In Search of Lost Dime

Zecky

“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 strode forward, butting me with his gut while 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 woman with long silver streaked hair slinked toward my left side.

“I might even do more for you.”

I sidled away from her.

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

I looked down the corridor. Where were all the people? This tunnel was usually filled with commuters. A slithering on my arm interrupted my scan of the hall. I pulled away from a grayish hand reaching into the bag.

“Heh-heh, sandwich” cackled 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, now unslithering. In the other hand he held—a fish bowl with a goldfish. 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.” The golem snickered.

“Come on toots.” The hexe cooed.

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 predatory to those of 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?”

“It’s insulting, besides, he’s not even Chinese. And Slender, what’s wrong with you reaching into other people’s bags. Why don’t you run along now,” Zecky said to the mod squad, “Or do you want me to take you back with me.”

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

“Nice of you to feed us.”

“Us?” 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 around Nassau.

“I catch the train toward Princeton.” I was a little uncomfortable about sharing too much, but his avuncular smile lulled 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 seemed to appear from nowhere to engulf us.

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

“You live here? With them?” I struggled to follow through the small gaps in the crowd he slipped into.

“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, some 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 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 to be prevented.

“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 rescued me from the derelict swarm, I was not going down that train tunnel with him. Before I spoke, another figure in the darkness of the tunnel behind Zecky caught my eye. It was just a silhouette in shadows, 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 sandwiches, the light strip briefly moved over the top of her face revealing a Slavic nose and blue eyes under dark eyebrows.

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

As I turned to leave, my wallet, apparently come loose from my pocket when I reached to hand Zecky the bag, fell onto the tracks.

“I’ll get it,” the woman started to run around Zecky to retrieve my wallet, when Zecky stuck out his arm to block her. She stopped immediately.

“It’s right here,” Zecky bent out of view, “Right under the platform.”

“Watch the third rail,” I cautioned him, as he remained out of view for a few seconds. Finally he straightened up again with a smile, handing me the wallet.

“I know my way around here,” he said, “And thank you for the sandwiches. Listen if you ever get in trouble again, you can call me.”

“Thanks,” I said, and then out of politeness more than a desire to ever contact him, I asked for his phone number.

“Just go to any pay phone behind the eagle,” 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 hurried to track eight.

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“Hi Dad. Had to work late again?” My son, Dave smiled his mother’s smile and twinkled his mother’s eyes when he opened the door to let me in.

“No, not really. I had a little adventure with the homeless in Penn Station.”

“Wow.” Dave put some of his home made lamb curry in the microwave for me. “Nothing too bad, I hope.”

“Turned out ok, but it was a little dicey for a moment.” I touched the picture of his mother, Sylvia on the piano as I always did when I came home. “It was a bit weird though. When is spring break over?”

“I’ll be going back to the dorm tomorrow.”

I did not relish being alone in the house again with my thoughts, my memories.

“Just a couple of months before I graduate.”

“Any jobs lined up?” I asked.

“A couple, but I’ve not committed yet. Keeping my options open like you always told me.”

“I also told you don’t follow me into IT.”

Sylvia smiled at me again through Dave’s eyes. “Worked out okay for you.”

“I guess so. So you think you’ll like being a programmer?”

“Nobody calls themselves programmers anymore.”

“Oh yeah, I forgot,” I tested the curry for heat. It was nice. “You’re all architects or engineers, or something more expensive sounding.”

“That’s what an IT degree lets you call yourself. Here’s some more ghost pepper powder of you need it.” Dave passed me the bottle.

“Good idea. I think I just met a few ex-programmers in Penn Station.”

