

The Skull of Thomas King

When I first met him he told me his name was Tommy King, so I got to know him as Tommy. He got to know me as Smokes, because I sold him weed on a weekly or bi-weekly basis. He ran a pawnshop and let me live in the upstairs for cheap rent, sometimes paid in weed. We always bartered a little, and sometimes he got the better deal and sometimes I did, but in the end I think it all evened out.

Tommy used to live with his girlfriend, Lucy, in the third floor apartment, but then she flipped her wig and bought a webcam. They split up and Tommy moved down a floor with me. He let me slide on the rent a bit more after that. He still needed the money to pay the lease, but like I said, he always let me barter or pay in weed.

So that's how I brought Tommy his first skull. I came into the pawnshop after making my regular rounds with the skull stuffed in a grocery bag and an ounce of California Hydro stuffed in my pocket. Tommy had one of those old school pawnshops that was dirty, cluttered and aptly named "Pawnshop," instead of "Pawn U.S.A." or some other corporate bullshit. The walls were jam packed with an insurmountable inventory of crap. The place was so thick in used or stolen garbage my eyes never felt like they could see it all. It was like the place was alive, and watching eyes were hidden between all the assorted clutter. I wondered once if people's ghosts weren't still attached to their old pawned off shit, their souls lurkey amongst the broken sporting equipment and untuned electric guitars. If that had been a little true before the skull, it would become a lot truer after.

I went to the counter and put the paper grocery sack down in front of Tommy.

"What's up Tommy?" I said.

"Sup douchebag?" He was reading a magazine and didn't look up.

"Who pissed in your Cheerios?"

"What's in the bag?" he said.

"Why?"

"Because you pissed in my Cheerios when you bought that bag in, because I know it means bullshit is about to begin spewing out of your mouth because you can't pay rent and want to trade whatever it is in that bag for your share. I mean, Jesus Christ, Smokes. I haven't seen rent from you since I moved in," Tommy said, all nonchalant like.

"Alright. Alright. That's fair," I said, but didn't really believe. I say once the goddamn landlord moves in with you, you've already paid your rent. "But still, you *gotta* check this shit out."

He looked up from the magazine with a face that was intended to call my bullshit. I didn't cave so he gave me one more look and then dug into the bag. Tommy pulled out the skull and turned it in his hand so his eyes looked at its eyes and its eyes looked at his.

"What the hell?" he said.

"Plus..." I threw the bag of grass on the top of his magazine. "One ounce of California Hydroponic."

"Is this real?" Tommy asked, still checking out the skull.

"Look at how green this shit is Tommy," I said and tossed around the weed. "I'm talking top shelf."

"Where the hell did you get this?"

"What? The skull?" I asked him.

"Yeah, the skull."

"An acquaintance of mine," I said, meaning a buyer. "He stole it from a cadaver before getting kicked out of medical school."

"No shit, huh. Well, fuck. I'll take it," Tommy said, and just like that we were straight with rent. I should have kept the grass in my pocket. He hadn't even looked at it.

"Can you take it upstairs? I'm gonna close in like fifteen minutes."

"Yeah sure," I said and reached for the skull and the bag of weed, hoping it wasn't too late to save it for myself.

Tommy's hand landed on mine. "I'll hold onto that. Take the skull upstairs."

"Alright man. No problem," I told him. I took the skull and headed for the back stairway.

"And get my Happy Tree Guy bong out. In my dresser, third one down on the right side, next to the box of lithium batteries."

I went upstairs with the skull in hand and opened the door of what until recently had been my apartment. But it wasn't my apartment anymore. It was Tommy's junk museum. I just happened to sleep there. He gathered things he liked as if he were a squirrel stuck in an eternal November. Most of it was shit. Some of it was cool. A lot more of it was cool when it was crammed into *his* apartment instead of mine. Tommy was what shrinks call obsessive/compulsive. He didn't clean things or wash his hands all the time, and when he organized things they were organized in such a way that only he would know. The apartment looked like a garbage dump, but ask Tommy where he kept his stuffed and mounted woodchuck and he could give you longitude and latitude down to the centimeter. Me? I can't remember where I put my keys five minutes ago.

Collecting was Tommy's big compulsion, though. Everything else in his life served his one drive, especially the pawn shop. So that's how I knew he would jump on the skull. It was just too fucking cool to pass up.

I got Tommy's bong out of the drawer next to the batteries and went into the small living room that was even smaller with all the crap Tommy had filled it with. I cleared off a bunch of foreign coins, all from countries that no longer existed, and put the bong and skull down next to each other on the coffee table. I hit a switch and a dozen neon beer signs began to twitch to life on the walls. I sat down on the couch and stared into the eyeless sockets of death's head bathed in the neon light.

"You sure it's real?" Tommy asked. I hit his bong and nodded. "It's so white."

Still holding in my breath I said, "Worms."

"Huh?"

"They put it in a tub of dirt and night crawlers. The worms eat off all the flesh

and hair, skin, and cartilage from the nose and ears,” I told him. “Then sometimes they bleach it. Either chemically or by the sun.”

“Fucking aye right. It’s so clean, so real.” He hit the bong and he passed it back.

We sat stoned and fixated on the skull. It’s fucked up how seducing a piece of bone could be, but it was seductive, and it had us encompassed in its hollow eyes and nose, under its smooth but cracked white dome. We were smoking weed but its bone meal could have been coke.

“Who’s they?” Tommy asked, suddenly breaking the silence.

“Who’s who?” I asked.

“They. You said ‘They’ feed its flesh to worms. Who’s ‘they’?”

“Oh. Those ‘they.’ I don’t think I want to tell you,” I said back.

“What? Why the hell not?”

“Cause the way you are. The way you...just, you know, cause of the way you are.”

“What the fuck does that supposed to mean? You better tell me now. After saying some shit like that you are definitely going to tell me.”

I looked at him like I didn’t want to tell him but didn’t want to argue about it either. I sighed. “Collectors.”

“What kind of collectors?” he asked.

“I don’t fucking know, man. Like sick rich and eccentric collectors. The things go for big bucks on the black market, at least that’s what the guy who gave me this one said. They, whoever ‘they’ are, steal them or kill somebody for them, clean them up and then auction them off for top dollar.”

“No shit huh? So why’d he give it to you?”

“Said he couldn’t move it. I don’t know. He was probably lying off his ass just so I’d take it,” I told Tommy.

“You know how much they go for?” Tommy asked.

“No idea,” I told him.

“Huh,” he said and then turned back to those entrancing void-of-eyes that fronted the skull.

“Lucy still has your surround sound,” I said. This was maybe five or ten minutes later.

“Lucy can go fuck herself,” Tommy said.

“No problem there,” I said.

I think Tommy’s ex-girlfriend, Lucy, tried to drive him as nuts as she had become. The two were polar opposites. He was oddly and compulsively organized. He plotted, collected, schemed, and calculated losses and gains. Lucy was loose, spontaneous, sporadic and... did I say loose? She was loose in the purse, loose in the pants and way loose in the head. The shitty thing about her was that you’d think somebody like that would be pretty chilled and mellow, but Lucy was wound up. I swear she was only in Tommy’s life to drive him crazy so she’d have someone just as crazy as her to bounce off the padded walls with.

