

SMOKE

By Paul Wilborn

I'm stuffing the last lid into my old blue backpack when I see Barry outside my window – a fleeting figure in the flat metallic light that passes for a winter sunset in Ybor.

I yank open the front door thinking I'll surprise him but he's already there on my sagging porch, wearing shorts in January, with that paintbrush hair falling across his forehead and down over one eye. A black *Bad Taste In Outer Space* T-shirt barely covers the soccer ball that is his waistline.

"Buzz, you gotta hear this," he says striding in.

He flips me an album cover with one hand. He carries the shiny disc aloft with the other, his pinky through the center hole like a waiter balancing a tray.

"Prep the bong while I put it on."

Perhaps we've been neighbors for too long. Not just here on 4th Avenue for the past year, but Barry also has the stall next to me at *El Sama*, the abandoned cigar factory turned arts studio two blocks away. We both toss clay. Barry manages to make money doing it. I need my night job to keep me afloat.

Barry assumes I'm always ready to get him stoned when he arrives like this. I'm usually happy to oblige, but tonight is a work night and I'm trying to keep my wits about me. Truth is, I have trouble counting money when I'm lit.

"Listen, I gotta make some stops tonight. It's Thursday," I tell him, knowing this won't make any difference.

"And you are starting your Thursday night listening to *The Swimming Pool Qs*. Out of Atlanta, but the guy grew up in Lakeland. They're playing the next Artists and Writers Ball."

"Barry..."

"Two songs. Okay, one song." He drops the needle on a hard-hammering Southern Gothic number I later learn is called *Stock Car Sin*.

Barry flops down on my couch and pulls the silver tray towards him. I have to admit when your coffee table is home to a purple bong and a finely ground mound of herb on a silver dish, people assume you are always ready to light up.

Flame leaps from my brass Zippo, the bong bubbles, and next thing I know four or five songs have played and Barry and I are doing a furious pogo around the living room to a thrasher called *The A-Bomb Woke Me UP!*

One landing puts me directly in front of my window and there's Barry outside again – except it can't be Barry because he's just collapsed back onto my couch.

"Did you see that?" I yell toward him over the thrumming speakers.

"What?" he hollers back.

"Somebody's outside the window!"

I spring even closer to the window. The glass is cloudy from being 70 years old and from me not having ever bought a bottle of Windex. But I can see well enough to know there is nobody outside, just the peeling paint of Barry's matching shotgun shack and his identical window five feet away.

The song finishes and I move over and lift the needle.

"I swear there was somebody out there."

"And then..." he says, as he stuffs more green powder into the silver pipe head, "...when you look out the window a few seconds later nobody's there. Right?"

I nod, the sudden absence of music making the room feel like it is throbbing. I sit down next to Barry and rub my eyes causing a freight train loaded with hieroglyphics to crash – spilling the whirling patterns all over the inside of my eyelids.

"It's the 'litos," Barry says. "They're out there, man. I've seen 'em in my windows too. Like a flash, then gone. Fuckin' 'litos. I heard Jenny got mugged after she closed Roughts the other night. A 'lito with tattoos all over his neck pulled a knife."

Barry's voice seems to be coming through a string stuck in a tin-can telephone. I open my eyes and the room settles down. Smoke streams from Barry's lips.

"What are you talking about?" I ask.

"Marielitos! Where you been? Castro's killers and crazies! He put 'em on the boats and shipped 'em here. Now we got a fuckin' crime wave. You best watch your back, Buzz Man."

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OK, it's no secret in Ybor that I'm The Buzz Man.

I was born Robert Krane – with a K – but all my life I've gone by Buzz, based on the fact that my dad, Major Robert Krane, USAF retired, gave me a buzz cut with his Norelco every Saturday.

My brother too.

And by buzz cut, I mean down to scalp level, flattened out on top, with just an inch left in the front that you greased with Butch Wax so it stood straight up like some kind of follicle fence.

My junior high classmates who were growing Beatles mop tops would make buzzing sounds when I came to school. But truthfully, I liked "Buzz."

And now that I'm living in Ybor with hair that falls in a Rod Stewart shag to my shoulders, the nickname has morphed into my brand.

The coffee mugs and pitchers I make at *El Sama* with "YBOR" on the handles - look underneath and there it is: "BUZZ MAN."

And in my night job – keeping the arts colony herbicized - it's the perfect handle.

"Hey, Buzz Man, good to see ya! What you got for me today?"

Anyway, I finally break away from Barry and my bong – both lit – and head out to make my sales calls - a door-to-door peddler in faded jeans and a torn sweatshirt.

Lacking actual weapons, I arm myself against killer refugees with fingernail clippers, ready to slide out the sharp nail file in case of trouble. Since I don't own a flashlight, I pocket the brass Zippo, leaving Barry to find his own flame.

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