

The Gambler and the Thief

Chill city air smelling of wet pavement and burger grease greeted the three of us as we poured into the street. Me, weighed down by a bag of new comics, my friend Shayna, hopping up and down to stay warm in her frilly Lolita skirt, and one new hanger-on: a quiet girl with spiky black hair and red lipstick and an oversized grey sweater that either made her look chunky or failed to hide it. Raven.

Shayna hurried ahead, scanning for a place out of the rain where we could get a beer and ogle our convention goodies.

“First one to spot a pub can have one of my Weeble stickers!” she called back to us. Her bleached hair had frizzled up in the wet and now bounced around her like a halo in the streetlights. The new girl, Raven, panted past me with her own bag of books, eager to help.

It had to be a pub, not a café. Shayna always wants a drink after these events, once told me it helped rinse the uncoolness out of her mouth after all that talking to nerds.

Shayna often attracts Klingons. Raven probably became stuck while I was in line for a booth, and none of the foam costumes or single-run comics had shaken her loose. Dangers of talking to nerds, I guess. Shayna has fans even though she doesn't make anything. But she's loud and wears provocative clothing and lonely people mistake her volume for confidence. They flutter like moths around a firefly.

“I think there's a Browns up on 5th street”, Raven suggested, only slightly out of breath. She had a sweet and pleasant voice, at odds with her studded boots and heavy makeup.

Shayna ignored her. Trudging along behind them both, I imagined a little farmer inside Shayna, shoveling Raven's raw idolatry into a heap and hoping that's how you grow respect.

With a whoop, Shayna spotted somewhere suitable and whirled around, using big airplane-guiding gestures to usher us to some black double doors. It sort of blended with the other shop fronts, indistinguishable as a pub except for the brass handles and a backlit plastic sign in one window proclaiming “Eat, Drink, Be Irish”. I'd never been in before but it felt familiar. I knew the décor would be brown and green, or brown and red, the bathroom would have a tampon machine but no condoms, there would be two domestic lagers and Guinness on tap with and a few other options in bottles.

I was looking forward to setting down my bag, but just as we entered I caught a flash of my friend's painted nails sliding into Raven's pocket. My shoulder pain took a back seat to irritation. I watched as Shayna's glossy nails fished something out and then whisked the something into her little plastic purse. All the while she commented loudly to Raven about the

small beer selection, the mismatched chairs. This wasn't the first time Shayna's weird little obsession with other people's stuff put me in hot water.

When we were kids, she stole from me. But I knew where she kept her stash, so it was kind of harmless. One day something of mine would go missing. The next week something from her collection would disappear. We didn't talk about it.

Shayna's wild gestures occasionally caught attention from the room at large, which was then perhaps absorbed by her halo of hair. In stark contrast, the new girl's mild expression and Eeyore clothes shed interest, dodged scrutiny. Raven nodded now and then and asked questions like "and then what happened?", with big eyes and genuine fascination. A support character to the core.

Shayna looked almost high. How did Raven not wonder at the sudden change?

Partway through our first round, two lagers and a black tea, Raven frantically started patting down all her pockets and breathing faster and faster and I knew the heist had been discovered.

"What? What's wrong?" Shayna asked, lying eyes wide.

Still clutching at her clothes, Raven moaned "the pendant my Dad carved for me. I can't find it". A few eyes around the room slid over to watch her distress and she looked mortified. Ragged breath battled with rising sobs, and lost.

A farce ensued, with two of us avoiding the object in question and the third crying useless little circles around the table. Embarrassed tears dragged mascara down Raven's round face while Shayna soothed her with weird cooing noises and I had to kneel down on the dirty brown carpet and pretend to search the floor to get away from them.

As Shayna lavished attention on Raven like a new pet, sobs eventually became sniffles. Mopping at her face, Raven cringed at all the makeup that came away on the napkin.

"Don't worry, you look like a total metalhead" Shayna teased, and actually drew mascara down her own cheek with a wet, beery finger. "It's true" I said, trying to smile. "Right out of Rolling Stone". I stuck my tongue out like Gene Simmons and I got a small hiccup of appreciation.

We'd changed seats during the search and now Shayna sat in the middle, completely engrossed in playing Mother Hen. I stared at my beer, but saw past it. Shayna's purse was tucked under the bench by my boot. Without really thinking, I reached in and felt around. A wallet and some lipstick and one other thing met my fingers. My heart leapt into my throat and stayed there.

The other two girls were distracted with each other and didn't say anything when I rabbit off to the washroom. Did any of the other patrons see? Think I was a thief? My hand felt dirty where it touched inside my friend's purse. Suddenly I actually had to pee.

