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MONEY IN MY HAND

ABC Pawn was a small place in the center of town. The only pawn shop for miles should have more to recommend it, but poor people have poor stuff. Just a fact of life. So ABC had a few big-box televisions, just a couple of the new, flat kind, DVD players, even VCRs with big flaps over gaping wide mouths lined in black rows on the shelves. Jamie quickly scanned the electronics and focused on the shelf of grandmother knickknacks—a boy figurine with pink cheeks and fishing rod across his shoulder, his chubby bare feet comically emphasized. Jamie waited at the glass box jewelry case that separated a wall of guns from public hands. Inside there were rings, a few necklaces, tarnished watches, most of them cheap in their first life, but a few pieces had to be something to somebody desperate enough, no other choice enough, to find themselves on the wrong side of that pawn box.

“I’m coming,” a man yelled from the back.

Under the guns on a skinny table were band instruments in battered boxes like the ones his classmates used to carry. Jamie was not musical himself but loved to watch the band members warm up, put their instruments together, wet reeds sticking out of their mouths, all so important but foreign, like the first time he watched a woman pee.

“You looking for something?” The man was wiping his hands. He smelled like peppers and beans, Mexican food on his breath. “I got a deal on some watches, this month. I’m getting too damn many of them.” The man’s face was an expressionless page, though he’d tried to sound friendly. He reached for the keys hanging from a ring on his pants.

“Nah.” Jamie hoped the eagerness he felt didn’t seep through to his face. “I’m selling, not buying,” he added, though he was sure most people were selling.

Jamie reached into his coat and cradled a wad of paper towels in his hand like a bird. “So you take jewelry, right?”

The pawn man shook his head, motioned toward the box. People came in all the time, if not every day then every week, with the same story, the same expression, the same gathering of paper towels.

"I've got this," Jamie said as he unwrapped a yellow gold brooch, red and white clusters on what looked like branches fanning out to flowers. "It's rubies and diamonds," Jamie said, hoping he was stating the obvious.

"Hmm." The man picked up the brooch, felt it for heft. "It's a pretty thing, a little old-fashioned but pretty," he said. Jamie wondered if this man could tell if the piece was real. It was said the pawn man's daddy would look at a piece in a dozen ways, weigh it in his hand, take out his loupe, the eye of a jeweler looking for the thing, the right thing. If this man had those skills, Jamie couldn't know, but his indifference that seemed practiced, the great and incomparable ability to communicate in a glance that a man was holding shit was convincing. But how much skill is that really? How hard could it be to convince the really desperate what they already know?

"Rubies and diamonds? Who told you that?"

"It was my grandmother's. She gave it to my mother. When she passed, I got it." Jamie knew this statement didn't answer the question, but it was the only thing he could think of to say. His grandmother Louella Perkins had worked well into her old age for a rich family, a doctor's family. She'd watched the doctor's only child grow and go, watched the doctor's wife pine for grandchildren as her own multiplied almost faster than she could count. Louella Perkins loved that family and talked about them like they were friends together. Her children learned better than to point out that the gifts from the doctor's wife—old clothes too big or small, rickety furniture nobody else cared about, Christmas boxes of Whitman samplers—didn't prove she was any more part of them than the mailman or the trash collector, and in some ways even less so.

The pawn man held the pin up to the light. "I don't see no rubies here. This is glass. You see how it shines in the light. It won't reflect like a real ruby would. See here?"

Jamie pretended to look, the desperation rising in his stomach. He had thought he might get three or four hundred for the brooch. Looked like now he might walk away with nothing. "It's real. I know it is," Jamie said, but he was suddenly unsure. The only thing of value his grandmother ever got from that family, the thing she coveted and wouldn't even wear for fear of losing it, was just junk? "I could take a hundred for it. I need a hundred."

The man chuckled softly. The laugh scared more desperation into Jamie. In that laugh he heard how little he had, how easy he was to dismiss. "I can't do a hundred. Not for this. You got anything else?" Was this the part of the game to make the boy sweat? Make him believe whatever in his hands was worthless? Jamie had nothing.

"Man, listen here," Jamie tried to calm the tremor in his voice. "I need a hundred. Can't you do it? Man, I really need at least a hundred." Jamie's voice quivered. He felt small and young, a pleading child. He had meant to be strong.

Jamie saw the pawn man almost smile. "I'll do fifty. I'm doing you a favor at fifty."

"Okay, okay, that's okay." Jamie nodded while the man pulled the ticket pad from under the counter. The man explained the rules. In a month Jamie had to pay twenty percent on the loan. Twenty percent for the pawn man to hold the brooch in his name. Come back in thirty days with sixty dollars or the brooch belonged permanently to ABC pawn. The chance of Jamie coming in the door with that kind of money was slim. They both knew it, but the rules had to be said.

