

STREET LIFE

AN EXCERPT FROM

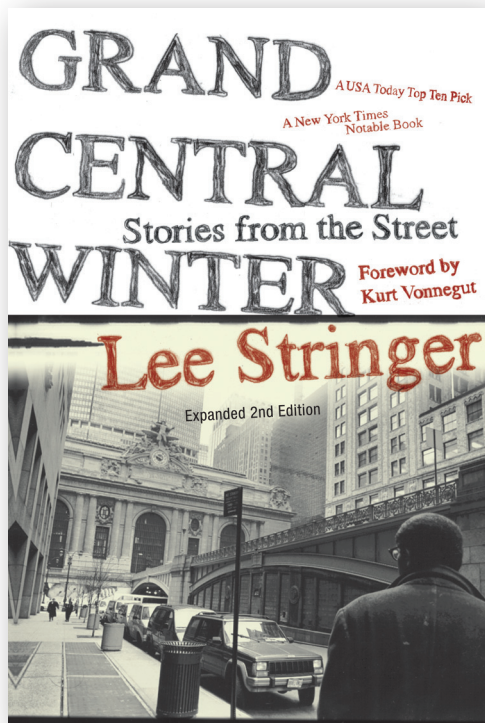
GRAND CENTRAL WINTER

STORIES FROM THE STREET

By **LEE STRINGER**



ColdType



Lee Stringer lived on the streets from the early eighties until the mid-nineties. He is a former editor and columnist of *Street News*. His essays and articles have appeared in a variety of other publications, including *The Nation*, *The New York Times*, and *Newsday*. He lives in Mamaroneck, New York. The revised paperback edition of **Grand Central Winter** features four never-before-published chapters, and a startling new ending.

Published by Seven Stories Press, New York, NY (256 pages)
ISBN-13 978-1-58322-918-7

This excerpt consists of Chapters One and Nine of **Grand Central Winter**
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STREET LIFE

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GRAND CENTRAL WINTER

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By **LEE STRINGER**

CHAPTER 1

What happened was I was

digging around in my hole – there's this long, narrow crawl space in Grand Central's lower regions, of which few people are aware and into which I moved some time ago. It is strung with lights and there is a water spigot just outside the cubbyhole through which I enter. It's on the chilly side in winter, and I baste down there in summer, but it is, as they say, home.

I have filled this place with blankets and books and have fortified it with enough cardboard baffles to hold any rats at bay (the secret being, of course, to never bring food down here. It's the food that attracts them). So, at the end of the day I come down here to polish off that last, lonely blast. Or just to sleep it off.

But as I said, I was digging around in this hole – lying flat on my back, reaching back and under the old blankets, news-

“

I'm digging around under this mess, cursing and muttering under my breath like an old wino on a threeday drunk, when my fingers finally wrap around some sort of smooth, straight stick

papers, and clothes that I've amassed over time and that keep me insulated from the concrete floor, trying to find some small, dowel-like instrument with which to push the screens from one end of my stem to the other, so that I could smoke the remaining resin cake up in the thing.

For those of you who have not had the pleasure, I point out that when you are piping up, the first thing to go is your patience. And I'm digging around under this mess, cursing and muttering under my breath like an old wino on a threeday drunk, when my fingers finally wrap around some sort of smooth, straight stick.

I pull it out and it's a pencil and it does the trick. I push my screens and take a hit and have a pleasurable half hour of sweaty, trembling panic that at any second someone or something is going to jump out of the darkness – I get much too paranoid to smoke with the lights on – and stomp the living shit out of me or

something.

That's the great thing about being a veteran crackhead.

Always a lot of fun.

Anyway, the point is, I start carrying this pencil around with me because I really hate like hell to be caught without something to push with and then have to go searching or digging around like I was doing when I found the thing.

The good thing about carrying a pencil is that it's a pencil. And if I get stopped and searched for any reason, it's just a pencil. Of course I carry my stem around too. And there's no doubt about what that's for. But, hey, I'm not looking to strain my cerebral cortex on the subject. It's all I can do just to hustle up enough scratch every day and go cop something decent – without getting beat, arrested, or shot – so I can have a lovely time cowering in the dark for a couple of hours.