Pants around my ankles, I took the pendant out and rolled it between my fingers in the dim light of the stall. It was a smooth white tablet maybe an inch long, rectangular, with a raven carved into one side and a heart on the other. The craftsmanship was nothing special, but maybe that's not the point.

The scrape of the bathroom door made me jam the thing back in my pocket, and caused my heart to do its jackhammer thing again. The fervent wish that I'd given this thing back at the table squeezed into my mind and danced there.

But what if she suspected me? Panic. I did some breathing exercises. I read the bingo poster taped to the stall door in front of me and tugged the TP dispenser for the benefit of the other occupant.

On my return, Shayna's high laugh cut the close room, almost a shriek. She's like a neon light on the fritz, electric energy that demands attention and grates your nerves at the same time.

Feeling an odd closeness with each of the others, albeit for different reasons, I started to clamber over Shayna. She squealed and fussed and I caught a flash of something that could have been jealousy in Raven's eyes. It made me reverse course. Being shuffled to the outside seat is like being stuffed out a door. It's chilly. And the knowledge that I was now saddled with the evidence of a crime sat sour in my belly. I took a long, quiet pull from my beer. Canadian. Flattish.

Bathed in the unexpected inclusion from Shayna, Raven was recovering from her loss. Eyes still red and watery, she once more played conversational pitcher, gamely egging Shayna on with "that's amazing!" and winding up a "what did you think?". Hidden in the pocket of my loose jeans, I ran my fingers over her pendant.

So far I'd resisted the urge to throw it in Shayna's face.

Then the waitress came back to bring us more drinks and I took advantage of the interruption to hijack the conversation.

"Hey, both of you. I need your help".

I need your help. A phrase that will seize a habitual helper like a steel trap, and will bedazzle a narcissist, too.

Two sets of pupils dilated in my direction.

If I was going to lie to this girl, I might as well go all the way. And lying to Shayna, well... at least the truth didn't have to be hidden in a box marked "Private" under a bunch of socks.

“I read this story recently, and I just don’t know what to make of it.” Not true. “Maybe you guys can help?”

I didn’t know what I was looking for. Sometimes you just have to stir the pot and look in. I started in on a fake story that sprang into my head in the loo.

“So there were these two guys, old friends. One of them owned a bar and the other one was a gambler.”

“I didn’t know that was a profession” Shayna interjected, giggling. Contradiction is her way of interacting sometimes, so I let it slide.

“Anyway, bar guy felt bad for his friend. Would give him free beer sometimes, or in exchange for scrubbing toilets or taking care of his dog or whatever. Even though this guy had a decent job and everything, he just could not hang on to money, and his buddy didn’t want to not serve him. But eventually he lost his house, started living out of his car.”

Shayna rolled her eyes “yeah, gambling.” But Raven just nodded sadly.

Lowering my voice, I continued. “The bar owner sees this, and what does he do? He installs a slot machine in the bar.”

“Yeah, not cool, right?” I asked, seeing their expressions.

“Then one day, gambling guy asked his good friend if he could sleep at the bar because he sold his car. Instead, bar guy takes him home. Gives him a bed. Makes him breakfast.”

Flat beer and cold tea swirled in mostly-empty cups.

I finished cheerily, “Anyway it kind of just ends there, with bar guy taking all his friend’s money and then spending it giving him free drinks and a place to stay”.

Shayna finished her beer, looking off in the distance. I bit my tongue and tried to not be the first person to talk.

Raven jumped in to rag on the guy, but I heard her only distantly.

My eyes were on Shayna, watching as her brow creased and her lips drew together in a line. Finally, shrugged and looked up at us.

“Well, the guy was helping his friend, right?” Wide eyes turned to me, then to Raven, uncertain. “He had an addiction. I mean, he would have just blown it anyway, right?”

Then Raven stood up, large and spikey in her grey sweatshirt. We'd both completely ignored her but now she demanded our attention.

"He's lying."

She enunciated each word, as if we hadn't noticed that part.

"Friends don't do that to each other, lie like that!" Raven blazed, eyes still red and smudgy with half-wiped makeup.

"So?" Asked Shayna.

I leaned back, relieved of the need to engage. I felt lighter.

Shayna had been perched precariously on the edge of her seat, but now she reclined into the familiar role of bored cynic.

"He could just help instead of..." Raven trailed off, waving her hands in frustration.

The word she was looking for was 'enabling', but I didn't offer it and eventually she stopped looking. The momentum of her brief outburst bled away and she sat down.

Shayna and I staggered a bit and leaned on each other as we left the bar. I stopped before our street to give Raven a hug, and slipped the pendant into her open bag. The hidden act, even of kindness, made me sweat and shake. Unlike Shayna, who wobbled cool as a cucumber ahead of me into the rain-stained darkness.