



It's gorgeous outside lately. I just met an interesting duo, Edward and Ronnie. Edward is 65, an alcoholic with a heavy drinker's bulbous nose. He lives with a roommate in a new local shelter. Their room has its own bath. The shelter serves three meals a day. He draws Social Security for cash. Looks like he spends much of it on liquor. Most of the rest, \$370 a month he claims, goes for cigarettes. About 35 packs.

Ronnie is 56 with the most gravelly voice this side of a talking cement mixer. He says it's from smoking. He's jealous of Edward's ability to live rent free with cash from the government. Plus meals. Ronnie was off to make an upgrade to his electric bicycle so that he wouldn't have to pedal for the motor to kick in. He used to be an electrician's apprentice. He confidently asserts that he's got an idea how the mechanism might work.

Dixie and I head up the street and meet Kevin, a friendly, obese old Irishman with a cane. He likes to start his day with "a few cold ones and a bird," meaning beers and a joint. I asked him if he had his couple of beers this morning already and he said yes, five of them. He expected it would take him an hour to waddle up to Broadway which is five blocks away. I don't know how he does it without having to pee. Maybe alleys do the trick.

Lowcountry girl Dixie and I often stop to rest in the tiny park on West Eighth and F Streets. Benches covered with worn paint surround a couple of huge oak trees, a Madonna statue, and three trash barrels. The birds flit from the trees to the ground, pecking at the bread and rolls left by visitors. The three slices of multigrain bread I put out serve as carrier landing crafts for the little dive bombers, mostly sparrows and grackles. One grackle hammers at the bread, right in the middle, 19 straight times before waddling off to burp and get a cup of coffee or something to wash it down. An upturned trash can lid is full of rainwater so he doesn't need to go far.

Then the little sparrows hop over and peck away in unison. If this is a dance, it's only lightly

choreographed unless chasing each other's butts is part of the act. I assume it's the boys chasing the girls but maybe social norms have changed here in the park, too, and the gals are asserting their independence. Throwing off arbitrary shackles and such. Winging it.

One bench over from where Prince Edward and Ronnie sat are two young women, about twenty. They're squatted over a small bottle of Hennessy, passing the ugliest joint in South Boston. 'Sarah' is a redhead and mostly listens to 'Emily,' who without any makeup and brown hair is slightly cuter, with a street mouth and Southie accent befitting a ward boss. They banter about boys they hang out with and their troubling behaviors.

"So Tommy goes, get outta heah, lemme scoh some dope and get high with my bruthuh and Billie." So Billie says to me, "Yoah kinda cute, why doncha hang with us foh a while?"

"Is he like really cute?"

"Yeah, kinda. But he's dune all these uthuh guhls and probly has some disease uh somethin'. Hey when's yoh mom comin' to pick us up?"

Heavysset mother 'Frankie' pulls up in a faded grey sedan minutes later. She steps onto the sidewalk clutching an armful of trash and marches it over to a barrel. Then she goes back, returning with crushed plastic water bottles. She has her daughter's red hair, now flooded with grey. "Emily, you sit behind Sarah, c'mon." The girls shove their supplies into purses and hop in.

Dixie and I miss their yakking even though they are the rare patrons who don't come over to pet her. I explain to my lovely old friend that they were doing girl talk and probably didn't see us. Dixie says 'ok fine, let's keep moving, old man.' We head over a block to see if the West Ninth Street Ladies Roundtable is in session.

We're in luck. The sun is shining and six elderly white women have formed a circle with their plastic deck chairs, white and green. They know me and especially like Dixie. "Good morning, young ladies," I call out loudly since several of them are hard of hearing, especially little Mary.

She dresses the same every day with her red jacket and blue baseball hat, sneakers. Sits in the same position and moderates the discussion.

“So Mahty [Mayor Martin Walsh] sez he’s gonna open up the bahbah shops next week. Salahns and such. And ya can’t buy menthol no more.”

“Yeah, ya can’t trust them politicians. Maybe he will, maybe he won’t. My sons haven’t had a haeah cut in three months. And I ain’t been to see my haeah and nail gals neither. Can’t. All closed.”

“How’s yoah sistah doin’, Madge?”

“Oh not too bad, specially unduh the cuhcumstances and all. She was cookin’ chili for her and Bobby last we spoke.”

They proceed like this for hours on end, until the sun goes down too far or they get cold. While they chat a man and a woman show up with several hand trucks stacked with large Amazon boxes. Amazon had nothing to do with it, the city simply filled the boxes they had with fresh produce for folks on food stamps. Nice things, the ladies proclaim. Fresh corn, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, four pounds of grapes, mangos, apples. They express their sincere appreciation for the thoughtfulness and bounty. I can only smile with and for them. I like these ladies.

Back in the tiny park the next morning, we meet Kevin and Pat. Kevin is in public housing, Pat in a shelter. It’s 8:02. Kevin is working on a Bud when Pat shows up. “You got somethin’ foh me?” Pat lights a perfectly rolled joint and they pass it back and forth. Pat is also smoking a cigarette and coughing. His full head of grey hair is buzz cut. I ask them some chatty questions and beckon them over into the sun. It’s 55 degrees going up to 73 by afternoon. They trade friendly wisecracks over the joint, poking each other gently in the arm and leg. Kevin is chilly in shorts so Pat lends him a sweatshirt. At 8:30 Kevin heads up to Broadway for more refreshments. Pat asks me if I’d like a coffee.

We head home, saying hello to a young woman with a gigantic blonde ponytail done up over

her head like Woody Woodpecker. Her baby dachshund is 13 weeks old. We pass Alfredo's, two large cheese pizzas for \$18.99. A billboard across the street beckons, "Are you anxious? Jesus offers relief."

Back home in a lovely condo, I don't feel anxious and think about Prince Edward and Ralph. I guess I'm a prince, too.