So I have this pencil with me all the time and then one day I'm sitting there in my hole with nothing to smoke and nothing to do and I pull the pencil out just to look at the film of residue stuck to the sides – you do that sort of thing when you don't have any shit – and it dawns on me that it's a pencil. I mean it's got a lead in it and all, and you can write with the thing.

So now I'm at it again. Digging around in my hole. Because I know there's an old composition book down there somewhere and I figure maybe I can distract myself for a little while by writing something.

The funny thing is, I get into it.

I mean really get into it.

I start off just writing about a friend of mine. Just describing his cluttered apartment. How I kind of like the clutter. How it gives the place a lived-in look. How you can just about read his life by look-



Williams will start off talking about, say, what it smells like to work in a shoe factory and before you know it, he's going on about wanting to kill his father or something like that

ing around.

So I'm writing away, and the more I write, the easier it gets. And the easier it gets, the better the writing gets, until it's like I'm just taking dictation.

Pretty soon I forget all about hustling and getting a hit. I'm scribbling like a maniac; heart pumping, adrenaline rushing, hands trembling. I'm so excited I almost crap on myself.

It's just like taking a hit.

Before I know it, I have a whole story.

I go to read the thing and it's a mess. The pages are all out of order. Parts are scratched out. Other parts are written sideways in the margins. But what I can read looks pretty good.

Even great in parts.

By the time I go back and carefully rewrite the thing, it's too late at night for me to bother going out, which is a remarkable thing for me because I don't think there's been a day since I started that I have gone without at least one hit.

So I read the story over and over.

Fix a few things.

And what I end up with reads like Tennessee Williams (I have a paperback with all his short stories in it) in the way it kind of comes in through the side door. I mean, Williams will start off talking about, say, what it smells like to work in a shoe factory and before you know it, he's going on about wanting to kill his father or something like that.

That's how my story went.

It started with my friend's house and then I have a guy sitting there with him who wants to get some pills from him so he can take himself out before the AIDS virus gets him – you see, he is HIV positive – and when he gets the pills, he goes over to the park to just lie down and fade away on the grass.

Only he feels the need to apologize to

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the world because he has to die in public. And someone will have to come along and pick up his sorry, dead ass and all. But he's homeless, there's no place for him to go.

I guess they'll never make a musical out of it.

But the thing is – and this is what gets me – when I read the story, I can feel this guy's pain! I mean, I haven't been able to feel much of anything in years. And there I am, sitting down there under Grand Central, reading this thing scribbled in an old composition book, and I'm practically in tears.

The next day I take the story over to my friend's house and he reads it. All I'm expecting from him is a sarcastic remark because this guy is one of those snob alcoholics. He doesn't approve of anything.

Ever.

Least of all me.

But he just puts it down quietly when he finishes and gives me the slightest nod. Then he says,

“Do you love me?”

I know why he asks this.

Because in the story the two guys are friends but they would never admit it. They just hang around together putting each other down all the time – a lot like my friend and me – and in the end the one guy loves him – in a normal sort of way, I mean – and that he'll miss him.

He never realizes this until he's dying.

The only real difference between the story and me and my friend, come to think of it, is that I'm not HIV-positive and I'm not dying.

But my friend is.

And when he asks me whether or not I love him, it gets to me because I would never have thought he gave a shit one way or the other. So I go over to him and hug him, and that weepy shit starts kick-



The only real difference between the story and me and my friend, come to think of it, is that I'm not HIV positive and I'm not dying

ing up again.

What can I tell you?

It was one of those moments.

All because I sat in my hole and wrote this little story.

Next thing you know, I'm up at the Street News office with it, asking if anybody'd be interested in putting it in the paper, and – sure enough – damned if I don't open up the next issue and there's my story!

That's how I got my first thing published in Street News.

I think I called it “No Place to Call Home.”

