



Decisions

He was a large, black man. About six feet two, big shoulders, handsome, with penetrating eyes, not aggressive, but perceptive. They seemed to be judging whether I held an attitude toward him. His white wife followed him through the door of the Big Sur Pub, where I tended bar, carrying their beautiful, beige daughter in her arms. They took the table to the right of the doorway, the one nearest the fireplace, and he picked up menus and, seeing our board on the wall, asked me if we had any darts.

I showed him the magnificent ones with the English flag feathers.

“These belong to the manager,” I said. “Our house darts are all broken. He gave me explicit instructions not to let anyone use these. Be careful, will you?” I asked as I handed them to him. He smiled.

“Sure.”

He played darts alone while his wife tried to cheer up their little girl. She seemed out of sorts at first, but under her mother’s persistent touch, she opened up and soon was

laughing. He said they would order in a few minutes.

The five Hispanic bikers in their black, leather, riding gear ambled in about two minutes later. The black guy glanced over at them and they looked back without any overt mutual communication. The first biker was at least six feet four inches, and looked like he'd be a tough basketball player. The others were smaller, but in their black pants and jackets looked mean enough. The bar air didn't register any contentious vibrations, and the black guy went on with his darts. The five bikers continued a conversation they had brought in with them after getting off their black Harleys out in the parking lot. Everybody settled in quietly among the vague background sounds of the TV playing in the corner.

The dappled, old, pink-skinned couple did not enter as much as they materialized. Nothing particularly distinguished them except the age marks on their faces and hands. He was in his eighties. She too. They did not look around but kept that self-centered control that comes so naturally to older people. They were at home inside their own skin. They picked up the menu and looked at it intensely together for a long time, literally at least five minutes. It was as if they had to study every single word, perhaps every letter of the alphabet, to decide if they wanted to stay and eat.

Something in the menu finally appealed to them. They discussed it in more detail. I couldn't hear their words, but they must have speculated on the nuances of the Taquitos, or the potential richness of the Enchiladas. They conferred upon the Cheeseburger, perhaps, whether to have Coke or diet Coke or lemonade or root beer, I suppose. They seemed to make up their minds and together raised their heads to identify seats.

Then they saw the black and his family and the Latino bikers.

Fear oozed from them like water from a reservoir whose gates have been slightly opened. They whispered into the menu as if it were a hymnal. Their eyes darted. Their lips fluttered. They did not leave the bar so much as they dematerialized, quietly, softly, as if they had never been there. I looked over at the black and the bikers. They had not even noticed the old couple had been in the room with them.

Walking up to the black's table, I nodded over at the bikers to indicate I would be with them shortly. They smiled their acknowledgement and continued their talk.

“What’ll it be?” I asked.

“My wife would like a salad, and I think I’ll take a hamburger,” he said. “The little one will eat out of ours. And a couple of Cokes, please.”

“That it?”

“That’ll do it.”

“How’d you like the burger? Raw, medium, or fried to a crisp?”

“Medium rare possible?”

“We’ll give it a try.”

I walked into the darts’ physical pathway without any immediate danger, since the Black guy had given up his game of solitaire, aware that someday when I least expected it I would receive a sharp tang in the back of my neck indicating I’d been penetrated by one of the little spears. Would it be enough to kill me, I speculated? What was inside the back of a neck that could cause death? A major artery? Some obscure gland connected to a basic life support mechanism? A nerve that could unbalance one’s mind?

The cook studied the order as if it were a problem in nuclear physics.

“What’s the trouble?” I asked.

“Ah, shit, my wife is causing me pains. I think I’m going to leave her.”

“All right with me so long’s the burgers get cooked.”

“Damn women!”

“Indeed,” I said.

I poured the two Cokes from the automated liquid dispenser and delivered them to the black guy’s table. His daughter squealed in festive delight at the sight of the Coca Cola. His wife gently restrained her groping fingers.

“Hey, you guy’s able to keep it quiet?” one of the bikers barked.

