

Free!


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Free!



I'd been standing on top of the union all night, wondering if anything was going to happen. I mean, anything at all. The sun was just rising over the ashes of Gilchrist and I figured, well, here I am. I'm bored and freezing and its morning already and nothing has happened and it doesn't look like anything is going to happen and I've just been wasting my time here.

Which was very depressing. So, I decided to go back to my room and maybe get some sleep, when this guy more or less appeared next to me. He had this wretched black scarf wrapped around himself all the way from—I swear—all the way from his nose to his navel. His eyes were these icy little windows, frozen open so he couldn't even blink. Every so often a tiny puff of air escaped from where his mouth should have been, then dissolved in the crisp air. He was in pretty bad shape.

He didn't say anything, didn't even move, and I thought, sure, buddy, go ahead and drop dead on me right here so I'm the one who has to report it—with my luck they'll probably send me up for murder. Some people have really got nerve.

I started to walk away.

"Have you got anything for free?"

A panhandler! My first impulse was to shove him over the edge and leave, but then . . . it was only a few days after Christmas and here was someone who looked worse off than even I, so I tried to humor him. "What do you want for free?" I asked.

"Oh, photographs, poems, essays, drawings, etchings, sketches, haiku, maybe a short story or two for starters. But I'll also accept ideas, idiosyncracies, praise, donations, letters, opinions, differences of opinion . . . most anything."

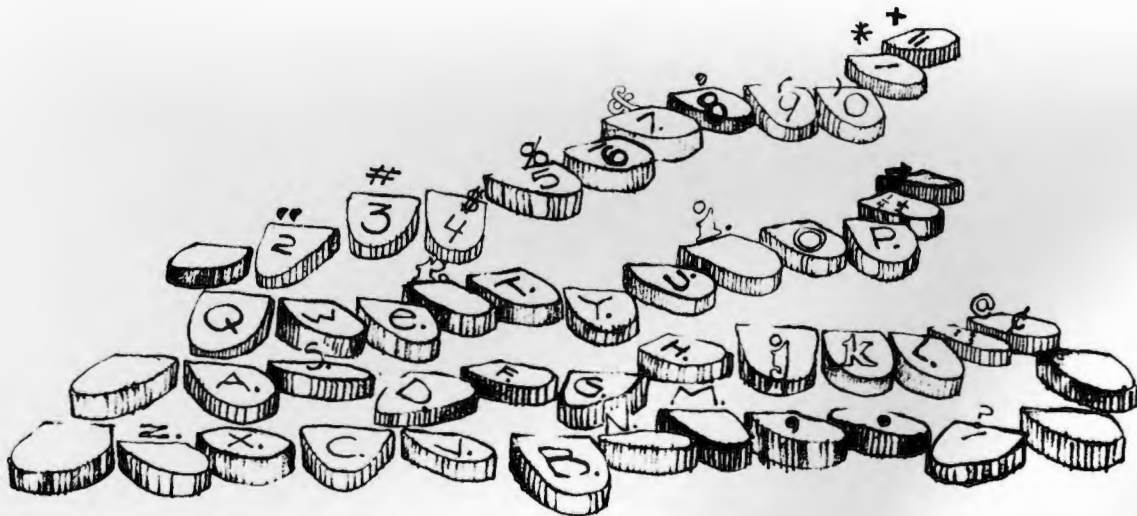
I realized the weather had affected the poor guy's mind. Still, I couldn't help him until I understood his problem. I tried to sound sympathetic. "What are you babbling about, friend?"

"Free," he replied, as if that were sufficient.

"Well," I became philosophical, "what exactly is free?"

He shivered a little and said, "This—"

Sue Denim







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Our cover drawing is by *Cary Kann*.

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