

the outlaw

Jesus Rodriguez pulls out of the busy rush of early evening traffic on the Boulevard and parks the motorcycle in the “NO PARKING” zone beside the fire hydrant in front of the Courthouse. “Shit.” he curses quietly, the movement of his mouth barely visible beneath his straggly black moustache and bushy black beard. “Goddamn knees.”

He leans forward on the sweat-stained, contoured leather seat of the bike, his large hands still squeezing the grips of the handlebars, and bends his stiff legs slowly, one at a time, flexing the knees. “Shit.” he mutters again, satisfying the pain.

Releasing the handgrips, Jesus opens his hands wide and stretches his fingers, then combs his shoulder length black hair back from his face with his hands. He adjusts a pair of heavy metal bracelets, one on each arm, which have slipped down to his wrists. He pushes them up on his arms, past tattoos of a rearing stallion on the inside of his left forearm and a diving eagle on the inside of his right forearm, until they are hidden by the sleeves of his denim work shirt and jacket. On the back of the jacket is a large black circle around an off-center white circle containing the number “8”. White letters on a black banner above the circle spell EIGHTBALL. Turning his head, Jesus stares at the immense, white marble Courthouse, and slowly begins to count out loud to himself. “One... two... three...”

The front of the Courthouse shines bright in the darkness, lit up by eight huge spotlights, but the other three sides of the building are dark. There are sixty-four steps leading up to the eight doors at the front of the Courthouse. Jesus has counted them hundreds of times. There are sixty-four of them, eight sets of eight steps, with a long flat terrace between each set. At the top of the steps are eight tall white columns, and behind the eight columns is a wall of marble and

glass—big eight-foot square marble blocks and big eight-foot squares of tinted blue glass—and behind the glass is the lobby of the Courthouse, which is always lit up at night. This lobby is the office of Old Pete, the night watchman and janitor, who does not know Jesus, and does not know that Jesus loves (and hates) the Courthouse more than any other building in the City. “Six... seven... eight.” counts Jesus. “Eight times eight. Sixty-four.”

Jesus turns his head in the opposite direction and stares across the Boulevard at the neon-blinking line of hotels and restaurants and parking garages where conventions and salesmen and vacationing out-of-towners sleep and eat and park their cars. The parking garages are full, and there are lights in many of the windows on the upper floors of the hotels. And here and there a couple, or a family, or a group of businessmen are going into a restaurant to eat. “Business sure looks good tonight.” says Jesus, with a smile.

“Jesus?” asks a voice hesitantly from behind him. “Is that’s you?”

Jesus turns and looks at the old man on the sidewalk for a long moment. “Hello, Joey.” he says quietly.

“Why don’ts you go on over there and checks in? Tell them you is a salesman... or a fireman, they’s lots of them in town.”

“A fireman?” asks Jesus.

“Tell them you wants the biggest room and the softest bed, and the biggest steak and the best bottle of old bad wine they gots over there.”

“Why don’t you bite my ass, Joey?”

“Okay, if you says so. Didn’t eat me no breakfast. And alls I had for lunch was old bad wine. If you says so... I’ll bites it just for to put some meat in my stomach.”

Jesus stomps down a stand to hold the motorcycle upright and gets off the bike, swinging his leg over the seat awkwardly. He bounces up and down, flexing and popping the joints in his knees, pulling at his jeans where sweat has stuck them to his groin and buttocks. He steps over the curb onto the sidewalk. “What bike?” he asks, putting up his fists to fight.

Jesus begins to dance stiffly around Joey, throwing lazy punches that are well wide of any target. Joey turns as Jesus dances, always facing him, his hands coming up instinctively to defend himself. In one hand, Joey holds a fistful of strings, which are tied at the other end to a dozen red, white, and blue helium-filled balloons. Suddenly, Jesus stops dancing, and his hands fall to his sides. Joey’s back is turned to the motorcycle. “What’s all this shit?” says Jesus, reaching out again to grab at Joey’s coat and the fistful of strings that he holds.

Joey takes a step backwards. “Is my job now... works for Mister Wilson... from the church where Rusty works. Balloons salesmans. Mister Wilson gots me the permits from the Courthouse.”