The black turned his head toward the bikers and immediately stood up and walked over to them. He stood looking down at them with both his hands in his pockets. They all looked up at him and seemed surprised he had reacted so instantly to their outspoken one’s comment.

“You gonna say something?” the talkative biker said.

“You going to apologize?” the black guy said.

“You got a screw loose?” the biker answered.

“I don’t know. I’ll look if you don’t answer me.”

“Well, I’d look if I was you,” the biker said. “Cause I ain’t planning on answering no Black faggot with a half breed kid, you dig?”

“Gosh, sir,” the black said. “I didn’t mean to offend you. I’ll do that. I’ll look to see if I’ve got a loose screw.”

The biker glanced at his buddies, not showing if he was surprised at the sudden fear he figured the black guy was showing him, and then grinned a wide one that showed his gums. The grin evaporated as the black guy pulled a small automatic pistol from his pocket and pointed it neatly into the biker’s face.

“You see any loose screws in this?” the black asked.

The biker was speechless. The black guy cocked the hammer with his thumb.

“I asked you if you see any loose screws.”

The biker’s eyes dilated. From my position behind the bar I could see the pupils getting bigger. The rims of his eyelids seemed to pull back from the whites to give enough room to accommodate the pupils. The eyes’ owner’s hands rose up before his face and fluttered like they were trying to talk for him.

“Put your hands on the table, flat!”

The biker did so with a slap.

“Now, what we have here is not a failure to communicate,” the black guy said. “This ain’t Paul Newman in Cool Hand Luke. What we got is a dumb ass Hispanic biker who hasn’t ever run into an educated black man who doesn’t like to be fucked with. What’s going to happen is this. You and your friends are going to get up, and I am going to escort you to your bikes, and you are riding into the setting sun. Do it! Now!”

The bikers rose in unison, like a choir singing. They quietly marched outside with the black closely following, and got on their bikes and started them. The roar of the machines filled the parking lot. After motioning them to hold still, the Black pulled a cell phone from his pocket and dialed three digits. It took about thirty seconds before he spoke again. I had walked up close beside him.

“Please connect me to an officer,” he said. “I have an emergency to report.”

The bikers didn’t move a muscle.

“Lieutenant. I’m Jonathon Barker. I’m at the Big Sur Pub and three big mean looking bikers have been threatening me and my wife. They’re riding North on Highway One, back toward Carmel. I’m a Captain of L. A. P. D. Could you try to intersect them and deliver a lecture about courtesy to other races? Three black Harley’s They’re all in black. One’s got red hair, one’s bald. The third one’s wearing yellow boots. Yeh. Appreciate it. My cell’s 310-Bad-Buck. Thanks. We’ll be here eating another thirty or forty-five minutes. No, I didn’t check ID’s. All right. I’ll tell ‘em.”

He hung up.

“Lieutenant says if you guys will ride quietly through Carmel and Monterey on toward San Jose or San Francisco, he’ll stay in his office and finish his coffee. What you say?”

The three bikers nodded and waited for permission to leave. The black guy gave them the nod. As the black guy came back in with me to join his wife and daughter, he pulled his badge out and showed it to me.

“Sorry,” he said.

“No problem,” I said.

The two old people walked in then from the side door, the one off the hallway to the two bathrooms in the back.

“Hungry?” I asked.

“They gone?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, we are hungry.”

“You could of have eaten next door, you know,” I said.

“We know. But we kind of wanted to see what the little girl is like. She’s so cute.”

“Well, sit down,” I said. “And we’ll all see how it plays out.”

She ordered a Chicken Taquito and he an Enchilada. They both got a Corona with lime.

“What’s her name?” the old woman asked.

“Margarita,” said the Black guy’s wife.

“What a pretty name.”

The black guy and his wife and the old couple had a nice time playing with the

little girl and eating and with me refilling their glasses with Coke and beer. I'd never served a black guy with a white wife and their kid having fun with two old white people before. It was a unique experience, I guess you would call it. And the bikers didn't come back, although I hadn't expected them.

Everybody left nice tips too.