

# Tom & Annie

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The other day I was caught peeking in someone's garbage. Well, I wasn't really looking in their garbage. I had merely lifted the lid of the wooden bin that housed their trashcans. The sixtysomething face behind the curtains was stony with disapproval. I felt like I had been caught picking my nose by my third grade teacher, Mrs. Rood. I shut the lid and managed a stupid smile before shuffling off toward the benches in front of St. Marks Church.

I was looking for the belongings of Tom and Annie. They used to stash their clothes and what few personal items they had in that bin. They did this because it was a pain to lug them all over the East Village.

I met them almost a year ago. I was taking time away from the books, drinking beer and shooting pool alone at a local bar. Bored, I wandered to the benches at St. Marks Church, figuring I'd sit and watch the weirdness drift by. I found an empty bench and plopped down. There was a couple to my right. He wore filthy black jeans and a torn concert t-shirt. His hair was raggy and his faced looked as though he had just pulled it from a smokestack.

She was cute—or had been. She was a dishrag blonde, maybe 5-foot-6 and thin, but not bony. I turned my face forward and tried to eavesdrop on them, but they had clammed up. So I sat there. She got up from the bench and took a few steps. A white spring dress with pale blue flowers hung on her body and lapped the backs of her knees. She had curves, and I

wondered why she was hanging with this slob. She stopped next to a garbage can and began sifting through it. I then noticed that her dress was worn and looked as if it hadn't been washed in days. Though her calves were thick like bowling pins, the flesh on her arms jiggled as she dug in the garbage. It reminded me of my grandmother when she was being eaten up by cancer.

She pulled a styrofoam food container from the garbage and opened it. "Score!" she said elatedly, her eyes bright. She returned to the bench and after a heated exchange they agreed to have a few bites and save the rest for later. They ate with their fingers what appeared to be a half-eaten plate of rice and tortillas. Her hands were thick and her left one had large purple tracks across the back of it. They looked like leeches. She caught me eyeballing them.

"What are you looking for?"

"Nothing," I muttered.

"You sure? You're alone. You look like you were looking for something. We can go somewhere if you like. You and me."



I blushed and confessed that I was just hanging about because I really was bored of studying and wasn't in the mood to hang with friends.

Tom and Annie told me that they had been on the street for more than a year. They began seeing each other their senior year in high school—four years ago. Two years back they snorted smack for the first time. Now they were shooting it few times a day each.

"Time to get to work," Tom soon announced. They gathered

their few plastic grocery bags and I followed a few steps behind as they stowed them in the wooden trash bin down the block and then we headed east. To prove I wasn't a cop, Tom insisted I pay him five bucks and show him my student ID. I obliged. I was intrigued.

On 1st Ave., Annie left us. She stood in traffic with her knuckles resting on her hips. Her fingers held bunches of her dress, hiking it up to her mid thigh. Within minutes a car stopped. She got in and the car drove off. Tom smoked a butt he had plucked from the sidewalk and said nothing. Twenty minutes or so later, she came walking down 1st Ave., chewing gum.

I saw her do this six times over the next few hours. While she was gone Tom and I just stood there and made no eye contact. Her third or fourth time, I asked him if he worried she might not return.

"Yeah, but what are ya gonna do? We need the money. Besides, she's smart. She can take care of herself."

Around midnight Annie called it quits. "Fuck it, we got enough money." We fetched their bags from the wooden bin. I offered and they allowed me to carry one of their plastic bags. Inside was a thin bar of soap and some dirty clothes. A small bottle of Charlie perfume pressed outward.

We sat down on a dark stoop on a quiet side street near Ave. B. Annie had brought in almost \$100 from the blowjobs. "Not a big deal. No weirdos wanting anything else tonight," she stated matter-of-factly. Tom left Annie and me to get some smack. She opened the styrofoam container, spat out her gum and began eating. We made small talk until I saw a couple footlong rats creeping up on us. They wanted her food. I threw bottle caps and pebbles at them, trying to back them off. They were within five feet when Tom came back and they scattered.

Tom cooked and Annie loaded the needle. "Okay—you wanna get off first?" Tom asked. Annie said all right. She turned her back to the streetlight, hunched over and slid the hypodermic into one of her purple leeches. Then Tom did likewise, shooting the remainder of the junk into the bruised, spotted curve of his left arm.

We sat silent a few minutes, their eyes heavy. Tom rose weakly. "Be back in a minute," he said, and slinked down the block toward a bodega. Annie, woozy, looked at me with slit eyes. "Come on, you must want something... Come on, I'll give you a deal... You seem nice... Ten bucks for a quick blowjob..."

I declined politely as I could. Her slack face tightened. "Come on. Tonight's money is already spent. Come on. It's okay, Tom won't get mad. Nobody will see us here. I'm not skanky, I'm gonna need the money anyway." Her face was very close to mine and her leech hand lay limply in my lap.

I stood up and stepped down to the sidewalk, trying not to give insult. I waited for Tom to return before saying goodnight. "You know where to find us," Annie said as I turned away.

Every month or so I've looked in the wooden bin for their belongings. Once I did find their stuff and then them, hanging out on a bench by the church. But that was months ago. The sun was low and a mild breeze blew. The avenue sang with smiling young people and new cafes. Tom and Annie were not there.

I walked to the Lower East Side looking for them, stopping at a junkie outreach center. The needle lady said she didn't know of anybody fitting their descriptions.

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