

about 4,750 words

Loose Change

Monday, 7:40 a.m. Mike Wilson was ready to walk out the door of his apartment when the phone rang. He glanced at his watch, although he knew the exact time. *I've got five minutes. It might be a client. I should answer.* He picked up the receiver.

"Mike? It's Janine."

"Hey, Janine. I'm going out the door. I've got an early meeting with new clients."

"I just wanted to tell you how much I enjoyed last night." She paused. "I mean, I really enjoyed last night."

Mike was a sucker for female voices, and Janine could do this thing with her voice. It was like a super power, at least where Mike was concerned, an instant seduction.

"I had a great time too," he said, looking at his watch, "but I gotta..."

She interrupted. "I'm off early on Wednesday. Amy's coming in from corporate, so I can leave by five. Maybe we could do something?"

"Uh, Janine, I have a bunch of new client appointments this week. One this morning at 8:30. The government quarterlies are coming out. You never know how that'll affect the market. I've got to be on my toes. No late nights on work nights."

Nights with Janine were late nights. She was bold, inventive. She loved to experiment. She asked for things. And she was inexhaustible. Mike had never been with a woman quite like her, and he had been with many.

"Mike." Janine sounded annoyed. "We've been seeing each other for three months." *Three months? That long?* "And I'd like some sort of commitment. Like, I'd like to know more than a day or two in advance if I'm going to see you."

"Ok. Look. You know I'm trying to build my business. It's not easy being an independent when the other guys have major investment houses backing them. So I have to work hard, but I'll put aside Friday night, I promise, for you. Ok?"

"I guess what I'm really asking is where I stand."

"Stand?" Mike looked at his watch. 7:46. *Shit*. The five-minute cushion was gone, and he was moving into the late zone. "Is this like exclusive commitment talk? It's 1990, Janine. The Puritans no longer rule around here."

"Did you ever hear of AIDS, Mike? STDs?" She was angry now, Mike could tell. "Maybe they don't print that stuff in the Wall Street Journal, but I don't need a boyfriend bringing that shit home just because he needs space." She spit out the last word, and the line went dead.

Mike sighed. Not what he needed today. He needed to be sharp, focused. This meeting with the Cortlands was important. They were old money in Gleasonville, both Mr. Cortland and his wife, who was a Blair. Their family names were on streets, parks,

buildings, and they were friends with Jack Worthey, Mike's landlord. Jack had talked him up, and Mike was determined not to disappoint.

#

The meeting went well. The Cortlands seemed to like him immediately. They made what Mr. Cortland called a modest commitment, which made them Mike's third largest account. Their investment was the largest single transaction of Mike's career. On top of that, they invited him to lunch at the Plowmans Club, the city's most exclusive social club. *Maybe they'll invite me to join*, Mike thought as he locked the office door and headed to the Skylark Diner for a celebration breakfast.

When he got there he went to the men's room to wash his hands. He liked the Skylark. The bathroom was clean by diner standards. He looked in the mirror. *Mike Wilson, Wealth Management*. His reflection smiled. "You could use a haircut," he said. His dad had said that once a week when Mike was a kid. But he liked his hair, and Mom had liked it, the luxuriant black waves that parted naturally in the middle of his head, fell around his ears and brushed the nape of his neck as he moved.

He glanced at the condom dispenser on the wall and thought of Janine. He had only been with one other woman since he met her. He wasn't in love. No, it wasn't that. She was like a drug, and you just kept wanting more. *And she's right. I shouldn't be taking unnecessary chances. I should stock up. I'm not through having fun, but I'm through taking chances*. At thirty Mike had taken plenty of chances, chances with women, with money, with life. So far he had luck on his side.

He felt the lump of coins in his pocket, their weight tugging at his waistline. He was bad with change. He forgot to use it, handing over wads of paper instead, getting

back more coins. They filled his pocket, falling out when he sat in the park, the theater, the office. At home they slipped down into the lining of the couch, rolled under the bookcase or the bed. They piled up on the dresser until he scooped them into a mason jar.

