

## Ask and Ye Shall Receive

The spare-a-penny mantra used'ta work out fine if ya didn't get cotton mouth, otherwise ya could sit out in the rain with a wet dog and a paper cup. Both very promising options. As most kids came to discover, there were lots'a good ways to make a buck. Some kids used'ta fly signs, which, like any traditional art form, had differing schools of convention. There were Comedians ... y'know, kids who used'ta like to make ya laugh with signs like SPARE SOME CHANGE FOR A PENIS PUMP, I'M A LITTLE SHORT. Other kids kept their eyeliner on, even after leaving home. Tragedians. You knew 'em when ya saw 'em. STARVING AND PREGNANT! FOR THE LOVE OF GOD HAVE MERCY! I HAVE AIDS! ☹

Big impact sorta stuff.

There were pros and cons to both approaches, but if ya ask me, a few too many nights were spent eating out'a dumpsters and debating signs. Street kids took that kinda stuff real serious, especially Rainbow Dave. His signs belonged to a world entirely unto themselves.

SEEKING PRECISELY \$37.25

Ya wouldn't think so now, but in the year 2000, on the streets of Toronto, that sorta thing caused quite a commotion. As far as the homeless were concerned, Rainbow Dave was a household name.

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He had a Jewy afro and the kinda black eyes ya get from a broken nose. He used'ta wear a filthy pair of bellbottom pants made out to look like your grandmother's quilt, and long, frilly scarves, and puffy-sleeved numbers with the V-neck cut low to show off a little gold star his daddy got him for his bar mitzvah. He told me all about it one time in the lineup for soup at a Food Not Bombs, how he learned everything he knew from his father, the great Lesley Feingold, barrister, who was doing a stint in Kingston for money laundering and embezzlement. He wasn't faking it, though. Rainbow Dave really did know a lot, about all sorts'a stuff—like business ... and UFOs. He liked to take uppers. And he liked to talk—a lot. And when he got high, he used'ta parade up and down Queen Street preaching financial sermons to street kids and offering up unsolicited sign critiques.

“A sign like that won't cut the mustard on a Tuesday afternoon. This is hardly Bay Street, my brother—and for crying out loud, do us all a favour and circle the word *please*.”

The skinheads wanted his nuts on ice, and so did the Natives, but he got a new girl every night and always had a big bag of weed. He was generous with what he had, and if sitting through a sermon meant getting high for free, most of us were willing to do it. As for the advice itself.... I guess ya could boil it down to *Ask and ye shall receive*.

SEEKING PRECISELY \$37.25

That was the whole sign.

People couldn't help themselves. "What do you need \$37.25 for?"

"Drugs and a burrito, my brother."

Me and Lint and Sandy Penny could be out until 11:30 some nights tryin'a earn \$10 between the three of us. Meanwhile Rainbow Dave'd be knocking back pina colodas at a youth hostel with some Hungarian tourist.

"A man must merely ask for that which he desires," he told me one evening in the Grange, impressing me greatly with the size of the smoke circles he was able to blow. "Deep down, everyone's yearning for an opportunity to help somebody else. And Rudy Boy, why shouldn't that someone else be you?"

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Lint got two weeks for squeegeeing after he'd been ordered not to, and Sandy Penny got it in her head that we ought'a do something nice for him while he was away. She didn't want him to get out and think we forgot him. She said, "we're saving up to go to the Warped Tour and we're gonna pay for Lint's ticket," and that sounded fine and I said "alright," but tickets were \$40 a piece and we still needed to come up with \$6 every day for Sandy Penny's storage locker. And eat food. We weren't too sure how to make it all work, so I mentioned it to Rainbow Dave. He said he'd give the matter some thought, and later when the sun started to set, he found me and Sandy Penny in front of the Active Surplus, and made a proposition.

“Ms. Sandy Penny,” he began, clasping his hands rabbinically behind his back and swaying like a flame. “What I have to say I shall say out loud before a witness, as I have nothing to hide, and I do not wish to be mistaken for a sneak. Mr. Lint has been taken away. These are the facts. A travesty, no doubt.” He placed an avuncular hand on Sandy Penny’s shoulder. “Please accept my condolences.”

“Thank you.”

“We are told that Lint is to return in two weeks’ time, but the wheels of justice spin slowly, and it is not proper that a young, beautiful woman such as yourself should be without the protection of a provider. Your associate here,” he said, gesturing towards me, “is indeed a fine lad; but he is merely a boy. Of the two of you, who protects whom?”

