



The Body In The Alley

For the record, I had nothing to do with the Hell Bound Kids. Abraxas would have you believe I'm the one responsible for the murder spike and reduction in output, when in fact, it was his gross mismanagement of Punk City that caused the situation with the Kids to spiral out of control.

—*The Architect*

“Fifty-three, respond...”

Detective Gacy grit his teeth, continuing in his unmarked Crown Vic westbound on Minos Highway.

It was always night in Punk City. There was no moon, no stars, only the bright city lights guiding him west to the sea, where his Marina loft awaited somewhere in the interminable vanishing point of the highway.

“Fifty-three, respond... Respond, fifty-three...” the dispatcher deadpanned over the rover again. The dispatcher with the androgynous voice.

Gacy tried tuning it out. He listened to the rumbling engine of the car. Focused on the damp cold bleeding through the shut windows. The wind whistling over the cracked highway. Nothing helped. Gacy accepted it was a futile attempt, anyhow. Even if he could block out the voice, the dispatcher was only a lesser symptom of the endless grind of his job, a job which dragged him back night after night, preventing him from reaching his final destination. Its omnipresent shadow would harass him the entire way home. Taunting: *‘The countdown’s begun. Soon, the Beast will find you. Dangle that well-deserved rest in front of your face. Only to snatch it away at the last second and saddle you with another homicide case. Another murdered Kid.’* And of course most times he wouldn’t make it. Central Division would call him back, sometimes when he was in sight of his loft, and often used the same dispatcher to relay the order. The same one Gacy wanted to throw head first into a wood chipper... *if I can ever find the miserable prick.*

Bright headlights appeared somewhere ahead of Gacy. A car horn screamed. He snapped from his thoughts and swerved back into his lane, as an oncoming Chevy SS blew

past, its horn blaring, and then just as quickly as it arrived, the car vanished eastbound into the city under a starless night.

More cars passed. Again, the dispatcher's voice came over the rover. With it the weight of Gacy's servitude to the Powers That Be.

Gacy snatched up the mic. "Yeah. Fifty-three, go ahead. What the hell is it this time?"

He thought he heard a snicker.

"Two-three-three Twenty-eighth Street. Anonymous call reporting one-eight-seven in the alley," the androgynous voice deadpanned. "First responders are on scene with the new Medical Investigator."

"Ten-four."

The Detective threw the mic at the rover. Hitting the brakes, he whipped the cruiser around, skidding to the other side of Minos Highway.

Cars slammed on their horns and brakes, crashing into each other. They rolled and flipped into crumpled heaps of screams and torn flesh. His anger had blinded him again. Part of him didn't care. The rest of him knew what was in store for him if any Kids or real people were killed.

He watched in the rear view mirror, expecting to be transported to a deeper level of pain and misery, but the twisted metal and mangled bodies decayed and crumbled to dust across Minos Highway, and he breathed a sigh of relief knowing his entry in the Book of Fate had not reached an end. *'Not yet.'* The ashes blew away, dissolving in the dampness coming off the dark ocean, as the Architect recreated the Projections and repaired the damage.

Gacy proceeded eastbound as though nothing happened. The Crown Vic's reflection streaked in the rain-slick highway

alongside the car, bending and refracting in myriad colors under the streetlights, beneath the bright lights of the hulking Miesian glass and steel skyscrapers. East to west, Minos Highway crossed the black heart of Punk City. All the minor streets flowed to Minos, as though black arteries to a blacker aorta pumping pain and misery in place of life-sustaining blood, then the highway disappeared, evanescing to the city's infinite black skyline.

South on Paradise Road, Gacy passed through Downtown and the recent Gaslight quarter.

It amazed him what a good job City Management had done cleaning up the area. Downtown—where most of the Adults and Projections lived—was no longer the ancient relic of bygone years. The new and improved was nothing like the old and squalid, when block after gang infested block of porn shops, liquor stores, and flophouses once crowded the chaotic streets. Before the City Management gentrified the locality, turning it into the Gaslight. And the pricey bars, hotels, and restaurants supplanted the old with the new. The college kids, yuppies, hipsters, socialites, and tourists replaced the bottom feeders.

Even if they are mostly Projections, he thought. *They're still a better class of Projection.*

It was another section of Punk City the Adults had reclaimed from the Kids, using crafty city ordinances to push the gangs deeper into the city. The city blocks of towering high-rises crowded the Gaslight. Streetlights reflected the tired body of the cruiser again off the oily wet streets and gutters. The drizzle had relented an hour ago; now the dirty mixture of pollution and rain curdled the night air with a sweet-n-sour odor of sugared piss. The mists crept in from the sea, crawling over the city.

