

JOHN SHUMATE

The Zombie Guru

MY CIVIC WAS running on fumes when I stopped in front of the Holiday Inn. There I was, exhausted and relieved, prepared to enter the tenth annual Monster Wizard Tourney. The three-hundred mile trip to Chicago had cost me my job, my wife, and a couple-hundred bucks. I put the stick in park and rolled up the windows, my mind running through a host of images: the screaming match with Gloria, the slammed door, the zip over to the bank, the emptied savings account, the *fuck you* call to my boss. Gloria, my wife of five years, she haunted me through the entire trip, standing in my head, sitting in the passenger seat, her legs propped on the dash, her eyes and cheeks red and puffy — she wore that tight camouflage tee shirt I loved so much. I kept going back to that moment, three-hundred miles ago — she had dinner on the table, the works — mashed potatoes, Salisbury steak. The fight had begun the same as most of our fights. She had discovered, for the fourth time in three months, that I had spent half of my paycheck on Monster Wizard cards. But it was a necessity, I had in-

sisted — just adding a few last-minute power cards to my three Tourney decks. But that was another thing. The Tourney. She couldn't get it, me wasting all my time and effort on a trading card game. She had refused to go with me, then the Wendy's management team had refused to give me the week off. To Hell with all of them, I thought, reaching into the back seat and grabbing my deck box. I had played and trained for fifteen years. Fifteen years, all invested in that moment, the Monster Wizard Tourney. First place was ten-thousand dollars.

I sat the box on my lap. I brought nothing else. No clothes. No extra cards. No trade bait. I was a professional, making my competitive debut. Monster Wizards was a serious sport, and I had come to clean house. I caressed my deck box and everything but the task had vanished. Gloria was the last to leave my head, taking her time as usual, and I knew she would return before the day was out. Her camouflage tee shirt floated, bodiless for a second, impressions of her C cups springing from the chest, then diminishing, leaving only the brown and green patterns, preparing me for combat.

I arrived at the Holiday Inn with five hours to spare — enough time to take in the competition, enough time to size up the vending booths, to sip a Long Island iced tea or two in the lounge. I left the Civic and headed toward the sliding doors, a huge golden banner hanging over my head: *Holiday Inn Welcomes Fantasy Masters Inc. and the Tenth Annual Monster Wizard Tournament and Convention!* I was stoked. And so were the Gamers flanking me, most of them at least ten years my junior, wearing shirts blazoned with screeching dragons and half-naked valkyries, their hands loaded with luggage and card folders, backpacks brimming with all their spare commons and uncommons and rares. These were the adolescent novices who would fall under my experienced and honed wrath, who would hunker home

to their mommies to soothe their brutal defeats. By the time the glass door whooshed and closed behind us, our problems in the world had become neglected scraps, floating in the gutters surrounding the hotel. We were Gamers, and I was proud of our designation, our trade, our art. Geeks, they called us, those who couldn't understand, like Gloria. Weirdoes. Dweebs. Smelly freaks. But we knew better. We were good people.

The entrance opened into a gargantuan, circular plaza, the sky-lighted ceiling hundreds of feet over our heads, bathing the place in summer beams. In the heart of the plaza a small yet sufficient swimming pool was sectioned off with white ropes and striped life preservers, complete with a small booth selling Corona, for those who were too drunk, lazy or too laden with children to make it to the bar. I saw the cordoned entrance to the Convention, but I thought a drink was in order, so I turned into the small, neon and fake flower lounge across the way. I had all of our savings in my pocket — over a thousand bucks, enough to stay there for days, drinks included.

The bar was empty when I entered, sitting my deck box next to an ash tray and asking for a Long Island. The bartender was a pretty twenty-something redhead. She took one glance at my white, Fantasy Masters Inc. tee shirt and dismissed me, sliding my glass over with an empty stare. The Long Island was smooth, just what I needed to clear away the cobwebs. I had never been much of a drinker. In fact, that Long Island was my first in years, but on the eve of the most important display of talent in my life, a little hair of the dog was mandatory.

