

Blue Sky City

The sun peeked over the green metal roof of the New Day Rescue Mission as Louis opened his eyes. He was stiff and his back ached from leaning against a palm tree all night. His neck itched with mosquito bites thick as chickenpox. Unfolding himself, knees popping, he shook the numb from his legs. His new wool blanket was gone, his shopping cart too. "What the hell?" He turned all around, scanning the vacant lot. A couple of other men were sacked out under the scrawny pines and blackjack oaks, using their rucksacks as pillows. No sign of his gear anywhere.

"Dammit." He kicked an empty hurricane bottle. He'd traded a fake blount to Charley the Hawk for that blanket his last night in Jersey, and he'd just rolled that cart off the Winn-Dixie lot yesterday. Ordinarily this kind of day would make him stalk off looking for an eight-ball to clear his head, and if he found the jerk with his stuff, well, he was liable to pull out the shank in his sock. But he was in Florida now, his second day, and the air didn't stink of smoke and wet garbage or make his joints ache. Here the sun warmed his shoulders like melting butter on a shortstack. Here he felt young, like great things were possible.

“Aw right, Lord,” he said, looking at the sun, shaking his head. “Nekkid we comes into this world and nekkid we will depart.” Preacher Man, they’d named him in the joint because he could quote the Word chapter and verse. Grandma Lou to thank for that. But the Word hadn’t kept him from Sugar’s Town Shack and hadn’t made him leave his 38 special under the bed and sure as hell wouldn’t bring back that dead dude. Leon, Leo, Lee? What the hell was his name? First time in fifteen years he couldn’t remember. “Lord, you musta finally forgave me,” he muttered. “Washed me clean as Ivory soap.”

He pulled off his gray watch cap and stuck it in the back pocket of his Army surplus pants, then followed the smell of strong coffee across the street to the back window of the Rescue Mission, where they were handing out styrofoam cups. Louis got in line. He’d stumbled dopesick off a freight train day before yesterday in what he thought was Miami but turned out to be Jacksonville. So far, he and Jacksonville got along fine. No need for a warm grate or even a doorway to cut the night wind. Maybe the Lord was telling him he didn’t need a blanket. Maybe he didn’t need the stuff he was gonna fill up that cart with either.

“Morning, Pops.” Louis nodded to a hunched, bearded man wearing two jackets and a brown ski hat. “Ain’t it a fine day, brother? Yessiree, mighty fine.”

“What’s so goddamn fine about it?” the old homebum growled, his coffee cup hand shaking from last night’s date with Four Roses.

“Ain’t Jersey. I know that’s fine.” Louis peeled off his jacket and his flannel, long-sleeved shirt and tied them around his waist. This morning an undershirt was enough; course it was filthy. He’d gotten used to his own stink in the joint, that and a chinful of

itchy whiskers. One bath and shave every two weeks in Rahway. Good practice for life on the street.

“S’pose a fella could use the head?” he said to the man in the window.

“Sorry, bud. Got to go to the shelter for that. We don’t open till 9:00. You’re welcome back then for Bible study.” He smiled, his brown eyes sweet as syrup. “Cream and sugar?”

Maybe it was the kindness in the man’s voice, or the look in his eyes, or the thought of cream and sugar---anyway, something turned a rusty key inside Louis right then. “Load it up,” he said, smiling. “Lord bless.”

Any other morning Louis would have settled on the curb and chatted with the guys. But not today. And it wasn’t just that he had to take a leak. Today the Big Guy had something up his sleeve. Louis asked the way to the shelter and started down the sidewalk, coffee in hand. It was so much easier getting around without the shopping cart.

He came to a two-story green boarding house with paint peeling off the walls. “Hey lady,” he said to a girl huddled on a small porch near the doorway. She shot him that “white girl sees a brother” look of panic. A full shopping cart was behind her, guarded by her body. Her arms were folded tight over a wine red windbreaker, the hood of a gray sweatshirt covering her hair.

Louis gave her a closed smile, careful not to show his missing front teeth. Ladies scared easy.

The girl’s face relaxed a little. “Got any money, man? I’m flat broke,” she said.

Louis reached into his pants pocket. “Blessed are the poor, the Good Book say.”

