

# New Mexico Quarterly

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Volume 24 | Issue 4

Article 7

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1954

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### Recommended Citation

Granat, Robert. "The Price of Candy." *New Mexico Quarterly* 24, 4 (1954). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol24/iss4/7>

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*Robert Granat*

## THE PRICE OF CANDY

**N**IGHT AND THE DIRTY WINTER fog fell upon the street together. The neon writing which all day long had been blinking "Morton's Cafeteria" ran now into a meaningless flashing blot of carmine. The limestone skin of the great post office building across the street broke out into a monstrous, heatless sweat, and the wise-guy traffic sounds were smothered down to whimpering.

By nine p.m. the swing shift workers from the post office had finished their "lunch" of hamburger, coffee and pie. Singly or in small clots they slipped out of the cafeteria into the wet embrace of the fog. They cursed, shrank low into their coat collars, and shuffled across the street to the dimly lighted doorway marked "Employees' Entrance." The heavy metal door gaped open again and again, swallowing the dark bodies of the men into the urine-colored light of the interior.

For five long minutes men flowed from the lighted cafeteria across the street and into the Employees' Entrance like bits of debris floating down a gutter. But every now and then one would stop at the right of the doorway, as if there were some sort of obstruction there that caught and hung him up momentarily.

Something was there . . . boxes . . . three or four stacked orange crates that huddled against the cold sweating stone. . . . A candy stand, a miserable little retail enterprise, set up in the yellow stain of light. And it was open for business, too, for behind it a creature was standing, swathed in a tight, frayed overcoat, rocking on his toes to keep warm, wheezing softly like a dog with distemper, and earning his living to the clinking of the smallest coins. . . .

Kafka, Andrew thought. He was standing in line against the shrubbery observing the candy-salesman. Two customers were

ahead of him, the first a tall young Negro and the other an older, heavy-set man in a sailor's pea-jacket.

That's it, Andrew thought, Kafka—he had been reading *The Trial* over his hamburger—a perfect clerk out of Kafka. Look at him: the pinched, ash-grey face, the narrow skull, the round steel glasses held up by a long fleshless nose in front and mouse-like ears on the sides. And the stained felt hat, the heavy woolen muffler, and most of all the skimpy foreign cut of the threadbare black overcoat—exactly! A poor clerk out of middle Europe somewhere, a begrimed and down-at-the-heel office worker, one of Kafka's pathetic little men, paying for the unforgivable crime of being born meek and simple in a brutal and complex world.

The candy-man snuffled and wiped at a drop that hung glistening under his nose, wincing a little because the skin was inflamed and sore. Poor bugger, Andrew thought, and who gives a damn about him? Nobody. . . .

"Tha's righ'," Andrew heard the first customer saying, "what I tells you, no foolin', man, tha's the tru'." The voice came out with the happy-sweet languor of a muted jazz trombone. "Yeah, a bathin' su', tha'd do you 'bout righ', Ten Q. Man, tha's what I calls a *undahwatah job!*" The voice split into a warbling falsetto laugh, gay and carefree as the night was wretched. A piano keyboard of a smile flashed in the dark face, a face that looked as if it had been moulded with thumbs, a simple low-relief of rounds in the perfect oviform of his head.

But this warmth went to waste. The candy-man only wheezed unhappily and lowered his head as if in shame. Probably doesn't understand a word, Andrew thought.

"Come own theah, Ten Q," the boy tried again, "Cain' be *tha'* bad, man! Y'ain' daid!"

The candy-man continued to cringe.

"Well, see if you can fine me a deck a Camels undah theah, Ten Q."

Ordered, the candy-man came to life instantly. His arm dived under the square of canvas that protected his display and fished

out the cigarettes. His small, dirty-pale hand took the money from the huge brown and pink one, held it in front of the glass lenses and made change.

"Ten Q. Ten Q, sir," he said in a wheezy little voice.

Ten Q . . . this phrase, by which the regular post office men called him, was the only one Andrew had ever heard the man utter, outside of the brand names of the cigarettes and candy-bars he dealt with and the names of the coins.

"I thanks you kindly, suh," the colored man said, in the tone of a Southern gentleman, and dah-dahing the melody of a popular song, he went bouncing off in a syncopated lope.

