

Bourne
toWrite...
creative writing
workshops

One Of Us

(part two)

by Elaine Weddle

Sparks fly as the airbus skims the corner and glances off a building like a stray bullet. Two girls stumble into seated passengers and an elderly lady closes her eyes and makes the sign of a cross as the bus slows and stops. I stand, the doors open. We're some twenty metres above the maze of narrow streets in the Old Tech quarter. Music is hopping and bopping through the souls of my feet as I step on to the glass elevator.

Watch TV and this place doesn't exist. It just isn't like anywhere else; despite the raids, round ups and cleansing of undesirables this place just won't be brought to heel. So, we are in a news-free zone. Everyday there are more incomers, young people mostly, they come to party for a few weeks and squat in the old shops and abandoned buildings. Andrea had loved it, she said the smell and sound of it reminded her of life before the sickness ...

In a side street, wedged between an abandoned factory and a half derelict school, I find the Gig & Byte. I watch from a doorway on the other side of the road with Dog by my side. I wasn't sure that bringing Dog was a good idea even though he was highly advanced and almost indistinguishable from the real thing. But I'd promised, I'd told Ida about going to Old Tech and told her I'd be safe. I said I'd explain later but in truth I couldn't explain any of it, not even to myself. So, here I was at the place where the waitress hung out. When the chef at the Yellow Café told me, he'd had this smirk on his face that said you're wasting your time, she ain't going to be interested in you old man.

As we approach, a big guy steps out of the door of the café. He must have remembered me, because he slaps me on the back and shakes my hand as if we were childhood buddies. He calls over a Server who glides up to us on her pink neon air skates. That was the problem with the Servers, they were too perfect – their legs were always longer, hair blonder, lips fuller. The designers just couldn't help themselves. She was about to guide me to a chair when I spot the waitress at the bar, drinking shots with a parrot.

"No shu-gar, no shu-gar," said Mr Green as I sat on the stool beside her.

"Nice bird," I said. The girl twizzled round in her seat her eyes fixing immediately on Dog, her ungovernable hair falling over her face.

"Nice dog is that a Ridgeback?"

"Something like that," I said.

"Do I know you?" she said looking up at me.

"The Yellow Café ..? I started to recount the events of the week before, until I notice she is looking straight over my shoulder and Mr Green is standing motionless on one foot head to one side. The hubbub of chatter has faded and there's just the sound of heavy boots. I turn to face a group of heavily armed men in bomber jackets and balaclavas.

"Everybody empty your pockets, then get out!" shouts the first man waving a large automatic weapon at the crowd. "Don't even think about short changing me, all of your trinkets and jewels, or the boyz will find it and blow your brains out." The crowd moves slowly, cautiously. "NOW!" he shouts.

"Thieving pigs," says the waitress.

"Let's just get out of here ..." I whisper.

Dog was already on its feet. Mr Green hopped up from the bar on to my shoulder. The room was quiet as people threw stuff on the tables then moved towards the door where one of boyz was carrying out a search and punching anyone in the face who tried to withhold something. The waitress was pulling on her jacket and pushing that long tricky hair of hers out of her eyes as we joined the queue for the exit

"Hey you, yeah you, bird man..." shouts the leader of the gunmen. I stop and the rest of the crowd walk past. When I turn I see the man is now standing by the bar, he's pulled off his mask and is knocking back shots.

"That's one good-looking dog. You are going to give me that dog, right?"

I could see the boyz watching and behind us thirty or forty nervous people are waiting to get out, waiting for me to make the wrong move.

"...take it," I said "... more trouble than its worth."

“Thieving pigs,” squawks Mr Green. The man throws the glass into the mirror behind the bar before aiming his gun at the bird. I don’t hear anything for a second but I feel the air move as the bullet slides past my head. Somebody screams, people fall to the floor and Mr Green flaps his wings and takes flight above our heads.

“Get the fuck out of here,” shouts the man, “you’re wasting my time.”

It was dark on the street, just a couple of pink signs blinking above our heads.

“What was that?” I said.

“It’s the Wild West round here man...the authorities should be cracking down.”

She’s smiling at me for the first time.

“It’s not safe. I’ll walk you.”

“No way man. I don’t know you.”

“Then take the dog.”

She eyes the animal suspiciously and shrugs. Out of the blackness above us, a bird is circling, Mr Green flaps on to my shoulder.

“What’s with this bird?”

“Looks like you’ve found yourself a friend,” she said before striding off into the darkness of the street, Dog by her side. “See you around!”

“I don’t know you’re name,” I say, “I don’t ...” but she’d already gone.

“Night, night Kara,” squawked Mr Green.