"Come back in thirty days. Got it? Don't come in here in thirty-one days asking where's my stuff. You hear? One day late and it's sold."

"I get it." Jamie filled out the papers, showed his license to the man, signed his name. His mother's pin, his grandmother's pin, vanished under the counter.

"I'll see you," he called to the pawn man, relief spread like a virus all over his face.

Fifty dollars wasn't much money. Only the youngest child would think so, and Jamie was not a young child. He was twenty-eight in two months, almost thirty. He was an age he never considered being. Thirty was for other people, or at least far in the future. Other people got old, not him. Jamie fingered the money a minute before arranging it in his wallet. High to low, all the faces peering up at him when he opened the leather flap. Jamie pushed his wallet deep into his back pocket. Almost thirty and other than the pawn money, his clothes, his collection of hats, the few pennies he saved in a jar by his bed, he was living in the world the way he entered it, suffering and broke. A man that close to the edge of things had to have money in his hand, the insulation of money, a parachute at the abyss, even the wrong cure for the

worse disease.

Back outside, it was a warm day in early April, like summer instead of just into spring. Jamie had to walk where he needed to go, so he dreaded the heat and the depressing days to come that would leave him sweaty and sticky, looking a little deflated and not the confident, young kid he hoped he looked like coming toward you. Jamie opened the heavy door to the old gas station. The door that had needed fixing—years ago when he was a student at the old elementary school across the street—still had not yet healed itself. “Pack of Basics, man,” Jamie said to the heavy white dude behind the counter. The gas station wasn’t one of the newer kinds that carry everything, no fancy soda station with flavors you can shoot into the cup yourself, no cheap toys to tempt at the counter, but a shack attached to new gas pumps, a sweet smell to the rotting wood floor, old candy and gum that would probably break your teeth.

“You want menthol?”

“Regular.” Jamie reached for a Mountain Dew in the ice chest by the register and watched as the fat man swiveled on the stool that held him up like a toad. The swivel conserved energy, used as few moves as possible. You might not appreciate those small movements in an hour, in a day, but that turn instead of a stand, instead of a step or two could mean the difference between a tired back or not, sore feet or not.

“That’s four dollars for these. You believe that? I remember buying Camels for my daddy for fifty cents a pack.”

“Yeah, inflation,” Jamie said. He wasn’t in the mood to go down memory lane with this stranger.

“Costs too much to even kill yourself,” the man laughed. “Am I right?”

The man took the twenty Jamie placed on the counter. “You right. You right.”

The man counted out the change into Jamie’s hand. Jamie greedily watched the bills, making sure they were all there. “Later,” Jamie yelled over his shoulder, letting the dirty door limp back into the frame. He was a young man still, beautiful, or so he was told, with a full pack of cigarettes. Things were going to be okay.

The McDonald’s was a new one, just opened a year or two and still nice and clean-looking. Jamie had no memories in this one, no good times, no lean

times, no scraping together the change with friends to get ice cream cones. His mother worked at a McDonald's when he was very young. She loved to tell the story about the dirty little girl who bought one extra-large cup and came in every day to refill it for free. *Free refills* the sign said. So every day, here comes that girl with the dirty face, the boy's haircut, the bony knees. Jamie's mother had finally gotten tired of seeing the sagging paper cup at the self-serve fountain and had given her a new one to refill. She could have gotten fired for that. Her first day on the job the manager had told her that McDonald's *don't play*. You steal a French fry and you get your walking papers. That little girl came back over and over again with her newer cup until the manager told her not to return. That little girl was a grown woman now, older than Jamie for sure, running a bigger hustle somewhere else, maybe.

Jamie hadn't been to a fast food restaurant in a couple of weeks. Weeks. When he was a kid, they'd go every week to the local place. His mother would get a disgusting pizza with peppers and olives that hurt his head to smell, while he and his brother got kids' meals. They sat in the parking lot, crinkling paper, squeezing little packets of ketchup on themselves and the upholstery, trying to decorate their shoestring fries. Jamie loved those nights in the car, all of them chewing together, the food packaged like gifts. What rich days, what excess of feeling—though it is difficult to know the happy day at the same time you are trying to live in it.

The white girl at the counter at the McDonald's had her hair dyed midnight black. She should be in school, it looked like, but it was hard for him to tell any more. All the girls, even the middle-school babies, wore shorts that looked like panties, low-cut shirts, too much makeup, desperate to look twenty, though all they really succeeded in doing was looking more like the babies they were. Jamie liked women, not girls, but they all liked him. He was careful though. He liked children well enough, but the idea of his own terrified him. What would he look like walking away with a baby calling after him? He couldn't take the idea of some baby, then some child, hoping in him, longing for him, waiting for him, eventually blaming him for being himself.

