

BUYING BEANS AT THE RED OWL



A man in a leather jacket was behind him at the checkout counter, wallet ready, while the girl with the two hundred spicurls totalled his selections. There were six half-gallons of Pepsi Light, three half-pound bags of Doritos Nacho Cheese Chips, a box of Entenmann's Coconut Chocolate Chip cookies, a TV GUIDE, a copy of THE ENQUIRER, a copy of THE STAR and the man was leafing through the latest issue of PEOPLE while sneaking looks at the spicurl girl.

"You takin' that PEOPLE?" the girl asked as she paused on subtotal.

"No - I guess not - darn. How much is it so far?"

"Seventeen-sixty," the girl said as she examined her two-inch fingernails. The purple polish was chipped off her right digit finger. She raised her eyebrows to the man in leather.

"Zat include tax?" the Pepsi-man asked.

"Yes," the girl said, drumming her fingers on the cash drawer.

The Pepsi-man was trying to calculate quickly but he had a perplexed look. He looked at his twenty dollar bill and said, "Add it in." He wasn't certain if he had enough and hoped she wouldn't get mad at him if he had to put it back. The guy in leather was already getting irritated.

"Nineteen forty-six," she said as she smashed the Doritos into the crevice between the Pepsi.

"That's the year I was born," the Pepsi-man said, handing her the twenty.

"Musta been some year," the girl replied, softly. She had his change ready.

"Thank you – very much," the Pepsi-man said and walked away. Next time I'll axe her to visit me, he said to himself as he stepped on the rubber mat that triggered the automatic door.

"God! How pathetic," the girl said to her friend in the next chute. "That's all he ever buys – d'jew see the gut on him? Gonna be a hot night t'night – you bet."

"Don't he give ya the creeps?" the second girl said. "He gives me the creeps and he don't even come to my register. He always goes to you. There can be four in yer lane an' two in mine – he still goes to you."

"He loves my spicurls – asked me one time how I did them.

"Gives me the creeps," the other girl said again.

"Aw – he's harmless. He'll go home and off all over Jackie 0. He's harmless," the girl with the spicurls said once more. This time she sounded a little less assured.

"Jus' the same – I'm glad he goes to you."

The girl with the spicurls looked at the man in leather and punched up 1.09, slid the artichoke hearts down and grabbed the single avocado.

.89. It rolled down into the corner. Thomas's English muffins. 1.29. Now here's an interesting man, she thought. Never says anything to me.

"Makin' some guacamole?" she said pertly, then slid the Helman's Mayonnaise over the laserbeam that would instantly reorder another half pint. 1.19.

"Ah – no" he replied, stirring from his stupor. "Actually it's for a sandwich I especially like. Add a slice of this cheese and melt it in a toaster oven. I'm afraid I'm addicted."

"Sounds good," the girl said. "I'll have to try it." She punched up 2.37, hoping he would pick up on her hint; invite her to dine with him sometime. She would bring the Sangria.

"Yes – you should," he said. "It's quite good."

"Six eighty three," she said and then he remembered what it was he had come in for in the first place. TUMS. His stomach was rotten; had been since he woke up in some car in the parking lot next to CBGB and couldn't remember how he'd gotten there. He had checked the billboard but Topper & The Blue Tycoons triggered no recollection.

Actually he usually stole his TUMS. They were easy to palm and slip into his pocket as he rounded an aisle, out of sight of the parabolic mirrors. It was trivial, only saved him a buck, but what the hell. He'd been shoplifting small items like that since he was a kid. He'd been caught a few times but it never broke him of the habit even though it was always very humiliating to make up some lame excuse. But there was little chance of getting caught here. He gave the girl his last ten and wondered where all his cash went. He thought he could remember breaking a hundred only the day before. Little lapses. That bothered him. The girl gave him his change and looked him in the eye when she thanked him. Fuck it, he said to himself as he stepped on the rubber mat. I'll get some TUMS at the tobacco shop.

