

The Runt

Sharon Sperry

THE SKY was very dark with pink patches of clouds the day Peterson bought a cup of coffee at the corner store by the bus stop. He flung an umbrella and a brown derby on the stool at the end of the counter and hopped up onto the next stool. The morning newspaper sprawled on the counter top and he scanned the pages of print to find the want ads. A South American revolution splashed the front page. Beneath it was a boxed-in traffic accident. He thumbed quickly to the entertainment pages and noted with satisfaction that the opera was being held over another weekend.

A greasy-faced waitress took his order and the order of the woman next to him. Peterson glanced sideways and saw a mountain of bubbling flesh. A tiny warted face lolled above a pillow of chins. She, in turn, looked down on Peterson.

"Something wrong with you?"

"I beg your pardon."

"I ain't too sure I like that."

"Madam?"

"I said I ain't too sure I like that."

"What?"

"I ain't never had to be pardoned for nothing."

"Oh, no . . . that's a figure of speech. It . . ."

"Don't say nothing about my figure neither. It ain't all so bad ya gotta talk that way."

"But it had nothing to do with . . ."

"Godamighty, if you'd carried six kids you wouldn't look so hot neither. I wasn't always like this ya know. I had a right good set of legs, I did."

"I'm sure. Now if you'll excuse me. I'll . . ."

"Oh, go on. Just no gentlemen left in this world. I can't even talk to no one no more. Just go on, you little runt."

Peterson drew himself up to full height, jumped from the stool and glared at her over the expanse of her left hip.

"Madam, you should watch your tongue. That was most ungracious."

"Lordy, but you do talk good. Ungrashoes? Was that what ya said? Hermie! Come here. Look here at this little fellow. Why he know more words than you 'n me put together."

Heads craned around papers and eyes peeked from behind wall booths. Peterson lifted his umbrella off the stool, placed his brown derby over his balding crown, and turned on his heel. Hermie was lumbering up the aisle and Peterson met him in front of the cigarette vending machine.

"Where ya goin', huh?"

"Let me pass."

"Gracie, what'd he do? Should I mash him?"

Peterson slipped beneath Hermie's outstretched arm and got two steps toward the cash register before a burly grasp of his shoulder jerked him back.

"You ain't goin' nowhere. Now what's this, anyway?"

Peterson laid the umbrella on an empty booth seat, placed his own hand on top of Hermie's and spun around. Hermie, his feet churning, sailed backside first into the booth. Peterson picked up his umbrella, flipped a coin toward the open-mouthed proprietor and strode out.

The bus rolled to a hissing stop and a mob of elbows swarmed toward the open door. Peterson, in the midst of the Eastside commuter trade, felt himself swept up off the ground and onto the bus platform. He eyed a huge grinning face over his shoulder.

"Thought you'd get mashed down here."

"Thank you. I could have managed quite well."

"Aw, it's just that you little fellows need help sometimes. I had a brother about your size. He was never too good at anything."

The crowd shoved, and Peterson sought the edge of a corner seat. He opened the paper he'd carried beneath his arm and searched the want ads a third time.

Moment of Glory

Russell L. Durbin

DEMAS could hear the rats scurrying about in a corner of the cell, and he thought, wryly, that Antonia was not particularly noted for its accommodations or pleasant company. He sat on a straw mat, his head against the cool stone wall, and listened to the regular breathing of Gestas. Amazing how a man could sleep so soundly only a few hours before he was to be executed. Was it that he was completely fearless, or simply a fool? Demas didn't know which; he only knew that he, Demas, the Greek, was very much afraid of what the morning light would bring. He had seen these Roman executions before and knew how slow and painful they could be. Would he whimper and cry and curse and beg and plead like he had seen others do? Or would he endure in silence?

"No," he thought. "No man can endure that kind of torture, that kind of pain, in silence."

Thoughts, emotions and memories whirled and eddied in the stream of his consciousness as he sought to grasp something solid and hold onto it. Strangely, there was nothing that did not slip and fade away—nothing except the hard reality of the prison walls around him, and the iron bars across the narrow window. The walls pressed in on him in the darkness until he felt as if he were suffocating. It seemed that a great band was pressing in on his chest, relentlessly squeezing the breath of life from him. Then, in a cool rational moment, he realized he was holding his breath. Demas