

Bob Hope Springs Eternal

The cantina was in West Hollywood. Dark and clandestine. The type of place celebrities went to hide. Or so I imagined. I had leafed through a *People Magazine* at the dentist's before, but I knew squat about celebrity life. I was from the suburbs of New Jersey and had never been farther west than Iowa.

I stood around at the hostess station, trying to play it off like I was comfortable, like I was an old regular. "I'm meeting some people here," I mumbled. The hostess was clad in a short pink dress and both her arms were tatted up in a hodgepodge of strange symbols and shapes. She gestured for me to go inside with her chin. I took a couple steps past her when I heard a booming voice above the din, "Jason!" I looked to my right. There at a small table tucked in back stood Pat, his hands cupped to his mouth. "Over here!"

From twenty yards, his blue eyes cut through the blackness. His flaxen hair swept up and billowed from his temple to his crown—there was lots of forehead and it was all orangey tan. He wore a garish yellow and magenta Hawaiian shirt, swimming in palm trees and floating margarita glasses, the top two buttons unbuttoned revealing even more orangey tanned skin. The whole look could be summed up in two words: I fuck.

I walked over and shook Pat's hand. His palm was warm and soft, buttery almost, but the back of his hand, which I grabbed lightly with my fingers, was leathery and rough, like old salamander skin. "Glad you could make it, Jason," he said and gave me a big nod and sat back down.

Marsha had turned her head and wore a gigantic smile, showing off some stellar dental hygiene. "Here he is. Here's our big winner," she said and pulled out the chair next to her.

Big winner. I didn't want conversation to revolve around my performance. What was I going to say anyway? I'm awesome, I solved every goddamn puzzle? That I didn't even need the extra three consonants and the vowel on the bonus puzzle? That I already knew "ARMENIAN GENOCIDE" from the RSTLN and E?

Marsha was going home with the one-thousand dollar consolation prize, yet she beamed happiness as if she were the one who pulled in seventy-five grand in thirty minutes. She was from sunny San Diego, wore a low-cut yellow halter top, and smelled like vanilla pudding.

"There's so much luck in it," I said and shrugged. This was partly true. One puzzle, Marsha filled in most of the letters and landed on bankrupt. I was up next. Total lay-up. Should she have known "WHERE THE STREETS HAVE NO NAME" and solved sooner? Not risked the extra spin? Sure, maybe.

"Oh it's more than luck, Jason, you were good, my friend," she said and gave me a slap on my shoulder with the back of her hand.

Pat was sipping a mudslide through a miniature straw and nodding his head. "You played very well, Jason. Once you knew the puzzle, and I can tell when someone knows the puzzle—"

"Oh I bet you can," Marsha said.

"Forty years on the job, I pick up a few things," he chuckled and looked back at me. "Once you knew the puzzle, you kept spinning to rack up some extra money. Most people get scared and solve right away. Sometimes with barely any money." He grinned. "Total pussies." Then he held up his glass and saluted me with it. "But not you, Jason. You, my friend, showed huge balls."

"Thanks, Pat, but still, there's so much luck to it. One bad spin and you're done." Again: partly true. I'm a numbers guy. I knew the spin odds. Two bankrupts, one lose a turn, twenty-

four spaces on the wheel; we're talking 87.5% chance of success on any given spin. Damn good odds. Once I had built a big enough lead to salt away my place in the bonus round, I pressed my luck.

"But you didn't have that one bad spin, Jason," Marsha said, taking a sip of her peach margarita, baring her luminous white teeth.

The waitress came over to take my order and I was glad for the interruption. "I'll have what she's having," I said, thumbing at Marsha's drink. I wasn't really a margarita guy. I wasn't really a drinker, anymore. But here I was in California bloated on success. I was getting a drink.

"It's delicious," Marsha said and held hers out for me to try, but I waved it off.

"Thanks, I'll just go for it," I said to the waitress. After she left I said, "Great spot here, Pat." I'm not sure I really meant it but it felt like the right thing to say.

Pat had invited the three of us for dinner and drinks after filming wrapped for the day. Final show before vacation. That was Pat's life. Four days of filming, three weeks off. More or less. "Pretty good gig, huh?" he had said with a smile and an eyebrow raise.

"It's too bad Vanna couldn't come," Marsha said.

"Yeah, Vanna's a blast," Pat said. She was off to the West Indies, likely flying over the Pacific at that moment. Then Pat told us all about how he and Vanna used to get hammered before production in the early days.

"Doesn't look like Sherrill's going to make it, huh?" Pat said.

