

Chewing Up the Innocent
by Jay Lake

Ariadne's a beautiful kid, you know what I mean? The kind of child that people stop and look at when we walk down the street, her little hand in mine. The Daddy hand, the cross-the-street hand, the I'm-worried hand that drops away the moment there's a swing to be swung on or kids with jump ropes or chalk. Little fingers, not so little any more, but still they clutch at me with an echo of that infant monkey grip, don't-drop-me-from-this-tree-Daddy firm until she runs shrieking into her future.

And I don't mean beautiful-pretty, either. Though God knows she's cute enough. I mean charisma to turn your head and a thousand-watt personality that can hold a room full of people. It's not the RSO's on the county watch list I worry about. It's what will become of her. All that raw go-go in one little head and one little heart. And only six years old.

I've painted this kid half a hundred times, photographed her so much I've gone through two digital cameras. Elaine doesn't get it. "Quit screwing around with that stuff," she tells me.

"Look, the way the light falls on her face."

"So turn on the lamp."

"That's not what I mean, hon—"

"Come on. Pay attention." Then we're off in some half-hearted argument about the cats or her friend Lynette's divorce or who might have swiped the stone chicken out of the back garden and what the hell we could do about it anyway.

Until I'm down in the basement, developing black and white or sketching on sheets of foolscap taped to the walls. Ariadne, Ariadne, Ariadne. If I capture my daughter just right, maybe it will be okay to let her go.

I never did get the point of art jams, not for years. My buddy Russell finally pushed me into one, about a year after my first montage ran in Oregon Alive! "Get out there, Jim. Take some fucking board and a sack of markers and go down to Speed Racer's. It's cool, man, I mean, just fucking cool."

He's a hippie forty years out of time, Russell, with long hair and a taste for women's underwear — with or without the women still attached — and a sense of purpose when it comes to my life. His own, that's a different issue, but Russell ain't married with the most beautiful kid in the world looking him in the eye every day.

Russell's been kicking my tail since we were both in our twenties. I still remember sitting in a Denny's out on I-5 somewhere, on our way to some party down in Salem I'd probably forgotten about before I got home that night. "Look, man, you've got a hand a lot of artists would kill for. I've seen you whip off napkin sketches of the waitress that got our tab lost. Work."

I laughed over the ruins of my Grand Slam. "You're so full of shit, long-hair. Work, my ass. You wouldn't know the meaning of the word if I fed you the dictionary."

He got real serious for a moment. "I ain't got your hand, either, Jim."

"Fuck my hand. I got projects due." Marketing, bane of everyone's

