

The apartment was cold and he felt it in his hands. The winter was over a month away but it was sending advanced scouts.

There were three dollars in his bank account; not enough to withdraw but he got paid in two days. Until then, there would have to be some moves made, nothing he hadn't done before. He was getting good at fancy footwork.

He ate the last chocolate bar his friend had sent him in a care package from New Zealand because there was nothing else in the cupboard but spaghetti noodle, maple syrup and a jar of capers. When he was living abroad, he was quite broke but he had flashes of joy: real experience that had nothing to do with the balance in his bank. These days the soil was just as fertile.

The rifling through drawers in his room yielded nothing more than nickels and dimes, an expired condom, old pieces of identification, concert ticket stubs (one signed by the singer), cords and connectors, batteries, pens, two zippers, a ticket for a movie that he saw with someone and that sent him back to a time when he wasn't as broke and single but he found no quarters and certainly, no dollar coins.

There were no beer cans in the kitchen to return either and he had to leave in a half an hour to go to dinner with a friend. It was four dollars for a return bus ticket. He could check his roommate's room for empties but quickly decided against it.

You can leave life hanging over the edge until it's almost too late before you pull it back and that's real living. Sometimes, the sharks or crocodiles snap it up but he would pull it back just in time. That's what he was doing: being brave.

He did not have to buy that last pint after work the night before, but he did. That's what he did. That was a pattern and he was learning those patterns. Good for him. A few more quarters and he would be fine.

Putting them in the slot at the ticket booth will be a test. There will most likely be people behind me and that jangling sound is going to go down a good twenty or some odd times. He nodded and closed the drawer and walked out of his room, through the living room, down the hall into the kitchen and out the back door on to the patio. The sun was out but a cold wind blew and there were no cans on the patio. He guessed that his roommate took them.

There was a six-pack with dust on it near a box full of wine bottles. He brought it inside and closed both doors. The corner store was run by a nice family and he took a few cases back at a time and they might raise an eyebrow at one six pack but times were hard. He put them on the oven. He would remember that.

Opening the laundry room, he felt the air from the cracks in the back door. The pile of clothes showed no pants so he started digging, found a pair of jeans and shook them out but no coins.

In the living room he sat down and checked the time. He had another twenty minutes before he had to leave. Why not relax until then? His time was his own and that was more precious than money. When you have time, then you have your life and that made him feel warmer.

After a few minutes, he decided to leave early and patted the change in his right pocket. He put his keys in his left and his phone in his back right.

He put his shoes on and found a dime on the floor and put it in his pocket with the other

coins. The front door did not close easily so he gave it a sharp tug.

He came down the stairs by two and hit the street and did up his jacket.

On the way to the metro station he passed grocery stores and liquor stores, places people went to buy things; that was not his lot on this Tuesday.

After the stores he passed a bar where once, a few years ago he told someone he loved them. She was with someone at the time and now she was back in their hometown and had two kids but he glanced through the front window to the back of the bar as he always did when he passed, the banquette along the wall where the jazz trio played that night a few years ago.

At the square in front of the metro, a canvasser for a charity waved at him and asked in French if he had some time to talk and he said the words he knew to use when you were too busy to speak to canvassers and panhandlers on the street and her cheeks were red and her mouth closed and she shrugged and smiled but he was already past her because he was busy and he didn't have any money anyhow.

He pushed the heavy doors to the station open and held them open for a woman with glasses behind him and she thanked him in French and he nodded and unzipped his coat on the escalator going down.

On the opposite escalator rose men, women and couples. Some stood and some walked up. He wanted to be a human being. He did not want to be someone who took vacations every few months or collected expensive things but a man who could save up for a trip that he would look forward to taking and maybe take a girl out for dinner every sometime too. Right now, he was very far away from that and was trapped.

Under the slope of the roof, the orange and blue ticket kiosk came into view. There were four people in line. No one was in line at the agent's window and she sat in a blue shirt with their head bowed but there was no way he would unload that pile of shrapnel in front of them, right there on the counter; he would never do that.

He took this place in line and the person at the machine took out their ticket and walked away with the next person in line which left two more people in front of him.

He gathered the change in his fist and opened his hand to look at the coins. That would be more than enough and he put all of the quarters together in his hand and put the rest in his pocket so he could fire them quickly into the slot.

With a whoosh and a roar, a train came in the station and people began streaming over the stairs.

He saw an attractive woman with dark hair who looked familiar, two pretty girls in school uniforms and a slim woman with a dark streak in her hair wearing a jean jacket.

None of them would want to be with him. How could he provide for anyone else when he could barely sort out the four dollars for the metro fare? They streamed by and he watched and he didn't want life to stream by anymore. He wanted it right in front of him.

The machine was free and the man with the glasses and dark curly hair and the lady with the beret stepped aside. The train left the station.

