

This story is dedicated to the more than two thousand people reported missing every day in the United States, and to Judge Crater who started it all for me.

Loose Change

Mike looked around as he washed his hands, then looked at himself in the mirror. The bathroom was pretty clean by diner standards. *Hey, Buddy. You're lookin' good.* He smiled at his image. It smiled back, radiant, toothy, ruggedly handsome. "You could use a haircut," he said out loud and smiled again. His dad had said that to him at least once a week when he was a kid. But he liked his hair, and Mom had liked it too, the luxuriant waves of glistening black that parted naturally in the middle of his head, fell around his ears and softly brushed the nape of his neck as he moved. He glanced at the condom dispenser hanging on the wall. *Maybe I should stock up. I'm through taking chances. I'm not through having fun, but I'm through taking chances.* At thirty Mike had already taken plenty of chances, chances with women, chances with money, chances with life. So far luck was on his side.

He felt the lump of coins in his pocket like a lead weight tugging at his waistline. He was bad with change. He always forgot to use it, handing over wads of paper instead, getting more coins in return. They filled his pocket, falling out when he sat down in the park, in the theater, in the office. At home they slipped down into the lining of the couch, rolled under the bookcase or under the bed. They piled up on the dresser until he scooped them into a peanut butter jar. Coins were some kind of government scam. They minted them, sent them out, and the coins circulated around 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 useless trinkets caught their fancy they knew they'd never see them

again. That book would never need to be balanced. Mike thought about those old Roman coins the archeologists found. *Probably dropped out of someone's pocket.*

He rubbed his hands together briskly under the air dryer then reached into his pocket for a handful of change. He began feeding quarters to the condom machine, cranking the big chrome handle around with each one. On the fourth coin the machine emitted 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 pulled out the card, looked in the slot, tried to get a finger into it. He tried to turn the big chrome handle. It was locked in its detente position. He banged the side of the machine. Nothing.

“Shit.” He looked down 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 band of windows that formed three walls of the nearly empty diner. It bounced off the formica table tops, the polished metal and glass of the miniature jukeboxes that adorned each booth, the stretches of chrome 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 just a kid. Eighteen or nineteen at most. Pretty too. *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, her forearms on the counter. Her face had that open look that said she found him attractive. Mike recognized it immediately. He had seen it a hundred times. Women *liked* him, often at once and without reservation. He knew from experience that he didn’t need to *do* anything. *Just let it happen.*

“Is the manager around?”

“You mean Mr. Patterson? He’ll be here in about an hour. Is there anything *I* can do for you?” She tilted her head coquettishly.

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, then at him. “Out of the blow dryer?”

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

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

Mike, impatient, spit out, “Condoms. I *expect* a condom dispenser to dispense condoms.”

She looked at him like he had just spit in his own coffee. She stood and folded her arms in front of her saying nothing.

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

Wordlessly she extracted a card from beside the register and dropped it on top of the white card. She looked right through him.

“ It’s just... 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 a quarter from his pocket and looked at it.

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 little boys’ room.”

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

Mike looked toward the counter. The girl still looked at him, arms folded, face 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 a quarter of *my* money to call *you* about a vending machine that *ripped me off*. Maybe for that 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." The line went dead.

Mike slowly returned the phone to its cradle. *What am I doing? I don't care about the dollar. I don't care about the condoms. I should have bought 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. It had been a long day, a busy day, a good day. He fished in his pocket among the loose change for his keys. Something white fluttered to the floor. *The card from the condom machine.* He retrieved it, went inside into the kitchen and tossed the keys and card on the table. He got a beer from the fridge 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 a lot of balls." He turned the card over. The other side read:

Paradise Rewards

1-800-2SAY YES

He took a drink of his beer. *I should give these guys 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 come out.”

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 that sometimes, reverse-searching from a phone number. 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 when Mike got home there was an envelope from Paradise Rewards among his mail. At the kitchen table with his beer, he opened the envelope. *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, continental cuisine but not pretentious. 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 all his clothes at the Sartorium. The older businessmen in town still shopped at Weldons, the city's landmark clothier, but the younger set favored the hip, cutting-edge fashion of the Sartorium. 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 along? Thanks, R."

Mike pulled two letter-sized sheets out of the envelope. *Some sort of questionnaire.* He glanced down the first sheet past the personal information section. *How many TVs? How much do you watch?* He flipped to the second page. *Magazine subscriptions?* It looked like standard demographics stuff. *Must be high-end judging by the generosity.* He dropped the sheets on the table and went for another beer. He looked at the blinking light on the answering machine. *I'd better get to those messages.* He hit the 'play' button and settled into his chair.

