

"Under your jacket?"

The man, comically adorned in an oversize raincoat and wide-brimmed fedora, put his fingers to his lips. His eyes darted left and right. He leaned toward me.

"Yeah," he whispered.

I was entirely unsure how to react in this situation. I mean, I'd seen it in cartoons. Hell, even the Muppets lampooned the situation in their "wanna buy an eight" sketch. But here I was, for real, a few feet down a dark alley engaging in an illegal deal. An illegal occupation to be precise.

"A whole empire?" I whispered back, still not believing.

"Sure, why not?" he answered.

"I figured you had stolen watches or drugs or something."

"I got those too - Afghanistan's hot if you're into opiates, otherwise it's parcels of South America."

"Parcels of or parcels from?"

"You're still not getting it," his contempt dripped through his words. "I'm offering empires. Growing, dying, military, commercial, global, regional, local. Whatever you need, babe. I got."

He tapped a hidden pocket

"I'll bite," I said while getting for a twenty."

"Oh, honey," he sighed. "for twenty. You want empire prices."

"And what's an empire

"Blood. Your humanity. pay that and I can get

"What are you even talking

"Media empire - sex tape. Military empire - the lives of your Twenty bucks ain't gonna get you nunch."

"I don't know if I want to make that kind of trade," I said.

The man shrugged to excess. I started to walk away.

"One sec - I got it," the man called me back. "A nation. I can get you a nation."

"Twenty bucks will get me a nation?"

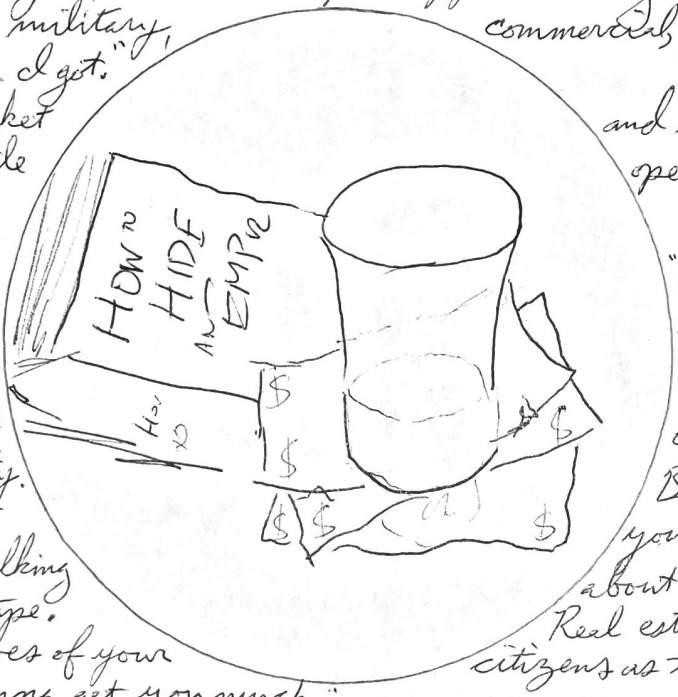
"Yeah - throw it at me."

I considered it for a second. My curiosity got the better of me and I forked over the twenty.

"Thanks," the man said and started walking away.

"What - what about my nation?" I demanded.

"Donation!" he yelled and broke into a run.



and winked as punctuation. opening my purse. "What can I

"Oh, honey, I can't do much an empire, you gotta pay

cost?"

Basic human decency. You you an empire."

about?" Real estate empire - morality. citizens as they subsidize your troops.