

Sterling Beer and Jalapeños

by H. W. Moss

“Work is day jail,” Jason said as he finished pouring amber liquid into his glass. He sat back and eyed the rim to make sure it didn’t spill. He was prepared to sip from the lip if necessary, but the decant was accurate. The brown foam debubbled.

On the bar stool next to him, Billy tilted the last drops of his tenth beer down his throat and slammed the bottle on the wood surface. “Couldn’t agree with you more. But I gotta go pollute the Bay.” He used his knuckles, not the palms of his hands, to boost himself up from his tall seat. Standing was an effort, an almost superhuman feat considering the amount of alcohol he had consumed. He wobbled slightly before capturing the restroom in his mind’s eye and headed toward it leaning at a forward angle like a schooner attacking the wind.

Two hors d’oeuvres plates full of chicken bones surrounded by drizzled heaps of deep fried crumbs and a half dozen dead soldiers littered the counter in front of where they sat. Jason idly ran the tip of his index finger in a pattern around first one plate and then the other, a figure eight. He accumulated a greasy layer of scum under his nail as he hummed quietly to himself.

“Certainly hope you boys ain’t driving,” the bartender offered from directly opposite. Jason nearly jumped out of his skin.

“Jeeesus Keerist! Don’t sneak up on me like that!”

A seagull squawked as it flew past the bayside pub looking for French fries. In the late Sunday afternoon air the briny odor of the bay wafted through the Ramp’s open loading dock doors.

The bartender would not accept complimentary drinks until the sun had set. He was still sober and wore a stern, no-nonsense expression. Jason recovered from his moment of fright. "Course I'm drivin'," he said with one eye closed and his head at a rakish angle. "After all, I'm too drunk to walk."

Before the man could respond, Billy magically reappeared on the seat next to Jason and waved a \$20 bill under the bartender's nose. "Five of this is yours if you get us two more brewskis and another plate of buffalo wings."

The bartender was not immediately persuaded, but gave in when a patron down at the far end yelled his name. He snatched the money from Billy's hand and went to fill the order.

"Spicy!" Jason shouted at the man's fleeing backside. Jason swiveled in his seat to face Billy and said with one eye squinted: "The objective of work should be to quit."

"Couldn't agree with you more, bro. Puttin' in my time on that goddam chain gang is how I feel every day in that goddam sweat shop."

"That's what I like about you, Billy, you're so frank. It's refreshing to know someone who speaks his mind."

"Always do. Ahhh," his eyes lit up and his mouth went into an O shape. "The beers are here." Another plate lined with Jalapeño chilies was shoved under his nose. "Oooof. Did I really order these?" Tentatively, he picked up a pepper in one hand, a buffalo wing in the other. He bit a large piece of the tip off the green vegetable, then quickly chomped into the meat. Dropping them back onto the plate, he lunged at his beer with both hands and washed the mixture down with a long swallow.

“Cayenne,” said Jason as he snatched up a portion. “That’s the secret of good wings.” He separated the greasy delicacy into two parts, placed the drumstick whole in his mouth and withdrew a clean bone. A crunching sound followed this maneuver.

“You eating the bone too?” Billy asked with a cringe.

“Naw, naw. Just the gristle. Good for you. Cartilage replacement theory. You’ll never get arthritis.”

Billy peeled the label off his bottle until he had a small mound of colored paper lying on the counter. He belched loudly. They ate and drank in silence for a few moments.

“Jalapeños are nothing,” Jason rolled one in his hand. “Serranos are nothing. Thai chilies, they’re moderately hot. But habanera, now that’s one hot pepper. The fire sticks to the inside of your mouth and nothing, I mean nothing washes it away. “He chewed off half in one go, munched contentedly as Billy stared in disbelief.

“Sounds like one of Joe’s progress reports. Stays on your record for months, years.”

Jason took a pull on his beer, frowned and said: “You really ought to try and stay on his good side, y’know. After all, he is in charge of our project.”

An hour passed. They ordered another round. The sun was well down when the bartender gave them the bad news. “You two are cut off. Want me to call a cab?”

Jason was remarkably clear-eyed with hardly a slur in his voice. “That won’t be necessary, my good sir. We’re on our bikes.” When the bartender’s eyes lit up he added, “Bicycles. We’ve been exercising to keep fit. But we gotta work tomorrow, don’t we Billy? C’mon. Time to hit the road.”

Jason put one arm around his friend's shoulder as Billy allowed himself to be guided off the stool and aimed toward the door. "Sterling beer, absolutely sterling," he muttered.

Billy fumbled out a key and unlocked the coupled bicycle frames. The night air did wonders to sober them up as they pedaled toward their downtown condominiums. Only blocks apart, they separated and each made his own way home. It was in the elevator that Jason's stomach threatened revenge. He managed to hold it down and splash water on his face, to undress and crawl into bed. His last conscious thought was to flip the alarm clock switch into the on position.

Around ten o'clock the next morning Jason nursed an aching head with a cup of black coffee in the lunchroom of his high rise office complex. Joe Wagoner was trying to explain the Woodacre deal but Jason did not have the patience to follow all of it. He had not seen Billy yet and wondered if he had made it in to work or called in sick.

At that moment, Billy burst into the room. He spotted Jason and marched over. Without so much as a greeting or hello, he said, "My fucking asshole hurts like hell. It feels like it's on fire. It's still burning. It even hurts to take a shit! I'm never doing anything like that with you again."

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