

The Green Fields of America

By D. L. Lewis

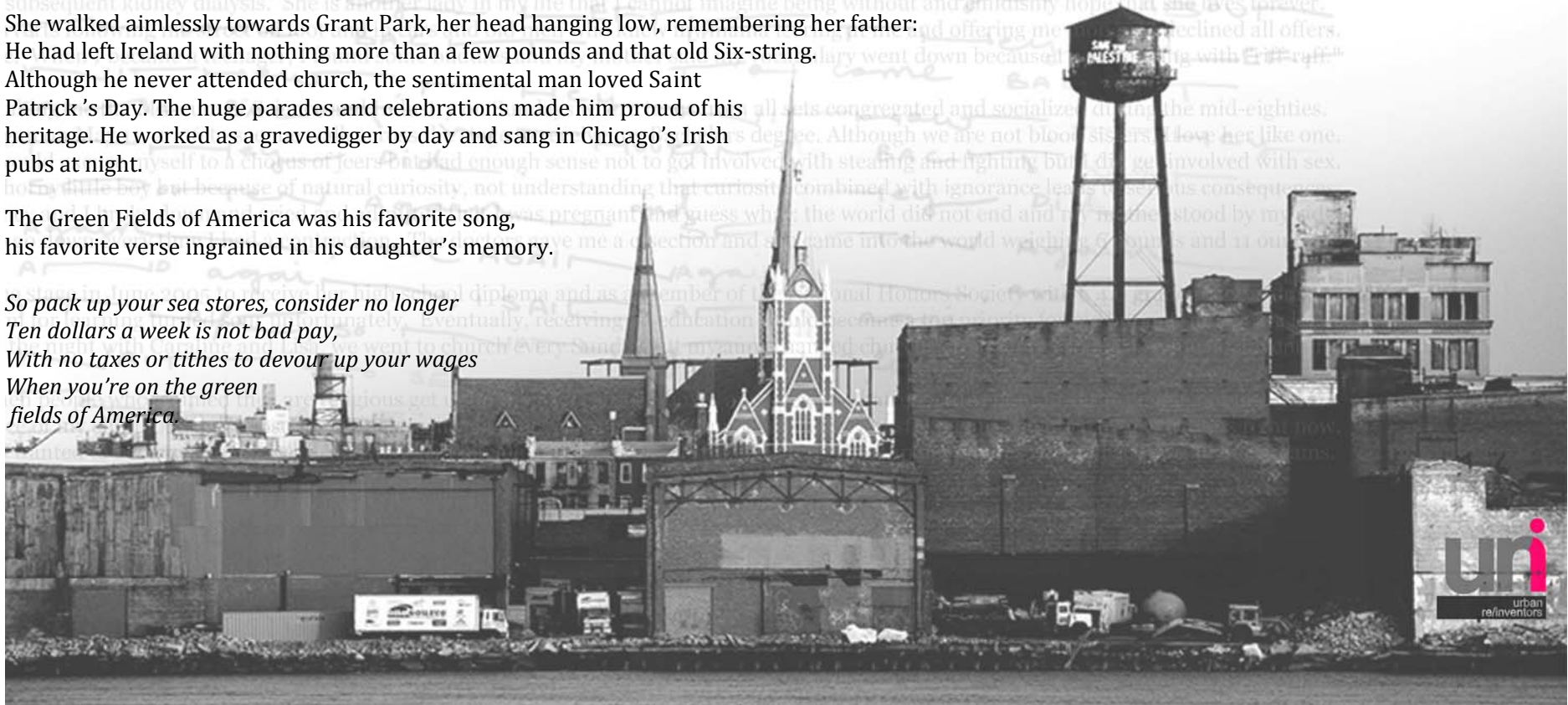
“Fifty bucks,” said the pawnbroker. “That’s my final offer.” The haggard woman took a deep breath and touched the instrument one last time. “All right,” she returned, averting her eyes. “I hope the bloke that gets it has a soft spot in his heart for folk songs.” The impatient merchant put five ten-dollar bills in her hand. “I couldn’t care less what kind of music they like. It ain’t yours anymore, what do you care?” Shelly Kelly painfully glanced at the smiling eyes on the flattop guitar and pocketed the money. She left without saying another word, but not before the callous remark induced a childhood memory: She watched her father paint the image of Saint Patrick on the guitar’s soundboard. The brushstrokes blended the colors together like magic. As the personage emerged from the wood like a sunrise, her father’s steady hands never faltered. The smiling eyes welcomed Shelly, unconditionally, like her father’s love. Before he died her father often repeated what became a benediction of sorts, a code for her to live by. Now, stricken with shame, Shelly knew the blessing would forever haunt her: “Lassie, if ya keep a stiff upper lip, and do the right thing, smiling eyes will always guide your way.”

She walked aimlessly towards Grant Park, her head hanging low, remembering her father: He had left Ireland with nothing more than a few pounds and that old Six-string.

Although he never attended church, the sentimental man loved Saint Patrick’s Day. The huge parades and celebrations made him proud of his heritage. He worked as a gravedigger by day and sang in Chicago’s Irish pubs at night.

The Green Fields of America was his favorite song, his favorite verse ingrained in his daughter’s memory.

