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 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 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 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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“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 them, 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 smelling of mulled wine and pipe smoke and a young woman’s Slavic 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 I 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 all 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 old book with the 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 to. 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 the bizarre experience the night before, but as I walked past it, I saw police standing behind an emergency worker who was tending to someone lying on the floor. They must have just arrived, as the corridor was not yet blocked off, so I walked toward them in 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 rather 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 stretcher and getting ready to take him away when one of them put the sandwich in a plastic pouch. “Better take this, in case there’s a toxicology request.”

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Houdini Museum: 33rd street across from Hotel Pennsylvannia

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