Joey straightens the dark, worn, mismatched suit that he wears, pulling up the pants and buttoning the coat. The coat is too small for him and fits too tightly. The pants are too large and baggy around the legs. He wears a white shirt with a high collar buttoned tight against his neck, but he wears no tie.

“So, Old Man Wilson got you, too. Caught you feeling sorry for yourself? Saved your goddamn soul for you?”

“Mister Wilson ain’t gots nobody.” says Joey. “He just helps me and Rusty, that’s all. He knows all the peoples in the Courthouse.”

“Some help.” says Jesus. “You say you had plenty to eat today? Breakfast. lunch, AND dinner?”

Joey stares defiantly at Jesus, but does not answer.

“Is that goddamn hot dog place still up on the corner?” asks Jesus, pointing across the Boulevard.

Joey nods.

Jesus starts walking up the sidewalk in the direction of the hot dog stand. “Come on then, and let me buy you some goddamn supper.”

Joey hesitates, but then begins to walk sulkily behind Jesus, as if he were a child. “Can I has a ice cream cone, too, Daddy?” asks Joey.

Jesus turns. Joey stops. “Fuck you then.” says Jesus, walking away again. “I don’t care if you eat today or not.”

Joey moves up quickly beside Jesus. “Mister Wilson ain’t gots nobody.” he repeats.

“Goddammit, are you hungry or not?”

“Yes.” says Joey quietly.

The two men walk in silence for several moments towards the hot dog stand. “Is you going to works tonight, Jesus?” asks Joey, finally.

Jesus is silent, almost angry again, but then answers sullenly. “Maybe...don’t know. Where’s the young cop? He still work the nights around here?”

“Still works it. Ain’t sawed him yet. But I know wheres he’s at.”

“Where?”

“In the movie show. Talking to that big girl at the candy counter.”

“You mean Big Tits? Is she still around?”

Joey nods quickly, unable to hide his embarrassment. “He spend about half of every hour in there... talks to her.”

Jesus chuckles. “Sounds like he’s got her on his mind, man. -- But maybe he just likes candy?”

Joey looks down at the sidewalk and says nothing.

“And she’s got just the kind of candy he likes.” says Jesus, after a moment, laughing at his own joke.

Again Joey does not respond.

The two men walk on together in an uncomfortable silence. Joey walks with his head down, carefully avoiding stepping on the cracks in the sidewalk. Jesus walks with his head up, looking all around, and particularly back over his shoulder at the Courthouse. He stares across the Boulevard at the tall restaurant and hotel buildings of New Town, and at the dozens of darkened office buildings behind them. And he looks at the young trees and newly planted grass of the Park, which has been built beside the Courthouse, where once there was an old neighborhood running all the way down to the River, a part of Old Town before the Courthouse was built.

And Jesus thinks of Old Town on the other side of the Courthouse—the factory-working people in their small houses and small Mom-and-Pop stores, in their cheap walk-up apartments and cheaper hotel rooms, shopping at the supermarket and the five-and-dime store, eating at lunch counters, drinking in their bars and taverns on Saturday night, going to church on Sunday morning, and on every other day of the week walking across the railroad tracks to work in the mills.

And Jesus thinks of the four blocks directly behind the Courthouse, the Block, where the bar girls hustle drinks in the strip-and-clip joints, and where the hookers hide in doorways waiting for customers, and where the peep shows and the sex shops do a booming business.

The two men cross the Boulevard carefully at a corner, Jesus waiting impatiently for the red light to stop the heavy traffic. “You sold a bunch of balloons today, Joey?” asks Jesus, breaking the silence.

“Ain’t hardly selled the first one yet.”

“You been out all day and haven’t sold any balloons?”

Joey shakes his head. “Didn’t came out till after noon. -- Then Rusty and me spendd all the change money Mister Wilson gived me for old bad wine for lunch.”

Jesus looks at Joey, puzzled.

“After lunch, I went asleep for a while.” says Joey.

“For how long?”

“Till just before I sawed you.”

Jesus laughs. “Went to sleep? Sounds like you passed out to me.”

They arrive at the hot dog stand.

“Didn’t passed out neither.” grumbles Joey. “Me and Rusty worked late last’s tonight, cleaning up the church for Sunday school tomorrow.”

