

Colin and Kurt

by H. W. Moss

Two women seated next to each other on stools at the bar were approached at the same time and completely blindsided. Neither had an opportunity to look at the other in order to convey a superficial suspicion they were being set up.

Which is exactly what was happening.

“Hiya, baby. How’s the air up there?” The voice came from her left, but when the girl turned toward the sound she found no one.

“Down here baby doll.”

At her hip a head covered in a white fedora, face upturned.

“That’s right deary. How about putting me in your lap and letting me fondle your tits?”

The brazen little man stood four foot zero. He reached up with a drink in his hand saying, “Bought you another gin and tonic since that’s what you been drinking. I’m hoping to get you drunk, y’see, cuz I wanna take advantage of you.”

Before she could respond -- although she really had no response, she was so astonished -- her attention was drawn to her right where a somewhat smoother pitch was being delivered to her seatmate.

“Hello my pretty pretty. Tequila sunrise is your drink, right?” A hand waved at the bartender, index finger and thumb cocked like a gun pointed at a nearly empty glass on the counter and mock fired. “Lady’d like another. My treat.”

The bartender was not going to move until he made eye contact with the prospective recipient. A slight head nod, she seemed willing to accept the offer. He began

the three colored pour as a good natured laugh rose from the other girl. By now a vacant bar stool had been pushed over next to hers and the small man with the big attitude was standing on it waving his arms as he told a story about how his name was Colin and he hated being called colon, “Which is the lower end of the alimentary canal if you care to follow me there, sweetieface.”

“Colin and me, we’re in business together,” Kurt interjected before either girl asked. “Partners. My name’s Kurt. You are . . .?”

“Maggie. I’m Margaret. Maggie,” said the sunrise drinker. She volunteered her friend’s name who looked as if she might not do so on her own: “’At’s Shirley.”

The look between the ladies said they knew these boys simply wanted to get laid. Let’s get a few free drinks out of them before we give them the brush off.

Kurt had approached Maggie with a slight limp and a grin that was all teeth, big as the ivories in Matt Dillon’s mouth in “There’s Something About Mary,” only real. It was an endearing if somewhat devilish smile and Maggie was not put off by it.

“And what sort of business is that exactly?” Shirley’s voice dripped sarcasm. “Pimping?”

“We’re private dicks,” came Colin’s blithe reply.

“That’s just disgusting,” Margaret said hitting the bar none to softly with her glass.

“No, s’true,” Kurt said putting an arm around Maggie’s shoulders to keep her from any further demonstration of contempt. She did not shrink from his attentions; always a good sign. “We’re investigators. In business for ourselves.” Nodding toward his purported partner, he added, “Appearances can be deceiving. His nickname among the ladies is ‘The Little Giant’ or does it have to snow for you to get my drift?”

Colin was dressed in a brown double breasted wide-lapel suit with a black shirt and white tie. Standing on the chair seat, his feet proclaimed attention: Highly polished shiny black shoes with two-tone nine button pearl adorned spats. The white fedora added to his gangster image.

“Who’re you investigating in this place? Certainly not us.” Shirley sounded confident.

“Why not?” Colin shot back. “You got a jealous husband or boyfriend you’re not telling me about?”

By now the bartender’s attention was directed to several guys at the far end who were waving money. He took their order, began pulling beers from separate taps with a nonchalant ease. The foam was an inch thick on top when he slapped the drinks down in front of the patrons who did not seem to mind the fact they had each been cheated out of at least two ounces.

Colin kept up his patter. but his eyes were glued on the bartender who was ringing up the transaction. “You ever watch PBS? Like, Nature? Well, they had this piece on the Kalahari Desert. Showed this frog dig his way out of the ground where he’s been hibernating for a year, maybe two, but he’s big as a dinner plate and the announcer says - and this is where I come in because I got the same unbiased perspective – this frog he comes out of the mud and the announcer says he has two objectives in life: to feed and to breed.”

As the bartender returned to the beer drinking patrons with their change, Colin nodded toward Kurt whose eyes blinked in agreement.

Suddenly silent, Colin scrambled down the side of his bar stool, hand over hand mountain climbing backwards as if on metal pitons. When he hit the floor he marched to the end of the foot rail where he slipped under the hinged overhead door without ducking.

