

Free Speech

Chuck McDonough didn't like street people, though of course he would never say so straight out. This was not a very practical dislike, as he lived near Tompkins Square Park.

The WALK light flashed, but Chuck stayed where he was. On the opposite curb, police were arresting a homeless man. Chuck recognized him: he was the one who tried to sell strange homemade incense, and mumbled endlessly of travels in Goa, Nepal or Tibet. Chuck doubted he'd been any further east than Queens.

The man struggled and cried out, wild-eyed. Chuck waited until the cop car drove off before crossing. A plastic bag had split open in the fight, tumbling out its contents: foul old clothes, a black banana; and a picture wrapped in kleenex. It was a wedding photo, bride and groom with bad Seventies hair. The metal frame was carefully polished, and the glass spotless. It obviously had some sentimental value.

Chuck's virtue got the better of him, as it often did. He took the picture home for safekeeping. A few days later, as usual, the incense-man was back on the street. Chuck retrieved the photo and steeled himself for the encounter.

The man looked sidewise at him, ferally, from a crablike crouch. "You dropped this a couple of days ago when the cops were arresting you," Chuck said. "It looked important."

The man snatched the picture and clutched it to his breast like a teddy bear. Chuck turned to go on his way, duty done; but after a few steps the man appeared at his side. His hand was taken and a baggie thrust in. It contained a clutch of what looked like homemade tea bags. "I want you to have these. You did me a good turn so I want you to have these. Karma, you know. Know what it is? Kalpataru tea. Really rare, really really rare. It'll --"

A beat cop had appeared at the walk's far end, taking a usual turn through the Park. The incense-man hunched even more crablike, scuttling into the bushes, seeming almost to shrink before Chuck's eyes.

"Still, it was really nice of you to do that," Jeff Greene said. He gave Chuck's shoulders a rub and his head a nuzzle. They'd been dating for two years, sharing the apartment four months.

"Now he'll probably think I'm his best buddy, and be all over me every time he sees me." But Chuck never found the incense-man again, not even weeks later when he was searching hard.