Tommy wanted something like a trophy wife. Not that he ever wanted an

actual wife. He didn't want a commitment. He wanted to own her, possess her, collect her. Lucy was fine as hell and Tommy knew it. And he knew everybody else knew it too, and Tommy liked having what other guys wanted but couldn't have.

Although they saw this as the perfect grounds for a healthy relationship, this led to obvious conflicts and chaos. Eventually Lucy told Tommy to kiss her ass, bought a webcam and started broadcasting her more intimate self to anyone with a computer and a spare \$4.99 a month. Just like that every swinging dick willing to stick it in a hot chick in front of a webcam had Tommy's once exclusive possession. Not to mention the untold number of dudes enjoying the events from home. And if that wasn't bad enough, the digital era itself stuck a thorn in Tommy's side. See, although each session was broadcasted by Lucy and bought by dozens of strangers no physical item, product, or even cash ever changed hands. She was live streamed to her subscribers so Tommy couldn't even download her. I think the fact that he couldn't even collect and gather and own the recordings of Lucy's pussy working like an oil well drove him absolutely insane more than anything else.

After a few weeks Lucy's website went twenty four hours and she invited another pussy to share the apartment that was once Tommy's. These days there was a constant show in the apartment, whether it be guy-on-girl, girl-on-girl, guy-on-girl-on-girl, or just girl-on-herself. So when I said to Tommy that Lucy would have no problem fucking herself there was a lot of truth in it.

"Fuck you, Smokes. Who asked you anyway? You think I don't know she still has my surround sound?"

Here was another way Lucy peevd Tommy. *She* still had some of *his* stuff, most notably his Bose surround sound system.

"Yeah, but she bought a new system now. Got it all hooked up, but your speakers are still hanging on the walls. Her new one are just sitting in the Styrofoam."

"That fucking cunt," Tommy said. "When was this?"

"Today when I was making my rounds," I said. "I told Lucy that it was fucked up, but she didn't care."

Which was a load of shit. I didn't even see Lucy. When I came by Jen opened the door. Jen was Lucy's co-star in their fuckumentary. She was wearing a silk Japanese robe opened at the front so me and anybody walking down the hall could see her goods. She had a dildo pushed against her lips and a look on her face that asked, "Who do I get to fuck now?"

"Hey Smokezies," she said. Jen was just as hot and as crazy as Lucy, maybe even crazier. "What's up?"

When she talked she always spoke in that half-sweet half-slut tone. The sight and sound of her made me mute and immobile for a handful of seconds.

"Um... am I... uh... interrupting anything?"

"Oh no. I was just doing horoscopes for the website. We do that for members now." She wagged the vibrator around when she talked like a normal person would with a ballpoint pen. "Come in here, Smokes. It's been a few days, and never mind this," she said and held up the dildo for me to see. "The stimulation helps with reading the stars."

Most people use a telescope, but whatever.

We walked inside the apartment and I shut the door behind me. The place was decorated in satin, silk and pop stars like Marilyn Monroe and Miley Cyrus. Candles hung from the walls and sat on the furniture burning away and pumping fragranced smoke into the air. I got the feeling that the whole place was layered in stage dressings, and the webcams hanging from almost every ceiling corner told me I was right. This wasn't an apartment. This was a peepshow booth.

Then Jen stopped walking, pivoted around and gave me a mischievous look as she heard the dildo between her tits. Then she said to me, "Hey Smokes, you know, you could give me a hand figuring out these horoscopes."

The next thing I knew I was on my back and Jen was riding me like I was Sagittarius.

"Mmmm...Gemini will have good financial luck this month. Oooh yeah! Mmmm. Risky choices will be...ahhh...rewarded!"

"Oh fuck yeah!"

"And Taurus...ooooh...Taurus should stay away from Pisces this month. Yeah. Pisces is sooo bad. Mmmm. So bad. Oh fuck yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah! Oh god yes, ooh."

Then she rolled to her side and put me on top.

"Now it's your turn."

"Ah, um." What the hell did I know about the horoscopes? I didn't even know my own sign. How could I make predictions about other people's signs? But I sure wasn't going to end this game over a little technicality. "Yeah, um Sagittarius is going to win the lottery."

"Oh yeah? Mmmm...tell me more!"

"Leo is going to get fired from his job."

"Ooooh, I like it!"

"Yeah?"

"Yeah! Fuck yeah!"

"And uh..." Had to think of another sign. "And uh...Libra! Libra is going to get fucking choked to death!"

"What!?" And just like that she threw me off of her and onto the floor. "I'm a Libra you fucking asshole!"

"Huh?"

"Get the fuck outta my apartment you stupid fucking stoner son of a bitch!" She threw a pillow at me and I just managed to duck it.

"Does that mean you don't want to buy anything?"

As soon as I said that her whole hateful demeanor changed and, quite nicely, she said. "Yeah. What do you got?"

That was Jen. I couldn't get Tommy to believe it, but I knew she was crazier than Lucy would ever be.

I did notice the new surround sound system plugged into Tommy's old speakers, but I actually never saw Lucy, like I told Tommy, and therefore couldn't tell her a thing. I was too busy reading horoscopes and selling dope to go track down

Lucy and give her shit about Tommy's stuff.

"I'm going there tomorrow morning," Tommy said as the two of us sat, smoked, and stared at the skull. "I hate that fucking bitch...both those fucking bitches."

The next morning was Sunday. Sometime around 9 or 10 in the morning I did a little wake and bake, grabbed a 40 of Steel Reserve and went up to the roof of our building.

Tommy was already up there sitting in one of two camping chairs we kept up there. He had his own 40 of Steel Reserve in one hand and his skull tucked under his other arm like a running back with a football. I went and sat down next to him, cracked open the beer and tossed the cap over the side of the building.

"What's up?" I said.

He shook his head, meaning no, and then took back a swig of beer. After that he put the 40 between his legs and ran his fingers over the top of his skull. "Some skinhead was knocking on the shop door a few hours ago. I didn't let him in but...God, he had a perfectly shape skull. Perfectly round, not bumped or pointed or peaked. His skull was perfect."

The way Tommy talked was almost lustful and part of me was afraid for this early-rising pawn shop shopping skinhead. It was as if the last thing Tommy had wanted to say was, "I wanted it," but had stopped himself. I didn't know what to say back to my friend, so I drank my beer and kept my mouth shut.

"You know what else I was thinking?" Tommy asked and I shrugged my shoulder to tell him that I truly and honestly had no idea.

"You know the way that chick's heads protrude from the back of the neck? You know how it bulbs out from the neck like that...like when chicks wear ponytails you can really see it...that shit is sexy as hell. I love the way chicks heads are shaped. Guys' skulls aren't like that. Only chicks."

A lot of people go to church on Sunday morning and worship God. Tommy and I kept the Sabbath too; it was just the roof of our building instead of a church, and we didn't really worship any one thing in particular. We drank 40s, looked across the city and the river that split it, enjoyed the fresh air, and praised the fact that we had nowhere else to be. This Sunday held an orange overcast that dulled the sun's brightness. It was ten in the morning but the sun hadn't burnt through the clouds and smog enough to make it seem any later than six AM. Mornings like those were made to be worshipped alongside of our city and our 40s. But I think Tommy was worshipping something else that day. Something sacrilegious.

