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Skim Milk

by Lois J. Peterson

Shayla doesn't believe me when I tell her that I handed in that wallet to the bus driver. She shakes her head, hoping, I know, that her hair will shift in that floaty way it did after she got that Jennifer Aniston cut that looks just like someone chewed it off. "Jeez," she sneers, "I wonder about you, I really do. When was the last time you had a wallet full of cash?"

Never, I guess." I'm thinking of my mother, whose favourite expression is *I don't care about being rich. I just want enough so I don't always know how much I've got in my purse.*

That's a line, of course. Why else does she live at the bingo?

Shayla wiggles Darcy's stroller, and the sleeping baby's head bobs like it's going to fall off any minute. "You get a look to see what was inside?" I swear she doesn't look at that baby more than she has to.

I shrug, not telling her how long I sat and watched it under the seat, like it was alive thing about to run off. It had been raining all day and the windows were fogged up. The bus was warm and drafty at once, and smelled of wet hair and baby spit.

"You at least gave the driver your name, so if it doesn't get claimed you can have it?"

I'm not about to tell her I didn't think of this then. Wonder if it's too late now. "*Bet* it just had an old lottery ticket and maybe a five-spot. Didn't look like it belonged to anyone who had more than we do."

It's hard not to look poor. I guess I was fifteen when I figured out that worn clothes, too small, and beat-up shoes give you away, so I started with the thrift stores and tried get Mom to buy shoe polish.

"You thinking of going in the army?" she asked.

So I bought the polish myself with my first McDonald's cheque.

Shayla is wearing hipster jeans that show her snake tattoo and an orange strip of her thong. Her sister Julie did her hair, which proves why she flunked hairdresser school and now works at the Subway at Newton. I know where her hands have been, so I wouldn't have one of their subs if you bought it for me.

Julie has three boyfriends and juggles them like plates, daring them to break when she tells them about what she got up to at the Ozone with another one. But they all stick around. It's a mystery to me.

Drew took off the minute he heard about the baby. Last thing I heard was he moved to Saskatchewan to live at his sister's. I guess whatever Julie has is another thing I don't have. But I do have Ryan, and he's sweetly asleep in his stroller that I got from the consignment store, and his clothes are all washed every day, and I make sure I take one layer off when I dress him to go outside like they say in books,

and let him crawl around with a bare bum indoors to keep the diaper rash away. And it works.

Darcy's cheeks are more red and chapped than any rash Ryan's ever had.

Shayla was so pleased when she found out she was pregnant just three weeks after me, figuring our kids would grow up together and always have someone to play with. But if you put these two down to play in the same spot, it's not ten seconds before there's yelling. So now we only get together when they're likely to sleep through, and anyway, I don't want more babies at my place. The landlady already complains if Ryan's cried too loudly, and he's a good baby most of the time.

It was him I was thinking of when I sat watching the wallet on the bus floor, too far for me to reach over and grab it without waking him up. He had his head burrowed into my chest I knew there'd be a wet, slimy place my jacket from where he'd been drooling. But it's washable. Another thing I learned about being poor.

I thought of how there might be enough in that wallet to sign Ryan up for baby gym or buy him one of the big Tonka trucks I saw at the Cloverdale Swap Meet last week. Maybe I could get him some real baby food in jars, instead of homemade stuff that I learned to make from a book.

He'll need a bigger coat in a few months and real shoes when he starts walking. I'm out of shampoo and wouldn't mind getting a TV guide that's up to date instead of last month's, which doesn't have the new season's shows in it.

It's still eight days until I get my cheque.

But picking up the wallet would have meant waking Ryan, so I just sat and watched it. Wondering.

Shayla's fingernails are bitten and her fingers are red and ~but she still insists on wearing nail polish, which makes them look worse. She's tapping on her package of smokes on the table, her eyes shifting around the room like one of those beams that sweep the sky from used car lots. Shayla knows everyone.

In school she was the smart one. But not smart enough to stay out of trouble when discovered pot and booze. she was the only one my friends my mother could stand; said Shayla made her laugh. Wouldn't have been laughing if I'd got up to the stunts that Shayla didn't mind telling her about.

I know she steals and lies. Always has.

I pinched a lipstick from Zellers once. Got halfway home and decided I didn't want to keep it. Got caught putting it back. Try explaining that! Even my mother wouldn't believe me.

While I was watching that wallet I was thinking if you find something and don't hand it in to whoever might find its owner, is that stealing? What if I need what's inside more than they do? What if the owner had stolen whatever was in the wallet from someone else? What if they've got so much money that losing the wallet will only mean have to take trouble of getting new ID and credit cards? But no real loss.

I could feel myself thinking in circles, looking for away out that would let me shift the baby, lean over, pick up the wallet from the dirty floor, and slip it in my pocket.

Shayla's up at the counter, leaning against it hoping Brad will let her have another muffin for free. We only go to this Tim Hortons and not the one at Guildford because she thinks he's cute. Doesn't care about the ring on his left hand.

While I was watching the wallet I was thinking that if there was twenty bucks inside maybe I could pick up a tray of pork chops, a couple of cans of corn. If there was just ten I could at least pick up some cream for coffee instead of skim milk, which just makes it grey and hardly worth drinking.

When I was a kid, my mother made up jugs of milk from powder that she mixed with two percent. "You'll never know the difference," she used to say each time as my brother Jake made a gaggy noise watching her stir the clumps of into a jug of water.

I couldn't care either way, just drank it because ads said milk was good for you, But back then I swore that however poor I was when I grew up, I could stand anything as long I didn't have to buy milk powder for my kids instead of the real stuff in cartons.

Ryan's too little for any kind of milk, yet. But it doesn't matter if he never has baby gym classes or the kind of toys they show on TV or tickets to real live kids' shows instead of just movies and TV. As long as he never has drink skim milk from powder. I thought about this as I was on the bus going down King George Highway in the dark. I thought how easy it would be to pick up that wallet and keep whatever was in it and no one would ever know or care.

Except me.

How can you be the kind of mother that wants real milk for your kid but is happy to get it by stealing?

Just before we came to my stop I got up and shifted Ryan onto my hip. "There's a wallet under that seat." I had to say it twice before the kid in the red toque listening to his Walk man knew I was talking to him. "Under there." I pointed, "Pass it to me, would you?"

He groped around, picked it up and looked at it, turning it over a couple of times so I knew it wasn't his. He handed it over then shifted his earphones and tucked his chin back down into his coat.

"Found this," I said to the driver as I stood at the front waiting for the doors to open, He took it from me but didn't say a word, not even when I said "you" as I stepped down into the road,

That's what I want to tell Shayla about, but she's too busy tipping her skinny hip at the guy at the counter, who hardly notices, And Ryan's too little to know that not being able to afford pork chops or Tonka trucks is not the worst of being poor, But the fact that you don't count to lots of people. I'll make sure he grows up knowing that even a bus driver who makes his living driving people around who can't afford to get around any other way - could have the courtesy to answer when someone says *Thank you* when they get down at their stop, or say something when they hand in some lost property they could have just as easily slipped in their pocket and carried home with them.

But Shayla wouldn't get it, Any more than she got it when I tried to tell her that as long as Ryan never had to have milk made from powder I'd know I'd done my best for him.

"Milk" she said. "Yuk. Give me a Coke any day."

So there's no point telling her why I handed in that wallet, instead of keeping it,