

Hell's Half Acre
by Will Christopher Baer

one.

Pink and gray sky, the color of muscle. The truck screams past and its exhaust drifts into dark flowers that hang on the air and fade away like I'm staring through a mirror stained with my own fingerprints. I saved a guy's life just now and I think it was a mistake. I didn't recognize him, not at first. I jerked him back from the edge by pure thoughtless reflex, like I was saying god bless you to the stranger sneezing beside me on a bus. Then I got a shiver-fast scope of his face and in a far corner of my brain came a sunspot flare of recognition, like glancing up at a passing cloud and thinking wow, that cloud looks exactly like a girl on a bicycle. Blink, and the flare is gone. Even now the particulars of the guy's face are dissolving into a thousand others, but I remember he had dirty blond hair and mercury eyes. The slow spin of echoes and I realize I know this man, and I believe him to be a monster. I think he is one of my own monsters come home.

This is how it begins.

I was crouched on the side of the curb at Geary and Jones, waiting for a dive named Mao's to open. A dead dog lay stretched along the curb beside me, gold and black fur busy with flies. I kept thinking that if I picked up a stick, maybe that dog would get up and run. I had a touch of the dry mouth and dark clouds were forming around the periphery of my vision. These were the first indicators that a seizure was on the way and soon the air would commence to accelerate and pulse, like a bird was attacking me. I would suffer the imaginary rush of wings furious around my head, and I wasn't in the mood for it.

And just then a man came running from a narrow dark gap between buildings. He staggered and turned toward me, confused. He didn't realize he was in the middle of the street. I shook off the phantom wings and glanced left to see a delivery truck hurl around the corner way too fast. For my money, it was about to crush him to the pavement and burst his skull into nasty wet chunks, just like your average melon. I came to my feet and ran toward him as the truck heaved up close. I grabbed the guy and spun him out of the way and the truck squealed past, missing us by maybe a foot, the exhaust hot as god's own breath. The man was an inch or so shorter than me

and had liquid gray eyes. Blood down the front of his shirt, a lot of it. He stank to heaven of gin and there was something about him that screamed bad voodoo and at this point I suffered that flare of recognition, like I had seen this guy before. I just couldn't say where I knew him from. A lot of faces have flashed by me over the years.

He grabbed my shirt in both fists and by habit or reflex I picked his pocket. My hand darted into his jacket pocket cat quick and came out with his wallet and he never had a clue. This was a talent I'd picked up the last few years as a means of survival. There was a wavering moment between us as the last splintered rays of the sun fell on our faces and I sort of froze in disbelief. I thought he might laugh or hug me or punch me in the face and all of a sudden I felt a hot wave of regret, like I might have just saved somebody who couldn't wait to go home and kick the shit out of his dog and beat up his wife or worse, and maybe I ought to follow him. And maybe he didn't want me to follow him because when he let go of my shirt he without so much as blinking slugged me in the mouth.

The guy had a heavy fist and I went down to one knee dizzy, while he sprinted up the street and disappeared. The bastard was gone and I was crumpled in the street with blood on my hands, on my shirt. Funny thing was, he may have done me a favor. Hitting me in the jaw had eighty-sixed that seizure I felt coming. A car horn sounded and I looked up. A woman in a gray BMW was honking at me, and giving me a dirty look through her windshield. I staggered up and out of the way and for half a tick I was just happy to be packing the same number of teeth. Then I glimmered the thin shadow mouth of the alley my possible monster had come running from and wondered why the dude was running and who from.

I walked into that dark mouth.

At the farthest end of the alley there was a shrinking egg of light. A man and woman were fighting in that sphere, fighting furiously. They were each of them expert fighters and crazy fast. Their hands and feet moved like insects attacking in mid-air. But the man was hurt, shifting his weight and trying to protect his left side. And as I approached, the woman

spun and landed the kill shot, a knife to the throat. He went down so suddenly it was like pulling the plug on a computer. The guy just went dark.

