

# ENZYMES

By Greg Stolze

I think I used to be human.

I mean, I'm shaped like one and I know human things that are really, in the scheme of what I do, pretty useless. I can piss, for example. I did it one time in an alley. Just to do it, really. It came out black rainbows, like the stain on a garage floor under a Chrysler with a leaky oil pan. I can read, too. Restaurant names, newspaper headlines, bumper stickers. I can read all that stuff.

I'm in Syracuse tonight. I sleep out the day in a public garage and wake at sunset. I think about doing *It* right away, but I'm restless. Spoiled for choice, but none of the choices stacked up in the car park are good ones. I'm going to drive.

I have a 1987 Ford Mustang, a five-speed with a V8 engine. That's the "5.0" Mustang, the Fox body with the Aero styling. I sleep in the trunk, so it's a notchback, of course. It's got a custom midnight blue paint job, but with the miles I put on it, it's usually dirty. It gets rained on, but it won't rust. My car will never rust.

I drift along downtown, checking out the buildings. Nothing too special, except for the Niagara Mohawk building. Big tiered pile of steel and glass, like a chrome wedding cake, and nailed in the center is this metal angel in the Jesus Christ pose.

He's got a helmet on and big shiny wings, all angles and planes like a Transformer toy. The building's cool, it's Art Deco I guess. Reminds me of the *Batman* movie, the old Tim Burton one.

See? It's stuff like that. I can't remember the last time I saw a movie or watched a TV show, but I know about Tim Burton's *Batman*. I don't remember anything about going to it, if I was alone or with someone, if I snuck in or paid, if I got popcorn, but I know there was a look to it, a look like the NiMo building. What does that mean?

I drive up the hill and turn right, drifting around, looking for *Her*, for tonight's *Her*, so I can do *It*. Up by the University, near that gothic pile Hall of Languages I see *Her*.

A woman with a blonde bob and sweat pants is locking up her 1998 Jeep Wrangler 4x4. She doesn't see me watching. Almost no one ever does. I wait until she's up the walkway to her building, until she turns a corner, then I move in.

The Jeep's a TJ, the four-banger, stock red paint job. I get out of my sheltering car and drift down the street, looking right and left, but casual, until I can get to the Wrangler. I put my hand next to the headlight and *It* begins.

I can feel the neglect coursing through the car like blood, not contempt but just distracted indifference. No one is taking care of this vehicle and so it responds to my touch. I slip my fingers up underneath the wheel well and caress the dirt encrusted on its unseen underside. I scratch and rub briskly with my palms, the way you would on a hound's belly. (Why do I know about dogs?) I feel it, feel the metal change. Looking I can see the exterior paint bubble, just a little, I know the rust is forming.

My touch drops to the tire, and it was already a little low, but it sags another half inch and the tread imperceptibly wears, it won't pass the penny-head test tomorrow, if anyone thinks to give it. I reach beneath the rocker panel and then I'm underneath. I don't crawl under the car. At this point in the process I'm not really... I don't have to move myself or crawl or squeeze, I'm just... I just *am* there. I'm not a person anymore, just a presence. No hands to touch with, no eyes, but I still see everything. I can't really explain, but there the true form of the vehicle becomes known to me, the pipes and axles and shocks, and they're all rusted up already. Syracuse is a brutal town for the undercarriage, they get so much snow and so much salt. I lick my lips and there's the tank, my fangs pierce it and I drink, deep.

Maybe I'm not human, maybe I never was. I'm pretty sure humans never feel like I do when I drink gasoline, that sweet intoxication, so pregnant with possibility and power. It's like the power

of the sun, and of a great tree that drew in sunlight to grow, and of an ancient beast that ate of the tree and died, that sank into the earth and was worked on by millions of years until it turned to oil. It's like all those kinds of power, concentrated step by step, and the toil of the drillers and refineries and pump mechanics too. Gasoline is everything. Gasoline is the elixir of modern civilization and I'm one with it when I drink. All the clouds of exhaust and all the labor of machines and their men, I'm all within it.

Then I drop off and I have to crawl out, I'm man-bodied again, dressed in jeans and a denim shirt with fake-pearl snaps. My fingers are crusted with rust and black under the nails but I run them through my hair anyway. It's long hair, unkempt and black. I never get it cut, never trim my beard, but they stay the same.

I don't cast a reflection, so I have no idea what I look like.



Some nights I do five, ten, a dozen cars or more. Other times just one. I've never missed a night, as far as I know. I don't think I could. I think if I didn't, I'd cease to be. Like at the high point of *It*, only without feelings or thoughts. I'd just not exist and my sweet Mustang would become a mortal car again. Or maybe it would fade away too.

I do *It* because... because I do it. I don't know if there's any point in doing *It*, but I don't see any point in stopping and at least *It* tastes good. I don't know. It's my purpose.

I never get tired, but a lot of nights I feel like I *should* be tired.



People don't see me often, but it does happen. In Cincinnati a while back I was starting in on the fender of a Ford Taurus when this guy started yelling. "Hey!" he said. "Hey y'bum! Get off my car!"

I turned, but he was on me. He grabbed me by my shirt and hauled me up the slope of the trunk. He was a big guy, wearing a sport coat but I think it tore on the back center seam when he took hold of me. He was mad, started shaking me.

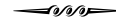
"Whatcha doin' to my car, huh?"

"I'm not... I wasn't..." I didn't know what to say. People can't usually see me, so I don't have a lot of conversations. He was getting madder, really losing it, starting to spit. I raised my hands and somehow got one on his shoulder and then his neck, and it kind of fell apart in my grasp. Blood all over, a real mess. His throat just went to pieces, like when you stew a chicken in a crock pot and the meat falls off the bone from the lightest touch. I didn't know I was going to do that to him. Didn't know I could.

