2606 words

ACHMED'S LESSON

The manager came into the kitchen with papers, put them on a counter. The manager asked Achmed questions, his name, his numbers, and wrote them down. He had a hard time writing the Roman letters for Achmed's full name.

"From now on," said the manager, "your name is Al."

"This is not my name."

"That's what I'm calling you. Got it?" The manager put a finger out, and jabbed Achmed in the chest. "When I call for Al, that's you!"

In the village at home, Achmed's father would have revenged a lesser insolence, but in America, one controlled oneself. Achmed stood very still. Here in America passion is not respected.

Achmed needed the pay. Money from the family at home did not go far enough, but Achmed would not show disrespect by asking them for more. One choice was to make American money working like a servant. One must kiss the hand one dares not bite.

And nothing worse followed. The manager was a red-faced man with a shining bald head, no belly, rapid movements of his head, hands, eyes, a worried man. He handed Achmed a white apron. Achmed understood the apron. He put it on.

A thin, fair American boy with pale hair and skin, protruding ears, wearing an apron too, stood within a fortress of metal shelves around a machine. Achmed stepped beside the pale

American boy. The manager finished his scribbling and went back into the restaurant again.

"Look at this, Al." The boy bent over a hole in the machine. "If the machine stops by itself, here's what's wrong."

"My name is not Al."

"That's just a nick-name. They call me Pearlie, but that's not my name. It's just because of the job, the pearl-diver."

"Why so?"

The boy sighed, stood up again. "We spend a lot of time with our hands in garbage. The joke is, we're hunting for jewels, pearls but...it's just a joke. Nothing bad. They call the cook, Cookie, but that's not his real name. He has some Chinese name. Hell, even the manager has a nick-name. We call him Curly. 'Cause he has no curls. He's bald. But not to his face, of course."

"He calls me Al to my face."

"Because it's not an insult," the boy, Pearlie, insisted. "But Curly is sensitive about being bald, so... Here, look at this. When the machine stops by itself, something has fallen out of the dish rack, down into the gears. Like a fork or a spoon."

"In my country, this 'al,' it is meaning like 'the' in English."

"Yeah? Means 'the,' does it? That's interesting."

"My name is not so hard. Why does he call me something else?"

"Al, don't worry about it."

"Americans, they give many names to things that they do not like."

Pearlie frowned up at him from where he had been leaning into the curtained opening of the dishwashing machine. "For

example?" he said.

"For example, W. C."

"What?"

"The bath room, the toilet, and many other names."

"Yeah, sure," said Pearlie, "the can, the crapper, the john, the powder room, the head, the pisser, and a lot more."

Achmed pressed the inescapable logic of the argument on the boy. "So, for the same reason, he calls me Al."

"No, no, not the same reason. We give nick-names to things we like, too. Take my word for it. Look at this."

They began to work. The boy showed him the electric switches. The machine was noisy, steamy, hot. The boy talked, much too fast, especially in the sloshing roar of the machine. But Achmed nodded, smiled at him.

The boy showed him how to scrape dirty dishes into a garbage can, how to pile the plates on their edges into wooden racks. The racks slid into a curtained opening of the machine, the machine roared and splashed, then the rack emerged from the other end, sliding onto one of the metal shelves. The boy and Achmed pushed the rack aside, to let the hot dishes drip and dry. Next the boy showed him how to use the glass-washer, how to avoid cutting his fingers whenever a glass broke on the two spinning brushes.

Then the boy showed how to leave the machine, go through the swinging doors into the restaurant, and to bend down behind the counter to pick up the metal boxes full of dirty dishes, bring them back through the swinging doors to the machine. After an hour, they had no more dishes to do. The "rush," said the boy, was over. He turned off the machine. They talked.

Achmed explained that he had been sent to learn American

engineering. He had finished his first year at the university, mostly studying English to bring his levels up. He did not mention that he dreamed of bringing home Logic, in short supply at home. But not more Passion. At home, Passion was a surplus commodity. He said merely, “It is hard to buy the books, pay room-rent.”

"The money's always a problem," said the boy, nodding. The boy, too, was a university student, a first-year person. His family, he said, had decided to help with the costs. So the boy was leaving the job to be a full-time student.