Now the woman crouched low, looking at the body of the dead man on the ground. She didn't see me, and I didn't yet recognize her because the shadows were so thick and purple. I walked toward her slowly through the dark. I had no urge to hurry. I don't know exactly what I was feeling. I had just pulled a guy out of traffic and my skin was humming. But there was still that echo of recognition and the slow forming notion that he was a demon from my yesterdays, an idea that was like the taste of sick in my mouth.

The woman never saw me coming. She crouched there not moving, not breathing. Long arms resting on her knees. Blood on her hands. She didn't touch the man on the ground, not at first. She was hunkered over him like a wolf over prey. She made no effort to help him and something told me he was beyond help. I couldn't be sure if she was waiting for him to hurry up and die, or if she was mourning his passing.

Black hair falling like spilled ink to her jaw. This was unmistakably Jude.

I almost stopped breathing.

Jude and I had wounded each other deeply, and we had not parted well. But still I had spent going on five years looking for her.

I was not close enough to see the stars around her eyes but I could see that the corner of her pale mouth had gone flatline, and by her posture she looked more than a little freaked out and furious but by no stretch did she look scared. She wore heavy boots and black military trousers and a thin pale blue summery wisp of a shirt mottled with blood. I could see the muscles jumping in her arms and I had a glimmer that her every molecule was on fire, her body caught in the slow whirl between shock and adrenaline. She was so still she might have been painted there. And now she moved. She wiped the knife on her thigh. She took the man's head in her hands and, using the tip of the blade, made two fast flicking motions with her wrist. I couldn't quite see what she'd done, but I had an idea.

Then she got freaky.

With no hint of ceremony or theater, Jude took a fistful of the dead man's hair in her left fist and pulled it back like a clutch of dead flowers. She put the edge of her knife to his forehead, just below the hairline, and began cutting. She made a near perfect circle around his head, then twisted his hair in a truly violent motion. I was fifty feet away but still I heard the man's scalp rip away from his skull. She flung the bloodsoaked

mass of hair and skin into the shadows. She fucking scalped him. I knew why she'd done it, and as well as I knew her, I couldn't quite believe it. My left boot touched a bottle and the sound of glass on stone shimmered like a bell. She came alive now and ran from me, never looking back. At the far end of the alley she hopped onto a stripped-down silver racing bike that looked like a pterodactyl on wheels, which I reckoned was a Ducati. She yanked a black helmet down over her head, roared the bike to life, and rocketed away.

Fine by me.

I knew where she was holed up, and anyway I wasn't ready to talk to her.

I came to the body and knelt beside him. There was a wide black puddle of blood around him that ran to the brick walls in either direction. The guy was in his early thirties, handsome. That is, he had been. Pale and feral. He had a patchy gold beard and a girl's rosy lips. I assumed his hair, too, had been the color of dirty gold. I couldn't be certain, as the top of his head now was a horrorshow of seeping blood, wrecked tissue, and exposed bone. And he had no eyes. His eyes were gone. She'd scooped them out with the tip of her knife. I glanced around and saw one of them, a bloody knot glistening in the dark.

And like the guy with ghost eyes in the street, this man was familiar. I knew where I'd seen them. Even mutilated, the likeness was easily apparent. The men were brothers. I had laid eyes on them once before in the flesh, in New Orleans. And I'd dreamed of them many times since. Thinking about it made my skin crawl. I felt nothing much, but I was glad this one was dead.

He was thin, wearing a faded jean jacket. The knees of my pants were soaked through with his blood. I could see that his carotid artery had been severed and he was about as dead as anybody can be. I bent over him and sniffed at his mouth anyway, an unorthodox little habit that I picked up somewhere along the way. I don't know what this is about but I could always tell the living from the dead with one whiff and the air that seeped from this guy's hole was pure graveyard. I touched two fingers to his throat for form's sake. There was no pulse to speak of.

