

New Smell
by Eric Cecil

I got a new smell. It's oily, leathered, minklike. It turns heads on the bus, clears whole cars on the train. Most times it walks five paces ahead. I follow it into any number of restaurants or bars, sliding past tables too close together, heading into backrooms cantering with bare, swinging bulbs. Bartenders, servers and cooks all ask what we're doing. The new smell smirks at them and says, You were just leaving. And one way or another, they always do.

My new smell and I wend our way down alleys and into spare bedrooms, where women smile at us under frowning eyes, where landlords and -ladies tell us it's fine this month, but the next'll be a different story. We exchange knowing glances and set out again. There's no telling where we'll go. But wherever my new smell goes, I follow.

One night I follow him to a park somewhere, most of its lights dim or dead or flickering, its trees like great dark clouds. My new smell dances between them, then struts down the pathway and slides under a bench, where a woman sits as if she's always been there, waiting. He whispers up her backside: I know somewhere we can go. She stands without a word and leads us to the edge of the park. My new smell takes her hand and winks to me and says, C'mon.

Later I wake in a hotel room, all cold and blue, the bathtub filled with tepid water: glass shards scraping and pebbling its bottom, loose labels floating like ribbons on its surface. The woman's gone. So's my new smell. The room is damp with my old odor, and in the mirror, I see the years fighting their way past all those lamps, lights guttering under shades hoary with hair and dust.

I walk out into a bright and frigid afternoon, the sprawl of a large lot before me. A car idles there. Its driver is silent when I slide into the backseat. Did he hire you? I ask. Hire me? he says. His eyes find mine in the rearview, then move back to the road. I'm just taking you where you want to go, he says. I think of all the places I'd been the past few months, all those stairways and back alleys, and all those smells, old and new. They're gone now. Now the car is sour with sweat, mint, the seminal tang of bleach. I want to crack a window, but before I can ask, the driver slows at a light, and I see him.

He waits at the nearest corner. His collar's upturned, eyes narrowed to slits, and there's that hunch that kinks his posture. Up there, I say. Pull over. When the car stops and the door opens, he ducks into the front seat, grinning. The driver frowns at us both and says, Where are we going now?

My new smell slides his hands over the vents in the dash. The air sags under the scent of mink, leather, oil. We, he says, will go anywhere we please. But you were just leaving. And one way or another, they always do.