

Lost Downtown

A service station. Three black men in greasy coveralls, cavorting in horseplay. Big-toothed grins at each other's jokes, partial jokes, cryptic phrases Shep doesn't understand. Turning quiet as he approaches. Sideways glances, reading in his face what he feels—like happy, only opposite of happy. Looking away, turning their backs, acting busy, not wanting to be the one he walks to.

Shep stops and pulls the map from his overcoat pocket. A line with a circle at one end and an X at the other: the playground where he'd come from and the church where he was headed. But that had been hours ago, or maybe only minutes, before a lot of walking. He decides not to show the map to the attendant. But what will he say? He had not been clear when he asked the little girl.

On his way to the church, he had passed her a second time. The yellow jumpsuit imprinted with blue elephants. The same sandbox under the same tree beside the glass building. It had stopped him rigid, teetering, his skin prickling. The black shadow of lost that had stalked one step behind all day had caught up, shrouded him.

He was invisible to everyone but the little girl who had stopped her play to stare. A *smile*, or the French braids stretched her face to look like a smile. The only smile all day. When he waved her to the hurricane fence by the sidewalk, she dawdled over.

"Help me?" he'd said.

A polite little girl. Listening patiently, not running away.

His thoughts had run together—where he had come from mixed with where he wanted to go. The church, the red brick one with two tall steeples. He'd raised his arms like steeples. He had tried hard, not realizing until her confused face that it was babble, only babble to her.

She had drawn him a map on a flat rock with a crayon from her pocket; slipped it through the square mesh of the fence. Dropped from ivory fingers into the walnut burl of his palm.

Hands from behind grabbed her shoulders and turned her before she could explain. As they walked away, the fat woman's whispers made the girl glance back with a scowl. She had sat on the edge of the sandbox and resumed her play with a doll, not looking at him again. As if he didn't exist—had never existed.

The service station attendant listens with a contorted face. When he's heard enough, he walks Shep to the edge of the parking pad. The service station is on top of a hill overlooking the city, crosshatched by black streets, spaghetti ramps, cars like ants crawling in lines.

"There?" the attendant says.

Shep follows the point. The color had leached out of the day, the sky the same gray as the concrete jungle below. And then he sees them, the towers, black against the orange sunset. The church really exists, not just a misplaced long-ago memory. He forethinks to the joy of standing in front of the tall wooden doors with massive strap hinges, the familiar, the knowable. He feels the smile crinkle the skin of his face like wax paper.

But it's at least a mile away. Had he walked that far, always taking wrong turns?

“That where’s you’re wantin’ to go?” The man takes a red rag from his hip pocket and wipes swelter from his face as he waits for an answer, then points the rag down the hill, the road Shep had just walked up. “If that’s it, gotta go back that away.”

The church isn’t that way. He would have seen it. Was the man teasing? Sometimes he couldn’t tell when mean people were teasing. The shadow clutches him tighter, making him ridged like in a cocoon. He can’t turn his head anymore so he pivots in little steps to look across the city again. Only the black towers sticking up from the skyline register meaning.

Shep feels the attendant’s frown at his back, wanting him to say something, do something.

“Are you okay, ole fella? Want me to call somebody?”

If he turns, the man will read distrust in his face. He doesn’t want to appear impolite so he keeps looking down the hill at the church. He feels the warmth of it even from here.

And Shep stands there as the black towers fade into the night. And after—fixing where they had been in the pattern of streetlights and streams of cars, white coming toward him, red going away. He fastens the few buttons left on his trench coat against the chill. A light pole steadies his wobble and then his back slides slowly down it until he is sitting, head nodding and then jerking as he battles sleep. Something bad will happen if he sleeps.

A car door slams. Gravel crunches behind. Light from the service station casts the shadows of two giants growing larger as they walk toward him.

“Hello, Shep,” one giant says.

The voice is familiar.

“You know him?” the other giant says.

“Yeah. We go way back. We get a call every week or so.”

“What do we do with him? Take him to that shelter on Seventh Street?”

Seventh Street. What he couldn’t remember when explaining to the little girl. Where the church is. Food. A cot. Where it’s safe to sleep. The thought warms him.

“Nope. They won’t take him anymore. Keeps wandering off. Too disruptive.”

“Well then, what? Can’t leave him here.”

“Jail. We’ll take him in for vagrancy.”

The giants lift him, one under each arm, steadying him as life flows back into his legs. *Jail?* He remembers jail. Bars to keep mean people away. Light all night. He stumbles toward the police car, them holding to his arms.

“Man, he stinks,” the unfamiliar giant says.

A shower. With hot water. He is eager now and tries to walk on his own.

“We’ll keep him a few days until some judge turns him loose. And then we’ll get another call and do this all over.”

The tires slap the seams of the highway. Red and yellow neon swoosh by the side window. In the warm closeness of the cruiser, the grip of the shadow loosens. Shep’s head nods; eyelids droop. *Found—safe, found—safe* chants in his head. Only a vague apprehension lingers as he sinks into nothingness.