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 his gut me 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 fiftyish 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 before 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.

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 grayish 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?”

“It’s insulting, besides, he’s not even Chinese. 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 hurrying way with quite uneasy, even 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 west of Nassau.

“I catch the train toward Princeton.” I was a little worried about sharing too much, but his avuncular 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 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 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 a dangerous situation, 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, 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 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.”

“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 a desire to ever contact him, I 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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“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 most notably it had a small hole in the top of it. The last time I saw a coin like that was when my grandmother showed it 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 woke up suddenly and completely from a deep slumber, sat straight up in my bed and said out loud “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. Looking out the window as my train sped between houses, factories, mostly abandoned, in Newark, and finally the swamp of the meadowlands, I thought more clearly about The Hessian. It was one of the last of those old musty bookstores where one could spend hours pulling old tomes in various states of dilapidation and in various languages, some over a hundred years old from the dimly lit shelves. When I worked in the financial district, it was a favorite reprieve from the rabid movers and shakers in the banks and brokerage houses. It was on a little street called Ann Street between the even smaller Theatre Alley, and Park Row across from City Hall Park. It originally occupied three stories of the old building, but as digital media grew, it was reduced to two, 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 of runology in old German script which I couldn’t read, but I liked the look of. 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 give 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. Then I noticed 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, as the corridor was not yet blocked off. Curiosity overcame my aversion and walked toward the scene the direction I normally took each morning to get to work. 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 going to distribute 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.”

The medics were strapping Ernie into a gurney and getting ready to take him away, I inched closer to where the sandwich lay. Before I could push it out of view with my foot 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 destitute 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?” His arched eyebrows and tight lips and square jaw gave him an austere, somewhat intimidating appearance, which his large stomach and bald head somewhat 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 considered doing what you did too,” Andrei said, “but I was too chicken.”

“Yeah,” 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 aa reason.” Andrei added. “Best solution would be to get the off the streets somehow. Giuliani did it.”

“But it made him crazy.” I said, “But 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 off 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. That 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 locked door knob did not turn, and after a couple of obligatory knocks, I started back down the stairs. Before I reached the end of the third 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?”

He nodded.

“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 as I looked at the door.

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 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.”

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

I am your best nightmare

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

Sleeping nightshade

hebona