

I'm a Doctor!

Palmillas Outdoor Mall is, by any measure, an ambitious project for a town the size of Yuma, Arizona. It is the pyramid product of a building craze caused by a recent economic bubble. The town, dormant for decades, has doubled in size in a few months in regards to commercial units. The task now is finding occupants for its exploded vacant inventory.

One of the first tenants at Palmillas is Cucina D'Italia, an eatery opened recently. Two patrons have just finished dining and remain at their booth. Dr. Jason Patane, a well-known surgeon empties the last of a bottle of Chateau Blanc in his glass.

"Did you like the way I did it last night? Like a lollipop," asks his young companion flashing a coquettish smile.

"Hush."

Weary of being seen in public with a teenage girl that could be his daughter, he checks around the dining hall for over-hearers.

"I've learned a lot at Horny Goat Pass."

"Horny what?"

"Horny Goat Pass—that place outside town."

"Never heard of it," he says still looking around. He appears pale, nervous, uneasy.

"The *place* where the young meet."

"Where's that?"

"All kids know about the *place*, the canyon in the sand dunes."

He swings his concerned head like a metronome.

"Didn't know there was such a place."

"West of town. Where they hold slumber parties." Her reddened face flashes rows of pearly teeth.

"Parties. What do they do there?"

"Kids bring in pot, booze and sex CD's. They drink till shitfaced; then, parking in rows, listen to rap music and do drugs and backseat sex."

"In the backseats?"

"Yeah. But it's not *real* sex. It's what the President and that Washington intern did under his desk. It's in fashion and everybody digs."

"How did you learn so much about the subject?"

"The subject?"

"Sex," he says into her ear.

"Sex Ed school. They teach us how not to get pregnant and

give us condoms and pills. Me and my friends don't use condoms and pills but know how not to get pregnant."

"So, you and your friends outsmart them all?"

"Sure do."

"How long have you been attending those parties?"

"Since I was fourteen."

"The gland explosion I suppose."

"The what?"

"You'll understand me when you grow older."

"Amazing, I've bumped into the kids of policemen, teachers, businessmen. The mayor! One day I bumped into Marla, the preacher's daughter."

Noticing his uneasiness, she asks, "Are you afraid of being seen with me?"

"Is not that Lolita. Some people love gossip. You look awfully young for me."

"I'm *not* awfully young. I'm eighteen."

"Do you parents know?"

"Know what?"

"The slumber parties."

"Never suspected. We're good liars. I used to tell Mom I'd spend the weekend at my friend Mona's. Her parents travel a lot and we often had the house for ourselves. Her little *sis* covered for us when Mom called to check on me, ha, ha, ha," she flashes her pearly teeth. "Funny, Mom sleeping the angels' dream and we, orgying."

"Amazing!" Wide-eyed, he feels his chin dropping.

"Yes. The parties lasted all night and broke up at dawn, our chaperons, the moon, the stars and the crickets. Sunday nights, all cleaned up and made up, we returned home to prepare for Monday school."

She changes gears.

"Now, tell me about your first time," she says turning to observe him, fighting back a grin.

"My first time?"

"Yeah."

"You mean?"

"Right, I mean sex."

"Okay, but don't laugh."

"I promise not to," she says, wrinkling her eyebrows.

"I'm actually an introvert. My first time was when I got married to my high school sweetheart, my first love. I was twenty-eight."

She blocks an exploding grin with her hand.

"See? I told you," he says.

"I'm sorry. Not laughing at you, I swear. Just felt like

laughing." Looking into her soda glass, "Tell me the truth about last night. Was I good?"

In her ear:

"You left me speechless."

"You mean you didn't like it?" She leans away to look at him.

"On the contrary! But let's change the subject, will you?" Nervous, he rotates his wine glass.

"Let me have some." She leans over and sips from his wine glass.

"Oh." She grimaces and wipes her thick red lips with the back of her hand. "It's gross."

"Yeah, it's rather dry."

His muscular arm wraps her blond hair locks and neck.

"You're ice cold. Want your coat on?"

"No, I feel great."

He pulls her in and kisses her softly on the mouth, then sits back.

"How do you like the assistant-nurse job?" he asks.

"Love it, except the old head-nurse, she's nasty."

"Nora? She's worked at the hospital since... before you were born."

"I think she should retire." She knits her eyebrows. "Ha, ha, ha," she smiles softly.

"What is it?"

"That little old lady's so funny, Ursula," Lolita evokes. "You ask 'How are you?' she answers, 'Eighty three.' You ask 'What's your name?' she says, 'Portland, Oregon.'" Lolita's humor is contagious.

"Mrs. Parker? She's Alzheimer's," he says,

"And the other lady, Thelma. She calls me each time I walk by. 'Come sit here with me child,' she says. That's when I get in trouble. Nora hates us to fraternize."

Doctor Patane looks ahead vacantly. Cellular phone rings bring him back.

"In one hour...? Yes I know." He puts the phone back in his pocket. "It's Nora reminding me about surgery."

He looks down, pensively.

"Penny for your thoughts," she says.

"You still love him, don't you?"

"Love him?"

"Nestor."

"Nestor, ha, ha, ha. No, no, it's not love."

"What is it then? Why did you hang on to him?"