*So pack up your sea stores, consider no longer
Ten dollars a week is not bad pay,
With no taxes or tithes to devour up your wages
When you’re on the green
fields of America.*



* D.L. Lewis is a fiction writer that focuses on the depths of human dignity when confronted with life’s random inequities. Many years as a traveler, and musician, have afforded him a front-row seat for the magnanimous beat that ordinary folk produce against insurmountable odds. Mr. Lewis is presently working on a novel set in the 70’s about blues music.

"Where ya been?"

"The pawnshop," mumbled Shelly, startled, looking up at her friend.

"When I saw ya without it, I figured," Suzie said. "How much did ya get?"

"Fifty dollars. It's over . . . I'll never play again."

Suzie stroked Shelly's long, red hair. "Sweetie, there's enough jukeboxes on the Southside to keep the music playing forever. Am I right?"

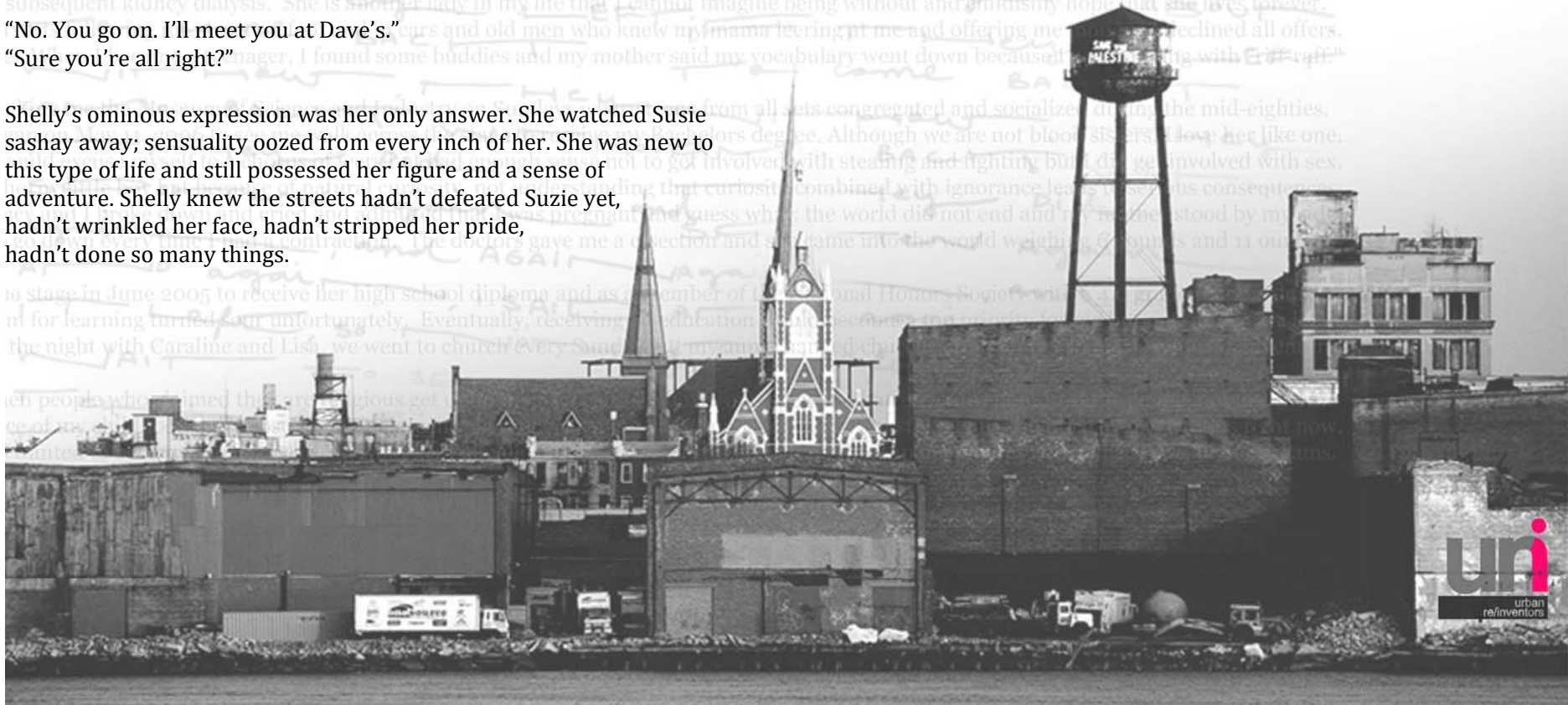
"I can't take another winter out in the cold," said Shelly. "I'm going to Florida. Will ya go with me?"

"Have ya lost your blooming marbles? We don't know a living soul in Florida. Besides, how could I leave all this?" The jest brought a slight smile to Shelly's face. Suzie laughed and Shelly followed suit, if only out of nervous tension. Even though they were close, Shelly doubted the younger woman would leave Chicago. "Listen, they're having a party at Dave's tonight," Susie said. "We'll talk about it then. I promised Tiger I'd meet him at the library. Says he has something for me. You wanna come?"

"No. You go on. I'll meet you at Dave's."

"Sure you're all right?"

Shelly's ominous expression was her only answer. She watched Susie sashay away; sensuality oozed from every inch of her. She was new to this type of life and still possessed her figure and a sense of adventure. Shelly knew the streets hadn't defeated Suzie yet, hadn't wrinkled her face, hadn't stripped her pride, hadn't done so many things.