No sooner had the heavy door sealed off the first customer than the figure in front of Andrew, the stocky one in the pea-jacket, began to splutter. "Black bastards!" he exploded. And then: "Gimme a Honey-Crunch!" all in the same hate-tightened voice. He turned abruptly on Andrew. "Ya see that son-of-a-bitch just now," he growled, "Ya see the way he acts, like he owns the goddam place. All them bastards are gettin' like that. This here used to be a good town, kid, before the war. And then while you and me was out there fightin', them bastards start movin' in, thousands of 'em, and now look at 'em . . . got all the decent jobs, makin' easy dough, ridin' around in big shiny cars and actin' like they own the goddam world . . . yackin' away there, makin' me and you stand out in this goddam fog . . . ya know what I'm gonna do next time that black son-of-a-bitch . . ."

He did not tell Andrew what he was going to do next time. The candy-man said "Five sants" just then, and the sailor tossed a nickel onto the canvas so violently that the little man had to scramble to keep from losing it in the wet darkness of the shrubbery. Then, as if he were alone, the seaman hawked loudly and spat to the sidewalk a thick coagulation of his anger.

"Ten Q. Ten Q, sir," the candy-man said to the closing metal door.

"Honey-Crunch too, please," Andrew said, stepping up into the beerstench the sailor had left in front of the stand. Andrew

didn't smoke, so he bought a Honey-Crunch from Ten Q every night. It was a very small bar and not too bad.

"No more Haney-Crunch, sir," the candy-man said, showing him the empty carton. "You vant try Golden-Creme? New . . . very good?"

"All right, whatever you've got there." Andrew held a nickel out to him.

"Tan sants, sir. New bars all tan sants. Haney-Crunch going up too. Next time tan sants. Cost me six sants hullsale."

"Oh yes?" Andrew was startled to hear him talk. More than startled. For some reason it made him uneasy to discover the candy-man knew more English than he had imagined. And yet, this Ten Q must have sensed sympathy or he wouldn't have opened up like this. Andrew felt flattered.

"Well, how do you like this job?" he asked suddenly.

The candy-man looked up at him, squinting quizzically through his thick glasses. Then the corners of his mouth lifted to form something that was almost a smile, and he shrugged his thin shoulders despairingly.

"Gotta vork, sir."

"I know, but—well, there must be other kinds of jobs. How about—well, why couldn't you work here at Christmas like the rest of us? They hire anybody."

It was true—old, young, rummies off skid row, students out of cash, merchant seamen without a ship, anybody, hundreds of anybodies, were handling mail during the Christmas rush at \$1.56½ an hour.

"Gotta be citizen ta vork for Uncle Sem. I not citizen."

The emaciated grey face with its pathetic almost-smile looked up at him. Andrew had something encouraging all ready to say, but when the face looked up at him he forgot what it was, and suddenly felt drained, unequal to it.

"Ten Q. Ten Q, sir."

Andrew felt the heavy metal door shove sullenly against his back as he entered the post office. Anger boiled over in him and

he turned and kicked the door with all his strength. The air contraption that kept it from slamming hissed like a reptile and the door swung wide. But it closed again immediately with a "haaa" sound, sealing the candy-man outside.

Five minutes later Andrew sat city-zoning. No, not sat. The post office stool was not a seat. It was a plank of wood mounted on a vertical iron pipe at an angle calculated to make sitting down impossible. It was more like a goad that pushed you into your work. No, not work. City-zoning was not work. It exercised neither the back nor the brain, but only a primitive reflex or two. It meant shuffling through perpetually growing stacks of incoming letters, and sorting them into pigeonholes according to their postal zones. Like bailing out a river. Andrew loathed city-zoning, and as he took his place he remembered this was the eleventh straight night he had spent city-zoning. Hour after hour after aching hour, at \$1.56½ each. Right now nothing bothered him. Right now he could think about anything he wanted to. But soon aches would start hatching in his back, in his shoulders. The hard plank and his pelvis would conceive a sudden attraction for each other, pushing at the flesh that kept them apart. At this stage he could think only of himself and city-zoning. But still with a humorous detachment . . . he could make little jokes, it would all seem farcical. But then everything would gradually turn grim, and there would be less and less funny in the situation. Until by the last hour or so, everything that was human or even animal in him would be cringing, while the purely mechanical remains would go on city-zoning in a stupor of activity, just like the un-invented city-zoning machine whose place he was filling.