Sherrill was the third contestant and would appear on the right side of the TV screen next to me in her cherry red blazer and square designer pink-framed glasses.

"I don't know, she seemed a little annoyed at the end," I offered. "She didn't say anything to me after I won, you know." I was mincing my words. She was more than a little annoyed, she

was pissed, in sharp contrast to Marsha who ran over and wrapped me in a bear hug after Pat snapped open the card and revealed I had won twenty-five grand.

“Tell us Pat,” Marsha said her eyes two large orbs floating in a white sea. “How are you going to spend your time off?”

“I’m off to Maryland for a couple weeks,” he said. “We have a home there.”

“Really?” Marsha said. “You struck me as a California guy, like, all the way.”

“I am a California guy and I love it here, don’t get me wrong” he said. “But I’m a huge Washington Capitals fan,” he said with a boyish smile, his blue eyes bouncing from me to Marsha to me as if revealing a surprising concession. “And it’s the playoffs”

Pat was speaking my language. I was a sportshound. Hockey especially. The Devils. My best friend Vigs used to have season tickets and we went all the time. That was before his father cut him off after the incident at college.

Marsha looked at her phone. “Wow, it’s 7:15. I can’t believe Sherrill isn’t here yet.”

“Whatever,” I said and shrugged. I was glad she wasn’t coming.

Pat nodded. “I’m getting hungry. You guys must be hungry?”

I was still on East Coast time so this was early for dinner, but I could eat. I could always eat. “I could eat,” I said.

“Me too,” Pat said and looked up over my shoulder, raised his eyebrows and made a little gesture with his index finger. A moment later, our waitress appeared.

“I think we’re ready to eat, Kayla,” Pat said.

Pat went for the mole with extra chocolate sauce and extra zucchini. Marsha went for the fish tacos. And I went for the chicken burrito. I always go for the chicken burrito. It’s my

Mexican equivalent to Pad Thai for a meat-and-potatoes American who ventures into a Thai restaurant once a year.

“Good choice,” Kayla said with a smile. There was a large gap between her two front teeth. Cute girl despite all the scars across her face and arms and a pronounced limp that led me to believe she barely survived some horrible accident.

“You're not going to walk out of here feeling hungry, trust me,” Pat said.

“Good cuz I'm starving,” I said.

Marsha threw her head back in laughter. Kayla reached for the table-setting next to Pat. “I can get these out of our way.”

“Well, our fourth is just arriving.” Pat made a nearly imperceptible head bob and raised his eyebrows over my head.

I spun around in my seat to see Sherrill walking toward our table. She was clad in the same cherry red blazer and matching suit pants she wore on set. She filled out her suit nicely. That much I could give her.

“I'm late,” she said and pulled out her chair next to Pat. Her voice was nasally with a bit of a Pennsylvania accent. She was from a small town north of Philly and was apparently somebody important there. A town aldermen or councilor or something related to government and politics. She was very proud to be the first woman in that position. Whatever it was.

“I got hung up on work,” she said and put on a smile intended to impress, her lips painted a bright fuchsia. “We're erecting a George Floyd statue in the center of town. It's a huge event. The governor is coming in.” She fluttered her hands around like butterfly wings. Then she paused and looked around the cantina before sitting down. “Quite a place, Pat,” she said with no enthusiasm.

“One of my all-time favorites,” he said. His voice was relaxed, composed. “Sherrill, we just put in our food order. Sorry, we didn't think you were going to make it.”

“That's *fiiiiine*,” she said. “How's the food here?”

“Excellent,” Pat said.

“Is it authentic?”

“Authentic?” Pat asked with a smile. “The food is definitely authentic, but I'm not sure about the people making it.”

Marsha howled and I snickered.

“What do you mean by that, Pat?” Sherrill leaned back in her seat and craned her neck toward him. “Why aren't the people authentic?”

“What do you mean what do I mean?” Pat asked, his eyes squinted and his forehead grooved in deep wrinkles, as if a contestant had just ventured a Z on a wide-open puzzle or asked to buy a vowel and guessed Q.

“Like is it that some kind of joke or put down? I don't find it particularly funny.”

“It's just a joke Sherrill, relax,” Pat said. “There are a lot of illegals here in Southern California and I was just riffing off that. Authentic, legal. You know,” he paused. “I know you're from Pennsylvania so I don't imagine you know the landscape here.”

“So you think a person can be illegal?” she asked.

Pat chuckled. “Well, not illegal on Earth. But illegal here in California, yes, meaning not lawfully here, not permitted by our system of laws.”