The Sartorium, in the heart of the commercial district, was just two blocks from Mike's office. Mike made his way there through the lunch-time street traffic, stopping to admire the window display before he stepped inside. Kevin, the Sartorium's counter man didn't just do window displays. He liked to tell stories. In today's scene a man stooped to tie his shoe, his foot up on a park bench, while his wallet was being 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. With his encyclopedic knowledge of fashion he was the final arbiter of taste. "I'm glad you stopped by. *Somebody must really like you.*"

“Why’s that?” Mike asked.

“*Somebody* got you a pretty nice gift certificate. I’ve got it here in the register.”

He handed Mike an envelope and Mike looked inside. The amount was stamped across it in florid script: Five Hundred Dollars.

A down payment on a whole new wardrobe. Mike looked at Kevin. Do you know who this *somebody* is?”

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

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

“I swear I don’t know this woman, Kevin. Can you describe her?”

“Interesting thing. Her hair’s about the same color as yours. That really black black that you don’t see too often, and long. Her features are perfect, not model-thin, fuller than that. Maybe a hint of Asian but it’s 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 Mike Wilson’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, and left.”

“Well I’m stymied, Pal. Must have been the goddess of high 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 or something? 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.”

By the time Mike got home that night he had made a decision. He would call Ruth... *and say what? Thank her for her generosity and see what happens next. Let it happen.* Mike thought again about Kevin’s description, light on detail but intriguing. 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, the 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, not the number. He searched through the papers again. No luck. He looked at the questionnaire, hesitated, then began filling in the blanks.

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

Ruth,

Thank you for the very generous “tokens.”

I filled out the questionnaire (the least I could do).

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

Mike

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

The next two days were difficult ones for Mike. He had trouble focusing on his work. Every task seemed to take twice as long. His mind wandered continually to anticipation of a call from Ruth. When he finally arrived home late the second evening he felt out-of-sorts. He immediately 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 pile of mail on the table, discarding junk, stacking bills neatly in the holder he had for that purpose. Halfway through the pile the phone rang.

“Hello?”

“Hello, Mr. Wilson? It’s Ruth Sipes. I’m so glad I caught you at home.”

Mike thrilled to the sound of her voice. It sounded even sexier than he remembered, and he matched it with the mental image he had constructed from Kevin’s few hints. “Hi, Ruth. I’m, uh... I’m glad to hear from you... and you can drop the Mr. Wilson stuff. 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 in the near future. 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 2 o’clock work for you?”

“2 o’clock will be fine.”

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

She’ll be there, Mike thought, smiling.

It was 1:58 on Mike’s watch when he 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 a little strong. I’d say intrigued. I’m intrigued by a voice on the phone.* He stepped into the building. A doorman stood in the spacious lobby.

“May I help you, Sir?”

“I’m looking for Paradise Rewards.”

“And your name, Sir?”

“Mike Wilson.”

The doorman pressed a button on the intercom. “Ruth? A Mr. Wilson is here.”

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

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

Sumptuous upholstered 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. I’m 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 overlooking the city. It really was a beautiful day, drenched in sunshine, one of those postcard early fall days. 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 leather-covered couch near the window wall. “Madeleine will be with you in a minute.” She indicated a closed door that bore the legend, “Madeleine Winter.”

Mike settled onto the couch and watched Ruth's retreating figure. He felt a pair of coins slip from his pocket and slide over the smooth leather toward a crease between the cushions. *Now what?* he thought.

It was barely a minute before the door opened and Mike's entire world flipped again. Madeleine Winter stood in the doorway 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 in previous days were gone.

Unnoticed, 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."

For the briefest moment 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 just 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 crossing the line from social to intimate space.

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

“I deserved that. It was 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 very rare occasions, Ruth was one, I think you’re another, we come across someone special, someone who can contribute more than just a few statistics, a few answers on a questionnaire or a product test. Someone who can be a real asset to the company’s future.”

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. "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, Mike.” 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?”

“Will 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. “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 might have a reservation at the Hearth and Chalice?”

This is almost too easy. The gazelle is running right at me.

The physician’s assistant was yet another beautiful woman. Mike wondered if beauty was a requirement for employment at Paradise Rewards. He was pretty sure that would violate some kind of labor law. *I'm not going to turn them in.* He wondered, too,

if he could ever get any real work done in such a sexually charged atmosphere. The stethoscope wandered across his chest and back.

“Deep Breath.” Pause. Move. “Let it out slowly.” Pause. Move. “Again... now breathe normally.” She took his blood pressure, pulse, looked into his eyes, his ears, his 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 all done.”

Mike watched as the needle slid painlessly into the swollen 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 the skin of a strawberry, *to be tasted.* She smiled at him, her face very near.

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

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

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

His legs were like boat 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 the 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.

In her office 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 here. I have your donor... Yes. Male, Caucasian, about thirty. Perfect physical specimen... multiple organs, yes... No, no trauma at all... Comatose. no hope of recovery. We’re preparing to transport now... 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 outer door. “Ruth, honey? It’s time to pack up, darling. We’re all done here.”