He was still petting the skull and staring at nothing. He was in one of those obsessive moods of his. Something was out of place in his mind. He needed something he didn't have. His collection was incomplete and he wouldn't be happy, wouldn't be ready to worship until it was.

I was going to ask to borrow some money from him, but as a rule I don't ask things from people when they're already in a funk.

Then Ke\$ha started up...from Tommy's surround system just a floor below us.

I didn't say a thing. All the muscles tightened on Tommy's face. Tommy had had something in his craw before the music started but now, as the pop queen burst into the chorus of her #1 hit that would stick in all our heads for the rest of the day, he became straight up old-fashioned pissed off. I tried not to look at him, tried to drink my beer like nothing had happened, and tried not to hear that damn song. It was ten in the morning and those bitches were cranking that shit.

"Saw some dude come into the building a few minutes ago," Tommy finally said. "Some nerdy looking punk with a mullet."

He shook his one head and petted the other.

"Fuck this shit," he said. "I'm getting my speakers back."

With that said Tommy put his 40 down on the roof's gravel surface. He stood up and placed the skull back down on the seat of the chair so it could look over the city. Then he headed off towards the staircase we had come up by.

"And don't mess with my skull Smokes," he said and then left.

I sat where I was. I listened to the pop song blare out of the speakers and waited for Tommy to end the noise. I looked down at the skull next to me.

The skull had no jaw bone and no mandible so it couldn't grin or smile. Still, it displayed an expression of knowing something that I didn't. It was an expression of unattainable experience and solid undeniable truth. It said, "I am truth. I am real. I am your destiny and the final answer to your every question. I am unavoidable. Some day you will be me, but that someday isn't today and therefore you cannot know what I know."

It said, "You don't want me to be here. You don't want to see me here. You don't want to be me and you don't want to know what I know. You don't want to know what evil thoughts I have put into your friend's mind, but you soon will."

The music kept playing and hidden behind it I think might have been the sounds of some chick in sexual ecstasy.

I waited through that first song and then through the elusive and rarely heard second song on the pop album. Then the third song started up. All the while I fought the need to look over at the skull next to me. It sat there so smug, gratified by its exclusive knowledge and its ability to creep me the fuck out.

Then I exhaled a long breath and wiped the sweat off my forehead that I had no rational reason for sweating. Or maybe there was a reason, and maybe I knew exactly what that skull knew.

Tommy opened the door leading up to the roof from the staircase and I jumped, spilling beer on my lap.

"Smokes," he called to me from where he was, half in and half out of the door. "Hurry up man. I need some help."

"What's up?" I asked as I slowly got out of the chair and put down my beer.

"Hurry the fuck up already! Seriously, I need some help with this shit so fucking move it already," Tommy said.

I hesitated for a few more seconds, which was just enough time to look back down at the skull and its all-knowing eyes.

Tommy led me downstairs to the landing just outside of Lucy and Jen's

apartment. Jen's dead body laid there. Ke\$ha was louder just outside the door, and so was Lucy, screaming like a pig for her most recent mullet-headed co-star. When Jen died, she was wearing a skimpy schoolgirl outfit around her hips and tits and a black and blue choker of bruises around her throat.

"What the fuck did you do Tommy?" I asked even though I knew the answer.

"I killed the bitch; what the fuck's it look like? Grab her arms. We gotta get her outta here."

I don't know. Just what exactly is a guy supposed to do when his best friend asks him to help move a dead body? I guess there's a different answer for everybody. Situation dictates. Me? I lifted my eyebrows and went around the body to grab her armpits. Tommy grabbed her ankles and began leading the way down the stairs to our place.

"Hey, Smokes," Tommy said while we carried her and he grinned. "Ever seen a dead bitch's cooter?"

And again I had absolutely zilch for a response. "Damn, Tommy. I thought you were just going to get your speakers."

"Yeah, well, I came down to get my speaker, and then this slut opens the door. I say, 'Where's Lucy? I wanna talk to Lucy.' Then she says, 'Lucy's a little tied up right now. Actually a *lot* tied up.' And that's when I hear her fucking that mullet-headed son-of-a-bitch in our old bedroom and by what this whore was saying that motherfucker had her bound and gagged like it's Abu fucking Grab in there. So I say 'Whatever bitch. I'm taking my speakers.' I go in there, right? And sure as shit just like you said they got a whole new system all wired up, but with my speakers on the wall and theirs were still sitting in a box. Then she starts going off on me, telling me how I can't take them, she needs them to read her fucking horoscope and that they're not even mine anyway. And fucking aye man when she said that shit I just lost it.

"I said to her, 'Listen here bitch. You ain't shit to me. You're not some Hollywood porn star. You're not an astrologist. You're not even a real lesbian. You're just some porno-party-fuck-bag lesbian, you cunt-licking poser pussy eating fraud!

"And that's when she attacked me like I was a fuckin' gazelle or some shit. She jumped on me and started clawing at me and hitting me. She was going for my eyes man! It was fucked up!"

By then we'd reached the apartment's door. Tommy stopped talking and let go of one ankle so he could open the door. She tilted to the one side and as Tommy popped open the door one of Jen's dead tits popped out from her undersized school girl shirt. Tommy didn't notice. We brought her in, I kicked the door closed behind us and we put her down in the middle of the living room floor.

"So yeah, she's flipping, scratching me, trying to gouge out my eyes right? So, I grab the thing closest to me and end up choking the bitch with a rope of big black anal beads."

"No fucking way," was all I currently had in my vocabulary.

"I didn't try to kill her. It was her fault for going after me like some kind of starving raccoon. If she just would have let me have my damn stereo..."

"No fucking way."

“Way dude. Fucking look at her.”

I did. “Should we call the cops?”

“Dude! Fucking look at her! They’re not going to believe any self-defense B.S. I’m going to look like some sick twisted pedophilia sadist! Call the cops? Shit Smokes, I just murdered this bitch!”

“So, what the fuck are we gonna do?”

Tommy didn’t say anything. He put his chin in his palm and stared down at Jen. She had a series of little round bruises encircling her neck, a bruise for each anal bead. Her hair was in pigtails but pulled loose a bit. The knot tying up the front of her white school uniform top was still tied, but like I said her left tit was flopped out and it looked like an eyeball fixed to the ceiling with a death stare, just like her other two eyes. I could see, just like Tommy said, that she wasn’t wearing panties under the plaid mini-skirt. One of her knee-high socks was pulled down to her ankle. She looked like a rape victim just as much as a murder victim. And then I knew, probably knew all along, that nobody was calling the cops.

“I want her skull,” Tommy said the words I knew he eventually would.

“What about the body?” I said, surprised by my own lack of surprise.

“Throw it in the incinerator. I’ll clean it out, sift out anything incriminating and incinerate whatever is left again,” Tommy said. The building did have an incinerator, and it was up to Tommy alone to maintain and clean it.

“What about Lucy?”

“I don’t know. We’ll have to make up some story about Jen leaving town. Regardless, that bitch ain’t keeping my surround sound,” Tommy said.

“What about the website?”

“Fuck,” Tommy said. It wasn’t the kind of answer I was looking for. “We’ll figure that out later. Help me lop her head off first, will ya?”

That wasn’t the answer I was looking for either.

