

First place entry
Scarfinger and Fred
by Stacey Sokolan

Most drivers of lonely highway stretches pick their noses. You can ask them, but you know, all you'd get is bunk. Believe me: I've ridden up in a semi cab for years and years now, and all the data I've collected points to a plague of nose-picking. Seriously, cellphone-clutching businessmen, harried mothers—everyone does it, but they're all in denial. Yep, every one of them.

I thought I had witnessed enough human contradictions during my short stay on a drugstore countertop back in my hometown. It's painful, admitting that I haven't seen it all, but I'll take it like a man and do my admitting.

If you want to know the truth (and I'm assuming you do, because you already listened to my scandalous secret of the human nose), I'm not a man—not even made of flesh and hemoglobin, actually. A machine squeezed me out, rather than an agonized, sweaty woman, but, like most humans, I can't recall those early years.

Ah well, no one wants to remember their factory days, but d'you ever wonder if something horrible happens to humans during infancy and the whole excuse of the "brain's memory neurons still learning to make connections, yadda yadda yadda" is all a conspiracy?

I'm telling you, I get too much time to think. I remember Bud, though. Yeah. Bud was the guy who rescued me from the drugstore countertop, though I never really saw it as "rescuing"; we plastic bobble-head basset hounds were so popular at the time, we didn't stay on the countertop long.

(Alright, another confession: We were designed to sell. A competition amongst the branches of the drugstore chain ensured that the sales quota of our kind was met every day. There. Now can you trust what I tell you? You'd better. I'm a straight-up hound.)

Driven by Bud, I sat sentinel on my dashboard position during haul after haul, listening to his own "conspiracy theory" talk. Occasionally, Bud would allow hitchhikers to use the empty passenger seat, and those events grounded me a bit. Taught me that Bud was relatively sane—his reasoning for picking up those diverse creatures was that he'd sometimes rather talk to humans than a plastic dog.

"Yer fine company, Fred, and a better listener," he once explained to me on a stretch of highway heading north. We were hauling a load of paper products—tonnes of napkins—to fast-food restaurants in Alberta's northernmost communities. (At least I think that's what we were hauling. Bud never explicitly explained our loads' contents to me, so I made

the best inferences I could.) "Problem with you is, I get tired of all yer agreein'." I suppose that was why he didn't mind hauling people who believed we were all going to die a horrible death tomorrow, when Jupiter falls out of orbit, hurtling toward Planet Earth.

The reality of Bud never recognizing my opinions or emotions did hurt, but my ultimate lesson in pain was to come from one of the "crazies" Bud lifted from a rain-drenched highway, that same day he candidly dissected my assets and flaws.

"Gawd dammit, Fred," Bud drawled. "If you don't start sayin' somethin', I'm just gonna hafta ..." He trailed off, realizing the futility of finishing a sentence directed to a plastic bobble-hound. His gaze left the road a moment and caught something on the shoulder.

Determined sheets of rain had pelted our semi all day.

"Won't be able to sleep tomorrow if I don't lift this poor feller," Bud reasoned aloud. Hearing his thoughts gave me importance—the keeper of Bud's dark secret—the secret that underneath that emerald-green mesh cap, and beneath the snap-up blue down vest, lived some compassion.

That guy he picked up didn't look very poor, just wet. A lost expression in his hollow face and the visible veins in the hand he used to hoist himself into the seat struck something deep in my plastic being.

"Where ya headin', Chief?" Bud interrogated.

"City, up north—visiting my sister." The passenger made determined eye contact with me, awakening my memory.

Being a sedentary creature, my observation skills were finely honed. Not like there's much else to do all day.

About five years ago, I witnessed a guy, about 30, slide prescription painkillers and antibiotics over the drugstore counter via his right hand—the one with five workable digits. Gauze covered the ring finger of the left one, and he paid quietly. Nothing out of the ordinary, but later, that ubiquitous gossip birthed a fascinating story.

"So she said that Rose-Marie's cousin's doctor's receptionist heard that the guy—you know, the one who sliced his finger off on that table-saw—he had AIDS ..." (whispering the acronym self-consciously), "... and never told anyone. Just let it bleed like crazy while he stuck the amputated finger in his cooler and drove to the hospital."

"All kinds of kooks around this town—makes you want to wear surgical gloves." "Could've been blood on that cash used for his pain medications that day! We should get tested."

If my eyes were moveable, I would have rolled them against Betty-Ann and Marjorine and Tilly-Mae's ignorant reports.

The subject of that ancient legend was the man sitting across from me in the cab, confirmed by the scar on his ring finger: a remnant of the digit's reattachment.