Coins, he decided, were a government scam. They minted them, sent them out, and the coins circulated until they reached the end-user, the coin-collector, the coin-saver, the coin-hoarder, the coin-loser. That's what he was, the end-loser of coins. Coins were the government's profit margin. Once the feds spent them on whatever trinkets caught their fancy they knew they'd never see them again. That book wouldn't need to be balanced. Mike thought about those Roman coins the archeologists found. *Probably dropped out of someone's pocket.*

He rubbed his hands together under the dryer then reached into his pocket. *One way to shed some loose change.* He fed quarters to the condom machine, cranking the big chrome handle with each one. On the fourth coin he heard a satisfying double-click and a small white cardboard rectangle issued from the slot at the bottom. It was slightly larger than a business card and boldly lettered.

What the...? Mike grabbed the card, looked in the slot, tried to get a finger into it. He gripped the handle. It was locked in its detent position. He banged the machine. Nothing.

“Shit.” He looked at the card in his hands.

Congratulations!!

A once-in-a-lifetime opportunity

is yours

Call Immediately for Details

“Fucking shit.” He banged the machine again and turned away.

Late-morning sun streamed through the windows that formed three walls of the nearly empty diner. It bounced off the formica table tops, the chrome and glass of the miniature jukeboxes that adorned each booth, the stretches of metal that edged every surface. It flooded the interior with light. Mike headed for the counter. “*Damn it,*” he thought, seeing the girl at the register. She was a kid. Eighteen or nineteen at most. Pretty. *This is embarrassing.* But it had to be done. Mike couldn’t tolerate it, anonymous machines swallowing people’s money. At least he’d complain.

“Can I help you?” The girl smiled, leaning toward him, forearms on the counter. Her face had that look that said she found him attractive. Mike recognized it. He had seen it a hundred times. Women *liked* him, often at once and without reservation. He didn’t need to *do* anything. *Just let it happen.*

“Is the manager around?”

“Mr. Patterson? He’ll be here at noon. Is there anything *I* can do for you?”

Mike took a deep breath and placed the card between the girl’s hands. “This came out of the machine in the bathroom.”

She looked at it, at him. “Out of the blow dryer?”

“No, not the blow dryer. Out of the... uh, out of the dispenser. I put a dollar in the dispenser and that’s what came out.”

She was eager to play. “So what did you *expect* to get out of the dispenser?”

Mike, impatient, clenched his teeth. “Condoms. I *expect* a condom dispenser to dispense condoms.”

She looked at him like he had spit in his coffee. She stood and folded her arms in front of her.

“Look, Miss, do you know who runs the vending machines here?”

She extracted a card from beside the register and dropped it on the counter. She looked right through him.

“ Look, this sort of thing shouldn’t be going on. Freaking vending machines taking people’s money.” She did not react. He shrugged, grabbed the cards and turned toward the phone in the corner. He pulled out a quarter. *Christ, this is getting expensive.* He dialed the number on the card, and mercifully a male voice, gravelly and tobacco-scarred, answered.

“Impulse Vending.”

“Hi, my name’s Mike Wilson. I’m at the Skylark Diner and one of your machines just confiscated my money.”

“Oh, yeah? Which machine?”

“The condom dispenser in the boys’ room.”

“Sorry, Pal. Not me. I’ve got cigarettes and candy. The slip covers are somebody else.”

Mike looked toward the girl. She still stared at him, expressionless. He swore under his breath. “How about the telephone?” he asked.

“Oh, yeah, the phone’s mine too.”

“Well, listen. I just fed *your* phone *my* money to call *you* about a vending machine that *ripped me off*. Maybe you could do me the favor of telling me whose machine it is?”

“I’m really sorry... uh, Mike was it?” Mike grunted. “I don’t meddle in hygienics. I got enough trouble with the tobacco nazis and the health food nuts. *I’m* makin’ their kids *fat*. *I’m* rottin’ their kids’ teeth. *I’m* givin’ their kids cancer. *Christ*, tobacco was a sacred plant of the Native Americans. Is it my fault it got ruined by big business? I can’t help you. See Mr. Patterson. He’ll tell you whose machine it is.”

“Patterson’s not here.”

“Well then, Mikey, I guess you’re shit outa luck.”