When Tommy moved in with me he hung a painting of the Lord’s Supper over the kitchen sink. Like I said before, Tommy was never the religious type. An old lady brought it into the pawnshop one day, and Tommy gave her ten bucks for it. She sold it because she said she was looking at it one day and realized that there were thirteen disciples sitting around the Lord instead of the usual twelve Leonardo had painted. She said she got it at an antique store for forty dollars and now that she realized it was errored she’d be glad to take twenty for it.

Tommy took it, hung it up in the pawnshop with a fifty dollar price tag on it. Then he noted the painter’s name and looked it up on the internet.

Antonio Shrack was a leader in the Satanic Church during the 1960’s. He had re-painted a variety of famous Christian works of art in his own blasphemous way; i.e. Adam was giving God the finger... David had a boner... Jesus had thirteen disciples with blood to drink and flesh to eat. Also, in the re-dux of Da Vinci’s classic, it was the Christ holding the little bag of thirty pieces of silver instead of Judas.

As soon as Tommy had read this, he took the painting out of the pawnshop and put it into his own collection. Now Tommy was as much a Satanist as he was a

Christian or anything else. It's just that the painting had a story. Stories turn junk into collectable gold.

It's fuck up to imagine how many times that lady prayed the "Our Father," underneath that twisted Leonardo remake.

We sawed off Jen's head with a Ginsu knife underneath that painting. The kitchen sink caught the blood, and there was a lot of it. If we would have left the strainer in the drain I bet we would have filled the basin half way up with blood. It was more than I ever thought I could handle, but once we started I just kind of did what came next, and before we knew it Jen's head was lying in the bottom of the sink and her body was on the floor with towels plugging up the neck. She twitched and kicked some when we went through the spinal cord, but that didn't last long and Tommy did most of the cutting anyways.

The head sat in the sink, under the painting, while Tommy and I moved the body down the stairs and into the basement boiler room. The incinerator was there and we crammed what was left of Jen through the door. Then Tommy fired it up.

Meanwhile the evil Christ Judas glared down at the decapitated head of Jen the Slut. I never noticed it before but he had the same expression on his face that Tommy's Skull did: arrogance and knowledge, wisdom and cynicism, joyful hate.

On the roof, the skull still sat in what was once me and Tommy's church. It soaked up the morning sun next to our 40's of Steel Reserve, basking in its own knowledge. All the while the sickening fumes of burning flesh and garbage pumped up in plumes out of the incinerator's chimney. The incense of a crematorium filled the air.

The head stayed in the sink while Tommy and I mopped up the blood, changed clothes, took showers and in general cleaned up the crime scene. When that was done he turned to me.

"Okay man. You gotta go up and talk to Lucy," he said.

I held my ear to our ceiling. Ki\$ha had ended her insistent babble but I thought I might have heard Lucy's "Soundtrack for S&M Porn" still spinning.

"And say what?"

"Tell her Jen's grandma died and she had to leave town," Tommy said.

"Simple lies are the best lies."

"And what are you gonna do?"

"I'm buying a worm farm."

So just like that Tommy left me in an apartment room that used to be mine, but now belonged to him with a rotting and de-bodied head, and Jesus Iscariot. I have to admit; I was starting to get crept out.

When Tommy had cut the main cables in Jen's neck it pulled all her muscles taut and her eyeballs wide open. So what was left of Jen was a bloody melon and a surprised face. Her eyes bulged out as if the side of the sink was the most interesting thing a pair of eyes had ever seen. Blood and spinal fluid were still leaking out of the neck and running down the drain by way of a little red and orange river. The Evil Jesus and his dedicated thirteen disciples presided over the draining head with little Mona Lisa like smiles.

I had to get out of there.

I stepped out of the apartment with the idea of going to the roof in my head. Then I remembered that the skull was still up there. Then I thought of the stench that had snuck out of the incinerator door and realized that the entire roof was most likely perfumed in “Essence de Crematorium.”

Then I thought of the next floor down from the roof, Lucy’s apartment, and Tommy’s instructions.

When I got to the apartment door I heard Lucy still crying out like a rat with its ass in a fire.

“Fuck that,” I said out loud.

So, I went downstairs, determined to spend the rest of the time that Tommy was out shopping for worms in the pawn shop. I left the head behind.

It was Sunday and the shop was closed. The only light was the light of day coming through the front windows. I took my spot behind the counter at the back of the shop. The light coming from the street painted a thousand shadows behind a thousand different bits of junk hanging on the walls, and each shadow reached back towards me like the fingers of a leafless tree and between those fingers could have been a thousand sets of watching eyes or a thousand ghosts lurking out of each artifact that entombed them.

I shook my head and looked down telling myself to get a grip. That’s when I saw the little Libra necklace in the glass case underneath me. About a half hour ago it has been Jen’s. About fifteen minutes ago it had fallen to the kitchen floor since there was no longer a head above it to keep it in place. Now Tommy had it down here, ready to be bought cheap. Surrounding the necklace along with several other pieces of discarded jewelry, were a dozen or so handguns. I actually thought of snatching one and stuffing it in the back of my pants, you know, just for safety, but the case was locked. It was probably for the better, but telling myself that didn’t help to calm my nerves.

What did calm my nerves was the dugout full of weed I smoked right there behind the counter. At first I was just a little more paranoid, but I kept at it until my brain had been smoked into a soft and numb submission.

When Tommy came back he had a tan Styrofoam box that said “Magic Worm Farm!” He looked at me once and said, “What are you minding the store now?”

I laughed, but since Tommy walked so fast through the pawn shop and up the stairwell with such a sense of purpose I didn’t have the mind or the time to say anything else.

“D’you call that bitch and tell her Jen’s grandma died yet?” he called down the stairs after he was already past me.

“Uh...” My slow stupid brain-gears turned with a clocks pace. “Huh huh. No.”

“Good. I’ll do it,” Tommy called down. Then he mumbled something about having something to say to her anyway.

By the time I got back into the apartment the head was safely stowed away in

its magic worm cooler. Tommy was on the phone, yelling at Lucy. It was something about having to listen to TV from the tiny-ass built in TV speakers. From what I gathered Lucy was taking the grieving route and going on about how he could worry about speakers at a time like this with Jen just lost her grandma. She called Tommy heartless.

If she only knew.

Tommy yelled some more, calling her a thieving, disease seeping cunt and then hung up.

Meanwhile I sort of absent-mindedly slumped down into the chair in front of the computer. Tommy was standing next to me by the wall phone. He looked down at me.

“That webcam shit has me worried man, no bullshit,” which was probably the sanest thing he’d said in a week.

I didn’t say anything, but did start to mess with our PC.

“I mean, if some jerk off old man saw me choke that bitch, fucking forget it. We’re through,” he said. I raised my eyebrows when he said “we”, but kept at what I was doing all the while. “But seriously though, how many old farts are so garbanzo about beating off they’d be tuned into those bitches on a Sunday morning? Not to mention the freak show going on in the bedroom. If some sick twist was logged on he had to have been watching Lucy, not me and that pussy-for-hire,” Tommy said and hitched a thumb towards the worm farm. “I think we’re good bro. I think we’re in the clear.”

He smiled, and then, since I didn’t really smile back he said, “Nobody saw me dude.”

“This guy did,” I said and stuck a finger to the computer screen.

Tommy frowned and then looked at what I was looking at.