His eyes were wide and bloodshot. In-between sentences he stopped to lick his lips; in the corners of which were thick puddles of foam. The sound of it all was like someone squeezing a soapy sponge into a bucket.

“It has been brought to my attention that you are seeking precisely \$120 plus all applicable service fees. My proposition is this, Ms. Sandy Penny: in the absence of Mr. Lint, I shall fulfill the role of your provider. You shall do for me nightly that which you previously did for Mr. Lint, and perhaps much more, as I am a man of great appetite. In exchange, I shall provide you with the full funds necessary for three tickets to the Van’s Warped Tour—that, and my

unwavering protection of you for the duration of time beginning this very evening, June 17th, in the year 2000 A.D., and lasting until the return of Mr. Lint, after which our obligations to one another shall be relinquished. I pledge to keep this agreement discreet, and to arouse no unnecessary hearsay. Your associate, Mr. Rudy here, shall serve as witness to this binding verbal contract, and, as he is already under the protection of Mr. Lint, my protection of you, Ms. Sandy Penny, shall extend to the boy. That is my proposition. Will you accept?"

Sandy Penny took a long, serious breath, then walked about a quarter block in the opposite direction of the setting sun, stopped abruptly, turned around, and walked back.

"I want you to babysit my penny bottle while we're at the show," she said, and stuck out her hand to shake.

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With Lint locked up and Rainbow Dave taking Sandy Penny every night, things got real lonely come 2/3 AM. There wasn't anyone to sleep next to and sounds that never used'ta wake me up started scaring me to death. By daybreak I was always exhausted, but there were benefits to the situation that kept me from complaining. Rainbow Dave was good on his word and offered quite a bit more than he initially promised. He brought us cigarettes and lots to eat throughout the day, and in the evenings he brought us weed and Colt 45s. Given the situation, we really didn't need to be panning all day, but Sandy Penny insisted on filling her penny

bottle up for the Sick Kids. Something about idle hands and a Protestant work ethic. What did I care? I was happy to fall asleep beside her in the sun.

One day, some nice old black man with no teeth and a plaid t-shirt tucked into khaki slacks gave Sandy Penny a bible, and the way she went about reading it, you'd think she was president of the goddamn Book of the Month Club. I asked her what the hell she was doing with that damn thing and she gave me a look like, "don't you hassle me, man," and I just let it go. What did I care what she was reading?

Then one day she woke me up right in the middle of a good deep sleep and said, "Rudy, do Jewish people read the same bible as Christians do?"

I let out a long loud moan so there'd be no confusing the fact that I was annoyed. I rubbed my eyes and said, "we don't read the New Testament."

"But you've read the *Old* Testament, Rudy?"

I took a sip of Sandy Penny's 7-Up and swished it around in my mouth to get the taste of sleep out of it. "Depends what you mean by *read*," I said. "I can keep up, if that's what you mean, but it's not like I read it front to back, y'know?"

"*I've* read it front to back," she said, like she was showing off. "Cover to cover. And you know what? I started to notice something.

I never thought about it until today, but in the Old Testament God's always showing up."

"Oh, he is, is he?"

"I don't think He shows up even once in the New Testament."

"Is that right?" I said.

"Don't say it like that, Rudy Boy."

"Like what?" I said.

"Like a prick." She waited to see if I'd defend myself and I didn't, so she went on. "In the time between the Old Testament and Jesus Christ, where the hell did God go, huh? In the Old Testament, He shows up—in the whirlwind and the tempest—and as a burning bush ... and He 'walks with people,' too," she said, making bunny ears in the air. "But by the time you get to the New Testament, He stops showing up. He doesn't appear in the wind or the storm or the fire. He just appears as a voice—and in dreams. Well, *I've* had dreams about God," she said, poking me on my shoulder, "dreams where He speaks to me. And what I wanna know is this: if He says hi to me in a dream, is that the same as Him saying hi in real life? And does that make me a messenger of God, Rudy? Does it make me an angel?"

"Maybe it makes you a schizophrenic," I said.

*“People do speak to God, Rudy! Jesus Christ spoke to God!”*

“Well maybe Jesus Christ was a schizophrenic, too,” I said. “And why are you yelling at me?”

Sandy Penny punched me in the arm, hard, and grunted. “Are you *tryin’*a be a fuckin’ prick right now?”