The Pepsi-man was pacing around outside as he emerged from the

yellow florescence into the purple grey November day. Pathetic creature he mumbled as he zipped his leather jacket. Not unlike myself, he admitted. An icy drizzle was beginning.

A beautifully pregnant, Hispanic woman – Madonna-like face – passed between the two shoppers.

"Maybe if we got a bigger place, you'd feel more like staying home," she began to say to the man with her.

"You don't understand," the man said, impatiently. "I don't wanna stay ta home." The man's voice trailed off as the couple entered THE RED OWL.

She looked a little like Natalie Wood, the Pepsi-man said to himself. Why did those guys hav'ta drown her? Was she pregnant and couldn't decide who the father was? Didn't know where ta turn? If I'da been there I coulda talked to her – made her see it was okey. Alls she needed was Jesus. I coulda told her that.

The Pepsi-man was trying to decide whether to go back into THE RED OWL for some jellybeans. He was pretty sure fifty-four cents was not enough. Everything costs about a dollar these days – at least. Nerts, he said as he strode off down Pearl Street. He liked to suck on jellybeans while he watched the news. Especially when Mr. President was on. He told himself he could buy a small bag at Woolworths from the red-haired girl with the tiny scar on her bottom lip that she got falling off her trike years ago. She had told him that once when he used to shop there more often. But that was before the girl with the spit curls.

"TUMS, three pack," he said to the poofter in the tobacco store. "And a couple packs of Merit and some Coronellas." She had gotten him started calling these guys poofers. If was a small step up from what he used to

call them.

"What – no pipe tobacco?" the poofter said. Everything sounded as if it was supposed to mean something deeper.

"No – thank you. My second wife's third husband sucked a pipe and she doesn't like them."

He felt stupid saying that. It wasn't the reason. He wanted to tell the scrawny little twerp to stuff a pipe up his ass. But if he did then he'd have to find another tobacco store. So he held his tongue.

"How poignant!" the poofter said.

He wanted to say fuck off faggot, as he made his escape. Instead he said, "You wouldn't know."

"Well – rilly," the poofter said.

What he had wanted to say was: listen, stop the flirting. Say what you mean. Wouldn't she just shit if her little juice pot could be replaced by a milking mouth that would make no demands.

In the past after splitting up, as she began to feel better, she would begin to think she could handle him again. Even though nothing had changed except she was no longer banging her head against his fist. That was the last time and the three or four times before, when he swore he had changed. Each time he would say this time he would be good; he knew what a fool he had been. And never once had he said he loved her. She knew he couldn't and that was ok. But now, no more. This is now and she didn't want him anymore. She had to admit, however, that she'd like him to call once more. Then she could be temperate, strong, recapture the dignity he had taken from her. And then tell him to fuck off.

She listened, over and over, to Bonnie Raitt singing, Love Has No Pride, but she'd never call out his name. And it scared her to think he might come back; thought about having the lock changed but had not gotten

around to it.

She flipped the record over and started dancing to Give It Up Or Let Me Go. She poured another drink down her throat and looked in the mirror. It was a nice throat now that the finger marks were fading. She picked up her heavy shawl and bopped out the door, singing, 'gonna find me another man – one who wants to give me everything'. Into the night.

"He's gonna miss my ass," she said to the first couple she passed.

"There ya go, Sister," the other woman said. Her companion promptly let go of her hand and created some distance between them.

It was coming back to him now as he walked back out into the drizzle with the 'rilly' ringing in his ears. And the faggot's giggle. They had been walking down Bleeker. When? Last night? The night before? She wanted to go to The Mudd Club and he just wanted to go home, get blown and go to sleep. He was pulling on the pinfeathers of a pint of Wild Turkey and passed the last little shot to her. She smashed the bottle against a building and grabbed him by the wrist, pulling him into the lobby of a closed-down Blarney Castle.

"You wanna fuck mate – let's fuck." She flattened herself against the wall, hiked up her skirt. With one hand she pulled down her panty hose and unzipped his fly with the other. "Come on hotshot," she taunted. "Whatty ya got in there – a prick or a pencil?"