About three months ago, not long after the historic Tommy/Lucy break up. I got a pound of Alaskan Blue weed. The shit was primo stuff, big buds, bluish-greenish leaves, little crystals all over, I mean fucking primo.

So, of course, all my best buyers are broke, namely Lucy. She had some money but not a lot and I wasn’t letting go of Alaskan Blue for cheap. So we bartered and she got what she wanted and I got what I had wanted, a few bucks and complete free and total access to her website. Righteous.

Back then the website had been pretty bare bones, or bare breasts if you prefer, but now it was full service, complete with horoscopes, newsletter, merchandise, and message board. That’s where I found mister lendog48@webmail. This guy was a witness to murder; so what did he do? He posted a few lines on a porn site’s message board. A real hero in action this guy was.

“Did anyone catch Jenny Sunday morning? Awesome snuff scene. Looked real. Wasn’t real, was it? Why didn’t he fuck her, though?”

“Who the fuck is he?” Tommy asked me like I fucking knew, through grinding teeth.

Still, it was easy enough to find out. When Lucy hooked me up she was too impatient and too eager to burn the Alaskan Blues man to actually get me my own username and password, so she just gave me her username and password. And just like that I had access to everything from free pics to member's billing information.

"Leonard DeChezawitz. 1410 Irving St. Apt 7 in Springfield. Local boy," I said. The website still got most of its cash from local advertising and word of mouth. Springfield was only about an hour away. "A member since December 01. Maybe it was a Christmas present..."

"Tommy?"

He was grabbing his keys and wallet off the counter. I noticed this time, that he grabbed the keys to the pawn shop display cases too.

"Leonard's about to have a real bad fucking day," he said. I think this was the first time I'd fully seen his temper and rage. "I hate this website shit. I'll make a website out of his fucking entrails!"

Tommy slammed the door. The facts came slowly to my stoned brain, but they were clear all the same: Tommy had written down the address; he was going to take Leonard's skull; I had just signed a man's death warrant.

I guess I should have felt bad about that, but with all things said and done, I've done worse.

What was really on my mind was how sincerely pissed off Tommy was at ol' Lenny for joining a porn website that happened to star Tommy's ex. If you knew Tommy, it's not that surprising really. After all, Leonard had something Tommy didn't, and there was nothing Tommy hated more than that. What really had my baked brain in a trap was the fact that I had what Leonard had and never told him about it.

I hoped that Tommy would realize that I had also saved his ass from a prison sentence before he stretched my guts across the apartment in a spider web-like pattern.

If I had been Tommy, maybe I would have fixated on that, obsessed over it, let it eat at me till I was insane. But I wasn't Tommy. I was Smokes and Smokes had a motto he lived by.

"Fuck it."

I found Tommy's Happy Tree Guy bong and what was left of his sunny CA hydro. I sparked it up and stared at the ceiling and lived by my motto.

Sometime later I realized I was still logged onto Lucy's website. I tapped the mouse which turned off the screensaver and gave me a shitty image of the empty living room. There were buttons next to the image of the living room labeled Camera 1, Camera 2, and so on up to Camera 9. I started clicking through these and as I did the main window switched to different point-of-views throughout the apartment. The kitchen was empty. As it turned out I found Lucy in the bathroom.

I never understood the whole voyager porn thing. I never understood dudes who got their jollies by watching girls pee. I don't dig fetishes and I think these web-cam sites like Lucy's are for cowardly old men who never grew out of being a peeping tom. Don't get me wrong. I like porn. I just don't dig on porn that requires

me to have some kind of complex just to enjoy it. Call me old fashion.

I watched Lucy sit on the pisser with the same kind of mild interest I paid to sitcoms or reality TV. I casually observed, but others out there were out there watching the same thing with bulging eyes, erect dicks and sweating foreheads. All the while Lucy sat and peed and examined her fingernails for chips and cracks.

She was naked, and I guessed by the sound of running water upstairs that she was about to take a shower. Still she didn't look like she was supposed to be sexy. She looked bored, melancholy, lonely. Really I just felt bad for her, not horny.

But that was just me. I looked at the screen and imagined an apartment in Springfield: some dirty unkept bachelor-of-forty type place. And I imagined that Leonard DeChezawitz was sitting there at his computer looking at the same thing I was looking at and getting all excited. He was into it, into every movement, gesture and pose of the girl sitting on the throne clipping her toenails. He was just as obsessed as Tommy was with his skulls. He studied Lucy closer than any person ever would. He was jerking off and getting close to popping his champagne cork.

And there I was, stoned as Marley, watching half of it in my head and half of it on the screen. There was Lucy, bored, lonely and undignified. Leonard was watching her. Then came Tommy creeping up behind him with a loaded gun in his hand. The door to the apartment was broken in. Leonard was unaware; raptured in the screen, in Lucy's bathroom. Tommy aimed at his back, but was looking at his skull.

Then Tommy pumped three rounds through Leonard's back, heart, chest and screen.

That's how I imagined it went down. I guess we'll never know exactly how right I was.

I was still watching Lucy as she wiped, flushed and climbed into the shower. If I had wanted to I could have switched from Camera 8 to Camera9 and watched her bathe. I shut the damn thing off instead, half believing that if I didn't Tommy would instant message me from lendog48@webmail.com's account and say, "dude I need you to buy me another worm farm."

I took a few more hits off the bong and then went over to the couch and laid down. Within a few minutes I crashed underneath the neon glow of a half dozen different beer signs with the head of the girl living upstairs still resting in the sink.

I woke up to the sound of loud knocking on the door. Immediately two things jumped into my head: It's dark outside; and the cops are here. I sat up as soon as I woke up, and now I stayed perfectly still in that exact position, hoping I dreamt the knocking.

Then they pounded on the door again, loudly and impatiently. Knock, knock.

"Who's there?" I called because if I didn't, I figured they'd bust down the door.

"Orange-ya Glad-ta-see-me, motherfucker. Now open the goddamn door." It was Tommy, the son of a bitch.

"Hold on," I said. I got up and opened the door, initially glad to see that it was him. Then I spotted the brown Styrofoam Magic Worm Farm. It looked full.

"Couldn't reach my keys," he said and brought the third skull into the

apartment. "Shut the door, will ya?"

I did and while I did he put the head-cooler down on the kitchen counter. The other one was there too, full of night crawlers hungry for Jen's head. Tommy bent his face down to the sink, and then quickly brought it back up.

"Phew! This bitch is even nastier *without* her pussy," he said. "I didn't think that was possible."

"Fucking shit, Tommy. You fucking killed that son of a bitch, didn't you?" I asked, knowing the answer. "You fucking killed him and chopped off his fucking head!"

Tommy laughed. "Yeah. I guess I did, huh?"

"No shit you did! Fuck man!"

"Yeah... Fuck. Chopped *both* their heads clean off."

"Fuck, man," I said calming down, hoping he was thinking a little more clearly.

"Well..." he said with some resolve in his voice. "Sucks to be them, huh?"

And as far as it went with Tommy, that was that.

"Hey, I could use a hand stripping this other skull," he told me. "I already did Lenny's but if we don't get that stinky bitch's head in a box we're not going to have a place to do dishes."

"Strip it?" I asked.

"Yeah. Strip it, clean it, gut it, shell it, husk it, whatever."

"You gutted that guy's skull?"

