

Sooty Tears

by Lloyd Hudson Frye

The alley is the same year around. Narrow and covered in an inch of soot. No car or truck has been down it for decades; even homeless men avoided the place. Rain causes small black puddles to form in the dim, shadowed crevice of the city. Sounds of sirens and cars honking are magically muffled by eons of soot and the ancient stench of time, lost to men.

My name is Sam Bone, a private investigator for hire. My downtown office, above an empty bakery business gone bankrupt years ago, is the lowest rent in the city. The door reads *Bone Investigations* and no one knocks when they come to see me. It could be that the doorknob is missing and the door is ajar all the time. I hide the files inside three slants in the dark paneling for security purposes.

If I scoot my chair back from the old oak desk, I can see through the pale, white-stained window into the alley below. There is lots of time between phone calls, which allows me plenty of time to stare below while I retrace the steps I took to get to this point in my life.

I wonder what's below the countless bumps in the alley, some large enough to be decomposed bodies from a long ago homicide. There has always been a stench, like a dead rat in the wall, since I rented the place five years earlier.

Today I've decided that I will get a stick and poke some of those mounds in the alley to see what I can find. The back stairs are loose and sway as I descend down to the back door. I'm looking for a stick or rod to use in my hunt. An old curtain rod is leaning up against the back corner.

"Perfect. You'll do just fine."

I'm pulling on the back door. There is something stopping me. No bolts or catches are in sight. I figure that it is just plain stuck from nonuse and kick it open. The resulting cloud of soot is scary.

"I can't believe this place."

The soot cloud soon engulfs the entire area. I narrow my eyes and step into the alley. There, a sudden silence like a cemetery, wraps around me.

"This is spooky out here."

Even my words seem to die in midair and fall helplessly into the soot below. I stab this mound and then that one. They all seem hard. I push on a long, large mound that gives as the rod sinks into the soft form. It's so soft I lose my balance and fall forward, hitting my head on the brick wall on my way down. Before landing in the pile of soot and ashes, I feel my neck strike a corner of some box.

"Damn it!"

I lay there in the gathering cloud of soot, helpless. I've lost all feeling from the neck down. I try to move my hands but nothing stirs as the soot swirls around my nauseous head.

"Help! I've fallen and I can't get up!"

No one calls out to me.

"Help!"

Panic strikes my soul as I realize there are no other tenants in the building.

"Help!"

My throat becomes caked with soot. Soon, I can't even hear myself call out. My ears are full of soot.

"Help. Help me."

Days pass as I accept my fate. Sooty tears run down my black face.

First, one letter comes and drops into the mail slot in the door always ajar. A month later a second letter falls to the floor. Two weeks later a letter drops that reads on the front in one-inch high red letters, FINAL NOTICE TO VACATE.

Two weeks later a young financial counselor, fresh out of college, is sitting at the old oak desk. An old man is scrapping off the gold lettering of *Bone Investigations*. He leans back and stares out the oxidized windows to the alley below.

"I bet there's a body under all that soot, probably from a homicide long ago."

Lloyd Hudson Frye was born in California's wine country in 1947. He was raised in Kansas City and spent summers on the West Coast. He came close to a BS degree in psychology late 1970, years later granted an accounting degree from Chico State in 1975, also managed to get halfway through an MBA at University of Santa Clara in the early 80s. Now lives in the Northwest.

He worked as retail shelf stocker, janitorial office worker, greenhouse worker, type setter, press operator, dorm janitor, cabinet assembler, migrant farm hand, carpet cleaner, produce rack worker, pulled chain in a lumber mill, Fuller Brush salesman, math tutor, teaching assistant, study lab instructor, customer service rep, c.s. supervisor, product manager, product marketing director, electronics buyer, and senior commodity manager.

Since being NAFTAed in the back in 2003 he has been seeking gainful (30 years experience in purchasing) employment --- unsuccessfully.

*Since January of 2005, he has been writing first draft of the epic *Barnacle Bill the Sailor* that begins in 1676. In February 2006, he joined a virtual writer's workshop and began writing other pieces for publication (see below).*

His ambition is to write for a living, in other words, to live a life of abject poverty with delusions of eventual fame and fortune.