Cheap Date
by Daniel Passamaneck

I was driving to work, a little later than I wanted to be - as usual. The car was a bit run down, but serviceable - as was I. My route took me down through Polk Gulch. It was Monday again and I was stopped at another traffic light, listening to loud music, loudly. My window was open so I could get some fresh morning air on my necktie and points north. Her voice in my ear caught me by surprise.

I'd seen her on the street before - a woman always in distress. She was probably pretty, once, with curly brown hair and fair skin. I would guess she was in her early 20s. I'd seen her, at various times, scabby, snotty, washed out, strung out, and flat on her back. She typically wore the cheapest of tartware, trolling for tricks in the chilly early mornings when more successful hookers were getting their sleep. Not her. She always looked so very tired as she trudged her wares at 7:25 am.

She was at my car window; I didn't understand the burble of her words. "I'm sorry, would you repeat that?" I asked automatically. Tears had been pouring from her sunken eyes; she was out of them now. Her face was bruised. She wore a light t-shirt and panties. No bra. No pants. Her legs were filthy and the skin of her knees was torn. She repeated through sobs, "Mister, do you want a date?"

I was already late. I had ten dollars of lunch money in my wallet to last the week. I shook my head. "I'm sorry, I can't." I wanted to say more, to explain, to apologize, to let her know I wished things were different. She didn't have time for that. She howled her despair into my car and, turning, out into the street, lurching across the yellow line to another car going the opposite way.

I drove on, eventually turned the music up again, even louder than before. That made no difference. Her solicitation still reverberated against the shuttered buildings lining the street. Lady, if I were going to hire a whore, it wouldn't have been you. But had I the

money I'd have given it to you outright. Lunch was bitter all week long.