

A blue license plate with the word "TAG" in red, bold, sans-serif capital letters. The plate has four white rectangular marks, two on the top and two on the bottom, representing mounting holes. A yellow road with a white dashed line in the center leads from the bottom of the page up to the license plate.

**TAG**

A NOVELETTE BY  
**JAY CARLSON**

**poe  
orio**  
**in tag**

Jay Carlson

The Plug Publishing

## *Friday*

That lady who didn't do squat for a whole hour finally put away the sign "Please use other window." She rubbed lotion into her hands and exclaimed, "May I help the next person in line?"

I walked up, papers in hand.

"How may I help you?" she asked. "Would you care for some lotion?"

I muttered, "I'd like a vanity plate. No lotion, thanks."

"License, registration, and proof of insurance please."

I handed over those documents and more. Expired insurance cards. Emissions certificates. I mean, I had photocopies of checks that I'd paid to the DMV from

two years ago.

She thumbed through my paperwork and came to a halt. She asked, "Poe? Like Edgar Allan?"

"Yep," I said. "Just like that."

Lady Typist went back to finger-pecking my data and stared at her screen while it worked its magic.

"Okay, how would you like your plate to read?"

"Studman."

Her face went dead. I mean, absolutely numb. She looked me up and down like I had a hidden camera in my bag. My sheepish half-smile told her I didn't. So what if I wasn't her idea of a stud? Fine by me. It's not her I'd be after anyway. Being a Studman is as simple as believing you're a Studman. And damn it, I'm a greased up, fur-on-my-belly, love-in-my-blood Studman.

Lady Typist typed while stifling her giggles. Then she announced, in a much louder voice, "I'm sorry. Studman is taken."

"You're kidding." Her sheepish half-smile told me she wasn't. I hadn't considered any other options. "What about Studman with a space in the middle? Like stud, space, man."

She entered my request and responded, "Sorry. That's also unavailable." She fluttered her tiny hands away from the keyboard. "I guess this means you have competition."

The saps in line stared at the back of my head, because they had nothing else to stare at. Their eyes quietly told me *hurry it up, buddy*. I knew, because I had done the same thing to the people in front of me.

Lady Typist offered, "You know, a lot of people spell stuff phonetically to get what they want."

"That's good," I said. "Yeah. Let's try that."

Three weeks later, I received a thin box in the mail with a cold metal center. It made me so giddy that Friday at work Harold commented, "You've got a shit-eating



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a novelette by  
**jay carlson**

***mitch  
tugrelli***  
in tag

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## *Friday*

“What a craphole.”

“Agreed.”

“Like, who ever thinks about this road? Like, not the road itself, but who thinks about, like, that piece of grass right there? You know?”

Javo had no choice but to look at and think about that piece of grass. And all he came up with was, “Apparently *you* do.”

“Damn straight,” I said. “I bet no one’s even looked at that piece of grass right there.”

“Well, how could they? There’s more grass than people. It’s like trying to see all the ants in the world. You can’t keep tabs on that.”

“I’m gonna be the first,” I said. I got down on my

knees and told the grass, “I notice you,” and then kissed the top of the blade.

“Be gentle,” Javo said. “It’s the grass’s first time.”

I laughed, “I’m going to deflower the grass.”

Javo laughed, too. “It gave you an itchy.”

This led to one of the best ideas I’ve ever had. “Hey, you know what’d be cool? To spend the night right here.”

“Why?”

“Because no one’s done it before. We’d have total nature cred.” The thought of actually going through with a roadside sleepover made me snicker. “I bet it would confuse the hell out of people, too. Like, ‘Why are those guys sleeping on the side of the road?’”

“We could tell people it’s a political statement or something. Like we want people to notice all of nature. Even the little grass blade.”

“Man, that sucks so bad,” I said. “We totally have to do that.”

“Agreed.”

Javo and I continued hiking to PAC Liquor, or should I say, the storefront formerly known as PAC Liquor. Every few months somebody leases the building and puts in yet another liquor store, like the new person’s unique spin on liquor is going to make the store work this time. Of course, it never does, thanks to the tight notches of the Bible Belt.

Every time a business goes broke, the owners cover the store windows with plywood, because people around here like to throw things more than they like to drink things. A blank wooden canvas that faces the road is enough to make any tagger come out of the woodwork.

The night before was PAC Liquor’s boarded window premiere, and guess who waited in back for the sun to go down? First come, first served. I left my mark on the prized front window, six feet wide, easy. It was