



## Buying Life

**Diana L.S. Edwards**  
**Des Moines Area Community College**  
**West Des Moines, Iowa**

Peas roll, especially when harvested fresh, frozen with care, and steamed just enough to be firm but not mushy. Isabel always cooked them right and she grew them herself in their tiny back yard.

The yard had been more patches of weeds than grass when she was transplanted from the 300-acre farm of her parents to the square block of square houses on the square lots just off center from the heart of the city. But she had dug and planted that first year, and planted again when her husband mowed it off. The following year she used ready-mix concrete and plastic gallon ice cream tubs to mark the territory. The peas Isabel chased across the worn linoleum now were from the fourth season.

A plate lay broken at the base of the wall. The biggest chunk still leaned against it. Her eyes followed the dripping, brown stain four feet up to the splat on the fruit-patterned wallpaper. Pieces of noodle still clung there in some deranged portrait. One meaty eye shed gravy tears. A chunk peeled off and landed on Isabel's wrist. She flicked it away and emptied her palm of the peas she'd gathered.

"Peas roll!" she shrieked and leaped to her feet. "Goddammit, Barry, they roll and you can never find them all!"

She felt stupid calling out to no one. Barry was gone, having left his dissatisfaction on the wall and in the bruise beginning to tighten in her left side just

below her ribs. Isabel found a cloth, swiped at her useless tears and began to clean the mess more efficiently. She was done within the hour and it wasn't yet dark. She grabbed a pop from the refrigerator and retreated to the living room.

Isabel held the cold can against her torso and wondered where Barry was. She hoped he was eating at the corner diner or at fast food row four blocks over and one up. Please not a bar, she prayed. But he'd taken the car and that left too many options. He was obviously up for what he often called a "working man's dinner." Too tired to chew? Drink your supper.

Finally she opened her drink. The whooshing spritz of fizz was so inviting, a beckoning hiss. "Come inside. Sweet. Good. Reward." Maybe Barry's cans whisper too, she thought. Or bottles, frosty mugs, glasses clinking merrily full of ice. Which one whispered to him this evening?

Rum, thick and sweet to kindle a fire below the belly? *Shiver me timbers and bed the wench!* Tequila with its seedy taunt? *You don't need no stinking wife!* Or would it be just beer? *Knock 'em back and knock her down. We'll all have a good laugh in the morning.* It didn't matter what they said, he'd come home to say the same old thing, "I'm sorry, Babe. You know I can't stand leftovers."

The doorbell was broken so it took a few raps inside the screen door before Isabel realized she was being called upon. She wanted to sit still and ignore it but the loneliness that had settled in her chest willed her to stand and walk.

"Good evening, ma'am," the girl said. "I'm with the Inner City Youth Challenge Ministries. A purchase of just one magazine will keep me and others like me off the streets."

The woman was young, black and big in a pleasing sort of way: forward breasts rolling over folding belly into soft, wide hips. She had an overt air of sexualized confidences as if to say: "You gotta earn your ticket for this ride."

Even after four years in the city, Isabel's stomach fluttered a little when faced with someone different: someone not white, not quiet, not content to just fade into the background, into a role. She was ashamed of her involuntary reaction and at the same time envious of the way the young woman's skin, her size, her attitude commanded attention. Isabel could scream on a regular basis and never be noticed.

The girl didn't seem nervous at all, not like Isabel would be upon entering a stranger's home. She let herself to the couch and started talking.

"My name is Chiandra and I used to live in the back of a Impala until Youth Challenge changed my life; gave me a job, gave me a purpose, made me somebody."

Isabel sat down beside her, somehow comforted by the way the girl's weight dipped the cushion, made her the center, a gravitational tug.

"I don't really want any magazines," Isabel said quietly.

Chiandra shifted and pulled a brochure out of her notebook. "I walk the streets now, day after day, not begging or stealing for my food, but working for it."

Isabel got up. "It was hot today for the season. I can get you something to drink."

She didn't wait for an answer but went to the kitchen and returned with another can of pop. Chiandra accepted it as Isabel sat again, but put it right down on the coffee table and fanned the brochure open across both their laps. "I can see you're good with guests. Maybe you'd like *House and Home* or this publication by that TV lady who's always cooking. I like *Better Homes and Gardens* myself because they put in a little about everything from furniture to fried chicken."

"We don't have a lot of people over very often."

"Oh, you should. You have a nice home. I'd like to have a little place of my own someday. That's why I'm here right now." Chiandra licked her lips and reached over to open her pop. She took a long swallow, set it back down on the coaster and started talking again. "I really like that statue over there."

Isabel followed her gaze to the wrought-iron owl perched on the television. It was Barry's. Well, everything she could see from her position was Barry's, but the owl was his favorite. He'd won it at a flea market in some exhibition like ax-throwing or fly-casting or some other outdoorsy thing like that. She didn't really know, that was back when he went to places like that and there had been some other woman at his side.

"It's not really a statue," she told Chiandra. "It's a votive candle holder. When you light it, the flame glows through the cutouts and makes patterns on the wall."

"Really? That is a fine thing. To have such a thing as would just shine on like stars against your very own living room wall."

Isabel shrugged. She got a queasy feeling perhaps she was being patronized.

