

Fish Thieves

Nico lives on 47th Street, on the corner of Ransom, the north corner of the projects, across from a baby doll hanging from a telephone wire. Its plastic arms are open wide, as if in an embrace, but its pink bald head sags to the left of its body. The paper carried a photograph of the baby doll today. Nico is reading the caption under the picture in the voice he uses when he's really angry-- fast, so fast it's hard to understand him. But I already read the caption myself this morning, so I know what he's saying,

"The doll, hanging from a noose, is a talisman warning that visitors are entering one of the most lawless corners of the city."

I nod, "Savages in the jungle" I say what the guy who wrote the article was thinking but couldn't quite write. But I don't feel angry like Nico, only tired.

Next to my house, on the other side of the park, there is a pair of sneakers flung over a wire. "The shoes, hanging above passerbys heads warn of a neighborhood of upwardly mobile young professionals who'll step on you to get where they're climbing to," I imagine the article saying. But it's not news, at least not yet.

A couple weeks ago, there was a white guy with a truck full of fish robbed in Nico's neighborhood. The paper made it out to be racially motivated. I mean why else would people steal fish, if not out of racial anger? Since then the police have been making daily "raids" on the projects. Door to door searches. I know because I have seen it from Nico's window. The paper reported last week that the police made an arrest. The suspect had a fish in his freezer. At the end of the article, after you turn the page and

hunt for the continued column, the police admit they could not positively ID the fish.

Nico laughed his ass off when he read that aloud to me.

His voice gets higher now as he reads the opening paragraph of the article that goes with the baby doll picture, "Walking the graffiti-scarred streets, passerbys are accosted by the menacing stare of idle young men." The paper says idle young men but it should have read unemployed young men because they're the last hired first fired especially in this recession. So I know these things. And Nico knows I know these things, and this is why when he says, "I hate white people." I only nod my white face.

Nico puts down the paper and kisses my eyes until I smile. It's hot in his apartment and time for dinner. We put our money together but it only equals \$8.65. It's the third time in a row that my paycheck is late. Last time I didn't get paid until the day before the next one was due and then that one was late too. But Nico's been laid off one of his two jobs so at least I have some money. Most of the time. Nico checks his other pants pockets, searches the bottom of his bag and looks in a few drawers but \$8.65 is all the money we can put together. It's enough for one burrito, one and a half falafel sandwiches or three slices of pizza.

"Burrito," we agree, knowing it is the most filling option, but we both know we're going to be hungry. I adopt my work persona: a glaze over my eyes, looking slightly beyond Nico and moving my hands a lot as I speak. "I will never tire of burritos because while the ingredients remain constant, the make up is forever slightly changing, causing the chance mélange of ingredients to create in each bite a unique culinary delight of evolving tastes."

Nico laughs but sneers, "How many lies today?" And I answer "Three or four," without really thinking because I've stopped counting the lies I tell at work to try to get people to buy art. At first I felt bad about it, but then I realized its all a part of a game that the client wants to play. If you tell them it's the last print you have and that there's another bid on it and that they better hurry up or they might not have another chance to buy it, they feel that much better about the purchase. Like you're thinking of them first. Like they are lucky to be able to fork out several thousand for a piece of art. It's a shit job but I try to console myself that I'm only exploiting the rich. If they don't spend it on an Escher, a Liechtenstein or whatever, they're just going to spend it somewhere else. And it's paying for the burrito. Yeah Nico put in \$2.27 but that's from the twenty dollars I gave him at the beginning of the week, so it all came from my salary in the end, and yet, he sneers.

It's a double life I lead. In the morning, dressed up in my work clothes, trying so hard to coordinate an outfit where the stains won't show, where safety pins can hold together fraying hems, permanently dirty cuffs and collars are concealed and I take pains not to sweat at my armpits. I always take my work clothes off right away, so I don't wear them out any faster. I must dress like I'm wealthy to sell to the wealthy and yet my job is too many hours and because it's based on commission, it frequently pays barely above the poverty line. I'm one of the few left working there-- in this twenty-year old gallery, with a big name, a big space and a facade carefully covering the rotting structure of the business. We are always desperate to sell. It's usually to wealthy idiots who don't know much about art but recognize a name that had its heyday at a time when they couldn't afford to buy anything here. Or there are the piranhas. Lanky men with names like,

Perin Walker, Rock Lamb, and Douve Sent, who negotiate elaborate deals involving multiple pieces at vast discounts and then pull out at the last minute to try to get it a little cheaper. Should we actually see the thousand dollar deals go through, the money goes into loans on our bank for payroll back taxes, suits won by unpaid artists and overdue rent. My salary and that of the two others who still remain is squeezed from what if anything is left over. Between the three of us, we've split up the many titles of those who've left and haven't been replaced. I am receptionist, secretary, administrative assistant and sales person. Roger is maintenance, framer, shipper, janitor. Doug is director, curator, bookkeeper, publicist. The gallery teeters from month to month, as if a fierce wind or a heavy down pour could fell it. I think that's why I work there still. I find a sadistic pleasure in watching the struggle. In seeing an animal so much greater than myself flounder. An obsolete, dying aristocracy that evolution, or maybe technology, is phasing into extinction. That and the fact that with this economy there are no jobs anyway.

