

Thick as Thieves (my new gang)

by WAYNE CRESSER

I needed to catch up to myself as I sat there in the Brew, drinking Gucci coffee, nibbling on an over-sized and far too sweet cookie. I was having a hard time, with my mind, I mean. A thought didn't have much of a chance in that mess with the tables bumping up against each other, and the laptop cords draped over tabletops and running across the floor to wall outlets, the arrangement making people skip over them or bend at peculiar angles to pass through, constantly mumbling---"Excuse me, pardon me, Excuse me, please." And there too was the irksome insistence of the jazzy house music and the conversations, buzzed and louder than they ought to be. So I watched and listened.

Close by me three kids talked about literature. Any book of considerable length was referred to as a beast. James Joyce's Ulysses was a beast. Dostoevsky was easier to understand than Joyce, who apparently never cared much about making sense, but his books could be beasts too.

"You know what's a real beast?" one of them said, ___ "anything by Charles Dickens."

"Dickens is a monster, yeah."

"Beastly altogether," the girl with blue hair said and they all laughed.

Three young men, two wearing stringy dreadlocks and all wearing beards, approached and grabbed the last empty table. Musicians, maybe. Immediately one of the dreads talked about playing reggae music and the other one switched the conversation to bars where you could hear good reggae music. This intrigued the third guy, a heavy eye-lidded fellow wearing a navy blue watch cap. Once the

dreadlock duo's authority on the subject of live music was established, one of them got up and stretched.

"I got yoga," he said and left.

The other switched the conversation to rare coins. Civil war coins, or maybe one coin, or maybe he thought it might be from that era but he wasn't sure. He and his metal detector had found it buried in the sand at Barrington town beach. It had "symbols and shit on it." Maybe the other guy could tell if he looked at it.

The heavy-lidded guy leaned in close, taking care to keep his elbows off the flat and square shaped paper bag he'd placed on the table. "I'd like that," he said. What's it made out of?"

"Gold, I think."

"You think?"

"Well it's tough to tell. It's black in spots. I described it to this other dude who asked me, 'Is it a Liberty coin?' 'I don't know,' I told him. 'Got a lady's profile on it. She's wearing some kind of hat.'"

"'Sounds like a Liberty,' the dude told me, 'could be worth something.'"

"I like old stuff," said the heavy-lidded guy, "a lot. But I don't know much about coins, see? I collect 78's."

"That's cool, man; that's what...78's?"

"Old records, blues and country music mostly. Like this one."

He reached into the bag on the table and pulled out a ten inch record, sleeved in brown paper, with a circle cut out to display the label information. He handled it delicately, like a fresh egg.

"See, Columbia, 'The Freight Train Blues.' Roy Acuff."

Dreadlocks shook his head, sighed through his nose. "No reggae?" he said.

The heavy-lidded guy raised an eyebrow. "You were saying about the coin."

"Yeah. The dude who mentioned the Liberty Coin thing said he'd be back to check it out later. He's real interested."

"What? You got it with you?"

"Not on me. In the car."

"Could I see it? If I like it, I'll maybe make you an offer."

Dreadlocks stood up, pointed toward the door.

I didn't notice Mickey Pierce, who owned the Brew, until he was standing nearby, hovering over the book club and telling them they had to clear out if they weren't going to buy anything, which I thought was uncharacteristic of him to begin with and unfair to the young scholars altogether. In all my years of coming to his place, I'd never seen him get in anybody's business that didn't deserve it.

The blue-haired girl raised her ice coffee and took a loud, slow sip through her straw.

Mickey stepped behind the table to let the coin merchant and the antiquarian pass. The sipper's demonstration had not impressed him and her friends had nothing to show.

He fidgeted and told her, "There are people who've been waiting for twenty minutes to sit down." Then he walked away.

She looked crestfallen. Her mouth turned down and she said in a low, sort of one foot voice, "But this is my office."

They left and shortly thereafter a man wearing a poncho and a fedora entered. I had expected a stampede to the recently vacated spot. Given the horseshoe layout of the place, an unseen herd could have been forming on the other side, just waiting for an opening. But the man with the hat sailed to the vacant table onto which he dropped a red, spiral bound book before making his way to the counter to order.

He was a familiar East Side type. A little overweight, pushing 60, a van dyke for a beard. All of it white. He could have been an antiques dealer, a college professor, a folksinger, or a fraud. In any event, he had the table and I turned back to trying to put two and two together again.

Rare had been the opportunity to sit and ponder the recent course of events in my life, circumstances so extraneous to anything that would make a difference to anybody, as to be duller than a paper sack with a hole in it, yet here I was, finding reasons to be cheerful. I was discovering that I could take some satisfaction from being a fly on the wall. To me, this was no small thing.

I was giddy by the time dreadlocks returned, and I looked for the lover of rare and remarkable things to be right on his heels. But he returned alone, reeking of weed, and maybe it was there before, but something about the little gash under one of his eyes looked fresh. He slouched his way over to the man with the hat. Mickey Pierce popped up again too, and to my surprise, without any wandering customers in tow.

He nodded to both men and sat down with them, an odd pair turning into an even weirder trio. They spoke very quietly. At some point, dreadlocks placed a little plastic bag on the table. It was big enough to hold a cigarillo, or a coin. And it was empty.

"The money?" said the man in the hat.

Dreadlocks shook his head.

"If it wasn't for disappointment," the man continued. "I wouldn't have any..."

Mickey shushed him and dreadlocks pushed the empty bag across the table.

"Can I get you anything?" Mickey asked him.

"A chai latte and two almond biscotti, awwright?"

"I was thinking of your eye," said Mickey.

"Do I stutter?" said dreadlocks.

"Gotcha. And you?" Mickey said, turning to the other.

"No, no," he said tapping his coffee cup. Then, keeping his eyes on both of them, he reached into his pocket, dropped a shiny piece of change into the bag, returned the bag to dreadlocks and mouthed the words, *Right back at 'em tomorrow.*

They nodded their agreement.

Yeah man, I thought. That's all right, tomorrow is just fine with me.

