

Emerald City Days/Nights

by R. Daniel Lester

"It's all I've been getting lately," she says to him. "Pennies. So call me that."

Penny and Jake, they first cross paths somewhere on Granville Street. Neither can say exactly why/how it happens, they just start hanging out together. It works. Their energies jive. Yin/yang. Combined they don't add up to more than 40 and Jake knows for a fact he's 24. Jake never asks Penny how old she is because he doesn't want to hear it. Then, even though he already knows, he would *really know*. And he doesn't want to be responsible for that kind of information.

Boil it down, Penny gives Jake something to protect.

But they're a good team.

Penny pulls her own weight. She plays poor homeless waif girl like a star. Makes eyes at the dudes with the Rolexes, the HAVES that wander down from their tall glass towers. They often experience flash floods of guilt/pity because Penny and Jake are their negatives, the HAVE-NOTS.

Reactions vary: sometimes this means a few coins, sometimes it means being ignored/insulted/mockered.

Jake, for his role, he plays penitent monk, recedes into the darkness of his jacket hood to stare out at the world from there. Jake watches. Jake rain dances. Jake prays for the clouds to unleash pocket change.

End of the day, they pool the money. They see what's what. Most times there's enough for a few burgers/fries/milkshakes. Or a few pizza slices each. On a good day, maybe even some left over for a little donation to Jake's rainy day fund.

"Rainy day fund?" Penny asks, always, smirking wide. "This is Vancouver, fool."

And Jake takes it, accepts her laughter, even smiling a bit too, because Penny has a way of making him laugh that no one else does.

But he always tucks the extra money away, secreting it, absorbing it, dividing it between pouches, pockets, compartments.

Penny and Jake, they sleep where they sleep. They move around. They stay mobile. They are the street's children, and the street demands obedience. The street demonstrates tough love. In return for whatever protection it offers, Penny and Jake are good kids. They listen to the street. They learn from the street.

Daytime. A weekday.

And like usual Penny and Jake are bivouacked down on Granville, their backs up against the wall of a movie theatre. It is a slow day, only a couple bucks in their hat. Across the street, another HAVE-NOT inhabitant of the grid, a dreadlocked punk-type, attempts to quiet down his dog that is barking at the onslaught of rain hitting the awning above it. The dog is a Siberian husky with a thick grey-white coat and piercing arctic blue eyes. The dog appears about 34 times healthier than its owner.

Penny asks Jake if he knows if it's true or not that when dogs get left behind in a house they think it's the last time they will ever see their master. "Can you imagine?" she says. "Living every day like that?"

Jake tries and feels a molten lava pit of hurt/longing in his gut. "That why you don't like dogs much?" he asks.

"I guess," she says, because Penny is definitely more of a cat person. Cats are fickle. Cats are moody. This is Penny in a nutshell. But a dog's love is unconditional. This confuses her. She says, "I think it's that they're so...tragic."

As she says this, a Rolex dude, mid-40s, suit, long raincoat belted at the waist, umbrella, walks up to them, dropping a five-dollar bill into the hat. As usual, he is looking at Penny. He only has eyes for her. He is Penny's friend. He visits on the regular. He smiles big white teeth.

But Rolex dude is a predator in disguise. The candy apple with the razor blade inside. He enjoys trading money for games. Full-contact games. He says goodbye to Penny.

He says, "See you later, sweetie."

Ten minutes later, Jake tells Penny that life seems like a fast moving escalator that he can't gain a foothold on. He says he is worried he'll do something bad/violent at some point, if only to feel control over a situation. Penny tells Jake not to worry, to roll with the punches, that control is over-rated. She says she read once that some doctor in Europe discovered that half the population has little radios in their brains telling them what to do.

Penny reads a lot of things like this, mostly off the covers of various "newspapers." The grocery store checkout line kind. So gullible isn't exactly the right term to describe Penny, but it's in the ballpark.

"What about the other half?" Jake asks Penny, referring to the brain radios.

"Oh," Penny says, smiling. "Those people don't have a clue either. Radio or not, none of us know what the hell is happening."

An electric bus passes by, humming, the power line sparking at the contact point.

"And what are these radios tuned to?"

Penny turns to Jake like he is crazy, as if anyone could *not* know what the radios are tuned to. "Why, out there, of course," she says, pointing to the sky, the clouds, the void of space beyond. "Out there."

Later that night, they're on Seymour, tucked into the entranceway of an office furniture store that's been closed for months. Junk mail collecting under the mail slot. A thick layer of dust on the piece-of-shit computer desk in the window.

Suddenly, out of the shadows, comes a black car with tinted windows. The driver side window rolls down. Rolex dude is at the wheel, smiling big white teeth again.

"Good evening, Penny," he says from his car, barely able to keep a forked serpent tongue from spilling out the side of his mouth.

Jake sits up. "Pen."