A couple of months later I had a regular column in there. And – one thing after the other – I had the writing bug.

After that there were four things I did every day. Hustle up money, cop some stuff, beam up, and write. And in the end I wound up dropping the other three. ❖

CHAPTER 9

Valentine's adoptive father,

Richard, imagined himself something of a poet, seeking victory over the streets in words. Not too far in the past, he had also imagined himself something of a benevolent pimp. But that's another story.

When I met Richard, he was, like me, just another urban vagabond, peddling *Street News* to passers-by. He hailed from Jersey originally. What town, I don't recall. But it must have been some kind of dysfunctional hellhole. Because every tale he tells of his past is fraught with cruel and unusual tribulations.

Resentful, loveless parentage.

Suspicious and angry neighbors.

Cold, unrelenting institutions.

The kind of repressed and lost little

burg that squeezes the life out of you.

By the time he landed in New York, even his humble home-and-hearth ambitions – marriage, career, home, a family – had been all but crushed to dust. He'll tell you the story at the drop of a hat: the treachery of his ex-wife, to whom he had proposed even though he knew she was already pregnant by another man. The hostility of his ex-in-laws, who presumed him to be the deflowerer of their daughter. The bureaucracy of the system, which granted to his ex-wife most of the spoils of their failed union. He'll tell you how they all conspired to up-end his lot.

From then on it was strictly working girls for Richard. When they hit you below the belt, it was mainly your wallet that took the blow. He came to New York with one ace in the hole, the by-product of a failed attempt on his life. A Jersey pimp, who took exception to Richard's doting sponsorship of one of his working girls, made a determined try at vehicular homicide, but only succeeded in adding several bones to the list of broken things in Richard's life. And Richard had the wherewithal to commit the number on the offending license plate to memory and get himself a hungry lawyer. After that it was just a matter of time – and the application of a little jurisprudence – before all the pain and anguish he had suffered lying half conscious in the middle of a Jersey street would pay off bigtime in a Jersey civil court.

Richard also had the good sense to relocate to this side of the Jersey line while waiting on the slow-grinding wheels of Justice, content to mope through his intervening indigence among the homeless on the streets of New York City, hobbling around on crutches, sleeping in homeless shelters, eating in soup kitchens, and selling *Street News* here and there. But



His life has been one long, sad litany of unrequited loves, misdirected longings, and misplaced loyalties, all of which the poet in him has set to rhyme, a treasure trove of past laments that he keeps in Jersey, locked away in a trunk

old habits die hard, and Richard spent a considerable portion of his time communing with the ladies of the night who trod the pavement along Tenth Avenue, never quite the john yet ever the wannabe lover.

To look at Richard – T-shirt and blue jeans, hair down to his shoulders, with a red bandanna wrapped pirate style around his head – you might mistake him for a hippie. But he came off more like an urban redneck, though he lacked the conviction, which, to me, being black, was his saving grace. He did have the requisite worship of firearms, though. He would quite literally quote lock, stock, and barrel about them. More than once I heard him spout off about how he'd like to take his "thirty-aught-six," or whatever, and equalize this or that situation. But my reading of him was that if it came to squeezing off rounds at someone, Richard wouldn't really be there.

That was the sad thing about all his gruff posturing. Like most of us, all Richard really wanted was a bit of honest fellowship and an easier time of it. And like most of us, he just couldn't quite get a handle on how. So his life has been one long, sad litany of unrequited loves, misdirected longings, and misplaced loyalties, all of which the poet in him has set to rhyme, a treasure trove of past laments that he keeps in Jersey, locked away in a trunk.

When Richard's windfall comes in, he installs himself in a one-bedroom sublet just a few blocks from *Street News*' editorial office, where I have nudged my way in as senior editor – the title being in lieu of any decent money. And since Richard presumes that in winning my favor he will come to see his poems in print, this is when I get to know him. He appears regularly at the door, coffee and dough-

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nuts in hand.

“Breakfast is on me,” he says.

And sometimes lunch or dinner too.