Later that evening Shelly stood in front of the old motel. It had been converted to Efficiencies for renters on the bottom rung of the market. Shelly didn't bother knocking on the door; no one could have heard her over the racket. The two-room dwelling swelled with endless chatter. A cloud of smoke hovered at the ceiling; Bob Dylan's unmistakable voice whined from a stereo in need of repair. Shelly realized most of the street urchins mulling about were also in need of repair, so to speak. Most would never be fixed. The thick scent of cannabis and sweat filled the room.

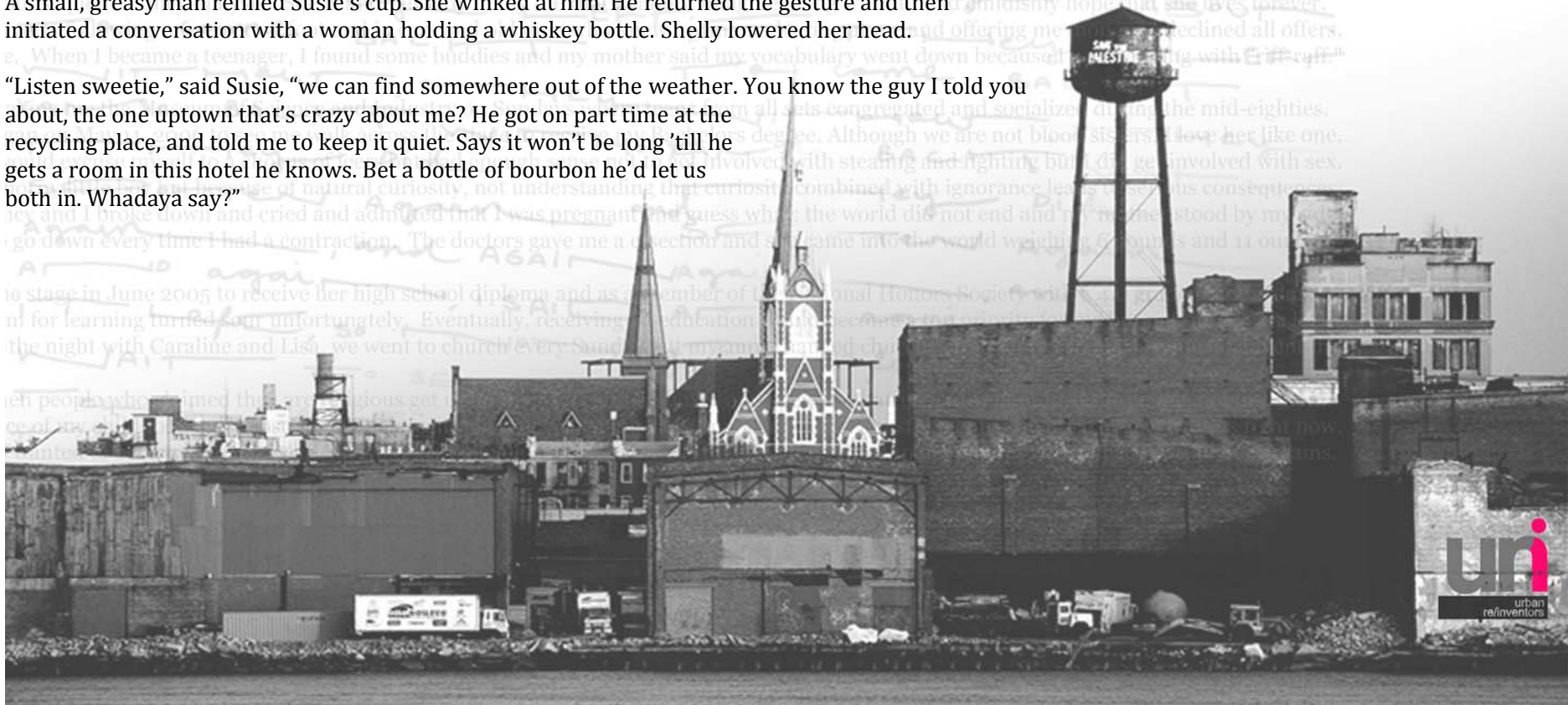
After taking several tokes of homegrown and accepting a plastic cup filled with cheap wine, Shelly found Suzie sitting on the floor by the portable fridge. "Dave has this place through Christmas," said Susie, "if he doesn't get kicked out. He hit a scratch-off ticket and paid for the first month and deposit, right up front. Everybody's gonna get well!"

"What goes around comes around," Shelly said. "I just hope someone takes care of him when the time comes."
"Sweetie, are you serious about going south?"

Shelly touched Suzie's hand. "I'm gone tomorrow, unless you need me to wait a few days."

A small, greasy man refilled Susie's cup. She winked at him. He returned the gesture and then initiated a conversation with a woman holding a whiskey bottle. Shelly lowered her head.

"Listen sweetie," said Susie, "we can find somewhere out of the weather. You know the guy I told you about, the one uptown that's crazy about me? He got on part time at the recycling place, and told me to keep it quiet. Says it won't be long 'till he gets a room in this hotel he knows. Bet a bottle of bourbon he'd let us both in. Whadaya say?"



