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by stanley lieber

Joining the priesthood had been a mistake. Years hated, but Shinji didn't know what else to do with his life. At his age, abandoning the security of the church was a risky proposition, and he didn't want to fall into the cycle of migration from scam to scam, burning bridges for firewood but somehow still just barely getting by. He didn't want to end up like his cousin, Carmine.

"You know what's fun?" Shinji asked.

"I do not."

"Blowing through all this money." Shinji snatched a bale of cash from his roll cart and sent it sailing overboard. "Watch for falling prices!" he screamed over the deck rail. It wasn't clear if there was anyone walking below.

Shinji opened his community center every day at 06:30. There were always a few junkies waiting when he arrived. He would nudge them awake and ask if they'd had any breakfast, inviting them in for a free meal. Most of the time the junkies would roll their eyes. But they'd still come inside for the meal. He was happy to help.

"Lady, you look good in that shirt." Shinji had convinced her, after all these months, to try one on. He had convinced her but still she wasn't convinced. "I look like an idiot," Cameron said. Shinji frowned, hurt. "Why, you do not." She took off the shirt anyway, and tossed it back on the cart. "I don't want to do this anymore." A seagull took this opportunity to relieve itself, right on top of the cart. "Exactly," Cameron said.

Shinji had often thought about returning to Japan. New York didn't need him; he knew that, now. His extended family at the community center comprised an equinoctial procession of different faces, all with the same problems. He had to resist giving newcomers a rundown of all the many things that were (he knew, straightaway) going wrong with their lives before they'd even had a chance to speak. He was losing it; that state of grace from which all moral authority flowed. Shinji bin Sony would shortly resign his commission.

"You can't just quit," Shinji said, matter-of-factly, and smiled. "We've a contract."

Cameron dipped her finger into the seagull shit, dug it around defiantly, and, before he could stop her, smeared a dollop across Shinji's smugly curled upper lip. He took a full step backwards, nearly tripping over Andrew.

"Th—This is an outrage. Why, I've half a mind to—"

"Can it, shitface" Cameron said, and stomped down the ramp to the docks.

This gave Shinji an idea.