Halfway through the drink I was playing with a straw and humming along to the Annie Lennox Muzak when a troupe of Gamers giggled into the lounge. Five boys in all, they made their presence known by slamming onto their stools and shifting their deck boxes, talking loudly about the Tour-

ney, looking forward to busting out their Eight Eyed Demon Hounds by the second turn, to stomping their opponents with well-timed Mutant Beetle attacks. I couldn't help myself. Those boys were in need of a reality check.

"Mutant Beetles are way overrated, you know. Just look at how many have to be in play to do any damage. It takes ten rounds to get those things going."

The boy sitting closest whirled around on his stool and smirked. He was thin and blonde and full of energy, his blue eyes creeping out of their sockets, stained red around the rims, sizing me up. "You here for the Tourney, man? How old are you, anyway? Like thirty?" He elbowed the kid sitting next to him, who turned and licked his pierced lips, rested his head on the kid's shoulder. It was clear they were lovers.

"Thirty-one."

He smiled and lifted his white Russian. "Well good luck, Gramps. There ain't been a champ yet over the age of twenty." His boyfriend echoed the gesture, nodding and smiling, just one professional to another.

"Guess that counts you out too, then," I told the kid.

He winked. I finished my drink and left.

I DECIDED TO GRAB a room. I wanted all to be in order before I stepped into the Convention, but I was also teasing myself, flirting with the Candyland past the Convention Hall doors like a child taking his time walking to the tree on Christmas morning. The elevator overlooked the gigantic lobby, and as I slid up the hotel wall I watched the splashing and diving in the pool, slowly receding beneath my feet. An overweight father sat in a plastic lawn chair, a bottle of Heineken cradled in his crotch as he watched his two sons create havoc, throwing their goggles at each other, pushing each other into the water, screaming, cursing.

The room was a one bed job on the third floor, seventy bucks a night, complete with prints of bad Bob Ross paintings, a small desk, and enough pay-per-view porn to keep all the idle perverts happy. I sat on the large fluffy bed with my deck box, briefly clicking through the options: *Debbie Does Dallas*, *Two Girls and a Donkey*, *Butt Bashers Five*. I thought that this was my doom, at my age, abandoning my home, my wife, this was my doom: Clicking through detached and emotionless sex scenarios, a thick pane of glass separating me from the action. But then the deck box resting under my hand reminded me that I was not alone. I had only known Gloria for six years, but the bond I had with my cards held steady since I was a teenager. I could always count on the foil wrappers to be in every store, every hobby shop, neverending, always releasing and reformatting and illustrating, Fantasy Masters Inc. was a lover I could count on. Sure my collection wouldn't suck my dick or give me quickies, but I was never much for that kind of stuff anyway — I preferred the aphrodisiac of fresh ink on card stock, of knowing that my opponent didn't have shit in his hand, of winning at the last minute with a well-timed combo. I smiled, comparing the situation with a soap opera love affair, lurid and secret — I had vanished from reality, my true love in my arms, checking in to a distant hotel with gleaming chandeliers to drink expensive wine and wrap myself around my infidelity.

I turned the TV to local news and explored the bathroom, shaking my head, trying to lose the image of Gloria's tee shirt. But as I pissed in the sparkling white porcelain hole I had the misfortune to look down at the cabinet handles below the sink, and Gloria reappeared as if on cue, naked in the shower, pointing at the handles, her fingernails painted blood red. I shook and zipped, shaking my head and chanting *no*, but in spite of the terror I felt, I bent over and opened the cabinet. There were the

predictable stacks of heavenly white towels, arranged in order of size, and a few individually wrapped bars of coconut scented soap. But I knew what it meant to be looking in that cabinet, to have Gloria washing her hair and humming next to me, and I saw what she wanted me to see, the thing I had been avoiding for hours on the way to Chicago, the thing I had been avoiding when I had screamed at Gloria, the real thing which had pushed me into the Civic, to the bank, onto the open road: a thin strip of indented plastic sat between the stacks of towels, a little circle in the center displaying a blue plus sign.

