

THE SMALL TORPOR

by

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I should have been in Paris on the trail of that high class conductor with the diamond baton. Instead I was still here in Muscatine, and out of a job. I'd lost it on account of illness: my boss had gotten sick of me. It was too early to have dinner, so I drove over to this little popcorn joint I knew, knew too well. A waitress came over. Her large bloodshot eye matched the checked tablecloth.

"What'll it be, big boy?"

"One popcorn, straight up, no butter."

The place was filled to overflowing, filled with people who looked like nothing in particular and didn't know it yet. The guy next to me wanted to talk.

"I hear you're out of a job, Gumshoe."

He was a worn-out intellectual with a cigarette cough and no money in the bank. So was I.

"Yeh, I'm out of a job." The waitress laid down the brown and yellow cardboard tub like it was a double whiskey and turned arrogantly back toward her steaming, popping machine. She had a good body for a cyclops.

The vagrant wearing gray skin and brown corduroy spoke again:

"You wanna work for someone ugly, mean, cheap, and stupid?"

I pondered for a moment, casually flicking an unpopped kernel of corn in the smoky air. "Sure."

"Milo Candini's dame ran out on him, and she stole his high school diplomas."

So it was Candini who was behind the Wichita Correspondence Course Caper.

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Candini and I couldn't seem to see eye-to-eye. He was cross-eyed, I realized.

"Gumshoe, for this job I want someone who is responsible."

"I'm your man. Everywhere I've worked, whenever something went wrong, I was responsible."

"Cut the guff, Gumshoe. I may have the mob behind me, but the dame who did this is backed by the International Harvester Combine. And I don't want her to get hurt."

I decided I'd better get sympathetic before Candini got vicious. It's not that I'm afraid of dying, but you've got to admit there's a lot of discrimination against the dead. I mean when did you last meet a dead guy who wasn't on the bread line?

"It's the old story, Candini. First she stole your heart; then she stole everything else. Is it LaGoon Rooney?"

"Yeh, it's LaGoon."

That was all the information I needed. I left Candini looking sad and thanking the man who made our fingers the exact measures of our nostrils.

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It was one of those hot September nights that we get out here in Muscatine, the kind of a night when the wind is coming down the river, but never gets there. Far away, on Broadway, the Limos are starting to run. It's the kind of a night when anything can happen. But nothing will. It's Muscatine. I got out of the Chevy, surveyed the low-budget shrubbery for false bushes, and went up to the door of the expensive ranch-style maison. A woman with sexy yellow fingers and eyes like bratwurst responded to my knock. I decided to adopt an indirect approach.

"Do you believe in free speech?" Would she recognize me before it was too late?

"Sure."

"Good. Let me use your telephone." Then she squinted, her long eyebrows and wide cheeks closing in ominously like the two sides of a frankfurter roll, but I stepped forward, pressing my demand.

"It's through the beaded curtain." She hesitated a moment. "But there's someone on it."

I walked into the plush velour foyer. There was someone on the phone. A woman's body lay on the floor covering the smooth black instrument, and the shiny cord coming out from under her belly led to a gun. From the polka-dot bloodstains on her dress I thought the dame had done her last waltz, but she was alive, and it was LaGoon! I don't like the smell of blood, so I emptied a handy decanter of Crême de Menthe over her softly clotting chemise. Then I dragged her out to the Dodge. I was

gentle. I tried to be considerate.

"You're blue, LaGoon. What's the story?"

"I don't know. Maybe I'm hungry."

"I'd like to invite you to dinner, but I hate slobs."

She began to revive.

"Then let me take you to my mother's house. She deserves a good laugh."

Home-cooking makes me sick, so we drove to some crazy little place where she knew the staff. The waiter dropped a whiskey in my lap. "The drinks are on me, eh LaGoon?"

I could tell something was up. There was a piece of boiled camel in my soup. But this was a vegetarian restaurant.