Typically, I wouldn’t’ve spoken to Sandy Penny like that—I wouldn’t’ve had the balls, but I was cranky on account of not sleeping, and the *last* thing I wanted to be woken up about was *God!* “Sandy Penny,” I said, taking a cigarette from the pack on her lap, “being out here has its ups and downs, and sometimes I miss home, but I don’t miss God, or Hebrew lessons, or feeling bad about jerking off, and if I’m acting like a prick it’s ’cuz I was made in God’s image. You’re talking ’bout a guy who told Abraham to cut off everyone’s dicks and kill his own son. Does that sound like the kinda fuckin’ psychopath you want visiting you in your dreams?”

Sandy Penny was quiet a minute, and I felt bad ’cuz I could see it was all happening for real inside her.

“Rudy Boy,” she said sternly, “you been out here long enough to know the difference between who’s crazy and who’s not. I don’t think I’m a schizophrenic. And I don’t think *you* think I’m a schizophrenic. God doesn’t tell me to cut off people’s dicks—He tells me I’m an angel. That’s what he tells me when I’m dreaming. Only ... in my dreams I can’t ever find my wings—or I find ’em, but they’re out of reach—placed up high on a fire escape I can’t climb,



or down some dark alleyway I'm too scared to go down. 'cuz, if I go down then—" A librarian-looking lady asked us how to get to Much Music. Sandy Penny pointed east.

"Keep going," I said.

"When I was growing up it was just me and my grandpa ... on a big barren dairy farm. Grandpa's wife died before he got me, and I never saw him date anyone. We never had any visitors and there weren't too many girls at the public school and the ones that *were* there were stupid bitches. I don't know why ... there just weren't any girls around. When I got my period, I was thirteen. I made a stain. It happens. Grandpa saw and started screaming I was a harlot, and since no one ever taught that stupid hick what a period was, he said I let Satan into my womb, and locked me in the crawlspace underneath the stairs, and he didn't give me anything except a King James Bible and a bucket. Once or twice, he opened the door to bring me a bowl of porridge, but he wouldn't say anything when I spoke to him—he wouldn't even look me in the eyes. After about two weeks he went over to Pastor David's to see about an exorcism, and I guess he let slip where he'd been keeping me 'cuz the police came and took grandpa to a psychiatric prison, and I went and lived with Pastor David until they found me a foster home.

"For two weeks under those stairs I didn't have anything to do but talk to God. So, I did. All day. Alone in the dark. He never said a fuckin' word. Then when Lint got sent to jail, I started asking Him to take care of us all—and ... it's not like I asked for anything

all that special, but now He's talking to me every night, Rudy." Sandy Penny's eyes got glossy, and her voice came out thin. "Why's He talking to me *now*, Rudy? I needed Him *then*! I needed Him more!"

I wasn't real sure if Sandy Penny wanted me to answer, and I started thinking about Lint and when he'd be getting back, and about Black Dog and Roger and whether my dad was sorry he'd given those dogs away and did what he did, and about the great Lesley Feingold, barrister, and all that stuff that Zaide told me about Auschwitz, and whether or not Mrs. Wong could've coped with spending as much time in Room 9 as I did, and Sandy Penny waved her hand in front of my face and shouted, "what's a matter? You don't believe me?" and I said, "I believe you, Sandy Penny."

"Well why don't you say anything about it then?"

I said, "it sorta seems like everyone gets locked up once and a while, and I don't really know how to make sense of that right now, but I'm thinking about it, and if ya want, I can letch'ya know my thoughts when I know 'em myself. I don't know if God's real, or if he speaks to people in their dreams, and I don't know how many pennies ya collected this year, but I bet if ya ask the Sick Kids, at least one of 'em would say you're an angel. And I think you're an angel, too."

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Lint got released later than we thought, but not so late that he missed the Warped Tour. Sandy Penny made a real good sign—it said LOOKING 4 (A) RIDE TO THE WARPED TOUR—and we got picked up almost right away—all three of us—and the guy driving gave Sandy Penny a disposable camera just 'cuz she asked him for it, and she was real happy to take pictures, and we all watched Green Day and Anti Flag and NOFX, and Lint figured out how to sneak us into the area where all the tour buses were parked and he got Fat Mike to take a picture with us on Sandy Penny's camera, and afterwards, when it was all over, me and Lint and Sandy Penny didn't feel much like going back to the city, and we found a soft patch of grass in the bushes behind Molson Park, and Lint built a fire, and Sandy Penny made peanut butter sandwiches, and we all sang songs and Lint told us how much he appreciated the tickets and gave us both hugs and said he loved us like family.

Rainbow Dave never caused any trouble, just like he said, and pretty soon it got to be like the whole agreement never happened. As far as I know, Lint never found out how Sandy Penny saved up for the Warped Tour tickets. I heard him ask her once. She just put her hands on his head like a healer and told him, "God was on our side."