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Mr. Destitute

He kneels beside the free box on Peach Street, rifling through paperback books. Any and all books will do—the crack-spined crime thrillers, the sci-fi and fantasy, romance, Dostoyevsky, Albee, Austin, Elkin, Camus, and Kafka; the tattered editions of scrawled-upon poetry (Rilke, Baudelaire, Yeats); eight-step primers on financial, marital, and emotional health; religion and philosophy texts; anything—engineering, chemistry, these manuals for prompting computers. He stuffs six or eight finds in his jacket and, joints creaking, stands. Commuters flutter past, all rush and roar and brash headlights. The fluorescent lights vanish, row by row, inside the bookstore; a man scuttles back and forth with his keys.

He totters toward Sassafrass, clandestinely caressing his moldering books. There's no paper-wrapped bottle of port in his pocket, as with your typical bum. He doesn't drink. Mr. Destitute reads. From gnarl-fingered sunrise to garish sunset he reads, reads, reads. At the library, the donut shop, the bus station lobby, on stoop or park bench, or his bunk undercover, by flashlight, at Snore Central, the shelter. The printed word rules—nothing else is. He leaves a trail as he goes, small telltale signs, secreting just-read texts like a rat leaving droppings.

Here to the left, another blackened-brick factory, broken-windowed, weed-fringed. Mr. Destitute halts. To the right, pure wreck and rubble, crumbling squat cement buildings, mud, ambiguous rusty machinery. He hangs at the fence, chin wedged in the cyclone mesh. Citations resound in his head. Dickens, macro econ, Althusser, the average lives of tin roofs. Towns from his youth keep cropping up: Hollsopple, Slickville, Black Lick, and Leeper, clips from this or that moment. Getting smacked in the gut at the firemen's dance. Ennis his sister half-dressed, brushing her hair. Hot blacktop, alfalfa; ice breaking apart on the river. And sound bytes: *Drop that book I said and get your butt to the table!* He completed nearly a year of college, not the best college, but affordable, and with a sizable library. Eight months was plenty. He couldn't hack the backpatting, smiling, beer parties, or, for that matter, people; he couldn't swallow the used-car promises (security, fraternity, love); he tried, he chewed hard, he choked. He'd read too much, even that early. Detail by detail, "what for" overpowered "what if."

He shambles down Sassafrass, over cracks and upwells in the pavement, over bottle caps, shattered glass, matted mulberry leaves, wind stabbing his peacoat, his pantlegs.

Here again is the shop he'd noticed before—ACUPUNCTURE, reads the handpainted sign, misspelled, bold red on white. And underneath: ENERGY WORK. TUNE CHAKRAS. AURA REPAIRED. The shop windows are curtained, lit from within, ethereal, pale pink. He lingers, laden with books, listens a moment, grunts, and pulling a menthol butt from shirt pocket, eases onto the concrete step. Cars line the curb, snouts all pointing east. Smokestacks loom in the distance, smokeless, abandoned. Bats twitter, arcing and swerving. It's twilight, eventide, last post, dog-watch and cockshut. The violet hour. He strikes a match.

Up above, a door rattles. Mr. Destitute turns, slowly, exhaling smoke.

There's a man wearing white slippers, white socks, a long lavender robe. His hair, grayish, is bunched on his head in a bun. Chinese-style mustaches trail to his chest, silver-black, like lobster feelers. He looks familiar. He descends and, hitching his robe, squats before Mr. D on the walkway. It's the bookstore guy, Mr. D sees. In drag, with his hair up and fake feelers; obviously he moonlights as a healer. He squats, staring into Mr. D's pupils, lower lip twitching. Speak, he says.

A car hisses past. Bats swoop. A streetlight blinks on.

There was a woman, Mr. D murmurs. Large, raucous. A carnival of a woman. Ambered everything over for weeks.

But you turtled back, the man answers, tugging a feeler. Back inside. Safe there. Safer. And?

Mr. D sits thinking. A crusading aunt, he says finally. The niece . . .

To rehabilitate you.

Yes.

The man tilts forward to hear. And?

And it came to pass . . . that nothing would pass.

In his pockets the books begin humming. Goethe and Shakespeare and Garrison Keiller, Schopenhauer, Pliny the Younger; a battered guide to winter gardens; another on having babies at home. If he doesn't pull something out and read soon—well, who knows what'll happen. The man's staring him dead in the face, unflinching. Mr. D meets his gaze momentarily.

Hands off the books, the man orders.

Mr. D slides his paws from his peacoat, ready to reach for the sky, like in a dime western. The books hum all the harder. *Read me*, they titter. Wait, Mr. D sighs.

It's a people planet, the man says. Souls a-journey. Intersecting trajectories. Get it?

Mr. D trembles. Sweat appears at his hairline. In the beginning, he says—

Was the word, the man interrupts. Spoken. Not text.

Mr. D'd like to rise now and totter off—he tries, in fact—but he's grown incredibly heavy. The texts in his pockets, strangely, have converted to lead. His head, so weighty, so burdened, degree by degree tips toward the staircase. The man leans close, hovering, feelers astir.

Sell your cleverness. Buy bewilderment, he tells Mr. D.

Rumi, Mr. D groans.

Hush! the man hisses, palm raised to strike, then staggers, then rights himself, his cheeks going pink with compassion, or the light from his curtains. Bats thicken around

him, flitting and clicking, reciting their lists of ghosts. Blocks away, industrial smokestacks—unused for decades—belch flames in the gloaming. Tears gather in Mr. D's eyes, first time in ages. His face softens. But in his jacket, pure frenzy, there is no surrender. The books rumble, they shudder, they sputter and shake.

*We can save you! We can save you!* they shriek.