He was a little stunned. Not because she was doing this but because he knew then it was the farthest thing from his mind. He didn't want to fuck her – he wanted her gone. And he just wanted to sleep and perhaps not wake up. He stood mute and immobile.

"Come on," she said impatiently, "then let's go to The Mudd."

"Fuck yourself," he said and walked away.

She was seated on the edge of the bed with her right foot up and flat on the sheet. Her left foot was flat on the floor with cotton balls stuck between each toe, toenails freshly painted dayglo orange and green. She was curled over the bottle as she did her right toes and breathed the toluene. It made her spacey and precise with the brush. But God! It smells so bad, it's almost not worth it, she thought.

He would like her toes when...no no... if he saw them. They would make him want her then and there; as it would have if he had been there watching her, leg pulled up, thigh showing and a glimpse of pubic hair. Little visions like that made him want her but they wouldn't have if he knew she spent two hours every waking day on what she called her toilette. It was good for him that he didn't think of such things. He had never asked her what she did with her time. In fact she hardly existed when he wasn't with her.

She picked up the phone and cradled it between her neck and shoulder, picked up a pack of Merit, found it empty and crumpled it. She sent the empty pack in an arc towards the brown paper RED OWL bag in the corner. The bag was placed in the corner to allow her a two-bank possibility to score a shot. Two points, she said to herself as she punched a speed dial number. She stretched her legs out together to check her paint job while the phone rang.

"Hey - it's me. You see my old man anywhere?"

"What was he doin' there?"

"No - not since the other night. "

"It's not the first time - God if I had a nickel..."

"Because – you know – everybody knows about such things.

"Why are you?"

"Ha! You're the only one who thinks so. Your old man's so lame a quadriplegic would fall outta his chair tryin' ta open a door for 'im."

"Well – you stuff it too baby."

"Yeah? Says you."

"What? Who is it?"

"Okey. Call me right back – okey?"

"I'm at home – where else? He's somewhere else, thank god! Said he wasn't comin' back. Love ya."

Why was it all coming back now? It was nowhere near his mind an hour ago. What triggered the synapse now? What caused the lapse before? Wild Turkey, no doubt. That and the pathetic nature of existence was enough to blot everything out. It was no doubt a survival mechanism. When he got home...Ha! Home! When he got back to her hovel, he would make one or two his sandwiches and then sleep until he woke up.

There was a good looking woman on the elevator; a new woman in the building? He immediately imagined himself in bed with her instead.

"Would you mind not smoking," the woman said without looking at him. It was not a question.

"Yes," he said, knowing he wouldn't fuck her now if she begged him. He also knew she never would. "Yes, I do mind."

The woman backed into the far corner.

He moved ever so slightly toward her. Just enough to make her uneasy. "Would you mind taking another elevator? That perfume cocktail you're wearing, your douche spray, your underarm deodorant, your pancake makeup, your hair spray and your Certs makes me nauseous. I have to smoke to blot out all that crap."

When the elevator stopped on three, the woman got out and turned around to wait for another.

"Take a bath," he called after her.

She was snug in bed when he walked in. The smile on her face as she slept was conflicted. I'll give you something to smile about he thought when he saw her cute little rump poking out of the Indian blanket. But first, a sandwich. He unpacked the ingredients, one by one, until he came to the mayonnaise.

In the apartment next door, the Pepsi man paused to dunk a coconut macaroon in his Woolworth crystal glass of Pepsi without looking up from the page. He was reading about Prince Albert ripping a bikini off a starlet named Boo. (See pictures page 3A.) He skimmed ahead. The picture was of Prince Albert at a handshaking ceremony with an inset of Boo from a movie he himself had never seen. He reached for another macaroon. Darn it! Two chocolate chips and some shreds of coconut were scattered in the corner of the box. He shook the crumbs into his hand and washed them down with a shot of Pepsi.

"What are you doing? Stop it," she said sleepily.