The bartender had moved to the far end, but spotted Colin immediately. “You can’t be back here, buddy,” the man said approaching menacingly toward Colin.

“I certainly can and I am and we’re going to have a little chat, you and me.”

The man closed the distance rapidly. His concern showed on his face although he still had the tough guy attitude. “Yah, well not with you I won’t be havin’ no talk until you get back the other side where customers belong.”

“You’re cheating the till,” Colin said calmly. He stood his ground, hands on hips, in front of the bartender who now towered over him. “They bought three beers. You rang up two in the till, gave them the correct change for three and at the end of your shift you’ll pocket all those missed drink charges. Your boss hired us to catch you in the act is what I’m doing here. You’re fired.”

Rage formed on the man’s features as this information sank in and he lifted a foot to step on Colin who took a pace backward before he could be squashed by the 14E lumberjack boots.

The leg started its downward arc. Colin grabbed the shoe as if it were a pendulum and with a twirl reminiscent of a dance move, swept it away. The man’s body twisted between bourbon bottles and beer kegs. His leg cracked against the steel handle of a back bar refrigerator. He fell to the floor and grabbed his shin and shouted with an ear splitting howl that silenced all the patrons in the place.

“You broke my leg!”

Colin was nonplussed. "I did no such thing. You did. I maybe provoked it a little and maybe you broke the skin, but it didn't cut and it sure didn't go deep as to hit the bone. Now get the hell up and collect your things and get the hell out of here."

Instead of taking this masterly advice, the big man rose to his knees, clenched his hand and took a straight shot with a ham fist right that Colin easily ducked. The fist stopped in mid-air when it reached the limit of shoulder to knuckle extension. Colin moved in under the armpit and punched three quick jabs.

The arm fell as dead weight. The bartender became more enraged. Shirley screamed an exhale cry and turned toward Kurt.

"Aren't you going to do something?"

"Like what?" Kurt's response was incredulity at her request.

"Get in there and stop this!"

"It's a confined space," Kurt said reasonably. "I'd only get in the way."

"Help him!" Shirley's response was insistent.

"Why would I want to help the bartender?"

Kurt leaned in over the bar to get a better view. Colin moved to the right in order to avoid the remaining fist as it moved futilely toward him almost in slow motion.

Colin began a taunting patter as he rapid fire punched the man's nose which began to bleed. "Do something anatomically impossible for me!" Punch, retreat, move in again, punch. "Make your dick touch your asshole and go fuck yourself!" Punch, retreat, punch.

The man stopped throwing his fist and knelt there with tears and blood streaming down his face. With one hand he attempted to cover his eyes defensively; he could not move his dead arm. "Stop! Stop! I'll go. Just stop hitting me."

Colin took him at his word. He dropped his offensive posture, turned and left the back bar just as he had entered.

Kurt got off his stool, walked calmly to the transom at the end of the bar, lifted it to allow the former bartender to exit and entered the sanctum of alcohol dispensing where he assumed a casual air in front of Shirley and Margaret.

“Ladies care for a refresher? On the house.”

* * *

The elevator doors opened on a window filled foyer. Ten feet inside an entry guarded by a young receptionist wearing mouthpiece headphones and glasses, Colin stopped and looked up.

“Mind if I use the head?”

Woman appeared quizzical. “Head? What’s a head?”

“Nautical term, lady. Toilet. You got a toilet?”

“Of course we have a toilet which is not available to the public,”

Colin began shifting his weight from foot to foot. “Look, either I get a throne to sit on or you’re going to have to call a janitorial emergency.”

Kurt kept his distance, even took a pace back acting as if he did not know Colin, it was mere coincidence they rode the same elevator.

The receptionist appeared to reconsider her last statement. However, she still demurred. “I need to ask Mister Dougherty.”

Colin said, “Listen lady, I really gotta take a shit.”

This statement affected her demeanor which reflected shock or surprise or both as she indignantly replied, “Well, if you put it that way.”

“Now lady! It’s crowning.”

“Oh, all right,” she presented him with a key attached to a tiny plastic poodle by a short chain. A buzz sound indicated the glass entry was available to open. She said, “Down that hall, last door on the left.”

As he moved through the hallway, Colin reached in his pocket and removed a small metal box meant to hide a key, but which now held wax. He impressed the bathroom key into the wax leaving an easily duplicable form mold. Once inside the bathroom, he fished a small round object from his other pocket and mashed it into the underside of the wash basin where it stuck.

