

25 Cents at a Time

by Michael J. Solender

Surrounded by the rhythmic bass of humming clothes dryers, Paulo carefully folded yesterday's paper and placed it on the barren table adjacent to the bench where he waited for his sheets final spin down. He calculated that he had 31 quarters left to carry him through the weekend.

He never bothered converting the tip money he pocketed at the Imperial Street 24 hour car wash as his world was replete with 25 cent transactions, making quarters the perfect coin for his realm. Quarter coffee with refills at Nicks. 12 quarters for smokes in the machine at the ratty bar where he hustled pool. 6 quarters exactly for once a week wash and dry at the laundry mat.

He never bought detergent. He was usually able to scrounge up enough from the empty boxes in the trash or put the bite on an unsuspecting transient, "borrowing" a cupful or two from someone who he didn't already "owe" from before.

4 quarters once a month bought him 3 minutes on the phone to his ex who always took his call, but never responded to his pleas for forgiveness or promises of repentance if only she'd take him back.

He was broke, but he wasn't dirty. Paulo had an obsession with his appearance and cleanliness in general. They let him shower in the back at work but drew the line at his laundry, hence his Saturday a.m. ritual.

Being sharp and clean did pay some dividends for him. Paulo routinely made the circuit of free breakfasts at the various suite hotels in the office park surrounding his small, no bath, studio flat. Freshly shaved, hair still wet from the shower and crisp newspaper

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under his arm, Paulo was the picture of a paying guest and was never turned away from the protein rich buffets that provided him with the days only sustenance.

13 months ago he and Benita had seven Sandals brochures spread out on their suburban kitchen table trying to decide which one would host them for their 5th wedding anniversary. How did it all go to shit so fast?

He knew the answer, but he never stopped asking himself the question. Exposing your wife and unborn child to the hell of AIDS was not an answer that he could rap his arms around, yet that is exactly what he did.

There was some grace in the situation, Benita had told him right after Consuelo was born that she had been spared.

Benita wasn't as fortunate. Paulo had abandoned life on the down-low before marrying Benita but couldn't escape its siren call of adrenaline rushes and the intense highs that came from those forbidden encounters.

He was careful to go only where professional men like him hung out, they were clean and it was OK to avoid dicey condom discussions.

He still hadn't become symptomatic, that Benita rushed past HIV and right into a full blown infection staggered him.

There were no apologies, no explanations. She wanted him out and took all the money. His job working for her father was of course over. Six months to the date after filing, their divorce was final. While she would not agree to see him, she did start taking his calls 3 months ago. She had gotten into a regimen and her symptoms were abating, maybe she could live a long life with the disease, she didn't know.

He couldn't fight her, he loved her too much. He'd give it time, get his life together, one quarter at a time and be there when she was ready to take him back.

Hope was all he had.

