

Feeding the Fire

by Michael J. Allen

Had I any idea that I would behold my future in the eyes of a madman that afternoon, I might have called in sick after lunch.

It was only lunchtime and had been a rough day already. I set aside my fork upon the takeout container now empty of chicken marsala and checked the afternoon's schedule.

Wednesday July 14, 2004 14:00 to 17:00 - Inmate: Pausner, Paul Barrett.

A sigh escaped me. After several minutes search, I excavated a bottle of aspirin and half of an antacid roll from the desk. I chewed four of each - a mixture of biting bitterness and chalky fruit - and gathered up his records.

My feet took me from my office in the administration building, across the lawn and into the prison complex. As they did so, I reviewed the particulars in his file. This was not going to be an easy session. Entering the building, I turned left and headed down a hall to the interview cells. The antiseptic corridor transformed into a vise of glass and metal teeth. Submitting to the standard search, I was once again reminded of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. This time, the thought prompted a sardonic chuckle.

“Good afternoon, Dr. Wong.”

“Hello, Robert, how is your day going?”

“Same as usual, just keeping the animals in their cages.”

It was a familiar refrain, and again, I tried to correct him. “I've told you before, Robert, it's not right to call them animals. It's unhealthy for their personal image. We're trying to help them heal, become productive members of society.”

“Doc, you know who you're here to see right?”

“Mr. Pausner.”

“I rest my case. You're cleared, he is in interview room four.”

Robert escorted me along lines painted on the floor which always reminded me of slot cars, through a set of security doors and into a long drab hall. We joined Steve - an always cheerful guard - in the observation room. Steve's attentions were fixed on the room's occupant beyond a one way mirror. The sour look on his face prompted a frown. I followed his gaze to a little man seated on the table's far side.

I studied him. I'd tried to get into his head in my office, staring into the eyes of his file picture. His guilt was unquestionable, but this man was smaller, meeker than the man in the file. Judged only upon his appearance, no one would have thought the murders hung above his head were within his nature. They'd have been wrong. He wore his fine light brown hair mid-length and parted. Though only in his mid thirties, a touch of grey shot through its edges. His over-large eyes darted around the room from beneath the overhanging fringe. He spun a cigarette in his fingertips, fidgeting with it. His whole manner resembled a nervous little dog, waiting to be scolded.

Robert extended a hand toward the door. I squared my shoulders, set a smile upon my face and entered the room. The door latched shut with a ominous tone.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Pausner.”

His eyes darted over me when I entered, then returned to their frantic search of corners and shadows. I settled into the seat opposite and arranged my notes. I folded my hands upon the table, regarding him, still waiting for a response. He placed the cigarette between his lips with trembling hands. He just didn't seem like a man who had killed hundreds.