So I got in the Mustang and hit a hundred miles per heading south. Stopped after a

couple hours to wash up at a truck stop and buy a pair of Carhartt dungarees and a Harley sweatshirt.

Looking back now, I guess I should have taken his wallet instead of pausing to finish *It* on his car, but, well, I was kind of shook. I guess I was on autopilot.



A couple days after Syracuse, I'm in New York City. A terrible place, terrible place to park. One time in New York I came upon a guy getting tow chains around the Mustang and I... well, anyhow. This time I used a pay lot and it nearly busted me. I'm going to have to steal some money soon, which I don't like to do even though it's pretty easy when almost nobody looks at me. I don't have a lot of choice. I can't exactly hold down a steady job, what with my needs and all.

I'm doing trucks, delivery trucks. No real rhyme or reason to it, it's just that kind of night. I'm near Central Park and it's early still, I'd worked *It* on an exterminator's van parked behind that Hearst Tower thing that looks like a glass and metal soft-serve ice cream cone. Then I see her.

I don't mean I see a vehicle I'm hungry for. I see an actual woman, kind of. She's in a book store, by a big display of red hardbacks piled together, all alike. She opens one at random and looks over the pages, then closes her eyes and opens her mouth and licks the page. I know right then.

No one looks my way when the door jingler sounds, nobody but her. I go right to her and her eyes widen behind little wire-rim spectacles.

"Are you like me?" I ask.

"You can see me?" she says in reply. She has on a gray cardigan, long skirt, black tights and tennis shoes. Brown hair in a bun.

I nod. "Most people can't though, huh?"

"Yeah." She looks around, aimless, then puts her hand on the book with the red cover.

"The woman who wrote this," she says, "She wrote a clever mystery about eight years ago, it sold well, so she did a sequel, and then she tried something different, a story about a couple getting divorced. She really put her heart into that one and it didn't sell at all. Even the critics didn't like it. So now she's got another sequel to that first mystery and I... I felt..."

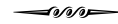
I nod. "You needed to eat it. The neglect let you in."

"Do you... read?" she asks.

"No, um. Cars are... my thing."

"Huh." She scratches her ear, like she's trying to remember what people do in this sort of situation. "Do you want to... go... get coffee?"

"Oh hell no. Let's just walk in the park."



"Do you know what an enzyme is?" she asks me.

"It's a chemical, right?" I know Star Tron fuel additive uses enzymes, and Auto Zapper interior cleanser.

"It changes things," she says. "Like an agent of decay, for example. I think we're enzymes. When it's time for things to be done... we come along." She adjusts her spectacles. "Think how many there must be in Nashville, or at the movie theaters... how do you suppose it works for re-run TV shows?"

"I don't know."

We walk for a bit and there's this little half-memory suggesting I should hold her hand, but I don't. It's probably just something I saw on TV, long ago.

"Enzymes change things but they don't, themselves, change," she adds.

"Do you... like it?"

"Yeah," she says. "Sure. I mean, even a lousy book that has to be put down, someone cared enough to sit at the table and write it. I just wish... there are some books that I can't even touch. Those must be so... wonderful."

"One time," I say, "I touched a Chevy Caprice that had Turtle Wax on it and it blistered my fingers. The nice rides, the new ones, the restored classics? Nuh uh."

"So with the cars," she says, "You drink the gas?"

"Yeah. How'd you know?"

"It just... sounded reasonable."

We walk along a bit more, then park ourselves on a bench.

"Why not just drink it out of the tanks at the gas stations?" she asks.

This surprises me. "I can't," I say without even thinking. "I mean, I probably can't. It never occurred to me."

"Probably like me trying to eat a toner cartridge," she says with a cute little laugh. "It hasn't been formed. Still just potential."

"I guess." Not sure I'm following her. She's probably a lot smarter.

"Why do we think, though?" She sits up real straight as she asks this, raises her hands palms up. She has this sad, concerned look, she's really hoping I can answer that. But I can't.

"Why do people think?" I ask. "I mean, we have a purpose, at least. What are people here for?"

She shrugs.

"I think we used to be people," I say, "But I don't know how I got to be... this. I don't even know what I look like."

"Your face... you're maybe twenty or thirty? You look kind of worn out. Sad

eyed, I guess. A nice nose though," she says. "What about me?" She blinks. "Am I pretty?"

"Yeah," I say. "Yeah, you absolutely are."

"What color are my eyes?"

"They're gray. What about mine?"

"Red," she says.

"Red?" This throws me, I don't know why. "Like, bloodshot, or like glowing red eyes from an Ozzy video?"

"Maybe they're just light brown? It could be the light. It's not really all that noticeable."

"Red eyes," I mutter. "Like a monster."

She doesn't reply and we start walking again. Night runners go past, they see nothing.

"Are you in New York for long?" she asks at last.

"Nah, I'm always on the move."

"I have to stay here," she says. "There are a lot of publishers."

"Do you have a... phone number?"

"No."

"Me either."

We keep walking.

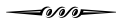
"Next time I'm in New York," I say, "I'll check that book store you were at. First

thing after sundown, like. Would that be okay?"

"Yes!" She nods, once, twice, three times, smiling. "It would absolutely be okay."



It's a year later in New York and the bookstore is closed. Shut down for good, I mean. I wait until midnight and then go off after an Impala, the 1996 one when they changed the rear quarter panel.



It's a year after that and I'm in Memphis. It's just after dark and I'm looking at bookstores when a year 2000 white Toyota Camry Solara catches my eye. Business before whatever, I guess. But my heart's not in it. I kind of wish I could be tired.

I think I used to be human and I think this feeling—whatever it is—is a little more of what being human is.