The Lilies of the Field

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of years. Then Mom saved enough money to buy her own house out here at this lake, and she took me out to live with her 'cause she didn't like to live alone.

It's pretty nice, with a lake and nice houses and a clubhouse and swimming and boating and everything, but still everybody seems to be watching you, waiting for you to do something wrong. I began to feel bad just sitting there on the back of that park bench by the clubhouse. It was getting dark anyway so I jumped down and started walking home, wondering who could have stole the gas, because most of the guys I knew out here could pretty much have all the gas they needed, their folks having so much money and everything. I couldn't figure it out.

The Lilies of the Field

by Rick Atkinson

Fish and Wildlife Biology, Soph.

G'MORNING, Peaches,” the man called to him.

"Hey, Mr. Wilson, morning to you, nice day huh?"

“Shit,” the other replied.

This exchange had been standard for over a year now as the two began their daily tasks. The day was fair with blue sky showing through the clouds. A bit brisk though. Mr. Wilson had seen fit to wear his moth-eaten topcoat and Peaches' wife had pinned a blanket across her man's shoulders. He would keep an eye open for something more suitable as he worked.
Peaches was a long-time veteran on the dump. He and his family occupied the stripped body of a fish truck. Inside it was furnished with discarded furniture and lighted with kerosene lamps. One corner was devoted to a cooking fire, and a hole was knocked in the roof for a chimney. Peaches didn't consider this a permanent home but rather a temporary shelter. He had never known a home in the common sense because periodically the dump was bulldozed flat to make room for more human refuse. Then he and his people would occupy the first packing crates or car bodies that were thrown on the level ground. Peaches had been born under such conditions about 25 years ago in this same dump.

Today they were out early. This was the critical day of each week. From the results of this day it would be determined who ate well the next six days and who could afford the opulence of a bottle of gin. This was rubbish day. It was different from garbage day which occurred several times a week. Garbage was the everyday disposal of kitchen wastes, tin cans and coffee grounds, and was burned in the giant incinerators whose chimneys towered over the four-square-mile dump.

On rubbish day the products of countless cellar and attic cleanings showed up, the worn-out refrigerators and stoves and all the other sanitary non-burnable trash which the general populace rejected each week.

At eight o'clock the first red-and-white trucks crawled up the dirt road to make their deposits. Each man was armed with a hammer or hatchet, a pair of pliers, and a screwdriver. Mr. Wilson's was the only white face in the group of fifteen or so. Primarily the objective was scrap metal which sold from 28¢ a pound for copper to 4¢ a pound for cast iron. The women and children, who would make their appearance later in the morning, collected rags and newspapers, tying them into crude bundles.

As the garbage truck's body tilted upward, each man scurried into position to claim salvageable items first and pile them in a heap for later investigation. This was the only real competition in the dump. After the truck left, the men plodded along, each at his own unhurried pace.
Mr. Wilson surged forward with the rest, feeling a little excited and a bit revolted at the same time. He was always left by himself, he noticed, and he enjoyed that. Showed there was some respect left in these savages, he thought. He was twice the age of most of them and white to boot. Someday he'd start his own salvage company. All he'd need is a building and a scale. Someday he'd find a diamond ring or a suitcase full of money and get the hell off the dump. "Peach boy, you want this generator?" he said aloud.

"No sir, Ah couldn't bust 'er open. Say, how you think Ah look inna suit?" Peaches answered. He had on a sports jacket torn in the sleeve and two sizes too big.

"Just fine," Mr. Wilson mumbled, intent on pulling a condensor from a refrigerator. Actually Peaches was a sight, with his head bound with a piece of rag, a heavy necklace made from brass nuts strung on a light chain around his neck, greasy overalls and a checked sports coat. Peaches and the other blacks on the dump thought highly of Mr. Wilson. He had been somewhere else. So it was assumed he could leave at will. His acceptance of the sports coat was a compliment, and Peaches resolved to add it to his permanent wardrobe.

Peaches had asked Mr. Wilson to eat with him or attend one of their dances many times, but Wilson always declined saying, "That ain't my kind of doings." Admittedly the dances were wild. Everyone would come and drink gin and jump wildly in time to a rhythm pounded out on refrigerators and television cabinets. A great fire would be lit, and the dancing would continue till dawn unless the fire department came and sprayed the party with hoses. No, Mr. Wilson didn't want any of that. He preferred solitude in his basement room. There he could drink peacefully and if it was a good week, hire one of the young colored girls to share his bed for a night.

The day wore on, and more trucks emptied their loads on the growing pile. The wagons they used to haul the day's find to the salvage company were heaped up, and the children were chattering and running about.

"Mista Wilson, whaddya make o' this?" Peaches held a picture in his outstretched hand.
"I dunno, Peach, where'd you find it?"
"In that trunk there."

Wilson took the picture and looked at the trunk. It was sure old. It smelled old. Possibly someone died, and the relatives tossed out all the old junk he had gathered. The picture was in a nice frame, and he considered saving it for the frame. Looking again at the picture he decided he'd ask at the second-hand store if they'd buy it.

Later after they'd filed one by one into the salvage company and gotten their pay, Wilson walked by himself down to the second-hand store. For the day's work he'd made $22.50. Pretty good he figured. He wouldn't sleep alone tonight. He found the store and pushed through the door. The man behind the counter eyed him suspiciously as he approached it. He knew all about Wilson's kind. Steal enough money to buy a bottle then get drunk and raise hell or sleep on the sidewalk. They were always finding or stealing some worthless junk and expecting him to pay for it. Wilson silently handed him the picture. The storekeeper glanced at it, then took off his glasses and ran his finger over it. Pulling out a volume from under the counter he studied it. Wilson in the meantime wandered about the shop. He spotted a good pair of pliers on one shelf, picked them up and slipped them into his coat pocket. Returning to the counter he asked the man, "Worth anything to you?"

Raising his head from the book, the man studied Wilson, then the painting, and asked, "Where'd you get it?"
"From the dump."
"Today?"
"Yep."

"Tell you what. The picture's nothing but I'll let you have ten for the frame."

Wilson was ecstatic. He wished he hadn't taken the pliers, and he tried to express his gratitude. "That's fine."

In a hurry to leave now Wilson collected his money and hurried back to his basement. Thirty-two dollars and a new pair of pliers. What a day! Wait 'til Peaches finds out. He'll be jealous, all right, and all those other blacks. Mr. Wilson gloated to himself all that night, impatient to get to the dump in the morning to casually drop the news.

Mr. Wilson enjoyed a higher status than he had previ-
ously. He had tricked the shopkeeper into paying him a fortune for a worthless piece of junk and had gotten pliers thrown in with the deal. Each of the others now sought for an identical painting which they too could sell for a high price.

For a week Mr. Wilson was elated. Then something happened to disturb him. He was helping a boy with a bundle of newspapers when his eye caught a picture of what looked to be the same painting he had sold. There was a man in the picture with a suit on who was taking the picture from the second-hand dealer who also had a suit on. There was a large price quoted in the caption, but Wilson couldn't make it out. He called Peaches over, and Peaches looked. He understood that the picture must be worth more than Wilson sold it for, and he laughed. They figured that picture was probably worth almost twenty dollars, and Wilson lost a little status that day.

come the fall

by mary-lynn barker

Science Journalism, Sr.

in this tumbletimed world
the space to spread your arms
around a birch
or a chance to wait for
sultry sunsets
shrinks to neitherness and none.

our ever-watching secondhands
crowd treasure into tremble
silver into sullen
rapport into rattle
and we are left barren
with the fall—
no spring's to come.