

October 12, 2022. 4:14 PM.

The first thing I want to say, above all else, is that I hate the homeless. Literally and figuratively. Everyone says that we should help the homeless, but I think that is a terrible idea. An absolute waste of time and money. Maybe that's a Problematic thought, maybe not. I don't even know anymore, but all I know is I think it's a bad idea.

Pretty much anything else you could possibly think of to do with resources would be a better use of resources than helping the homeless. Like, anything at all. Build a giant staircase into the heavens that goes nowhere. Buy every polar bear from every zoo in the world and put them in a giant arena and have them all fight to the death. Pretty much anything that isn't helping the homeless is a better idea than helping the homeless. The homeless are beyond help. The homeless are a lost cause. Everyone needs to stop worrying about them. Maybe we could have them all secretly killed.

I say this because at this moment, I am sitting in a parked car on the corner of NW 4th and Couch Street, watching a homeless woman take a giant soft-serve shit on the sidewalk while peeing and singing to herself. I don't know what she's singing. I can't tell. All I know is that, eons ago, in a time I can barely remember, I watched 2girls1cup.wmv and laughed at it, but now I don't want to laugh anymore.

“O-oh my!”

Flutterbutts appears in the passenger seat next to me. She seems horrified by what she's seeing. I can't say that I blame her. I'm only slightly less horrified myself, probably because I watched 2girls1cup.flv in order to prepare myself for this, although I hadn't known at the time that it was training. Everything in life is training. Everything in this world is connected. I take a sip of Monster™ Zero Ultra™ to steel myself for my trials ahead.

“You see?” I ask. The woman, meanwhile, pinches off a last steamy beef log and begins rubbing a newspaper along the inside of her crack. She is still singing. “Do you see the ultimate futility of your Marxist ideals? What role would you assign this person, where would she fit into the intricate clockwork of your ideal society?”

“I...I...I...” She can only stammer. Her long and sensuous pink mane flows around her graceful neck. She sits back on her hindquarters and wraps her wings about her as if to ward off the horrible sight, yet she can't look away. Tears well up in her eyes. I'm not going to lie, it's giving me about half a chub to see her like this, even as the homeless woman scrapes the remaining stank off of her rancid crack with a copy of *The Asian Reporter*.

The homeless woman tosses the newspaper aside and begins wandering aimlessly up and down

the street. Her pants are still down around her ankles, and still she sings, a wordless, atonal caterwauling that I eventually recognize as “Freebird” by Lynyrd Skynyrd. I'm surprised she knows that song. I'm surprised anyone knows that song. I'm surprised I know that song. All recorded copies of music designated Problematic have long since been purged from iTunes™, and there is no other legal way to obtain music.

“Ohmygahd! Thas fuggin disgusding!”

An inebriated voice howls from somewhere nearby. I turn my head around to see. On the other side of the street is a tall, thin, scraggly man of about my age. From the intoxicated tone I'd been expecting to see another homeless guy, but this guy clearly has money. You can tell because he's dressed like a homeless guy.

My iPhone™ beeps beside me. I reach down and examine the screen. Looks like the guy I'm supposed to pick up won't be needing my services after all. Slow day I guess. I switch the app off and return my attention to the scene unfolding before me.

* *CRACK.* * * *SMASH.* *

A glass bottle flies through the air, bonks off the homeless woman's head, and breaks into pieces on the ground. Instantly, the chorus to “Freebird” turns into a long, unbroken howl of confusion and pain. Not much different from when she was singing, really, but somehow there is a palpable change in her tone. I turn to see the thin scraggly guy shouting obscenities and waving his middle finger in the air.

“Shudthafugup, you stubid bitch!”

“Hey, what the fuck, did you just throw a bottle at her?”

The voice of a nearby pedestrian cuts through. As the woman collapses to the ground, holding her head in her hands and howling, various fluids once more spurting from various orifices, a small crowd begins to form. This situation looks like it could get ugly.

Meanwhile the guy, who dimly seems to realize that he might have overreacted a little, is swaying nervously from side to side, scratching his head as if in befuddlement at his own actions, as the pedestrians encircle the homeless woman. A few of them turn their attention to the guy, who would be walking quickly away right now if he had any common sense. Unfortunately he doesn't look as if he does.

Angry murmurs from the surrounding crowd begin to boil over into shouts and accusations. Several of the pedestrians, mostly obese women I notice, begin to turn their attention to the confused man across the street. I've got the windows rolled up, but I can make out a few words. “Privilege.” “OhmygodIcanteven.” “Problematic.”

