

Pretty White Gloves

by Paul Steven Stone

He sits on a folded-over cardboard box, slightly off-balance and without any visible sign of support other than the granite wall of the bank behind him and the few coins in the paper cup he shakes at each passerby.

Does he realize it is 4 degrees above zero, or minus 25 degrees if you factor in the wind that blows through the city and the marrow of his bones with little concern for statistics? Does he notice the thick cumulous lifeforms that escape from his mouth in shapes that shift and evanesce like the opportunities that once populated his life?

Can he even distinguish the usual numbing effect of the cheap alcohol from the cruel and indifferent caress of this biting alien chill?

Too many questions, he would tell you, if he cared to say anything. But his tongue sits in silence behind crusted chapped lips and chattering teeth while half-shut eyes follow pedestrians fleeing from the bitter cold and his outstretched cup.

His gaze falls upon the hand holding the cup as if it were some foreign element in his personal inventory. Surprised at first to find it uncovered and exposed, especially in weather this frigid, he now recalls that someone at the shelter had stolen his gloves and left in their place the only option he still has in much abundance.

Acquiescence.

Examining the hand, and the exposed fingers encircling the Seven-Eleven coffee cup, he smiles in amused perplexity, murmuring to himself, "White gloves."

Lifting his hand for closer inspection, he adds, "Pretty white gloves."

An image of his daughter . . . Elissa, he thinks her name was. Yes, Elissa!, he recalls. An image of Elissa rises up in his mind, from a photograph taken when she was ten and beautifully adorned in a new Easter outfit: black shoes, frilly lavender dress and hat and,

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yes, pretty white gloves. The photo once sat on a table in his living room, but he couldn't tell you what happened to it, nor to the table or the living room, for that matter. They were just gone. Swept away in the same tide that pulled out all the moorings from his life, and everything else that had been tethered to them.

The last time he'd seen Elissa she was crying, though he no longer remembers why. Must have been something he'd done or said; that much he knows.

"Pretty white gloves," he repeats, staring at his hand.

He recalls the white gloves from his Marine dress uniform. At most he wore them five times: at his graduation from officer's training school, at an armed services ball in Trenton, New Jersey, and for three military funerals. There was never a need for dress gloves in Viet Nam. They would have never stayed white anyway; not with all the blood that stained his hands.

Out of the corner of his eye he can see a policeman walking towards him and instinctively hides his cup, some vestige of half-remembered pride causing him to avert his gaze from the man's eyes at the same time.

"We need to get you inside, buddy," the officer says. "You'll die of cold, you stay out here."

Moments later, a second police officer, this one a woman, steps up to join them.

"That's the Major," she tells her colleague. To the seated figure she offers a smile.

"You coming with us, Major?"

"Go away," he answers, looking up as he leans further against the cold granite wall. "Don't need you. Don't need no one."

"Can't leave you out here," the first officer says. "We've got orders to bring you and everyone else in."

"Leave me alone!" the seated man shouts, gesturing with his hands as if he could push them both away.

"Oh shit," the female officer says under her billowing breath. To her partner she whispers, "His hands. Look at his hands."

Quickly recognizing the waxy whiteness for what it is, the officer shrugs, "Guess we're a little late."

To the man on the sidewalk, he offers, "That's frost bite, buddy."

"No," the seated man protests. He holds up both hands, numb and strange as they now feel and offers a knowing smile of explanation.

Just like the marine officer he once was, just like the sweet innocent daughter he once knew, just like the young man grown suddenly old on a frozen sidewalk, his hands are beautiful and special in a way these strangers will never understand.

"White gloves," he insists proudly.

"Pretty white gloves."