I sat on the toilet lid and pushed my face into my hands, but the tears wouldn't come. I could feel the bustle of Gamers and Gaming swarming three floors under my room, and it comforted me. She didn't think I knew — I had found the evidence in the sink cabinet a day earlier, and that dinner, our private Last Supper — the Salisbury steak, the mashed potatoes, we could barely afford any of that, and it was always a special occasion, to not eat out of a box. That dinner had been part of Gloria's process, part of the act of revelation — she had prepared a delicious supper for us, and had I not slammed the door and sped to Chicago, she would have dropped the bomb. Sitting there on the toilet, my hands rubbing my temples, I pinched my eyes together and shoved the whole damned thing out into the gutters, where it belonged, on this of all days, with the rest of the shit, swirling, forever swirling, hundreds of feet beneath the cement. I wondered if I should find a job after the first night's round of competition. I could live in my car. I never had to go back at all. I could make friends there, fellow Gamers. I could swim in my cards for the rest of my life, being a kid with all the other kids, living to play and playing to live.

There was a knock at the door.

It was the boy from the bar, his hand hanging from the backpack strap around his

shoulder, a Monster Wizard ball cap now resting backwards on his head.

"Hey kid," I said. "Used to have a cap just like that."

"Oh yeah?" He leaned against the door frame. "Wear it backwards too?"

"What do you want kid?"

"Saw you coming in here a few minutes ago. I'm staying in the room next to you. Thought I'd come over and like say 'no hard feelings' you know. Sorry for being such a smart ass earlier. I mean it. I respect you, playing as long as you have. Look, if you wanna come over later, I got some primo smoke, man."

"Smoke?"

"Sure. After the first couple rounds. If you wanna come over. To smoke, or whatever, you're welcome." He backed up and motioned down the hall.

I stepped out a bit, taking in his half-opened door — number twelve, and the black and red patterns twisting under our feet, the dim fluorescent lighting barely illuminating the small corridor, giving the hall the look and sensation of a deep and imposing tunnel. "Thanks but no thanks, kid. Need to stay focused. Besides, haven't been into that stuff for years. Think I'll take a pass."

He shrugged and slid his feet to his door, which opened as he approached, revealing a pair of brown eyes, pierced above and below — the friend who had been sitting next to him in the lounge. I closed my door. Think I'll take a pass. Those last five words, they resonated, echoed in my empty room, through the bathroom, into the sink cabinet.

I opened my deck box, deciding to stack my decks one last time. I grabbed my weakest deck first because it needed the most care — I called the deck "Wicked Foliage." Its main theme was forest creatures and leaf-generated attack capabilities. I separated the cards into five stacks, based on category: Creature cards, Spell cards,

Combo cards, Modification cards, Trap cards. The beautiful illustrations flowed through my fingers. There was the elegant and large-breasted Dryad, the withering Tree Folk, the earthy Soil Zombie, their glossy faces rubbing my hands, slipping past and over one another, softer and finer than any woman's skin. During these quiet moments with my decks, pride and hope would surge through me, heightened by hasty glimpses of flavor text:

In the thick wood of Karpassian Forest, I am the lord of fallen leaves and fertile earth, for I spring from the depths of the Underground Plains, where water runs clean and unmolested by the hands of man.

I feed on the carrion left by wars of greed and lust. I am one of the millions known as Soil Zombie, and in my wretched, armor-laden Hell, I anticipate the death of day, the birth of night, when I may roam freely through Karpassian Forest, feeding on the flesh of Mutant Owls and Beetles, or the occasional lost wanderer.

I could taste the flavor text — it licked my tongue, my teeth, my gums, transporting me to that sweet realm of adolescence, making me nostalgic, as it always did, for the days of marching band lessons and girls with budding chests. But looking at “Wicked Foliage” also brought sadness, despair. There was something lingering over my dissected deck, intangible and cold. Gloria lowered the pressure in the shower and shouted into the room — she wanted to know if this was the sum total of my life, my identity, those thin slices of cardboard spread across the bed in tiny piles. She told me that I was being foolish, putting all my emotion and life within two-inch borders, investing in a one-sided relationship, a mass-produced love affair. Then softer, to herself, she mumbled that something must change. Something must be done about the deck box, about my collection. I would not leave, she insisted, as the same person. She would clean my sickness out and send me racing home. I laughed at her. She laughed

back, so I closed the bathroom door and finished my work. On the way to the Convention I stopped in the lounge for one last Long Island, and by the time I paid the kid guarding entrance to the Tourney I was limber, in my prime, ready for the worst assault, ready to conquer.

