

Fool's Gold

“S’not much, but it’ll do ya this evenin.” Willy tossed a tin can on to the duffel bag that sat beside Eric. The sack was overstuffed. It bulged in spots like tumors do on an old dog, stretching the worn canvas thin.

“What have we here?” Eric said as he examined the can. Most of the metal ridges were filled with caked dirt, on one side adhesive clung to the scraps of what was once a label. A dent along the bottom caused the can to fold in on itself. It had probably been dropped a few times, but the weak spots made it easier to open with a knife.

“Hell if I know, but it’s food aint it? ‘Opefully one of them things of puppy chow again.” Willy flipped his knife open. “’fit is I’ll trade ya, meats meat I ‘spose!” He laughed obnoxiously and began to sit down. The cackling quickly turned in to harsh, guttural coughing fit and he spit out a wad of phlegm on the concrete at their feet. He turned to see the contents of Eric’s can.

“Beans. Kidneys I think.” Eric stirred the liquid with the rusted tip of his knife. “No, black beans.”

“Bah! Cranberry dressin’! Now see that’s jus’ your luck Eric! A big fella like yourself, you don’t need all that protein! No, you ‘ought to save it for us little guys. But here I am Eric, with this damn Cranberry dressin’ for the third time this week! ...‘Spose you won’t...”

“Dealers choice.” They traded. “Cheers.” The two clinked cans and put them to their mouths, drinking the food like a cold soda pop.

Eric sat back against the brick and let out a relaxing sigh. The sun was descending, but the heat lingered in the air like blankets of smoke in a still room. Slowly, the shade from the building grew, leaving only their feet exposed to the last of the day’s light. They sat along the

back side of the building so that they could face the river. This had been their home for a while now. A few months back, the YMCA realized that they didn't actually have membership, that they had just been going there to shower and watch television, so they upped their security. Port Street didn't have much to offer after that, so Willy suggested the river. There wasn't as much to gain from the outskirts of the city where the river ran; fewer shops meant less food laying around, but it also meant less people, which they both agreed was a fair trade. Neither of them cared for drugs or half-assed pity.

Willy cocked his head back and tapped the bottom of the can. A thin line of liquid dripped into his mouth, then he brought his tongue to opening and began licking what was left. He pulled the can away from his face and looked down at his long, wiry beard. His fingers dug deep into the beard, pulling out a black bean, then he popped it in his mouth like an after-dinner mint. He turned to boast about his findings, but Eric look disgusted.

“Ahh get ova' yourself! Yer too prideful.” He wafted Eric's disgust away with his hand.

Willy's time on the streets outweighed his time under any roof. Decades of dirty fingernails and soiled food had robbed him of a sense of dignity. He was certain he could stomach the bones of an animal, easily. Mold was just penicillin to him, and tree sap was just as good as chewing gum. Eric said it was a wonder he was still alive.

The sun now hid on the other side of the mountains like a child would behind their parent's leg; timid, peering around just enough to let their radiance be known. The crisp blue background had faded into an array of colors that reminded them of autumn, and all at once the day seemed to calm down. The heat was not as sticky, and their tummies were not as grumbly.

They gazed out on the water flowing through the river in front of them, taking in the silence of the calm evening.

“It’s getting late.” Eric said. Neither of them moved, but the ripple of his voice broke the stillness and they were now both fully aware of the present moment. They tried to absorb what was left of it. Willy cleared his throat as if to prepare himself for speaking, but held his breath for a moment and exhaled the dismissed thought. Instead, he reached his two arms in front of him and stretched, yawned with his mouth gaping wide, and let out a sigh before committing back to the present. Eric was fixated back on the river.

“I guess I’ll bathe.” And without stretching or yawning, or any contorting of his face, Eric stood up. He stood beside the now sprawled out Willy and began taking off his shoes. The bank of the river was just across a paved bicycle path and down a short, well-worn trail. He set his shoes down next to the duffel bag and set out towards the path.

“Jus’ remember Eric! Kids come crawlin’ ‘round after supper, don’t want one of them to catch you playin’ with yerself!” Willy shouted, cupping his hands around his mouth. He let out a thunderous cackle and wrapped both his arms around his gut to mend the premeditated ache from such a *hilarious* thought.

“Christ.” In the distance, Eric could hear Willy’s laughing turn into another coughing fit, but he was not amused by the joke. In fact, Eric found most of his jokes to be crude and immature, but their lives before had been much, much different and Willy was nice enough once all was said and done.