Shelly looked up with tears in her eyes. “I’ve quit hoping for things that might happen. My papa drank himself to death waiting on my mother to come home—that never happened. He didn’t even hold it against her. Said she couldn’t face the music after I was born. Just too young he said. She told him that she was afraid of being a bad mother . . . *No! I’m outta here.*”

Susie pulled back her poncho, revealing a pint bottle of Tequila. “Look. Tiger owed me. We’re gonna drink ever bit of it, just you and me. It’s only a week to Christmas.”

“You ain’t going, are ya?”

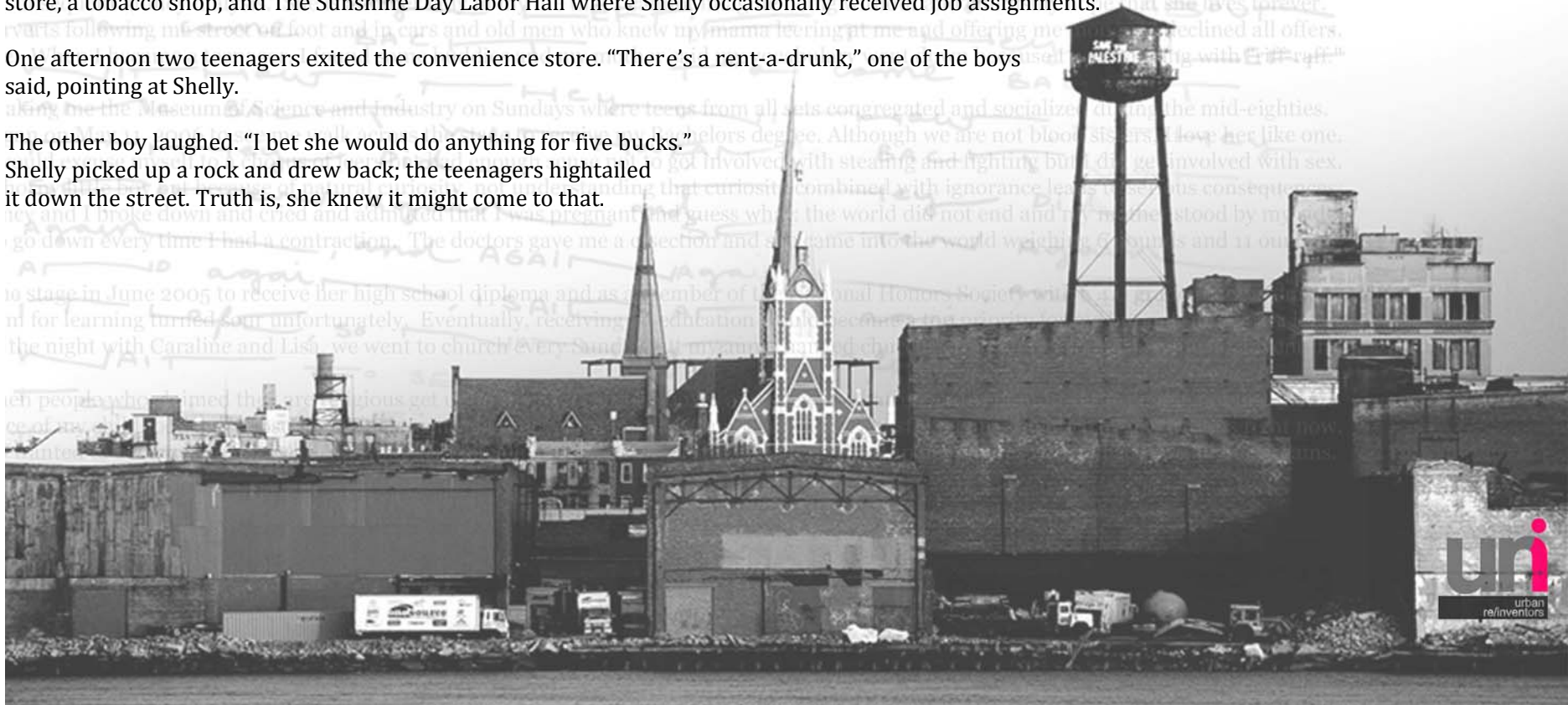
“I reckon not,” admitted Susie. “But we gonna have a goodtime tonight, no guff, lassie.”

Shelly Kelly spent Christmas in the woods just outside of Saint Augustine, Florida. They called the place The Pits: a large, fresh water pond left from a strip-mining excavation. It sufficed for several days, but the remote location proved too dangerous for Shelly. There was little protection from the drunken men, especially at night. Shelly settled in a cardboard box community on the poor side of town, behind a rundown plaza. It housed a convenience store, a tobacco shop, and The Sunshine Day Labor Hall where Shelly occasionally received job assignments.

One afternoon two teenagers exited the convenience store. “There’s a rent-a-drunk,” one of the boys said, pointing at Shelly.

The other boy laughed. “I bet she would do anything for five bucks.”

Shelly picked up a rock and drew back; the teenagers hightailed it down the street. Truth is, she knew it might come to that.



At least women had that, she reasoned. *Damn it! Having a roll in the hay with a barfly is one thing, but servicing some punk for money, well, surely it won't come to that.* She tried to convince herself, but the thought wouldn't leave her. Only alcohol silenced its possibility.

As soon as the day labor hall discovered Shelly's inability to work eight hours without a drink, they stopped giving her assignments. The plasma center also quit processing her blood, because her pressure was dangerously high. Shelly resorted to dumpster diving; aluminum cans earned her enough money to drink beer all day and have a bottle of wine at bedtime. Although she was glad for the warmth of Florida, Shelly's heart turned colder with each sunrise.