"Yeah. I took his gray matter and flushed it down the tubes to his brown matter," Tommy said with a smile. "If you can just hold onto it I'll do all the cutting. I took a wicked sharp fillet knife from old Len dog's apartment. Filleted his melon up quick!"

"I don't know man. I think I might get queasy over something like that," I said. One thing was for sure: This was a hell of a way to wake up.

"Hey, don't puss out on me now, man. We're in this together whether you like it or not. 'Sides you held her shoulders when we took off her head and that makes you two things. The first is an Accomplice to Murder and the second is an experienced butcher." Tommy had the fillet knife now, and he had it pointed at my face. "Now I need some help here buddy..." He smiled. "So get the fuck over here."

Go ahead and call me a coward, but the dude with the wicked sharp fillet knife pointed at me had already chopped off two heads that day, so let's just say I wasn't too eager to piss him off.

"Alright. Fine. What do I need to do?"

"Just hold her, maybe by the pigtails. Watch out so I don't cut you."

It took the worms two full days to clean the skulls. On Wednesday morning when Tommy took them out they were dry, bone white, and free of any flesh. Even the cartilage inside the nose cavity was gone. I have to say that Tommy's work was of professional quality. The two craniums he cleaned looked just as good as the one I had given him.

I found myself looking at them, studying them, and comparing all their different features. I could see Jen's face in her skull. I could tell the shape of her

nose and cheeks by the angles of the bone. I imagined her smooth forehead over the brow above the empty eye sockets. An anthropologist would have had to look at the shape of the back of the skull to pick out the female from the two males, but I didn't have to. I *recognized* that skull. I guess, if I had to pick a favorite out of Tommy's collection it would have to be Jen's skull.

I know this is fucked up, but Tommy's obsession, his lust, his fervent possession of the skulls was infectious. A normal person would have been freaked out. A normal person would have called the cops on his ass. I'm not a normal person.

Still, I didn't like the killings. I did not like and was not comfortable with the fact that the guy I lived with was capable of taking a life on a little more than a whim. That bothered me more than the fact that he carried the skulls wherever he went. That bothered me more than the fact he had pawned off Leonard's fillet knife on Tuesday afternoon. It even bothered me more than Jesus Iscariot, which had really started to creep me out since Sunday night. Maybe it was in my mind, but that bastard seemed to enjoy watching over our wet and bloody work more than any painting was capable of. Having said that, I think maybe you can dig how much it bothered me when I caught Tommy sizing up my head with his eyes.

Now days, I keep Tommy in front of me. I don't turn my back to him, not even the back of my head, because if I did I know he'd check it out as if it were some hot chick bending over to pick something up off the floor.

Now days, Tommy was sizing up the craniums of every customer who wandered into the pawnshop. He was rude and distant to people with oddly shaped heads and charming and flirtatious with people with nice heads. He'd fawn over his three heads while eyeing a fourth on the other side of the counter. Some people asked him about them. Most just looked at them strangely. Honestly, I think they were bad for sales, but Tommy didn't care.

When somebody would ask about them Tommy would say that they were replicated human skulls made out of ordinary plastic. He said they used them in movies and that they were for sale. One thousand dollars each. God I can't imagine what would have happened if someone had actually coughed up the money.

All the while he was growing greedy for another skull. He talked openly about adding to his collection. When a bitch would leave the store he'd say to me, "Damn Smokes. You see her? I should've tightened a piano wire around her neck till that fucking melon of hers dropped in my lap. Damn. She was fine."

A normal guy would have said something about her ass or her tits, but Tommy talked about her head. Tommy was definitely not a normal guy.

A week past since Tommy exhumed the two skulls from their perspective worm farms. No word from Lucy yet. Each day I worried she'd come down and interrogate us or call the cop, or maybe just straight up recognize her ex-lover's cranium as Tommy cradled it in his arms. Tommy didn't seem to worry. For him, it was business as usual.

On Monday, an old man came in to pawn off a bunch of lawn equipment. He

was tall with a tall and skinny head. His arms were full of tools, but he didn't look like he'd been doing a whole lot of yard work lately.

"Had all this junk crammed into my garage for who-knows-how-long. Haven't used it in ages. Thought I ought to see if I couldn't go and get some money for all of it," he told Tommy.

Tommy looked over the assorted junk and threw out a price for each. "I'll give you thirty five for the mower, ten for the weed eater, ten for the seed thrower, five for the tree pruner, five each for the rake, the shovel, the axe... and five for those hedge clippers too."

I watched all this from behind the counter with fenyng interest. I had the first skull, the one I gave to Tommy, in my hands and it had my attention locked in its eyes. I may have *liked* Jen's skull best, but this skull intrigued me the most. I hated that skull. It was difficult to look at but difficult in a way that I enjoyed. I was drawn to the skull like a masochist to a sadist. I don't exactly know why.

Meanwhile the guy spread his old junk over the counter and Tommy paid him in cash out of the register.

"So what's that ya got there?" the old skinny headed man said. After I looked up I realized he said it to me.

"Uh..." I said.

"That's a human skull," Tommy suddenly piped up and told the old bastard.

"What's that?" the man asked, meaning, "What the shit did you just say?"

"It's a cranium. My boy back here went a little crazy one day and killed some sorry son of a bitch," Tommy said to this guy with a big bullshitter's grin on his face. "Took his skull for a souvenir. You believe that shit?"

"No sir," the old man said with a smile. "Not one word of it."

"Smart man," Tommy told him, but with a little less of a smile this time. To me, it sounded like a threat. To the old man, it sounded like a joke.

Ha ha Tommy. You're a real George Carlin.

All the same the guy put his cash in his wallet and left the pawnshop. Tommy laughed after the door swung shut behind him. I sat exactly where I had been, muted by Tommy's stupidity.

"Man you should see the look on your face," Tommy said, still laughing. "Fucking aye, Smokes. You'd think I'd just sold you out to the god damn F.B.I."

That was the first time I told myself that this bad business with the skulls needed to come to an end, and quick. If it didn't Tommy and I would both be cooking our heels in federal prison. Then I said to myself, "Ol' Smokey ain't going to prison. No fucking way. This shit needs to come to an end."

Meanwhile, Tommy said something about me not having the nerve to play with the big boys. He was still sort of laughing/fucking with me, even while he busied himself stowing the lawn equipment on the floor behind the counter.

I frowned a bit and said, "Fuck you Tommy."

Neither of us saw the skanky looking brunette walk through the pawnshop and up to the counter. She was wearing a tube top over her fake tits, and I didn't see what, (a mini-skirt maybe,) below. Tommy was still grinning to himself, thinking of himself as Sam Kinison incarnate, and putting away the old man's tools when we

both noticed her.

“Hi, Lucy said she was looking for... um... you know, an assistant,” she said and we both looked up at her for the first time. She spoke with a high airy voice, and with an estimated I.Q. of twelve. “Is that opening still available?”

Holy shit. Here we were worried about Lucy calling us out on our lie. We were worried about her asking questions such as: Where’s Jen? What the fuck happened to Jen? How come she never told me about her grandma and what the hell am I supposed to do with all of her shit? We were worried Lucy would go and file a Missing Persons Report.

Instead she placed an ad that read something to the effect of: Replacement Pussy Needed for Lesbian Internet Exploits!

