

One More Nickel

The aluminum crinkles lightly under my grasp, and as the can falls into my bag, it clanks and rattles against the rest of its kind. One last scan around the grassy lot confirms that no more treasures wait for me here, so I pull the drawstrings of my sack tight, hoist it over my shoulder, and march onwards to my next destination. That's 12 pieces today, so far. I squinted up at the bright sun above me, using my hand to shield my eyes from its blinding rays and judging its position in the sky. Almost 15 pieces and it's only a little past noon. I might be able to treat myself to something extra today.

At the thought of an extra snack, my stomach rumbles, like a tiger waiting to indulge in its prey. It claws at my gut, impatient and empty, desperate for something to satisfy its ache, but I have nothing to offer the beast. I stop and sink to the ground, clutching my stomach as in fear that the wild thing may somehow tear its way out from inside me. I quiver under the gaze of onlookers, knowing without opening my eyes that they watch me with pity, disgust, puzzlement or discomfort. I know the stares too well, no need to meet them to know what they are. I rise again on shaky legs once the monster has quelled itself, and continue forth on my quest.

That makes 14 cents wednesday, 17 thursday, and 19 today, I recount as I pick up one last water bottle and place it in my bountiful harvest. It's scratched and tattered from its previous prison, wedged into a bush along the sidewalk, and now my arm bears the same battle scars, but it's worth it for one more nickel. I close up my lush cornucopia of plastic and aluminum, and begin to hurry over to the recycling center. On my back rests a bundle of human negligence, but it's thanks to the disrespect of those better off than me that I can have 3 meals of cheap ramen today.

Elisa Pattyn

A block away from the recycling center, someone stops me in my path. My eyes dart down as they face me, afraid to know what look they'll give me now. As my gaze traces the outlines of my shoelaces, two empty beer cans suddenly obstruct my view, and I seem to forget what was so compelling about my shoes anyways. My head snaps up to the figure in front of me, and for the first time, I really see them. A woman with pale skin, blonde locks and clean clothing starkly contrasts my dark, disheveled form. As our eyes meet, I see sympathy, and the only words that I ever hear from her as she places the aluminum in my hands are, "I think you need these more than I do." As she leaves, my vision blurs and I weep with the thought of tasting a chocolate bar on my tongue.