

Mutiny

by Richard Kriheli

Face is saved regularly. Milk crates are spaced and positioned in a meticulous grid, holding spots. At three in the morning, there still is noise. A clanking of steel echoes from my right. Rods slide into one another forming an epic display. I wipe down my modest folding table dwarfing the neighboring setups. Amidst the haze and ruckus, there exists a temporary sense of calm. Another vendor materializes from the far corner and rolls his hand truck over a piece of cardboard on the floor.

He either reserved the spot, or the theatrics are moments away. I get in position for the best view. Almost on cue, Xavier emerges and is in the vendor's face. "X," as he is known around here, is indoctrinating the obvious newbie on the merits of showing up earlier and the logistics of placeholders and markers. The cardboard is Face's turf - everyone here knows that. And stepping on Face is a big no-no.

"This is horseshit," the typical tirade begins. Typical, because this guy was me a few weeks ago. And it was Boris the body-graffiti-artist last week. Boris slumps in his canvas chair three spots down and he nods at me half-smiling. Our smiles only breach the surface. Boris rises and paces in my direction while turning his head to catch the tail end of the squabble.

"Tiny, mah man, I think we should do it."

They call me 'Tiny' because I'm the biggest guy here, with the one of the smallest displays. I'm not sure who came up with it first, but it sticks like all the other nicknames. A few hours back, I proposed the usurping of X and his gang of cronies. It was too early for insurrection talks, as most were fresh out of bed or buzzing from last call. The plan is simple: get vendors to stop paying the homeless and scam artists to hold spots and we'd drive X out in one swoop. The lazy bunches that fund X's enterprise show up late and benefit most from rest and location. The artist market is designed to be first come, first serve and we are fighting for the last handful of spots on

the preferred outer loop - at three in the morning. Once the loop is booked, the later arrivals form the dreaded inner loop - an obstructed, virtual dead zone for sales. The disgruntled newbie barking under his breath, rolls past us into the last spot around the curve.

I nod at Boris' suggestion, excited about landing my first recruit. "We need to get the others on board."

"We'll stick it to these jerks," Boris says with fervor. "But, what about the bucs?"

Most of X's benefactors are non-artist opportunists. They're known as pirates or 'bucs' who hijack the high visibility artist spots with tourist garbage. Postcards, t-shirts, miniature statuettes, framed photos of the city skyline - all with no inherent message or artistic value. Things found at airport gift shops for a fraction of the price.

I offer up an amendment to the plan: "We can get a bunch of us to hold down spots for each other and let 'em have the inner loop. Take shifts, you know?"

"Good call. Lem'me talk to Grump o'er there." The new guy is already branded.

My revolutionary takeover hustle starts to earn legs and I feel a burgeoning sense of progress. I wish my product was met with the same enthusiasm. I sell hand screened t-shirts that read "Bail me out," in hopes that I can continue to pay my mortgage. The letters are white on black. Those with a sense of humor who appreciate the polarity and implications about the downward spiraling economy fork over twenty per shirt. The reception thus far is lukewarm and I find myself questioning the investment of time and resources in producing these shirts.

An oppressive stench of piss and sweat surfaces and I know Oscar is close. No one knows his real name, but he resembles the trash can puppet on a popular kids program. He is one of the scattering of X's homeless personnel. I turn my head a couple eye lengths, and I see him hobbling towards me.

"Crap," I say, under my breath.

He's in front of me now, and doesn't say a word at first. I suppose this is my cue.

"How's it going?" I ask.

He doesn't say anything for a minute - part of his repertoire. He then launches into his pitch.

"The spot next to Face is available. You should move up."

"Nah, it's alright. I'll wing it from here."

"You sure? That's a prime spot. First thing people see when they get out the subway. Only forty bucks."

"Only forty, eh? I'll pass," I say as Oscar scampers off to the next vendor.

Face sells tourist junk. His enormous display bordering on the eight-by-eight foot restriction is a monstrosity that features public domain photographs of famous city landmarks. Framed. Ten each, three for twenty. He's not an artist. He is a shining example of what is wrong with this place. Also, framed.

The sun inches up behind the skyscrapers that envelop the park. The temperature will vault about twenty degrees before the first batch of customers roll through. A boiling point, however, is already reaching on the pavement. This time, the heated exchange is coming from Oscar and Grump. I suspect Oscar's proposition didn't sit well with the newbie. The shouts and accusations get louder with each passing second, and a disjointed triangle of curiosity forms around their perimeter. Oscar takes a wild swing at Grump that does not connect. The lame excuse of a fight gets broken up by bystanders seconds later. Just like that, the temporary calm returns.

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A little after seven, Face materializes and he begins to set up. The other artists trickle in and begin forming the inner-loop to much visible distress. Boris singles out the ones he wants to recruit by pointing his chin in their direction while making eye contact with me. Vendors speak in code. Much like the rampant nicknaming, there is a common language between them. A language of gestures. Extending both arms on each side is marking the width of the display about to be erected. Pointing at a spot between vendors with

a chopping motion is suggesting they inch over to either side to make room for squeeze-in. Pointing at the same spot and shaking the head meant - "not gonna happen, buddy."