He also feeds me schemes – unwieldy and halfbaked ones designed to put *Street News* on the map once and for all. I give them a polite ear, poke at the holes here and there. But unlike some among his newfound circle of friends, I won’t juice his ego for a shot at his cash. I do hit him up for emergency loans now and then, which, to preserve my line of credit, I take special pains to repay.

But mostly it is restlessness that has Richard dabbling in *Street News*’ business. His sudden liquidity has not had the impact on his life he thought it would. It has not made him the man of substance he longs to be. This is New York City after all. And a poor fellow has to actually get his hands on eighty grand or so, as Richard has, before he realizes that it isn’t what they call *real* money at all. It’s certainly not enough to buy him grand entrée into the ranks of the high-and-mighty. Which leaves Richard dangling among us smaller fish, where a wad on your hip gets a more wide-eyed reception.

He becomes a Big-Time Charlie at the soup kitchens, where he sometimes appears to rescue souls from their handout meal, whisking them off to the nearest greasy spoon. And when he strolls along Tenth Avenue at night, he spreads a few tens and twenties among the working girls in consideration of their hard-luck stories, and by and by he earns himself a little status and deference among the lost. It is through this kind of restless wandering that Richard comes to meet Valentine’s mother, Suzi.

Suzi is a past-due tourist, a Brazilian national who came to visit the Apple and long overstayed the welcome her



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visa provided. But if New York loves anything, it’s displaced young foxes of little material means. There is always room amid the costume-jewel glitter of the Times Square area for one more diamond in the rough. Especially one with Suzi’s spunk, figure, and vaguely foreign intrigue. She has little problem finding fast money off the books. But as is often the case in the business of twilight amusements, fresh meat travels along an inverse track – starting at “the top,” as it were, and working its way down from there – and Suzi’s descent has been as quick and sure as any.

Exotic dancer.

Peepshow queen.

Escort.

Hooker.

Skeezer.

At the bottom of it all she finds herself left with little more than the clothes on her back, two kinds of drug habits, and little baby Valentine kicking in her belly.

Did I say old habits die hard?

When Richard spots Suzi, sitting at a soup kitchen table, belly out to here, a mangy black crackhead excuse for a pimp at her side, he sees another damsel in distress – a train by which he had certainly been hit before – and anticipating that her gratitude and his solvency might win for him what his want of looks and charm might not, he once again plays the white knight. With a quick flash of his cash, he makes the same vow to Suzi that he had once before made so disastrously.

“You don’t have to sell yourself on the street for that crackhead,” he tells her. “Come, you can live with me. Have your baby and I’ll give it my name.”

All Suzi has to do is say yes.

A few months later, in the middle of February, one day shy of the holiday that

bears her name, Valentine is born. And within a matter of weeks Richard is brandishing her to everyone he knows, a tiny, vague bundle of wailing pinkness nestled in a blanket. Hairless, elliptical head; dark black eyes; chubby, piggly-wiggly fingers and toes; and a huge, distended naval.

She's a regular piss factory, too

And Richard, proud papa that he is, industrial-size box of Pampers crammed into his knapsack, worships every golden drop that comes out of her. He can hardly wait to get to the business of changing her tiny dirty drawers. Talk about being smitten! Rarely does Richard appear in public without little Valentine dangling from a harness lashed to his chest. He cannot pass a store without investigating whether there is anything at all inside for his little girl. And oh how cute the working girls think she is! For that brief first blush of parenthood Richard is a man that has it all – his woman, child, home, and the better part of \$80,000 in the bank.

I was rooting for him. Who doesn't want to believe that if money can't buy happiness outright, it can at least pave the way? Only Valentine's mama is not down with the domestic-bliss scene. Richard's homey heaven is her landlocked hell. She is far too young to be pinned down by motherhood, and Richard has offered little else – no courtship to speak of, no giddy nights out on the town, no circle of friends to socialize with – nothing to compete with her passion for the streets. He has simply acquired her, in a kind of distress sale, and installed her, complete with child, in his home.

