

At the Underground Drag Strip

By Patrick Harig

WHY WE LIKE IT: *A bizarre—even creepy—little story by a fledgling author who at the time of submission was unpublished. We're always excited when we discover 'something' in the work of an emerging writer and this tale, full of kink and a little bit kitschy, won us over, though we admit it's not everyone's cup of hemlock. But the offbeat characters, especially Katrina, are alive and kicking, the descriptions are good and the psychology behind the whole thing intrigues. Call it Goth, call it Punk, call it Urban Puke. It works and that's all that really matters, folks*

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Quote:

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Her name is Katrina. Like the hurricane, she says. People are kind to her because of her looks. Her outrageous hair. Her leatherbound exterior. They leap to help her, they melt a little under her. She expects it. I am determined to dislike her.

I see her for the first time on Lower Lower Wacker, during another of my increasingly frequent underbelly jaunts. I've gone every week for many weeks now, and to speak the truth, I have become bored with it. This time, however, the feeling is different. Alone, I stand in the small raucous crowd that spills off the slim sidewalk and into the orange tunnelled street.

"Like the hurricane," she says, in my ear. I imagine us meeting in the center of the road, lips touching as two jagged wrecks roar off like fireworks on either side. I must find new ways to repulse myself, you see.

We talk about pedophilia and mass murder, which seems to be all I talk about these days. We agree something must be done. About the marked increases. She asks if I'm one of *them*. I tell her I would kill myself if I were. She says, "Good. Me too."

Katrina is like this: she gives off the impression of a clear philosophy, of having ideas about things. In the back of my lizard brain I formulate my own idea, that a symbol of a way of life is the most attractive thing a person can be.

"No one likes an architect," Katrina tells me. "It's tasteless to be so meticulous. Only the most superficial people become architects."

I ask her if an architect cheated on her.

"The point is," she says, "That motion is the whole thing of life, constant unpredictable motion. Like a rollercoaster you've never been on before. And the more you ride it, the more sick of it you become. So you have to keep finding new rides. Only there are only so many rides in the world, and so you end up dead on the toilet with some pervert asshole's number tattooed on your neck and a noose around your arm. The world is the problem."

"You sound like a high school anarchist."

“It’s too small,” she says. A great thunderous roar fills the street and bounces off the close walls and low ceiling, echoing a thousand times, growing with each reverberation. Katrina and I watch as two bright bullets streak past, smoke plumes billowing. The small raucous crowd whoops and hollers. I smell the burnt tires curling in my nose. Beer cans and obscenities fill the air.

Katrina knows a Lower Lower bar. Of course she does. She tells me that only a few such places exist.

Some bars on the surface have hidden speakeasy basements, some speakeasy basements have secret sublevels on Lower, and even secreter rooms on Lower Lower. Secret rooms in secret rooms in secret rooms, all the way down. The only people who can find them are those that have been there before.

On the other side of a sheer concrete wall, we grab unmarked drinks from an iced-filled bathtub and sit on a dusty floor. The largest moth I have ever seen rests on the stained wallpaper, its velvety wings shimmering and pulsing in the warm lowlight. This is the end of exclusivity. The dull smell of marijuana comforts me.

“The real heart of the city,” I say “I can feel the weight of everything down here.” I look at the ceiling. “Think of everything up there. But this is where we live.”

“This isn’t the heart, this is the shitstained anal passage. Or it’s the back corners of the brain.”

“I’m determined to dislike you,” I say.

“Good. How’s that going?”

“Well.”

We drink our anonymous drinks and I watch the moth's wings breathe. "Do you think it keeps going down?" I say.

"It's possible. A bottomless pit of hidden bars and hidden streets and dark dealings. Deeper and deeper and darker and darker. Lower lower lower lower, lower lower lower lower." She closes her eyes and laughs. "Maybe if you stick around long enough you'll find out." The moth, as big as my hand, takes off and flaps around a caged dying bulb above us. It is hypnotic to watch. It flies in a pattern: around and around, in then out, around and around. I feel myself falling.

I'm floating away from myself.

"I bet you are, lightweight."

"Really, I am."

"That's good, you know. Don't limit yourself to yourself. Why be you when you can be everything. That's something I realized a long time ago."

"I should work out more," is all I can think to say, leaning back and laying on the hard floor. The giant moth beats above me.

"That's bullshit. All that self-improvement bullshit. Let go of that noise. Who you are doesn't matter. Start thinking of yourself in the third person."

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"Do you believe in God?"

“I believe in me.” Her eyes gleaming through cigarette smoke. Glowing in their pure and total life. The shape of her skull, under her skin, like a porcelain sculpture. I imagine all her parts, floating and growing and utterly present. All of us, one vast spanning field of organs and bones and everything else, and somehow this vision feels real.

“Are you God?” I ask.

“I think that I am.” Her voice a million miles away.

“Oh.”

She laughs. “I think we all are, or no one is.”

We’re back on the surface, walking along the river. The cool night air kisses my skin. I ask if she’s ever killed anyone before, she says only twice.

How could she do that?

“It was like killing myself. It was easy.” She looks at me, drags on her cigarette, considers. “Are you serious about this? You want to involve yourself with these people, in these places?”

I don’t even have to think about my answer, and I am amazed. I had thought the conviction would have died away by now, as it always had before. But my brain is on fire. “This is the only thing that matters to me now.” Why don’t I just say how I feel? “It’s like there’s a river of fire in my brain. A river of fucking fire.”

She nods. “That kind of thing can be hard to ignore.” She looks over the railing at the river below. She drops her cigarette and it falls, turning over and over, into the deep black water. “I was told in school that the opposite of lust is courage. Not chastity. I remembered that. I think you should think about it.”

“I think that’s true. I think that’s so true.”

“It sounds good, doesn’t it? Do you think these people. These creeps. These truly evil people. Are cowards?”

“I don’t know. What I mean is I can’t know for certain. I’ve never fought one before.”

“But you want to.”

“Yes. God yes.”

“Would you like to tonight?”

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *I wrote this story after reading some articles about Lower Lower Wacker Drive in Chicago, a secret third sublevel under the city that at one point was the site of illegal drag racing. I remember a particular article about a man being killed by a crossbow. When I was writing the story I thought the crossbow would show up but it never did. But there was a novel in there somewhere, which I’ve been working on for about a year. I hope to finish it one day.*

AUTHOR’S BIO: *Patrick Harig resides in Chicago, Illinois, where enjoys staying inside and living rent-free in other people's heads. He aspires to grow old and move to London, where he plans on becoming a grizzled motorcycle courier.*

(I do not have any publishing credits, although one of my stories was given an honorable mention in Glimmer Train's Short Story Contest for New Writers a few years ago.)