

Burping Frog Publishing \$6.95 U.S.

Breathe

of the

Flesh

a novel by

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Breathe of the Flesh

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Detroit • Michigan

BREATHE OF THE FLESH

Published by Burping Frog Publishing, Inc.
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Library of Congress Number:
ISBN: 0-9703053-3-8

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It looked like hell. Tom Leopard drove slowly through the yard of the steel mill, past the heavy machinery, over the criss-crossing railroad tracks, past piles of scrap steel. A steady, icy rain coated every surface with a slick, shiny sheen. It was the first night of December, 1942, and the shores of New Jersey never looked more foreboding.

Leopard looked at his partner, Gil Chen, seated beside him. He was watching out the passenger side window. Around them, tall smokestacks poured thick smoke into the night and fires blazed and spit from openings in the huge, ugly buildings. Molten steel, as bright and yellow as the sun, poured like soup from a massive pot and the entire night sky blazed orange.

The car rocked over the rough gravel road. They rounded a corner behind the mill. A huge bulldozer waited for the car to pass, like one of hell's giant beasts coiled on its haunches to attack. The engine rumbled like a deep, hungry growl. Seated atop the beast, the driver's face was black with soot under a metal hard hat. He stared with blank eyes that did not blink.

"There it is," Chen said, pointing straight ahead.

The site was not difficult to find. Leopard drove toward a clump of flashing red lights, swerving to avoid holes in the road and the chewed, jagged scraps of steel that looked like the remains of that bulldozer's last meal.

They got closer and saw a gaggle of cars. The back doors of an ambulance were open. A uniformed cop appeared in the

headlights, waving a flashlight over the ground. Leopard stopped the car. He and Chen got out. The gravel, the weeds, the rusting train cars, the piles of steel, everything was coated with black coal dust. The air stunk of rust and sulfur and oil and God only knew what other sorts of rotting things. Leopard's nose crinkled, but the stench did not fade. He threw his cigarette on the ground and hoped that wasn't a puddle of oil where it landed.

The cop shined the flashlight in their faces.

"Sorry, no reporters, gentlemen," he said.

"You wanna get that light out of my face before I shove it up your ass," Leopard said, shielding his eyes with his hand.

"Hey, take it easy, pal ..."

Chen took out his wallet and flipped it open.

"We're not reporters."

The cop shined his flashlight on Chen's wallet and squinted.

"Oh. FBI. You guys are all right," the cop said.

Leopard shivered and hugged his trenchcoat tighter to his body. The cold, wet air bit through his clothes to his skin. He hated the Goddamned winter and everything about it.

He looked back at the steel mill. Fires burned here and there, some small, some like the blast from a volcano. The bulldozer prowled back and forth like a beast in its domain, searching for food to eat, growling then roaring and spitting smoke from its snout.

How was it Dante described the lower levels of hell? It was like looking down on it from higher up, and the steelworkers in their stained work suits crawled over the structure like the devils who tended the condemned souls, lacking only their lances and pitchforks.

"Leopard? Tom? The body's over this way," Chen said.

He motioned toward the rail cars with his thumb.

Leopard walked with him, his hands in his pockets and his head down. He watched for holes and puddles, but he was not anxious to see another body.

It lay on the cold, wet gravel between rail cars loaded with coal.

It was covered with a white sheet. Already, the clean sheet was speckled with drops of icy rain and smeared with dirt. A bunch of cops, some in uniform and some in overcoats, stood around the body and among the rail cars, smoking cigarettes and poking into crevices. One man, with a camera, snapped photos of this thing or that thing, the flash bulbs going off like a miniature lightning storm.

One man crouched beside the body and lifted one side of the sheet. He was bald, wore a plain white shirt and straight black tie, and his pocket was full of pens. From under the sheet stuck a small, delicate hand.

Two of the cops watched them approach. The one in the darker overcoat pointed and said something to the man beside him. The second one stepped forward.

“Whoa, fellas. Who the hell are you?” he said.