Mike returned the phone to its cradle. *What am I doing? I don’t care about the dollar. Or the condom. I should buy them in the supermarket, for chrissake. I gotta get on with my life here.* He stepped outside into the sunshine.

#

Later that night Mike stood at the door to his apartment. He fished in his pocket among the loose change for his keys. Something fluttered to the floor. *The card from the condom machine.* He retrieved it, went inside and tossed keys and card on the kitchen table. He got a beer and folded himself into a chair. A coin fell from his pocket and rattled on the floor. Mike made no move to pick it up. He read the message on the card:

Congratulations!!

A once-in-a-lifetime opportunity

is yours

Call Immediately for Details

“Shit. These people have balls.” He turned the card. The other side read:

Paradise Rewards

1-800-2SAY YES

He took a drink of his beer. *I should give them a call. They shouldn't get away with this crap.* He brought the phone from the counter. On the third ring a female voice answered.

“Paradise Rewards. This is Ruth Sipes. How can I help you?” The voice was... what? *Sexy.*

Mike spoke slowly, keeping his voice neutral, conversational. “I have a card in my hand. It has your number on it. It came out of a vending machine. It wasn't what I expected to get.”

The woman laughed. “People are often surprised to get one of our cards.”

“Don't you want to know what machine?” *She already knows what machine. Or maybe she doesn't. Maybe they put their cards in all sorts of machines.*

Oh, the machine doesn't matter. The important thing is you didn't throw it away. Lots of people throw them away, but you called. You made the right decision, Mr... uh...”

“Wilson. Mike Wilson.”

“You definitely made the right decision, Mr. Wilson.”

“Uh, Ms. Sipes? I don’t really know what decision you’re talking about. I called because I don’t think it’s right... I mean, taking people’s money in vending machines like that.” It was hard to be forceful against her voice. *So interesting, so nice.*

“Please, call me Ruth. And, Mr. Wilson? Can I do something for you?”

“Do something for me?”

“Send you something, a token, to show that Paradise Rewards is not about...” She paused. “About absconding with loose change. Let me just make sure I have your correct address. 1789 Ruskin Boulevard, Apartment A-2, Gleasonville?”

Wow, she must have pulled that off the computer. Mike used CompuServe at the office, and it was amazing, the information that was available. For a couple of bucks you could get just about anything, birthdays, anniversaries. It impressed his clients, those little personal touches. “Yeah, that’s right.”

“Why don’t you just wait until you hear from me by mail, Mr. Wilson. Then perhaps we can talk again. Alright?”

“Uh, yeah. Sure, Ruth, sure.”

#

The next evening Mike found an envelope from Paradise Rewards among his mail. *Man, she’s quick.* Inside was a gift certificate, dinner for two at the Hearth and Chalice. Mike considered the Hearth and Chalice the nicest restaurant in the city. It was also expensive. There was a sticky note pasted to the certificate.

Dear Mr. Wilson,

Hope you enjoy this. There’s also a

little something for you at the Sartorium.

Well, she sure knows what buttons to push. Mike bought his clothes at the Sartorium. The older businessmen in town shopped at Weldons, the city's landmark clothier, but the younger set favored the Sartorium's hip, cutting-edge fashion. The note was signed "Ruth" with a flourish that ended in a tiny heart. There was a P.S. "If you get a chance could you take a look at the other material I've sent? Thanks, R."

Mike pulled two letter-sized sheets out of the envelope. *A questionnaire.* He glanced at the personal information section. *Age, Sex, Marital Status?* and beyond that, *How many TVs? How much do you watch?* He flipped to the second page. *Magazine subscriptions?* It looked like standard demographics. *Must be high-end judging by the generosity.* He dropped the sheets on the table and went for a beer. He looked at the blinking light on the answering machine. He hit the 'play' button and settled into his chair. The first message was Janine.

"Mike, I'm sorry about yesterday. I was completely out of line. I hope we're still on for Friday. I'll make it up to you, promise."

It was nice when these things just sorted themselves out. And Friday night with Janine, that would be good.