He entered a stall, latched the door and sat without raising the seat. He dangled his legs for what he thought might be an appropriate time, stood and flushed. Then he washed his hands.

Upon his return, Kurt was in idle conversation with the girl. He turned toward Colin and asked, “How’d it go?” anticipating a wink or facial expression indicating a successful plant.

“Big as a burrito,” Colin said and the girl flinched at the thought.

Colin looked up at the receptionist and handed her the key.

“I’m a writer,” he said convincingly although this was an outrageous lie. He might bring himself to sit on a toilet, but could not sit long enough in front of a keyboard to peck out a single line of type. “That’s my publisher,” he pointed at Kurt. “Right now I’m doing a piece called ‘The Workings of the Urinary Tract’ or ‘How Doth He Pee.’ It’s a murder mystery. And it’s funny. A comedy murder mystery set in the Sixteenth Century about potty training.”

The receptionist maintained her cool. “Why are you here? This is a law office specializing in ecological and environmental law.”

Kurt did an extended surprised look with eyes popping open and mouth dropping. He looked at the receptionist in wonder, turned his gaze down toward Colin and said, “Ooooooppppsss. We’re in the wrong place. Let’s get outta heah.”

The two receded to the elevators behind them, punched a button and waited until a car arrived. Colin doffed his hat at the receptionist as the doors closed and stuck in an earbud.

It was a ten floor ride down and for the first two or three they were alone in the compartment. Kurt said, “How’s it working?”

Colin grimaced. “All too well. I heard someone fart.” He tapped the earpiece in mock repair. “I got a look around on the way to the gent’s. After the receptionist, I passed Lardner’s office on the right of the hall, Hennessy on the left. If what Mallory said is true, they meet regularly in the shitter to pow-wow. I’m just glad this thing is voice activated and being recorded. Otherwise I’d have to listen to the urinals flush all day.”

“You saying a fart sounds like a voice?”

Colin disregarded the question. “Who ya think this guy Dougherty is she mentioned?”

“Gotta be her direct supervisor. If so, he’s just office personnel and can’t be important to our investigation.”

“Is the task force ready for a take down?”

“That’s the plan Stan.”

“I wish you wouldn’t call me that, Frank.”

The elevator opened and they exited onto Market Street which was a zoo. Panhandlers lined both sides of the entrance to the building; a drummer who used found objects and jugs filled with water as his trap set made noise on the other side of the sidewalk; a crazy person sang a chant in praise of Jesus while shoppers and business types threaded their way past these obstacles in a never ending river of humanity.

Colin said, “All religions are different. All religions are the same. No religion is correct, that’s what I think.”

Kurt silently steered Colin toward the entrance to the Fourth Street garage.

Colin buckled into his passenger seat and said, “My favorite religious concept was given to me by my old friend Jon Exworthy. He said your soul is like a Frisbee. Throughout life it gets tossed from place to place and then, at the end, it goes up on the roof and nobody can get it down.”

Paying attention to the road, Kurt refused to respond to this remark.

Despite the silence that ensued, Colin made a shushing sound and moved his hand in a downward motion. “Quiet. I hear them now. Certain it’s our guys. Something about a National Priorities List. Can’t tell if they’re talking business or pleasure. I’ll go over it closer when we’re back in the office.”

* * *

“Ever wonder how come we say ‘take a shit’ instead of ‘leave a shit’?”

Colin and Sam were on high round black pleather stools watching a pool game in progress. Sam sat chin in palm, elbow in lap, body bent in resignation watching the never ending show. Two women who did not know how to shoot were aimlessly knocking balls around. It wasn’t clear they were playing by any rules.

Sam said, “You don’t really expect an answer, do you?”

“Well, they’re taking a dump on the table,” Colin opined. “The only balls they sink are by accident.”

A few more minutes elapsed before it became obvious the women had no intention of concluding the game. They paid their dollar, they would get full value. Instead of shooting quickly, between shots they went to their respective set of friends where they joked and talked and took a sip and eventually wandered back long after their turn had come.

No one else could start a new game until this one was finished. Talking and drinking from a pint glass, the fat girl glanced toward the table on occasion making sure no one took the initiative to drop coins in the slot and gather the remaining balls.

