

Untitled 1: True Stories of 2001 America

By Leviathan Joe

There might have been a world out there. The strip of metallic blue sky beyond the impossible reach of the mute monoliths suggested as much. Crane your head back far enough and you can see, maybe even believe.

Inspector Pizza didn't believe, didn't care. He only hunched close enough to his cupped hands so that the spastic flame could kiss the cigarette tip long enough to catch. It caught, and he smoked there in the narrow cleavage between crumbling skyscrapers, his trench coat snapping in the dirty winds. The open sewer seethed and ached in front of him, beckoning him into its lurid bosom.

At the nearest end of the alley, a hundred yards away, an ambulance flashed by. Maybe it carried a saint or a psycho. Or an atheist or addict. Would the universe collapse any faster, or would the sky be any less impossible in the resounding non-silence following the final beat of that nameless heart?

No. Just another senseless tragedy heralded by frantic, dead noise.

There would be no such fanfare for Jack Sheckly, the man whom Inspector Pizza hunted, whose path had led Pizza to stand and smoke above this gullet of madness and stink, while he decided how to best go about his task.

For decades, Sheckly had eluded all the authorities. FBI, IRS, PETA; everyone wanted a piece of him.

But only Inspector Pizza stood at the bottom of this urban crevasse, above the threshold of the cruel sewer land, into which the trail of his elusive quarry had slunk.

He flicked the cigarette in and watched the darkness swallow up the spiraling ember.

Then he climbed into the snake's mouth and closed it behind him. He scaled its metallic ribs, going down until the single beam of light from the manhole cover could plumb no further, and kept going. He hadn't even removed his sunglasses. It was just as well. Painful gastric ulcers produced excess mucus, leaving Pizza's stomach sensitive to ambient vibrations. Light was fickle. Down here, his gut would guide him. Already he could tell through vibrations in the oily rungs how much further he must descend.

He dropped on spongy ground, a drunken sewer breath fluttering up through his trench coat. A faint blue light swelled up around his boots; he'd agitated a patch of sewer fungus. A trap that alerted the underworlders to his presence. He stepped away and gradually the poison light faded.

Inspector Pizza slipped a cigarette from a special pack and lit it. The dancing flame illuminated the disemboweled corpses of John Powell and Hans Zimmer, gods to the very people who'd suspended their drained bodies from hooks and chains to be snatched up by marauding sewer alligators.

He dragged deep, the cherry flaring. Before the light faded, he saw a bloated rat licking blood off his boot.

The ember smoldered in the blackness, reflecting off his lenses like infernal

pupils. The exotic San Lorenzo tobacco excited the ulcers.

He flicked the cigarette away and was on the move. He slid along dripping corridors, across catwalks and chasms. Clangs and clicks resounded through the chambers, rippling through his stomach and prodding the ulcers to dance their fire-dance, guiding him.

The sewer-dwellers swarmed in the darkness, moving with inhuman stealth, many of them born underground, aliens to sunlight. They clacked and spat in their unholy language. Pizza froze to evaluate their intentions.

The underground terrain was a perfect medium for their distinct hisses and clangs. They communicated through or with the miles of pipes that snaked through the mazes. They were a shrewd and united people, more advanced, some said, than their clumsy, sunlight-stupid counterparts.

Inspector Pizza waited. He sensed them crawling, loping, and dangling. Their clicking became sparser, less urgent. He was no threat to them.

He knew Sheckley was not among their party. Jack Sheckley had lost his right eye in a polo match against a great white shark, and had spent less than a month below ground. Even if the underground society had accepted him, he wouldn't be among the scouting parties. But neither would he be among the thousands that made up the general population, fortified and thriving God-knew-where. Evasion was Sheckley's keenest instinct; always on the move, always alone.

Neither did Inspector Pizza need their aid. Just as he didn't need the force or the FBI or NPR or any of the hired hounds that had hunted Sheckley for over a decade. Destiny was hunger and only Pizza knew when he was hungry.

A burst of their alien language rippled through the darkness from a nearby chamber.

He froze. His esophagus burned. Had he offended them?

