

The Night People

The Killer

"GREAT! GREAT! GREAT!" he kept saying to himself foolishly. It was because it was such a superb day. Or something. As he walked west along 42nd Street, it seemed to him that everything looked much sharper than usual, almost as

through some sort of crystalline lens. And it was hot. The sun beat down on the shoulders of his dachon suit with a pressure that was nearly physical. But it felt good.

The back of his neck itched slightly from the combination of a sweaty shirt collar and a fresh haircut. Somehow this added to

the sidewalks were crowded. The agency office on Madison seemed in another world, although he had only left it 20 minutes before. It had felt like a good day for a walk instead of lunch, so he had headed west into an area he seldom traversed on foot, past stores with displays of "surplus" goods that seemed to be mostly

by JEAN SHEPHERD

—A Jean Shepherd original—

his feeling of being alive and virile and vaguely excited as he crossed Seventh Avenue with a straggling lot of rumped, people.

He paused momentarily in front of a place where a crowd of men and short fat women were eating hot dogs. They stood as they ate and there seemed to be hundreds of them. For a moment he considered going back to the oyster bar he saw in the rear of the place, and he went so far as to enter the wide-open door, but when a blast of hot air hit him from within, he turned aside and continued west.

It was shortly after noon, and

as fast as he could work the trigger. Not a clay duck so much as quivered.

Waves of Excitement

Perspiration trickled down his nose and into his mouth as he sighted over his third weapon. His face felt flushed, but he experienced waves of such excitement as he had never known before. There was a fleeting impression that everyone else had stopped shooting in order to watch him, but he didn't care. Nothing mattered but the ducks and the alive thing in his hands. His hand rang with sound. Suddenly, one of the ducks exploded into a white puff of dust. Trembling, he put the 22 down on the counter in front of him. He knew now that everyone really was staring at him. Without picking up his change, he turned and walked toward the doorway past numerous slot machines. In his haste to get out of the place, he bumped heavily into a tall man working a machine labeled "Test Your Love Powers," and muttering an apology he scurried out into the sunlight.

switchblade knives and miniature Japanese cameras tagged at 79 cents. He spent at least 10 minutes standing in front of a window full of huge rubber feet with claws instead of toenails and covered with horrible red warts. There were also masks of Frankenstein's monster, trick golf balls, neckties featuring naked women with plastic breasts that extended out a good half-inch, a pink china ash tray with a farm boy wearing a yellow straw hat. The kid was relieving himself. Many many things. As the young man from Madison continued to walk, his spirits rose until he felt actually excited. For no real reason as far as he could tell. Just a good day. Then he had to hit that damn penny arcade.

HE HAD NEVER been inside an arcade before, and in fact had only vaguely been aware of their existence. What drew him inside now was the crack of rifles being fired at clay ducks. They moved from right to left, on an endless belt concealed behind green painted-metal scenery depicting the forest. There were other targets, but only the ducks moved. He couldn't take his eyes off them.

Three boys in their teens were popping away at them with 22's as he walked up to the counter. A neon sign overhead flickered off and on with a buzzing sound. It read: "10 Shots—25 Cents—Try UR Luck." He handed the attendant a quarter and for the first time in his life felt the heft of a gun in his hands. It was heavier than he thought it would be, and holding it was an oddly pleasant sensation.

Momentary Memory

He pointed the rifle at one of the ducks and started to follow it with the sights. Suddenly and convulsively he jerked the trigger. The rifle jumped upward as if it were alive and his ears rang with the sharp crack. There was an acrid odor that gave him a momentary memory of firecrackers. The duck moved on.

His cheek felt sticky and hot against the worn stock as he continued to pursue the duck with his sights. Again his finger snapped the trigger wildly, and again the weapon leaped in his hands. With a saucy flip of its clay tail, the duck disappeared behind the scenery unscathed.

He swung the barrel to the right, picked up another duck, and quickly fired. Nothing doing. Fog formed on his glasses as he emptied the gun rapidly without success. Handing a dollar over the counter and getting another rifle happened almost automatically. This time he got off 10 shots

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