

## POCKETS

Three tramps, two men and a woman, scurry along the brightly lit Boulevard from the direction of the railroad tracks, flitting from shadow to shadow, fearful of being seen, headed for the dead-end alley between two large hotel buildings. The winter night is cold, with a promise of snow or sleet before morning.

“What’s that?” asks Major, their leader, stopping just inside the mouth of the alley. “Sounded like it come from in here.”

“Was probably a dog.” whispers Dink, the other male. “Or a cat. Turned over a can. Don’t matter.”

“Was a rat. Turned over a can.” repeats Lady, the female, nervously. “Don’t matter.”

Although it is two hours before dawn and the Boulevard is empty, the three look around to see if they are being watched or followed. Then silently, without any signal between them, they file into the alley. The dead-end passage is narrow, long and dirty. Heavy metal doors and barred, blackened windows are the only breaks in the high brick walls. The alley is filled with garbage cans—some full, others empty—and plastic bags of trash—some tied closed, others torn open and spilling their contents.

Deep in the alley, the tramps begin to search among the cans and bags, groping through the trash in the dim, reflected light of the Boulevard street lamps. Lady picks at the trash on top of each pile, as if shopping, examines it closely, and then either puts it in her shopping bag or discards it, leaving it only a bit more wrinkled than when she picked it up. Dink is methodical and fast, pulling an empty can close to a full one and emptying the one into the other rapidly, piece by piece, until he has looked at everything. Major attacks the plastic bags of garbage, ripping them open, strewing the contents onto the ground, kicking through it, scattering it around, looking hard to see it all.

“Jesus God, I’m cold.” says Major finally, pulling his too-small, military surplus jacket more tightly around him. He tugs at the broken bill of his ragged winter cap. The earflaps are turned down over his ears.

Neither Lady or Dink respond to his statement.

“I said ‘Jesus God, I’m cold’.” repeats Major.

“Me, too, Major.” says Dink, smiling out at him from the woolen warmth of a tattered gray topcoat. “Christ, it’s cold.”

Dink tries to flap his arms, as if to warm himself, but the heavy coat is too binding. Lady, distracted by a gaudy bit of cloth she has found, responds absently. “Cold.” she says.

She lifts her heavy black cape-like coat and deposits the piece of cloth with the other bright rags in one of the already overstuffed pockets of her shapeless green dress.

“Shit.” says Major scornfully.

“Don’t think about the cold so much, Major.” says Dink. “You thinks about it all the time and that makes you cold. Me and Lady don’t thinks about it so much, so we ain’t so cold as you.”

“Shit.” says Major.

“If you’re cold, it’s cause God wants you to be cold.” says Lady. “Me and Dink loves God and fears him, so we ain’t so cold. Ain’t that right, Dink?”

Dink nods enthusiastically, then adds slyly. "That's right, Major. You're cold because God wants you to be cold."

"Shit." says Major, for the third time.

"Shut up, Major." says Lady. "And you better start using your polite manners around me. Or God'll hear you and make you colder."

Chastised, Major looks apologetically at Lady, but soon growls at Dink.

"Where's those gloves of yours?" he asks.

"No, Major, these's my good gloves. If you use them, you'll get them all dirty."

"Goddammit, Dink, give me those gloves, or I'll take them away from you."

"Lady, don't let him take my gloves." whines Dink, sticking his gloved hands deep into the pockets of his heavy coat and pulling in his head like a turtle. A large fur hat covers his head. "Don't let him take my gloves, Lady. He'll get them all dirty."

Lady ignores the two men.

"Give me those gloves, Dink." orders Major.

Slowly, Dink's head and hands come up out of the coat. He pulls off the gloves and flings them at Major, then begins to pull off the heavy coat and furry hat. "Here. Take them." he cries. "Take it all. I can get more. And you can't. You can't even take care of your own self. I got to take care of you for you. -- Here. Take it."

"Fuck you." says Major softly, picking up the gloves.

"Take it all."

"I said 'FUCK YOU'." says Major, more loudly, throwing the gloves back at Dink, and stalking away down the alley.

