

FLASK

by Chris Dungey

WHY WE LIKE IT:

We love this low-key domestic one act quietly sketched in mostly browns and grays. The American Dream has slipped out of grasp and the sleepers have awakened to lives of quiet desperation. It's 'All in the Family' without the laughs. The 'Monday to Friday' prose is the perfect fit for this unpretentious 'dirty realism' slice of life and Dungey's dialogue impresses. Quote: 'On a limited budget they probably would've chosen satin sheets over wallpaper every time.' And 'His own T-shirt is easy enough to find, though the moment is probably lost.' Yes!

When he dreams after drinking, they are shallow ones, usually related to work. Hector Fritch is laid-off again. It's just for the usual model change but there is plenty of time for beer and leisurely mornings for any consequences. This might not even be a dream. Maybe just the mind drowsing while he waits for Gwen to come up from her bath. Either way, it gets weird and threatening. He has hung a water-test shield improperly on the front of a car body. Now he's trying to fix it. The clamp-on device falls half-way off just as the job enters the booth. There is no engine at this point; just the chassis and fenders, the windshield that mustn't leak. Fritch is out there on the front of the carriage, trapped in the spray, soaked with putrid, recycled test-water. No amount of frantic effort will get the shield to stay in place. Somehow, it catches on the wall of the booth. It's going to scrape right through or snap.

"You bastard." He bolts upright. "Fock me," he sighs then. His tee-shirt clings.

Gwen remains asleep. Where did *she* come from? Snuck in on him. But at least he didn't yell out loud. Apparently. Good thing he came-to when he did because he has to pee like a Siberian race horse. Where the hell did he learn *that* one and what the *hell* does it actually mean? Now though, there's a *real* noise coming from the street. A rhythmic screech of metal on concrete. But before he can investigate, it stops. The sound must have worked its way past the thrumming window fan right into his miserable subconscious. Well, maybe it saved him from wetting the bed. That has happened; so blitzed that he dreams he's standing at the toilet. Can't afford to party that hard. Yet. There's a waiting-week before the first unemployment check. Gwen brought the six-pack home out of her tips. He gropes for his glasses on the night stand, knocks over the luminous, tocking alarm clock. 3:15. Luckily, the half-full long-neck be brought upstairs remains standing.

He swings his legs over the edge of the bed and tip-toes into the walk-in closet. All three bedrooms on the second floor of the dilapidated *starter home* have walk-in closets. The place was probably considered a palace around the time of the Depression. Since the oil embargo hit last fall and the lay-offs began, the Fritches haven't been able to afford remodeling. They got as far as renting a steamer to strip off the faded, pre-war wallpaper. The dust of old paste and the withering paper had fired up Hector's allergies. The baby developed chest congestion.

It's a long way downstairs to the single bathroom, over creaking floors of the pitch-dark hallway and down a steep, turning staircase. He hasn't yet memorized how many steps to the newel post, or how many more down to the first landing. He doesn't want to wake three-year-old Wesley in the nursery. Kid never goes right back to sleep, so

Hector keeps a piss-jug in the closet. Gwen made him get rid of the milk bottle so now he has one that's hospital grade. There's a kind-of lewd anatomical angle and a tight, snap-on lid. He situates himself and lets go, the gurgle resounding in the nearly empty space, a rank odor of ferment drifting up to him.

"You need to dump that friggin' thing," Gwen says from the bed. "A lot more often."

Over his shoulder, Fritch picks up the white, or are they pink, panties against the burgundy satin sheets. There is just enough streetlight filtering through the maples out front along the sidewalk. The panties hold the light against her backyard tan. She tosses fretfully onto her side, the top sheet wound between her calves. On a limited budget, they would probably choose satin sheets over wallpaper every time. Well, if *he's* decorating. "Yeah, sorry. Wes kept me chasing all day and I forgot. Gets hot up here."

"Fucking gross, Heck. I can smell it from here."

"Yeah, yeah. I said I was sorry," he sighs. "All done but the shakes." He snaps the lid on so she can hear it.

"I *told* you he could be a pistol. Welcome to *my* world."

Those panties are still on so someone has dropped the ball. He's pretty sure he wasn't *that* drunk he rolled off the couch after Johnny Carson. Two beers, plus the half-a-one he brought with him. It's pretty muggy, but if she was too tired, why the bath? Why not the usual quick shower, then boxers and an over-sized t-shirts? She must have decided it was just too hot. He squeezes once, twice. Use something to daub himself with, just in case? His own t-shirt is easy enough to find, though the moment is probably lost.

He puts down the whatcha-ma-call-it. It's not a *truck-driver's friend* which is what he went looking for. That's what the old hillbilly, Preacher, up the line calls the one he keeps in his pick-up truck. The guy doesn't waste time in the john on his way to lunch break. Just get right out there and crack the pint of *Popov* vodka to go with his sandwich. Ok, right: what Fritch finally bought is called a *urinal flask*. That's what it read on the tag at the *Yankee Store*. Flask? Try hiding *this* thing in a vest pocket.