After dinner Dave got his things together for the drive back to school, and I went upstairs to my bedroom, the currents of the events in Penn Station swirling in my head and sweeping up fragments of a memory which I could only glimpse as it broke the surface of my consciousness, before sliding back out of view. Strange how Zecky wanted me to call him without giving me a number. And from a payphone. I wouldn’t know where to find a working payphone. I emptied my pockets on my bedroom dresser top, the keys, my wallet, my phone. Finally I scooped the change out of the bottom of my pocket and spread it out. Call him with a dime he said. Even if I could find a working payphone which still took coins, I couldn’t remember when a call cost ten cents. I was about to go to my bed, when a coin in the pile from my pocket caught my eye. It was a dime, but a very old one. It was not the Roosevelt dime, nor even the Liberty Head which preceded it, but it was the Barber coins from before them. It was not in great condition and I could not even read the date. But what struck me was a small hole in the top of it. The last time I saw a coin like that was when my grandmother showed one to me. I was a bit into coin collecting then and she had a very old coin from the mid nineteenth century which was in great condition except for an appalling hole through it like the coin I was looking at, completely destroying its value. She had told me people used to make necklaces from them. I guessed they were seen as something valuable to wear like jewelry, so it kind of made sense. I didn’t want to risk accidentally spending it, so I put it in a soap dish I kept for interesting things I might find. I watched a little television, and then fell into dreamy hallucinations redolent of mulled wine and pipe smoke and a young woman’s laugh.

At about two in the morning I suddenly and completely awoke from a deep slumber, sat straight up in my bed and said out loud “The Hessian.”

The Hessian

It was a tired commute to Penn Station the next day. Once the memory of The Hessian came to me, more pieces about the place floated gradually to the surface all night, until I fell asleep a half hour before my alarm clock woke me. Rundown houses, factories in Newark, mostly abandoned and finally the swamp of the meadowlands flowed past the train window. Clearer images of The Hessian arranged themselves in my mind. It was one of the last of those old musty bookstores where one could spend hours pulling from the dimly lit shelves old tomes, some over a hundred years old, dilapidated to different extents and in languages both recognizable and indecipherable. When I worked in the financial district, it was a favorite reprieve from the rabid movers and shakers in the banks and brokerage houses. Situated on a little lane called Ann Street between the even smaller Theatre Alley, and Park Row across from City Hall Park. It originally occupied three floors of an old fire escape equipped building. But as digital media developed, it was reduced to two stories, then one, then none. And it always had that smell from somewhere, of cloves, mulled wine and pipe tobacco. And, though I did not remember him specifically, someone like Zecky could easily have been employed there, or been a regular whom I might have bumped into. But there was a person who definitely worked there. That’s where I met Sylvia when she sold me an ancient book in English, but with many notes in the margin and inserts of notes in several languages and of different handwriting in old German script which appealed to me even though I couldn’t read most of it. But mostly I wanted to buy something impressive from Sylvia.

Walking up the stairs from the train platform at Penn Station, I tried to place Zecky in one of those memories, but couldn’t. Anyway, it was all too bizarre to be given any serious thought. Put a dime in a payphone and call him? As that thought went through my mind, I actually passed a payphone. I picked up the receiver, found a dime in my pocket and put it in the slot. It just fell through and out the return hole without so much as a dial tone. Noticing the wires hanging disconnected underneath, I took my dime and walked toward Seventh Avenue. It was my intention to avoid the corridor where I had had the bizarre experience the night before, but as I walked past it, I saw a police officer standing behind emergency workers who were tending to someone lying on the floor. They must have just arrived, since the corridor was not yet blocked off. Curiosity overcame my aversion and I walked toward the scene in the direction I normally took on each morning’s commute. Until I got closer, all I could see of the patient was his feet sticking out from between two squatting emergency workers who were leaning over him. When I passed in front of them I could see Ernie’s face staring up at the ceiling. Lying not far from his limp left hand was a half-eaten sandwich like the ones I was distributing the night before.

“What happened?” I asked the bored cop monitoring the medics.

He just shrugged. “He was found like this, unconscious,”

“Is he dead?” I asked.

The policeman shrugged again and asked one of the medics.

“Not yet,” the medic said, “but he’s in bad shape.”

“What happened, was he hit?” I asked.

“No sign of that.” The medic said, “But the exam in the hospital may show more.”

“So what happens now?” I asked the policeman. “Some kind of inquiry?”

He looked bemused, “Not likely, especially since he’s still alive. Maybe if was found dead, a detective would come and take some notes.” He looked at me and around a bit before adding. “It ain’t that unusual. These derelicts keel over all the time.”

I looked at the sandwich lying next to Ernie. “So will they collect anything for evidence?”