She held out a brown-gloved hand, and he filled it with coins.

“Blessed, my ass.” She loosened her hood and a few orange strands of hair sprang out. “I do thank you though.”

“What they call you?”

“Ginny.” The girl’s eyes were blue and see-through. They flitted around like a bird, up and down and past him.

“Walk with me, Ginny,” Louis said. “Let’s find us some chow.”

She hesitated, but then shrugged and jiggled her shopping cart down the warped wooden steps and onto the sidewalk.

Louis didn’t spend nights in shelters. Didn’t like four walls or sleeping on hard floors in marked lanes. Besides, they had crazy folks at shelters, mean bastards too. And worst of all, no chance of sharing booze or a smoke. Give him a campfire, moon and stars any night, unless it was freezing or pouring rain. So far this town’d been blue sky city all the way. “God gonna show Hissself today,” he said, helping Ginny push her loaded cart.

“What the hell’s that mean?” Ginny asked, swiping the red tip of her runny nose with the index finger of her glove.

He sneaked a side glance. She was young but her teeth were brownish. A tweaker, poor kid.

“Well, my mission’s an Egg McMuffin,” she said. “Not that shit they serve at the shelter.”

Mush is what they served at shelters. Watered-down oatmeal in a cardboard bowl, washed down with dishwater coffee. Fifteen minutes to eat, then back outside to make room for others. Shelter lines were always long. All ages too, even little babies.

“The things of this world gonna pass,” Louis said, his arm waving at a flowering redbud tree.

“Apple pie in the sky.” Ginny rolled her eyes. “Save me a piece, will ya?”

Louis spotted a snipe on the sidewalk and leaned over to grab it. Almost a whole cig, hardly smoked at all. “Yessir, a lucky day,” he said, reaching in his shirt pocket for a matchbook. He sat on a low brick wall in front of Bradley’s Bail Bonds and lit up, inhaling deeply, a faraway look in his eyes. He tilted his head to one side and blew the smoke out in a long, curling stream.

Ginny kept walking but she was slow. Louis finished his smoke, peed behind the bail bond sign, then caught up with Ginny half a block away. The sun grew white and hot. Ginny peeled off her gloves and windbreaker and rolled them up, nestled them in the cart beside a ratty stuffed Valentine bear.

In the shelter parking lot, a tall, pink-faced man wearing a clerical collar nodded at them.

“Father, might you help a hungry mother-to-be?” Ginny said, touching her hand to her belly. “I’m eating for two these days and one of us is always starving.”

The priest reached in his jacket pocket and fumbled with his wallet, handed her a five-dollar bill. “You know there’s a free clinic here,” he said, already moving toward the shelter door. “Open on Tuesday afternoons, last I heard.”

“Thanks. Sure thing.” Ginny stuck the bill in the pocket of her pink jeans. They were unbuttoned above the zipper.

“God sure is good,” Louis said, tonguing the gap between his teeth. He wondered how he could get hold of a clerical collar. Be nice to show God had marked him special.

“Wanta come to McDucks?” Ginny said. “Golden arches just a few more blocks.”

Louis forgot himself and smiled wide as he helped Ginny ease the cart wheels over the curb. They paused, waiting for a break in the heavy morning traffic. “Tell you what, sister,” Louis said, squinting in the sunlight. “God calling my name. Just like Samuel, loud and clear.”

“God ain’t got no phone, last I heard,” Ginny said, holding out her hand to stop a car. “Sure it wasn’t an ambulance or maybe somebody farted?”

As they crossed the street, Louis stopped in the middle and lifted both hands like he was about to direct a choir. “Lord brung me here for a reason.”

“He better bring you across the street.” She tugged his arm, pulling him away from a pickup trying to make a turn.

Five blocks later they reached McDonald’s and headed around back. Ginny hid the shopping cart behind the dumpster. The garbage smelled musty and sour in the morning sun. “Will you watch my gear while I go get the food? We can go halves.”

“Sounds good,” Louis said, resting his hand on the cart.

Ginny pulled her hood down and finger-combed her hair. A hoodie could scare the kids at the counter. She’d wash up in the bathroom before placing her order.