“All right, all right, whatever,” she said and held up her hand. “I don't agree with you, Pat, but I'm not going to argue.”

Then she looked at me. I was right across from her. “This is your treat, right, Jason?”

“My treat?” I repeated.

“You're too funny, Jason.” Marsha said and cackled. Too funny. I liked that even though my response was not at all funny.

“It would be but I haven't got the money yet.” I looked across at Sherrill and stuck out my hands, palms up. I felt myself smiling and I looked over at Pat. “Pat, can you do anything about that? Expedite things?”

Sherrill's face was humorless but Pat chuckled and said, “That, my friend, I cannot do, but I wish I could.”

Sherrill fanned open her menu and moved her finger up and down it, like a child learning to read.

Kayla was back. “Can I get you something to drink?” she asked Sherrill. “You ready to put in a food order?”

“I'm going to stick with water for now,” Sherrill said looking up from her menu. “Let me ask you about your best vegetarian options. I don't eat meat. What would you recommend?”

“The veggie burrito is one of my favorites,” Kayla said and looked up and back down.

“No, I don't want a burrito. I want something more authentic, something that just screams SoCal,” she fanned out the fingers on both of her hands. A gaudy wedding ring glimmered.

“Well, I mean, a burrito qualifies, I think,” Kayla said nibbling on the lip ring on her lower lip.

“I got a burrito and I'm excited for it,” I said. I tried to make eye contact with Kayla, get a smile, something warm and inviting, but she was staring off at something over our heads.

“Ok, fine, the veggie burrito then.” Sherrill closed the menu and handed it to Kayla and looked across at me. She wore a thin smile. “So Jason what are you going to do with all that money?”

The real answer, I didn't want to get into. My plan was to go back to school, finish up my senior year, graduate. I was twenty-five, on the old side to be finishing college. But there was no way I was going to give her the satisfaction of sharing my story, how my roommates and I got kicked out of college for throwing a party during the pandemic, leading to a bunch of odd jobs, my current one being an event bartender for a catering company. We all have stories we don't want to share. So I said, “A little traveling, a little saving, got some bills to pay.” I paused and repeated it, “Yup, got some bills to pay.”

“Uh-huh,” Marsha said nodding her head up and down. “I know how that goes.”

“Well, that sounds like a good plan,” Sherrill said and adjusted her glasses. She must have been about forty. She was married – that much I knew. She thanked her wonderful husband Walt during her introduction. No kids, it seemed. She was the type to mention kids during an introduction, brag about them in a way that reflected well on her.

Pat looked over at me, his pale blue eyes shimmering like some distant Caribbean ocean. “Jason, you *have* to go to the Galapagos. I was just there with my wife. Amazing.” He gestured authoritatively with his hand, slicing down through the air. “Absolutely amazing. The sea turtles. All the magnificent birds. It really feels like you're stepping into a different world.”

I suddenly imagined myself riding on the back of a giant tortoise like some kind of liberated sea cowboy. “That sounds great,” I said.

Marsha added, “Oh my God, I've always wanted to go.”

“Road trip?” I turned and asked her.

Sherrill interjected, “I mean, like, that's all that place needs, more tourists tramping around.

Pat turned toward her. “Come on, there's not that many tourists there. And what’s the point of a beautiful place if not to visit?”

“That's the whole point I’m making. It wouldn't be such a beautiful place if everyone went there.”

Pat responded, “It's not *everyone* going, it would be just Jason here.”

I found myself getting annoyed so I said, “Well, I’m traveling up the coast after this anyway. The Galapagos will have to wait.” There were some places I wanted to see up in Northern California, the Giant Redwoods in particular, and then continue north to Oregon and eventually Cannon Beach where the mist and sea dance the eternal dance. My buddy Vigs’s words, not mine.

Kayla was back with a food runner— some Mexican-looking teenage girl who may or may not have been authentic enough for Sherrill or legal enough for Pat—to deliver the meals around our table.

“Smells delish,” Sherrill said.

“Can I get you anything else?” Kayla asked, scanning the table. “Another mudslide, Pat?”

He tossed up his hands as if to say, bring it on, I’m on vacation, and then nodded.

“Alright one more, but stop me at four, okay?” A third button of his shirt had come undone, revealing a curly patch of blondish gray hair.

“I'm good for now,” Marsha said.

“Another margarita?” Kayla asked me.

“I’ll have a Corona,” I said and excused myself to use the bathroom. My head felt light. I walked to the back of the cantina. A mural on the wall of a man and woman in a suit and wedding dress under a lamppost in a park, danger in their eyes, seduction in their smiles. In the bottom right corner of the mural, a small signature: DeAndre Hastings.