THE TOURNEY ROOM was as large and open as the main lobby, filled with evenly spaced square card tables, sanctioned judges proudly displaying their passes on strings around their necks, walking up and down the aisles, observing each duel, hands wrapped behind their backs. A humble silence permeated the entire room, most voices never rising above controlled whispers, the sound of shifting pieces of cardboard defining every move, every decision, every attack and defense. I looked for the signs of Gloria or her tee shirt, but my suspicions were confirmed — there, in what she must have considered the ultimate layer of evil, the dragon's den, the troll's cave, I was safe from her spectre eyes. She would stay in the shower, pestering me with every passing hour, every passing victory, until she broke me. But I would never give her that pleasure, I thought. She could follow me all the way to Chicago, tucked inside my brain, refusing to leave, but she wouldn't affect my resolve. I was a professional. I was a professional.

My first opponent was an eighteen year old with thick glasses, his face little more than one gigantic zit. His greasy hair fell into his eyes, and I quickly learned that he liked to swat his hair away when he had just drawn a particularly crucial card. For that first night I had selected my most powerful deck — I called it “Red Nightmare,” on account of all the Blood Ghosts and Vampire Ferrets which composed the main thrust of the deck. I slaughtered the kid. By the third round I had summoned my King Blood Phantom and I had devastated

his horde of Sponge Worms. I attacked with my Phantom, then played the Ultimate Damage Infliction Modification Card — a nasty little combo days gone by. The card involved was worth two-hundred dollars. My opponent bowed his head upon defeat, rose from the table and left silently to report his loss to the Grand Judge. I was elated. One of two duels won, which meant I qualified for tomorrow's competition, regardless of the outcome of the next duel.

It seemed that fate had something special planned for me and my unwanted neighbor — the kid ambled up to my table, slapping his deck down and smiling, twisting his cap in the proper direction. "I wear it this way when there's serious business at hand," he said, taking his seat across the table and waving to somebody across the room. "I can't believe it. Here we are. Guess we were destined to have it out, eh? I must have thrown one Hell of a gauntlet down in that lounge, huh?"

"Blind stupid luck," I said, annoyed with his coyness. "You know as well as I do, they pick the order by drawing names out of a hat." But I could tell then, hours before my sacrifice — the kid would pester me, follow me, haunt me until something came out of our misshapen relationship. It was in his fingers, tapping anxiously on the card table. It was in his arched, expectant eyebrows and his blue, searching eyes. There was nothing about that kid that did not annoy me, yet there I was, forced to face him for the third time in five hours.

"Yeah," he laughed, "out of a Monster Wizard hat, like mine!"

"Just cut the deck, would you? Let's get this thing over with."

"Got somewhere to go afterwards, do you? Like a little party down the hall?"

"I told you I wasn't coming. Just cut the deck already."

"Alrighty, Gramps — here goes nothing."

I shouldn't have been surprised

when the kid laid out the first Mutant Beetle on round two. I was standing well enough by that time with two Carrion Ghouls, but my Blood Phantom wasn't in my hand on the draw, so I would have to put up a sturdy defense until my power combo showed up. Things went downhill from there. the kid had the luck of the draw — by round three he had four Mutant Beetles because he had managed to play a restricted card (meaning only one allowed per deck, like my King Blood Phantom), the one card that could allow half a chance for a Beetle deck to work, a little card named Bug Factory, which allowed the owner to multiply his insect deployment by two. I was swarmed, only drawing enough peon Ghouls and Zombies to keep up with his Beetles for the first four rounds. After that I drew shit. His Beetle gamble had worked, the bastard. I lost on round six — the quickest beating I had experienced in at least four years. My one-thousand dollar pro deck had succumbed to a cheesy little common deck filled with ten cent Beetles. I was in a rage, but I tried my best not to reveal this to the kid. Both of our faces were red, mine from temper, his from embarrassment or sympathy, I couldn't tell which.