But the little man outside had it worse than this, Andrew conceded. How long did he stand out there anyway? When they came on shift at four Ten Q was already there behind his orange crates, munching on his supper, a poppy-seeded roll from which slovenly edges of salami hung out like unkempt shirttails. And when they went home at twelve-thirty or one he was out there still, standing upright in the night along with the fire hydrants and the tele-

phone poles, rubbing his hands with cold, coughing into his woolen muffler.

And Ten Q wasn't the only victim of the city, Andrew thought. Everywhere you looked you saw them. But something about this little immigrant's misery disturbed him especially. He wanted to help him, to do something for him. But what?

The question hung, infertile and stagnating in his brain, and to escape Andrew looked down at the pack of green envelopes he had just picked up. A sea of them lay on the table behind him . . . direct mail advertising. Some store was running a sale on something. The familiar advertising housewife was stamped on the envelopes, this time in shock-red, this time screaming: "*HURRY! HURRY! DOWN TO SIMON'S! THIS IS WHAT YOU'VE BEEN WAITING FOR!!!*"

Andrew stared down at the ecstatically grinning little face, the jauntily swinging apron, the prancing little legs . . . a nylon girdle, he thought, a dishwasher. A defiant contempt for this little two-dimensional creature and all she represented rose up in him, and for an instant he felt a sense of power and well-being. But then everything collapsed, and he felt himself being sucked down again.

"'Scuse me please." Andrew heard the clicking of chewing gum in his ear, smelt the lavender of dime-store perfume, and saw the pink angora wool bust of the girl who collected the letters for zone three. He leaned aside and she brushed against him, spongy, scenty, woolly-warm. Her face was pleasing, a golden earth color, her features were a confluence of races.

"An' how you s'evenin'?" Andrew heard her say to the next man, in a voice hushed enough so that the cigar-clenching supervisor pacing behind could not hear. "Now what's you lookin' so down in the mouth 'bout t'night, Curtis?"

"Oh, hi deah sugahbaby." The words came sweet and singing as from some brass jazz instrument.

Andrew glanced up and recognized the candy-man's first customer.

"Oh, I needs plenty sympathy s'evenin', babydoll. This heah

torture-bar I'se settin' own like to *kill* me. I was jes' now figurin' to myself wha' we goin' do when we fines the guy wha' thunk it up. An' you know wha's the wors' poss'ble punishmen' I could think of? Jes' set him down own this heah brain-chile a his an' don' let him up off. Ain' tha' righ'?"

The girl listened with a turned-on look and gave a trickling little chuckle. But then she lifted her eyebrows and lowered her lids in mock exasperation. "Well, nobody's *makin'* you keep sittin' on it, Curtis. I don' see nobody standin' here stoppin' you from gettin' up off it." Her teeth began to worry the gum again and she reached over for the second time into the empty coop in front of Curtis.

"Heeh!" Curtis slapped his thigh and wagged his head in admiration. "Now they's one gal what got *brains!*" he said. "Baby, how come some people like you an' Einstein got *all* the brains, an' some people, like me f'instance, nevah done got *none?* 'Splain me tha'."

"I'm sure *I* don' know, Curtis," the girl said as she sidled off, her hefty hips churning like the rocker arm on a river steamboat.

A tremendous slice of gleaming white rent Curtis' face. His shiny brown head bobbed in sheer delight. He noticed Andrew, and grinned and bobbed at him as if to say, "Now ain' tha' some-thin', man!"

Andrew felt the other man's pleasure strike him like a wave of radiant heat. A pressure of good-feeling built up in him and released itself as a smile. For an instant of know-nothingness he lost himself in the warm molasses-brown eyes. And then, suddenly self-aware, his gaze broke. It fell down across a black tailored sportshirt, mauve-colored slacks, and rested for a moment on a pair of shoes, sharply pointed, lovingly shined, as orange as fire.

Andrew shrank before his own question, feeling vaguely uneasy and annoyed as he always did when things didn't fit right. All right, he thought, there must be a rational explanation for Curtis.

At the same time, but in a lower world from where he was now, down on the level of the present and physical, Andrew's city-



zoning reflexes had begun to slacken and the stream of green envelopes was growing sluggish.