Once at the bank, Eric took a deep breath, finally having a moment entirely to himself. The river emitted a cool breeze, which felt nice in the heat of the summer. Along the bank there

were clusters of Aspens and Cottonwood trees in bouts of greenery that provided *some* concealment, depending on which angle you stood at. Some of the trees were alive and standing proud, some had been knocked down in windstorms and had been left to rot over the years. To the right, the foliage was dense like a forest and the trail continued for miles, splitting off into different paths along the way. This was the side that Eric preferred to bathe on. He was out of Willy's eyeshot, and the swim upstream gave him a chance to exercise his muscles daily.

After scanning the river, Eric took off his stolen YMCA tee-shirt and folded it neatly along the rock beside him. Although he did not condone thievery... it *was* a comfy shirt. And technically, it was the only tee-shirt that he had. Most people who go homeless still have a few keepsakes from their previous lives, but Eric had next to nothing. He started out wearing a cashmere sweater, jeans, and some sneakers. Willy convinced him to sell the "rich boy sweater" after he snagged him the tee-shirt one afternoon.

He unbuttoned his pants and pulled each leg out individually, careful not to brush his sandy foot along the pantleg. He folded them and set them on top of the shirt, now standing completely naked. His brown hair hung unsuspected along his back, reaching the bottom of his shoulder blades. Although he lived outside, he maintained a moderate appearance. His muscles once bulged along his arms and thighs, but were now suited to his body, minimal and smooth.

The cool water flowed freely through the middle of the river, occasionally diverted by the large boulders that were covered in algae. The riverbed was home to the rocks after all, the water that waxed and waned through the year was just a passer-by. On the banks, the rocks were clustered together and formed small pools that filled with a disgusting concoction of driftwood, foam, and littered trash. The decaying plants smelt like rotten eggs, but Eric thought it was generally more pleasant than Willy's funk.

Every couple of yards, the rocks along the banks were further apart from each other and made room for little patches of sand. These patches typically aligned with the trails leading from the bicycle path and made for an easy entrance into the river. Minnows and water skippers liked to hang out in this area, but they quickly scattered as soon as Eric stepped into the water. His feet sunk into the impressions in the sand and kicked up a cloud of underwater dust with each step. He gradually made his way into the middle of the river, easing his warm body into the cool surrounding. Eric, in his delicate demeanor, thought about all the ruckus Willy made when he would come to bathe. Splashing the water about, trying to catch trout with his *bare hands*, belly flops on nothing but skin and ribs. He winced at the thought of calling it 'bathing'.

The water was up to his chest now and the strong current made it difficult for him to keep a firm footing, so Eric kicked off an underwater rock and began to swim upstream. He intermitted from fast, overhead strokes to submerging himself underwater and relying on the tread of his legs alone. Within a few minutes, his clothes looked more like a colorful blob in the distance than a neatly folded pile. He found his way to a rock in the middle and stood behind it so that the water split off on either side of him, finally able to stand comfortably. He propped his elbows up on the rock and leaned back, taking in the beauty of the sunset.

Suddenly, his concentration on the evening sky was broken by a splash off in the distance. He looked towards the splash, but it was too far out to see the ripples. It was not uncommon for fish to jump up out of the water, he thought, but before his mind settled, the water plopped up again a short distance from the first one. This time he saw the rock. He unpropped his arms and stood on his tip toes to get a better view. Then another one, and more rocks that were now actually skipping along the surface. Two people emerged from the bushes and walked up to the

bank of the river. One squatted down to collect more rocks while the other kept throwing the ones in their hand.

“Shit.” Eric sunk deeper into the water, his long hair spreading out along the surface like the petals of a flower.

They were too far down stream for him to really see, but thankfully, he thought, they had not seen him. The few times he had encountered people during his nude swims made him anxious, but their visits were always awkwardly short once they noticed him. Most people found solace in the calm river and rarely wanted to swim in the company of a stranger. He thought about hiding on the other side of the rock until they left, but it was getting dark soon and he didn't want to get trapped out in the water. So he decided to swim around a little, hoping that his known presence would force another awkward shuffle back down the trail they came from. Unfortunately, this was not the case.

Eric swam to the other side of the river, letting the current take him downstream slightly. He could now make these people out to be boys, teenagers that were probably both in high school. Their hawk eyes immediately shot to Eric and they too began sizing up this water lurker. Something about their stance made Eric uneasy; they were firm and unmoving. Maybe, he thought, that they believed they had gotten there first and were trying to will him away with their unwelcomed glare. Eric's timidity overcame him, and he sunk back into the river so that the water flowed along the tops of his shoulders.

