

The Barrel

The man approached the barrel. It was an ordinary barrel, trained wood girdled in two bands of steel. The man thought how, as a hobo, he might instantly bond with the barrel, knock into it accidentally, setting himself and the barrel wobbling in sympathetic motion. Then the barrel might serve as a symbol of the man's empty pockets. But the man's pockets were not empty. On the contrary they bulged with winnings from the skeet-ball parlor two storefronts in the man's past: long strands of connected and disconnected tickets crumpled haphazardly into balls, stuffed into pockets for lack of a better means of transporting them. Only transporting them where?

The man scratched his head and with his other hand squeezed one protruding pocket vulgarly, absently. He thought to himself about the vanity of money, the uselessness of prizes. He indulged a sickened inner laugh recollecting the price tag in tickets and general physical repulsiveness of the gold-speckled duckling in the prize case in the arcade, how uncharacteristically close he had come this one time to telling the toothless fat woman behind the counter to hand it over as an emblem of his victory, his skill, his bad taste in prizes if nothing else. Instead, he pulled out a cigarette and handed it to her upon leaving, as he had done every day for three years since beginning to shoot skeet to alleviate the boredom of his retirement, and cut down his increasing tobacco use.

The woman was a routine to the man, nothing more. She wore a pink and white dress uniform and a stained beach hat bearing her employer's insignia, which was mostly incomprehensible on account of its poor translation to a felt patch medium. The woman's outfit was an eyesore, but the man stopped heeding that fact long ago on account of facing it every day without ever any variation--a noteworthy point in itself, but again one whose

notoriety had long ago faded. The man merely held out a cigarette as he left every day and said nothing. He no longer remembered why. Had he met the woman on the street one day, he would probably not have recognized her. Had she made small talk from their one verbal point of reference--the time she once asked for a cigarette--he would have handed her a cigarette without listening, and probably not helped her to light it, but stared at his feet.

He stared at them now to avoid the harsh glare of the late afternoon declining sun. He was curious to see where they were taking him, having stepped outside their usual precinct by stopping unexpectedly at the prize case with the gold-speckled duckling. The man watched them from above as they transported him along the roughshod boardwalk to the barrel, which gaped upward at the man's downcast eyes. The man stared down into the barrel without understanding it clearly. "What do you want?" he felt like asking, and eventually he did ask. He heard his tired voice echo faintly in the hollow interior. The effect made him uncomfortable and he reached deep into his pockets, among the refuse, as if to hide his frail body there somehow.

At length the man reversed this action and withdrew from his pockets two enormous handfuls of tickets, which he slowly fed to the barrel like a dusting of snow. He repeated this transfer several times until his pockets were empty not only of tickets, but also the man's wallet, his senior citizen park pass, and the keys to his retirement condo. After those personal items, the man removed his gold watch, several tarnished rings, and a gold necklace bearing a fragile plain cross. The man dropped these items into the barrel as well, and climbed in after them with an unusual agility. As he sat down on this pile of identity and loot, the man withdrew the only item remaining in his physical possession from the loose breast pocket of his pale golfing shirt: a disposable lighter. He flicked on the flame and began almost lovingly to ignite the small tickets all around him.