

THE WHEELS ARE FALLING OFF

by Jon Boilard

I was getting a tan in Washington Square. One-Legged Johnny fought in Vietnam and stepped on a land mine. He was still pissed. He came by with Big Al Ma. Big Al worked in the pantry of the President Roosevelt for almost thirty years. At thirty years he could retire with his pension. One month shy they fired him for being drunk. One-Legged Johnny and Al were broke. They didn't ask me for anything. They never did. I'd just won money on Tiger Slew at Bay Meadows. It was a hunch. I sent Big Al to the corner for a twelve-pack of Pabst. We drank it in the sun. All the cops new us but this rookie walked up. He said we couldn't drink in the park. I apologized and One-Legged Johnny and I dumped our beers. Big Al Ma kept drinking. And the rookie kept talking and finally he grabbed the beer away from him and Big Al pulled a steak knife out of his coat. I don't know where he got it or what he thought he was going to do with it. It happened so fast. Big Al was only about four-and-a-half feet tall and he weighed maybe a hundred pounds soaking wet. He was under arrest before you knew it. One-Legged Johnny couldn't stop laughing.

We hit Golden Boy for a slice of pepperoni. Gino and Carlo's had the usual crowd. It was Saturday afternoon. Pierre was in there smiling through his one tooth. I once saw him carry a refrigerator up five flights of stairs. I bought him a shot of Jack Daniels. He stunk to high heaven. The Iranian was in there bothering people. I told Marco behind the bar that the Iranian had to go but Marco said he was still breaking him in. Marco liked projects. He liked to say that I was one of his projects and look how I turned out. It was true. I used to be in worse shape. I raised my glass to him. The Giants were on the television. Santiago hit a two-run dinger.

Brown Sugar saw me standing by the bathroom. I was making sure One-Legged Johnny made it okay. She put her quarters down for a game of pool. She told me she was available if I wanted to come by her place later. She had a clean little apartment in a dirty building on Market Street. She was a decent girl. She stripped at a joint on Larkin where stripping wasn't the only thing she did. It was good money. I wasn't in a position to judge anybody. I told her I probably wouldn't be able to walk that far. She told me to take a cab. One part of me wanted to go and a bigger part of me did not. One-Legged Johnny fell down against the door so I couldn't even get to him. He pissed all over himself. The Iranian had some smart things to say to us so I socked him in the lip. I used to get paid to hit people as hard as I hit him. Brown Sugar got out of the way. I told Marco behind the bar that I was sorry and we left so he wouldn't have to ask us to leave.

I used to have a wife. She taught school. She said she divorced me because of my drinking and that was before I really started drinking. That sucked everything out of me for years. She was a local girl too and every now and then I hear things about her and I'm glad she is doing better. She has a nice house in the Bernal Heights and a family and all the things I could never give to her. I think she married an investment guy from back east somewhere, maybe Connecticut. For a while I called her a two-timing whore but that was never the case. Now even when one of my brothers eggs me on just for kicks I can't think of a bad thing to say about her. She is perfect in memory.

One-Legged Johnny didn't want to go to La Rocca's. That is what he would do. He would hit the wall. So I bought him a turkey sandwich and some gnocci and a halfpint of Jim Beam. I

gave him half a pack of smokes. I left him on a bench in the shade. Dougie was working and he had my drink poured before I sat down. Some fat fucking punk from the Sunset I used to knock the shit out of was sizing me up. In the old days I would've started in on him right away but I let it go. I let everything go now. The Giants lost to the Braves. There was basketball on too. When Dougie's shift ended then Erin with her curly blond hair took over. I sang pop songs to her and she rolled her eyes at me. She was young and she had a couple young boyfriends hanging out at the end of the bar keeping tabs on me. Then they helped her push me out the door at closing time but weren't really as rough as they could've been. I wouldn't have blamed them for trying.

I sat in the park for a while. A few kids from the projects rolled some yuppy who had veered off course. I recognized them from Salesian. It was pretty harmless. He was all right. I helped him up and his nose was busted and needed some attention. I told him to get it looked at. He pushed me away and called me an old drunk. I hailed a cab and told the driver to bring me to Market and Sixth. I couldn't remember her exact address. If he dropped me there I could find it. Brown Sugar buzzed me up. She was burning incense. She told me she won four or five games of pool and the Iranian was talking shit the whole time. That fucking guy. She went to mix a couple drinks but then she could tell that I'd had it. Her bed was soft. I didn't want to talk anymore because my head hurt. I got these headaches. She undressed me. Her skin was smooth in most places. She put a rubber on me and used some jelly on herself to save me the trouble. Then she did all the work but it was a good long time and she was able to finish. She was a professional and took pride in what she could do but I was too numb to really feel anything. I was happy to help her fall asleep. And the visuals of what we had just done would help me later when I was alone. When I woke up she was gone and there was a fat black cockroach inches from my face on the pillow. I checked my roll of cash and it was a bit smaller but that was an understanding we had.

I picked up Big Al Ma at North Station. He needed a drink in the worst way. He told me that jail wasn't bad. They gave him some food that tasted like a peanut butter sandwich and an old blanket that smelled like mildew. They let him call his sister but his brother-in-law answered and wouldn't put him through. They had disowned him years ago. They used to have a sweet little studio in the garage for him. He had told me this story a million times but I let him continue because I didn't have the energy to stop him. He was crying. I put my arm around him and we stood like that. He came from Hong Kong in 1961. He traveled the world on the President Roosevelt. After he got fucked out of his pension he didn't know what to do. He moved in with his sister's family and drank whatever he could get his hands on. It was bad for the children so his brother-in-law told him to leave. They kept his savings and his monthly social security checks and gave him an allowance. It was enough to pay for a hotel room and meals but that was about it so he was always asking for more. Eventually they got tired of him bothering them so they opened an account for him at Wells Fargo and let him do what he wanted. He told me that was a great day. He used the word freedom. He looked up at me and his eyes were dried out and blank. Big Al Ma shuddered and I held onto him tight so he wouldn't blow away in the wind.

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