Dink rebuttons his coat and pulls his hat back down over his ears. He picks up the gloves and puts them on again. "Always works." he says, laughing softly. "It always works, Lady. He's been after these gloves all week, and he ain't got them yet. It always works, I tell you."

Down the alley, Major kicks over a garbage can.

"One day it ain't going to work no more." says Lady. "One day he's going to get so mad, he'll cut your guts out. -- Talking to him that way."

"He ain't neither. It always works, I tell you."

Kicking through the garbage from the spilled can, Major finds an apple, which has been thrown away after only two bites have been taken. He picks it up and examines it. The places where the apple has been bitten have turned soft and brown.

Lady begins to chant softly at Dink. "Cut your guts out. Cut your guts out. Cut your guts out."

"Stop it. Shut up." whines Dink.

Major walks back to the other two, holding up the apple proudly. "Look what I found." he says.

"Hey, give me a bite." says Lady, almost lovingly.

"Divide it up." squeals Dink. "Equal shares. Equal shares."

Major takes a knife from the outer pocket of his military jacket. He opens a single long-sharp, gleaming-shiny blade.

"All right, Dink, all right. Don't worry. You'll get your piece." says Major. "Equal shares. I'll divide it up."

Major slices the apple in half, then divides the rotting, bitten half again. Dink grabs the large, good slice and starts to bite it. "Fair's fair." he cries.

“Wait a minute.” says Major.

“What are you do...” begins Lady.

Dink stops in the middle of his bite, and quickly gives the large good slice to Lady. She eats it in one bite. Dink and Major pick up the rotten apple quarters and eat them, but without gusto.

“That was good.” says Lady. “Is they any more?”

“Don’t know.” says Major. “Found this one. Didn’t look to see was there any more.”

Dink leads the way, running, bending down from his waist as if sniffing the ground, to the overturned garbage can. The others run behind. The three search for several minutes, but find nothing.

“No more apples.” says Lady. “No more nothing.”

“Goddammit, it’s too cold. Got to have a fire.” says Major, kicking the trash at his feet into a small pile.

“No, Major. Remember the last time.” says Dink. “And the next time they said they’d call the police.”

“But, goddammit, it’s too cold. And it’s getting colder. Maybe might snow. I’ll freeze without I build me a fire.” says Major.

“Freeze then.” says Lady. “It’ll serve you right. But we ain’t having no fires. -- No fires, no police. That’s what I say.”

“Hey, has anybody seen Slops come out yet?” asks Dink suddenly. “That’s what we come here for, ain’t it? It’s almost time.”

“Almost forgot.” says Lady. “We almost forgot about Slops.”

“Slops ain’t come out yet?” asks Major.

“Come on then, let’s get these cans out of the way.” says Dink, dragging garbage cans away from a large green metal door for a distance of about ten feet.

Lady helps drag several cans. “Goddammit. We nearly forgot.” she says.

“Major, you’re the one suppose to remember about Slops.”

Dink empties an almost new-looking garbage can and scrubs the bottom with newspaper, then places other pieces of newspaper on the bottom of the can as a lining.

“I remembered. I didn’t forget.” says Major. “Just wanted to see if you remembered, that’s all.”

Dink places the can with the newspaper lining just outside the green door. “Come on, everybody. Hide.” he says.

The three hide in a recessed area, among garbage cans, in a part of the alley where none of them has been before.

“I knowed. I remembered. I just wanted to see if you would remember.” repeats Major.

“Bullshit.” says Lady. “You forgot, Major. I almost forgot. Only Dink remembered. Looks like he’s right. He’s got to take care of us his own self. You can’t do it no more.”

“Be quiet, you two.” commands Dink. “Last time he saw us, he pissed in it.”

“I can still take care of us.” says Major. “Who found the apple? I found the apple, that’s who. I’m still taking care of us.”

“Taking care of us? Shit.” says Lady. “You can’t even take care of your own self.”

Offended, Major stands and wanders further back among the garbage cans.

“Shut up, both of you.” says Dink, looking back. “Major, you get back here. If he sees you, he’ll piss in it.”

“Fuck you. I can find food. Who found the apple?”

