

UVic Diversity Writing Contest 2011, First-Place Fiction Winner
By Aysia Law
Cold Snap

She was shivering, sitting on the pavement wrapped in mouldering blankets. I had passed her twice already today, on the way to school and back, but hadn't had the time – or inclination – to stop. She hadn't seemed to move all day, a frozen statuette in the January chill.

This third time past the hunched figure, I took the time to read her cardboard sign:

“Single Mom
Pregnant. No drugs, just hungry.
Spare change? Thnx.”

I couldn't let a pregnant woman sit out in the cold. “Hey,” I approached her as everyone else skirted around, averting their eyes like I had that morning. “Can I buy you a coffee or something? You must be cold.”

Her bowed head raised to meet my face, and I could see she wasn't much older than me.

“Um. Thanks. Okay.” She spoke haltingly, as if she hadn't used her voice in a while.

“There's a Timmies just around the corner. You okay to walk?”

She nodded, then rose to gather her blankets and the few pennies and nickles she'd been tossed.

We made our way to the coffee shop in silence. I'd never done this before, and wasn't prepared for the awkwardness that could make itself apparent in a gesture of compassion. I couldn't think of anything non-intrusive to say to her, and couldn't read her expression to guess what she might be thinking.

The door crunched close behind us and we took our place in the short line. “Do you know what you would like to drink?” I asked her, kindly as I could without sounding patronizing.

“A double-double, please.”

I paid for the drink and we sat at a booth, her possessions in a bundle beside her. She sipped her drink as tentatively as she spoke, and we were silent again.

Her coffee finished, she thanked me quietly, got up and left. I stayed there for a while, trying to figure out what I'd do next time I passed her on the street.

Over the next few weeks I saw her panning in the same spot several times. Whenever I could, I took her out for another coffee; when I didn't have time I would cross the street behind her and hope, like everyone else, she didn't see me.

Every time I took her out I attempted to coax more from her. I felt like a kid in a forest aspiring to get close to a flighty deer; day by day inching closer, chipping away at her fear while trying to assure her that I meant no harm.

“One large double-double, please. And a small hot chocolate.”

This was something like our tenth time going out together – well, me taking her out for coffee – and I'd finally learned a few things about her. I had finally gotten the nerve to ask her a few questions about herself by our third time out, and the more I saw her the more willing she seemed to speak. Her name was Chantal and she had grown up in Toronto. She was twenty-two and had a three year old son she hadn't seen in a year who lived with his father – “See: I'm single, and I *am* a mom; so the sign's not really a lie, right?” She had hitchhiked here to Victoria when she was seventeen, but I hadn't been brave enough to ask her much about her life here.

We collected our drinks and headed to what was becoming our usual booth in the corner. I had tried to prepare some not-too-invasive questions for her before finding her this time, but I was

apprehensive. I wanted to know more about her, yet at the same time I wasn't sure just how much I wanted to know.

"I—" we both started at the same time. Trying to encourage her to speak without prompt, I was eager to let her finish her sentence first. "Go on."

She paused, then took a deep breath. "Are you ever going to tell me anything about yourself?"

Slightly taken aback, I said, "I didn't know you wanted me to. What would you like to know?"

"You're the first person who's spoken to me who wasn't collecting information for the government or telling me to 'move along' or blurting out some embarrassed excuse in ages. Who are you? And why are you doing this?"

Good question. "Well, my name is Shelley. I just turned twenty a few months ago. I moved here from Kelowna last summer to go to school at UVic," I trailed off. "I don't know what else you want to know."

"What are you studying?"

"Sociology. Just barely escaped my parents forcing me into law school."

She grimaced. "Do you have any kids?"

"Ha! God no. Frankly, they scare me a bit. I just always feel I'm going to do something that'll scar them for life or something. Don't want that kind of responsibility. You know?" Oops. I flinched as her face fell. "Um," I floundered for a hasty subject change. "So, what were your parents like?" If possible, she looked even more withdrawn. "Sorry. Uh, did you ever have any pets?"

The tension-break was palpable. "Yeah. I once had a goldfish named Goldy. Not very creative, I guess. Oh and I had a cat named Luna – like from Sailor Moon. But she ran away one night."

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I like to imagine her living in the forest like a ferocious black panther or something."

I laughed. "That sounds pretty good to me."

There was a beat of quiet, then she turned bright red and stared at her empty coffee cup as if about to ask it a question instead of me. "So, do you have a boyfriend?"

I turned bright red, too. "No, not exactly."

She looked up in interest. "What do you mean?"

"Well," Oh, what the hell. I'm in Victoria. "I'm single right now, but I just broke up with my girlfriend. It's sort of complicated, because she wants to get back together with me and I'm pretty sure dating her in the first place was a mistake."

"Wait, so you're a..."

"I'm gay, yeah. I don't like the word 'lesbian'. It sounds funny." For a second, she looked like she was going to cry. Or explode. "Um. You okay?"

"Oh I'm fine. *You're* the one who's sick!" She grabbed the hand-me-down jacket I'd given her two weeks ago and stormed out.

So much for 'home of the gays', I thought. I couldn't imagine how this would have come as a giant shock; with my mens jeans and beat-up biker jacket, all I needed was a Harley to complete the diesel-dyke image. *Maybe it's the hair. Still girly-ish.*

Despite the bewilderment, I was stung. How could she get high and mighty with me, when I was the one clothing and feeding her a few times a week? What right did she, a homeless kid, have to judge me, a student at a prestigious university? *Whatever. Try and help someone, see what happens. It all gets thrown back in your face.*

The next day I had planned to stroll purposefully in front of her without even a glance, should she be in her usual spot on the sidewalk; but she wasn't. *Well, good,* I thought. *If I never run into her again, we'll be fine.*

But after a few weeks I began to worry a bit. I hadn't seen her around town at all – not that I had heaps of time to wander around looking for her, but still – and though we were supposed to be heading

into Spring the temperature didn't seem to have received the memo. I never did find out where she was staying, and the coat I had given her was more of a sweater, really.

I tried to figure out what I'd do if I saw her again. Her reaction to my disclosure still made my skin flush when I thought of it. Obvious as it might have been, it was something I'd trusted her with.

I didn't see her again until early April. I was walking up Cook Street towards a friend's place after a study-session at the library, when I saw a bundle of ragged blankets I'd stopped looking for some time ago, just half a block ahead of me. I paused. It had been a rainy few days, and while it was drier today the wind was rolling harshly in from the beach. I texted my friend to let him know I'd be over later than I thought, then walked up to stand in front of the damp cardboard sign.

“Hey,” I said. “Can I buy you a coffee or something? You must be cold.”