There was a bite in the February morning as Shelly made her way from dumpster to dumpster. She noticed an elderly woman in an alley. Some household items had been set out for the taking and the woman was examining the lot. This wasn't unusual. What struck Shelly was the woman's appearance. The redheaded scavenger and Shelly shared the same features: an oval face, blue eyes, small ears, and pasty skin. *She looks enough like me to be my mother,* thought Shelly, and edged closer.

The woman hissed. "This is mine! I saw it first. Don't think because I'm old I won't fight. Cause I will."

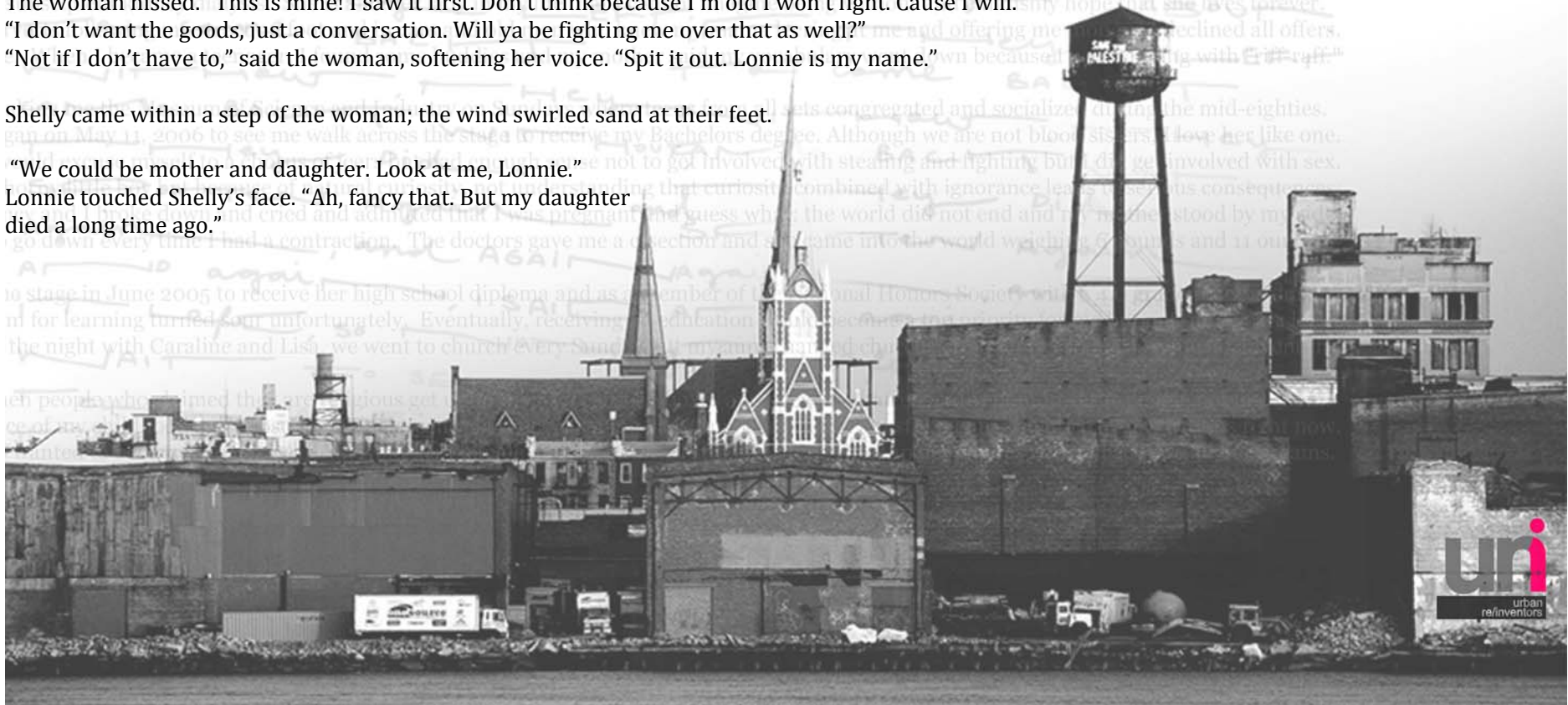
"I don't want the goods, just a conversation. Will ya be fighting me over that as well?"

"Not if I don't have to," said the woman, softening her voice. "Spit it out. Lonnie is my name."

Shelly came within a step of the woman; the wind swirled sand at their feet.

"We could be mother and daughter. Look at me, Lonnie."

Lonnie touched Shelly's face. "Ah, fancy that. But my daughter died a long time ago."



“And her name?” asked Shelly. The woman’s eyes glazed over and she spoke with a sadness Sherri understood, the shameful kind that never went away.

“Mary . . . her name was Mary. I’m sorry for biting your head off. Really, I am. All I want is this chest, ya see. I used to have one exactly like it.”

