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Water Works

Richard Pearce

The Water Works people came by the other day and gave me the notice. They're tearing my life down because after all not enough people been using it. Going to put up a high-rise fireplug instead.

I been on this corner 42 years, not counting a couple weekends off for the revolutions. Lately I been down to three or four steady customers, and even them, I had to mail free advice samples to keep them coming around.

The last half-dozen years I been using the stand to sell these advices from the big paper rolls they make in the West Side factories and truck over here. Plus a little aspirin, illegal or no. Got to make a living, right?

But lately the paper on the rolls been getting worse, harder to unroll without sticking, a couple layers at a time, so you ask for an advice and you get SMILE! YOUR FEET LOVE YOU but then underneath showing through DON'T TAKE DRUGS. TAKE NEWMAN TO CONGRESS. This gets distracting to my customers and I have to give out more aspirin, and a couple of times I got caught and the cops fined me. But mainly it's been a problem of no money coming in, and the Water Works is holding the lease. That's why the fireplug.

They say in the *News* it's going to go up to 800 feet. It'll be able to soak the whole East Side and downtown in case some kids light up molotov cocktails, or it can pinpoint a spray on one guy lighting up a cigarette eight blocks away. And it only has to be three foot diameter, which is roughly the size of my life, including also a little space in back for storage. Call it three by four, plus a couple inches overhang onto the sidewalk.

On the last night of business I called up my old customers but only one, Pearl, said she could make it. And even at that she was late, it was dark three hours before she showed up. Cold wind too, all the way from Chinatown.

"Too bad Leo. Bastards." She sat down on the overhang. "Got an aspirin?"

I reached under the change drawer and handed her one.

"You don't think that's dangerous? Keeping them where anybody can look?"

"Nah. Anyway what difference? They get my life tomorrow, so they wouldn't want to make any complications now."

“Bastards. If it was me I’d give *them* some complications. Why don’t you fight back?”

“I don’t feel like it.”

“Oh you’re a stick. I don’t know why I stayed married to you all these years. Look. You got to do something. Get out of this mood! You could unwind the advice rolls. Tie up traffic. Whatever.”

“What’s the point?”

“They deserve it, that’s the point. Water Works bastards. Forty years here, this one place, they could at least let you guard the fireplug.” She was waving her arms around, I think she could of been high from the aspirin.

“Let’s not argue. I just get depressed.”

“Well, you either do something to make me glad I married you or I get up and go right now.”

“Just hang on a minute.” I tried to think it over. Maybe she was right. I took a couple aspirin.

So the upshot was, I hauled out the biggest roll. Ten foot diameter, I had to keep it at the parking lot next door. We started pushing and unrolling it down Lafayette, past Canal on Centre, all the way down to Chinatown. They were having this big dragon parade, all these Chinese ducking and bobbing under these long cloth dragons, and I got to worrying there might be trouble, us unrolling our advices in English and them selling theirs in Chinese every third or fourth shop. I says to Pearl “Let’s get out. Come on and help me roll it back up.”

“Nuts to you if you’re going to buckle under. I’m staying right here for the dragon stuff.” And she walked away.

But I got nervous so I started rolling it back up but it was too loose and already filthy from dogs and people’s footprints, and the traffic was coming up behind me once I got it onto Baxter, honking and nearly running me down. I just managed to give it a shove over to the curb.

Just when I was leaning on what was left of it, a team of Chinese came by and one of them ducked out from under their dragon and heaved a lit firecracker onto the roll, and *Bang!* it started burning, so fast I had to jump out of the way. The roll was gone in a half a minute and then the flames started up the strip, and no high-rise fireplug near enough downtown to handle it.

So I started following the roll all the way up Lafayette, right to where my life was. I walked fast and got a little ways ahead of it. I figured, since it was my roll the least I could do was be there to meet it.

When I got there the Water Works people had already put this big CON-DEM-NED sign up and thrown all my stuff out onto the curb—change box, papers, the works. There was a cop inside guarding it and watching his portable tv, and I figured they must of found the aspirin and then he turned around and saw me, and that was the ball game. I went on over with my hands up. The least I could do was wait for the wreckers in the morning.