confusion in the corners of her eyes.

“Hey, you’re the guy...”

Trevor grabs her throat with his left hand, and places his right hand over her mouth. He drives her back into the apartment. She screams, but the sound is muffled. Winston steps over the threshold and closes the door behind him. Trevor and the woman land on the floor. He grinds his weight against her throat. She kicks her feet against the floor and scratches at Trevor's back. She screams into his hand, and Trevor hushes her.

"Calm down sweetheart," Winston says. He sits on the sofa and begins to leaf through a magazine.

There is one last thud of a heel against the hardwood. Then silence.

"She done?" Winston asks.

Trevor sits back. "Done."

Winston sets the magazine down. He stands and heads for the door. "You coming?" he asks Trevor. Winston looks back. Trevor has not moved. His shoulders are rocking. "You okay?" he asks.

Trevor looks up. His lips are stretched tightly into a smile. "How much you wanna bet she thought it was over the animal?"

"What animal?"

"The stuffed animal at the store."

"How you figure?"

"I don't know," Trevor says. "Like she probably thought I killed her because she didn't take it. Probably wished she had the whole time."

"Doesn't matter," Winston says.

"It did to her."

Trevor looks at the woman's eyes. They are open and blood-shot. His hand is still on her face.

"You ready?" asks Winston.

Trevor shrugs. "Remember the man I told you about?" Trevor asks.

"Which one?" asks Winston.

"The one I was with."

"Yeah"

"The one that I told."

"I remember."

“He was a special education teacher. And when I told him he kind of flew off the handle. He was talking about making a difference and making a change.”

“Okay.”

“But we do make changes,” Trevor says. “This is a change.” He nods at the woman who lies dead on the hardwood beneath him. He looks at Winston. “And no matter what that guy did his kids were still going to be retarded,” Trevor says. He laughs. He looks down at his hands.

“I suppose so,” Winston says.

“Hey,” says Trevor. He looks at his finger. “Can you get germs from blood?”

“What,” Winston says.

Trevor holds up his finger. The tip is dark red. “Must have squeezed her mouth too hard,” he says.

Winston shakes his head. “Wash it off.”

Trevor stands. There is sinister in his eyes. He moves slowly toward Winston with his finger stretched long and aimed for him.

“What are you doing?” asks Winston.

Trevor stabs with his finger, and Winston moves back.

“Stop it, God damn it.” Winston’s lips quiver as he walks backward away from the blood.

Trevor laughs. He picks up speed. Winston turns. Trevor chases him around the coffee table and in circles through the living room. They both jump over the torso of the dead woman. Their feet leave scuffmarks on the hardwood.

“Stop it you dirty little faggot.”

Trevor’s laugh is high and shrill. “It’s just a little blood,” he says. “I’m gonna dab it on your nose.”

Winston lunges up on the sofa. He turns quickly and draws his gun. He forces the barrel at Trevor’s face. “Knock it the fuck off,” he says.

Trevor smiles. He rocks his head from side to side.

“What?” he says. “Just having some fun.”

“Yeah, well fun’s over.” Winston pulls the hammer of the revolver back with his thumb.

“Gonna shoot me?” Trevor asks.

“Wash it off.”

“What?”

Winston motions with the gun toward the blood. “The finger,” Winston says.

“Oh this,” Trevor says. He brings the finger between them. A bead of blood rolls toward his palm.

“Yes,” says Winston. “That.” He steps down off the sofa but keeps the gun aimed at Trevor.

“Shit,” says Trevor. “Only fooling.” He shrugs and leans his head to one side. He brings his hand up to his face and laughs. His eyes are locked with Winston’s. Winston’s face is calm. Trevor puts the finger into his mouth and draws it out slowly across his tightened lips. He smiles. He swallows. Winston puts away the gun.

Brian Allen Carr lives near the Texas/Mexico border. His fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Boulevard*, *Texas Review*, *Keyhole*, *Gigantic*, *NANO Fiction* and others. His debut collection *Short Bus* is forthcoming from *Texas Review Press*. He can be found online at www.brianallencarr.com.