OK then, he was speculating up above, let's say this Curtis is the genuine article, a happy man, than the next question is *why* is he happy? And the answer to that's pretty obvious. Because ignorance is bliss, that's why, because here's a man who never thinks, or at least not enough to realize he's caught in a trap. He goes around sealed up in a perfect illusion like a child. He is a child, that's why he can be tickled by a silly joke or a pair of pointed orange shoes. The only reason he's happy is that he doesn't know enough to be unhappy.

Andrew mused over that: happy because he doesn't know enough to be unhappy—it sounded absurd. Maybe it did, but anyway that was the truth.

Andrew felt much better.

A good fellow though, he thought. He remembered how Curtis had attempted to cheer up the candy-seller before, not very effectively, but he meant well. A genuine affection for the brown man beside him coursed through Andrew. But it was the heavy kind, the kind that only flows from higher to lower.

"Hey! Hey! Hey! Wake up! What ya doin' there fella? Gonta sleep or somethin'?"

An irate finger prodded sharply into his shoulder, and instantly all existence was on the level of the present and the physical. Andrew wheeled around.

"Hunh?" he grunted, and there was the supervisor's face. It was bright red. Gold glinted from inside the mouth, and gold shone on the cigar-band, and the heavy ring on the hairy finger was gold.

"C'mon wit' me, fella."

Andrew followed the supervisor down the alley between the rows of workers who stood city-zoning, their rears toward the center aisle like cows in a dairy. At the end of the alley the supervisor turned to him. His face was twisted into that shrewd and skeptical mask even the most stupid people learn to make in

cities. He just looked insinuatingly for a moment, and then he said:

"Let's see ya badge, fella."

Andrew unfastened the blue tin badge he wore pinned at his hip, and handed it to the supervisor, who examined it protractedly, even though there was nothing but a number printed on it. His face gleamed red and cigar smoke drifted from his nostrils and mouth.

"How long ya been workin' here, *fella?*"

Andrew resolved to reply in a low, contrite voice. After all, he thought, he had probably stopped city-zoning altogether. Let the poor guy flaunt his miserable little authority if he liked.

"What are ya, *fella?* College boy?"

Andrew was determined not to squirm. He looked calmly into the smoking red face and saw the fat cigar wagging up and down obscenely like a threatening phallus. He observed where the redness came from—a fine network of livid surface capillaries. A stubble of silver hairs glistened on the sagging flesh of the jaw. High blood-pressure, Andrew thought, getting old, bad heart, no promotion. Let him rave.

"Yes, I go to school."

"Yeah? Ever held down a man's job before, *fella?*"

Something burst in Andrew. A freezing jet spurted through his body and turned him instantly hard and quivering with rage. A furious new need cried in him like hunger: "Take your hand, your right hand, and with your right hand, the heel of your right hand, mash that fat cigar into that fat face!" He began to shake with wild anticipation.

Then the supervisor turned away.

"Now get back there where ya was, an' I wanna see ya do it right from now on, y'understand?"

Andrew was left staring at the supervisor's retreating back. Then he turned quickly, went back to his post, took up the green envelopes again and began city-zoning them. They trembled violently in his hand and his heart thumped as if it were hacking its

way out of his chest in panic. He closed his eyes and exhaled heavily. Thank God! He needed the money.

"Don' pay no 'tention t'him, man. He do like tha' all the ti'."

Andrew looked furtively towards the whisper. Curtis was beaming at him, his entire face a smile.

Down below, reappearing faster than he could shuffle her away, the shock-red housewife was still with him, her tiny eyes popped by an unspeakable enthusiasm, her tiny mouth stretched into a soundless scream of ecstasy.

Two hours later Andrew laid the envelopes down with a sigh and walked, numb and aching, to the sanctuary of the men's lavatory. It was a vault of abused grey air, where men sat almost hidden behind pink newspapers in doorless stalls of grey, black-veined marble, or loitered against the walls sucking cigarettes. Water screeched and gagged and the reek of pine disinfectant tyrannized the sense of smell.

No sooner had Andrew entered than he saw a figure approach him. He squinted his tired eyes . . . oh Jesus, *that* guy.

He turned to flee. A hand clapped his arm, lightly yet insistently.

"Hey kid. . . ."

Andrew turned and faced him . . . the seaman, burly, blue, still in his pea-jacket, hat still clamped down hard—vagrants never took off their outer clothes.

