

Carbones Calientes

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To shake off a hangover, Liz decided to walk to Lake Michigan for the sunrise. She dragged on her yoga pants and ratty tee-shirt, laced her gym shoes, keeping her head level so it wouldn't spin. On the front porch, she took a deep breath, steadied herself on the banister, then pushed on. Swinging her arms, she walked past the produce store gone belly up, the hot-sheet motel, the private club with razor wire crowning the fence. Her eyes gritty, waves of nausea splashing inside, she headed toward the lake. On the way, she stepped around trash, bottles, old diapers, and potato chip bags. At the overpass under LSD, an egg-crate foam, burlap blanket, and plastic sheeting were piled into a makeshift nest. A rat scampering down the sidewalk burrowed into the mound. The pile undulated, swelled, and from underneath emerged a man who sat up, rubbed his eyes, and rose to his feet. Then he gathered up the foam and bedding, stuffing them into a bag which he slung over his shoulder before trudging off.

Further ahead, a grey squirrel ran down the trunk of an oak tree, transforming itself into a sweat-pant-clad woman, jogging on the trail. At the shore, a gull landed, stood on one leg, twisted its head slowly until an old man, dressed in flowing white pants and tunic, stood in its place, performing Tai Chi. A fish flopped onto the beach and stood up, a man in silvery spandex, who unlocked a bicycle from the rack and pedaled off toward the Loop. At the crest of a hillock, Liz saw a trash can with CARBONES CALIENTES stenciled on the side. A beak poked over the top of the can, followed by first one then the other wing of yellow and red feathers, flapping. The bird shook itself from head to tail, stirring up clouds of ashes, then spread its wings and flew off to join a vee of birds heading south.

Liz tried to focus her eyes on the horizon but the sun bulged and blinding rays shot across the surface of the lake. She rubbed her eyes, looked again and saw the sun hover, an orange, pulsating blob, above the water. She closed her eyes and willed her arms to sprout feathers, her toes to become claws, her nose a beak, waiting to catch the next gust of wind.