One of the boys hit the other in the arm and pointed out towards Eric, as if the second boy had not already noticed. Their eyes were unmoving, squinting even, to try and make something

of this floating head. They started talking to each other but against the running water Eric could not make out words, until they shouted.

“Hey! Show us your tits!” The taller boy yelled. The smaller boy laughed a little, and bashfully turned to the ground. He started back at Eric through the tops of his eyes, his head still slightly cocked down.

Eric was stunned! He felt a sudden surge of warm blood rush through his cold flesh. His uncomfortability forced him to cave further into himself and he instinctively wrapped his hands around his lower half under the water. This reserved movement disappointed the boys.

“Hey it’s okay! We don’t bite!” The taller boy cupped his hands around his mouth, “We promise!”. The smaller boy had regained his confidence and was now standing upright, prepared for the show. Eric did not move. The water pushed his long flowing hair downstream in front of him, and just then he realized that they probably *actually* thought that he was a woman.

The taller boy, now a little irritated at Eric’s modesty, rolled his eyes and turned his head to the side, now gazing further upstream. Something along the bank caught the boy’s eye, he hit the smaller ones shoulder, and nodded with his chin in the direction of his discovery. They were now both staring upstream, no longer mesmerized by the potentially naked lady before them. Eric sighed, relieved that they were not staring at him anymore.

“Last chance girly!” The smaller boy now speaking up. Their interest in whatever was upstream seemed suddenly more appealing than him. Eric took this as a good sign and hoped that they would leave if he just stayed put.

After waiting a couple of seconds, they receded back to the bushes that they came from. Finally, Eric thought, they were gone. He unclenched his jaw and could feel himself begin to

relax. He thought about Willy, and what sort of commotion he would have caused to scare the boys off. He would have probably showed him *his* willy.

Just as Eric had settled back into the calm of the river, the boys appeared again. This time, they were closer.

“God dammit.” he said under his breath, he sunk back into the river. He slowly started to walk backwards, upstream, so that they would have a harder time swimming out to him.

“Where ya going?” The taller boy shouted. “Don’tcha want these?” In one hand, the boy held out the only pair of clothes that Eric owned. He menacingly wiggled them out in front of his face, then the boys turned around and took off, back down the trail, and deeper into the forest.

“No, *SHIT!*” Eric immediately stood up and stepped on the rock next to him to dive into the middle of the river. He kicked off frantically, slipping on the algae and belly flopped back into the river beneath him.

“Shit, shit, shit!” The adrenaline surged through his body, he flopped his arms through the water trying desperately to reach the bank. As soon as he could stand again, he ran through the shallow water and up onto the sandy beach in which he first entered from. Embarrassment pierced through his body as he realized he was again standing completely butt naked. He entertained the thought briefly before sprinting back down the trail and into the forest after those boys.

The packed dirt along the trail made for an easy first few steps, but the diverge into the forest drew the line between a casual stroll and an expedition. The path was covered with worn leaves, miscellaneous sediment, and branches; some yielding to their guests, others that would

leave marks warning them to go back. Eric had no choice but to endure all these things without protection.

In the distance he could hear branches cracking and the intentional stomping of the boys that they knew would draw the naked body closer. They did not sound far off, he thought, but the density of his surroundings obscured his view, and he was not able to locate them. This of course also meant that they weren't able to see him either, which was a slightly comforting thought. Eric cupped his groin with one hand and began to run, following the sound of their shuffling feet. He tried to swipe away the branches that dipped down in front of him, his free hand gliding along the flexible twigs until it reached the end. Some were too short and would come back to whip him, leaving slashes along his face and arms. His eyes darted from the branches to the ground, trying carefully not to trip or step on any rocks. But the pads on his feet did little to cushion what he couldn't evade, and soon the tenderness forced him to slow down. Between his breathing and the rustling of his own stride, he had lost track of the boys. He came to a full stop, straining to listen for movement but all he could hear was the water running through the river in the distance. He fixed his ears to focus on the sounds of the forest, but nothing seemed to move. The thumping of his heartbeat echoed in the eerie silence of the trees, his feet in searing pain.

“Hey sweet cheeks! You came out!” Before he could turn to face the voice, his other hand reached for his groin. He was bound by his vulnerability; he tucked his shoulders in closer to his chest and bent forward slightly to hide as much of his body as he could. He could feel their eyes staring at his naked butt. He finally turned to face the inevitable.

“Nice as—Oh what the hell!?” The taller boy turned his head to the side and shielded his face with his hand.

“Dude!” The smaller boy hit the others arm, “He said it was a chick!”