The dishwashing machine stood at one end of a long room, near the swinging doors to the restaurant. The length of the room had one wall bare except for the swinging door. Down the middle of the room, long metal counters stood with shining metal shelves over them, and over these, black pots and pans on hooks. Against the other wall stood a row of stoves and ovens. Between the ovens and the shelves stood a short man with Asian eyes, the one called "Cookie," who never smiled. At the far end of the room behind a high counter stood a woman with henna-red hair, a Mrs. Dale, who made salads.

The thin American boy showed Achmed how to fill and use a mop-bucket, where to find the mop. "People spill things. Part of the pearl-diver's job is to mop up the mess." And finally, how to close down the machine, shut off the valves at the end of the day.

The next day and afterward, Achmed worked all day at the dishwashing machine by himself. Waitresses, one a thin wiry woman with skinny neck, the other a healthy fat woman, came through the swinging doors, shouted at Cookie, put pieces of paper on the

tall counter of Mrs. Dale, hurried back out into the restaurant again. Then each came back later to pick up the foods they had ordered.

During the "rush" the waitresses helped Achmed too, sometimes bringing into the kitchen the metal pans of dirty dishes. He washed glasses, and "china," though none of it was from China, and "silver," though all of it was stainless steel. After a few days of work, he felt himself learning. He had learned long before to ignore the brash dress habits of these women, their exposed hair, arms, even their chests.

He was learning at last to hear American too-fast speech from listening to the two waitresses. When business was slow, the nice fat one and the tough thin one stood at the tiny window of the swinging doors to smoke cigarettes and keep an eye on their tables, on Curly.

"Curly's always suckin' up to the owner," said the thin one.

"Oh, everyone does that." The fat one sighed. "We all do."

"Yeah, but Curly is an ass-kisser." The thin one frowned. "Makes it real obvious."

"You'd think the owner would catch on." The fat one wagged her cigarette for emphasis.

The thin one stood still, staring out the window of the swinging door. "But when he talks to us, Curly has a nasty tongue. Tries to make himself superior."

"Talk back, and he turns red and shakes," said the fat one. "Mostly he makes remarks. How fat a person is, how slow, so she can overhear him say it."

"He sneers," said the thin one. "I can always feel him lookin' at me, at my back. You know like someone left a door

open, a draft?"

"His looking casts a cold shadow," suggested Achmed.

"Yeah!" The thin one turned to Achmed and nodded. "Like that!"

"Yeah," said the fat one, "that's good."

In the evenings, just before closing time, the Owner and the Owner's Son visited the restaurant. Both were weighty, confident men, with short, bulbous noses, generous chins, and prosperous bellies that hung over their belts. Cookie always left then, but Mrs. Dale, and some of the waitresses, and sometimes Curly too, stayed on to play cards with the Owner and the Owner's Son.

At the end of his first week, after he had finished closing the dishwashing machine, shutting all the water valves for the night, Achmed came out into the restaurant. The last bus would not go by for over an hour. He stopped at the table where the Owner, the Owner's Son, Mrs. Dale, the thin waitress and the fat one, and Curly too, played cards. The Owner's Son said something and gestured to a nearby chair.

"Never mind," said Curly. "He can't understand. He doesn't speak English."

"I speak a little," said Achmed. He pulled the chair to the table and sat down to watch. He listened too. They talked and laughed while they played.

The Owner's Son said, "Here's a joke. For the next time the garbage collectors go on strike. I got a plan."

"I'll bet you do," muttered Mrs. Dale.

"I do! I'm gonna gift wrap it. Put it on the back seat of my car. And park it down town."

Achmed knew he had missed something only when everyone else

laughed.

"See?" said the thin waitress to Achmed. "It's 'cause downtown they steal stuff from parked cars..."

"Never mind," said Curly. "Don't bother to explain. He doesn't understand."

"Some jokes are for one country," said Achmed. "Difficult for foreigner. Some jokes are easy, for all peoples."

"Oh, yeah?" said Curly. "Okay, for example, what's a joke for all people?"

So Achmed told them the one about the war between Stupid-village and Wise-village. "The gun-men from Wise-village, they call out over the walls, 'Abdul! Abdul! Stand up!' And stupid Abdul, he stood up. The gun-men from Wise-village shot him. And then they called out again, this time, 'Mahmoud! Mahmoud! Stand up!' And Mahmoud, not so bright, but an obedient boy, he stood up. They shot him too. The gun-men of Stupid-village were all getting shot this way. So that night, the old men and the gun-men of Stupid-village had a council of war. Everybody talked about how their gun-men were all getting shot. Finally the oldest of the men in the council spoke. 'I have a solution,' he said. 'Tomorrow, when those gangsters from Wise-village call out to you boys, 'Murad! Murad! Stand up!' Murad? Then you, you don't stand up.' The mouths of all the young gun-men fell open with delight and surprise at this plan. 'Instead,' finished the old man, 'Achmed, you stand up.'"

