

Where Can I Find the Local Fishmonger?

Paul J. Murray

I've been walking these streets all night in this little city. An ugly unfriendly face passes every couple of blocks. Neon signs ablaze in unwelcoming light. Glowing caricatures buzzing and humping poles that cry 'open for business'. I flick my last cigarette to the wayside nearly setting a shuddering blubbering pile of rags on fire. People got it tough all over. I stuff my hands in my pockets and step out of the darkness into a little bodega. The smell of stale beer is stifling. It reminds me of my old man's trailer before it burned to the ground. In the corner is a pervert with long greasy beard thumbing through the modest selection of porno mags. The Hindu behind the glass scowls at me. I guess I'd be suspicious too at this time of night. I step over a puddle of what I hope is beer, "Hey Mack give me a pack of Viceroy's". Dirty and cheap. I swear I can taste the formaldehyde.

I step back out into the putrid night. Drizzle is still falling. Just enough to get the city moist and pungent. I put my hand on the cold hard wall; I swear I can feel the mold growing beneath my fingers. My stomach growls. I see a little diner up ahead and decide to stop in for a sandwich. The doorknob feels slick. Now my hand does too. There aren't many people here. A couple of old men sit at a booth puffing, playing with the little containers of cream, probably talking about the good old days. I sit down at the counter on the stool that's seen better days. The bright red fabric long since faded to the color of blood on a shirt after it's gone through the wash a hundred times. The counter shines in the bright fluorescent lights.

Grease. Grease seems to be everywhere. The cook is shiny too. His fat face a veritable field of oil with little mountains of puss dotting the landscape. He sees me out of the corner of his eye. Back at his grill he snuffles a huge load of phlegm before shuffling up to me, his face a cross between weariness and contempt. The smell of burned oil assaults my eyes and nose. "What's it gonna be?" He asks, cleaning a glass with a filthy rag.

"A cup of coffee and a ham sandwich." A grunt is the only reply. I light up another Viceroy and look around. A couple streetwalkers sashay by in their evenings finest. The sequent pieces catch the light and splash it around in pure chaos. The beat cop walks by sunglasses down, blind to these two. I've been walking this city all night; it looks like they let a lot of things slide.

A clang of silverware makes me turn around. "Hey buddy, you can't smoke in here." I shrug and put it out on the saucer. I take a sip of coffee and promptly spit it back into the cup. Folger's crystals it ain't. I tear into the ham and cheese, hungry to fill something in me. And almost immediately I wish I hadn't. Slimy ham on almost toast. Not like my mother used to make. I pull some crumpled bills from my pocket and toss them on the greasy counter, then light up another cigarette.

“Hey Mack,” I say in a stream of smoke. He half turns his head giving the old stink eye. “You know where I can find the local fishmonger.”

At that he turns full towards me a sneer or scowl, I can't decide which, twist his face. “Fishmonger?” He says in a gravelly voice. He let's out a chuckle that quickly turns to cough in violent thick wet racks. “There ain't been a fishmonger 'round here in almost twenty years.” He says wiping his mouth with a big grimy paw.

I breathe out another thick cloud of smoke into the air. “Yeah that's what I hear,” I say putting my cigarette out in what's left of the ham sandwich.

Back out into the night I hear a forlorn cry from one of those pits of shit and filth we used to call alleys. Could be a guy having the time of his life. Or two cats fighting over the same damned pussy. Whatever it is, it sure as hell isn't what I'm looking for.