Face nods and acknowledges me. He is a daunting figure, tall and lanky and as dark as the night. All the time spent in the sun has given him a permanent gloss. He has a large scar across the length of his left cheek - a distinction that gave birth to his moniker. X glides over to him and they begin a muffled dialogue. They both look in my direction several times and I wonder if word about the uprising reached the ringleader already. X motions towards Boris and then flails his arms. Boris is unaware as he buys coffee from the neighboring bagel cart. Whatever X is spewing, the scowl painted on his face is not disguising it well. I think about walking over and reconsider remembering diplomacy is out the door in these parts.

Partly caffeinated Boris walks over to me as X leaves the scene.

"Grump's in."

"That one was a gimme," I say. "Who else? Did you talk to others?"

"Yep, the Japanese couple. They said they may not come anymore. Why?"

"I think X is on to us."

"Screw him, I don't give a . . ."

"Yeah me neither, but I don't trust him. What if he tries something?"

"Like what?"

"Don't know. Not sure what he's capable of."

Grump interjects and cuts in from behind us. He shakes my hand and thanks me. Grump and Boris start working out time slots for shifts, and I'm overcome with a different kind of hunger accompanied by an audible growl of my stomach.

"Can you guys watch my spot? I need to grab somethin' to eat."

Vendor artists, in general, look out for one another. They do not see each other as rivals, but rather comrades of the same struggle. Though I don't know Boris well, I know my work is safe. I'm counting on this camaraderie to fuel my plan.

An hour to noon and body art by Boris is in full swing. College kids seeking a temporary tattoo solution form a line. He makes a killing out here. Location is far less critical for him as it is for artists who rely on positioning for exposure of their pieces. The last few spots of the loop where I'm entrenched is not ideal. Shoppers that come in from the right have either already purchased something or are not interested. My sales are patchy at best. I've sold 3 shirts while Face and the pirates are starting to bank as evidenced by the good mood resonating in their direction. After the morning grocery shopping is out of the way, there is another lull that will last for a couple of hours until lunch traffic.

The plan must work. I'll be positioned right across from the intersection with the heaviest traffic and I should see the spike in sales. I can almost taste it, watching others enjoy the spoils of location.

There is chatter. I feel more eyes on Boris and I than I'm accustomed to. I even hear that some are starting to call me 'Mutiny' instead of 'Tiny' now. That's when I know the influence has reach. Some think it's Boris who's running the operation, and that's fine by me. We look out for one another. Same struggle.

"Did'ja hear about Boris' revolt," asks Sunny the floral painter as she passes by my display.

"Yeah, are you in?"

"Of course. I got here at 7 a.m. and I'm stuck in the inners. I got here before Face. This is messed up."

I nod.

"Do you know when it's happening?"

"Next weekend."

Some of the vendors are quiet, though. The quiet is a bit unnerving. I rearrange the position of my chair several times facing the direction of the heaviest traffic. I see X weaving the wave of people and pointing his chin at me. He swoops in and invades my area with a couple of his brawny intimidators. I rise up from my chair. X takes off his baseball cap and wipes sweat from his brow. I

wonder where the documentary cameras are, studying our showdown.

"The shirts are uh . . . twenty each. Cash only," I say.

"Look man, I know what you're tryin' to do. It won't work. There's history here, and ya can't hustle us like that. We don't play that."

"I'm just selling my message."

X looks frustrated but he smiles. I don't think I've ever seen him smile. He gestures to his goons and they take off.

"You're no different than me, homeboy. No different."

And just like that, he's gone.

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Later in the afternoon, I count the little money I was able to pull for the day thus far. From the corner of my eye, I watch Face do the same, although he's still counting long after I'm done. A woman approaches his table. She is pregnant and even from this distance her eyes show worry. She leans over and kisses Face. They talk for a few minutes and he hands over a wad of cash only holding back a few bills. Her eyes still show worry as she shuffles her bag and breaks towards the subway entrance. The moment is broken by a young boy who I realize is standing in front of my display. He glazes over my setup while his parents check out a neighboring setup.

"What do you sell?"

"T-shirts."

"Bail me out? What does that mean?"

I pause for a moment and think about what I should say.

"See, banks give out money they don't have, hoping they get more back . . ." I pause.

"I don't get it."

I lose place. "Yah, me neither."

The boy shrugs and moves on to the next vendor and I am still.

The letters on my shirt do not seem as bright and contrasting as they did in the morning. It is said that if merchandise is in the sun too long, it tends to fade in color a bit. The reality here is that my message is fading. Though most pack up around sundown, I decide my time is up already. I pack the remainder of the shirts in a

makeshift suitcase. I look over at Boris, but his area is overflowing with customers. He doesn't see me. I stare at my table and dust it off one more time, before I fold.