Old joke, but they liked it. Everyone at the table laughed. Even Curly, though he kept glancing--moving his eyes but not his head--to see how much the Owner and the Owner's Son were laughing. The Owner's Son spoke to Achmed, showed Achmed a

curious respect, listened when Achmed spoke. That an Owner’s Son would listen to a pearl-diver, was this the Democracy that Achmed had heard so much talk about in America, and seen so little evidence? Certainly after that, everyone talked to Achmed more. He learned names of the waitresses, Tootsie, the thin one, and Babs, the nice fat one. He even learned to speak too-fast, the way they did.

He noticed too that Curly was not so arrogant in the presence of the Owner and the Owner's Son. Curly would tell a waitress to bring him something to drink from the fountain, but not when the Owner and the Owner's Son played cards. Curly got up from the card table to go to the fountain himself, and asked if anyone else would like a glass.

One evening the Owner passed through the kitchen, just speaking back over his shoulder, to Curly following him. "Don't tell me how much you *want* to do it, dammit," said the Owner in his deep, hoarse voice. "Just get it done, right?"

"Right, right!" said Curly.

Another time, he heard Curly talking with the Owner's Son, outside the back door behind the kitchen, by the garbage cans. "Just because they're clocked in, working the shift, you can't just give commands, you know." The Owner's Son slowly shook his head, his several chins. "Quit saying ‘go do this.’ Say, like, ‘Let’s do this,’ and start doin’ it. Gotta show' em. Show 'em you can do the work as well as they can.”

"Right, right!" said Curly.

Achmed was interested to watch the body-language of the men, the arms and hands of the Owner's Son turned open, relaxed, and Curly's back bent, his hands clasped, tense. Curly too needed to

kiss a hand that he dared not bite.

Achmed also learned that he was not the only one who disliked Curly. Everyone disliked Curly. Even the customers. One night Tootsie and Babs stood with their cigarettes just inside the swinging doors and peeked out. At the cash register, Curly shouted. Lady customers shouted back. The top of Curly's head was red.

At the end of the day, after he finished with the last dishes, as Achmed was closing the valves on the dishwashing machine for the night, Curly suddenly burst through the swinging doors.

"Fill a bucket, Al!" Curly cried. "And bring a mop! Some broads have made a goddam mess of the women's crapper!"

Achmed sighed. The lady customers had revenged themselves on Curly. But Achmed would have to clean it up. He found the mop-bucket beneath the machine. He filled the bucket with water, put in powdered soap. He picked up the bucket, took the mop from its hook behind the door, and carried them into the restaurant. Ahead at a table the Owner, the Owner's Son, Mrs. Dale, the two waitresses sat playing cards. Curly stood by the table, staring down with a worried face, bent toward the Owner, the Owner's Son.

Achmed stopped by Curly, put down his bucket on the floor.

"I am tired," Achmed announced. "Is not work-time. Is volunteer-time." He shouldered the mop like his rifle in the military at home. "Curly," he called, stepping forward, "Volunteer! Take up the bucket!" Achmed marched to the door of the women's toilet, halted, did a military right-face.

Curly stood with his mouth wide open, his face not red, but very pale. Surprise showed on his wide American face. Had no one

before ever called him “Curly” to his face?

Achmed turned to the door and rapped his knuckles. "Hello? Is someone in, using? Be warned! It is I, Achmed, and Curly! We threaten to enter!"

Achmed looked back again. Curly came toward him, his bald head bowed, carrying the bucket. Beyond Curly, Achmed could see the Owner, the Owner's Son, Mrs. Dale, and the waitresses, all holding up their cards to hide their smiles.

Curly bared his teeth, winced, stopped walking, bent to put the bucket on the floor. When Curly stood erect again and turned to look back at the others at the table, Achmed read the set of Curly's shoulders. Achmed knew that Curly was learning a lesson: a bucketful of water in the hand pains less than smiles that strike upon the back.

THE END