"Dunno what it was. It just happened. I get a job at his accounting office. My senior year. I need money for my prom

dress and stuff. Then he starts chasing me all over the place. A ten-arm octopus. Wouldn't leave me in peace!"

His gaze travels up the swellings under her low cut neck and stops at her hazel eyes.

"You're a splendorous work of art, the female of the species in her prime."

Open-mouthed: "What?"

"What I said."

"You crazy nut! Ha, ha, ha."

"Don't mind me. Just a reverie."

"Anyways, he says he's crazy about me. To prove it, the jerk leaves his wife and asks me to marry him. Ha, ha, ha, I crack up: 'Marry you? You must be nuts!' He doesn't let down. I go along 'cause I like the presents and driving his Jaguar convertible."

"But you had his child."

"I didn't mean to. One of those things. He kept yanking off his rubber. We didn't know whose baby till he had the test done."

"DNA."

"Ahem. When my mom found out, she made a big scene and wouldn't let me get rid of it."

"It wouldn't've been nice"

"Look, he's not for me. I'm eighteen! Just out of high school. He's forty-five. A dirty old fart. With that squirrel-like beard over his face, he looks *old*. Besides, he hates dance and doesn't dig my friends."

He says defensively, "I'm not too young myself. Thirty-five next month. Could be your father."

"My father?"

Eyes fixed on her:

"I mean you look... fifteen. My colleagues call me a cradle raider."

She examines him. "You're handsome, Jason. Many of my friends envy your chiseled body." She squeezes his solid bicep.

"When's the last time you were with him?" he says, concerned.

"A few days ago before I met you. He was becoming a pest. Fighting all the time. One day he pushed me against the wall when I came back from a night out... after he'd given me permission!"

"Have you told him about us?"

"Yesterday. He threw a fit. Hit the wall so hard he broke his knuckles. Then, the crazy jerk pulled out a gun and threatened to blow up his brains. He's such a bozo."

"He seems unstable. Be careful. Do you have to meet him

again?"

"He's harmless, I know him. Anyway, I've walked out on him. Told him over the phone I wouldn't be back, and again today when he called to apologize."

He gulps down the wine and waves to the waiter.

"We've got to leave. I'm a few minutes away from surgery. That's the problem with being a surgeon and the reason why my wife and I became distant. No private life. Where's our waiter... There he is!"

He waves his arm vigorously but the waiter, a tray in hand, sweeps by ignoring him.

"What the h-, as if we were invisible." He waves to other waiters, waitresses, nobody listens.

"We've been abandoned. This is rude."

"They must be real busy," she observes.

"But those people at the next table came on later, have eaten, paid, and left already. It's quite amazing."

"Why don't we just walk out of here? My friend Lisa and I did it once. Nobody paid attention and we had a free meal. It was a riot!"

"We might just do that."

Suddenly, a surge of excitement, a nervous trepidation overtakes the morose restaurant personnel. Irrelevant whispers, mumbles and aimless pacing replace the various tasks of the food serving business. Under the indirect lighting, the subdued atmosphere of the restaurant turns frantic. The waiters desert their posts, put down trays, water and coffee pitchers, and run toward the foyer. Patrons at their tables stop dining and drinking and intrigued, crane their necks in the direction of the commotion. A girl, fear-flushed face, stomps in from the parking lot:

"Someone got shot! Someone got shot! Out in the parking lot!"

Diners abandon their tables and dash toward the front entrance—a rout en masse.

"I'm going out. You better stay here," Jason says, pushing the table back.

"No, I'm going out with you!" she says, shadowing him. He catches up with two weepy waitresses.

"Who got shot?" Jason asks, but they ignore him hands over their gaping mouths.

Holding hands, the doctor and Lolita step outside. It's dark beyond the entrance and the crowds block the view from the parking lot.

"Who got shot? Who got shot? I'm a doctor. I'm a doctor!" he yells.

Men, women, and restaurant personnel are so absorbed in the incident that they don't turn their heads to heed the doctor's words. He overhears a couple ahead of him. He cranes his neck between them and listens.

"I saw the whole thing," the man tells his female companion. "The couple walked out of the restaurant and were approaching their car when a man came out of the shadows gun in hand, sneaked up on 'em from the back and shot 'em both in the head without saying a word. Bam, bam, execution-style. They dropped dead and he ran back into the darkness where he'd come from."

"You take a good look at him?" his companion asks.

"Not very good, forty to fifty, medium built, gray beard." Louis and Lolita sneak around the couple.

"I'm a doctor. I'm a doctor."

They slip through the throngs of the curious to approach the focus of the commotion. It comes from the area where the doctor's car is parked. They push their way through and finally reach ground zero, the zone of the incident.

"I'm a doctor!"

Jason steps up next to the circle of people standing around or crouching down by the stricken couple who are lying supine next to the doctor's car, the car door open. They're not moving. White handkerchiefs cover their faces. Blood spreads out around their heads—crimson halos over the pavement.

"I'm a doctor."

Jason, Lolita beside him, kneels down as someone pulls the handkerchiefs away from the victims' faces. Shell-shocked he collapses on the asphalt backwards.

"O my god, it's...it's..."

"It's us!" she screams through her fingers.

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