"Give me a number one, make it a big one, with a vanilla shake add one of them apple pies to it, too."

"You can get two apple pies for a dollar," the girl said.

"I'll just take the one."

"It's cheaper to buy two. You can have it for later." The girl grinned at

him. Jamie had pretended not to notice the girl's eyes on him from the time he walked in. She had not been the first woman to wonder what it might be like to have him beside her, his thick fingers on the small of her back leading her into whatever doorway he chose.

"Do you want it?" Jamie smiled back at her. She should probably be in high school. Nothing about her appealed to him. She was square-bodied and pale, her hair dyed very black to make her stand out among the other girls. The worst part was she knew how she looked, and her disappointment spread across the downturn of her thin lips.

"What's your name?" he said, leaning onto the counter.

"Sam."

"Why you have a boy's name?"

The girl sighed like she'd heard that question a million times. "Why don't you have a car?"

"Don't you worry about that," Jamie said as he stood up straight.

Sam giggled. Jamie had meant to be the one in control. He was the adult, but just that quick and she was playing him. This plain girl with limp hair was playing him. Used to be she was the kind of girl he would never even see.

"That's seven sixty-eight," she said and put an extra apple pie in his bag. She smiled at him, tried to win him back. Jamie almost felt sorry for her. She had meant to be teasing, playful like the quirky girls that were all over the movies making scenes, saying stupid things, beloved. Jamie almost felt sorry for her.

"I forgot to ask if you want to eat it here?"

Jamie looked at her and jerked his head toward the door. No need to encourage her. He was sure her eyes never left his back as he walked away. The park where he could eat in peace was just around the corner. He would walk out triumphantly, like a man with a shiny car going back to a good job.

Freedman Park was the black park in town. In the center of it was a big shallow pool, dry now, but once perfect for getting your feet wet on a hot day. Jamie's mother and her sisters used to bring the kids there. The women would sit in the shade while the kids panned for gold, pretended to swim, but the water was too shallow to hold even the smallest of them afloat. The funny kids pretended to drown, acting the scenes they'd first witnessed on bad television.

One of Jamie's teachers had told the class that drowning happens fast and is quiet. The body can't waste energy screaming and flailing. The image of a solitary figure dropping into the water quiet as a rock and just as doomed haunted him for months.

Once Jamie pretended he was being baptized, though he told no one. He had seen his cousin Lisa, not much older than he was, get dunked in the baptistery in church. Lisa was not a beautiful girl, but she rose from the water, grinning and sputtering, the joy she felt radiating on her face. Whatever Lisa had in that moment, it was contagious, and Jamie had felt inexplicably happy, inexplicably clean right along with her. Everyone was changed. He saw it on the faces of his cousins, his mother, even the preacher. The good feeling did not last. By the time he got home, his friends, his cousins were all re-enacting the baptism, making fun of Lisa's stupid grin, her gasping, her giddiness in the arms of the preacher. All of them ashamed to have felt something with her.

The Freedman Park pool hadn't had water for a long time. The empty space was ominous with the lack, a crater where something had impacted. Jamie ate the sandwich quickly, balled up the bag with the second pie left in it. A white man sat in the bushes nearby, unkempt, expressionless, focused on the sky. Jamie almost asked him if he wanted the pie, but who knew what people will do when they believe they have been left behind.

When Jamie was a teenager, Sunday was the adult day at the park. Young black people, or those who hoped to pass for young, showed off their cars or their slick-skinned bodies. People met and talked, music from gleaming cars wafting past as their cocksure owners drove by hoping for admiration. A girl he thought beautiful showed him her naked chest behind the beehive slide when he was fifteen. She was flawless, the way the things you covet are, but what struck him most was how easy this forbidden closeness all seemed. The girl waited for his breath intake, his delight. Girls need that attention. Girls want to be adored, and in exchange they give you everything: sex, love, everything in the power of their fragile little bodies. The commerce of it was easy, if you understood it. Jamie had looked at the naked girl for how long he wasn't sure (maybe he was still looking), sure something was happening that couldn't be taken back even if he wanted to.

All that showing, all that preening, all that parade. Jamie paraded right along with the rest. In those days, his boy Robert had an old Nova they both

thought was made of gold, and they spent Sunday morning washing and waxing until the deep-green paint showed their reflections back at them. Robert had three kids now and worked at the chicken plant in Wilkesboro. He went from knee deep in yellow chicken guts to line foreman in six years. Jamie lasted there for four days.