He stepped forward and clicked the buttons he had to click, and the moment was dangling and he was just like any other person using the kiosk to purchase a metro ticket. This was how millionaires would have to do it as well; even billionaires and he straightened his back.

He got the quarters ready, raised his hand and prepared one between his thumb and forefinger. The slot opened with a sliding sound.

He put one quarter in and the number on the screen went down to \$2.75. He put two and the number went to \$2.50, three for \$2.25 and the fourth quarter went in and made a long jangling sound down and clattered on the metal of the drawer, rejected.

Don't pick it up. Keep going and pick them all up and then try firing them back in. Another two quarters clattered, one after the other. One stopped and the other spun before it settled.

Two more quarters were accepted and the number was down to \$1.50. He tried the three rejected quarters again and they all followed each other to clatter in the drawer.

Time for the dimes but hopefully not the nickels. I just need fifteen dimes. He pulled them out of his pocket and put them in one by one and felt the people behind him exchanging glances and they were probably talking about him as well. How many coins does this guy carry around with him, they're thinking. He's probably some crazy panhandler.

Ripples rose up his back and the dimes fired down into the drawer. A few last nickels chipped the number away to \$0.60. He picked up all of the rejected change, his forehead felt tight and he put them in one by one and one by one they were rejected and clattered down in the window where the ticket would come out.

That was it. No bus-ride for him and no home-cooked meal with old friend and maybe a little meal. He would make something up for their benefit later.

He pushed the cancel button for a refund and heard someone cough behind him. All the coins that he put in the machine crashed down in the drawer and three dimes bounced out and fell at his feet. Another train came in with a roaring sound of air and stopped.

Take what's in the drawer and that's it. Something stopped in him and he scooped the change from the drawer and willed himself to bend down and one by one he picked up the dimes despite all the blood rushing in his ears telling him to get out of there because three dimes was not worth his time and people were in line behind him and they were all looking at him and would know that he was poor but he stooped and picked the last one up and stood up and stepped away from the kiosk, not looking at the line that had formed behind him.

A woman in a pea-coat came off the escalator quickly and ran toward him and he stopped and stepped back and let her by. A train was coming in to the station.

He took the escalator and stood at the side because there was no hurry now, just the brisk walk home as night fell.

Then came some pleasure: he could enjoy it if he wanted. He had done his best with what he had and he was proud that he picked up those dimes off the station floor. He could have quickly walked away with the shame burning but he did what he could at that moment. It was a good feeling that he would have liked to know more.

He didn't do what he could the night before when he bought those beers he didn't need but he liked the girl he was with and he had had a feeling that she had a feeling and she didn't and he found out almost fifty dollars later.

The doors were held open by a man who let the wind in and he walked out to the square and there were less people out and no canvassers that he could see and the night was already turning because it was November.

He did his coat up and put his hands in his pockets. There were the coins again. He could buy a slice of pizza. He would not be hungry tonight.

The light was red at the corner across from the coffee shop, where the taxi cabs lined up but he looked down the street and crossed because the way was clear.

A man stood outside the coffee shop and smoked. Then there was a thai restaurant and through the window, the dining room was almost full and there were white candles lit on the tables. A woman smiled as she was handed a menu.

A man with an arm around a short woman with big brown eyes laughed and said something in French that meant he wanted her to know he was telling the truth.

At the next intersection the light had just turned green so he went on. An older man with a hunting cap walked with one leather gloved hand holding his collar shut and his nose was red.

A girl walked after him looking up at the signs and lights on stores, her mouth half-open and something dancing in her eyes. She looked like the kind of girl that he would want to be poor with, maybe even share a slice of pizza. It's such an unusual thing to say to someone that she would surely be charmed. He even knew how to say it in French which would surely win points.

At the corner, in a doorway between a restaurant and a bookstore a man stood holding a green sleeping bag around his shoulders. The man wore a sweater with frayed sleeves and khakis that were stained many times past their original shade. He had large unlaced steel-toed boots on his feet.

The panhandler held a hand out and his eyes scanned from face to face, back and forth and he asked for whatever change anyone could spare.

I'm going to spend some of this on pizza but surely I can give the rest.

That would be a little embarrassing if I stood there as people shoved around me to dole out fifteen or twenty cents to this poor guy out on the street; embarrassing for him and me.

The panhandler's eyes locked into his; they were blue. The almost-broke man clenched the coins in his pocket so tight they hurt as he smiled a small smile and said a word in French that meant that he was sorry to the panhandler. Those coins were his and that was fair because he needed to eat first and he had nothing else until he got paid in a few days.

A yellow cab slid up to the sidewalk and at the passenger-side window, a blond woman with large dark eyes looked at him and looked up.

A man stood under a lamppost and breathed a plume into the night air.