

The waiter arrived at the table with Joe's coffee. Tall, and brutally thin, he had long stuck-together dyed-black hair twisted into shanks and tufts of varying lengths, with many more tattoos than Joe normally preferred on a food service professional. From fingertips to neck was all ink. Joe couldn't really distinguish what any of the tats were, but it had the effect of his body being turned inside out, as if the guy was wearing arteries, capillaries and tendons on the outside. This was, of course, along with all the requisite epidermal punctures -- lip, nose, brow, cheek. Joe thought of a book from the Fifties that he had reviewed in *Out of the Attic* two weeks earlier called *The Dud Avocado*, where the main character, a young woman living in Paris, refers to a group of expatriate non-conformists who were all "so violently individualistic as to be practically interchangeable." Was that why he looked familiar? Then it came to him.

"Hey, man," said Joe. "You in a band?" *Of course you are. Why am I even asking?*

The Illustrated Man nodded somnolently. "Yeah, dude. I'm in a couple. The Stuckists and Merkins of Death."

"Right," Joe exclaimed, nodding. "Yeah. I've seen The Stuckists. You guys are really good. Didn't I just hear that you all got signed?"

"Ye-huh." He set down Joe's large Ferndale Blend, then took out a cloth and smeared around a small blotch of spilled sugar and coffee on the table.

"That's awesome. No offense, but what are you still doing waiting tables?"

He pouched his wide lead-singer lips together and cocked his head. "Got to make a living, dude. I ain't no rock star yet."

"Pretty close."

“Maybe in Rotterdam, but not here.” He stood up and regarded Joe with a smirk. “Anyway, I ain’t gonna blow all my cash, then get dumped by the record company for not selling enough units. I know too many people that’s happened to. So I work here when we’re not rehearsing or touring. Keeps my head straight.”

Joe couldn’t help but smile. “I guess you’re right. Still, good for you. Congrats.”

“Whatever, thanks. Need anything else?”

“No, I’m good. Thanks, man.”

“Rock on.”

That last comment by the waiter was made at a level of irony that Joe almost couldn’t hear anymore. Dog-whistle irony. It was something that was happening more and more these days. Humor he couldn’t quite laugh at, cultural references that he wasn’t quite getting anymore. Was he getting to that point, where he just wasn’t understanding the younger generation? Jesus.

Then there was the comment about how working in a coffeehouse “keeps my head straight?” So funny. This was one of the things Joe loved about Detroit. Even the creative folks, at least the ambitious ones, the people who were getting their work out there, their music or writing or art, hardly ever quit their crummy day jobs. The only people who did were musicians who had to because their bands were touring Europe all the time. Places like Berlin and Dusseldorf and Amsterdam absolutely loved Detroit music and pretty much everything to do with the place. Strange: to most of America, it was fucked-up Detroit, forgotten manufacturing wasteland, decaying building and murder capital of the nation. But to Europe, Detroit was the embodiment of *uber*-urban, *echt*-industrial, proto-

apocalyptic, rustbelt cool. (At least it was to the extremely well paying Euro culture magazines for which he had many times written about the Detroit scene.) Europeans were way more hip to the positive things going on in Detroit, the music and art and history, the grit and spirit of the people, and even if they perhaps over-appreciated the aesthetics of blight, they at least understood the way the whole place somehow inexplicably got under your skin.

Even if a Detroit band made it big, you'd still hear them say things like "I haven't forgotten how to deliver pizzas," or "I could go back to doing upholstery work if I had to." It was that twisted Midwestern work ethic, the factory worker DNA that threaded through Detroiters, embedded by generation after generation of immigrants who put their heads down and ground it out in a loud, grimy, windowless place for thirty or forty years, because that was just *what you did*. There weren't discussions about happiness or fulfillment or self-actualization. You shut up and went to work because people were counting on you. Then after all those great-grandfathers, and grandfathers and fathers who toiled silently (and often bitterly), came the spoiled generations after, the ones that went to college, who thought it was their right to be happy at a job.

That was Joe, of course, who had deluded himself into thinking that he could actually make a living as a freelance writer. He used to think it was okay not having that much money, always buying cheap beer and thrift store clothing. It was officially part of his lifestyle. It was part of Ana's too, at one time. Now, here in his late thirties (let's call it that for now), being poor didn't seem like so much fun anymore. (During his brief tenure at *The News*, he had developed a taste for microbrews and top shelf booze. Now he was drinking above his station.) He was tired of saying things like "I don't have a lot of cash right now"

to Ana. He was tired of being a mooch. He was starting to get the feeling that Ana was tired of him being a mooch too.

She had been making good money for about seven years now, though it may have been longer. Time seemed to be getting away from him these days. A while back, he had started adding three years to any casual estimate of time passed. Thus, if it felt like something happened two years ago, it was probably five. If it seemed like six years ago, it was definitely nine. And these days, he had noticed that three years wasn't quite enough. He'd started adding five just to be on the safe side.

*Which meant that Ana had probably been making good money for somewhere between nine to eleven years.* Lucky thing too, because by now, he would probably be living beneath the 8 Mile Road overpass cadging rumpled singles from the cars that pass, like the guys he would encounter coming home late from seeing bands in Hamtramck. Two thirty in the morning, and there they were, with their six coats and three hats, their overstuffed shopping carts and their greasy, creased-soft, cardboard *GOD BLESS* signs, staring blankly at you as you stop for the traffic light. These days, Joe had been giving them the stray dollars that he'd find wadded in his bar pockets. He'd look them in their eyes, all rheumy and broken, so not to seem like one of those people who didn't think of them as humans. He didn't like it though, the time that one of them wanted to shake his hand. Joe did it, but couldn't get the little bottle of hand sanitizer out of his glove box quickly enough once he was down the street.

Which was another thing -- when did he become one of those people with hand sanitizer in his glove compartment?