

Them.

HARVEST AT dawn. The dumpsters are rich from the night before, and the trucks haven't come for them yet. It's quiet. There's a chorus of birds, a setting moon and a rising sun. It's the best time of day to avoid being hassled.

Rest during the day. Sleep wherever you can. Ignore people. Unless you're asking them for money. Most of them avoid you. If someone says something, say something safe, like "God bless." Get used to kids gawking.

At night, there's a flophouse by the police station, but they don't let you drink. Shelters are dangerous. People steal your stuff. You're safer outside and more comfortable in a jail bed. Problem is, the police won't arrest you now; they don't pick anyone up this time of year.

This time of year, there's a camp every night next to the library, but you got to get there early if you want to stay out of the wind. It's in a nook between walls. People set up under blankets and umbrellas. One lady has a tarp. You can't even tell how many people are in there, all of those bodies. It's warm. A lot of them are sick. They're all wretches, wretches clinging together. There's always someone worse off than you.

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On a curb next to a storm sewer in downtown Detroit, Victor sat in the warm rays of the declining sun. He pictured *them*, two young girls in pink giving away dollar bills that morning outside the Pontchartrain, a high-end glass and steel hotel near West Jefferson.

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Dusk dwindled to darkness. Victor heard a voice. *What is your life?* the voice said.

Victor ignored it. "I'm hungry," he said.

*Go back tomorrow,* the voice said. *You'll get some tomorrow.*

Victor tucked into a fetal position, and Jesus, his three-legged dog, circled himself around himself and settled snug next to Victor. They faded lump-like into the pavement, into the night, the sky awake with possibilities as numerous as the stars.

In the morning, mist drifted hazily up around them, specters rising in the drama of a new day. Into it, the ascending sun fired golden bolts, and distant traffic rumbled in on the city.

Victor curled and uncurled his toes and fingers back to life and pulled himself upright, his lower back aching. He must have slept on it wrong. His legs hung from the knees, stiff. He located his pint and took a long draw, burning out the aftertaste of yesterday. He stood, relieved himself, and stretched. Jesus got up and stretched with him. Only then did he find what was left of a panini that someone had placed on the sidewalk next to him. They ate the panini.

Victor and Jesus cruised the downtown dumpsters, plodding through streaks of sunlight. There was always something to be found if you were early – a pizza box with a couple of slices, loose change, dropped cigarettes. The busses drained their bleary-eyed office workers, sidewalks filling and driving Victor to the park, sun-drenched, to dry his yet-damp clothes.

By mid-morning, the park sizzled. Flies buzzed, only to be drowned out by the rise and fall of a cicada chorus, like electricity in the wires. Jesus snapped at a deer fly. A street musician played a harmonica. Victor pressed his lips together and hummed, and trod west on Larned to the Pontchartrain. Across the street from it, he sat with Jesus. To either side were others like him, not beggars but shabby, smeary people who had to beg, their eyes glistening and enormous and round as a newborn's, studying the well-dressed denizens of the Pontch. The street people all thought the same thing: will they look at me?

In no little time of waiting, they came out of the hotel, just as they had yesterday. A man in a suit, a smartly coiffed woman, and two small girls set out under the steady gaze of the innumerable. The man took his wallet from an inside pocket and extracted a thick fold of bills. He gave ten dollar bills to each of the girls "for the homeless people across the street."

The girls entered the gauntlet of need. They solemnly dropped dollars into empty hands and hats. Within minutes, they gave it all away, and then they got to Victor.

"We don't have any more money," the taller girl said. Her words fell to the sidewalk like dead things. Victor eyed their pretty pink dresses.

"Don't get close," said the woman. The girls stepped back. Jesus looked rueful. Victor's face strained, a creviced landscape, facial muscles shifting like subterranean lava, and then he cracked.

"God bless you," he dripped. "Did you forget your ten-foot pole?"

The man grimaced. "We're trying to help you."

Victor hissed, scaring Jesus as much as the girls, who scampered to their mother.

"Let's go, girls," the father said. "You'll always run out of dollars before you run out of *them*."

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