

## **The Peanut Company**

The rats were making a racket. I could hear them scuttling in the walls in the banquet room behind the mural of old Azusa avenue stretching off into a dusty horizon. Leaning on an empty table, smoking a cigarette, I listened to their little talons scratch-scratching away, and I could feel them, feel those talons under my skin.

Old Bart came in around this time. Now, normally this would be no big deal since he was just a skinny little grizzled barfly in dirty jeans who hunkered at his corner of the bar most nights and grumbled and laughed and seemed to sort of just stick to the air in his hazy way. But old Bart struck it big, it turned out. Old Bart finally got lucky, in a life that had very little good luck to speak of. Old Bart won fifty thousand in the lottery! Imagine that, a sad old loser like Bart got struck by the open palm of Lady Luck. He had the place astir when he came in with a blond hooker who was a good head taller than he was. Everybody wanted a piece of old Bart. Who knows, maybe some of that luck would rub off.

And who might that be? Well, I guess it was me, because the hostess sat him at one of my tables. “Yes indeed,” Jalal said in that thick Moroccan accent of his. “Good tip for you, huh?”

“Yeah,” I said. “We’ll see...”

Jalal didn’t need the money. He was a rich kid, and I couldn’t understand why he worked there except that the place was never very busy, pretty lax really, and it was easy to get drugs and sell drugs and he liked to party. Although, he did say that his father back in

Morocco told him as long as he was in America he had to work or go to school. Coleen, the manager of the place, was a wasted piece of LA tail who blew the bus boys in her office and stood just like the rest of us in a ring around the drunks when a fight broke out. The only “authority” she exerted was to say, “Take it outside,” and then she’d follow everyone out to the parking lot to watch the action and bet on who’d get his ass kicked.

I guess, well, I guess I didn’t believe the best of old Bart. Nothing I’d ever seen led me to believe that getting a big pile of money was going to rewrite his soul in a good way. Maybe he picked that up in me when I went over to the table where he had his arm hooked around that woman’s neck. He didn’t really know me since I rarely hung out in the bar, but he’d seen me around plenty. But I could just feel it when I got to the table, that he was going to be an asshole.

“Hey,” I said. “Good evening. We celebrating?” The woman smiled. Bart looked around like the press was going to descend on him with cameras and microphones and ask for an interview. He had on a slick new leather coat, but he was still unshaven and greasy.

“Bring us a couple of Martinis,” he said without looking at me.

I put in the drink order at the bar and waited there, since it was pretty slow that night and I only had the one table at the moment. Jalal was smiling at me with that you’re-going-to-get-a-big-tip smile. Some of the other waiters and waitresses were gliding around. They’d pass by me and say things like, “Lucky you…” or “With all that money he’s got, now, maybe you’ll get a hefty tip!” Except for Janice. She was a lifer. She’d been around there longer than anyone and would probably be around long after most of us were gone. She just had that go nowhere, change nothing air about her. She

lived with her boyfriend in a mobile home and had two kids, and she needed this job to survive more than anyone—she let us all know that when it came to divvying up shifts, just like she let me know there was a cosmic injustice in sitting old Bart at one of my tables when she said to me out of the side of her mouth, “Should have been my party.”

I brought the drinks to the table. He took a sip and sneered—“That’s shit! Take this back and get me a decent drink!” So I took the drinks back. Out of curiosity, I took a sip to see, and it tasted all right to me.

“He doesn’t like the drinks,” I told the bar tender. And then he sneered.

“What’s wrong with the drinks?”

“He doesn’t like the drinks.”

“Oh, what the fuck!”

And the bar tender tossed out the drinks and made another set. I took them to Bart’s table, and when I got there he was sinking his teeth into that poor girl’s neck, and she was laughing a little bit because she was paid to laugh, but I swear I could see her skin crawling.

“Your drinks,” I said, and placed them on the table.

He turned and took a drink. “Ahh....it’s still shit but it’s the best I’m gonna get in this dump.”

“Would you like to order?”

“Yeah, yeah...bring us a couple of porterhouse steaks.”

“Right,” I said, and I went back to the kitchen to put in the food order.

“Fuck,” I said to Jalal. “This guy’s being a real asshole.” Jalal just smiled.

Nothing seemed to surprise him or knock him out of his joyful party self.

I took out the salads. He didn't like the salad. I took out the soup. He said the soup was shit. The girl gave me a sympathy look.

In the meantime, I had gotten another table. A couple sat down and I went to take their drink orders, and right then a big fat rat ran across the floor between us. What could I say? I just shrugged and looked at them and said, "You still want to order drinks?" Of course they didn't. They left after that.

Then I got another table, a man and a woman with their young son. I brought them drinks and was just bringing them salads when the boy said to me, "Hey, I think I saw a mouse over there." He was pointing at the shelf on the wall above the table, where there was a display of an old miner's wagon and burlap sacks each marked with the word "Gold."