On the sideline, Sam tried to make eye contact with the fat girl, but it was no use. She paid no attention to him, simply continued yakking.

He turned to Colin and said, “Hey, you won a goolie chit at the New Year’s eve party at the bar. A drink tab worth \$50.”

“So I did. So I did.”

“Wow,” Sam said. “A whole day’s worth of drinking.”

“Yah, right Sam. Me, I thought it might be good for a beer a day every other day which would work out to maybe two, three weeks. Alternatively, yah. I can see it would be good for one day of drinking: eight shots and a beer.”

The fat girl and her opponent stood next to a booth occupied by several women sitting around a table some ten feet distant from the game in progress. The fat girl had a drink in one hand, her upright pool cue butt to the floor in the other. She threw her head

back and laughed, took a sip. Her opponent was equally intent on another conversation and in no hurry to tell the fat girl it was time for her to play. When the fat girl finally came over to the pool table, she turned and asked over her shoulder, “What color am I?”

“You stripes,” Sam said laconically.

She looked at him like he was a turd floating in her personal space. Then she leaned over the table to take an incredibly stupid shot, a ball that had no chance of sinking, which caused her pendulous breasts to fall out of the top of her shirt toward Sam who averted his eyes.

Kurt ambled up carrying two beers. He handed one to Colin, set the other with a napkin on top in an alcove in the wall and wrote his name on the chalk board. He took the barstool next to Sam who, by now, had his nose buried in an app on his smart phone. Within seconds Kurt was aware of the evolving tension between Sam, who wanted to play a pool game, and the girls, who could care less that others were waiting.

Sam was next on the list, Kurt sixth.

Kurt’s phone rang. He fished it out of his pocket. The caller I D said it was an old college roommate who moved to Chicago. If it was ten o’clock here, it must be midnight there.

“Hey, Bob,” Kurt said.

“No. This is Lex, Bob’s girlfriend,” a female voice responded. “We’ve been in bed the last 24 hours and had marathon sex and he said he likes it when I call his friend on the West Coast and tell him what kind of sex we’ve been having.”

“That’s why you’re calling me?”

“Yes. He’s curled up in bed and can hear me. Says it makes him get aroused and . . . Oh. Guess what? I think he’s right. I gotta go. He wants me to suck him again. Goodbye.”

Kurt put the phone away unsure whether he should feel angry, annoyed or amused.

Three new guys carrying beers meandered over to stand near the sign-up board. They sipped and watched for a moment as nothing happened. The fat girl and her opponent were yards away and appeared to have nothing to do with the layout of the balls on the table. The three guys talked between themselves, but did not write their names on the board.

Kurt was not going to personally interfere. He got up and walked to the front of the bar and indicated to Damen who stood behind the bar drying clean shot glasses he wished to talk. Damen leaned in and Kurt explained how two girls were hogging the pool table, not really interested in the game, would Damen please ask them to hurry along?

“They’re patrons. They have just as much right to play as you. If you don’t like how they’re playing, that’s up to you to say something. Otherwise, get over it.”

“You want me to get over it, I’m over it,” Kurt said and walked back and took a seat on the stool the other side of Sam.

Nothing had changed in Kurt’s absence. Both girls were still laughing with their friends in the booth and paid no attention to the few balls left on the green felt. The skinny girl answered her phone and began talking in earnest. The fat girl gulped her beer, started pouring another from the half empty pitcher on the table.

It was clear to Kurt the three guys were thinking about shooting a game and had pretty much decided the balls on the table were abandoned. One of the newcomers

approached and, as he began to reach for a ball, Sam looked up from his phone, started to say something cautionary, but Kurt interrupted.

“Let them do it. They have no idea what they’re getting into, but better them than us. Follow me, Sam?”

Sam nodded, said nothing as the fellow plucked a ball off the table preparatory to dropping coins in the slot. He gathered a second ball and the fat girl shouted across the room, “What the fuck are you doing asshole?”

The insult went unacknowledged as the young man replied, “We just wanted to shoot some pool. We thought no one was here.”

Outrage flowed from the fat girl who would have spewed smoke from her nostrils if this were a cartoon, Kurt thought. But this was no cartoon and as a real life drama it could turn out well. Or not.