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The Sartorium, in the heart of the commercial district, was two blocks from Mike's office. Mike walked through the lunch-time street traffic, stopping to admire the window display before he stepped inside. Kevin, the Sartorium's manager, didn't just do window displays. He told stories. In today's scene a man stooped to tie his shoe, his foot

up on a park bench, while his wallet was lifted from his pocket by another well dressed man. Mike smiled. *It's those pockets. Nothing stays in them.*

“Hey Mike. How's it going?” Kevin was dressed to the same high standard he sold. “I'm glad you stopped by. *Somebody* must like you.”

“Why's that?” Mike asked.

“*Somebody* got you a pretty nice gift certificate.” He handed Mike an envelope and Mike looked inside. The amount was stamped across the certificate in florid script: Five Hundred Dollars.

A down payment on a new wardrobe. Mike looked at Kevin. "Do you know this somebody?" *Janine? That would be way out of her budget.*

“Don't you?” Kevin looked surprised. Mike shook his head.

“Well,” Kevin hesitated. “Shall we say she's *hot*? Or is that crude? Smokin' sort of captures it.”

“I swear I don't know this woman. Can you describe her?”

“Interesting thing. Her hair's the same color as yours. That black that you don't see often, and long. Her features are perfect, not model-thin, fuller. A hint of Asian, but not the first thing you would think of. Let me put it this way. If I know Mike Wilson, this is a woman Mike Wilson *really* wants to know. If Mike Wilson sees this woman, he's gonna run her down like a cheetah on a gazelle.”

“Did she leave a name, a card, anything?”

“Nope. She paid cash. Said your name like it was the nicest thing she had in her mouth all day.”

“Well I’m stymied, Pal. Must have been the goddess of fashion hinting that it’s time to update my wardrobe.” Mike looked at the envelope. “Can you hold onto this? Credit it to my account? I’ll probably lose it otherwise.”

“I’ll give you a credit right now,” Kevin said turning to the register.

“Oh, another question, speaking of losing things.” Kevin looked up. “You know the way the pocket on these new slacks is sliced way down?” Mike slid his finger down the pocket opening of his slacks. “I’m dropping a lot of loose change out of these. It doesn’t happen when I wear jeans.”

Kevin looked incredulous. “Loose change? Mike, let me explain something. The *cut* is the *style*, and the *pocket* is the *cut*. Donate your loose change to charity, for chrissakes. That’s what I do.”

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By the time Mike got home he had made a decision. He would call Ruth... *and say what? Thank her for her generosity. See what happens. Let it happen.* Mike thought about Kevin’s description. And her voice, there was no forgetting that. He rummaged through two days of mail looking for the card. It wasn’t there. He found the envelope and questionnaire Ruth had sent, but there was no number on them, only a P.O. box. *How’d I lose that card? Oh, right. Mike Wilson, end-loser.* But the number was easy, a toll-free 800 number with some kind of catchy acronym. What was it? 1-800-Go-South? 1-800-You’re-It? 1-800-Too-Sweet? That was her voice. He searched through the papers again. No luck. He looked at the questionnaire, hesitated, then began filling in the blanks.

Once finished, he folded the sheets and closed them with a sticky note:

Ruth,

Thank you for the very generous “tokens.”

Please give me a call that I may properly
express my appreciation.

Mike

He added his phone number and stuffed everything into the envelope Ruth had sent. He put on some jogging sweats and ran to the post office.

#

The next day was difficult. Mike had trouble focusing. His mind wandered to anticipation of a call from Ruth. When he finally arrived home that evening, he felt out-of-sorts. He checked the answering machine but there was nothing from Ruth. *I need to stop obsessing and concentrate on something else.* He began sorting through the mail on the table, discarding junk, stacking bills in the holder he had for that purpose. Halfway through the pile, the phone rang.

“Hello?”

“Mr. Wilson? It’s Ruth Sipes. I’m glad I caught you.”

Mike thrilled at her voice. It sounded sexier than he remembered, and he matched it with a mental image constructed from Kevin’s hints. “Hi, Ruth. I’m, uh... I’m glad to hear from you... and you can drop the Mr. Wilson. Mike is fine.”

“OK, Mike. I wanted to thank you for sending in the questionnaire.”

Mike laughed. “It was the least I could do. You were extremely generous.”