Major bangs his body into a line of cans, knocking them over, and suddenly sees the body of a boy lying among the trash cans, dressed only in jeans and a T-shirt. The boy is young and pale and barefoot.

“Look here.” says Major proudly. “Look what I found.”

Dink and Lady both turn to look, then run back to Major.

“See has he got a wallet.” says Dink.

“Check all his pockets. See what’s in his pockets.” says Lady.

Major leans down. “Ain’t got no wallet. Ain’t got no nothing. -- Here. Help me get him up.”

The three tramps place the body on a row of cans. “He’s still yet warm.” says Dink, leaning over the body. “But he ain’t got no heartbeats. And he ain’t got no breathing.”

“He’s dead then.” says Major. “Dead. That’s what he is.”

“He ain’t dead.” says Lady. “He’s still warm so he ain’t dead yet.”

“Ain’t got no breathing. Ain’t got no heartbeats. He’s dead.” says Major. “He’ll be warm for a while yet, but pretty soon he’ll be cold.”

“Maybe should get him a doctor.” says Dink. “Might not be dead. A doctor could tell it for sure.”

Major laughs. “Looks like the doctor done been here. Boy ain’t got no wallet. Ain’t got no shirt, no coat, no shoes. The doctor’s done already been here and gone.”

“Maybe a policeman would come see for sure is he dead?” says Lady.

“A policeman?” says Major, laughing louder. “Sure. We could say to him, ‘Mister Policeman, sir, we found us a dead boy over here in the alley, sir. And we was just wondering could you come look and tell us for sure is he dead or not?’ -- He’d ask you your name so many times you’d forget what it was.”

There is a noise from behind the green door. Dink shoves the body from the cans to the ground. “Get down, you guys.” he says softly. “Slops is coming.”

The three squat on their heels and remain still. More noise is heard near the green door, and suddenly it opens wide. A short, fat cook emerges, wearing a dirty white paper hat, a stained white T-shirt, and white pants with a dirty white handkerchief sticking out of the back pocket. He carries a silver bowl.

The fat cook shivers in the cold night air, and blinks his eyes trying to see deeper into the darkness. Steaming air escapes from the hot kitchen behind him. Quickly, he puts a hand to his mouth and calls. “Sooeey. Soo—eey. Here pig, pig, pig.”

His call echoes from the high walls. The cook stamps his feet impatiently. “Sooeey. Soo—eey. Here pig, pig, pig. ---- SOOO—EEEY.” he yells, dumping his shiny bowl of scraps into the garbage can nearest the door, then laughs. “Fuck you, then, you don’t want to eat.”

The fat cook blows his nose violently onto his fingers, then shakes his hand over the garbage can until the moisture falls from his fingers into the can. He goes back into the kitchen, slamming the heavy green door behind him, but the door opens again almost immediately. “SOOO—EEEY. SOOO—EEEY. HERE PIG, PIG, PIG.”

The door slams shut again, and there is a noise of it being bolted and locked from the inside. The three tramps do not move. "He's gone." whispers Dink finally. "Lady, you get the food."

Lady tiptoes up to the door, leans into the can, and grabs the newspaper full of scraps. Dink and Major remain still, kneeling beside the body of the boy.

"The bastard." says Lady, returning, laying the newspaper full of scraps on the boy's chest. "He blowed his nose in it. Almost rather he piss in it than do that."

"It ain't hurt." says Dink, wiping up the moisture with a finger of his gloved hand, rubbing it off on the boy's T-Shirt. "It's just water. What'd we get?"

"What you think?" asks Major. "What do we always get? Steak and baked potato? -- Or tater peels and burned fatback."

Major takes the knife from his pocket again, opens it with a flourish, and begins to divide the food. "Two pieces of fatback and a pile of delicious tater peels for you, Lady. And for you, Dink, two pieces of fatback and a pile of tater peels. And for me, the same."

"You got three pieces of fatback." says Dink quickly.

"And two of yours is the biggest." adds Lady.

Major is very surprised when Dink reaches over, takes the two largest pieces of meat, and gives one to himself and one to Lady. "And you got more tater peels, too." says Dink, picking up the knife and raking half of Major's potato peelings into a pile between Lady and himself.