I slapped at the guy's pockets and found a fat ziploc baggie that contained small individual balloons of what looked to be generous dimes of heroin. I stared at them a moment, tempted sore. Then hissed at myself and threw the lot violently into the far shadows. I found a cell phone in his jacket pocket and

dialed 911. The operator came on and I muttered the words dead man at Geary and Jones, then dropped the phone on the guy's chest. I wiped my bloody hands on his pants and stood up. I wanted to make myself scarce before the cops showed, and besides I had an appointment with an old flame that was long overdue.

Here's what happened. I arrived in San Francisco five days ago, having tracked Jude to California after losing her in New Orleans some five years back. I have been on the road so long I've about lost myself. For the past nine months I've been crisscrossing the southwest, eyeballing the sun like it was my blood enemy. By the by, saying I tracked Jude anywhere is generous as hell. I'm not much of a hunter, never was. And most of the time I was wandering around on foot, as the seizures and false visions have got progressively worse of late, making it dangerous for me to drive. I do know how Jude's mind works, however, and I've had some okay luck just following my nose.

Anyway. Two weeks ago, I was laid up in a shitty motel in Bakersfield, where Jude's trail had run cold. The only evidence that she had even been there were the busted collarbone of a bartender in Flagstaff named Rabbit and the severed hamstring of his buddy Steve, a bouncer by trade and former kickboxing champ who was never gonna walk right again. Rabbit and Steve told me they had run afoul of Jude a month or so prior when she blew into town and began sniffing around for two guys, brothers named Shane and Sugar Finch. These names meant nothing to me, but they did mean something to Rabbit and Steve, who told me between shots of whiskey they had been best pals with Shane and Sugar since they were all still wetting the bed. Shane and Sugar had moved on years ago, they said, having graduated from freelance thugs to mercenary killers. But they were still practically family, Rabbit said, and when Jude showed up looking for them, Rabbit and Steve got nervous, and rightly so.

The woman they described had identified herself as Jesse Redd, and they had taken her to be a professional bounty hunter. They said she had a body that knocked you out at first glimmer, but when you examined her up close she was pure muscle and hard as cut glass with a scar at the corner of her mouth and long devastating legs and hair so black it looked wet, skin somewhere between yellow and pale coffee, and eyes shaped like almonds. They said she was wearing desert boots and army fatigues that fit her ass snug as a bug and a scuffed

black motorcycle racing jacket and a little white T-shirt underneath so thin and tight you could see her nipples plain as day.

That freaked me out, said Rabbit. She caught me looking at those high beams and she stared through me so hard I caught a chill.

No shit, said Steve. It was her eyes freaked me out.

How so? I asked.

She didn't seem to blink, for one thing. For another, she has this long white scar that starts just above the left eye and disappears into her hair, like somebody tried to damn near cut off the top of her head. And around the other eye, she's got three small black tattoos, three stars, like her own little constellation.

This was Jude, without question. The physical description was dead on, and I had known her to use the name Jesse Redd when we were on the run in Mexico. Jude had fake passports in a dozen different names. Wendy Sweet. Emma Frye. She liked names that sounded like superhero secret identities. As for the scar above her left eye, she'd acquired that in New Orleans, the same night I came by the massive blow to the head that caused a goodly knot of scar tissue to form in my brain, which may or may not account for the seizures and false visions that developed slow but sure over the past years. And while I'd known Jude to have several tattoos, an eye between her shoulder blades, a Greek symbol on her forearm, and a small dragon on her hip, the stars around her eyes were new. Apparently she's acquired more ink since I lost her.

The long and short of Rabbit and Steve's story was about what I expected. Jude was looking for info on the possible whereabouts of their childhood buddies, Shane and Sugar Finch. She was asking nicely, at first. Everybody was getting along. And then Rabbit got a little too fresh with her, and maybe Steve gave her some static about hassling their friends. At which point she handed their asses to them, in exchange for the information that Sugar, which they swore upside down and sideways was his real name as shown on his birth certificate, used to have a girlfriend named Maggie who slung cocktails at a tittie bar called the Painted Lady, in Bakersfield.