

Rain Turtle

by M. F. Sullivan

The first thing Vera did after her dismissal from the mortuary was buy a pack of cigarettes. She'd quit smoking a month before, but being fired on a Friday after she'd spent the afternoon busting her ass was just too much. That very morning she'd broached the subject of promotion to her boss, and now she trudged through the oppressive desert heat with her black jacket draped over her burning arms. Her ride wouldn't pick her up from the convenience store for another half hour. The managers had offered her a ride, but far be it from her to suffer the indignity of sitting in a car thick with the kind of silence that ached a person's teeth. Besides; the death-march was short, the cigarettes were worth it, and she still wasn't sure how to tell her roommates what had happened.

As she stood outside the gas station, dragging the first Winston to its filter, her head buzzed with an incredulous void. She was a good worker, better than anyone they deigned to keep. They hadn't even done the decent thing and fired her on the spot, instead claiming they needed to talk to human resources; her gut knew what the answer would be.

By the time she was flicking away her second cigarette, a homeless man came around the corner wearing that uniform of the chronically impoverished: haggard beard, hat, fanny pack, blue t-shirt, skin tanned by the sun and hammered by life. He called after a young guy who rode past on a bike, shouting, "Hey, you know where to find a little weed?"

The rider kept going. The man turned his sleet eyes upon Vera as if to appraise her feelings toward less-than-legal substances. She smiled, her sympathy genuine as any she'd felt. "Brother, if I had any, I'd be smoking it. Trust me."

The man laughed. His name was Christian. He looked almost seventy, but at least ten of that was the sun's doing. When she offered him cigarettes, his eyes lit up, gratitude pouring from

beneath his beard. "I sure wish I could find some green. All I need is a little weed, a little shade."

"Tell me about it." She bent her head to light a third for herself. "That's all anybody needs, but some people don't want to admit it."

A look of almost youthful delight swept his face. "You know, that's true. Boy, wouldn't that be nice. It gets so hot out here, man."

"I know. I haven't lived here very long, I don't know how people like you manage to deal with it, you have to be out in it all day."

"It's miserable. Sometimes you can't even move."

She had to strain to make out his words, every syllable slurring into the next like a man slipping across ice. In another show of sympathy, she shook her head. It was bad to be jobless, but some things were worse.

As she opened her mouth to grope for something to say, Don came around the corner wearing the familiar gray-blue uniform of the cemetery grounds crew. He'd been good to her, a little old man with the toothless smile of an enthusiastic prospector. This was a man who had worked his whole life, one of the few remaining blue collar workers who had seen American assembly lines and filled one tedious position after another.

He gaped from beneath his white Fu Manchu. "What are you doing here!"

"They sent me home, I think they're firing me. What are you doing here?" As his mouth only widened, she waved at the homeless man. "Don, this is my friend, Christian. Christian, Don's a coworker."

After a brief smile, Don's attention returned to Vera. "They sent you home? Those jerks. That's like last week, I got sent home because I wasn't wearing my helmet."

She'd heard all about that story. This wasn't the same at all. It was pettier than safety, and it was going to get her fired. All the same, she laughed. "We'll see how it goes, I find out next week whether or not I have a job."

"Well, if you're not there on Monday, I'm going to tell them they need to bring you back!"

Behind his words lay the indigence of a touchy grandfather discussing his grandchild's perceived mistreatment. That alone brought a genuine smile to her lips. "No, Don, you shouldn't, if they find out I'm discussing it they'll probably fire me anyway."

Christian scoffed, sudden exploding with a slurred back-in-my-day torrent of words she couldn't follow. Don kept up with him perfectly, the two lingering to have a conversation about the state of the working man. Her coworker broke it off only to go inside and buy a soda; on his way out, he paused to pat her shoulder and tell her he was thinking about her.

As he vanished toward his truck, Vera checked her watch. It had been twenty minutes. Cigarettes in the June heat were like trying to smoke in a car with the windows rolled up; they suffocated, but at times like this, suffocation was acceptable.

One grizzled hand sweeping beneath his hat, Christian huffed for air. "It's just too hot, it's going to be a bad summer. So much sun, I wish it'd rain. Boy, when it gets hot like this, you got to make a rain turtle. You know what a rain turtle is?"

She smoked back her laughter. "No, what's that?"

"It's like a circle," he said, squatting down toward the pavement, "but it's a turtle. Spiritually."

"I see."

The mumbled words that poured from him grew increasingly unintelligible, as if he were losing himself at the mere thought of this turtle. It seemed he was on a constant trip, free-associating in a coherent way that made a small whiff of sense to the sober mind. She squatted down beside him, struggling to make out his soft words. His finger drew a circle upon the sidewalk in demonstration. "He's trying to get to water. And each day he gets a little closer. When this turtle gets to water, Tucson will have rain." The very idea had his voice leaping in sheer delight.

"It would be nice," she said, flicking away her current filter, "I hope he hurries up."

Christian's eyes widened as he nodded his agreement. He knew it better than she ever would. Pretty twenty-something white girls

never had to sleep on the street, not if they were willing to sacrifice their integrity, their dignity, something, anything. As long as they had friends, family, it would never happen. Thank God, thank God, there was always a way out.

Inhaling new smoke against the heat that squeezed with physical intensity, she said, "You never know what a sunny day is until you get a little rain."

He gasped, regaining a look of some lucidity. "That's true. Man, you," he laughed, "you're smart. You in college?"

"I used to be. I'll go back when I have the money. It costs too much for too little these days."

Before her new friend could properly begin his newest, most intense series of ramblings, another homeless man appeared. Christian stood, smile widening. "This is my friend, Jim. He was in Vietnam."

Why didn't she have cash to give them? It killed her. She gave Jim cigarettes, instead; this man was more together than his friend, identical, almost apologetic for his manic companion. Christian lowered his voice as he spoke to his friend. "Hey, she might be looking for a little help, too."

Vera laughed, waving her hand. "Nah, man, thanks, my roommates don't approve of weed."

"Oh." Jim nodded and took hold of his friend's arm, saying, "Come on, let's go."

After pleasantries, they disappeared around the corner. Too late, she realized she could have used a card to buy them sandwiches, cigarettes, booze, something, anything. The gesture, that was what would have mattered. The pair was nowhere to be found. Guilt twisted her stomach; finally, her ride pulled up to take her for drinks. The heat blazed through the windshield of the black truck; for the first time in thirty minutes she became conscious of the stagnant moisture sticking the burgundy fabric of her shirt to her underarms.

That turtle needed to hurry up.