There was a guy at one of the urinals who turned his who face toward me as I went next to him. “How's Pat doing?” he asked, a smarmy grin on his face.

I never like it when guys talk to me in the urinal, talk to me in a public bathroom in general. Feels an infringement on a moment of private sanctuary. “He's fine,” I said.

“How do you know him?”

I glanced over and his beady eyes bore in on me. He had short cropped hair and the face of someone who should be gnawing on a piece of hard wood.

“Yeah I don't know. Just a friend.”

He zipped up his fly. “Well tell your friend Pat I'd like to buy a fucking vowel.” He flushed hard. “And then tell him it better be for sale.” Then he laughed hard.

I didn't answer. The guy walked over to the sink, looked in the mirror, didn't touch the faucet, and left. I finished, flushed, and went to the sink to wash my hands and slap some water in my face. I could see my face had turned a burgundy flush. All it took was a drink or two. It would only get worse with another beer.

I got back to the table and Pat and Sherrill were facing each other, reared back in their seats. Sherrill's arms were crossed over her chest. I sat down and Pat was in the middle of saying. “Do you have a fence around your house?”

“What's that got to do with anything?” Sherrill asked.

“Just answer the question, Sherrill.”

“Well, yes but it was there before we bought the place.”

“Why not take it down?” Pat asked and I could see his chest rise up. He had the mudslide in his hand and brought it up to his mouth and sipped through the miniature straw. His cheeks puckered, accentuating his dimples. “What? Fences make good neighbors right isn't that what Robert Frost said? Is that why you kept your fence? Are you a Robert Frost fan?”

Langston Hughes, I figured. Or Maya Angelou. And I bet she had never read either. I took a sideways glance at Marsha to catch her reaction but she revealed nothing.

“No, no I'm not,” Sherrill said. She was rubbing the side of her face and made a quick grab at her glass of water and took a sip. She didn't use a straw and the water dribbled down her chin.

“You're not keeping it up to keep people out, are you?” Pat wore a smirk. “And if you are, I've got nothing against that.” He held up both his hands like stop signs. “It's perfectly reasonable.”

“What's your point, Pat?”

“My point is this: What if you saw a person standing in your yard when you came home from an important Town council meeting, just standing there under your beautiful black walnut tree gazing into your windows, wouldn't you feel unnerved? Wouldn't you feel intruded upon? Wouldn't you realize immediately that this man didn't belong in your yard?”

“Where the hell are you going with this?”

“Now take it a step further. Imagine that you open your front door, you walk into your house, and this same strange man is now in your kitchen and he's flipping pancakes on your brand new griddle. And you own your home, right, it's yours, all yours, you have the deed to prove it, but he's in there, this odious, strange man. And did I mention he reeks of rotting fruit?”

And that he's six-four, wild-eyed and bald on top, with a shock of hair around the sides that makes you wonder whether he just fingered an electric socket? Wouldn't you want him out? Wouldn't you immediately think police, police, police! I need to call the police! This man is in my house illegally!"

"Okay," she held up her hand. "This is too dumb. It's beyond ridiculous what you're implying. Trying to compare a nation's immigration policy to someone's private home. I wish I didn't even bring this up."

"But you did," he said. "But you did bring it up. And *I* thought no human is illegal." A smile swept over his face, revealing a set of gleaming white teeth. "I bet you have one of those yard signs in your yard, behind your nice picket fence, proclaiming that hate has no home here. no human is illegal, right?" Pat smiled. "So if that were true, if you really believed that, shouldn't this man be able to cook up his pancakes on your brand new griddle, shower in your shower, dip into your medicine cabinet supplies, raid your fridge, pick out a snack or two, some nice healthy piece of organic fruit you picked up at the local farmer's market."

Maybe even drop a deuce, I wanted to say.

"This is so ridiculous. I don't even know what to say," she said. "Okay fine, I didn't want to say anything, but fine, you're pushing it."

"Fine, say it. Say whatever you're going to say."

Marsha hadn't spoken in about five minutes. She was eating in silence and looking up every one in a while and I was doing the same next to her. The burrito was damn good. I didn't give a shit about authenticity or whatever. It tasted good and that was enough for me.

"Your whole show," she said she spun her hand around. "Your whole show is racist."

Pat shook his head back and forth. “*Racist?* What are you talking about? Oh boy. More of this. Everything is racist now, right?”

“Just look at these puzzles today, Pat.”

“What on Earth was wrong with the puzzles?” He aggressively moved his fork around his dish, drowning the zucchini in the mole sauce.