The stand is a small room in the corner of one of the big hotels, with a large sign “FRANKS” hanging above the single entrance door. A long counter with eight stools runs the length of the room, and there is a window counter where customers can stand and eat, looking out the windows at the Courthouse, the Park, and the Boulevard. But the windows are fogged up now where the heat of the grill has met the chilly December evening air.

“Hey, Frankie.” yells Jesus, as soon as he and Joey are in the door. “Give me four red hots over here, will you? With everything. And two cups of coffee, when you get a chance, okay?”

The fat sweat-and-greased stained, tee-shirted man behind the counter is startled and looks up suddenly from the foreign magazine he is reading. There are color pictures of naked women on every page. He recovers and nods his head, holding up four fingers of one hand at Jesus.

Jesus nods back at the counterman slowly, imitating his four-finger gesture and turning it into a wave. Joey ties his balloons to a coat hook next to the payphone near the door. The balloons nestle together in a corner of the low ceiling. Joey unbuttons his tight coat, and he and Jesus sit down at the counter on the first two stools nearest the door.

There is only one other customer at the stand, a boy of sixteen, who is small and thin for his age and could pass for twelve or fourteen. An unruly mop of dark hair struggles to get out from under his worn, red baseball cap. He is seated on the last stool at the rear of the room. The young man ignores everything but the hot dog and drink in front of him, which he eats slowly, concentrating on every small bite.

The counterman brings Jesus four hot dogs wrapped in white paper napkins and two cups of hot coffee. "Thanks, Frankie. How you been doing, man?" asks Jesus, smiling, passing two hot dogs and a cup of coffee to Joey, who begins to eat immediately. "How's business?"

The counterman looks at Jesus carefully, as if trying to understand or remember him, then shrugs and answers. "No good... no bus-i-ness... no make lots money."

"Hell, Frank, money ain't everything, is it? You got a good little bus-i-ness here. The best hot dogs in the New Town. You ain't going to go hungry, now, are you?"

Jesus smiles and winks at Joey, who is chewing vigorously on one hot dog and bun already completely in his mouth, and holding the other one ready in front of him.

“Hotel no like...tell peoples...work there, stay there...eat there, no come here.” says Frank, stabbing the air with his finger, pointing to each place he mentions. “Tell me go cross street where belong.”

“Hotel don’t want you here, I guess.” says Jesus.

“Me here first. But no want be here no more...make lots money. Go back home. Live big. Lots woman. Lots whiskey. Lots money.”

Jesus smiles. “You don’t need to go back home to get lots woman, lots whiskey.” he says slowly. “You stay here. We got lots woman, lots whiskey for you right here.”

“No like woman here, no like whiskey. Go back...Where hell you go?” snarls Frank suddenly.

The boy at the rear of the room has left his place and, as Frank notices him, breaks into a run for the door. Jesus leans back on his stool and grabs the boy by the arm, pulling him to the counter. “Let me go.” says the child. “I ain’t got no money. Let me go, dammit.”

Joey turns and stares at the boy for a moment, then calmly turns back and begins to eat his second hot dog.

The child struggles as Frank leans over the counter, grabs him by his hair, and slaps him once, knocking off his baseball cap. Jesus catches Frank’s hand before he can strike the child a second time. “No got no hot dog...if no got no money.” says Frank, pulling to get his hand away from Jesus, who releases it. “You stay. Me call police.”

Frank goes to the payphone near the door, fumbling in his pants pocket for a coin. He places his foot against the front door, holding it firmly closed, and looks back at the child. The boy shivers, on the edge of tears. Jesus relaxes his grip on the child’s arm and looks at him

closely, thinking deeply for a moment. “Hey, Frank, forget it.” he says. “I’ll pay for what the kid ate.”

Quickly Frank puts down the telephone, and retrieves his coin from the return slot.

“Okay.” he says. “You pay me now.”

Jesus keeps a loose grip on the boy’s arm and reaches into one of the front pockets of his jeans, pulling out a handful of dollar bills intricately folded into small neat squares. He selects one, and shoves the other bills back into his front pocket. Jesus unfolds the dollar easily with one hand, and hands it to the boy. “Here, kid. Pay the man and get out of here.” he says, releasing the boy’s arm, and leaning down to pick up the red baseball cap.