"So much for the uselessness of Mutant Beetles, eh?" He smiled, reaching over and poking my arm. "No hard feelings though, right? I mean, what a great deck, man. I could never afford the power you have in those cards. I'm impressed man, really." He reached over and tapped my deck box, the brief physical encounter with my treasures accompanied by eyes loaded with passion, desire. He had designs on my cards, I could feel it. He wanted my cards. I imagined him later that night, creeping into my room and stealing my box, zipping home with his boyfriend and tipping a few white Russians to celebrate the heist.

Before my jealousy turned into screaming or strangling I stood up without another word. I had managed one win, but

two would have secured my position. I heard the kid shouting behind me, something about seeing him at the party. I didn't turn around. As I reached the Grand Judge's booth to report my loss, it felt as though the kid's beetles were crawling all over my skin, down my shirt, into my boxers. What I needed, I thought, was some high-quality insecticide, to shove down the kid's disrespectful throat. I hadn't been a sore loser in years, but the old feeling crept over me as I left the Tourney room. I wanted to punch something. Someone.

I had to walk through the vending section to get out of the place — it was a blur of backpacks and thick guts under cheesy tee shirts. Young men and boys bumping into me from every direction, some absently cursing my lack of attention, others checking the contents of their bags after running into me or anybody else, paranoid that their precious finds were being pilaged a few feet away from the point of purchase. A tall man passed, holding his toddler by one hand and cradling a two foot statue of Gandalf in the other. As I reached the exit I noticed that many fathers were doing the same thing, keeping their eyes not on their children but on the highly expensive treasures in their sacks. The whole room was filled with the bastards, some sitting on the floor in corners, counting the ratio between money left and quantity of loot. Most of these passive convention-goers were not there to play but to arm themselves — they would scuttle away after the first night or the second, their wallets so light they could barely afford a couple value meals on the way home. It always ended like that, I had seen it time and time again, when food and gas were secondary necessities, survival taking a back seat to this or that ultra rare card, this or that missing combo, this or that autographed illustration of a photograph. Before I left I stepped up to the closest booth. An old man with a missing nostril stood behind the table, sur-

rounded by posters and packages of Monster Wizard action figures. The real treasures were under his wrinkled hands, under the glass case, spread out and protected by thick plastic sleeves. He grinned and played with his yellow goatee as I scanned the selection. He asked me what my pleasure was, and I pointed to the three-hundred dollar card in the center of the case. My pleasure, I told him, was the privilege of owning that card: Zombie Guru, the third copy for my collection. See, in Monster Wizards one copy is never enough. Four was ideal and five was great. Two more to go, I mused, feeling much better after my purchase, feeling much more at ease with leaving the Convention for the day.

AFTER TWO HASTY Long Islands from the lounge, I spent an hour restacking my decks and admiring my new purchase. The alcohol warmed my body, allowed me to forget the bitch in the bathroom, scrubbing her unmentionables with a lace squeegee. I fell asleep early, around ten or so, not bothering to crawl under the blankets or take off my clothes. My clothes. I would have to find a Wal-Mart in the morning to buy a new wardrobe, a few tee shirts and a couple pairs of shorts. Then maybe I could stop at the liquor store, get a few supplies, make my own Long Islands for the rest of the Tourney, and for less than five bucks a glass.

I dreamed of walking in and out of some Supercenter clothing department, picking the threads which would hold my new identity, leaving the store and making my Civic more comfortable until I could find an apartment and a new job. Installing a sink in the back seat. An oven in the trunk. A television in the dash. Things would be good, living out of my car, and better still if I won the Tourney. I floated to the podium to accept my first-place check, and I flew to the bank, taking enough time to stop in front for a press photo op, shaking hands

with the Grand Judge, who also passed me the key to the city. Gloria's camouflage tee shirt was the bank teller, counting my prize slowly, in one-dollar bills.

