

Talking about Talking about

He stammers a request for change with words suggesting turmoils of many drunken nights, or perhaps the lingers of heroin have left him nervous and under-circulated. A neo-nazi mo-hawk and a smiling, childlike face recounting 2 months in Ecuador with escaped war criminals, he's scoured a life through 49 states. Just not Hawai'i.

"The Midwest is colder than Alaska," he says, and I know to believe him. 45 minutes to Philly and NYC. Yes, he knows central Jersey. South Dakota was where he shot the chute. A man named Abel sits coddled in his late 20s. I wish I knew, did he kill or was he killed by his brother? It would be easy to kill someone with his romper-stomper boots, except they were too clunky and oversized to be weapons.

So pretty, smooth skin, purplish hands, black patchwork jeans with dental floss stitching. A non-descript black tee-shirt with blood dripping screen-print and a leather jacket more suited for swimming. His golden wood guitar was pretty and clean, less picked and plucked than would be expected of a traveling man. He was using it as a pillow when I came up and offered him a coffee. He wanted it black. I knew he would. His is the type. I like it creamy and sweet, and tepid. To drink it quick, to get the buzz, to take the dump, to speak the wayward mouth with nasty quips.

But I wasn't nasty or rude to him, my neo-nazi doe boy with pinpointed baby blues. Polite as could be, my smile plastered happy like a meeting with a bank in 1957, I complimented and coaxed for stories, and made no jokes. I regret not asking for a song. Instead we talked up tales of continental jaunting.

He caught me, initially, by surprise, sitting as he was in the secret alcove nestled within the haphazard church, just off the sidewalk at Orchard and Cherry Streets. I had been liling

down the sidewalk with a happy step, out the back end of the Beaver Street back alley, moving as I do, dancing when no one is watching, with raver arms, a cowboy 2-step and all sorts of voguish hip-hop charm. He sat, scrunched and squinting, sucking the dregs of a rolled cigarette, cross-legged and tiny, he seemed fetal and cold.

Discovered by an unsuspecting stranger, I smiled through my sunglasses, said “hello” beneath my ear buds, floated by on quickened step.

“Good morning,” he replied, already behind me. It was at least 12:15 but who’s counting.

“How’s it going?” I toss off, still moving, still dancing away, across the diagonal of Cherry down Orchard, for the mailbox three blocks away.

“I should go back,” I say. “He’s out of place. He needs people. People like me.” I kept dancing, forward, waving my envelope like flags at the disco, skipping my 2-stepping self down the street, down the next block to the box.

“Keep going.” I think. “Follow your path. He’ll be there when you get back.”

And he was, but asleep, or rather splayed on his guitar across the “Devota Scott” memorial bench. And at that moment my neighbor Nancy, her eternal limp suggesting life had tossed her off the horse one too many times, walked by my way as well.

“Hi, neighbor,” I say, and the two of us walked, and she talks about the weather being cold. It was just below sixty this morning.

I arrive home and clip my toenails on the porch, wash my hands and heat two jam jars of coffee on the stove. I cap one up and grab some sugar.

“He doesn’t want sugar. He wants it black. He takes coffee black,” I tell myself. But I make one sweet and say, “You look like you could use some coffee.”

And he pauses, onto a quiet, resounding, “Yes, that sounds right.” And he sips and then

drinks it down, and I drink the sweeter brew and we chat about paint factories, pot, his chill Aunt with whom he's crashing, the benefits of Eugene over the false world of Portland, and how fucking lame people in California are, when it comes to weather. I know we are. He does too. Five degrees and fog is not news. It's nothing. Really. We *are* laughable when it comes to weather. And it keeps me laughing, and dancing down the block, by no choice but of joy.

And I leave the street, into the back alley. Abel follows, too shy, too high, too stumped or too sleepy, too something to ask articulately for change, but he stammers the question and I offer three bills.

"As long as you don't mind ending up in a story," I say. "I'll change your name."

"You don't need to," he says.

Which one was Abel again? And he's gone.