She became an enraged bull. She approached the table calling the surprised fellow a “misogynist motherfucker think you can push girls around and take their game away you fucking . . .”

She turned the pool cue around, took it by the ferrule end with both hands and raised the butt like a baseball bat as she moved toward the guy who was clearly intimidated. He dropped back with a protective arm raised. It looked as if she was intent on cracking him with a blow to his rib cage or head.

Kurt realized what was happening just as the cue began its arc. He grabbed his right thigh in his right hand, the lower part of his right leg in his left, and swing his running shoe covered foot up directly in the path of the swing. Before the cue connected with the

object of the fat girl's wrath, the end of the shaft collided with Kurt's ankle. There was a dull sound of wood striking metal and the stick halted in mid-swing.

The tip held steady in the air against the ankle for at least a second. The force from the strike caused a quiver to flow up the shaft which must have felt to the fat girl like an electrified wire because her hands sprang open and the cue clattered to the floor.

"You! Fat fuck! Out. You're 86'd. Get the hell out of here and don't ever come back," Damen shouted from the near end of the bar and pointed an accusatory finger.

His attention had been brought to focus on the situation as soon as the fat girl began her insult rampage. Fortunately, Damen saw most of what transpired and did not have any reason to indict any of the other patrons.

Several seconds of quiet followed the fat girl's departure. Kurt looked at the three newcomers, pointed at the chalk board and said, "Put your names on the list if you want to play."

They recovered a degree of composure. One asked, "Is there a list?" He turned to where Kurt pointed behind his head. "Oh. We're just getting it all wrong, aren't we?"

Kurt said, "Sam's up. Play the skinny girl, Sam, and make it quick. I'm next."

No one seemed to notice the amazing quality of reserve in Kurt's voice and none asked how he had done what he did with his leg.

Colin lifted his glass and clinked with Kurt. "By the way, I got it. No need to go back. And I burned the bug remotely so even if they find it, it can't be linked to us."

Kurt removed his ear buds. "What'd you get?"

“We got game. The password. Found it on the recording. We’re talking a high stakes poker game this Saturday. A ring game with a ten thousand dollar buy in, one winner. Pot should come in around \$200,000.”

“What’s the good word?”

“Archangel.”

“I’d of gone with Operation Barbarossa. But, hey, I read 20th Century history. Did you get the time and place?”

“Sure did.” Colin told him. Then added, “It’s great we get a piece of the take. But I’d do this just for shits and giggles.”

* * *

The house was a beautiful example of Victorian architecture situated on a triple lot on a hill with an indoor swimming pool in Saint Francis Wood.

Kurt went to the front door alone while Colin waited in the car. Light from the inside silhouetted Kurt as the door opened and he crossed the threshold. Password must have worked.

Colin waited until another car pulled up, parked and two men got out of a late model Mercedes. They were not particularly well dressed and, compared to Colin’s own tailor made outfit, a richly woven three piece suit with a diamond stud tie-tack as big as the rock on a Florida widow’s hand, put him in sartorial splendor by comparison.

Colin followed them at a distance up the stone steps and waited patiently while they were vetted. He gave his name and the password. In a class by himself, neither the two he followed nor the man who answered the door thought anything other than this guy

belongs here. The man at the door was too startled by the brazen little man's confidence to challenge the assumption he might not be acquainted with the two who preceded him.

Colin recognized the man at the door from pictures of partners on the McMillion law site.

"C'mon in then," and Colin was led into a spacious living room where he quickly counted sixteen players seated around a long green felt covered table that had no corners.

Kurt was seated on the other side at one of the round edges. Colin was directed to a chair which he pulled back from the table. Before he clambered up he asked the host, "You got a dictionary I could sit on?"

After a brief departure into what Colin took to be the library, the home owner returned with a copy of "The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire."

He asked, "This big enough for ya?"

Colin smiled approval and boarded the chair. As if doing the gentlemanly thing, their host pushed it in far enough for Colin to reach his cards and chips on the table top, then took a seat at the head.

"We all set? I'm Dealer."

Colin said, "Is that your name or your profession?"

"Name's George. Game's Texas Hold 'Em. We pass the deal with this button."

George made a show of the small object which was a real black button clipped from a suit jacket. He placed the button on top of the deck which lay on the table in front of him.