“Where the streets have no name. I mean, seriously, come on. U2? Can you come up with a band that appeals more to white people than U2? How about a song that a black person would actually know? How about something by Tupac or Snoop Dogg? No you would *neeee-ver* see a puzzle like that.” She looked over at Marsha. “Right, Marsha? Am I right?”

“I mean, I know U2, and I know that song.” Marsha shrugged and wrinkled her face. “Just wish it occurred to me sooner.”

Sherrill ignored her. “And how about that stupid “Before and After” puzzle. Bob Hope Springs Eternal. I mean, what the hell kind of puzzle is that? Can you get any more old white man than Bob Hope?”

Pat was chewing and held up his finger. “Listen, we have a dedicated team who creates the puzzles. They try to present the best ones and they try to be diverse, but they have to appeal to a general audience. This is a TV show, Sherrill. There is an audience to consider.”

“So you're just catering to the white audience. You're not even trying to appeal to the black population,” she gestured at Marsha with her jaw and bopped it again toward me, “or the Asian population.”

I waved my hands in the air and said, “Leave me out of this.” Marsha chuckled awkwardly and said “Uh-huh.”

Sherrill looked at me, her large brown irises overwhelming the frightened sclera. “This is exactly what you should be fighting for, both of you.”

I ignored her and kept scarfing down my burrito. The burrito was unraveling, becoming a mess. A mélange of sour cream, rice and beans, and chicken streamed over my fingers.

She turned back to Pat. “I know about you, Pat.”

“You know about me?” he asked, a feigned shock in his voice.

“I know all about your conservative beliefs.”

“What about my conservative beliefs?” A dollop of sour cream rested in the dimple of his chin. He raised his voice. “What about them?”

“You’re just another white supremacist,” she said, pushing her plate of food away from her towards me.

“If I’m such a white supremacist, why did you even come on the show?” Pat barked.

Both Marsha and I ate in silence, our heads bowed toward our plates.

“Just another white supremacist,” she repeated.

“Why did you come on the show then?” Pat was shouting now. “You’re willing to come on the show. You were willing to overlook my white supremacy to win some money, weren’t you? That’s the problem with you liberal elites. You’re such a sanctimonious bunch of phonies.”

“I’ve seen your racist tweets,” Sherrill shouted back. “Your idiotic racist tweets.”

“What are you talking about?” Pat laid down his fork.

Sherrill suddenly stood up. She shook her head at Pat, a galaxy of scorn in her eyes, a universe. “I was going to say this whole trip was a huge waste of time, but it’s not.”

Pat looked back at her in the silence. He looked back at her with the sad fading eyes of someone who had stared at a green letter board too long, who held a cue card in his hand too long, who had said, “Sorry, no S” with an affected surprise in his voice too many times.

“It hasn't been a waste because it's inspired me to continue my fight against people like you. I'm more determined than ever.” She threw her purse around her shoulder and stormed off to the front door.

I didn't know whether to cry or laugh or scream so I just took another bite of my burrito and licked at my fingers. The sour cream was sumptuous.

Pat reached for his wallet, muttered an apology for how it all turned out, and laid three hundreds on the table. “This should cover the bill and then some,” he said. “I'm sorry to cut out like this, but I have to get going.” His plate was half-finished, his fourth mudslide near its liquid peak. “I lost track of time.” He looked down at his wrist watch. It was gold and sparkling. “It was great meeting you both,” he said. “Jason, congrats again on your big win. And Marsha, I'm sorry you couldn't have won more but I'm glad you came on and I hope you enjoyed your trip.”

I held up my glass and said, “Thanks for everything, Pat” and I put the glass down and stood up and shook his hand. Marsha stood up and did the same. Then Pat was off careening through the cantina, wobbly afoot, his head lowered to the ground, his right arm grasping onto the back of empty chairs for balance until I could see him no longer. He disappeared past the hostess station and was out on the named streets among the unnamed people, going God knows where, going but gone.

Marsha and I sat back down and we both said it in unison. “Wow.” I shook my head and said it again, louder, “Wow” and then we both broke up in laughter.

I picked up the three hundreds that were strewn loosely on the table, tidied them like a small deck of cards and laid them back down. An idea suddenly came to me. “Up for another drink?” I said. “There’s plenty here to cover another round.” And Marsha wore the same smile she wore earlier in the night. “Oh yeah, definitely,” she said. I got up and moved across the table to Pat’s seat, leaned back in my chair, and soaked up the whole place in a sweeping glance. “Now *this* is a place,” I said. And then I repeated it.