The cop snorted. “Like I said, it happens all the time.”

While the medics were strapping Ernie into a gurney and getting ready to take him away, I inched closer to where the sandwich lay. I was considering pushing it out of view with my foot when one of the medics picked it up and put it in a plastic pouch. “Better take this, in case there’s a toxicology request.”

Ernie rode unconscious through the hall and the policeman walked away in the other direction, making notes for his report. I set off to continue on my way, but was stopped by the sound of a loud sob behind me. I turned to see a dark skinned young man, standing near where Ernie had been lying.

“Did you know Ernie?” I asked.

The man nodded his head behind bunched up fists pressed beneath watering eyes.

“Do you know what happened to him?”

He nodded again.

“Is he your friend?”

“We lived together.” He said in a trembling voice.

“Here, in Penn Station?” I asked.

“In the Houdini Museum.”

“The Houdini Museum? You mean the one up that little staircase in front of the station on Seventh Avenue? I thought that was closing.”

The man gasped as he suppressed another sob. “You can still get in.”

I checked the time, and realized I would be late for work. “Can I talk to you later?”

The man turned and ran down the corridor.

When I arrived at my work in the TenCentury Hedge Fund, my colleague Andrei came over to my desk. “Any luck with those sandwiches, Dan?” His arched eyebrows and tight lips and square jaw gave him an austere, rather intimidating appearance, which his large stomach and bald head only exacerbated. His Russian accent completed the Bond Villain impression he gave, but he was actually very nice, and finished his question with a warm grin.

“If you count bad luck,” I said. “Walking into Penn Station with a bag of sandwiches is about as safe as a puppy walking into a Korean restaurant.”

“I always considered doing what you did too,” Andrei said, “but I was too chicken.”

I nodded. “I just looked at all those sandwiches always left over from lunch, and then I think of those homeless people.”

“Maybe they’re homeless for a reason.” Andrei added. “Best solution would be to get them off the streets somehow. Giuliani did it.”

“But it made him crazy.” I said, “Anyway, I learned that lesson.”

“Well there’s another homeless colony in Grand Central if you want to try them out.” Andrei said smirking.

Talking to Andrei somehow brought to mind the woman on the tracks behind Zecky, but I could not figure out why. Before I could run that thought down, my calendar beeped an alert to attend our daily scrum. The day from then on was too hectic to get my mind on anything besides work.

The busy day and the interrupted sleep of the night before left me very exhausted by the time I was ready to leave the office. The free lunch the office provided on that day was pizza instead of sandwiches, which would have been more awkward to distribute in Penn Station if I had wanted to. But I didn’t want to. I left the office and walked down from Times Square, determined to go straight home and get a better night’s rest, but as soon as I entered Penn Station, the crowds told me that there were delays. Indeed, there were no trains departing for my home destination for another hour. I walked outside the station and strolled around the block until I found myself standing in front of the sign advertising the Houdini Museum three flights up. I pushed the street door open, and ascended the narrow staircase. On the third floor, the door widow was soaped over to block the view inside. The door knob did not turn, and after a couple of obligatory knocks, I started back down the stairs. Before I reached the next floor, a voice called from behind me.

“Hey mister.”

I looked up to see the young man who had cried over Ernie.

“Come in.” He held the door open and beckoned me upward.

All the relics of the museum had disappeared as completely as the great illusionist himself, but to the far worse fate of somewhere in New Jersey. Ernie and his roommate had been squatting here until the landlord caught on.

“I’m Jimmy.” He said without offering me his hand.

“How’s Ernie? I asked.

“Dead.”

“I’m sorry.”

He just looked at a sleeping bag in the corner. “Can you get him back?”

“Get him back?” This was starting to feel like last night all over again.

“Ask him.” Jimmy’s eyes rose from the floor for a second to engage mine, then rolled back down. “The man.”

I didn’t know if he meant THE MAN or the man. “The man?”

As he nodded, I noticed a nervous habit he had of flicking two fingers together as though he was trying to get something sticky off them. It made a light sound, softer than a snap.

“Which man?”

“The one who killed him.” Jimmy’s eyes came up off the floor again, but this time they didn’t go back down.