Nico takes my hand as we walk the two blocks to the Tacoria. Being with Nico gives me a sense of freedom and makes me feel like I belong. Lately, the need to connect to him has intensified. I haven't been able to keep my hands off him, especially in public. I link arms with him, lean my chin on his shoulder, I push him in a doorway and kiss his eyebrows, eyes, nose, mouth, chin, neck, collarbone. He acts the same way too, holding my hands, putting his arm around my waist or shoulders. It's strange the insistence that has grown between us. It started as spontaneous desire, but now it feels different, now it's a need, a demand, a proof. Even when we fight, even in anger I think about touching him to annoy-- by pulling his head to my chest, kicking his heels as we walk, pinching

him. Affirming that we can feel love physically, can give and receive pain from each other. As if the idea of our love no longer counts-- words are too abstracted to believe in, to depend upon them to stay down, and not float away like a plastic bag blowing in the wind.

"We've crossed over into the lawful side of the city," I remind Nico. It's rush hour, so with the commuters emptying out of the subways, it's even busier than usual. On one corner of Mission and 24th Street, a man is yelling about his love for god. He's holding an old sheet with sloping Spanish sentences written in green magic marker. I wonder how much love that sheet saw before it saw the love of god. He bellows, oblivious as to whether people look or listen. His eyes are raised heavenwards, as if his words are mostly meant for God. On the opposite corner, the Revolutionary Communist Party has a banner and a pale forgettable man and woman are yelling too. Only their style is a little different. They yell in English and they are clumped together, ready to dart out from their core to descend upon you at the least hesitation in your stride. They push newspapers at you and simultaneously unload their angry words onto you.

"We must move heaven and earth to save Chairman Gonzalo." Revolutionary communism in one country or another. Nico and I know the buzz words of their religion in the same way we identify the tracts of la palabra de dios.

"White men spouting the victimization of brown people, while brown men shout white men's religion," Nico grumbles, his Mestizo features wrinkling into hatred for the white Christ whose teachings he has learned.

Lots of men standing around screaming is what I think, wondering where are the angry women. I am answered by a street person I don't recognize standing stock still

between the flowing commuter traffic and the clumps of high school kids gathered in bunches. We skirt around her as she points and says, over and over, her lips twisting to spit out the words, "Murder and rape and killings and hurt and rape and murder and hurt." Her message is just as single minded as the others, but people seem to be paying her more attention. They stare openly, slowing down and giving her a wide berth.

Nico puts his hand on my shoulder and pulls me to him. I feel annoyed. The need to be physically connected to him has instantly evaporated. I don't want the cloak of protection he gives me, as if he can keep me from her fate. Keep me from being so alone. I step away from Nico shaking off his hand. I don't want the status of being claimed, taken, possessed, loved.

The crowd surges between us as older Latina women weave by carrying bags of vegetables and fruit. Mostly white commuters rush past, dividing in all directions. People spill out of cafes, bars, Tacorias and stores. Men stand on corners. The teenagers shout and toss a book back and forth, sometimes over passing peoples heads. A man selling popsicles, gestures to me. Several busses, the 49, the 14 and the 14L, pull up, one after the other, gliding into a parallel position with the curb and stopping abruptly. Crowds crush on as crowds push off. Some kids sneak onto the bus through the back entrance. An older Chinese woman struggling to get off curses them as they jostle past her. Spanish, Chinese, English, Tagalog, English swish together so that it's hard to differentiate the words from any conversations: "Dios, communism, mango, cerveza, murder, plantinos, stupid bitch. Stupid bitch."

I hear it again but it sounds a lot meaner, not an anonymous comment anymore. Over on the other side of the communists a man is screaming at a woman. She's crying

and repeating, "You don't understand." He's tall with greasy long hair and his body is rigid as he stands over her. "You're not going to pull that kind of shit on me anymore," he says.

They look like the junkies who are usually down ten blocks at 15th Street. They're both skinny and white with dirty thrift store clothes and red pocks on their faces and hands. But it's not their appearance that give me the sense that they're from 15th Street, it's something else. Something about being used to being on the street. To living private fights on the street. Something about the way she is oblivious to crying in public.

I know what it's like to cry in public. I try to hide it from the people around. I don't know why I should care but I do. But she isn't trying to hide it and nobody is even really looking. Sometimes one of the white commuters steals a look but they don't slow down any.

"I'm sorry," she's apologizing and her voice sounds like she's more than sorry about whatever happened. She's sorry she's even there talking to him. "Sorry," she's saying aloud now, as if to herself. She's turned away from him and he catches her by surprise as he hits her in the face. And then he walks away first. He turns to watch her, as she crouches with her hands covering her face. People don't seem to have seen it happened. Or else they don't care.

Suddenly Nico is bending over her, reaching to help her up. He puts his hand to her back, and I remember the fight we had last week in China Basin along the wharf. I had my hands to my face sobbing and I was leaning out over the railing along the bay under a streetlight dulled by fog but bright enough to attract hundreds of minnows to the surface below me. I remember my anger coming out with my tears, the fish breaking the

surface with their hungry mouths. I could almost reach down and grab them. I remember wishing he would put his arms around me but I had just told him to fuck off and leave me alone and he had ambled off quietly. I felt he was unreachable after that, a stranger.

As Nico bends to help the crying woman, I am flooded with jealousy. His wavy black hair falls over his face sealing the distance between us and enclosing them. He has compassion for crying strangers but not for me when I'm crying. The woman pulls one of her hands from her face and with her eyes squished shut, blindly punches him. Nico stumbles back and the crowd parts without stopping or looking at him. With one hand to his face, he stands stock still on the sidewalk, watching the woman as she hurries away.