“That’s just our way of saying we value your trust. You know, some of your answers on the questionnaire were very interesting. I passed it on to Madeleine. She’s our coordinator. She’d like to get together and talk with you sometime. At your convenience, of course.”

Mike hoped that would mean meeting Ruth. *After all, that’s the point, isn’t it?* “Well, I’m pretty flexible,” he said. “I work for myself, you know. One-man operation. I could make some time tomorrow afternoon if that would work for you.”

“That would be terrific. We’re in the Bartlett Building, downtown. You know where it is?”

“”Yes.”

“Would two o’clock work?”

“Two o’clock is fine.”

“Great, Mike. I’ll see you then. I’m looking forward to meeting you.”

She’ll be there, Mike thought, smiling.

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It was 1:58 when Mike arrived at the Bartlett Building. He felt excitement mixed with an uncharacteristic nervousness. It occurred to him that he had no idea why these people wanted to meet him. He was here only because he’d become obsessed with a voice on the phone. *Obsessed is strong. I’d say intrigued. I’m intrigued by a voice on the phone.* He stepped into the building. A doorman stood in the lobby.

“May I help you, Sir?”

“I’m looking for Paradise Rewards.”

“And your name?”

“Mike Wilson.”

The doorman fingered the intercom. “Ruth? Mr. Wilson is here.”

“Send him right up.” Ruth’s voice, Mike was sure.

At the 5th floor, the elevator doors opened onto a spacious reception area.

Sumptuous furniture lined the walls and floor-to-ceiling windows framed an urban panorama. An attractive blonde woman rose from behind the reception desk and strode toward him.

“Mike? I’m Ruth Sipes. So pleased to meet you.” She grasped his hand in both of hers.

Mike stared at her confused. *But, you can’t be.* She was certainly attractive, but the dissonance between his fantasy and the woman before him was disconcerting. Ruth did not seem to notice.

“What a beautiful day! It’s a shame to be stuck inside on a day like this, don’t you think?”

Mike agreed, forcing a smile. His eyes followed hers to the wall of glass. The day was drenched in sunshine, a postcard Fall day. He hadn’t noticed until that moment.

“Why don’t you have a seat.” Still clinging warmly to his hand, Ruth directed him to a couch near the window wall. “Madeleine will be with you momentarily.” She indicated a door that bore the legend, “Madeleine Winter.”

Mike settled onto the couch and watched Ruth’s retreating figure. He felt some coins slip from his pocket and slide toward a crease between the cushions. *Now what?* he thought.

It was barely a minute before the door opened and Mike's world flipped again. Madeleine Winter stood and stared at him for what seemed like a very long time. Mike stared back. Her eyes were emerald green flecked with butter yellow in the bright light of the window-wall. *Why didn't Kevin mention those eyes?* Her hair was indeed the blackest black and long. It fell in thick waves about her face, broke across her shoulders, and Mike imagined it tumbling down her back. *She's magnificent.* Ruth's voice was forgotten. The fantasies that had entertained him were gone.

Ruth had risen from behind her desk. "Madeleine, I'd like you to meet Mike Wilson. Mike, Madeleine Winter."

"I'm very happy to meet you, Ms. Winter."

"Please. Madeleine. We're very informal here. I'm sure Ruth told you. May I call you Mike?"

"Please," Mike replied as she led him into her office, closing the door behind her.

"Have a seat, Mike."

Mike wondered if he had enough change left in his pocket to make a proper donation to the furniture. He made an effort to compose himself. *Just let it happen.*

"May I offer you a drink? Coffee? Water? Something stronger?"

"I'm fine," Mike said. He settled into a chair. Madeleine perched on the edge of the desk and then, as if repenting that, moved to the chair next to Mike.

"So, you're single?" she asked.

Mike nodded. *Cut right to the chase, gazelle.*

"Never been married?"

He shook his head, a confident half-grin tugging the edge of his mouth despite his efforts to control it. The pleasure of looking at her was consuming. He hoped she'd keep talking.

"It's hard to believe no one's hooked a trophy like you." She was all invitation. Mike heard it in her voice, saw it in her body language, the way she leaned toward him.