It becomes a conflict of compulsions really. Suzi is restless. The twilight of the street life calls to her. But Richard wants her for his own. All Suzi wants is



Suzi is restless. The twilight of the street life calls to her. But Richard wants her for his own. All Suzi wants is to scurry back to her cocaine buzz, and all Richard wants – other than brandishing Valentine to the world – is to bury his face in her pubic fuzz

to scurry back to her cocaine buzz, and all Richard wants – other than brandishing Valentine to the world – is to bury his face in her pubic fuzz.

And Suzi knows just how to play that one.

It's "no dollee, no tickee" all the way, and she certainly knows her way to the door.

Pretty soon Richard is mother, father, housekeeper, and john, and Suzi is off on an endless roller-coaster run, beaming up and sniffing back down with a vengeance.

Methadone for breakfast.

Crack for lunch.

Dope for dinner.

And dealer's choice at night.

Richard finds himself shelling out a couple hundred a day for Suzi's buzz. But even then, between the twitching, the jonesing, and the nodding, he can hardly get a tongue in edgewise.

"At this rate," he confides to me – and any other willing ear – "I'll be broke in a year."

"So why do you give her the money?" I ask, even though, druggie that I am, I envy Suzi's easy endowment.

"I tell her no," he says, "but she starts smashing things. I'm afraid she'll hurt the child."

The child.

She has become the lever by which Richard seeks to move the world his way. For the sake of the child Suzi should be the sober, loving mother, wife, and companion he yearns for so badly.

"If you're concerned about Valentine's safety," I tell him, "why don't you call the police?"

"If I do," he says, "and they find out about Suzi's drugging, they might take Valentine away."

"Maybe that's better," I tell him. "For

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Valentine's sake – until you can get Suzi straightened out.”

But I can see his wheels turning, contemplating that empty bed, thinking even a fraction of a loaf is better than none at all.

“Oh, sure,” he says. “They’d love that. Child Services would love to get their hands on a nice white baby.”

Richard imagines that the city hungers and thirsts after fresh children. And that white ones are the most prized of all.

“Richard,” I tell him, “I have seen you be mother and father to that child. You dote on her. She doesn’t want for a thing. Anyone can see that you love her. Nobody’s going to take Valentine away.”

“Yeah, but I got an open warrant back in Jersey,” he confides. “A marijuana-possession charge, and I never went to court. If Child Services does a background check on me, I’m screwed.”

This is how it has gone every time I see Richard, him constantly and openly lamenting his misery, even while steadfastly refusing any reasonable out.

“And if they haul me off to jail in Jersey,” he says, “who’ll take care of Valentine?”

A few months later Richard strides in the door as if he’s just won the lottery.

“Well, I’m going to do it,” he beams. “I’m going to make Suzi an honest woman.” He actually says that. “We’re going to tie the knot.”

I can’t help myself. The only reaction that comes out of me is to earnestly ask him if he has gone completely insane. Quietly and patiently at first, and eventually at full rant, I throw reason after reason why marrying Suzi will only buy him more pain.

But he has come armed with reasons of his own.

Too many for them all to be sincere.

“It will give the child a legal name,” he



Richard has indeed gone mad. And after five hours of pleading, bullying, sarcasm, interrogation, and reasoning, I have not brought him a whit closer to sanity

says.

“It will make Suzi a citizen,” he says.

“It will give me legal custody of Valentine,” he says.

“I’ll be able to claim them on my SSI disability,” he says.

“Besides” – he finally grins, and this is what’s really at the bottom of it – “once Suzi’s married to me, I have certain rights. She won’t be able to tell me no.”

That confirms it for me.

Richard has indeed gone mad. And after five hours of pleading, bullying, sarcasm, interrogation, and reasoning, I have not brought him a whit closer to sanity. Nail him on one point and he slides over to another.

We are a dog. Me, the head, chasing him, the tail.

