

q u a r t e r s

The hospital check-in guy or whatever was maybe twenty, black and handsome with blinding white teeth. He was all lean and lanky. He pushed a Chinese history textbook towards a phone on the desk and covered it with some napkins. It made me wonder how many people died building the Great Wall. His name tag read: Maurice. I gave him a line about my parent's insurance and he seemed to buy it. I threw out fake phone numbers like it was my fucking job and he ate it up. They said they were keeping me overnight and that I could leave with my parents in the morning. Right.

The hospital was like an airport purgatory where everyone coughs invisible spores up into the cool air, smelling like hand soap, staring all sick and sad back and forth. The halls were nice though, they seemed more like hotel hallways with lacquer walls and fancy ceilings. Long rows of calm dark doors stood fixed with bronze lamps so tiny, it's like the doors were reading late into the night and they didn't want to disturb anyone.

It was a strange and sorry place. All sorts of everyday things you normally do for yourself, people insist on doing for you. This fat motherly woman who smelled like dog food and had hands as cushy as soaked

sponges led me around. She disinfected my cuts and jack hammered me with small talk about her lame kids and how they were doing in college. She commented on how muscled and slashed up I was and waited dumbly for a response that never came. Some shattered glass from the laundromat window fell from my pockets. She took my cigarettes and let me know what she thought about my smoking because that's what pig fucking whores do. I played along and pretended to care. Then she monitored me while I bathed.

It had been a week and a half since the last rain before tonight and otherwise I didn't get the chance to shower much. People who shower all the time are pathetic uppity bitches. You can read on their faces how impressed with themselves they are. I picture their proudly unknowing smiles while gallon after gallon of water is lost and it makes me want to clog their drains with their intestines.

Once a person understands their body's hygiene they can smell normal and stay pretty clean with minimal effort. Other than that, I think dirt and soot helps. You need it. Unnecessary cleaning softens you. It's the same as over brushing teeth. Everything is weakened once the enamel is scraped away.

They insisted I change into a gown. I clenched my lighter in one hand and my fold-out box cutter in the other—it wasn't a big secret, but I don't go anywhere without those items. The cigarette stealing, dog food

reeking bitch led me to a bed and stuck me with an IV. I felt good, probably better than normal after a librarian looking chick brought me a tray of food. A soft Salisbury steak, green beans, mashed potatoes and two Hawaiian rolls.

Firefly was probably racked out, snoring with her eyes half open and drooling like a mutt. The beds weren't bad at all. The nurse said they were doing my laundry, which was pretty cool of them, but it kept me from stealing anything for a lack of a place to stow my booty. I planned to take a washcloth, a bar of soap, a toothbrush and a pocketful of Q-tips. I'd round up the stash before leaving.

As a serious scavenger I often notice things others don't and instinctively relocate useful items to hidden spots. It's like when large litters of kittens eat. A few wade in through the melee and take the biggest possible mouthful and then escape to some dark corner where they can eat with a degree of fearful peace. I have the lurking sense that whenever I see something I want, someone else is also locking onto it and they'll take more than they need, just to make sure they'll have enough. It's what I would do.

I cleaned my ears, wrapped some Q-tips up in a small towel and stashed them under the bed. I grabbed some baby wipes and cleaned between my toes. I knew Firefly would pocket the surgical tubing in her room. She's all into elastic and stringy stuff. It helps her

build makeshift things like little tied together place mats that are almost like those Japanese ones, rebar-slingshots and some other useless decorative stuff.

I wiped the last of the gravy from the tray with my fingers. The nurse asked me if I wanted seconds. You're fucking right, bitch, I thought. I didn't care if it would make me sick. I just lightly nodded, giving the impression I might paw at it if she happened to bring it by. Didn't want to seem too desperate. I don't turn down food. I'd store that shit in my cheeks if I had to. Sometimes people give us food, sometimes we scavenge and sometimes we pickpocket. Every meal is a victory.

We had a pickpocketing night last December and we stopped by the arcade on Puller and 17th. It doesn't have a cool name, it just says 'ARCADE' in big neon letters. The sign is scrunched on both sides by other stores but if you walk up close you see a stairwell leading down, lit by somber fluorescents. Music plays inside but it's hardly noticeable and is often drowned out by beepings and repetitive sound bites. The place serves expensive bowling alley food like huge sodas, chili cheese fries and nachos with chemically engineered bio-cheese. I rip on it, but the salty smells still make my mouth water because I'm usually hungry as a mofo when we resort to that place—it's about a fifteen mile hike from where we sleep.