“He looks like a chick!” Eric felt relieved by their mortification. The taller boy turned back and scolded Eric with his now unshielded face.

“You frickin’ pervert!” His disgusted look made Eric feel ashamed, but he didn’t know why. His head dropped a little, then he saw his tee shirt and jeans, secured in the boy’s clenched fist.

“...Please...” Eric bent over even further and reached his hand out for the clothes.

“Oh these?” The boy glanced down at the clothes and without a second thought, he threw them high into a neighboring Aspen tree. The tee shirt blew open in the air and latched on to the leaves almost immediately. The pants unfolded around a thick branch, flipped around, and continued to fall another few feet before being snagged. The boys turned around and started heading back towards the path where they came from. Before running off, the smaller one looked back at Eric and stuck his middle finger up.

“Yeah, and *I’m* the pervert.” Eric thought out loud. He stared at the boys until their figures were just humming blobs, swerving between the trees, and eventually disappearing in the dusk. Then he glanced up at his clothes, and for the first time he noticed the eye-like knots along the Aspen tree that seemed to be staring back at him. The dark sockets wrapped around the trunk, watching the forest from every angle. He looked beyond the tree and saw another with the same observant nodes, and beyond that another. Most of the trees were smooth and stalky. They stood close beside each other, some conjoined at the base like a child resting on their mother’s hip. Towards the top, the trunk grew an array of thin, wiry branches. The vibrant green leaves dangled and wisped around in a way that made it look like they were trembling. The white bark

seemed to glow against the darkening sky, and Eric could not decide whether he felt uncomfortable or soothed in their presence, uneasy at the thought of removing his hands.

His clothes had been thrown with impressive force. The jeans dangled along the trunk, hooked by a broken branch about a quarter of the way up. Eric thought about trying to climb up to fetch them, but there was nothing to grab on to, and the soles of his feet were too wounded to try and scale the tree on his own. He decided his only option would be to look for a branch that could aid in his retrieval. The forest floor was littered with clusters of ferns, broken tree limbs that were covered in moss and cobwebs, and the sandy dirt from along the river. He followed the path deeper into the forest, desperate to find a sizable stick before night fell.

“Huh?” Down a trail to his left, Eric caught a glimpse of wood that was unlike the abundant milky bark around him. “A post?” He turned and followed the trail.

A few yards in, this path became much more distinguished from the others. The ferns bordered the sides in an unnatural way, the soil looked as though it had been leveled at some point, and the trees grew tighter together here than anywhere else in the forest. Eric was closing in on the post, which he could now tell sat along the corner of a bend where the path continued. He wondered whether or not he should keep going; afraid of wasting time wondering down a dead-end path, afraid of it getting dark before he was able to retrieve his garments. But most of all, something about the trees, those eye-like nodes that seemed to watch his every move intimidated him, and inside him grew a fear that he might stumble upon something that he didn't want to find. He stared back down the entrance where he came from and around at the watchful trees, then continued down the pampered trail, overcome by curiosity.

Eric rounded the corner and came to a sudden halt. Even against the dim lit sky, he could clearly see a structure that was made from the same dark, splintering wood as the post; a building about the size of a shed. The path turned from dirt to carefully laid river stone and weaved through an overgrown garden that thrived among the abandoned plot. The two windows in front had been poorly covered leaving slits between the crooked boards, revealing the dark interior. The door hung slightly ajar, clinging to rusted hinges that barely hung onto the rotten wood. The swelling fear that initially overcame Eric seemed to subside as he realized this place had been deserted long ago. In the corner of his eye, he saw a patch of dainty white flowers that grew around an old wooden bench.

“Chamomile? Here?” Eric walked over to inspect the plant. From this angle, he could really see the vastness of the garden, and all of the various plants that inhabited it. A lavender bush that hummed with a consistent cycle of busy bees, rosemary and sage plants that had just begun shedding their delicate purple buds; it was an herb garden. Eric followed the stone path to the crumpling building and noticed a plump red strawberry hiding under the leaves of a bush that clung to the side of the wooden wall. He felt like Adam in the Garden of Eden, naked, and for once able to eat fresh food.

“God, Willy is going to love this place.” He said as he bit into a strawberry. The red juice dripped from his mouth down on to his chin. He wiped his face and licked his stained fingertips. It was the first strawberry he had had in years.

Just as he spoke, a wave of ravenousness came over him and planted a seed in his mind.

“He *would* love this place...” He glanced at the strawberries. The patch was big, but not *that* big, he thought. He sat in contemplation.