Screams threw me out of my dream. I ran to the door and cupped my ear. I recognized the kid's voice, higher in pitch, and the less familiar voice of another kid, probably his friend. They were having a lover's spat — I could only catch a few obvious obscenities. A door slammed. I cracked my door open slightly, peeked into the ill-lit tunnel. My eyes made contact with the pierced kid as he passed my door in a huff, wearing a tank top and jeans, his car keys hanging from his hand. This looked like more than a slight disagreement — this looked like me, running out on Gloria, slamming the door, going to the bank, speeding to Chicago. Final. Irreversible. Their relationship was over. I could see it in the kid's eyes, in the tears sparkling on his lip piercing. I felt at the time that the kid had received his just desserts — this was God slapping his hand for using those stupid Beetles. I chuckled, sat on the edge of the bed, considered *Two Girls and a Donkey*.

I was close to ordering the porn when the first thump landed on my door. The sound shook the Bob Ross paintings over my head, rattled the bed, the water in Gloria's tub. Then another thump. And another. Slow. Methodical. I sat on the edge of the bed, arms wrapped around my waist, shivering from the cold emanating from the crack under the door. I thought I could see stage fog sliding into the room from that crack, and the idle flickering of alien flashlights. The kid moaned from the other side:

"Gramps? Are you awake, Gramps? Come on, man. I need someone to talk to. Pleease. We can party. Wanna party? I knooooow you're awake in there, Gramps."

I backed up and covered myself with blankets, peeked over the top. I didn't want to get involved. I wanted to tell the kid this,

but I wanted more to keep my presence secret. He was only a jilted lover, wanting comfort and reassurance from an adult, but his pounding and moaning seemed more like the ramblings of the creature on the card sitting on my small desk — he was the Zombie Guru, wanting to eat my flesh, to steal my cards, to play with my blood. I think he was still out there, jiggling the handle and whispering when I lost track of sound and time. I fell back asleep.

THE DONKEY SAT in the corner of my dream room, staring at me and the kid, sitting cross-legged on a waterbed the size of a football field. A huge grinding machine covered half the bed between us, clanking with determination.

"This will be the shit, man. I promise," the kid said, stuffing a handful of Mutant Beetle cards into a spout on the machine, which processed and shredded the cards into bits of confetti, spat out on the other end of the machine, onto a flower-embroidered plate. The kid took the plate, sat it on his lap and sprinkled the confetti into a blunt. "The Beetles are best for toking." He lit the blunt and passed. We sat in silence, smoking and bobbing our heads to the beat of the grinding machine's gyrations. I felt the smoke enter not only my lungs but my stomach and my brain and my arms and legs, numbing everything, making it all feel better. "Yeah," I said, "put that in your pipe and smoke it, Gloria."

"Who is Gloria?" the kid asked.

"Just some bitch," I exhaled, inhaled, coughed out a chunk of illustration. The donkey raised his head and smiled a huge, cartoon smile. "And who are you?" I asked the donkey, but the kid answered:

"I'm you."

SWEAT COVERED MY body when I woke up at four in the morning, trembling

from the ambient horror of the dream. I stumbled into the bathroom and threw cold water over my pale face. Gloria was in the tub, lying in a pool of steaming bubbles, a towel draped over her forehead. She lifted a foot and pointed her big toe — not at the sink cabinet but at the wall, past the wall, into the next room, the kid's room. She was right, there was something pulling me in that direction. I didn't care about the little bastard or his romantic problems, but still the urge persisted, to go down the hall, to face the tunnel, to open the door and see what was inside. I grabbed a fresh towel from the cabinet and wiped my face. As I left the bathroom Gloria splashed me — she told me to be sure to grab my wallet, and especially my deck box. I decided that if I was foolish enough to follow her lead to a virtual stranger's hotel room at four in the morning, then I might as well bring the shit with me too. I wiped my hands across my tee shirt, making sure my hands were dry, picked up my deck box. I felt that the box was more significant to me at that moment than at any time in the preceding fifteen years. A halo of self-determination surrounded the box, an aura of omen, premonition. I tucked it under my arm, confirmed that my wallet was in my pocket then left the room.