"Now for the buy-in. Everyone brought cash? Good. No checks or credit cards."

Colin reached in his breast pocket and produced a wad. He counted out ten piles of one hundred dollar bills and placed them in front of him on the felt. George looked at

each player clockwise around the table asking them to introduce themselves and give him their money. This was counted and exchanged for stacks of colored chips ranging in denomination from five dollars to one hundred.

It got around to a guy named Andrew who said, "I'd like to play, but I'm just no good at cards." Still, Andrew pulled cash from his pockets and bought in anyway. Ten thousand dollars worth of chips were placed in front of him.

When everyone had paid, George said, "This is a limit hold 'em game with a twenty dollar small blind that increases by half in succeeding hands. Three rounds of betting: on the deal, on the flop, on the river. Each bet has to meet or exceed the big blind. No limit pot except for all in. Any questions?"

By the fourth hand, Andrew's prophecy was proved correct. He was first all in, and first all out.

Kurt said he wanted to take a bathroom break, stood and left the table. He followed Andrew who wandered into the kitchen. Kurt watched the man pour a glass of red from a nearly empty bottle on the drink counter, examined the glass to determine how little there was and picked up a bottle of white. Andrew mixed the two.

Clonking the glass on the marble counter top after nearly draining it, Andrew launched into a monologue "I don't cook. I figured everybody else knew how to cook better than me, so why try? Soup! I've always wanted to know how to make soup. It just sounds so hard. I could never do it. Yes, I wanted to become a fireman, but I know how hard that is. So I studied law. No, I never did figure out how to change a tire. It's just beyond me. The whole concept of jacking it up. Lug nuts. The new tire."

Back at the game, one of the players looked across the table at Colin and said, “You a Danny DeVito impersonator?”

“Careful there Bud. I’m in a protected class.” Colin turned to the person to his right who had just bet. “See your fifty, bump you one fifty.” Colin tossed two one hundred dollar chips in the pot.

“So what law firm did you say you’re with?”

“Didn’t say.”

To his left, one of the two women in the game threw chips in and said, “Raise you two. What firm you with?”

George said, “That’s four fifty to you McAlinn. See it or drop.”

McAlin saw it.

Colin said, “Marshal, Dylan and Chester.”

The player to his left said, “That has an awfully familiar ring, but I can’t quite place it.”

The doorbell rang and Kurt said brightly, “I’ll get it.”

No one at the table paid much attention until a booming voice was heard: “Sheriff’s office. May we come in?”

The current dealer stopped moving with the deck in one hand, a card about to be dealt in the other.

George shouted, “No! You cannot!”

Kurt was heard to say, “Why of course you may, officers. Right this way.”

A dozen men dressed in black wearing tactical riot gear and holding automatic weapons moved with precision into the living room with Kurt following.

Bullet proof vests surrounded the players who remained seated. Each newcomer held a weapon except the one Kurt stood behind. He held papers and wore a helmet that looked like a construction worker's hard hat.

The leader had a big smile and was extremely solicitous as he said, "Please remain calm. By the power vested in me by the State of California and Penal Code 330, this is an interdiction. I hereby order you to turn over the combined illegal contraband and sign these waivers for release of said contraband."

He reinforced his words by motioning Hard Hat to show the sheaf of papers. Blank stares greeted these statements.

George had the temerity to say, "You can't do this to us! We're lawyers!"

Big Smile beamed with pride and replied, "Ain't payback a bitch?"

Hard Hat nodded and added, "A attorney who don't know the law. I love it."

"This is illegal! It's a violation of the right to due process."

"Tell me something I don't know!"

Hard Hat answered, "We don't know Beethoven's birth date. We know when he was baptized, but not his exact date of birth."

Big Smile and Hard Hat slapped high fives at the top of which Big Smile said, "That dude got fracked!"

"I mean, this is just a friendly game of poker," George insisted. "No money on the table, no gambling. You can't arrest us for gambling."

Big Smile grew even more pleased with himself. "That's the beauty of it. The good news," Big Smile said, "is none of you are going to be arrested. The equally good news and maybe not so good news for you, is we get to take your pot as an asset forfeiture."

“I’ve heard of that,” Andrew said. “But that’s for drug kingpins and money laundering operations, not a crummy game of poker.”

A grumble of agreement went around the table.