They were blowing raspberries, closer this time. A message relayed through the tunnels by separate groups. The group surrounding Pizza sounded out their turn in a flurry of lip flatulence. Then they were gone, the raspberry call echoing anew in the distance. Bad news travels fast. It was a warning.

Then another sound pounded through the caverns, freezing all who heard. A scream. For all their inhuman qualities, the sewer dwellers sounded every bit like anyone on the surface while screaming their death screams.

And then it was quiet.

Inspector Pizza swung into the nearest alcove and hefted the Beretta. Back against the wall, he tapped the cold barrel to his lips and waited.

Then he heard the slinking, the rustling, and the rasping. The clatter of talons. A dim glow filled the chamber; something was agitating the phosphorous fungus.

The alligator came lumbering up the corridor. Its belly brushed along the stone floor, blood-bloated with prey.

So this is what all the fuss was about.

Pizza held the gun's sight in his lips, wishing like hell it was a cigarette.

The creature's snout, a seven-foot slab of bone, scales and conical teeth, lurched in front of the alcove and stopped. Wet bleats and snorts issued from the nostrils.

From the creature's sagging belly came an urgent grumble. Pizza felt it through his boots. There was a wheeze and a gag and the beast regurgitated blood and bone with a

splatter and clatter on the stone. Such was the fate of the unwary. It was prepared to feed again.

It waved its snout into the alcove. Quivering nostrils spattered fog and snot on his expensive sunglasses, behind which he slowly blinked. It smelled Pizza, smelled his sweat and his breath and the isopropyl alcohol he splashed on after shaving his balls. And it smelled the gunpowder that exploded in its sinus cavity. To Inspector Pizza the sound of the gun going off was but a meaty pop.

The chamber filled with sound and spray. The enraged creature spun and snapped, churning up the toxic fungus into a shower of molten phosphoresce. Inspector Pizza was already gone, sucking on a cigarette as he ran.

He sprang onto a nearby catwalk and into a high chamber, dodging through fungi patches and shunning the poison light. At last he found a shady spot.

It took him a minute and the rest of that cigarette but he finally talked himself down from a coronary. It was but a moment's respite.

New sounds. Not skillful scuttling but clunky, desperate steps. The mucus in his stomach rattled like Jell-O. This was it. His gut quivered with the realization. Acid washed across his tongue. It tasted like destiny.

Azure light swelled in the chamber. He spun on the source, gun at the ready. But he froze.

A clown danced through the ambient glow, seeming to move in slow motion. It smiled its piano-key smile. In its gloved white hand, a sliver of sharpened metal sang through the viscous air. Then that smile cracked open, wider and wider, wide enough to engulf Pizza's head, goatee and all.

Pizza fired. A black flower blossomed on the clown's shoulder.

The report sounded through the chamber, sobering him. The hallucination dripped away.

There was no clown, it was just Jack Sheckley, wounded, stumbling away, stirring up fungus as he went, leaving a glowing trail.

Pizza worked on getting his head together. He'd inhaled too much toxic fungus. It was getting to him, just another topsider succumbing to quiet blue insanity. He had to fight it, had to pursue Sheckley through the poison light. He buckled to the floor.

He managed to pass a cigarette to his lips and got it lit. He smoked, feeling his strength return, and gave chase.

Jack Sheckley, one-eyed water polo enthusiast, sprinted through the chamber and came upon a chasm. A forest of chains from nowhere dangled into the pit. With only a sliver of hesitation he leapt into the air, reaching for a chain, but as he did, Inspector Pizza fired the gun, the report crippling Sheckley in mid-air as if he were trying to pull out of a dive. He plunged through the chains, entangling his leg. He spun upside-down over the pit, a spider on a thread. From below came the excited splashes and wheezes of a nest of alligators.

The inspector took a flying leap, trench coat rustling, and snagged a chain. Down he slid until he came upon the hapless criminal. Face to face. Blood from Sheckley's draining shoulder spattered the animals' quivering nostrils, spurring them on until the chamber was a cacophony of their hungry, masturbatory grunts.

Inspector Pizza blew the cigarette's last drag into Jack Sheckley's face. He said, "It's down to you and me, you one-eyed freak," and untangled him.

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