He could go see his brother's girlfriend. He could take her something small, some candy she liked or something for the baby. He could go to the Dollar Store and buy a cheap plastic toy made for short use. The baby would put it in his mouth, devour it like life is supposed to be eaten. Once he bought an umbrella there that flipped up and died at the first moderate wind. You get what you pay for? You get what you get. But Jamie didn't want to see Gina. His brother worked. He had the last job in the county since most of the factories shuddered and died only to be miraculously resurrected in new countries across the ocean somewhere. Jamie had declared for years to anyone who would listen that he'd never work in a furniture factory. He was right. Gina would be alone with the baby unless she was doing somebody's hair. If he knew she'd be alone, he'd go spend some time with her, but the smell of relaxer depressed him, and the baby thought he was his daddy and would cling to him and stare. Besides, Gina would be too happy to see him. She would hope he stayed, she would tell him about her day, and behind the words he would smell her desperation, her youth burning up like a trash fire. She was ruined. She thought so. Since he loved her, he couldn't stand the pain feeding the feeling in his chest that would grow and expand and could kill him if he didn't get control.

In no time Jamie found himself at the mall. Jamie had loved Hanes Mall in Winston-Salem when he was young, with its rows of bright stores, open-faced restaurants. This was no Hanes Mall. The town had tried, but there was nothing fanciful or hip about the mall and from the day it opened seemed like a haven for middle-aged mall walkers in bright white sneakers. Jamie knew better than to put all his hope in a foolish thing like a mall. Who could find the missing piece, the lever that could move the world in your direction beside the stand for soft pretzels or miracle hand lotion? It made no sense, no sense. But who hadn't spent too much time hoping for the impossible thing?

Jamie had thirty-eight dollars. Money in his hand. With money he could be a whole man, not a boy, not a poser, but a man in the world. He counted the bills again. The sure thing that those wrinkled bills would soon be gone made him angry. Jamie did not live his life as a mean man; no one who knew him

would ever say that. But the terrifying desire to ruin someone's day crept up in him. He wanted the old people to know that their credit cards and good shoes weren't enough. Though he didn't believe it for a second. If anything close to the way they lived happened his way, he would take it like the last cool whiff of oxygen before he went under. But Jamie wanted to go up to someone and ask how it felt to be fat or old or ugly. Turns out that unhappiness is easy to have or to pass on.

There was no customer in the ball cap store, Lids. When he was young, everybody wore the brims of their ball caps in a curve. He spent many a lost hour curving that brim in his hand, making it look like the perfect duckbill. Now the youngbloods wore the lids flat, like train conductors. The look was wrong. They got it wrong.

"You need some help, man?" The young clerk, his mop of blonde hair in a bowl cut on his forehead, walked toward him in front of the wall where Jamie was standing. Young white boys want the approval of a black man they think is street. Secondhand street cred is better than none.

"This is a nice one right here," the young man said, holding a white Braves cap, the grinning Indian in bold red and yellow.

Jamie looked at the price tag, thirty-four ninety-nine. "Nah, man, I'm just looking."

"Not a Braves man, huh?" The young man returned the cap to the display.

"I try to stay away from that racist shit." But Jamie hadn't really thought about the Braves and their Indian mascot. He wasn't sure why he said so. "I'm just killing time, man. You know how it is."

The boy shook his head, "Oh, yeah, yeah, I know," he said. But Jamie knew this nice white child had no idea.

Jamie counted the money, jingled the few coins in his pocket. He had thirty-eight dollars. His mother wouldn't be home when he got there. She worked at a nursing home now, third shift, doing the jobs nobody wants to do. The surprising thing was she seemed to care about the old people who lived there. Jamie saw her hugging an old white lady, whispering to her like she was a child, a child that his mother loved. His mother did not comfort her own children. She saw her job to bolster, to harden, make her children strong. Jamie could not believe what he was seeing, the tenderness he saw with his own eyes. Was that when he decided to take her brooch? It was as good an excuse as any. The awful realization that his mother would not forgive him

stung. In her old age, as long as she lived, she would remember this wrong. She would remind him of it. Jamie would tell her again and again that the brooch was worthless, junk, not rubies, not diamonds at all, but just another worthless thing, its dream of being cherished—like all of theirs, including hers—something that needed to be let go. She would never forgive him.

Outside the store, Jamie reached into his pocket and tossed a quarter into the fountain. The water was so clear that the pennies, dimes, quarters, but mostly pennies, looked like disease underneath. He should get the quarter back. How ridiculous to throw away a quarter. All the money he wasted, for nothings, for nothings, and the quarter is what he missed. Ain't that the way? Ain't that always the way? He took off his shoes. He would get into the fountain. To the amazement of the mall walkers, he would retrieve his quarter. What would he look like to the old white people speed-walking, the sweat-pants-wearing mothers jerking their flabby arms, the young mothers, saying, "This way, honey," pushing strollers done up like hot dog carts. What would he look like taking his wish back?