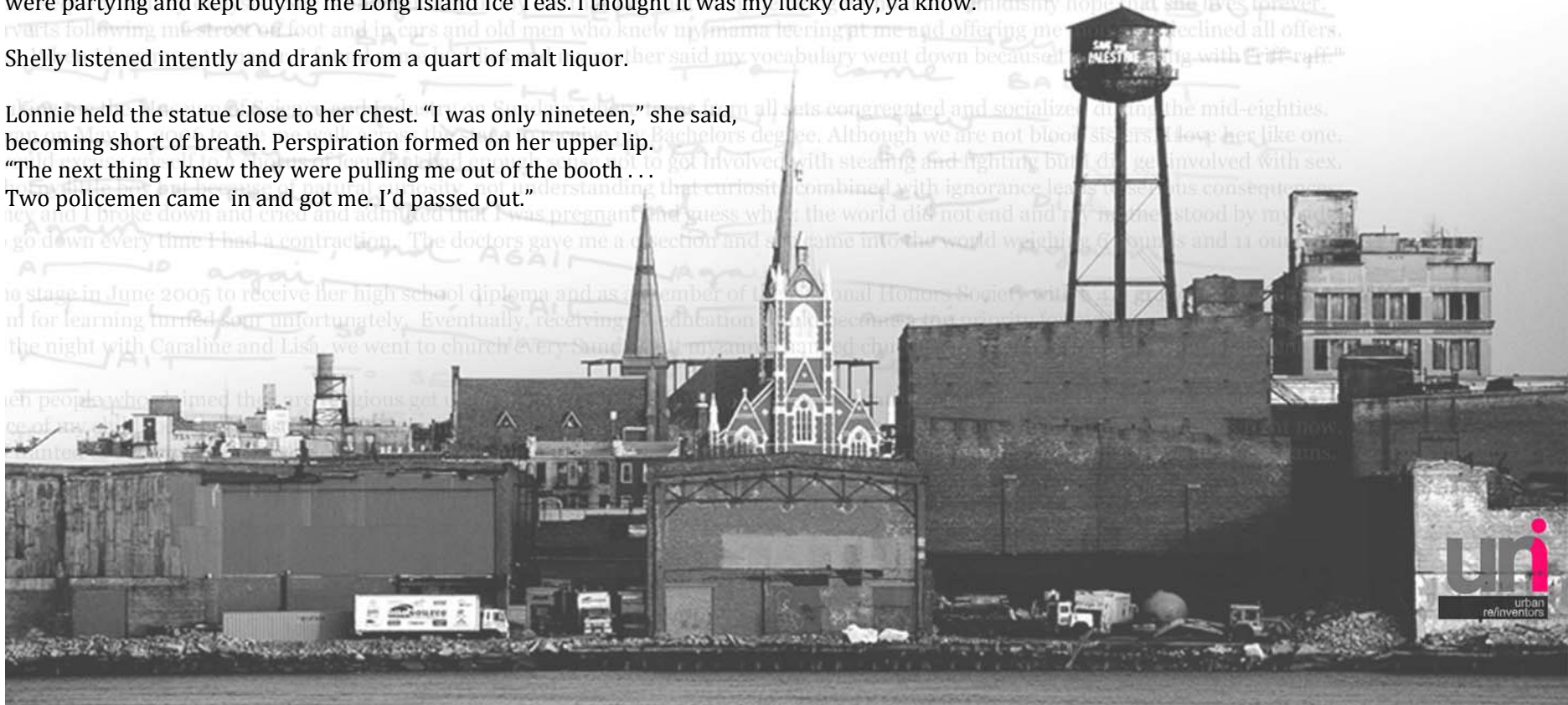
Shelly helped Lonnie carry the small chest of drawers to a campsite near the coastal inlet. Her leanto was hidden by a growth of palmetto bushes and filled with an assortment of useless items: pebbles, buttons, broken toys, nuts, bolts, odds and ends of all variety. Each item was a treasure with its own story. Lonnie’s way of remembering the important moments of her life. A wooden block represented her daughter’s first steps; a button for her first tooth; a piece of an old cloth marked a birthday, and so on.

Shelly picked up a small, plastic statue. “What about this?”

“It was scorching hot that afternoon,” Lonnie said, switching from one foot to the other. She took a stiff drink of gin. “I leaned on the hood of the car and burned my hand. I was pretty well hammered already, as usual, and oblivious to everything around me. I went inside a bar for a drink. These strangers were partying and kept buying me Long Island Ice Teas. I thought it was my lucky day, ya know.”

Shelly listened intently and drank from a quart of malt liquor.

Lonnie held the statue close to her chest. “I was only nineteen,” she said, becoming short of breath. Perspiration formed on her upper lip. “The next thing I knew they were pulling me out of the booth . . . Two policemen came in and got me. I’d passed out.”



"What did they want?"

"They wanted me to identify my Mary. Oh God! She, she was in the morgue. She died of heatstroke." Lonnie's anguished expression confirmed Shelly's worst suspicion.

"Oh, no," cried Shelly.

"I was too young," Lonnie muttered. "I shouldn't have been a mother. I was so afraid. Oh, sweet Mary. She was only two-years old . . . I left her in the car with the windows rolled up."

Shelly held Lonnie and their tears became one. Shelly realized that she could have easily been the recipient of Mary's fate, and now understood what her father had meant. Life's harsh realities were more than his young wife could bear. *My mother was too immature and afraid, just like Lonnie. She was in no condition to raise a child. She was a drunk.* These thoughts pierced Shelly where the truth could not hide: *It hurt papa so bad that I never felt any sympathy for her. What have I done? All these years I've wasted hating my mother. I've allowed it to ruin my life.*

Overwhelmed with curiosity, Shelly asked Lonnie to finish the story: "Why is the statue important?"