"What you doing?" yells Major.

"I found this food. -- Like you found the apple." says Dink. "And I'm dividing it up. Like you divided up the apple."

Dink throws the knife back at Major, into his food.

The three tramps begin to eat at once, ravenously.

Major talks as he eats, between bites. "You didn't found this food neither.---We all knew about this food was coming.---And I always divide up the food anyway.---No matter who finds it.---Because it's my knife.---You didn't found this food.---I always divides up the food.---No matter who,,,"

"Don't matter who divides up the food no way." says Lady. "Cause they ain't no more food left to divide up."

"But what about the boy?" asks Dink. "What are we going to do with him?"

"Do with him?" says Major. "We ain't going to do nothing with him. He's dead. We can't do nothing with him but put him back where we found him ---- where I found him."

"But he's still yet warm." says Lady. "Feel his stomach. He might not be dead yet maybe."

"Got to go get somebody to come look at him." says Dink.

"Somebody to tell us for sure is he dead." says Lady, walking towards the alley entrance. "I'll go see can I find somebody."

"Don't waste your time, Lady. Stay here." says Major, standing. "The boy's dead."

"Gots to go to the bathroom anyway." says Lady.

Dink rises and stomps the ground. "Shut up, Major. Just shut up. -- The boy might not be dead. Shut up, and we'll find out for sure."

“Don’t tell me to shut up, you little shit.” says Major. “Or somebody’ll have to come find out if you’re dead.”

“Big man going to slice me up with his big knife?”

“Might just do that.” says Major, stooping to pick up the knife. “Cut you up so you don’t talk so big and so smart.”

“Careful, Major. Watch that thing. Before you hurt somebody. Then you’d be all alone. Alone with a dead person.”

“Might not be so bad. Might could get warm.” says Major, extending his hands towards the body of the boy, as if it were a fire. “He’s still yet warm. -- Dink, give me those gloves of yours.”

Dink stops cowering and smiles. He moves closer to Major and begins to whine. “These is my gloves, Major. My hands’ll freeze without my gloves. Your hands is already cold anyway.”

Major moves away from the body of the boy and holds up the knife threateningly. “Goddammit, my hands is freezing, Dink. Give me those goddamn gloves.”

“All right, Major. You win. I can’t do this no more. Here. Take it. Take everything I got. I can get more. And you can’t. You can’t even take care of your own self. I got to take care of you for you. Here. Take it all.”

Major reaches out and accepts the gloves. “Thanks, Dink.”

Dink is surprised. “Wait a minute. Them’s my good gloves. You ain’t suppose to take my gloves.”

“I need them, Dink.” says Major, juggling the open knife as he puts on the gloves. “I need them more than you. God, they’re so warm. My hands ain’t been this warm all winter.”

“Give me back my gloves, Major.”

“No, Dink. I need them.”

Dink thinks hard for a moment. “Well, fuck you, anyway, Major. I ain’t losed nothing.” he says, taking an identical pair of gloves from the deepest pocket of his coat. “I had another same pair all the time.”

“You had another same pair?” says Major, his face turning red, anger giving way to hatred. “All this time? Why you---I’m going to cut your son-of-a-bitch head off.”

Major lunges at Dink, waving the knife from side to side. From the alley entrance, Lady walks towards them, ignoring the conflict, and finds an almost empty bottle of wine perched on top of a pile of trash.

“Wait a minute, Major.” says Dink. “All you had to do was ask for them. I would have give them to you. Honest.”

“Look what I found.” says Lady happily, unscrewing the cap from the bottle and drinking the few remaining swallows of wine.

Major and Dink rush to her.

“Hey.” yells Major.

“Stop.” cries Dink.

Major seizes the empty bottle from her hand and tries to drain a last drop into his mouth. But there is no more. Glowering at Lady, Major smashes the bottle against the brick wall.

“Didn’t find nobody.” says Lady. “To come see about the boy.”

“He’s dead, I told you.” says Major. “Ain’t no reason to find nobody to come see about him.”

“But what are we going to do?” asks Lady. “He’s still yet warm. What can we do?”