"It's really my husband's owl," she said lamely, eyes cast unseeing to the brochure.

She thought of Barry then for the first time since the girl had come, wondered what he would say if he walked in just then. What he would do after he made the girl leave.

"You're married then. Well, I was going to show you *Bride* but now I suppose I should turn this over and let you see *Parenting Magazine* and *Highlights for Children*."

In a fanfare of swinging arm and crinkling paper, Chiandra flipped the brochure end over end. More tiny squares with tiny pictures of grinning models and actors and prices printed in red under them: "Over 50% off the cover price."

Isabel scooted away a bit and began to pick at a thread on her jeans under cover of



---

"I walk the streets  
now, day after day,  
not begging or  
stealing for my food,  
but working for it."

---

the brochure. "I don't have any children." She'd almost had one, but...Had it been leftovers that night too? No, it was the garden and the concrete pylons, and it ended in the emergency room.

Chiandra folded the brochure and tucked it back inside her notebook. She looked

square into Isabel's almost gray eyes with her own walnut browns and asked, "What is it you like to do? Do you have any hobbies?"

Isabel forgot about Barry and whether he was coming home and searched her mind for a good answer. Chiandra wanted to know what she liked. "I grow a garden," she said. It was almost a peep. "And I used to knit."

"My grandmother knitted. That's just a wonderful thing. You'd like this magazine and *Better Homes and Gardens* like I said before." Chiandra began writing on a form on the front of the notebook.

Isabel smiled. "I once thought I might like taking pictures, even though I don't have a camera anymore." More writing. "I do like to cook and I should entertain more.

Do you have that one magazine, my mother used to subscribe to it... *Taste of Home*?"

Chiandra found it on her list and put a check mark next to it. "It's here. They're all here."

She stood up and Isabel stood with her, feeling as if she'd passed some kind of test. Chiandra liked her. She liked her home, liked her hospitality and she liked everything Isabel enjoyed. She was suddenly aware that she was breathing deeply and the rise and fall of her rib cage didn't even hurt her bruised side.

Chiandra finished writing. "With all the discounts that Inner City Youth Challenge Ministries is able to get for you today you've saved fifty seven dollars and I am authorized to give you a free subscription to *Life Magazine*. Since you like taking pictures so much I figured that'd be one you'd want."

Isabel still smiled, but everything sank behind her teeth; sank and tightened and swelled until she could barely breathe anymore at all. "I didn't really buy anything."

"You sat right here and told me what you wanted. Now like I said, I saved you fifty seven and your bill, payable now by cash or check, only comes to eighty four dollars. All I need is your mailing address and you'll start getting your first issues in four to six weeks, depending."

Isabel backed away a bit. Chiandra's presence seemed more intimidating than appealing. She thought again of Barry and her eyes darted on the door. "I can't pay you anything. I don't really want the magazines."

Chiandra scowled. "Why'd you ask me in if you didn't want to buy anything? I could've been to the whole block in the time I took jawing with you. Another one like you and I'll be back on the streets."

---

"I can't pay you  
anything. I don't  
really want the  
magazines."

---



"I'm sorry. I really am. I just...I liked visiting with you..." Isabel wanted to cry. She wasn't making sense. It didn't make any sense. "I don't want you to live in a car, but I can't buy any magazines. I don't have any money."

The girl softened a bit. "Everybody has some money. Even I carry five dollars on me wherever I go, just in case. Don't you have a change purse or a coin jar or something?"

"I really don't. I don't even have a checkbook. You have to believe me. My husband has the money. I don't need any money. I just am here, in here or in my garden."

Chiandra didn't look Isabel in the eyes this time. This time she looked her over from the toes of her worn socks and frayed pant legs to her thin, brown hair pulled into a sloppy pigtail. "I'll tell you what I'll do. Forget *Life*. I'm going to give you a gift subscription. You can send your mother *Taste of Home*. How's that sound? It's only fifteen dollars."

Isabel bit her lip and moved her head up and down. "But I want *Life*." Suddenly her voice rose unbidden. "I can...do you want the owl? I'll give you the owl for it."

"Okay," Chiandra considered. "I have taken a shine to it. You have a car?"

"No. I mean, yes. My husband has it just now." Isabel let Chiandra place the notebook and pen in her hands.

"You know, you can walk to the bus depot from here. It's three blocks from Parker, two streets over. You know where it is?"

Isabel nodded again. Her eyes stung and she blinked in time with the motion of her head.

Chiandra pointed to the blank spaces on the bottom of the order form clipped to the notebook. "You write down the address where you want the magazine sent."

In shaking script she wrote her name and her mother's address. Chiandra took back the notebook and scooped up the owl on her way to the door. Isabel held it open and the women stood looking at each other under the porch light.

"This is going to go real good in my living room," Chiandra finally said. "But I think it's worth more than a magazine. I'll give you the difference."

Isabel let her press bills into her palm. She didn't look at it, but knew it was more than five dollars. She watched Chiandra stride confidently down the sidewalk, notebook under one arm, owl gripped firmly in the other hand. At the end of the block she got into a car that was out of place on Isabel's street, shiny and clean under the streetlights, free of rust, and not an Impala. After the taillights disappeared Isabel went back inside to find some comfortable shoes.