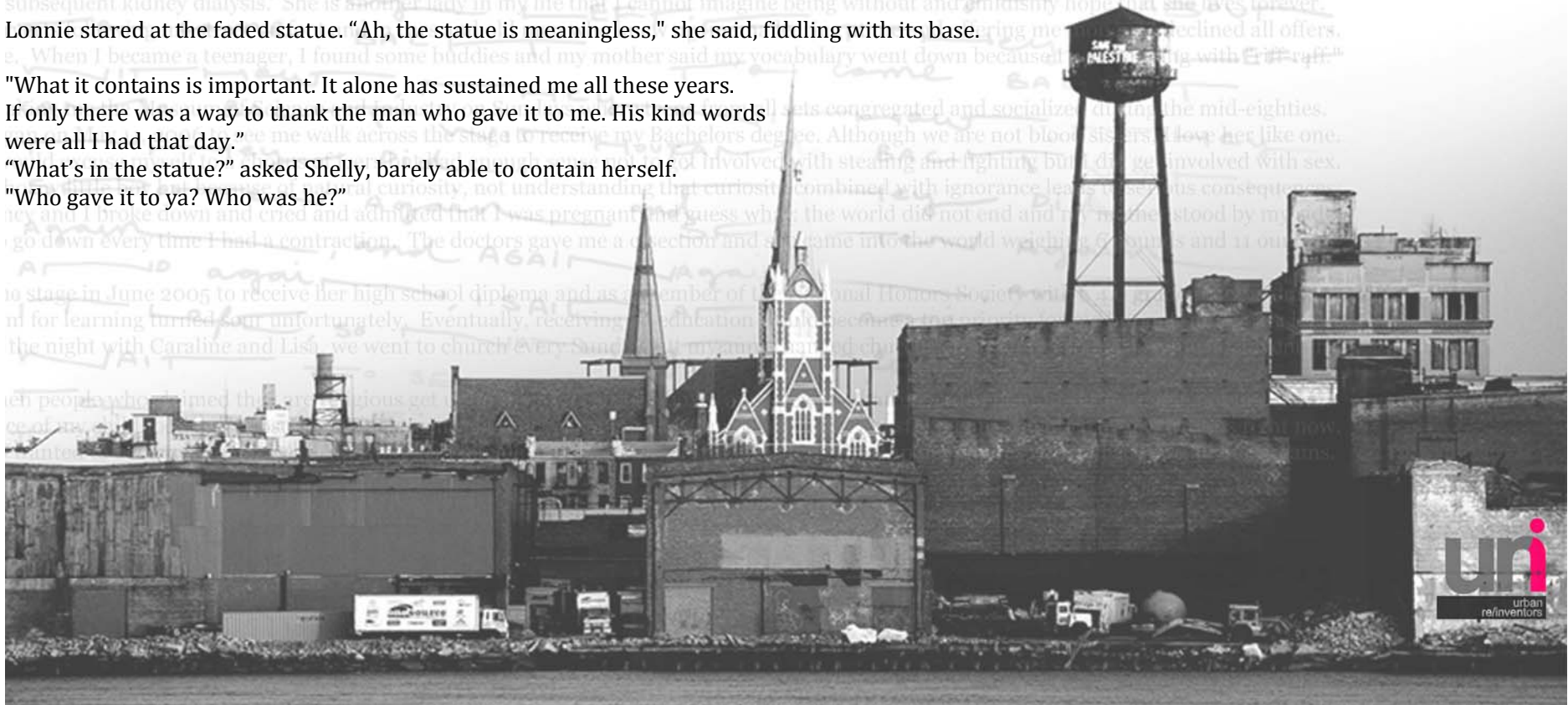
Lonnie stared at the faded statue. "Ah, the statue is meaningless," she said, fiddling with its base.

"What it contains is important. It alone has sustained me all these years.

If only there was a way to thank the man who gave it to me. His kind words were all I had that day."

"What's in the statue?" asked Shelly, barely able to contain herself.

"Who gave it to ya? Who was he?"



“He’s the man that dug my baby’s grave,” answered Lonnie, handing Shelly a rolled up photograph. “He told about the smiling eyes.”

Shelly unrolled the picture of her father’s guitar.