“He was killed?”

Jimmy nodded.

“The one with the sandwiches.” Jimmy said.

For a moment I thought he meant me, not knowing I had brought them. Then I remembered Zecky.

”The man who lives on the tracks?” I asked.

“He can bring him back.” Jimmy said. “With his magic books.”

“I don’t even know him, or how to reach him.” I did not want to explain the dime.

“He will find you, if you don’t find him.” Jimmy said, almost whispering even though we were alone.

“Why do you think so?”

“He tried to get you already.” Jimmy stared into my eyes in a very unnerving way.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“He almost got you down on the tracks.” Jimmy blinked, then continued the stare.

“How do you know that?” A tingle of fear flickered across my neck, and I looked toward the exit door of the museum.

Jimmy led me to a window with a desk in front of it and opened a lap top. After the screen saver disappeared, he opened an app and a video began to play. It was a recording from above of me following Zecky down the platform and him trying to get me down the stairs.

“How did you get that?” I was shocked.

“I hacked into the Penn Station security system.” Jimmy said matted-of-factly before pausing the video.

“You don’t look like a hacker.” I said.

“The hackers who look like hackers are the ones who get caught.” He shut the laptop.

“Was Ernie a hacker too?” I asked.

Jimmy walked across the room and opened the door where we entered.

“He can bring Ernie back.” He said. “He is interested in you for some reason. Talk to him again.”

“But how?” I stepped into the threshold as Jimmy opened the door.

“He might have told you how.” Jimmy said. “If he didn’t, he’ll find you again. Then see what he says.”

“What do I say to him?” I asked.

“You’ll figure it out. Just…” Jimmy seemed stuck in the middle of the sentence.

“Just what?” I asked.

“Just don’t go down in the tunnel with him.”

I wanted to ask why, but nothing came out of my mouth. Jimmy indicated with his hand that I should leave.

“It’s time for you to go now.” He continued to stare at me, flicking his fingers until I turned and left.

Limericks

Almost a week passed without encountering any of the Penn Station colony members. Though I felt I had walked into a physical riddle and had yet to find my way through it, the urge I felt to pull the unconnected threads together was not enough to overcome the trepidation I felt at the thought of stepping further through what felt like the threshold of an asylum. I had largely resumed my daily routine of commuting to Manhattan through Penn Station, working a full day, and commuting back home again through Penn Station. To be sure, I avoided that tunnel where it had all begun. Yet just walking through the station now was a completely different experience. One morning, as I was riding the train into Manhattan, the following chilling text was sent to my phone:

It is clear that the time is now rife

For the journey to recall your life

To relinquish the dread

Of confronting the dead

And walk back to the arms of your wife

I stared and reread the message for two minutes, glancing up to see no sending number at the top of the messenger. Jimmy, with his tech savvy was the first person I could think of who might have sent such a text. It would certainly not be any friend or family who would realize how disturbing that message would be to me. Maybe this was Jimmy’s way of contacting me.

On the day I received that creepy limerick, I walked to Penn Station after work along with Andrei. As usual, there were delays, and Andrei and I commandeered the best ‘train spotting’ location. Sitting at the bar in O’Malley’s grill we had a view of the departures screen, so we could keep an eye on when we might get out of the place that day as we sipped our beers.

“Remember that first job where we met?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Andrei replied, “Cosmo bank. I had only arrived from Ukraine. You showed me the ropes of living here.”

“That was a while ago,” I said, “There were some other Russians or Ukrainians there too.”

“Those were the days when we were invading America,” He smiled.

“There was a pretty young woman who worked with us too.” I said.

“In those days every young woman looked pretty.” Andrei replied between sips.

“There was one who was kind of bubbly,” I said, “She laughed easily and had long wavy brown hair.”

“And a gold tooth on the back you could see if she smiled broadly.” Andrei recalled.

“What was her name?” I asked.

“Irina,” Andrei said, “She was Ukrainian too.”

“That’s right,” I said, “I think I caught a glimpse of here the other day.”

Andrei put his beer down and leaned back to eye me with a little smirk. “So you think you saw her.”

“That’s right, and she seemed just as young as back then, though it was a little dark. But I think it was her.”