"Oh . . . didn't see you. What d'you say?"

"Hey kid, I wanted t'ask ya, what that son-of-a-bitch say t'ya before? Seen him talking t'ya, the fat bastard."

The seaman's upper lip was warped into a sort of snarl that laid bare the umber ruins of three or four teeth. Andrew looked at him. Another one, he thought, a real victim, what had happened to this guy to boil him down into this? He made an effort to feel sorry for the man in front of him but he couldn't. The seaman's head was low-hanging and his shoulders high and vulture-like.

"Nothing much," Andrew said, trying not to breathe in the

fetid gusts of decay and digesting beer the seaman sent into his face.

"Yeah, I could see ya was gettin' sore. Ya looked like you was gonna kick his goddam face in."

A tremor passed through Andrew as he remembered. He didn't say anything but began to move away. The seaman caught his arm again.

"Say kid, don' I see ya buyin' a Honey-Crunch out front every night?"

Andrew nodded. What was it the man wanted? What made him feel this intimacy with *him*? He hadn't done anything to encourage it.

"Yeah that's what I thought. Honey-Crunch is my bar too." He said it the way a man might say "I belong to that church too."

"It's the only decent bar they make any more. But the goddam bastards, every time ya turn around they make it smaller on ya, ever notice that?"

"No, there's not much to it," Andrew said. With inflation, Honey-Crunch had shrunk in stages until it was now barely a spoonful of toffee and chocolate.

"Not much to it?—Christ! ya can hardly *taste* the goddam thing. Before the war, there was somethin' to it, at least, but now—Christ!"

The man said Christ. He wasn't putting on either. He was really worked up over this candy-bar. Andrew had the feeling he would only have to make one derogatory remark about Honey-Crunch and the seaman would have sprung at his throat as if his god had been slandered.

"No kiddin', I mean, it's a gyp, doncha think?" The seaman looked up at him.

"If you say so. Everything's a gyp these days. To tell you the truth I don't go for candy much myself. I just buy a bar every night to help the poor. . . ."

Suddenly, in the midst of his own sentence, Andrew didn't want any more. He turned quickly and walked out of the lava-

tory. Even the post office floor came as a relief after that. Then a current of apprehension shot through him. He'd forgotten to tell the seaman that Honey-Crunch was going up to a dime.

The next night Ten Q was still out of Honey-Crunch.

"Aah . . . fa Chrissakes!" the seaman rasped.

"You vant try Golden-Creme, sir? . . . new bar . . . very good."

"Nah, don' want any uh that crap."

"Haney-Cranch tamarra night, sir . . . put in order dis morning." The candy-man picked the bar off the canvas where the seaman had dropped it and wiped it off on his cuff. He squinted for a second after the hunched figure as it heaved on the heavy metal door.

"Sarry, sir" he said when he noticed Andrew, "Haney-Cranch not in yet. Tamarra. You like nadder Golden-Creme?" He held out the rejected candy-bar.

"No," Andrew said, staring after the seaman, "a little too sweet for me."

"Baby Ruth you like?"

"All right," Andrew nodded, "Baby Ruth."

"Ten Q. Ten Q, sir. Haney-Cranch tamarra."

Tamarra . . . rain more than fog. The whole city seemed to be liquefying. A bright blood-colored puddle had collected beneath the neon sign in front of Morton's Cafeteria. The street had become a black canal, shiny as lacquer, through which the post office trucks wallowed, tires whining and windshield-wipers clicking fiercely. The sewers were gargling and men were streaming across into the Employees' Entrance faster than on ordinary nights.

In the shadow of the shrubbery Andrew stood in his raincoat. Even in the rain he could smell the garlicky, European odor of the candy-man's sandwich. Ten Q was waiting motionless behind his stack of boxes, head bowed as if brooding over the guilt of his poverty. A thin stream of water was dribbling from his hatbrim and forming a pool on the canvas. He brushed it off with his hands. Small hands, soft like a woman's, Andrew thought, waiting, waiting for the seaman to get there.

The seaman got there, stamping his feet loudly, cursing.

Ten Q looked up quickly. His thick glasses were pocked with yellowish drops of rainspray.

"Gimme a Honey-Crunch," the seaman said, clearing his throat and spitting.

"Yas sir, got dem in dis morning . . . new size now . . . bigger."