Tommy faltered for a second, gathering together the results of his ex’s actions for a second, just a second. “The opening?” he said. “Yeah, let me check.”

I saw Tommy reach down below the counter and then...

Whack! Just like that Tommy swung the old man’s machete right into her throat. The rusted blade cleaved through her muscle and windpipe and stopped halfway through the spine. Her body sort of stitter stomped a one second jig, and then her head tilted backward so Tommy and I could see her tissue and throat hole. Then she collapsed with the machete still stuck in her neck.

“Booya!” Tommy yelled. “How’s *that* for a fucking opening! Hoo-hoo! We got an opening *now* bitch! Eat it!”

“Holy shit! Holy fucking shit, Tommy!” My body was numb. I could not fucking believe what I just saw. I’d never seen an *alive* person get their head chopped off. There were a thousand different things fighting to come out of my mouth next but all I could manage was, “Holy shit!”

“You see that shit, Smokes? Did you see that shit? Little bitch comes into *my* shop asking me some bullshit like that? Oh fuck no,” he said. Then he leaned over the counter to the dead body sprawled out on the floor. “Fuck no, bitch!”

“Hurry up Smokes. We gotta move this slutty sack of shit before some douchebag comes in selling me his hot boom box.”

I dove deep into my current vocabulary and came up with this gem, “Motherfucker!”

Ever notice how god damn retarded you sound when things get chaotic?

I put the skull down on the counter and went around to help my friend move another dead body. Tommy grabbed her ankles and I grabbed her armpits. Her pits had stubble and dried white deodorant in the folds of skin, which was almost as sick as the way her head swayed back and forth with the long blade still stuck between her vertebrae and the way air bubbles kept coming up from her severed throat like farts as we walked.

We moved her, whoever “she” was, into the back hallway at the foot of the stairs. Then Tommy dropped his half of her.

“Hold on a sec,” he said, and then went back into the pawnshop. He grabbed a “Caution! Wet Floor,” sign from behind the counter, put it over a congealing pool of blood and then came back. Wouldn’t want to get sued by the stereo-fencing douchebags of the world.

We brought the corpse, which had that weird way of twitching every few seconds, into the apartment. We put her body on the kitchen counter and her partially attached head into the sink. Another sacrifice to that perverted demented, and illassociated Christ was on the altar.

“Smokes, I need you to go back down and watch the shop. Get a mop and clean up that blood,” Tommy told me.

“What if somebody comes in?”

“Tell ‘em it’s small engine oil. That old fart brought in a can of Marvin’s Mystery Oil with his weed eater. Tell ‘em its that shit,” he said.

“What are you gonna do?”

Tommy smiled. “I’m getting me another head.”

I went back downstairs and did what I was told like a good little bitch. Hell, I was glad to do it too, because if somebody didn’t sop up the blood and hide the evidence Ol’ Smokes would definitely be in prison. Not to mention that I wanted no part of another head-husking.

I cleaned up the pool and trail she’d drizzled over the floor as we brought her upstairs. Then I poured the blood, Lysol, and water mix down the drain. I left the mop and bucket in the janitor closet and put the “Caution! Wet Floor” sign back over the spot that was now just wet, instead of bloody. I also found the slut/victim’s purse. I dumped the contents, which of course included a vibrator, into the incinerator and put the purse itself up on a shelf in the shop alongside several others.

With that done, I went behind the counter to “mind the shop.” I sat on the stool and took a second to observe an empty, desolate, and quiet pawn shop. Nothing moved. No one came in. No one walked by outside. Not much noise came from upstairs. As of yet the cop cars weren’t surrounding the building with sirens and lights.

“Holy shit,” I said to myself and no one else, besides maybe the skulls and the lurking ghosts hidden amongst the trash. I said it again, regardless of who was listening. “Holy fucking shit.”

This had to come to an end. Tommy had derailed and gone way off the tracks. He’d flipped his lid more than Lucy could have ever hoped for and would have ever wished for. He was a god damn serial killer and the way he was, he could go on forever or until we were both sitting in prison. This shit needed to stop. His collection needed to become complete.

Upstairs, I’m sure Tommy was working away with the Ginzu knife we’d used on Jen. The filet knife was already pawned off. Some broad’s head was dangling over a Satanic Last Supper painting. Jesus Iscariot kept watch over both Tommy and the head.

But really, it wasn’t Jesus that steered him onto his present course of action. It wasn’t Antonio Sharack’s fault. It wasn’t the painting’s fault. It wasn’t Jesus’ fault either. If anything was to blame it was the skull, his first skull, the skull I had given him.

The skull was what had started it, and I knew I had to destroy it to make it all

end. I'm no genius. It took awhile for all the tumblers in my brain to fall into place as I sat there staring at the skull. But soon enough, it all became clear. To end it, to smash it to pieces would get Tommy to finally call his collection complete.

I hopped off the stool and went around the counter. I walked past a hundred silent watching eyes. As I reached one shelf all the eyes hidden there closed tight and fled away. I grabbed a sledgehammer and headed back for the counter. When I got there I picked up the skull, not Leonard's or Jen's skull but the first skull, and put it on the floor. I took two steps back and felt the weight of the maul in my hands.

"Sorry, Alejandro."

Then I brought the sledge hammer down in a tall arch. A smack rang out on contact. Teeth busted out. The dome cracked from front to back. I swung again and split the skull in two. Small chips and chunks scattered out like shrapnel. One piece of bone lodged into my skin. I swung again and broke large pieces into smaller pieces. I shattered the face, the dome, the sides, everything into tiny bits.

I tossed the sledgehammer off to the side. I was out of breath and my hands were tingling. I didn't notice the small piece of bone stabbed into my shin. My head was just thinking about how much what I had done was going to cost me.

Then I ran upstairs.

I went into the apartment and made sure I shut the door behind me. Sure as shit Tommy was working under the supervision of Jesus Iscariot, sawing off the broad's head.

"Tommy man," I said, out of breath. "You gotta talk to your woman, man. She flipped out on me, dude."

"Fuck are you talking about?" he said, pissed off to be interrupted.

"I'm sorry, bro. I tried to stop her but she got one good swing and the thing just fucking shattered!"

"What? What shattered? What the fuck are you talking about?"

"She came down looking for her," I said and pointed to the body on our kitchen counter. "Then she said something about seeing you with the skulls and this and that and about how she fucking hates you and shit."

"Smokes, just tell me what it is she fucking broke," he pleaded.

His face looked like I just told him his first born son had been hit by a truck. Maybe that wasn't so far from the truth.

"That fucking cunt," Tommy said and walked right past me to the door. He left the apartment and slammed the door behind him.

Here we go.

I ran after him and when I caught up to him on the stairs he was muttering, "I didn't want to do this. I didn't want to do it..."

He was still saying that shit when we came into the pawn shop. He saw the handle of the sledge and went straight behind the counter. He didn't even see the two guys hanging out on the other side of the counter.

Bad timing fellas. Come back some other time.

They looked like a pair of college kids. One had a backpack and the other had a visor on turned around backwards and upside down. They were all smiles. They had no idea what they had just walked into.

Meanwhile Tommy stood over the shattered remains of his first skull. I think he might have been having an aneurism.

I saw the two college heroes and shut my eyes and mumbled, "Sons of bitches..."