Andrei shook his head slowly, “Not likely.”

“Why,” I asked, “Did you keep in touch with her? Has she moved away?”

“Kind of,” Andrei’s smirk faded as he peered into my eyes. “The World Trade Center fell on her.”

I blinked a couple of times at Andrei, “Want a whiskey?”

He looked up at the departures board. “Looks like the trains aren’t coming through yet, and I doubt they’ll let me drive the train, so why not?”

Neither of us said a word between my ordering the whiskey and its arrival, until I finally spoke, “I guess it wasn’t her then. I hadn’t heard.”

“She was one of the thousands that died a slow death,” Andrei swirled the whiskey, “You remember how it was, people running around trying to find the missing, the photos stuck on the walls everywhere, the gate around Saint Paul’s Chapel graveyard, gradually worn away by the weather, because nobody wanted to touch these memorials. Most were never found. She wasn’t.”

“So she just disappeared?”

“Like the others, finally declared dead.”

A glint of gold hit the corner of my eye as I let a little more whiskey trickle down my throat. I turned to look through the window into the reception hall to see a light shining off a goldfish in a bowl. Slender hurried away when he saw me looking at him.

“Did you see that guy?” I said to Andrei, as I rose from my stool and rushed out the door.

“Hey, you leaving me with the check?” Andrei called after me.

Outside the door, I looked in the direction he ran but could not see Slender. I walked a few paces in that direction, and saw the public men’s restroom. He could have gone in there. I stepped inside and walked past the line of men waiting for a free urinal or toilet.

“Hey, we’re all waiting here.” One complained.

“I’m just looking for someone,” I said. Not seeing Slender in the line, I walked down to the toilet stalls. On the floor of one of them, I could wavy motions like light shining through water. There was also a flicker of gold among the motions.

“Heh-heh, sandwiches,” slender snickered from within the stall.

“Slender,” I knocked on the stall door, “Are you following me?”

He stopped laughing.

“He, Bud, wait your turn.”

I looked back to see the same policeman I met over Ernie in the hall, ”I-I just wanted to talk to him.”

“You’d better get outside, mister,” the cop said. “You’re not allowed to solicit strangers in the restrooms.”

Leaving the restroom, I saw Andrei standing in front of O’Malley’s.

“I’m sorry,” I said, reaching into my pocket, “What was the bill?”

“You get the next one,” Andrei said, pointing up to the screen, “We’d better get going, the trains are moving again.”

Andrei walked to the platform from where his Shore Line train was leaving and I headed to the Princeton line. I felt my phone vibrate as I was riding the escalator down and pulling it out of my pocket, read the following text:

We have once more arrived at the time

Where you need to find out through a rhyme

If you want them to last

All those things from the past

You’d better not misplace that dime.

Fame

The days after I had spotted Slender spying on me through O’Malley’s window had been uneventful until one morning at work I received an email from Andrei with a link from a local news report. I was in the middle of some intricate coding so I did not open it right away. I had already forgotten about it when Andrei spoke from behind my chair.

“Was that you?” He asked.

“What did I do now?” My initial thought was that I had introduced a bug, and opened Git to see what I might have checked in.

“The police might be asking that same question. Open that link I sent you.”

When I clicked on the link I saw a news report about the death of an unidentified homeless person found in Penn Station. An analysis of a half-eaten sandwich next to him indicated some unusual substance which was still being analyzed as a possible contributing factor to the death. The report also contained a security video of a person distributing sandwiches from a bag. I, of course was that someone.

“Seems the person in that video has not been identified yet.” Andrei said, “But it sure looks like your TenCentury trading vest peeking out from under that jacket.”

“It wasn’t me.” I said.

Andrei leaned over my shoulder and peered at the video. “Sure looks like you.”

“That’s me.” I pointed to the video. “But I wasn’t the one who gave him that sandwich.”

“Oh,” Andrei shrugged, “I’d better get back to my desk.”

I normally did not walk over to Penn Station during my lunch break, but that day I was drawn there without any specific purpose in mind beyond the general one of tying up all the loose ends which the place seemed to constantly spawn.