“Breach of fourth and fourteenth amendment rights!” Someone shouted.

“Can’t do that,” Andrew said.

“Careful,” Hard Hat said. “Or we’ll impound your auto-mo-biles too. Then you’ll have to pay, what’s it? Two grand to get ’em back.”

“Shut your mouth, Andrew,” the man who drove the Mercedes said.

Big Smile: “You know they say Missouri is the show me state? Well, I’m from California which is the I don’t give a shit state.”

This was followed by loud protests.

Big Smile waited for silence to return. He said, “This is all being done above board. We were greeted at the door by an inhabitant of the premises. We identified ourselves as officers of the law. We asked if we could enter and you see the result.”

“It’s a money grab, pure and simple,” said George.

One of the card players asked Kurt, who had not been told to join the ranks of the ensnared, “How come you look so smug?”

“Me? Smug. Nossir. I’m happy as a pig in shit. That’s all.”

“And why would that be?”

“Cuz he gets a piece of this action,” Big Smile said. “Think of him as a Blackwater executive. He provides support for the boys in uniform, black uniforms in this case, and he gets twenty-five percent of the take.”

George said, “Take? A percentage of the take!?! That’s larceny.”

“Not exactly. Doesn’t fit the definition because this is quite legal. It’s a civil asset forfeiture operation, as opposed to criminal asset forfeiture. You ain’t going to jail. We simply want your cash and in return we cut you loose. How’s that sound?”

The card players were told to stand, then line up on one side of the card table. As other members of the sheriff’s crew snapped camera phone pictures, Big Smile held up his cell, put it in record mode and asked, “Awright. What’s yer name?”

The first attorney said, “John Doe.”

Big Smile glared, but before he could respond, the next attorney in line, a woman, volunteered, “Jane Doe.”

Big Smile looked at a third man and said, “Don’t tell me. Dill Doe.”

The players were looking mostly angry. An armed contingent of police did not intimidate any of them.

Big Smile turned to the other woman in the room and said, “What are you doing here Helen?”

“Why do you ask? Don’t you think a woman can play poker?”

“That’s not what I’m driving at. What I’m asking is why my wife is in a high stakes poker game and she didn’t invite me.”

“I did invite you when I heard about it. But you said you were working that night. Remember?”

* * *

The rest of the night was suddenly free for Colin and Kurt who decided to call the girls for a night out.

Maggie and Shirley were staying on Lombard in one of the many motels that catered to tourists and out of towners in town for a weekend. Their original plan was two days sightseeing, but that was before the girls met the guys.

Cash money from their share of the interdiction burned a hole in their pockets. Kurt called Sergio and ordered his limousine for the night. As the girls got into the back of the stretch, Colin rolled up his sleeve to display his latest tattoo.

It was a one inch high buffalo.

“You know the difference between a bison and a buffalo? Strictly speaking, American buffalo are bison. The true buffalo is either Asian or the Water Buffalo. Scientifically speaking, a bison is not a buffalo.”

Kurt told Shirley, “If I felt half as good as you look . . .”

Sergio asked where to and when he learned they wanted dinner, a piano bar and dancing, recommended the Club Foot which was in Dogpatch and open late.

Colin had found time to change into a red shirt and black tie, a black coat and pants with a hat to match. His outfit can best be described as lounge lizard.

“You going to sing?” Maggie asked Colin breathlessly.

“No, but I’ll make you sing later tonight.”

Kurt’s phone insisted he answer. Again, the ID said Bob from Chicago, but Kurt was not going to be fooled a second time.

“Who’s this?” He asked.

“Smeee. Bob. Who’d ya think it was callin’ yer private number, Kurto.”

“Yah, well last time it was a girl you gave the phone to.”

“I didn’t give it to her. She took it.”

“Anyone I know?”

“Naw. I’m banging one of my sister’s friends.”

“Well, whatever. She led me to believe she wanted to have phone sex, then hung up on me.

“Ain’t that the truth,” Bob said. “I always have to teach a new girl the Kewpie Doll position.”

“Do not elaborate,” Kurt had a strong note of caution in his voice.

Shirley overhearing turned to Maggie and said, “Do you know what’s the Kewpie Doll position?”

Maggie shook her head no.

Shirley said, “Maybe I’ll get to learn it later tonight.”

And she did.

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