In the streets lingered an unnatural emptiness. The usual Saturday night Projections were strangely missing from the Gaslight. Mists or rain, the carousing Projections always came out in droves at this late hour. No vagrants camped on the damp sidewalks or huddled in doorways. No street traffic. Everything as still and silent as the grave.

Then, just like that, Paradise Road curved east, the streets transitioned. Downtown shrank away in fear and loathing. The glowing high-rises no longer rose up through the gray caliginous zone between the harsh luster of the Gaslight and the starless night pressing the bright lights down.

At last Gacy reached the borders where the edges blurred. Where the orderly streets conceded to the Southeast sector and a part of the city beset by murderous Kids and worse.

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The murder in the alley appeared to be a standard gang-related homicide. Patrol cars were collected at the entrance with high beams aimed into the alley. Ambulance waiting in the street. Yellow crime scene tape strung across the entrance.

Right now somewhere in this city a Kid was bragging about the killing.

By the look of things, the case would be routine. Tomorrow, Gacy would net the suspect after the briefest investigatory work. In forty-eight hours, seventy-two at most, he figured he'd have the case solved, the last of the paperwork wrapped up.

Gacy donned a black windbreaker with 'Gang Unit 416' in white letters across the back. He clipped his badge on his belt. Next to his holstered Glock 22. His unclean sneakers made

small splashes in the dank street, muddying the cuffs of his blue jeans. The Berries and Cherries swept the alley in a hypnotic panoply of red and blue that flashed over his salt and pepper hair, pocked cheeks, and face as pale as a ghost.

The first responders fell into two usual categories: busy ants working the crime scene, or lazy sloths watching the others work. Some snapped pictures and gathered evidence into plastic collection bags, some placed numbered yellow cards at points across the muddied ground, but most stood by and watched, or they gossiped with the paramedics waiting next to their gurney for authorization to remove the body.

“Detective Gacy?”

The new Medical Investigator waved Gacy to a dumpster stuffed with garbage bags spilling over the side. At least two week’s worth of trash ignored by City Management. A cop was hunched over the pile, taking pictures of a body sprawled in the heap like a person half sunk into a rancid morass of filth and plastic.

The MI waved again—friendly enough; yet agitated Gacy wouldn’t respond. Gacy took a half-empty tic-tac container from his pocket. Dumped a palm full in his hand. The more he studied the MI, the more the man resembled a white stick figure in tan khakis and a black Coroner’s jacket.

Finally, the MI came to Gacy. “You *are* Detective Gacy, right?”

Gacy popped the tic-tacs like Oxycontin. “Yeah. You the Medical Investigator that transferred from South Division?”

“Guilty as charged. Laurence Simms, but you can call me Larry.”

He pushed his wired-framed glasses up off the tip of his pointy nose.

“How ‘bout I just call you Simms.”

“Sure, whatever. Works for me.”

Gacy stuck out his hand.

“What’s the problem, Simms. You don’t shake hands?”

“Uh, not at all.”

Simms extended his bony limp-wristed hand and Gacy grabbed it with an iron grip and squeezed.

“Name’s Juanito Gacy, but you can call me Detective, or Detective Gacy.”

Gacy let go.

Simms massaged his hand.

“Alright, Simms.” Gacy clapped his hands, rubbing the palms together. “What’re you waiting for? The second coming? Let’s get this horror show started.” He licked his chapped lips. “Show me the goodies.”

“This way, *Detective.*”

They ducked under the crime scene tape. Simms led Gacy to the trash stuffed dumpster where the cop busied himself taking pictures. In the flashes lit up the body of a teenage Kid. The rats had already beat feet, but the roaches, crickets, and other creepy crawly things skittered about, regrouping between bursts of light to protest the insensitive prick with the camera.

Something about the Kid unsettled Gacy. The cop snapped a few more pictures and left. Simms shined a mag light on the body—the face blown-out, twisted into a final, silent scream.

It looked as though a .45 to the back of the head had killed the teen. But there was no way in hell the same caliber bullet caused that much damage on exit. Which raised the perturbing question. What destroyed the Kid’s face?

The end of a metal fence post, perhaps? Someone, or something, punching through the back of the boy’s head?

Something using the dead boy's body to open a gateway into the city for nefarious purposes...

Gacy chuckled.