“No-no...” He shook his head and stood up. As he came to his feet, his eyes locked with that of another Aspen tree’s and he suddenly felt guilty for even thinking such a thing.

He started back toward the front of the building and reached for the door. The crack was big enough for him to squeeze through, and he didn’t want to risk pulling the door right off, so he slipped in and entered the dark, musky shed. There was nothing in it except a wooden workbench that looked like it had been made from the scraps of the building. The faint light that shone through the cracks in the window revealed scribbled writing along the top; “M+S 2011 <3”, “PENIS”, with a lewd drawing in place of the ‘I’, and another drawn out quote carved in sharp, rigid letters; “He who wants everything will lose everything”. Eric stared at the letter with a hollow feeling in his heart, then scoffed. He walked out of the shed and heading back down the path.

It was well into the evening now, and Eric was still roaming through the forest naked. His fear of losing daylight was met, and even the bark from the Aspen trees could not make up for lost time. He wondered around the trails, attempting to retrace his steps, and trying to remember which tree his clothes were in, but everything blended in with the clusters of leaves against the dark sky. If he didn’t get back soon, he thought, he would surely get lost in the forest. So he cupped his groin once again and followed the sound of the river.

He emerged from the bushed where he first entered and looked out on to the calm river.

“God, what a day.” He walked back down the well-worn trail towards the bicycle path.

Willy was sprawled out, like usual, with his legs kicked up onto the duffel bag. He was mumbling a song to himself while tapping his foot to the beat. He had not yet noticed Eric, who

was standing nearby admiring his obliviousness. He was a little relieved to see Willy's familiar face.

"Hey." Eric said, "Can I borrow some clothes?"

Willy jumped, startled by the sudden intrusion. He scrambled to face Eric who stood there, covering his lower half. He leaned forward a little, squinting, turned his face to see Eric with his good eye, then *erupted* with laughter. Eric's cheeks flushed bright red.

"Yeah, yeah" Eric rolled his eyes, but Willy could hardly contain himself.

He cackled loud like a hyena, gasping for breath between each snort. He slapped his knees with both hands and kicked his feet in a rhythmic pattern, *really* relishing in his misfortune. Eric was beginning to get a little annoyed, the relief of seeing him quickly faded as he was reminded of Willy's true, obnoxious self.

"Look can I just—" but Willy cut him off,

"You- You—Bahah!" Willy started another round of laughing and continued to kick. His coughing fit soon caught up to him, but the laughing dragged on, even through the phlegmy hacks, he wheezed and wiped tears from his eyes.

"Did ya—" He could barely speak without snickering, "Did you show 'em yer tits?! Bahaha!" His amusement was relentless.

"Did I wha—wait what did you say?" Eric's face turned hot, his eyebrows pushed together, he stared at Willy with disgust.

“The boys, right?! Two—” He laughed, “Two boys, right?! I told ‘em you’d show ‘em yer tits! Bahaha! They think you were a girl?” His eyes welled with tears, he wrapped his arms around his torso, still gasping for breath.

Eric stood, glaring down at the revolting body that squirmed around on the ground. He felt humiliated, disgusted, betrayed, his whole body shook with anger. He thought about going up and smacking him, kicking him, screaming at him to “*Shut the HELL up!*”, but all he could do was sit there and watch the *freak* wear himself out. When the laughing turned to a dull, lingering giggle, Eric spoke up.

“Look, do you have extra clothes or not?” Willy wiped another tear from his face.

“Sure buddy, you can borrow mine!” He started unbuttoning his flannel, “But I ain’t showin you my tits!” He erupted, once again.

Once Eric was dressed, he sat down and leaned his back against the brick. He stared out into the dark nothingness and clenched his fists.

“Whew! Eric, pal, I ain’t had a laugh like that fer a *long* time!” Willy punched his shoulder, then he shuffled around and laid on the concrete, giggling to himself ever so slightly. He tucked his arm under his head and exhaled.

“Well, g’night Eric.” he said and drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, Willy woke up to the sun shining in his face. The birds that perched in the in the Cottonwood and Aspen trees that lined the river called out to each other, and the rest of the city announcing the daybreak. Willy stammered around towards the edge of the bicycle path to take his morning piss. He leaned his hand against the tree and chuckled a little, recalling last

night's events. He zipped his pants back up and rubbed the sleep from his eyes as he walked back to the brick building.

“G’mornin’ Eric you—Eric?” He glanced towards Eric’s spot, but it was vacant.

“Hm.” Willy walked down to the bank and stared out towards the free-flowing river, but there was nobody around.

“Eric...?”