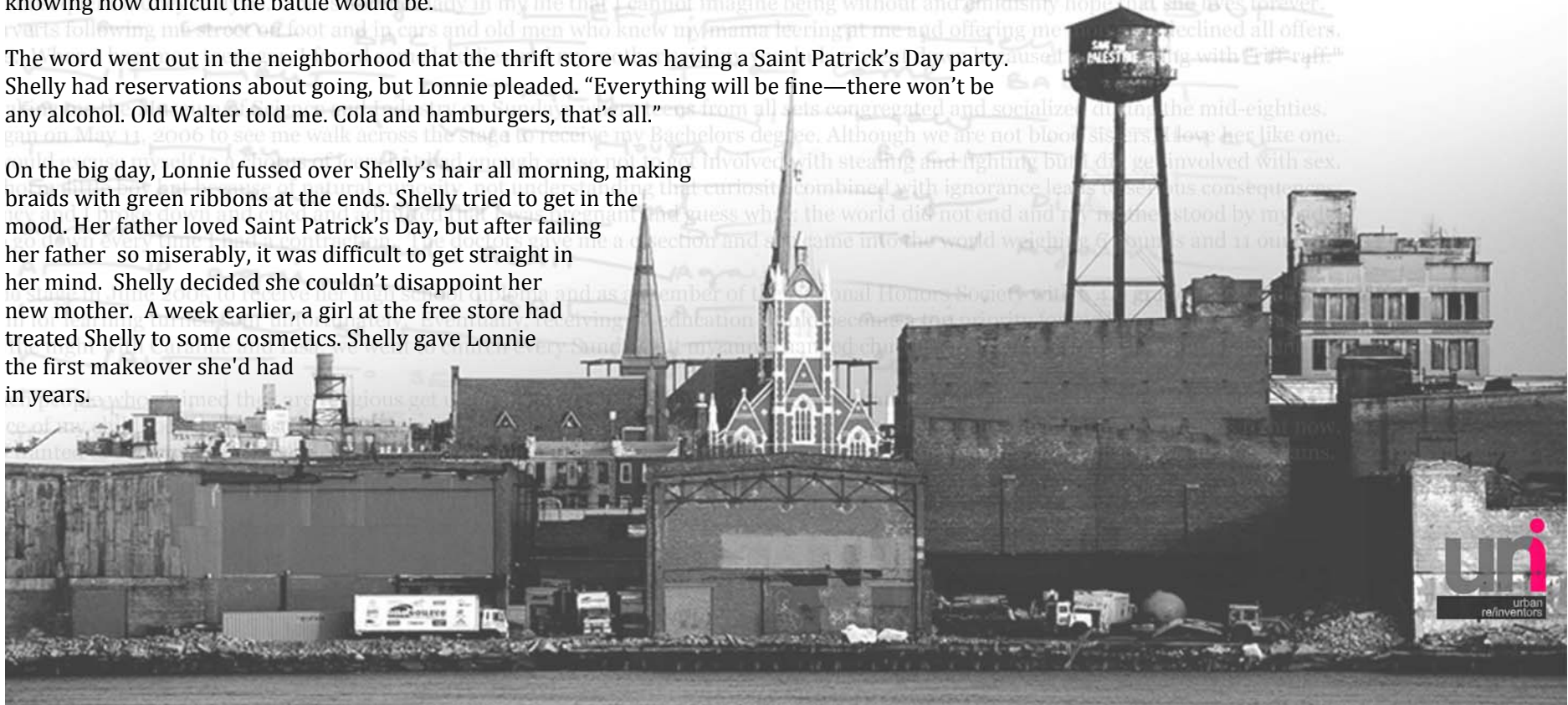
“How could this be? You’re not going to believe it! This is my father’s guitar, my guitar.”

The benediction came to her, like a voice in her soul: “Lassie, keep a stiff upper lip, and do the right thing, and smiling eyes will always guide your way.” Without a second thought Shelly Kelly vowed to quit drinking and be a daughter to Lonnie. The two women embraced and talked until daybreak. Lonnie told how she had left Chicago after Mary’s death, and chronicled the tragedy of a wasted life.

From that moment on, Lonnie fussed and watched over Shelly as if she were a child. In the weeks to come, with the money they saved from not drinking, they occasionally splurged and stayed in a cheap motel. Shelly spent hours in the bathtub. Lonnie brought her treasures to display, just like it was a real home. They were content and accepted what life had dealt them. They promised to unconditionally support one another in the fight to stay sober, knowing how difficult the battle would be.

The word went out in the neighborhood that the thrift store was having a Saint Patrick’s Day party. Shelly had reservations about going, but Lonnie pleaded. “Everything will be fine—there won’t be any alcohol. Old Walter told me. Cola and hamburgers, that’s all.”

On the big day, Lonnie fussed over Shelly’s hair all morning, making braids with green ribbons at the ends. Shelly tried to get in the mood. Her father loved Saint Patrick’s Day, but after failing her father so miserably, it was difficult to get straight in her mind. Shelly decided she couldn’t disappoint her new mother. A week earlier, a girl at the free store had treated Shelly to some cosmetics. Shelly gave Lonnie the first makeover she’d had in years.



There was a pleasant breeze from a cloudless sky; the lawns were turning green. Lonnie and Shelly wore pretty sundresses from the thrift store. Since Shelly had put on weight, they were practically the same size. They looked like mother and daughter walking down the street.

Upon their arrival, the store manager made a short speech and the party got underway. There were shamrock buttons and an abundance of food. Old Walter monopolized Lonnie from the start, and Shelly examined the clothing. The tables were shoved against the walls to make room for dancing. An old radio full of static supplied the music; those from the lowest stations in society were comforted. Good fortune was the main topic of conversation. Shelly could tell by the accents that many were second generation Irish. *I'm glad I came*, she thought. *This was the right thing to do. Yes! It is what it is.* She softly sang her father's favorite verse.

*So pack up your sea stores, consider no longer
Ten dollars a week is not bad pay,
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The store manager's voice interrupted the dancing. "What say we have some real music? Can anyone play guitar?"

Shelly hesitated and then proudly spoke out. "I can play."

"Excellent," the woman bellowed, holding out a guitar. "This just came in with the last truckload of furniture."

Saint Patrick's eyes were smiling.