Louis watched her cross the parking lot and go in the restaurant side door. Time was, he would’ve made a run for it with her shopping cart. She had a green sleeping

bag in there, no telling what else. He looked nervously around like the devil might pop out of the dumpster any second. But when Ginny got back with two small coffees and a white bag, he was waiting. They moved the cart to the back of the parking lot and sat in the shade of a Hostess cupcake truck parked sideways, a vacant lot behind them knee-high with milkweed, dandelions and sandspurs. The sun glowed around Ginny's fiery hair like a halo. There was something pure in her eyes, her pale, pock-marked skin. Louis wondered how old she was. Fifteen, sixteen, tops.

"Ketchup?" she asked.

Louis nodded. "Yes ma'am."

Ginny bit the corner off two plastic packets and squeezed ketchup over a hash brown patty. Then she broke the patty and McMuffin in half and handed Louis his share. Inside the McDonald's bag were a bunch of sugars and some little cream containers. Louis fixed his coffee and stirred it with a black plastic stick. "Just like the Waldoff Asstory," he said, holding the McMuffin to his nose, breathing in its bready smell. "Thank you, Jesus."

"Jesus and a guilty priest and his fiver." Ginny took a big bite of her sandwich.

On a Jersey day Louis might've dragged her behind a bush and ripped her jeans down, given her a taste of his thunder and lightning. But this day God whispered in his ear: Ginny was special, maybe the new Madonna, carrying the baby Jesus back to our place and time.

"We should get married," Louis said.

Ginny's eyes flashed. "You outta your goddamn mind?"

"Just like Joseph and Mary." Louis took Ginny's greasy hand in his.

“You’re a nutcase, man. No offense.” She snatched her hand away, scrambled to her feet and took hold of the cart. “Gotta run.”

“Where to?”

She was already pushing the cart across the pavement. “Wait up,” he called out. But she didn’t. He lost sight of her as she dashed around cars in the drive-through. He suspected she was headed to that white house near the park to score a hit. He’d heard of the place but hadn’t been there yet.

He sighed. Now what, Lord? He sat back on the curb, closed his eyes and waited for a sign. Exhaust fumes smoked the air. Engines hummed in line at the drive-through. A young girl’s microphoned voice called out every few seconds, “Have a nice day now.” He opened his eyes just as a crow flew overhead with a French fry in its mouth.

Louis knew what he had to do. He got up and started in the direction of the park. He’d find Ginny, take care of her, keep her away from the junk and the bad guys. Just past a Midas Muffler store he paused in the cool shadow of the building and cocked his head, enjoying the brooklike sounds of the gutter, when something smashed into his right temple. He staggered but didn’t fall. His hand flew to the aching spot and he looked around. Two teenaged boys stood by the bus stop across the street, one dressed all in black and the other in jeans, an undershirt that hung to his knees, and a Redsox hat. The boys ducked behind the bus stop bench. Then Redsox raised his head and hurled another rock.

“Whoa, hey now,” Louis said, shielding his head with his hands. “Stop that, fellows.” A sharp rock stung the back of his hand. “Why you doing this?” he cried.

A driver in a passing van honked his horn but the boys just waited for it to go by, then started throwing rocks again. Louis ran back toward the McDonald's but the hail of rocks followed. His back, his neck, his legs. He stumbled, fell, knees hard on pavement. The teenagers were all over him. One grabbed his arms and pinned them back. The other's hands groped his shirt pocket, his pants pockets.

A wallop to the back of his head stopped the pain.

When Louis opened his eyes, Ginny was hovering over him. The air smelled like rain on the way. His right temple throbbed. When he touched it, his hand came back bloody.

"What happened, man?" Ginny said, patting the side of his head with her sweatshirt sleeve. "Who did this?"

He saw the teenagers in his mind but couldn't think how to say the words.

"Help, this man needs help," she yelled.

Cars passed, brakes squealed, a distant horn honked. A few raindrops plopped on Louis' forehead.

Ginny cried out, her voice hoarse, cracking. "For Chrissakes, somebody call an ambulance."

If anybody came, they made no sound.

Ginny sat on the concrete, cradling Louis' head in her lap, rocking slightly. Her soft fingers stroked his hair. "Gonna be all right, buddy," she said, her voice sweet as a lullaby.