Leopard and Chen removed their wallets from their jackets and flipped them open at the same time.

“Federal agents. We want to see the body,” Leopard said.

He looked past the detective. The medical examiner, the bald man crouched beside the body, looked up briefly, then back down at the body.

The detective examined their federal identification cards.

“Why do a couple of G-men wanna to see a dead body?” he said.

Leopard and Chen flipped their wallets closed at the same time. Chen walked on to the body and crouched across from the medical examiner.

“We got a tip,” Leopard said.

The detective shrugged. “Anything you got can help us. We got nothing.”

Leopard nodded twice and walked with the detective back to the body.

“I’m Sergeant Remington. This is Sergeant Leyritz,” the first detective said.

Leyritz touched the brim of his hat. Leopard just nodded.

“This is Samuels, county medical examiner.”

Samuels looked up at Leopard again, turning his head in a slow, deliberate manner.

“I figure we I.D. all the guys she put out with we’ll find that knife and we got our killer,” Leyritz said.

“It won’t be one of her boyfriends,” Leopard said.

Leyritz stared at him with a dumbfounded expression.

“What do you mean? Lots of punks carry switchblades that cut just like that. She was probably one of them good little girls who like to tease tough guys, and this time she took it too far and he made her pay.”

“This was a professional. Maybe a switchblade, maybe something else, but I’ll bet you the coroner finds evidence of rape,” Leopard said.

Leyritz laughed. “You’re nuts. That girl was a virgin and a tease and you know it.”

“He says they know who did it,” Remington said to Leyritz.

Leyritz’s face brightened. “That’s great. You’re gonna save us a lot of work,” he said.

“I didn’t say that. I said we got a tip. That’s all,” Leopard said.

Remington and Leyritz looked at each other.

“So what are you saying? You’re saying you’re not gonna help us now?” Remington said.

“That’s bullshit,” Leyritz shouted. He started to go at Leopard, but Remington held him back. “What kind of feds are you guys? Why don’t you help us if you know something?”

Leopard stared at him. He could only imagine what he was going through. This was the second girl killed on their turf, and they were getting pressure to find the killer from their Captain, from the papers, even from City Hall. Leopard knew that kind of pressure.

“We don’t know anything,” Leopard said. His voice was cold and flat.

“Even if we did, we couldn’t share it,” Chen said as he stood up.

Leyritz looked between them, his mouth hanging open and

his eyes wild with incomprehension.

“Are you serious? Look at what I’m dealing with here,” Leyritz said.

His voice was hysterical. He pushed Remington’s arm away and yanked the sheet off the body. His voice attracted the other cops and the photographer.

“Look at it,” Leyritz shouted, pointing emphatically.

Leopard looked at the body. It was a girl, couldn’t have been more than eighteen. She had long, dark hair that spilled in a puddle beneath her head. Wet strands of hair covered her pale face like the strings of a spider’s web. Her eyes were open and stared at the cloudy night sky. Between her colorless lips poked the tip of her swollen tongue. She was completely naked. Her body was no longer beautiful, but horrible. Her wrists and ankles were marked with rings of bruises, and her neck was sliced open. He tried to imagine what she might have looked like when she was smiling. The picture in his mind was of a very beautiful and innocent young girl with dark hair and brown eyes.

“This is what I’m dealing with,” Leyritz said. His tone became pleading. “I got a predator out there. He’s gonna kill again, you mark my word. And you two? You’re just gonna stand there?”

Remington put his hand on Leyritz’s shoulder. Leopard looked at Chen. He nodded toward the car. Chen nodded and they turned to walk back.

“That’s right, leave. I swear I will bust both your asses before this is over,” Leyritz shouted.

Leopard didn’t look back. They got in the car. Leopard stared through the windshield.

“He’s right, you know,” Leopard said.

“Who’s right? The cop? About what?” Chen said.

“We got a predator,” Leopard said.

He started the car and they made the long drive back across the river into New York.