"It's okay, really," Penny whispers to Jake, to the street. "This is just the way things are."

Jake knows this. The street knows this. Still, this fact burns in their guts like acid. Penny will disappear, usually at night, for an hour or two, returning slightly ruffled/used. She will have a scratch on her arm, a bruise forming on her leg, a swollen eye that turns different shades of violent purple by morning. She will have two crisp 20-dollar bills and sometimes a stuffed animal key chain for her backpack. Or a new lipstick. Maybe a bag of Sour Peaches, which Penny loves. She eats them like, well, candy.

And all Jake really wants to do now is rise up like sweet justice, punch Rolex dude through his open window and take the money anyway. For the insult. But he doesn't.

"Try and get some sleep and we'll only be around the corner, okay?"

"You never needed my permission before."

"And I don't need it now, Jake."

Jake understands he has no sway. No say.

This also burns in his gut.

Penny gets in the car. The car drives away.

Jake watches. Jake waits one minute. Jake follows the car down the block and left into an alley. He gets up close to the luxury automobile, noticing his reflection in the tinted windows, in the shine of it. And Jake wishes he were still playing the ostrich with its head buried in the sand. Because then he wouldn't be hearing the "No, please, don't!" and not understanding if it is part of the routine, or if she is really in trouble. Penny told Jake once that Rolex dude likes it rough, wants her to put up a fight. Rolex dude is just that type of guy.

Jake hears whimpers/grunts.

Jake thinks: some protector, some saint I am.

Jake thinks: my very own forked tongue feels slick/moist against my teeth.

Then there is this downtown waft of cheap meat in a frying pan. The smell/comparison hits Jake like a right cross. He grins, accepting the punch. And never as a HAVE-NOT has Jake felt so

much like spilling the blood of a HAVE into the streets of the grid that birthed them both.

Jake opens the rear side door, sees bare legs intertwined. Rolex dude is on top of Penny, his pants around bony white ankles. Penny's black jeans are balled up on the floor, underwear (with little hearts on it) hanging off her left foot. Jake reaches in, pulls Rolex dude off, throws him backwards to the ground. Then he turns away so Penny can get dressed.

Rolex dude sits up, laughing, reaching into the pants that are still bunched at his feet. He empties his wallet on the pavement. He is throwing money at them because he knows money will solve all of his problems. He is just that type of guy.

Penny climbs out of the car. "Jake, what the..."

But Jake doesn't hear anything. He is pure, unfiltered, liquid rage. Jake kicks Rolex dude once, twice, five times in the ribs. On the last kick, there is a snapping sound.

"Jake, that's enough. I said—"

Jake stops.

Rolex dude is still laughing. Laughing and wheezing.

Penny collects the money and the wallet from off the ground. Rolex dude reaches for her. Penny steps on his fingers. He screams. She steps harder. He screams harder.

Penny is the one laughing now.

"Rough enough for ya,"—and she looks at his ID—"Harold?" Then she systematically goes through the wallet, collecting the contents. "Tsk, tsk, naughty boy," she says, dropping the empty leather shell at Harold's feet. She says, "Harold, I wonder what your wife would think about all this."

Harold is breathing broken ribs.

Harold is crying smashed fingers.

Then Penny grabs Jake's hand, and they run and run. And run. The only sounds become their ragged breaths, the flap of feet against pavement. They duck in/out of alleys, down steps, between buildings. They creep from streetlamp glow to streetlamp glow. They race shadows. The street tells them where to go. The city is too

light, so the street is showing the way to the dark. To Stanley Park.

Penny is one second mad, the next thanking Jake for pulling Rolex dude off her, even if it was a little late. She scolds him then kisses him on the cheek. Push/pull. Penny is a chameleon. She changes colours on a whim. She matches her surroundings.

“Do you love me, Jake? Do you?”

Jake says nothing (his tongue is concrete), but this says everything to Penny that she needs to hear. She hands him the money from Harold's wallet.

“For the rainy day fund.”

Jake disappears the cash. “It's raining now, Pen.”

“Is it?” she asks, skipping ahead. She jumps in a big puddle.

In Stanley Park, they sit on a park bench, staring back at the sparkling jewel city.

“I think it's like that movie,” Penny says. “The one with the girl with the red shoes.”

“Oz?” Jake asks.

“Do you think it's all a dream, Jake? Jake, could it be?”

And Jake hopes so because if it's a dream then they are sleeping, and when they wake up they will still have their blankets, sleeping bags, clothes, backpacks. Jake knows they never should have left those things behind. That they are probably already gone. Already scattered to the wind. The street is tough love. The street teaches hard lessons.

“One way to find out, right? If it's a dream.”

“I guess.”

“Ready?”

“Ready.”

“Close your eyes, Jake.”

“Okay, Pen.”

And then Penny, shutting her eyes tight, gripping Jake's hand even tighter, lifts her feet into the air. She taps them together one, two