Andrew watched as Ten Q held out both hands to the seaman in a classic gesture of benevolence. With his right hand he offered the candy, and his left lay open to receive payment. Their hands met.

"Tan sants now, sir . . . vent up . . . bigger size."

There was a silence—momentary, but long enough. Andrew began to feel a chill spread in his chest.

"Ten cents? . . . The hell ya mean, ten cents?"

"Price vent up . . . bigger bar . . . tan sants costs now."

Ten Q was not looking at the seaman as he spoke but at the candy-bar in his right hand. He was still clenching it tightly even though the sailor had taken hold of it as well. For an instant the little man and the big man posed there, motionless, wordless. The candy-bar itself was so small that the men looked as if they were holding hands.

Then the sailor yanked on the bar, but the little man's arm came right along with it.

"Gimme that, *will ya!* Here's ya goddam nickel."

"Gimme nadder nickel."

"Ya got ya goddam nickel, goddamit! Now leggo that Honey-Crunch before I—"

"Tan sants!" Something gave way in the candy-man's voice and suddenly it became a bleat. His thin shoulders began to agitate violently.

"Tan sants costs now! . . . don' vannit, gimme back . . . gimme back!"

"Go ta hell!"

"Go ta hal yasself, ya big bum, ya! . . . get away, get away! . . . don't vant ya goddem business!"

His small bleating wrath—like that of some little animal gone rabid—was terrible to watch. A little wincing grin came and went on his thin face.

"Leggo I said, goddam ya!" the seaman yelled, and tore his arm upwards, ripping the candy from the little man's clutches. Ten Q let out a sharp, gasping sound and in an instant had rushed around the stand and was assaulting the sailor bodily. Bleating, squeaking, wheezing with fury, the little man pawed, slashed, clambered his way up the seaman's arm to the fist that clenched the candy-bar and then he attacked the fist itself, prying at the thick heavy fingers with his small grimy ones, frantically. His face grinned with exertion, disclosing a row of small yellow teeth.

"Gimme back!" he kept bleating, "Gimme *baaack!*"

"What the hell. . . ." The seaman shook his arm savagely. The candy-man's hat and glasses went flying. But still he clung to the fist, dancing up and down in frenzy. Then a shrill, whistling squeal came from him, and his little teeth gleamed. . . .

"Get the hell offa me, ya—owww!" Words fell away from the seaman's voice; it became a roar, a snort, a howl—the bellow of some large and wounded animal.

With a single blow he hit his attacker square in the stomach and sent him catapulting backwards. The candy stand exploded with the crack of thin wood. Candy-bars and packs of cigarettes went hurtling out into the dark rain like so much shrapnel. The candy-man himself disappeared into the blackness behind. There was the sound of shrubbery splitting beneath his body.

The seaman stood there a second, noticed the squashed bar of candy in his fist, and with a vicious grunt heaved it after the candy-man with all his might.

"Ya son-of-a-bitch!" He turned and saw the half dozen men who had collected during the fight. "You guys seen what happened. Son-of-a-bitch *bit* me, fa Chrissakes . . . like a goddam *rat* or somethin'."

"Sure, sure," said one of the onlookers with a laugh, "serves

the little bastard right. Give me a penny the other day 'stead of a dime. Come on, let's go."

They went, the seaman with them. The heavy metal door hissed and sealed them inside.

Andrew stood transfixed.

"Cull a cop . . . cull a cop," he heard the outraged voice of Ten Q from the bushes, "Look vat he done . . . look! . . . Hey sir, you cull a cop . . . you my vittness, sir, you saw . . . the goddem big san-of-a —"

"*Shut up!*"

Andrew heard himself shout it. He didn't look around but began to walk slowly toward the post office door, numb with revulsion and hurt. "Rats . . . corrupted rotten," the words moved through his head, "all of them . . . all the same."

"Hey you, boy, you cull a cop, hanh? . . . you saw vat heppened . . . vas trying to gyp. . . ."

As his hand touched the cold metal door handle, Andrew heard a voice slice through the night.

"Ain' goin' call you no cop, Ten Q. Man, seem like you have mo' sense. Little guy like you ain' got no business tanglin' wi' big guy like tha'. Come own, man, help me get this stuff pick up. It's *rainin'*, man, what I mean!"

Andrew looked back and saw the tall lean body of Curtis bend to the ground.