

Street Theater

This really happened down in Five Points, out on the street in front of Joe Muggs. Joe Muggs, long gone now, was a coffee shop with lots of magazines, owned by Books-a-Million. There used to be a number of them, but, as I said, long gone now.

This happened on a cold Saturday afternoon, We went in to get some expensive designer coffee and look at the expensive art mags, of which Joe Muggs has a ton. It was me and Randy and Kim, the latter being a man, though the name doesn't make that completely clear. We'd met in a drawing class a few months before; they're both maybe twenty and pretty decent artists of the Jackson Pollack tough guy type, convinced that they're streetwise clever and able to handle themselves. Not true, of course, as any of the vagrants crazies and criminals lounging on the benches in front of the coffee shop could tell in an instant, looking at the thin wrists and fingers without gristle or bone, the soft skin, and the posture, shoulders a little hunched and the head turning, eyes sliding away. Just college boys posing.

It started when Randy for some reason I'll never understand decided to shoplift a sculpture magazine, God knows why since he seemed to have plenty of money – I wish I had some of it – and he's actually a nice boy, honest, raised up properly by his folks, both lawyers in Montgomery. So I don't know what he was thinking when he tucked the magazine under his blue jean jacket and headed out the door with his breve grande.

The kids that work in that store see real hustlers every day, being good shepherds of the magazines and candy bars, and so had no problem intercepting him at the threshold, next to the marks showing the height of the fleeing felons – Randy barely made it to five foot eight. One blocked the door and the other asked him if there was anything he'd like to buy before he left the store. These were not college boys, they'd been around some, the one in the door was black with a kind of micro dreadlock all over his skull, and a nice clean scar on his left temple, not too tall but heavy. The other was bigger, much bigger. with punk hair and tattoos on his neck, metal in his lip. Rough looking but polite, and certainly offering Randy an easy out, which was to pull out the magazine, hand over 8 bucks or whatever and leave. Simple.

But Randy decided to be difficult, which to him meant feint right go left around the micro-dread guy and hit the street running. It almost worked too, because he faked micro-dread out of his Nikes and got out of the store. The two clerks started after him but as soon as they hit the plane of the threshold they slowed and stopped and just looked out on the street. Evidently their jurisdiction ended at the door frame and they were quite sensible about tearing down the street after some psycho criminal of unknown capacity for violence. Beside, it was cold out there, and who would be left to mind the store? Just the third clerk, a dim looking little girl dressed all in black with black fingernails and

ultraviolet lipstick. Naw. Fuck it.

So they were turning back into the store when Randy hit a slick patch on the sidewalk and careened into the row of men sitting on the bench, knocking the last one off the end, causing a pretty good uproar with the chorus of Hey watch it asshole, and Lookout you cocksucker etc. Which drew the attention of the Joe Muggs boys, now even more reluctant to leave the store, though they could see the stolen magazine laying on the cement just a few yards away. Instead the punk said to micro-dread:

'Want to have some fun? Watch this.'

And opening the door he called out to the group of winos:

'Hey stop that guy he's a shoplifter! Ten bucks to anyone who brings him back!'

Oh boy. That brought them all to their feet and Randy, regaining his balance, found himself in the midst of a crowd of hungry vagrants, closing in around him thinking about what they could do with Ten Bucks. There was, just for an instant, a pause when everyone was completely still, looking at each other, then Randy tried to break out of the thicket and half dozen hands laid on him and he was caught, jerked from side to side as the group shuffled in mass toward the coffee shop.

Micro-dread and the punk were double up laughing, and Kim, who'd stood rooted to the spot next to the magazine rack since the hullabaloo started, was pale and big-eyed. I said to him:

'You got enough money to pay for the magazine?' He nodded and I said:

'Give it to these boys.' Then I said to them:

'He's going to pay for the magazine, does that square thing?'

'Sure, that's all we wanted,' the punk said.

'So there's no reason for the boy to come back in here?'

'Hell no,' said the punk. 'In fact he's BANNED for life.'

'Sounds good to me,' I said and pushed past him out the door to meet the shoving shouting crowd. By this time they'd started tussling with each other as they tried to get control of Randy so they could be the one to present him and claim the prize. In fact, they were pretty much ignoring him now, except to cuff him lightly whenever he'd try to break away, then they'd go back to squabbling and tugging.

I walked into the middle of the group pushing hard and the light, poorly conditioned winos started flying away from the group. I said in a loud penetrating voice:

'You fuckers back off' and I shoved the closest one extra hard. He went down and the rest melted back, leaving me and Randy standing alone. I glared around

and took Randy by the arm and guided him past the coffee shop and around the corner. I could hear a few shouts Hey, where's he going? He took our Ten Bucks, but no one followed.

I paused in the alley for a moment and Kim came sliding out. The two boys looked at each other and laughed like hell, slapping hands and high fiving like street hustlers. Randy said to me:

'Way to go buddy, I guess we showed those assholes.' Kim nodding along with him. I just looked. I didn't even shake my head.

'Come on dude, it's all street theatre,' Randy said. I didn't say anything, just thought Street Theatre. Then Randy says:

'Wait a minute, I got to go back and get my magazine.'

And he went around the corner, Kim just behind him. I don't know what happened next because I went the other way and never looked back.