And, there's that noise again. Like someone wrecking something down the block. Vandals? Fucking kids?

"You hear that?"

"Uhhmmm, whaaaa?" The top sheet gets furled again like a flag between her knees. She's facing away from him now.

The window makes an annoying screech as Fritch lifts the warped frame higher. The fan falls loose, into his waiting arms. Christ, he'll never get this dump squared away. It needs everything. He cocks an ear toward the hallway. Not a peep from Wes, yet. Maybe I *am* buzzed, Fritch thinks. Hmm, Just the two beers downstairs, he's pretty sure. And a few swigs before dozing off. So where is this alcohol bravery coming from? Almost like when someone makes a pass at Gwen in the bar. There's nothing happening in *his* yard that he can see. Should just drain that last beer and go back to bed. Kids'll be kids, right? Three years ago, *he* was a kid.

He eases the fan to the floor. A pick-up truck, it looks like, the tail-lights anyway, down the street a few houses. There's a figure moving around in someone's junk set out by the curb. Shit! He's forgotten to take out their own garbage. More scraping and

banging. He leans out the window as far as he can, bracing his hands on the worn shingles of the porch roof.

"Hey! Hey, there! What're you doing down there?!" He'd like to shout at the top of his lungs, but calls out just loud enough to be heard. He hopes. "I can *see* you!"

The figure pauses, appears to turn toward the Fritch house. "Peek-a-boo," a voice answers. The figure begins to move, approaching on the sidewalk through intermittent splashes of streetlight and leaf shadow.

"Fritch. It's just me. Randy Kendall." The man crosses the apron of the Fritch driveway. He stops at the end of their front walk.

"Oh. Oh, Randy, right. Where's...? Where's the big truck?"

Now a lighter flares in the man's face, followed by the orange wink of a cigarette. "Gotta go get it. Just making an early pass to get the big chunks." The cigarette waves in the direction of his taillights. "You wouldn't believe. Folks down there think I can compact an old wringer washer. I was trying to walk that booger over to the hoist. I got a big-ass AC unit on there, too. Bad time for that to quit, huh? Sorry 'bout the noise."

A slight breeze stirs the leaves. Fritch catches the scent of smoke. How in hell can Gwen even *smell* his jug? Ok, *flask*. She *claims* to smoke only ten a day. "Sorry I yelled. I couldn't see who it was."

The ash glows brighter, then the garbage man sighs. "Hey, at least you're on your toes."

"People though, huh? They must not care about the scrap prices."

That puff of breeze has little cooling in it. In the morning, Fritch will have to pry more windows open, maybe patch the ragged screens with tape or something.

"They don't got a clue. Recession ain't bad enough yet. My gain, I guess."

"Well, you earn it, muscling their junk around in the dead of night," Fritch tells him.

"Yup. The life of Riley, whoever *that* was. See ya 'round six."

Fritch chuckles: "I hope not." He eases his upper body back into the stifling bedroom. There is another squawk of warped window frame as he pulls it down to secure the fan.

"Jesus *Christ*, Heck. I'm *begging* you," Gwen groans. "You *know* I've got breakfast shift."

Which means I do, too, Fritch thinks, but knows better than to say it out loud.

"That was just the garbage man."

"Yes, yes. I heard every word."

Fritch sits on the edge of the bed for a moment. He drains the rest of the tepid beer then remembers the black bags waiting to be carried from the one-car garage. Crossing the gravel drive will require slippers, if he can find them. But, before he begins to inch down the hallway, he turns back. Gwen has begun a shallow snoring as he creeps into the closet. Groping, he finds the handle of the flask. Maybe she'll appreciate these efforts, maybe not. The best thing he can do, though, will be to just curl up on the couch when he's done.

After inching toward the staircase, his night vision beginning to help, Fritch is finally poised on the edge of the first step. Then a small voice, not yet crying, reaches from the nursery: "Daddy? Wet, daddy."

He steps back from the precipice but has only one hand to pat around for the light-switch. “Hold on, buddy. I’ll be right there.”

AUTHOR’S NOTE:

Most of my stories come out of life experience or the life experiences of others which I’ve read or overheard. Very rarely have I produced a fiction out of the whole cloth of my imagination, out of my butt, as it were. So divorce, alcoholism, assembly line life and traumas, parenting, the so-called ‘sexual revolution’, the Great Crash etc. etc. have all been grist for the mill. Merely add distortion, misrepresentation and blatant exaggeration. ‘Flask’ is dear to my heart since much criticism in my workshop (Flint Area Writers) seems to focus on my characters’ propensity for frequent urinations. Well, maybe. I’ll have to take a look at that. My protagonists also seem to spend a lot of time in Kroger. What can I say?

BIO:

Retired auto worker in MI. Ride mountain bike, sing in Presbyterian choir, feed two wood stoves, follow Detroit City FC and Flint City Bucks soccer, spend much time in Starbucks. More than 67 published stories. Currently in *Sweet Treat Review*. Forthcoming in *Free State Review*.