The arcade is a reliable choice in a pinch because kids are loose with their quarters. Still, it takes more finesse to walk away with pocketsful of coins than you would think. All it takes is one "hey man, that girl stole your quarters!" and we're out of there. If nobody is used to seeing you around, it's a solid way to pick up quick money for eats.

The darker the place, the better. The sudden lights strobing in the darkness and the jarring sounds make for great distractions. Some kids are so deeply immersed in some flashing screen that I can literally put my hands in their pockets and take what I want. The ones to watch out for are the ones bouncing from game to game. That night was freezing and we trekked long miles to reach the Arcade.

"How much are we trying to get?" Firefly said.

"Enough."

"How much is enough?"

"This much." I held out my hands to cup an imaginary softball-sized glob of quarters.

She focused on the size, actually taking me seriously. Then she ran her fingers along the lining of her coat and kicked out her sleeves and gazed downward at the crowded room. It's hard to tell what's going on in her head sometimes but I imagine she thinks she's some kind of cool comic book character on a mission.

Admittedly, she's a way better pickpocket than me. She can glide her slender little fingers into a pocket

with such swift subtlety that people often apologize if they notice her at all, feeling that they must have been crowding the poor skinny thing unknowingly.

I can wrap my thumb and pinky around her tiny wrists with room to spare. The wiry meat of her upper forearm looks like a Chihuahua leg when she flexes. It's like I can almost literally see which muscles are moving which fingers. More than once, I've seen her reach in somebody's pocket from the front, literally standing face to face with them. She's never been caught. I've been caught plenty of times.

I do the big stealing--anything that may require a getaway. I'm more like a sledgehammer. I bumper car into people dumbly and use some cheese line like 'oh, I'm sorry. Wasn't looking where I was going.' And I run my hands along their pockets and dust them off. I'm not even good at it, as it's hard to tell where the entry points to some pockets are. And I'm not about to unzip or unbutton a damn thing. Last time, my hand got stuck in a pocket like a cookie jar and then me and this man just stared at one another dumbly before I bolted.

Watching Firefly, I felt bulky. I'm only five feet and a little over a hundred pounds or so but next to her I'm a damn monster. I was a great gymnast once. Lots of power and a grip like an ape. I wasn't very graceful, but I made up for it with explosiveness. The coach was always on me for smoking because that spying fuck lived in my neighborhood. It was a strange sport

for me because everyone cheers like damn fools for no reason, and I could never be like that. I liked the chalk and the injuries and the moments when I was alone competing with myself.

Bars were my game. I swung the highest and hit everything like I meant it. It didn't matter if I was good, if I nailed the techniques or missed, I just wanted to go for it like I was trying to break my bones. So even when my routine was off, everyone would think 'fuck, she really went for it hard.' It was an expensive gym, and my mom worked overtime just so I could go. She was an embarrassing glossy eyed fool who jumped up and down and shouted for me. One night I told her to never come to my competitions again and she cried. I got kicked out of classes before I ran away. I never heard of someone getting kicked out of a class like that-I was told I was the first.

I make Firefly work out with me sometimes. She isn't terribly strong but she's enthusiastic. We exercise together in the morning but she is just one of those who is built small and stays small. She has no appetite and when she does she just wants little chocolate candies and stuff. Whenever we score a meal, I make sure she gets the fattier and meatier portions, even when I really want them. If there's leftover cheese or meat or something, I make her finish it. But for the purpose of reaching into pockets, she's just about the perfect size.

She slipped through the crowd of the arcade like an eel. Each time I saw her I knew she had more coins as her coat pockets drooped lower and lower. As usual, she worked nonstop. Her flushed face sweated and hairs loose from her dreads clung wet around her ears. She would only take so much from one person-whatever amount she felt they'd never notice. Sometimes while playing, kids can't believe they've run through so many quarters so quickly, and few would expect that they're actually right.

Even with Firefly's skill it took about an hour before we had enough for a decent meal. On the way out she pulled lightly at my sleeve.

"Yeah?" I yawned.

"I was thinking...do you want to play something?"

"Like what?"

"You know, a game." She stared down with blank curiosity.

"We've got food to buy."

"I know. It's stupid." She ran her fingers back through her dreads and trudged behind me.

Half a block down the street she zipped up her coat. Her sweaty face misted up in the freezing air.

"We'll see what's left over. If we have enough we'll come back and play something."

"Okay." She smiled and hugged me around my side.

We never went back. I should have taken her back. It was her money.