The nuptials are conducted the next day in a tiny, dusty courtroom in Chinatown, the “happy couple” decked out in T-shirts and jeans, Valentine restless and squirming all the while. In all of twenty minutes it’s a done deal. The “wedding party” convenes immediately thereafter at the Burger King down the block. Large fries and jumbo soda for everyone and a strawberry shake for Val. Suzi gets her wedding gift in hard cash and off she goes to the races. An hour or so later Richard is up in the office (naysayers like me not having been invited to the dance) gushing over my desk, giving me the blow-by-blow of the whole glorious event.

His doomed spasm of joy is almost too sad to watch.

The next day Richard is back sporting a fresh round of sad laments. He slinks into a chair and lobs them at me one by one, while Valentine waddles breathlessly around the office, a world of wonder in her big black eyes, opening every drawer, picking up every phone, grabbing every sheet of paper, twisting every knob,

oblivious of the turmoil into which she has been born. Richard's eyes keep track of her spree of abandon, but from some far distance.

"I can't believe it," he all but whines. "Suzi even charged me to go to bed with her on our honeymoon night."

For the New Year's issue of *Street News*, we dress Valentine up as the incoming year and put her picture on the cover. "A New Beginning," it says.

Richard buys twenty copies.

One Friday night I'm sitting at my computer, pretending to work. But my mind is not in it.

My mind is out the window.

My soul is in the pipe.

And just as I'm preparing to go out and give my demons another pound of flesh, the phone rings.

It's Richard.

He's calling from a Jersey jail.

The cops at Port Authority yanked him.

He had no ID.

They ran his name through the computer.

The warrant popped up.

Suzi is nowhere to be found.

And the nurse from Child Services watching Valentine is already two hours into overtime. There's no one else.

"Suzi's probably beamed up somewhere," Richard says. "Look, I know you're probably busy, but could you go over to my house and stay with Valentine until Suzi gets home? There's plenty of food in the fridge."

"Of course I'll do it," I tell him, the glory of being needed greater, for the moment, than my urge to fry my brains. But I pack my pipe and lighter out of dumb habit.

As I step out onto Ninth Avenue, I see



Down the block the girls are out. They suspect, by my purposeful stride, that I have just copped some goodies. I survey their expectant faces, but no sign of Suzi among them

the dealers are out.

They know me.

They sidle up.

They say, "Got it good."

But I'm on a different mission.

"Later," I tell them. "Later," and step around.

Down the block the girls are out. They suspect, by my purposeful stride, that I have just copped some goodies. I survey their expectant faces, but no sign of Suzi among them. For a second I resent her, off partying somewhere, carefree, while I'm about to be tied down with her child.

But not really.

I'm needed.

The nurse is packed up when I arrive.

Ready and waiting to go.

Valentine is standing near the living room window with her back to me, as if concealing her embarrassment. She has one hand up, resting on the seat of a chair to steady herself.

The nurse curtly points out the things I might need.

– Clean diapers over here.

– Bottle up there.

– Formula in the cabinet.

Then she is out the door.

At the sound of the door banging shut, Valentine turns herself around – unsteadily, but with amazing dignity – and peers past me to the closed door.

She blinks once . . .

Looks up at me . . .

Her lips begin to quiver . . .

And in the next second she is wailing away. It comes from deep in her gut and pours out of her little mouth, emptying her completely.

She has to gasp for breath before each terrible howl.

I go down on one knee to comfort her.

But none of my dumb child-pleaser shtick has any effect.

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Not goo-goo eyes.

Not hide-a-face.

Not even wiggly ears.

She just stands there consumed by her misery.

I phone my editor, Janet. She has just become a mother herself.

She'll know what to do. We talk briefly, Valentine sobbing all the while. I can't hear much through the din, but enough to discover that

Janet has no secrets to tell me. I am unsettled by this revelation – that all women are not born with maternal magic encoded in their genes.

I hang up in total dismay.

I draw Valentine over to me on the couch.

I look her dead in the eyes.

I see tears have crusted on her cheek, clear as crystal, like crushed diamonds. But I find no clue in her face to the source of her pain.

