**A White Rose**

The howling wind blew the snow that hung from the wires on Yonge Street down to the already white covered streets. It twas the night before Christmas, and Toronto’s air was brisk with anticipation. On the corner of Yonge and Eglington, the Tim Horton’s held a line out the door. The further you were in line, the less layers you wore, and the less you looked like a puffer fish, armed with coats, sweaters, mittens, gloves and toques instead of poisonous spikes.

The cashier was moving as fast as she could, which unfortunately meant as slow as a sloth. But the crowd didn’t mind, as they hummed or full on sung Nat Cole King’s “Chestnuts Roasting,” almost in homage to that great smooth voice. The smell of double-doubles, hot chocolate and freshly made donuts floated out of the shop, and floated toward the bus stop where a single old-man, somewhere in his mid-60’s, sat waiting.

Edward Smith breathed out hard, making his breath hang in the cold dense air around him. His lips, cracked and chapped, had held as many smiles as fingers on one of his liver-spotted, but steady hands. Despite the joyous time in Toronto and the jubilant sounds coming from the crowded Tim Horton’s behind him, he wore a solemn expression, unwavering and callous. His eyes, which fell deep within their sockets were surrounded by crow’s feet and would scare any man willing to look directly within them. His brow was furrowed, as though deep in thought, and cavernous lines were etched into his forehead.

As Ed sat on the bus stop’s bench, surrounded by graffiti, hundreds of flyers and an old hamburger just to his left, he checked his 1956 Rolex, and noticed how late the man was. Ed was ready to do his job, just like they had asked him. He had pressed his favorite grey shirt, which hung to his skeletal body, making him seem more like a corpse than intended. His pants, black and as neatly pressed as his shirt, were being held up by green overalls which stung and pained Ed’s tiny shoulders. He had no coat on, for the cold air did not bother him.

He tapped his toes, checked his watch again and lit his fifth cigarette. The tobacco smell always comforted him and stuck on to him, like sap on a tree. The smoke managed to cover up the warmth wafting out of the coffee shop and replaced it with an ominous haze. His greying hair was held perfectly together by hair gel and glinted around the shelter as the Toronto Transit Commission bus bellowed down towards him.

The bus, which looked like it needed to be put down, stopped in front of the stoop and its emissions plowed through the air, making Ed cough and tear up. And in an instant, the bus was gone and he was there. Where the bus once stalled, the man stood. He wore a long petticoat with a distinguishable bowling hat and just-too-short pants. This was the guy, it had to be. The man was walking quickly down Yonge Street and was headed to turn on Eglington.

Ed bolted up and, despite his age and growing case of arthritis, was soon just steps behind his target. The man walked with his shoulders hunched, head hung, hands buried deep in his coat pockets, as though ashamed of everything he did. He wasn’t tall, but he wasn’t short, and solely by looking at his back, Ed estimated that he had to be somewhere in his 30’s. But it didn’t matter, as the man turned the corner, for he was no one, just another number on Ed’s list.

The street was empty, the lights low and only the sounds of Ed and the man’s feet crunching the snow, black ice and whatever winters torment had laid on the street. Now was the time. Ed was just 10 feet behind the man when he stopped. The man stretched, putting up his hands, almost as if he knew what was going to happen next. Ed quietly pulled out his snubnose 49 and took aim. He breathed in hard, *just another number, just another number, just another number.*

But he couldn’t do it. For the first time in Edward Smith’s long life, he couldn’t end another’s life. He had lost count long ago of his victims, going all the way back to his time in the war. When he returned, there was no parade to come back to, no family to love him, no job to sustain him. The first months back were spent in bars, brothels or gutters, drinking to numb the pain, to numb all he had done.

The man finished stretching and kept walking. Ed didn’t follow. He still had his gun out in the frigid air, making his hands shake and turn a nastier shade of blue. Slowly the gun lowered, as did Ed, slumping to the ground. He had had enough. Enough killing, enough of people telling him to kill, enough of himself and enough of the cruel world around him.

He lit a cigarette and smoked it, taking long drags, as if every time he breathed in, would somehow kill him. The small little white stick burned in front of his eyes, a death stick of warmth that rose to Ed’s nostrils and comforted him. He looked up to the lamppost above him, a shining light beaming down on the blessed. But he was not blessed. He grabbed the cigarette out of his mouth and flicked it on to the street.

He pulled the gun out once again, but did not point it in front of him. Instead, he held it too his temple, breathed in the familiar smell of tobacco and for the first time in a long time, he smiled. His finger squeezed the trigger. The snow next to him was covered in a sickly red, a single red rose amongst a bed of white bleakness.