"Come on. What's the story, LaGoon?"

"I don't know. I'm not feeling well."

"Did something you eat disagree with you?" But I knew it wouldn't dare. Then I saw the waiter doing chin-ups on the salad bar, and I knew it was time to scram. There are never any witnesses in a little restaurant like that, so I put LaGoon into a cab, hopped into the Chrysler, and sped home.

* *

I relaxed in my apartment for a while by playing saxophone. Late in the evening there was a knock at the door. It was the platinum number from across the hall.

"If you don't stop playing that saxophone, I'll go crazy."

"It's too late. I stopped an hour ago." Then we got chummy.

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The next thing I knew the sound of sirens awakened me to the morning light. I remembered my neighbor who had complained about the noise. She had also borrowed a cup of poison. Well, it's better to have loved and lost, much better. Still, I was sorry. I was sorry I had spoken in anger to LaGoon. I was sorry I had spoken in spite. I was sorry I had spoken so quickly. I had thought of much worse things to say during the night. The police were in the hallway. There wasn't even time for a three-minute egg, a small one. I put on my shoes and left by the fire escape.

Crossing the parking lot toward the Plymouth, I stumbled over a young kid, dressed like a colonial drummer boy. I told him to beat it. He didn't cop my lingo, and started to bang his toy. The jerk was evidently a little politician, campaigning among the nobodies on their way to eight hours of nothing. He was wearing big "Elect Candini" buttons. There's more than one way to get at a punk. "Kid, you know Candini is the biggest crook in the state."

"Do you know who I am?" asked the brat. "I'm his son."

"Do you know who I am?" I asked sharply in return.

"No."

"Thank goodness." And I ran for the Mercury. That was

close. Someday I'm gonna write a book about kids, call it "The Care and Feeding of Monsters."

* *

So I went to the post office box they give on the correspondence course matchbooks. Soon a hand reached into it. I grabbed it. It belonged to a fruity looking bird.

"Don't you like me, Mister?"

She had a voice like a canary and a nose like one, too.

"I like you. Mother Nature didn't."

Suddenly she looked angry. "You must be the Gumshoe. You wanna sleep with me or the fishes?"

I really ^swasn't sure of the answer to that question. "At least once you sleep with the fishes, it doesn't matter whether they're mackerel or tuna."

"OK, Gumshoe, if you want to have a battle of wits, I'll throw mine away, so we can start even."

Dames. This one had the emotional maturity of a larva. Then, with trembling hands she reached into the post office box and removed a large high school diploma, still stiffly rolled and tied in a crimson ribbon, and she stuffed it into her cleavage. Suddenly she a pleading look. I wondered why. Had she failed to graduate?

"Please mister, would you lend me your car?"

"Sure, honey, borrow my car. Drive yourself crazy, not me."

So we went down to get the Pontiac. She got behind the wheel. I decided not to let her drive away without me and climbed in along side. After a while I could tell she was stalling.

"I think 30 miles per~~h~~our is the legal limit in a heavily populated zone," she mumbled.

"Yeh, it is. But we've been in the garage for ten minutes."

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When we finally got to the warehouse, there was a goon dressed in a gorilla suit driving a tractor towing a load of Wichita~~d~~iplomas down the alley. Candini was there too, desperately chasing the relentless caterpillar. Without warning a diploma came hurtling down and smashed him in the forehead, like a boomerang with an education. By the time we reached Candini, blood was trickling down into his now stained glass eye, and it was no use using Windex anymore. I don't believe in animal rights or human obligations, but I don't like someone drawing a mustache on my meal ticket, so I made a dash for the tractor, jumped up, and dragged the big ape down. I grabbed him by the wrist. I grabbed his arm. I twisted. Before he knew what had hit him, I was flat on my back. The gorilla had removed its mask. It was LaGoon.

"We'd make a lovely couple if it weren't for you, Gumshoe."

I guess I'm out of a job again.

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