A few bulbs must have blown while I was asleep, because there was no hallway left when I stepped out. just darkness, the only beacon being the light emanating from the kid's door — it was hanging half open, orange light bouncing and skipping across the hall, the light of a television fireplace, crackling and popping from inside the room. I took my time heading to the door. In my hazy, half asleep malaise, I expected the Devil himself to pop out at any second, or perhaps one of his minions. Perhaps it would be the King Blood Phantom, come from the depths of some ancient hole to end it all.

I stood in the front of the door, thinking about turning tail, jumping back

into bed and sleeping my weird urges away, but the door squeaked open with its own ghost momentum, and the light swallowed me. Before I could adjust my eyes, I heard the kid's voice, small, skipping to my ear like a fleck of dust:

"Hey, there he is! Gramps! Come on in, man!"

I was too dazed to notice how it happened, but the door closed behind me — I was in a world of smoke and jumping TV reflections. The smoke cleared away. The room was exactly like mine, only one large Picasso print stood in stead of the Bob Ross landscapes. The kid was sitting in the middle of the bed and I just stood there, looking back and forth from the contorted bodies in the print to the kid, slumped, legs folded, a glass pipe resting against his crotch. I felt his bulging eyes going over me, his blue pupils now lost in a maze of twisted and blated veins. My mind and body seemed to go on auto pilot and some hidden puppeteer asked the random question, I felt the words slip out of my mouth. "What has happened here?"

The kid's eyes weren't on me at all — he couldn't keep them straight. His left eye rolled into the back of his head and his other eye moved frantically as he said "the fucker left me." The words slurred into each other. He must have been nodding for hours before I had entered, but weed wasn't enough to trash a person so thoroughly.

"Why?" the puppeteer asked.

The kid shook his head and pointed to the small desk across the room. My eyes followed, rested on a small baggie, torn open and covered with tiny white rocks. "He was sick of it. Tried to hide it from him. Told me I was killin myself. That's why, you know, I wanted you to join us, Gramps. I coulda told him the shit was yours."

"Is that coke?"

"Crack."

Even the puppeteer was lost for words. The kid was a fucking crack head.

And the pipe between his legs, it wasn't a bong at all. It was a light bulb, the insides ripped out and the bottom torn away — it was a crack pipe.

The kid smiled and slumped over further, a string of drool sliding down his chin and onto the flowery sheets. He smiled, looked directly beside me, as if he thought I was a few feet to the left. "Hey, is those yer decks? Man, I bet those are killah. Did ya wanna play or something?"

This time the puppeteer spoke without hesitation: "This is for you." I threw the box on the bed, feeling an invisible tension, an elastic pull between the box and my hand as it flew through the air. The box bounced off of the sheet and landed beside the kid's pipe. As soon as it landed I felt the puppeteer loosen the strings. I was terrified. The box was already calling my name, furious of my neglect, my blatant disregard. I could feel the impression of the missing box around my palm, like an amputee's ghost appendage. I knew at that moment why Gloria had shoved me in the situation — this kid needed the company more. This kid needed a new lover, and so did I. He might go downstairs in the morning and hock my decks for crack, but I doubted it. Even half-serious Tourney players couldn't deal with the guilt of giving up such gems. "Use these in the Tourney. You'll probably win. And use the prize money to check into rehab, or to find your friend." The words had their own momentum, their own power and authority. For the first time in my life I was being a parent, and it felt good. I knew my words were hollow. I saw that I was feeding an addict more addiction, rewarding him for being a slobbering fool, but I didn't care, and that felt good too. I didn't care about the one thing I had spent half my life caring about. My deck box belonged in that room, right next to the crack, and there it would stay.

"What!" The kid screamed, as if personally scarred by my action. "You can't

do that! Don't do it, Gramps! There must be a thousand dollars wortha cards in here! You want these, right? Right!"

"I have to leave now."

"At four inna morning? Come on man, you can't do this!"