I walked up to the disabled pay phone I had tried, and dropped another dime inside. Again it fell through. Retrieving it, I remembered that Zecky mentioned something about a bird when he told me to make the call.

“Is there some special bird in Penn Station?” I asked a pizza vendor.

He smiled back at me and responded with a British accent, “Well I’ve got my own special bird, if you know what I mean, mate,“ He winked, and I’m sure a sharp looking young man like yourself would have no trouble finding your own.”

I continued wandering through the station for a few minutes, asking a couple of other people who worked there, but with no better luck. I finally climbed the stairs to street level, and as I stepped outside noticed a large stone eagle on a pedestal. The plaque underneath it described it as one of the sculptures which had adorned the original Penn Station before it was renovated. It was an eagle Zecky had mentioned, I now recalled. He said to use the phone by the eagle. I walked behind the pedestal, and around the immediate area but could not see a payphone. I pondered the bird, running my hand over its tail. I’d resigned myself to abandoning what seemed like another loose end, when a dignified older woman approached me.

“Beautiful, aren’t they?” she said.

I nodded. “Is there a phone around here somewhere?”

“A phone?” she chuckled, “And I thought I was out of touch. “Why, young man, you should get yourself one of these.”

She pulled out a flip cell phone.

“Yes, ma’am, thank you, I have one of those.” I reassured her, “But I wanted to find a pay phone.”

“Oh I see,” she said, “Looking for antiques are you?”

“Well yes, kind of.”

“There are a few about,” she said, stroking her chin thoughtfully.

“I heard there might be an interesting one by the eagle.” I said.

“By the eagle?” She said before a look of remembrance lit up her face, “Why yes there is.”

She stepped past me and looked at the wall behind the eagle, “Funny, there was one here. That peculiar man used to use it. But now it is gone.”

“A peculiar man?” I asked.

“Yes,” her frowning face looked behind a column, “An oily little man.”

“And he made calls on that phone?” I asked.

“Yes, in an uneasy way.” She said, “He once asked me to hold his fish for him. I refused of course.”

“He had a fish?”

“Yes, and in a bowl, not just bought from the fish market.” She continued searching the area.

“Was it a gold fish?” I asked.

She gave me an annoyed look, “I’m a bird watcher, not a fish watcher. It wasn’t a goldfinch, I can tell you that. But I suppose it was kind of gold.”

“And he made calls on the phone?”

“He talked into the receiver, but could have been talking to himself for all I knew. He tended to do that anyway.”

Not wanting to be away from work too much longer, I thanked her for the information, and was heading through the passage between Penn Station and Madison Square Garden, when I almost walked into another stone eagle identical to the first. Against the building wall right behind it was a payphone. And not just any payphone, but one with its own phone booth like those which had disappeared before the payphones themselves. I pushed open the folding door and stepped inside, picking up the receiver to listen. There was no dial tone, but I could hear some kind of faint whirring sound. I dropped a dime in and after a second it came out the coin return slot without triggering a dial tone. I was not able to see any wire connection, loose or attached, but the phone was set against the back of the booth, which was solid, so it could have been connected there. I waited in the booth a few more minutes, just to see if Slender might show up, before walking back up to my office, when a very old man with a very old woman rapped on the side of the booth.

“Are you about done in there?” He asked, looking impatient and eager.

I opened the door and stepped outside. “Yes, I’m pretty much finished. Do you make calls here a lot?”

“Not a lot,” the man said, “but time is running out for us. Was he answering today?”

He fiddled in his pocket for a moment, before the woman handed him something.

“I couldn’t get through.” I said.

“Oh,” the woman said sadly, “and time is running out.”

As the man reached out to place a coin in the phone, it slipped from his hands and bounced around the floor, before resting under a crack in the siding.

“Oh no!” he yelled, “can you see it?” he asked his wife.

I reached down and pulled it from under the siding. Handing it to them I saw it was a very old coin, like the one Zecky had passed to me. That’s when I remembered he had told me to use that coin. The woman snatched it from me without thanking me and was about to place it in the slot, when she stopped and motioned for me to leave the booth.

“Personal,” she said.