The child takes the money, and barely holding a corner of the bill, gives it to Frank without looking at him. The counterman looks at the limp, worn, many-times-folded-and-unfolded dollar bill suspiciously as he carries it to the money box in the corner of the counter.

“You did it stupid.” whispers Jesus to the boy, handing him his hat.

“What?” asks the child.

“You done a stupid thing.” says Joey. “You done a ...”

Joey stops in the middle of repeating himself as Jesus, with an annoyed glance, hands him a third hot dog, which he begins to eat immediately. Frank brings a few coins worth of change to Jesus. “Give it to him.” says Jesus, pointing to the boy. “That’s one dollar you owe me, kid. You remember that. That’s one you owe me.”

The child, afraid, nods.

“No come back my store no more... Never.” yells Frank, stalking off down the counter, talking to himself in his own language, to clean up the remains of the boy’s meal.

As Frank moves away, the boy stares at him angrily. Carefully he smooths his hair where Frank held him, and puts his baseball cap back on his head.

Again Jesus whispers. "You did it stupid."

Joey continues to eat. The boy looks at Jesus, but says nothing.

Jesus whispers. "If you ain't got no money or you ain't going to pay, you sit as close to the door of the place as you can. A side door is best. And you wait till the guy is busy or on the phone or falls asleep or goes to the bathroom or something. And then you get up and walk out. Just like you would if you had paid. You never run."

The child stares angrily past Jesus as Frank wads napkins and papers from the boy's meal into a ball and, with it, rakes a few crumbs from the counter to the floor.

"But you do it in a busy place." continues Jesus. "Not in a dump like this. And not close to where you live or where you hang out. You should have tried one of the hotel coffee shops."

"I was going to..." begins the boy.

Down the counter, Frank flings the ball of trash into a can and picks up the plastic glass, plunging it noisily into a sink of dirty dishes in cold dishwater, still mumbling to himself.

"Say, ain't you the kid who used to shine shoes for all the dudes over on the Block?" asks Jesus suddenly, in a louder voice.

The boy nods.

"How come you ain't shining shoes no more, kid? You used to make a lot of money."

"Ain't no kid." says the boy. "And I ain't going to do no kid job. I need me a man job now."

"I see. You're a man, now, is that it?" asks Jesus, continuing to speak in a loud voice.

"Well, no man would have run off without paying for what he ate. That's what a kid would have

done. A man would have spoke right up and said, ‘Mister Frank, I ain’t got me no money right now. You put this here hot dog and drink on my bill, and I’ll pay you when I get me some money.’ Dammit, you had money when you was shining shoes. You better find some other way to make money, or else get that goddamn shoeshine box back. Now get out of here before I really get mad with you.”

The child has listened carefully, but defiantly. He walks to the door, opens it, and turns to speak, but says nothing. The door bangs as the child runs away down the street.

Joey belches loudly, and quickly swallows the last of his coffee. “Excuse me.” he says, getting off the stool.

“Wait a minute, Joey.” says Jesus, but Joey unwraps the strings of the balloons from the coat hook and pulls them towards the door.

Frank turns to look, but turns back to his dishes, still mumbling.

“Wait a minute, goddammit.” says Jesus, taking two quick bites of the remaining hot dog.

“I thanks you for my suppers.” says Joey, as he goes out the door, carefully pulling his balloons through behind him, then allowing the door to bang shut for a second time.

Jesus finishes the last hot dog in one bite, and gulps the hot coffee. He wipes his mouth and moustache carefully on a napkin, watching Frank continue to wash dishes and mumble to himself. Slowly, Jesus gets up from the stool and takes several steps towards the door.

“Hey, you no pay me yet.” yells Frank, turning suddenly, pulling his hands from the cold dishwater.

Jesus turns, smiling, his hand on the doorknob. “Mister Frank.” he says. “I ain’t got me no money right now. You put these here hot dogs and drinks on my bill, and I’ll pay you when I get me some money.”

“What?” asks Frank.

Jesus shows the counterman his fist and slowly extends his middle finger. “I said... stick it up your ass, Mister Frank.” he says, laughing, and walks out the door as Frank runs to the phone, shaking water from his hands and fumbling in his pants pocket for a coin.