"Just what you need," he replied. "Go back to sleep." His fingers were covered with a creamy yellow substance.

"Kiss my ass," she said trying to turn over.

"Mark the spot – you're all ass to me, Queeny." He pushed her back on her stomach and spread her muffins. "Is this the spot?" His fingers led the way, first one, then two, then three, then himself hard and sharp as a nail. She screamed, "NO! Stop that!" biting her lip until it bled. "You know I hate that." Then as abruptly as thunder, she thrust herself into the air, driving him home, then twisted her hips. He rolled off her quickly and slapped her ass. "Damn you, I think you broke it."

The Pepsi-man had finished THE STAR and had determined not to buy it again. It lacked details and there was nothing in it that wasn't covered by THE ENQUIRER and PEOPLE combined. He looked over at his bedside table and took inventory. He counted one bag of Doritos and two half-gallons of Pepsi. Maybe I should run out for more macaroons, he thought. Then he heard a muffled voice cry out, "Stop that!"

I should stop it, he said, make do with the Doritos and the half dozen jellybeans.

He had now skimmed all his literature and was settling down for an evening of close reading; deciphering what it all meant. It sure would help if I had a few more macaroons, he thought.

When they awoke it was dark. "You hungry?" he said. "I'm starving."

"Whatta we got?"

"Articado avachoke sandwiches," he said, rubbing his hands together as he rolled naked out of bed.

"Mmmmmmm – just what I want," she said sweetly.

"What you want – you get," said Mr. Charm.

Isn't that pathetic, he thought. The dark and the drizzle and the gloom were descending again.

The Pepsi-man tried not to, but he dialed her number and began to sweat when the phone started ringing. He had called her often but never managed to say – always forgot – what he had rehearsed. She answered on the second ring.

"Hola! Como esta usted?" she said, fingering her spit curls. When no one responded, she said, "Hello?"

"Is this the girl with the spit curls?"

"Who wants to know?"

"You don't know me – that is – you wouldn't remember me."

"So – whaddy ya want?"

"Well – I..." he choked, chewing on a Dorito. He wanted to ask her to meet him – come Sunday – after church, for breakfast. "I's wondering if you go to church on Sunday?" He knew she did; saw her there with her little sister and her Mama.

"Yeah – I go to church. Is this some sorta survey?"

"No – no. I's just wondering – that is – I's hoping you could go to church with me sometime. Whenever you wanted – I'll go anytime..."

"Who is this? Never mind – piss off maricon."

The girl with the spit curls hung up the phone but couldn't shake the creepy feeling growing inside her.

The Pepsi-man dunked his Doritos and smiled. She's coming along, he said to himself. At least I talked to her. Next time I go to THE RED OWL I'll tell her I's the one who called, then axe her out. But now, there was just time enough for a refill before the season premiere of Dallas began.

He heard the sirens in the street and the commotion in the hall but did his best to ignore it. By the time Dallas was over, things had quieted

down. He peeked out the door anyway. A yellow police band was taped across 6B.

There was a small item in the dailies the next day but it didn't mention his name. The Pepsi-man got all the details the following week. The front page of THE ENQUIRER seemed innocuous enough. Not one of their better headlines. It said simply: HE/SHE. Story inside. (Exclusive Photos on page 18).

Well it was not an innocuous story and the pictures were not pretty. The Pepsi-man took one look, closed the paper quickly, then couldn't resist. He opened the paper again, took a slug of Pepsi and read.

HE apparently had slashed SHE quickly, then slashed himself much slower. He had wound a baggie-tie around his penis then sliced it off, little by little, as if it were a salami. If he hadn't fainted, if the baggie-tie hadn't slipped off the stump, he might not have bled to death; might have lived to fill out the profile. There were the usual quotes from friends and neighbors. The Pepsi Man read his own statement and sucked on two jellybeans at one time. "I saw them almost everyday," he had said. "They always seemed like a very happy couple. I think she was from England. Probably Protestant. I guess he was Irish. Catholic like me."

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