“Holy crap, is that guy going to catch a beatdown?”

Rainbow Darsh appears in the back seat and peers over my shoulder.

“Yeah, probably,” I say, watching as several of the pedestrians begin to advance on the poor befuddled man. I start my engine.

I'm about to pull away, when a strange impulse seizes me. I roll down my window.

“Hey man, did you call for an Uber™?”

Several people turn their attention away from the guy, giving him a momentary reprieve from the mob justice about to be inflicted upon him. Our eyes lock. He stares drunkenly at me for a second, as if failing to understand what I meant. Then, suddenly, the lights click on and he stumbles quickly toward my vehicle.

“Hey! Get back here shitlord!”

One of the heavy harpies notices their quarry escaping, and makes a failed grab for the back of his shirt with a flabby claw. The rest of the crowd stands motionless, but I know the indecision will only last so long. I'm putting myself in a pretty dangerous situation here, really. This guy is a Fucking White Male, who has been deemed Problematic and sentenced to do penance. I'm a Fucking White Male too, and if the crowd decides I'm aiding and abetting there's not much I can do to save myself that doesn't involve vehicular homicide.

“Holy shit dude what are you even doing?”

Rainbow Darsh is snickering unhelpfully in the back seat. Flutterbutts is still shaking and rocking back and forth in the front seat, her wings wrapped around her. The poor dear looks pretty deliciously traumatized; I'd probably have more than a half chub right now if I didn't have more pressing things to worry about.

I flip off the lock on my doors just as the guy grabs the handle. He tumbles into the back seat and I slide the gearshift into Drive just as the door closes. A couple of tubby lasses seem to have figured out what's going on and are waddling towards us, but I maneuver deftly around them. Tires screech as I lurch around the corner, and just like that the danger is behind us.

The guy groans drunkenly from the back seat. Why am I even doing this? He's not a real fare; if he pukes then I won't be able to work again until it's cleaned, and good luck getting reimbursed.

“Hey man, if you're thinking about puking back there, don't.”

“Immalright,” the guy mumbles. “I'm sobrin up.”

“Yeah, whatever. Where am I taking you?”

“Tage me home.”

He doesn't elaborate.

“Where's home? I don't know where you live, dumbass.”

The guy gives me an address in the Pearl. As I thought, he's got money. Young, rich, drunk and stupid; figures. Well, whatever, it's not like I'm doing anything better today. Fortunately his place isn't far from here.

I drive a few blocks and pull up in front of a swanky postmodern apartment complex. One of those bulky, boxy designs that's mostly glass and metal, designed to look like it was cobbled together out of yard debris, where a studio the size of a closet probably rents for a month's worth of my income.

I glance in the mirror. The guy is splayed out on the backseat, his eyes half closed, breathing noisily through his mouth. Rainbow Darsh tries to nudge him awake with a hoof, but of course he doesn't feel anything.

“Hey!”

He opens his eyes.

“Here we are.”

It takes him a couple of seconds to figure out what I'm saying, but when he looks out the window and sees his apartment building he seems to put the pieces together.

“Okay, thangs alot buddy.”

He stumbles out of my car, fumbles in his pocket, turns and tosses some money and a business card through my half-open window.

“We shoul'hangout someday.”

He turns and stumbles up to the front door. It takes him a painfully long time to fish out his key fob thingie to let himself in. However, eventually he manages to get the door open and go inside. As soon as the door closes, my good deed is done for the day.

I turn my attention to what he threw in my car. I uncrumple the bill and see the stout face of Alexander Hamilton staring back up at me. Ten bucks. Wow, big spender.

I pick up the business card and examine it.

“Elroy R. Tennbox. Executive Coordinator.”

The address is on the other side of the river. Business is called “Splash.” Never heard of it. His title sounds like a makework job, but then again most of them are these days. Well, whatever. I toss the card in my glovebox, where receipts, business cards, and other things I'll never look at again go to be forgotten.

Briefly I consider hunting around for more fares, but I decide I've had enough excitement for the day. Besides, it's slow. I put the car back in Drive, and head off toward home. Elroy R. Tennbox. The name sticks in my head for some reason.

January 9, 2023. 10:42 AM.

“Tadaima!”

I stroll in through the front door, a bag of groceries in my arms. Rainbow Darsh is lazing on the couch. She raises her head in annoyance as I step inside.

“Jeez, will you pipe down with that weeaboo crap? The neighbors already think you're weird. And close the door.”

“Stop being tsundere, baby. You know you love it.”