I looked at the couple, looked at the kid, looked at the couple and said, "Ah... no ya didn't..." Then I got out of there in a hurry, expecting them to leave at any moment.

I brought the steaks out to Bart's table, and I was just turning to leave when I heard him say, "Hold on a minute." I turned back around. "What's this?" I just stood there. "I'm talking to you!" And he pointed down at the steak and said again, "What's this?" And so I leaned down, and there on his steak was a little bristle from the cook's basting brush. "This," he said, his finger poised above the steak. "What the fuck is this?"

"A bristle," I said.

"Take them the fuck back!"

Well, I knew this was no good. Sending food back was a sure way to get your food spit on. That's the way things worked around here. But I don't think Bart ever ate here much. So I took the steaks back.

"No fucking way," the cook said.

I just stood there, nodding, completely disconnected, now. I stepped out past the dishwashers and heard one of them say, "Hijo de la chingada..." I made no sign that I knew what that meant, but when I glanced over at the guy he smiled and said, "Take hit easy."

"What?" I said.

"Hijo de la chingada...take hit easy..." like he was trying to teach me the phrase.

"Right," I said.

And I stepped into the alleyway and lit a cigarette and stood in the stink of the garbage and the sweet city heat and the rolling sound of sirens and the faint blur of stars overhead. LA is a crimson dream or nightmare, depending on how you looked at it. It was a city on perpetual liquidation sale. Car crash music with cruising shaded eyes, posture-posing calliope dummies and mannequin souls on parade in charade gear, riot-hungry and old on delivery. Everything speeded up, slowing down again. A snap of my fingers and—poof—ash drifting off the end of my cigarette floated up into the air in a honeycomb of layers becoming clouds that never bring rain. The grit grain of dust was coming down off the San Gabriel mountains in the first brief blast of Santa Anas, and I could feel those rats diving deeper into the walls.

Ring. Order up. And I took the same steaks, bristle removed, back to Bart's table. They are the same steaks, just rearranged and more bled-out after sitting under the

heat lamp. He maybe knew it, maybe didn't. He ordered more drinks and I brought them, though he was drunk when he arrived, and he was more drunk now, saying something wretched to the woman he was with that struck the smile from her face. The couple with the kid made it through the rest of their meal without any more rat sightings, but I could tell they were annoyed by Bart and his loud talk and his obvious hooker girlfriend. I could feel them thinking something like, didn't this used to be a family place? I wasn't surprised, after they left, to find a paltry tip.

I went to check on Bart again. "The steak's shit! Everything here is shit!" he said. He had barely poked at the steak, and it looked like the woman hadn't eaten a thing. "Just bring us some more drinks."

I brought another set of drinks and cleared the table. I didn't even ask if they wanted dessert. Bart was pretty wasted, now. I just wanted him to leave. I turned and was heading back to the kitchen when I heard the completely unmistakable sound of a slap. I turned back around and saw the woman holding her face. "That's right, you little cunt—"

I went back to the table, and I said, "Hey, what the hell, you can't treat her like that!"

"What?" He looked at me with those undersea eyes, and I could see something grimy and writhing and infected way down in there and struggling to surface. And what broke through was, "I fucking paid for her, I can do what I want!"

"You can't kit her," I said. "You can't do that. Why don't you just get the hell out of here!" I waited, standing by what I said. He pushed himself up out of that booth, and I could see that he was going to take a swing at me, so I pushed him back down.

“That’s right,” I said. “Stay the fuck down and gather yourself and then get the hell out of here...”

He struggled up. I shoved him back down. It was a joke, now, he was so drunk. So I left and went back to the kitchen. I didn’t care about a tip. I didn’t care if he paid at all and I got stuck with the bill. It was worth it if he just left.

Nobody saw anything. Nobody else saw any of it happen. But sure enough, a few minutes later, the manager appeared.

“What happened?” she said.

“He was hitting the woman he’s with.”

“So what!”

“So—it was upsetting the other customers.”

“I didn’t get a complaint.”

“It was upsetting—“

“He said you assaulted him!”

“I didn’t hit him!”

“He said ‘assaulted.’”

“I didn’t assault him.”

“Whatever...you’re through.”

“What?”

“That’s right...out now...you’re done here.”

“Hey! I was doing you a favor!”

“Now!”

I stripped off my apron and threw it down with a dramatic flourish of indignation that I didn't really feel. I didn't care at all about getting fired. I didn't care who got his ass kicked in the parking lot. I didn't care if rats crawled all over the food. She was right—I was through. Through waiting. I felt it hit. And of course, as I walked out through the restaurant, there was Bart with his skinny arm strung up over that poor girl's shoulder, smiling at me with a nasty, leering glare of victory.