In Search of Lost Dime

“Give me another one.” The words and the crumbs fell out of his mouth together.

“I - I was going to give some to the others.” I spoke up to his eyes some five inches above mine, taking a step back from the belly of his grimy T-shirt.

He took a step forward, his gut bumped me and his hairy finger pointed at the bag in my hand. “I don’t give a crap about them. Give me another damn sandwich.”

“I’ll kiss you good for one.” A scrawny fiftyish woman with long silver streaked hair appeared to my left.

“I might even do more for you.”

I took a step away from her.

“What? You don’t think I would do it?” She said before sticking her tongue at me through a gap in her green teeth. “Why don’t you think I’d do it to you?”

Another step back, I tried reason. “Because I wouldn’t want to do it to me.” She paused to consider my reasoning.

Where were all the people? This tunnel was usually filled with commuters. A slithering on my arm stopped my scanning the hall. I pulled away from a yellowish hand trying to reach into the bag.

“Heh-heh, sandwich” came out of a crooked grin on an embarrassed pudgy face with dark rings around its eyes. It was attached to the end of the arm, which was now unslithering. I took another step back in the only direction left to me as my paramour opened her blouse and gave me a flash I will never unsee.

“I’ll just take it then.” The ogre reached out again.

“Heh-heh, just take it.”

“Come on toots.”

I raised the bag above my head to hurl it behind the beggars and run the other way, when they all took a step back, their faces changed instantly from predators to children caught with chocolate stains on their cheeks.

“What you doing Ernie?” a calm, vaguely accented voice asked from behind me.

I turned to see a small, serene looking man in his sixties wearing a dark, short billed European sailor’s cap. He smiled like my parish priest used to after confession.

The ogre, who I now knew as Ernie, shuffled a little and smiled with surprisingly good teeth.

“Oh, hi Zecky. We were just accepting sandwiches from this gentleman. Thank you sir.” The last directed at me.

“Heh-heh, thank you.” The pickbag gibbered.

The fetching wench closed her blouse and smoothed her hair back. “He’s a nice Chinaman.”

“Now Elsie, you know that’s not appropriate.” Zecky admonished.

“Why not?”

“He’s not even Chinese. Why don’t you run along now,” Zecky said to the mod squad, “Or else I’ll take you back with me.”

Zecky’s last comment sent them hurrying way with quite uneasy, even frightened expressions. He then turned to me.

“Nice of you to feed us.”

“Us?” I asked. I hadn’t classified Zecky with the others. He was certainly not a dapper dresser, but he wasn’t shabby either.

“Here, I’ll walk you down to your track. NJTransit or LIRR?”

When Zecky stepped closer, a sweet scent, clovish like mulled wine, mixed with rich pipe tobacco triggered a Proustian flashback to my early years working downtown. It was still indistinct, but I thought of old book stores, now long gone on side streets west of Nassau.

“I catch the train toward Princeton.” I was a little worried about sharing too much, but his serene smile relaxed me.

“Oh great. That’s my way.” Zecky said, picking up his pace as he headed toward the Jersey tracks.

“You live in Jersey?” I asked, weaving between the commuters who all of a sudden engulfed us.

“No, I live here.” Zecky said over his shoulder, “but I’m going that way.”

“You live here? With them?”

“Same neighborhood.” Zecky said.

“Is that safe?”

“Sure it is. They just want minding. Say,” Zecky stopped and pointed to the bag of sandwiches. “Are you taking that home?”

“No. I was intending to give it away here.” I held the bag up. “But it’s harder than I thought.”

Zecky stopped underneath the departure screen. “Which track you leaving from?”

“It says track eight, in twenty minutes.” I said, finding my train on the chart.

“Great, we have time then. Carry that bag with me down to track one, that’s where I’m going.”

We walked to the end of the main hall and down the old stairs with brass banisters. One of the scattered relics of the original Penn Station which can surprise you like tombstones in a playground. I glanced at the departure screen to see the destination of the train leaving track one. But none was shown.

“This way,” Zecky turned at the bottom of the staircase and headed all the way to the end of the platform. I followed him until he started to descend a service staircase from the platform down to the tracks.

“Down there?”

Zecky looked up at me from the middle of the staircase. “Sure.”

“I don’t think I’m authorized to go down there.” I stood, looking down at Zecky, then around on the platform for someone official looking, not wanting to get in trouble, but also hoping for someone to stop me.

“I authorize you.” Zecky declared in a very authorizing tone, followed by a chuckle. “By the powers invested in me.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, handing him the bag, “But I don’t want to miss my train.”

“Oh yes, you have a train to catch,” Zecky stroked his chin without taking the bag from me.

“Here,” I thrust it toward him again, “It’s not heavy.”

“I’m sure it’s not,” Zecky said, “It’s just I like to have my hands free going down this dark part. I’m not as young as you, you know.”

I was about to apologize and leave the bag on the platform. Even though he saved me from an dangerous situation, I was not going down that train tunnel with him. Before I spoke, another figure in the darkness of the tunnel caught my eye. It was just a silhouette in shadows, but I could tell it was a tall slender female, moving on young legs.

“Oh, looks like we’re saved.” Zecky declared, taking the bag and turning to the shadowed form. “You came at just the right time.”

The woman stepped closer so that a strip of light shone across her mouth and shoulders. Long, wavy, dark brown hair hung on them like a thick shawl. The mouth was wide and toothy with a glint of gold in the back. Then she laughed a zesty, youthful laugh which drew me into the same flashback I’d had when I met Zecky, eerier this time for its repetition. As she reached forward to take the sandwich, the light strip briefly moved over the top of her face revealing her Slavic nose and blue eyes under dark eyebrows.

“I have to go now.” I said, “Thanks for saving me back there.”

“Oh, thank you for the sandwiches.” Zecky said, “Listen if you ever get in trouble again, you can call me.”

“Thanks,” I said, and then out of politeness more than intending to ever do it asked for his phone number.

“Just go to any pay phone,” he said to me holding out his hand to me. “And call. Use this dime.”

“But the number?” I asked.

“Just use this dime.” He dropped it in my palm, and went down the dark tunnel.

Thinking, hoping that was the end of this adventure, I dropped the dime in my pocket and made my way to track eight.

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I would pass through coming from home in the morning and returning home at night. My home is not important to this story though. What is important is what happened in this colony. I went through it on my way to a programmer job at a hedge fund by Rockefeller center. People don’t call themselves programmers any more. They are analysts, or engineers or architects, or whatever the new word is this year. But they’re all programmers no matter what they say, some are great, some are terrible, most are in between, but it has nothing to do with what they call themselves. I think a lot of the homeless were programmers, and a lot of the engineers will be homeless someday.

The hedge fund I worked for was great. It was privately owned by a billionaire and paid well, and the people were very nice, and they gave out free lunch on Fridays. That’s what got me into trouble. Actually you could eat for free there most days. Besides the official free Friday lunches, there were always conference rooms full of sushi or something else expensive and delicious left over from some meeting. Whenever one of us spied a loaded conference rooms on a bathroom run or some other errand, he would make sure to alert his teammates, after of course filling a plate himself.