

Before My Change Jar Went Missing

by Drew Jackson

Before she even tells me her name, my neighbor Wendy makes a banquet table of my pockmarked front stoop. We eat stinky cheese and Ritz crackers under the salmon sky—the only welcome to the neighborhood meal I've ever had. With every forkful of pasta puttana, she offers an apology or a nervous giggle.

Wendy has huge hellos for everyone who passes my stoop: the prison blue tattoo necks, the shrinking pigeon lady from across the street, the house painter with the wolf named Hendrix, the tweaker who mows her brown lawn at midnight. She knows them all. Wendy, the eggplant-haired patron saint of solitary desert rats.

When the sky deepens to purple, a thousand common gray birds tile the pigeon lady's roof and coo softly down into her lonely bedroom. These are the small miracles we witness from my barrio stoop.

Wendy brings over her mother's eight-track player and a milk crate of rattling tapes—all Frank Zappa. The milk crate is stamped, "Thou Shalt Not Steal." She rolls a Drum cigarette and laughs every time Zappa sings "stink foot" like it's the first time she's heard it.

The Zappa is her sole inheritance. She tells me how her parents got off the needle and died on a car trip. She says they were on their way to reconcile beneath the stars in the Painted Desert. I don't think even she believes it.

She hunts around in her denim tote and pulls out a bottle of strawberry wine, the kind favored by the hard drunks on Van Buren Avenue. Wendy is twenty-five.

I tell her I've been clean for almost a year but that I'm not one of those preachy Big Book thumpers. "Drink around me if you want," I say. "I'm cool."

Wendy carries a picture snapped before her ex-husband broke her nose on the burning summer asphalt. In the picture, she is twenty and prettier than any of the Arizona State University coeds I see maxing out daddy's credit cards in Tempe.

When the bottle is half spent, the tattoos come out. Wendy's second-hand clothes become stage curtains drawn back at just the right moment in her ink work narrative. But really, the stories of her tattoos are ordinary: skulls for mortality, snake-eyed dice for hard luck.... When she's done, I've seen the chorus of angels on her lower back and the India ink footprints that lead to her inner thigh, but not her forearms.

Wendy explains that clip joint girls aren't whores. Clip joint girls take it off for jack offs who can't touch them.

I listen, but what I don't say is this: I know.

Wendy lights another cigarette and explains that clip joint girls at Seven Seas earn way more than the topless dancers at Diamond Girls. If a whacker at the Seven Seas ever tries to touch her, a 280-pound doorman would come to her rescue with a buzzing cattle prod.

Wendy says most guys are like those guys, the ones who pay her. Not me though. She can tell. As she leans in, I smell the day's smoke, strawberry wine, and bubble gum. When we kiss, her knees buckle for a second. And in that second, my 300-dollar a month duplex on Monte Vista Avenue feels like the junior prom.

She takes up her bag and closes my bathroom door behind her. She never mentions the needle but I can feel its presence, the way you can feel sometimes when someone is staring at you in a crowd. Water sings in the pipes.

I palm the picture and slide it into the pocket of my cargo shorts. I lay back on my mattress.

When Wendy returns, her eyelids are poppy heavy. She sits on the edge of my mattress and kicks off a sandal, laughing as it arcs across the room.

I think about my halfway house counselor saying, "When you meet a girl you like, you don't fuck her right away."

Wendy throws her second-generation junkie arm across my chest and sleeps through the night.

