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*Dregs*

by Darryl Benjamin

“Even though I was in a coma, I was polite. The spirit catches you when you fall, you know. I had a cousin once. He didn’t have a cavity for thirty-four years. And then he dropped dead.” Cassandra says these things to me in a breathless flood as she sips a Dr. Brown’s Cel-Ray soda. Red lipstick on her teeth. She is nervous. Her jowly cheeks shake like candy apples in a child’s eyes. She wants money, but I am in no mood to give her any.

“Cassy,” I say.

“I know what you’re going to say, so don’t bother,” she interrupts and shifts her gaze out the big deli window. Outside people are rushing home from work like flocks of birds escaping a forest fire.

I sip my cappuccino. This place has gone downhill, I think. Their capps used to be the best in the city. A good cappuccino should burst onto your palate like step dancers on opening night, not hobble like an Italian organ grinder’s monkey after a thankless day.

“If you’re so damn sure you know what I’m going to say, then say it for me,” I urge.

She shifts her eyes to mine without missing a beat and opens her mouth. ““You’re broke, you’re looking for a better job, you could use a loan yourself’.”

I smile wanly.

She talks on without missing a beat. “Look at all the people on the street hurrying like chickens with their heads cut off. Like they actually have some place important to go. Like they have to *be* somewhere. Half of them on cell phones, talking to their housekeepers, probably, or their lawyer or lover or something. The rest of them are wondering how they’re going to pay their cell phone bill.”

I glance out the window without moving my head.

“Cassy,” I say, “what is it this time?”

“Hah!” she cries, as if she’s been stung. “It’s not birth control pills,” – we both know she hasn’t had sex for ten years or more – “and it’s not to buy diamonds.”

“Food? Bus fare?” I ask.

She nods, tears springing to her eyes. I put my hand on top of hers. “Cassy,” I repeat three times, softly.

“I’ve tried,” she says through her sniffles, “Really I have. I applied for maybe a dozen jobs, but no one wants a tired, used-up lady. I feel so unwanted. You can’t know.” She picks up a napkin and honks into it.

I tell her I know something about it. I tell her about what it’s like to work underground and sell subway tokens in a cage. I know what people are like: abrupt, impatient, insulting.

She brightens. “A make-over is what I need,” she reflects while in one smooth execution folds the hundred dollar bill I give her and slips it in to her ample bosom. “Safest place in the city,” she says, winking and with only a trace of irony.

I say nothing. What is there to say? We’ve been through this before. What strange alchemy could transform a tired, clown-faced, late middle-aged woman with a heart of gold into corporate fodder?

“You can go back to school,” I say without much conviction. “You can go to night school, can’t you?”

“And pick up my eighth-grade education where I left off? I don’t think so. I’d be old or dead by the time I graduate anyway. Besides, what would I study? Typing? Please. And computers? Forget it.”

I finish my cappuccino. It tastes like chalk. There are grounds in the bottom of the cup. I’ve never had cappuccino with grounds in the cup.

“Tomorrow’s another day,” Cassy says with forced cheer. She is trying to reassure me. She feels guilty about accepting a hand-out. She has her pride.

“Don’t worry about it,” I say, and wink back at her.

She’d been my favorite aunt for fifty years. I slip her a handful of subway tokens.

She drops the tokens into her handbag without looking up. And then she is gone, like snow on the water.