I know these things. My plastic nose may impede a preternatural sense of smell, but my memory more than makes up for that.

"What's the problem?" (Bud's compassion—there it is—ripping through all that fat and fabric!) Scarfinger hesitated. Looking at my nodding snout encouraged him, and he broke.

"Work injury, few years back—sliced my finger right through the bone—shocking experience. The wife asked about my gold ring's condition first—that's Jean for you. Man. I lost a lot of blood while they reattached it—got some transfusions to compensate. Transfusions carried HIV, though—that was before they really knew to test thoroughly for that stuff. Now it's developed into AIDS—learning to live on borrowed time."

"Fella, that's horrible," Bud consoled, hit by this fragmented speech. "What about a court settlement? I heard about those, way back in the day. Could have yerself a nice Mustang to drive to a five-star hospice—why're you taking this route?"

Scarfinger looked both resigned and determined. "Buddy, I've seen a lot of people who think money's the way to rewind and record over the evils of the past. Well, that ain't true, and we know it. Sure, I could get a lot of cash—for what? For Jean to buy a wider wedding band to cover my scar? I couldn't buy her a method of escape from the town gossip; from her own self-righteousness. Couldn't save her from the humiliation I brought her. So that's why I said, 'The hell with it!' I'd rather spend my last days with real people, not the plastic kind."

I wondered if he accepted plastic dogs, and I also wondered how long he'd been rehearsing his manifesto. Years? Did he use his time on the side of the road to collect his thoughts, trying to warm his icy-soaked body with optimism? Damn, whatever keeps you afloat.

We were at the city limits. "Gotta let you off here, law says," Bud explained. "City bus stops at that there post up the road." He pointed, placed some change into Scarfinger's palm. "Oh, and here."

I changed hands. "Fred may be plastic, but he's the most agreeable character you can find."

Yeah, I've observed countless hours of human behavior throughout my life, and nothing ever changes—they all pick their noses when they think no one's looking, and deny it even when they know someone's staring right at them. But the few who dig all that garbage out with no apologies are still my favourite.

Short Fiction
1500 words or less



KELSEY TANASIUK

Runner-up
There Was
by Kayleigh Cline

I was standing on the corner, waiting for the walk light so I could return to my apartment. Five people stood with me. I had crossed this corner countless times with countless forgettable people, but this time, because of what happened afterwards, I would always remember their faces.

There were two businessmen, immaculately dressed. One had a mole on the very tip of his nose. The other's face was wrinkled up around his blue eyes. There was an old woman with a walker that had three grocery bags hanging on it. Behind me, there was a very short and very round woman with large emerald earrings hanging from her dangling earlobes. And then there was a young woman who looked like she was maybe just out of high school. Her hair was cropped short, but it flopped around playfully in the wind. I could not see her face, for she stood directly before me. The traffic was zooming past in a blur of colours. As I stood on the corner, I was trying to decide what to make myself for lunch.

The young woman pulled her arms back behind her and let her backpack slide to the ground. I expected her to turn around and pick it up, but she didn't even look back. She simply stepped forward... off the corner ...into the path of a truck.

The truck swerved, but it didn't hit her. All the cars slammed on their brakes. She was left standing before them.

She looked around and blinked as a chorus of horns rose up around her. Then, she walked off the road and stepped back onto the corner just as the walk light finally turned.

All five of us were speechless. She glanced at us all and gave us a wry smile as she shrugged her backpack back on.

"Oh well. Better luck next time," she said cheerfully.

Then she bounded off across the street. After a moment of shocked silence, the five of us numbly followed, and then went our separate ways.

Once back at my apartment, I sunk onto my couch and placed my head in my hands. One question rebounded through my mind:

"Next time?"

We, the five people on the corner, knew that the young woman would try to kill herself again, but what could we do? We did not even know her name. Who could we tell? Who would care?

The next morning, I was standing on the corner again, waiting for the walk light so I could return to my apartment. I thought of the young woman.

Then, slowly, I let my briefcase slip from my hand. I stepped off the corner. And the truck didn't miss me.

"Hold on," said God, "I don't follow. Why did you kill yourself?"

"Um ..." I swallowed. "Aren't you God? Shouldn't you know? Don't you know everything?"

He smiled and leaned back in His chair.

"Yes. But I'm not convinced you know why you killed yourself. That's why I ask."

I sighed.

"It was because of the young woman."

God cleared His throat.

"That is not an answer."

"I know, I know. It's hard to explain."

"That is still not an answer."

I wished I had a pen to chew on to try and get my thoughts in order.

"I guess ... Well, it's not because I didn't want to live in a world where a girl could try to kill herself and nobody

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