

It's a good life.

Ignore people. Unless you're asking them for money. Most of them avoid you. If someone says anything, say something like "God bless." Get used to kids gawking.

In the evening, there's a flophouse that the police can put you into. Problem is, they don't let you drink. There's shelters, but they don't let you drink either, and people steal your stuff. Shelters are dangerous. You're safer outside.

There's a camp next to the library, but you got to get there early if you want to stay out of the wind. 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. A lot of them are sick. They're all wretches, wretches clinging together. It helps knowing that there's always someone worse off than you.

Victor went elsewhere. He found a spot next to a storm sewer and sat in the rays of the declining sun. He pictured *them*, two girls in pink he'd seen that morning, giving away dollar bills outside the Pontchartrain. It was a high-end glass and steel hotel near West Jefferson.

Dusk dwindled to darkness. Victor heard a voice and ignored it. "I'm hungry," he said. There was no one near him. *Go back tomorrow*, the voice said.

Victor tucked into a fetal position, and Jesus, his three-legged dog, circled the way dogs do and settled snug next to him. They shrank lump-like into the sidewalk, the sky alive with angels as numerous as the stars.

In the morning, mist drifted hazily up around them, specters rising in the drama of a new day. The ascending sun fired golden bolts, and distant traffic rumbled. 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 were stiff at the knees. 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 on the sidewalk; someone must have left it for them. They ate what there was, a few bites, not enough. *Go back tomorrow.*

Victor and Jesus wound their way towards the Pontchartrain, plodding through long streaks of sunlight, cruising dumpsters rich from the night before. There was always something to be found if you were early – a pizza box with a couple of slices, loose change, dropped cigarettes, an unopened can of pop. It was a harvest.

Victor stopped at a sun-drenched bench to dry his yet-damp clothes. As early as it was, the day had already started to sizzle. 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 harmonica. Victor pressed his lips together, hummed, and trod west on Larned to the towering Pontchartrain.

Across the street from it, he sat with Jesus. To either side were others like him, shabby, smeary people, their eyes glistening and enormous and round as a newborn's, studying the well-dressed denizens of the Pontch. They waited.

In no little time, the family came out of the hotel, just as they had yesterday. The father in a suit, the smartly coiffed mother, and the two girls. The girls wore blue outfits today. The man took out his wallet, extracted a thick fold of bills, and gave ten one dollar bills to each of the girls “for those people across the street.”

The girls crossed the street, shadowed by their parents, and entered a gauntlet of need. They solemnly dropped dollars into pleading hands and hats. There were murmurs of thank-yous and god-blesses. Within minutes, they’d given away all the dollar bills, and then they got to Victor. He looked at the girls, his eyes asking.

“We don’t have any more,” shrugged the taller girl. Her words fell to the sidewalk like dead things. Victor eyed their pretty blue dresses.

“Don’t get close!” said the woman. The girls jumped back. Jesus looked rueful. Victor’s face reddened and strained, facial muscles shifting like lava beneath his skin.

“God bless you,” he dripped to the children. To the mother: “did you forget your ten-foot pole?”

The father huffed and grimaced. “Well, that’s gratitude for you.”

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

“Let’s go, girls. You’ll always run out of money before you run out of *them*.”

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