"I make it a point to swim only in catch-and-release streams." He smiled. Madeleine laughed and moved to push hair from her face, her fingers gliding through the thick tangle.

"I deserved that. My fishing metaphor. I don't even like fishing."

"Neither do I." Mike laughed.

Madeleine turned in her seat so she was facing him, their knees almost touching. "Mike, on rare occasions, Ruth was one, I think you're another, we come across someone special, someone who can contribute more than just a few answers on a questionnaire or a product test. Someone who can be a real asset to our company."

Mike could smell her scent, warm, moist, like straw and crushed flowers.

"Would you consider coming to work for Paradise, Mike?" She looked at him, her hair falling forward making a tunnel through which her eyes shone.

Mike hesitated. *Work for Paradise? Are you nuts?* "I've worked for myself since I was nineteen. I don't..."

"That's part of the attraction," she interrupted. "You're independent-minded, self-motivated. You don't need a supervisor staring over your shoulder to get things done."

"I have my clients..."

“You can move into this at your own pace.” She put a hand on his forearm. “I know you have the energy. You look like you have a lot of stamina. You set the pace, Mike. Are you willing to take a chance?”

“Would I be working under you?”

The tip of her tongue drew a line along the gloss of her upper lip, caressing the serrations of her teeth. “That’s a possibility.”

It’s too crazy, this woman, this place. Play along. Let it happen. “Alright,” Mike said suddenly. “I’ll try it.”

Madeleine grasped both his hands in hers. “Great! Fantastic! Uhm... we’ll need to do a routine physical. We can do that right down the hall... a little more paperwork and then maybe you and I could have some dinner? I believe you have a reservation at the Hearth and Chalice?”

Mike remembered his date with Janine. *Shit. I’ll have to call and cancel. Tell her I’m working late. I can’t pass this up. This is almost too easy. The gazelle is running right at me.*

#

The physician’s assistant was another beautiful woman. Mike wondered if beauty was a requirement for employment at Paradise Rewards. He was pretty sure that would violate some labor law. *I won’t turn them in.*

The stethoscope wandered across his chest. “Deep Breath.” Pause. Move. “Let it out slowly.” Pause. Move. “Again... now breathe normally.” She took his blood pressure, pulse, looked at his eyes, ears, mouth. “You’re in excellent condition, Mike. Do you work out?”

“I like to run. I do some weights, and racquetball. I like racquetball.”

“Have a seat over here. I just need some blood and you’re done.”

Mike hesitated. *Blood? I have to give blood to get a date now? Oh, well, what's that saying? In for a penny...* He watched as the needle slid painlessly into the vein. *Interesting. She's pushing the plunger.* Pushing, slowly pushing. A click. A pause. *Oh, right. Now she's pulling, drawing the blood.* He watched the dark liquid flow into the tube, conscious of the nearness of the woman. He looked toward her, she intent on the syringe. He could see the texture of her skin, every pore, her cheek like a strawberry, *to be tasted.* She smiled at him, her face very near.

“Do you feel dizzy? Sometimes people get a little dizzy when their blood is drawn.”

“I’m fine,” Mike said. *I do feel dizzy.* “Actually I am a little woozy.”

“Here, why don’t you lie down.” She took his arm helping him up. “It’ll pass in a minute.”

His legs were like anchors stuck in bottom mud. *I'm not dizzy. I'm lethargic. Lethargy... from Lethe, the waters of forgetfulness... I sink into the waters of forgetfulness.* He lowered himself onto the couch feeling warm hands on his arm, behind his head, not caring. A coin fell from his pocket, bounced noisily and rolled toward a far corner of the room.

#

Madeleine cradled a phone on her shoulder, the earpiece lost in the forest of her hair. She moved things from her desk to a cardboard box. “Hello, Dr. Simmons? Madeleine Winter. I have your donor... Yes. Male, Caucasian, about thirty. Perfect

physical specimen... multiple organs, yes... No, no trauma... Comatose. no hope of recovery. We're preparing to transport... And thank you. It's always a pleasure to be of service. We'll talk soon." She replaced the phone on its cradle, unplugged it and placed it in the box. She opened the door. "Ruth, honey? It's time to pack up, darling. We're all done here."

END