I take her advice and close the door. I slide the bolt into place and set the bag of groceries on the floor. Rainbow flaps her wings and floats over to the bag, rummaging around inside.

“Doritos™, white bread, peanut butter, Smuckers Strawberry Fruit Preserves™, Mountain Dew™. Same as last week. Jeez, how are you even still alive?”

I shrug.

“It's the breakfast of champions. Want to help me put it away?”

The look on her face shows that she is not amused.

I whistle to myself as I put the groceries away. My commieblock apartment is barely large enough to have a kitchen, but there's an area in the corner with a tiny stove rescued from the previous century and a sink, and some shoddily-built cabinets nailed to the wall over an old fridge. I put the chips and the bread in the cabinets, and pull open the door to the fridge. A familiar, unpleasant aroma that I think may be related to some takeout that's been in there a while wafts out, encouraging me to quickly conclude my business there. I trade my new bottle of Mountain Dew™ for a half-empty cold one and shut the door.

I shuffle over towards the couch, expertly navigating my way around the empty pizza boxes and two liter bottles scattered around the floor. I throw some mindless moeblob anime onto the TV and grab my laptop off the coffee table.

My emails are about as exciting as they were yesterday. A local politician has personally reached out to me because she knows I care about the environment. Someone with piss-poor grammar wants to help make my penis larger. Dominoes™ wonders if they can tempt me with some mouth-watering cinna sticks.

Sadly, nobody seems interested in hiring the services of Tips Fedora, Private Dick. Can't say I'm surprised, but I usually check anyway. My PI business is nowhere near as successful as my transportation business. My transportation business, incidentally, is nowhere near as successful as my

primary business, which is mostly collecting neetbox and watching anime, but what the hell. I wonder if I should stop marketing myself as a “Private Dick;” it could be sending the wrong impression.

I stop scrolling for a second.

“Tennbox, Elroy.”

I read the name field of the message out loud. The subject header just says “Drinks.” Doesn't look like a work offer, but the name sounds familiar for some reason. I glance at the coffee table my unwashed feet are currently resting on and notice a crinkled ten dollar bill sticking out from underneath a plate. A dim memory slowly floats to the surface of my brain, an image of a drunk man about to be pummeled by a mob of corpulent roasties. I drove him home as I recall, about three months ago.

“Oh, yeah. That guy. Wonder what he wants?”

I skim the email. It's pretty straightforward, guy wants to have lunch today. Wants me to pick him up at work around one. I glance at the clock; I could probably manage that. Didn't really have anything else planned for today, at any rate. I wonder how he even remembers me. No idea how he found me; he gave me his card but I never told him my name and I never tried to contact him. I reach out and pick up the ten dollar bill.

“What is that?” asks Flutterbutts, materializing on the couch next to me.

“It's a portrait of Hamilton,” I say, holding the bill up to the light.

She squints at it curiously, and then wrinkles her nose in distaste.

“Money is the opiate of the capitalist bourgeoisie,” says Flutterbutts. “You shouldn't have accepted that.”

“I shouldn't do a lot of things,” I said, “And in any case, the money I make is what pays for the roof over your head.”

“You get this place for free,” calls out Rainbow Darsh from the sleeping nook.

“Nobody asked you,” I shout back.

January 9, 2023. 1:18 PM.

I glance at the address on the business card one more time and back at the numbers on the old brick building. This is definitely the place, although if it wasn't for the word “Splash” lettered on the glass of the door in some art-deco font I'd never have known there was even a business here. The building is an old industrial-looking brick warehouse, although I doubt there's been any wares housed in here for at least half a century. Faded white paint on the side of the wall advertises the name of some long-forgotten company that probably built this place God knows when. Light rain patters down,

running rivulets down the moss-stained bricks. I wonder what “Splash” does exactly? Probably a bunch of self-important hipster broads moving piles of imaginary money around; that's about all any business around here is these days.

I pull open the door and head inside. The interior lobby is painted bright blue, with unframed photos of bicycle parts printed on canvas hanging in a neat row along the wall. A couple of uncomfortable looking but apparently stylish chairs are arranged around a beat up old coffee table with some design magazines spread out on top. An unfriendly looking person with lime green hair whose gender is probably a touchy subject is sitting behind an ugly metal desk, staring at the screen of an iMac™ and purposely ignoring me.

“Hello?”

Xe looks up, visibly annoyed.

“Yes?”

“Hi, Tips Fedora here to see Elroy.”

Xir taps xens fingers against the desk, making an annoying drumming noise.

“Who?”