The kid crawled to the edge of the bed, pushing his pipe out of the way, fighting with passion to keep his eyes focused on me, but they won the battle, focusing instead on the relinquished deck box, reflecting his real desire — to tear in to the box and review the spoils. He looked like a blathering creature on the face of a Monster Wizard card, inching his way toward his prey. He was not aware of his actions — the puppeteer had possessed him, and he was playing out the motions, personifying my lost deck box, begging me to reconsider, while at the same time wanting me to leave.

I turned and ran out the door, followed by the kid's moans and objections: "Gramps! Gramps! Graaamps!"

THE ELEVATOR COULDN'T get me to the lobby fast enough. I leaned against the rails, tapping the glass and watching the pool beneath crawl towards me. The elevator chimed its first floor arrival and I sprinted out, my mind still in the dark tunnel three floors above, only one objective in mind, until I reached the pool.

It was deserted. The Lobby was vacant, lit by small ballasts buried in the floor, uplighting the whole place in a sick yellow glow. The pool stretched out in front of me, lit as well from the bottom, small ripples playing across the surface. I turned around and looked at the third floor balcony — Gloria stood there, looking down on me, wrapped in a pink towel, her wet hair dangling over the ledge. She nodded and mouthed the words: "You're almost there."

I dove into the pool.

I stayed under all the way across, fighting the weight of my soaked clothes.

Somewhere between the shallow and the deep line it became a mission, feeling my age as I kicked, as I pushed with my arms, trying to keep tabs on the amount of air left in my lungs. I was a pro by the end of the swim, my muscles numb from the exertion, it felt so effortless, so smooth and easy, to fly through the chlorine and kid piss, to cut through the water like a steel-bodied Olympian. I felt powerful, in control, lost in the liquid surrounding my body, becoming one with that simple element, feeling it enter my nostrils and ears and mouth — the water, the water, the water.

I emerged, spraying the water everywhere and squirting it out of my mouth in a stream, lifting myself out of the pool in one swift motion, standing triumphant next to the Corona booth. I didn't pause to take a breath. I was still swimming, my course clearly defined, past the sliding doors and into the budding sunlight. I would go home and make a glorious entrance through the door. I would slap the remaining money onto the kitchen table, next to the Salisbury steak which would certainly still be waiting for me, the bills fresh, clean and sterilized by my long swim home. My journey would be flanked by signs of optimism: *Never too little! Never too late!* My hometown would give me a grand homecoming, complete with a parade of old men driving little buggies, clowns with smiley-faced balloons, the Mayor riding in a sparkling convertible, ready to give me the key to the city. I would have the key to the city. Wendy's Management would be pleased with my early return — they would sweep that nasty *fuck you* message under the Dave Thomas rug in front of the registers. The kid three floors over my head would visit me years later, to tell me that he flushed the crack down the toilet, that he had won the Tourney, that he had take my advice, got cleaned up, made something of himself.

She sliding doors spat me into the parking lot and I shoved my hands in my

pockets, whistling that Annie Lennox tune with a passion. My left hand rested on a soggy piece of cardboard — it was the card I had purchased, the Zombie Guru. I studied the card for a second as I walked to my Civic. The illustration was one of the best in the series — a crumbling horror with long teeth and blazing red eyes, a tattered black robe covering his decomposing body. Even through the mush the card had not lost its gloss, its soft sheen playing with my fingers. I stopped halfway to the Civic, turned round and looked at the golden banner, instinctively squeezing the water out of the damaged Ultra Rare in my hand. maybe I should keep it, I thought, as a memento of my passage into the realm of responsibility, where all the bills are paid on time, where wife and husband spend a couple hours in a bar every weekend, laughing and complimenting each other on their beautiful children. I looked at the hours displayed on the sliding doors — the lounge would be open soon. Maybe I should stay, have a Long Island first. One for the road.

I read the flavor text at the bottom of the card:

I am that which cannot be seen or heard with the naked eye. I change form with the flick of a finger, and I follow you around every belabored corner, past every crack in the road, over every rickety bridge you try to cross. I crawl into your lover's bed when you are away defending your little slice of land, and I slide my cold fingers around her waist, giving her the last embrace she will ever know. I am the Zombie Guru, and nothing can stand in my way.