“Push him over behind the cans and cover him up again. Then somebody else can find him that knows what to do.”

“We can’t do that, Major.” says Dink. “Somebody’s done already found him. – We done already found him, and we gots to do something with him.”

“He’s dead. Don’t matter what gets did with him.”

“But he’s still yet warm.” says Lady. “We got to take him somewhere before he gets cold and freezes.”

Dink reaches down and touches the boy. “He’s not so warm no more. He’ll be getting almost cold before long.”

“Goddammit, he’s dead.” says Major. “Dead people don’t get cold.”

Major leans down and begins to unfasten the boy’s pants and pull them off .

“What are you doing, Major?” asks Dink.

“Dead people don’t get cold. Dead people don’t need no pants. Alive people do.”

Major pulls the pants on over his own.

“Robbing off the dead. Lord God, what are you going to do next.” says Lady. “Just what the hell are you going to do next?”

Major looks at Lady and strips the body of the T-shirt. He takes off his gloves and jacket to put it on over his own shirt.

“Don’t do that, Major. He’ll freeze if you take all his clothes. And nobody won’t do nothing if they find him and he ain’t got no clothes on. Give him back his clothes, Major. Please give him back his clothes.” says Dink, stooping to grab the gloves when Major has the T-shirt over his head.

“Dead people don’t need no clothes.” says Major, pulling his jacket back on. “Somebody’ll find him and call the police. And they’re going to take his clothes anyway. – And they’re going to freeze him anyway, so it don’t make no difference. – Hey, where’s my gloves?”

“Your gloves? Where’s your gloves?” says Dink. “They’re my gloves. Always has been my gloves, -- Since I stole them from that store last week.”

“Goddamn you, Dink. Give me my gloves.”

Dink moves to hide behind Lady. “Why don’t you ask the boy?” he says. “Maybe he brung some gloves for you.”

“Maybe he’ll give you some gloves.” says Lady. “Ask the boy.”

“Goddammit.” says Major, reaching around Lady, trying to catch hold of Dink, beginning to cry. “Goddamn you. I’ll cut your son-of-a-bitch head off.”

Lady begins to chant softly. “Ask the boy. Ask the boy. Ask the boy.”

“Where’s my gloves?” says Dink, mocking Major. “Goddamn you, Dink. Where’s my gloves?”

“Damn you. Goddamn you both.” screams Major, rubbing at the tears in his eyes, accidentally cutting his own forehead with the still open knife in his hand.

“Ask the boy. Ask the boy. Ask the boy.” chants Lady.

“Damn you. Goddamn you both.” mocks Dink.

“God, my hands. -- My hands are so cold.” sobs Major, wiping blood from his forehead out of his eyes. “My hands are freezing. My head hurts. I can’t think.”

“Ask the boy. Ask the boy. Ask the boy.”

“My head hurts. I can’t think.” mocks Dink.

Major sinks to the ground almost on top of the naked boy, crying uncontrollably, still holding the open knife. He puts his hands out towards the boy’s body, as if it were a fire. “Boy?” he says. “My hands are cold. – Do you have any gloves? My hands are so cold. – I can’t think. – And now you’re cold, too. Still a little warm, but now you’re cold, too. – Gloves. Warm inside. Gloves. Can’t think. Gloves.”

Suddenly Major sticks the knife in the boy’s stomach and rips the belly open. Dink and Lady are instantly quiet, horrified and afraid, slowly, involuntarily backing away from Major. Major tosses the knife aside onto the ground and thrusts both hands deep into the boy’s body cavity.

“Warm inside.” says Major happily. “Gloves. Gloves.”

“God.” wails Lady softly.

“He killed the boy.” says Dink, almost inaudibly.

“God. God. God.” screams Lady, backing away faster.

“Warm inside. Warm. Gloves.”

“He’s going to kill us next, Lady.” yells Dink, following her.

Dink and Lady turn and run crazily, screaming and yelling, screeching and crying out of the alley.

“Warm. Warm inside.” says Major, drawing out his hands, smearing blood onto his face. “Good warm. Warm good.”

Slowly, Major puts his hands back into the body and lowers his face down onto the belly. “Good. Warm.” he repeats.