And then, I can't tell you why, maybe because of her name, but whatever the reason, I begin to softly sing.

My little Valentine . . .

My funny Valentine . . .

You always smile when skies are gray . . .

. . . And to my amazement this works. Valentine stops crying as abruptly as she had started and stares back at me with profound curiosity. I feel an odd, sudden flush of gratitude.

Your lips are laughable . . .

Unphotographable . . .

Stay, little Valentine, stay . . .

I keep on singing, afraid to stop, panicking over the words, humming when they don't come, and suddenly, four verses in, the whole thing strikes me as absurdly funny. I imagine my dealer standing in the doorway watching. Eight o'clock Friday night in the heart of Hell's Kitchen, people chasing demons all up



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and down the darkness outside, let's go see what Lee is up to.

I'm cracking myself up.

Head tilted back –

Eyes up at the ceiling –

Laughing right out loud –

And Valentine joins right in.

Flaps her little arms up and down like wings and howls with delight. Her joy like a fragile gift.

I feel higher than I have in years.

When Suzi strides through the door several hours later, I am amazed at how suddenly maternal she becomes. With deft efficiency she swoops up Valentine, gathers her into her night things, and hauls her off to bed. I sit watching her, a bystander now. With each assured twist and turn of her firm body, my empathy for Richard grows. I can almost taste her juiciness.

Richard gets something like thirty days in prison. And no sooner is he released than he is in my office, bemoaning yet another slight in life. His lawyer – the same one who negotiated his wind-fall settlement – has saddled him with a \$20,000 tab for representing him on the warrant case – about \$18,000 too much for the work.

"You have a way with words," says Richard flatteringly. "I wanna do a letter to this shyster on the computer."

Drawing on my vast store of legal knowledge, gleaned from watching numerous episodes of *L.A. Law*, I imply, in so many well-chosen words, that a mal-practice suit is not only in order here but is definitely in the offing. Richard takes this to his lawyer, triumphantly returns, clutching a check for seven grand, and hits me off with a C-note.

Being in the can, it seems, was just the grist Richard needed for his muse. According to him, his rhymes went over in

a big way on the inside, and his poet's cap now firmly back on his head, he has written an ode to Valentine. He stands over me like an expectant father as I read the thing – sing-song rhyme, rap-song intonations. I don't recall the words. But it has Valentine out there already, a big, bad hot mama, taking the streets by storm.

On Valentine's birthday Richard shows up and invites me for coffee. We stop, on the way, to pick up ice cream, cake, and other party goodies.

"We're having a party for Valentine," he chirps. "Why don't you come over."

We haul the stuff up to his apartment, six flights up.

"You'll have to excuse Suzi," he says offhandedly. "She's not completely awake yet. She had a rough night."

Valentine and I play as Richard disappears past the kitchen to drag Suzi out of bed. She comes out in a tattered robe, puffy-eyed and short-tempered. When she speaks to Richard at all, she wields his name like a razor.



Valentine and I play as Richard disappears past the kitchen to drag Suzi out of bed. She comes out in a tattered robe, puffy-eyed and short-tempered

"Here we are!" says Richard, perky as a virgin coed, his insistent merriment beginning to grate even on my nerves. It reminds me of the one and only time my father invited me over to his house. He was so solicitous of my enjoyment, asking me again and again if I was having fun, that all I wanted to do was clamp my hands around his throat and squeeze.

It's just the four of us. We all gather around, Suzi prefacing every concession she makes to this with a tired sigh. We eat ice cream and cake, push smiling faces Valentine's way, sing "Happy Birthday" perfectly offkey, Valentine blinking back at us all the while, wondering at our odd behavior. I give it my best effort. But all I keep thinking, my eyes floating from Valentine to Richard to Suzi, is how very, very hard a lonely person will try.

I once wrote an ad for Richard. He imagined that he could wholesale his poems to *Street News* readers, and asked for my help. The ad read, "The street rhymes. It rhymes in the heart of the man who sings its song." ❖

WRITING WORTH READING FROM AROUND THE WORLD

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