Too many late nights drinking scotch, listening to records. Binging crime and horror television shows when the city's problems weighed heaviest on his shoulders and he was a prisoner to insomnia.

Maybe I need to cut back.

He squatted, prodding through the clothes with a pen.

The gaping hole in the Kid's face left little of him to recognize. The right eye had been blown out and tatters of the left eye, mouth, and left nostril peeled back into quivering meat flaps.

In twenty-two years of investigating thousands of homicides in the city, being privy to a wide gamut of gruesome murder methods and details, Gacy'd never seen anything like this. *Twenty-two years...* and that didn't even count all the years he lived in the city as a Kid before joining the police force. *Seven more months, I'll be celebrating year twenty-three* (and upgrading the vintage of his scotch). He shuddered to think of how many more years the Powers That Be would keep him there doing the same job.

The light fell across a tattoo of an Aztec sun on the inside of the Kid's left forearm.

The Sun God Huitzilopochtli. It meant the Kid believed in an afterlife. Gacy wondered if the belief had done the little psychopath any good.

The pen touched a spot where the blood pooled on the boy's baggy Freshjive t-shirt.

"What a mess. Chalk up another statistic. So what can you tell me, Simms?"

Simms snapped on a pair of latex surgical gloves:

“*And survey SAYS!...* Ricky Gonzalez, a.k.a Butcher Face. You think he got that name before or after the number they did on his face?” Simms smirked, but Gacy wasn’t amused. “Never mind. As I was saying, seventeen year-old with a forty-five to the head. Entry’s through the back, close range, execution style.” Simms turned the head, spilling out some glistening red meat and bits of skull, and showed Gacy the gore-soaked entry wound. “A can of gold Krylon spray paint was found near him.”

Simms gestured to card number four where the can had rolled a few feet away. Then to the letters—TGH—spray painted in gold across the dumpster. The lower case ‘T’ ended in a curly devil’s tail, pointing to the small stencil of a golden, open-palm hand. “Why am I not surprised to see the Hands... *handiwork*,” he snickered. Gacy still wasn’t amused. Simms sobered, clearing his throat. “Paint’s still fresh.”

Gacy reenacted the events. “So, he was kneeling down, tagging the dumpster, and whoever killed him snuck up behind as he finished.”

“Correct-o-mundo.”

“You ever seen a forty-five do that to a face on exit?”

“Nope, sure haven’t.”

“You don’t think that’s a tad bit strange?”

Simms smiled, “Yep, sure do.”

“I know.” Gacy shrugged, rolling his eyes. “I mean—all things considered.” He thought on it some more. “Maybe the Kids have reverted back to their old ways. Harvested him with some kind of new technique. New toolkit.”

“Possibly. But with a wound like that? I doubt it.”

Gacy rolled around the last of the tic-tacs in his hands like a pair of dice.

Most of the grime washed away in the rain, pushing muddy deposits of trash against the wooden fences and cinder block walls.

Garbage bags lay piled against the graffiti fighting for space on the scratchy wood fence.

Over time, so much graffiti had been painted on the fence, the jumbled writings at first appeared little more than a tangle of lines. However, upon closer inspection, a history started slowly forming in the scrawl—a sordid record chronicling the stories of every Kid who'd ever tagged there. The more Gacy deciphered the more he elucidated: their pains... their angst... their triumphs and defeats—but above all—their unrealized potential wasted in hopeless pursuit of a happiness that forever lay outside their reach.

Gacy thought of the can of gold spray paint found on Gonzalez.

The graffiti covered the fence like dogs marking their territory; yet Gacy could find no gold paint, except a thick golden line through the red letters—HBK.

“*Dios nos ayude*. Look,” he gasped, dropping the tic-tacs as he touched the golden line. “Shit.” Some of the paint rubbed off. “Hijo de puta, if this means what I think it does, we’re gonna have our work cut out for us.”

“Gee, and after City Management swore the implementation of the new system would mean *less* work.”

“I don’t know what it was like for you in Nordhiem, Simms, and I don’t care. But Aztlán District is a powder keg and always will be one. Whole city is. By design. Regardless of whatever system City Management implements.”

“You don’t say? Well I’ll be dipped in shit and rolled in bread crumbs,” Simms chuckled. He fingered the gaping hole

in Gonzalez's face. "I'm going to let you in on a little secret, *Juanito*. Before you get too carried away with your role."

Gacy glared.

Simms looked up, smirking. "It's all just a frightful illusion."