"Hey. Hey dude," the one with the backpack was saying to Tommy. "Hey man. We're here to see Lucy."

"The internet chick," the other one, the one with the visor said.

Tommy turned his head to look at them, but didn't change his expression of complete and total disbelief. Maybe it wasn't an aneurism. Maybe it was shock.

"Yeah, the internet chick," backpack man said. "What, is she upstairs?"

"We're gonna run on a train on that bitch, yo," Visor man said. Then he said, "Hoot, hoot!" and pretended to pull down on an air horn.

While the kid with the backpack laughed Tommy bent down and picked up the sledge hammer.

I said, "Ah shit."

Then Tommy swung the maul like a Louisville fucking Slugger and caught the backpack kid right on the sweet spot. I heard the crack and I saw the kid's head go all miss-shaped before he dropped. Two damaged cranium in ten minutes; this wasn't a good trend.

"Oh, shit!" the visor kid cried out. He sort of shook and stammered before his brain could decide what to do. Then he bolted for the front door. That was when Tommy drew the loaded and readied handgun from underneath the counter. He put two bullets through the kids back and dropped him to the floor.

I wish I would have known that gun was there earlier.

The visor kid wasn't dead yet and the other kid might have been dead, but I couldn't tell. It didn't much matter anyways. Tommy came around the counter and lined up with the gun. He pumped two bullets through the backpack and into the college hero. If the kid wasn't dead before, he died then. Blood was pouring out all over the floor.

"I just mopped there," I said. I told you before, dumb shit comes out of my mouth when I'm stressed. Okay?

The other kid was still alive and was crying and cursing to beat hell. "Ah shit! Ah fuck man! I'm fucking shot! Aaaaah fuck! Shit!"

Tommy dropped the sledge hammer and found the hedge clippers the old man had brought in earlier. They were the old fashion kind that looked like a really big pair of scissors with two straight handles.

The kid had a selection, but I think Tommy picking up the hedge clipper disturbed him more than his dead friend or the bullet holes in his back.

"Aaaaaah shit! Help me! Somebody help! Shiiiiit!"

Bad fucking timing; that's all I got to say.

Tommy straddled him and slammed the clippers shut over the kids neck. The kid caught one blade with his fingers and the other blade with the meat of his neck. That blade dug in a good inch or two and the other was cutting and burying his fingers into his flesh. Tommy forced the clipper further shut. The kid screamed and groaned and kicked, but really, he was screwed the second he told Tommy he

planned to run a train on Lucy.

Tommy twisted the clipper and turned the kid's head sideways until one handle was pressed against the linoleum. The kid cried out one more time, and then Tommy stomped down on the other handle.

That head, along with a couple fingers came right off. The clippers went "schunk!" and the head rolled. Poor man's guillotine. Fuck. I ain't never seen some shit like that.

Tommy stood there for a few seconds, caught his breath, and looked over his handy work. Then he went over and picked up the kid's head, with visor still in place, by the hair. With clippers in one hand and head in the other, Tommy turned to me and said, "Now where is that fucking cunt?"

Again, call me a coward, but I got the fuck out of Tommy's way and gave him a clear path to the stairs. When he went past me he didn't bother to even look at me. He just carried the head and the hedge clippers straight up the stairs.

I followed him up. He went past our door and up the next flight yelling, "Hoot hoot! All aboard! Here comes the train! Hoot hoooooot!"

I stopped at the landing and ducked into our apartment instead of following Tommy up to Lucy's place. I ran past the dead slut's body, past the painting, past the foreign coins, the beer signs, the stuffed hedgehog, and the bong collection. I went to the computer desk where the telephone hung on the wall. I looked at it once. The numbers 911 flashed in front of my eyes. Then I bumped the computer's mouse. The screensaver turned off and I saw that I was still logged on to Lucy's website.

I switched from Camera 8 to Camera 2 just in time to see Tommy bust open the door.

"Hoot hooooot! Next stop: The Neighborhood of Make-believe! You're gonna die bitch!"

I heard that through the floorboards, so I know it was loud.

When Lucy came around the corner I saw her on the webcam. She was wearing black high heels and some black lingerie that, given the situation, was quite tasteful.

Tommy whipped the head at her. It hit a framed Lindsay Lohan poster and broke the glass. Blood sprayed across Lindsay's face. Lucy screamed. Tommy hooted. Then Lucy picked up a thick black dildo and threw it at Tommy's head. It bounced off Tommy's melon and Lucy made a break for it. She slipped past him and started running down the stairs, screaming. Then I heard Tommy running down after her. When he passed by the door he was yelling, "Chugga chugga chugga chugga..."

I went to the sink, found the machete and headed out the apartment door. When I got to the stairwell I heard Lucy scream and Tommy yell, "Hoot hooooot!"

When I got to the pawnshop, Tommy was right behind Lucy. That's when she broke a heel and fell backwards, right into the blades of the hedge clippers. Tommy chomped them down on her neck and then opened them up to take another cut. Lucy fell to the ground with two huge cuts on either side of her throat. Tommy stood over her and got ready for the kill.

I spotted the handgun he had plugged the decapitated college kid with. I

scooped it out of the pool of blood surrounding the backpack kid's skull. Then I put down the machete.

"This has been a long time coming bitch. Couldn't 've just given back my surround sound, could ya? Ya had to be a bitch about it, didn't ya?" Tommy was saying. "Well here it comes you god damn slut!"

I aimed carefully, right for the middle of his back. He had the hedge clippers raised up in the air. He was one second away from bringing them down and taking her head clean off.

I fired three times. Each shot blew a hole in Tommy's back. He dropped the hedge clippers and then tumbled sideways to the floor.

Lucy was wheezing, crying, and shaking. So she was still alive. I went over to her and looked down at her.

"Oh god. Smokes, thank you so much. He... he... he was going to kill me. You saved my life. Thank you so much," she struggled to say.

She was always very sexy. Even with the gashes in her neck and Tommy's blood speckled over her face. Hell, she was more than sexy. She was beautiful. Her skull would *really* boost the value of the collection.

"Smokes... I... I... I think I need a hospital," she said.

"Sorry, babe. Not tonight," I said and then put two bullets through her chest. It was a damn shame too. She had an amazing rack.

I had to buy three more Magic Worm Farms to accommodate the five fresh skulls I collected that night. I packed a duffel bag with clothes and Tommy's Happy Tree Guy bong, because I always liked that one. I also put Jen and Leonard's skulls inside. I swept up the remains of the first skull into a big ziploc bag and put that in the duffel too.

I called a cab and when that came I loaded the five worm farms into the trunk and told the driver to take me to the nearby commuter airport.

On the way I called my supplier Alejandro and told him I had the collection. He wasn't happy about me smashing the skull he had given me to lure Tommy in, but news of the rest made him forget all about it. Regardless, Alejandro had a pilot and a plane waiting for me when I arrived. I saw the United States for the last time from the window, and I didn't cry any tears.

Gentlemen, I present to you the Collection of Thomas King. It is a nine piece collection including, this manuscript and my sworn authenticity of its integrity, three anonymous skulls, the remains of the skull given to me by Alejandro, the skull of Leonard, the skull of Jen, the skull of Lucy, and the crown piece of the collection: the Skull of Thomas King.

Bidding begins at ten million U.S. dollars. Gentlemen, good luck.