“Tips Fedora.”

“No, I mean the other name. Who is Elroy?”

“Elroy Tennbox.” I pull out the business card. “He works here. I'm meeting him for lunch.”

Xenu glances at the card and frowns disdainfully.

“Oh. You mean Samantha's husband. Yeah, I'll call him for you.”

Xerox™ quickly taps out some kind of internal communication and fires it off with the click of a mouse.

“He'll be out shortly.”

I nod pleasantly and rock back and forth on my heels, hands in the pockets of my trench coat. Xylophone glowers at me.

“You're welcome to take a seat.”

I smile and tip my fedora, and head off toward one of the uncomfortable looking chairs.

“What's that guy's problem?”

Rainbow Darsh materializes, floating angrily around the room and glowering at X the Eliminator. Obviously I can't answer her.

I thumb through one of the magazines, disinterestedly flipping through images from what apparently passes for an art exhibition these days. I'm trying to make sense out of a photograph of a man with nipple rings sexually harassing a toilet, when Elroy appears in the hallway.

“Tips!”

He addresses me like an old friend, even though this is only the second time in my life I've ever spoken to him. However, I accept the greeting pleasantly and stand up, tossing the art magazine back on the table.

“Hey there, Elroy. Long time no see.”

He nods, and turns to address the chupacabra sitting at the desk.

“Steph, we're stepping out for a bit.”

Xenocryst shoots him a rather unpleasant looking fake smile and says nothing. Elroy looks as if he's about to say something more, then apparently changes his mind and gestures to me.

“Shall we go?”

I shrug indifferently and follow him out onto the street. I can feel X gon' give it to ya glaring daggers into my back as we head outside.

January 9, 2023. 1:31 PM.

Rain drums softly against the roof of my Jeep™. The windshield wipers swish rhythmically back and forth. Smooth jazz music toots pleasantly out of the stereo. “Songbird,” written and performed by Kenneth Bruce Gorelick, from the 1986 album *Duotones*. Designated Problematic in June of 2019 for reasons of Cultural Appropriation and removed from iTunes™. If Elroy R. Tennbox is upset at my playing contraband on my stereo he doesn't say anything. He sits in the passenger seat, glowering moodily out the window.

He hasn't said anything since we got in the car. I don't say anything either. I barely know this guy; I've got no reason to try to fill the air with pointless small talk. If he wants to talk, he can talk. If not, I'm no worse off than I would be if I were driving alone.

“You married, buddy?” he says suddenly.

I glance over and shoot him an irritated look. I don't mind driving him around or keeping him company if that's what he wants, but I'll be damned if I let anyone talk to me like a cabby when I'm not being paid.

“You know, I don't think we've been introduced,” I tell him. “My name's Tips Fedora. You can call me Tips, or you can call me Mr. Fedora; your choice. If you're looking for a ride and someone to unload your problems on, I'm probably cheaper than a shrink. Just let me know so I can flip the meter on.”

He glances back and seems to realize that he was being rude.

“Sorry. I wasn't trying to be a dick,” he says. “I've just got a lot on my mind these days. You want to get something to eat?”

“Sure. You got a place in mind, or are you good with one of my haunts?”

“Any place that serves booze.”

Somehow that doesn't surprise me.

January 9, 2023. 2:17 PM.

About an hour we're sitting at a table in a little lunch place I enjoy, scarfing down kalua pig and mac salad and drinking some sort of fancy craft beer. Elroy's had six of them; I've had one. The guy can really put them away, and after about fifteen minutes of listening to his woes it's pretty easy to figure out why. He's not a complicated man, just unhappy. Kind of a moody prick, morbid sense of humor, but he'd probably even out if the right woman ever came along. There's probably a million guys just like him walking around at any given moment.

Unfortunately for him, the right woman is probably not going to come along, or if she does it's a shame for him, because he's stuck with the wrong one. He never mentions his wife's name, but I remember La Creatura back at the office referring to her as Samantha. She sounds like a real piece of work; I take a moment to thank White American Jesus that I had the good sense to skip the dating game and settle down with a pair of nice equine hallucinations.

He talks a lot about Samantha. Well, to be honest, he talks pretty much exclusively about her, and none of it is pleasant. He gets louder and angrier the drunker he gets, but I doubt he'd raise his voice like this at home. It's pretty easy to see that Elroy R. Tennbox is an empty shell, a poor, bedraggled man on a leash whose only comfort in life is getting good and soused. In spite of that, though, I find to my surprise that I like him, so I don't mind too much when he orders another round.