F. J. Bergmann - Thrall

I had hidden among the dark trees and thick undergrowth at the top of the hill since just before sunset. Now the stars were coming out, despite the glare of streetlights and shopping plazas from the town below. It was a school night, so the kids were getting an early start—I hadn’t needed to wait long. Evening dew was already misting the dead leaves under the high, cold light of the cosmos. I had never wanted anything but peace and quiet in my life, nor had I ever been the violent sort. Fate plays odd tricks on us sometimes.

As the cars parked one by one at a discreet distance from each other, a beginning throb of unnatural lust was not welcome, even though it warmed me. Once again I felt myself being tugged forward by what I desperately wished to dissociate myself from. *Not me! Not a part of my body* ... What had I done to deserve this? Why was I afflicted with such horrible desires?

I waited until the car farthest beneath the shadow of the forest canopy began to rock gently. A quick glance at the other vehicles showed their occupants’ attention was equally focused on private matters. My skin tingled with heat, but all the energy seemed to focus on a specific part of my anatomy. Though I had thought many times of removing it, I was not strong enough—the half-hearted attempts using household implements had been too painful for me to persevere.

I crept along the ground, snaking silently through the bushes. My clothes were stained dark with age and use, and my skin was naturally a dark shade; I would have appeared no more than a moving shadow cast by the branches overhead. Sharp pebbles bruised my knees, and the heel of my hand was punctured by thorns, but the pain could not prevent me from going forward; I had almost completely lost voluntary control of my muscles. As I approached the passenger side of the car, I noticed a patch of mud gleaming on the ground just below the door. *Perhaps there* is *a way to end this, after all.*

I diverted my trajectory slightly, so that my left hand and knees plunged into the gooey muck. As the terrible hook that had replaced my lost right hand reached for the door handle, my body began to climb to its feet, and—as I had prayed—slipped in the mud. I fell against the side window with a heavy thump; for just an instant, I was merely a dead weight, my face and the hook clearly visible through the glass. A siren shriek rose from within, then the noise of terrified scrambling, and the locks clicking shut.

Before I could rise again to a standing position from the slippery footing, the engine caught with a roar. The car reversed rapidly in a half-circle, my hook firmly caught in the door handle. I could have wept in disappointment when, without my conscious volition, my muddy, dripping left hand also took hold of the handle as the car shifted into forward gear and shot away. But as the accelerating car gyrated down the gravel fire road, swaying wildly from side to side as it bounced on the bumps and potholes, the ooze coating my left hand made a secure grip difficult to maintain. Finally, the car sideswiped a small sapling, and my enslavement was over! I watched the tail-lights disappear downhill as a faint and festive jingling came from the detached, demonic metal hook dangling from the car door.

I thrust my stump high aloft in exultation. *Yes! Free at last!* There was little bleeding or oozing. I looked about for another car containing a friendly young couple who could be prevailed upon to disengage long enough to take me to the emergency room. They would be safe; it was only the hook, the horrible hook, that had inflicted the obsessive perversions I had felt compelled to pursue.

The constellations were still brightening overhead, and a meteor flashed briefly across the sky. Over countless eons, some of those shooting stars and their fragments had fallen to the planetary surface, sources of rare, elemental metals that, originally, could not be mined by humans. Who knew where and how the endless cycle of their forging and reforging into weapons, tools, and machines might have ultimately caused those metals to be employed? Coming from the unutterable reaches of space, what hideous entities might have sent them, for what nefarious purpose?

This time, I vowed, no metal bits *anywhere* in the prosthesis—just nice, inert, flesh-colored plastic. Even if it didn’t at all match the actual greyish-black hue of my decomposing skin. And then back to my happy, routine existence. With luck, there would be some rotting surgical remains in the dumpsters behind the hospital after I was discharged; otherwise, there was never a shortage of roadkill. The thought of eating fresh, *living* flesh was disgusting: I was back to normal again!

first appeared in *Weird Mask Zine*