The two of them closed the folding door and put the coin in the slot. I stood outside watching and listening as best I could. I caught segments like ‘Not much time’ and ‘of course, of course, I know you are.’ After a few moments the call ended and they opened the door despondently. As stepped out of the booth, the man looked startled, as though he had forgotten I was there.

“Did you get through?” I asked.

He eyed me for a second, before saying, “Take my advice. Resolve these things when you are young.”

The wife nodded, “Don’t wait until you run out of time. Until your memories end.”

She suddenly stepped back into the phone booth and retrieved the old coin from the phone before walking away with the man, the two of them supporting themselves with their arms, and it seemed, with their memories.

Weekend Work

The last thing I usually wanted to do on weekends was to go back into Manhattan. Friday evenings arriving home were joyful little escapes from prison. It was a joy which dissipated with every passing hour as the bloodhounds of obligation ran me down the closer Monday came until I was finally recaptured and returned to my cell. But now I was restless on the weekend. Even commuting home through Penn Station I was tempted to linger and pursue my quest to unravel the skein which was woven of Zecky threads, Jimmy threads, Ernie threads, and the others which I was finding as I tried to unravel the knot. When I returned home from work the Friday that I had discovered the payphone behind the eagle, I went immediately to retrieve the antique dime with the hole which I had placed in the dish on my dresser top. But when I looked where it should be, it was gone. I searched all over the dresser top as well as the floor around it, and even pulled the dresser out to look behind it. If it had fallen on the floor, Carmen could easily have vacuumed it up when she cleaned the house. I emptied the contents of the vacuum onto some newspaper and searched through it for the dime in vain. Carmen, who normally came on Mondays, had arranged to come this Saturday for personal reasons. I had decided Friday night coming home from work that I would take the dime into Manhattan and try to call on the eagle phone with it. But now I would have to wait for Carmen to arrive in the afternoon to see if she knew what had happened to it.

While waiting for Carmen, I browsed the internet for news and saw that there was more information about the dead homeless man—Ernie. He had remained unidentified until his body was claimed by a family member. Neither Ernie nor the family member were named. Meanwhile an analysis of Ernie revealed high concentrations of several plant extracts which have been known as, and used as, poisons for centuries. The list included oleander, hemlock, deadly nightshade, ricin from castor beans and wolfsbane or monkshood. Looking up the named plants, I read their history, famous cases where they were used, and the science of what made them deadly. The articles had pictures of the plants, and one in particular brought to me that Proustian déjà vu experience the scent of Zecky had triggered. While most of the plant portraits were photograph, this particular one was an old hand drawn illustration of wolfsbane which felt very familiar to me. Looking through a bookcase in my bedroom, I found and opened the very old copy of Gerard’s *Herball,* which I had bought from Sonia in The Hessian so many years before. Leafing through the text, which I had not perused for many years, after several minutes I located the exact illustration of the wolfsbane drawing I had seen on the internet. It was not in the body of the original text of the book, but rather on an insert surrounded by notes which looked like Latin to me, but the handwritten script itself was difficult for me to read.

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Ernie was Jimmy’s father, still young from when he died.

I am your best nightmare

I danced at Chippendale’s until the bouncer threw me out.

They must devote themselves to proving they’re not peasants. Either elevating themselves with layers of bling or denigrating others through contempt.

If I knew I was going to live forever, I would have taken better care of myself.

Dying changes a man.

What doesn’t kill you makes you stranger

Rousing the rabble.

We all come into the world alone – not for twins

What does it mean when a man has big hands? He has big nostrils.

What kills you makes you stranger

Sleeping nightshade

Hebona

Gerard’s *Herball*

The publisher John Norton, who was the [Queen's Printer](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Queen%27s_Printer), approached Gerard regarding a possible English translation of [Dodoens](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dodoens" \o "Dodoens)' popular herbal, *Stirpium historiae pemptades sex* (1583).[[14]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Gerard#cite_note-FOOTNOTEDodonaei1583-16)[[15]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Gerard#cite_note-Ogilvie37-17) This was a Latin version of an earlier work in Flemish by Dodoens, his *Cruydeboeck* (Herb Book, 1554)

Deadly herbs:

Oleander, hemlock, nightshade, castor ricin, snakeroot, wolfsbane