

# On a Tight June Afternoon

*Stephen Collins*

Me and Henry and just about everybody else used the trick. You see, you bring the brown paper bag up to the neck of the bottle just enough to hide what you had. Of course, this never fooled nobody, but at least it hid your brand. Me and Henry drank Muscatel. Others drank Thunderbird or Ripple, but we didn't much go in for that kind a crowd. Those Thunderbird bums lived up in Griffith Park under the Hollywood sign or around the observatory; they payed no rent and had the extra change for the smooth stuff. I heard that they'd catch stray dogs and have a regular party roasting them over their camp fires. Sometimes late at night from clear down on the city floor just beyond the foothills we could hear their laughter and yelps a joy echain' off the cavern walls from deep in the park. Me and Henry would just look at each other shakin' our heads.

The other trick was tryin' not to get too tight in the mornin' or you'd fall asleep at your bench and somebody'd go through your pockets. When Henry was alive, I didn't much worry because he gabbed all the time except when he was shakin' his head, and I could never fall asleep. A while back he crawled into his abandoned Impala on Kingsley with a quarter bottle a Musk; said his stomach was upset. Two weeks later the smell got so bad I finally called the cops. I didn't want to rat on him, but what could I do? Now I keep to myself mostly and nobody much pays attention to a white haired old drunk. That suits me fine, but I have to try extra hard to keep straight in the mornin'. Besides, if I slept all day I'd be up all night when there's nothin' to look at. I try to watch myself, but I just get so damn thirsty.

One late mornin', in the easy heat of early summer when the sun looked just like one a those strawberry daiquiris they serve over at "Little Steve's," I did get too tight though; that's when I needed somebody to talk to. The Ethical Drugs Store was stuck in the bottom floor of the six story San Marcos Apartment buildin', and my bus bench sat just in front of its orange wall under the "Herpes Cure — BHT" sign. White and grey laundry hung from all the open windows upstairs. I muttered to myself there watchin' all these people walkin' quickly by, steppin' over pigeon droppin's, givin' me these queer looks. Traffic snarled like a soft rain shower and my eyes kept fallin' shut and poppin' back open. He waddled over to me and got me completely by surprise. Normally I would have spit

at him or yelled at him or asked him nicely to go away, but like I say, I was too tight in the mornin' and I thought talkin' with him might keep me awake.

His arms stretched past his thighs, and he walked hunched over kind a bouncin' his head like a gorilla. He sat by me, reached out this mammoth sweaty hand, and rubbed an ear into one shoulder. I took his cold palm, before I could think otherwise, tryin' to see his bloodshot pupils through those thick horn-rimmed glasses. He pouted his lips and stared hard.

"My name's Wenard." He bobbed my hand up and down.

"What?"

"My name's Wenard."

"Wenard? Oh, Leonard, Leo. Thrilled to the hilt to meet you." He slurred his speech, but so did Henry. We got along; we spoke the same language. He kept bobblin' my hand up and down with his cold cucumber fingers; almost shook the sucker right off, but I pulled it away in time. Little balls a sweat made his glasses slip down to the point a his nose.

He was about twenty-eight, I guess, judgin' from the light red stubbly shadow that started on his chin and raced right up over the back a his head. He could pro'bly have done well in the third grade. So I felt a little superior to the idiot, moron, what's the word? Retarded? Yes, retard. Somethin'. We could be good for each other bein' that he could pro'bly keep the hoodlums away with his lobster hands. Henry would have liked him.

"I'm gonna see them ambuwinces today." He honked like a goose, a sort a sour whine. Then he pushed up his glasses with his first finger and pouted. "My mom said I could."

"Oh."

"My mom said if I took out the trash I could go." His forehead was thick above his eyebrows like a caveman. "They weally wike me there. All the dwivers say I'm good luck."

"What makes you think I care, Sonny?" I said.

"My mom said if . . ."

"What makes you think I care?"

"I don' know."

"Well, why you hangin' around then?" He didn't move. He just looked at me with his sad pink eyes, droopy cheeks and cauliflower ears. "Well, have a drink then." I stuck out my paper bottle.

"My mom says I'm no allowed."

"Your mother? Hell, does your mother tell you everythin'?" I kept on.

"I don' know."

"What do you know?"

"I don' know."

"Have a drink." He studied the bottle. "Go on." He tipped my Musk straight up in the air an took a huge gulp. "Hell with them 'ambowinces' or whatever you said, come with me. We got things

to do." I stumbled up and managed to balance myself on my feet; the retarded gorilla took another swallow, got up and followed about two steps behind. I stopped and waited. "Come on," I said, "I can't talk to you like this. Get up here." He waddled up next to me and we set out down the street.

I had it in my mind to make the rounds. Actually, to get to "Mr. Enchilada's Burrito Palace" would be plenty. Two blocks can be murder on the corns, you know, not to mention the hemorrhoids. We walked slow; I didn't want Leo to get lost.

The sidewalk was gettin' hot, burnin' my feet through the holes in my shoes. I did need some cardboard to stuff in them but settled for some balled up trash that made me limp. The cars passin' honked and blew out smog. All those faces with their copper eyes on fire seemed to look at me, then drive by. Behind those faces were dreams, a hundred of them, each one a piece of broken coal half burnin', half ash. Most just ended up a clump a white cinder.

"You ever have a dream, Leo?"

"A dream?" He thought about it for a second. "I'm gonna kiw the Mailman."

"Kill the Mailman? You mean one of those guys in the cute blue suits who spray mace on all the dogs? Those guys with the thin blue ties and slicked hair? Kill the Mailman? What he ever do to you?"

"He don' wike me. He won' bring my ambuwince magazines. He a bad man. My mom says so. She say she ordered it, he won' bring it. It's his fault. I'm gonna stwangle him." He laughed twistin' his hands together ringin' an imaginary neck. "First I'm gonna tie him up, then I'm gonna stwangle him." He twisted his beefy hands again.

"Nice dream," I said. "Dreams are good to have. I always wanted a dog." As we walked along, me limp in', him bouncin', cars kept honkin', and I could see people crossin' the street ahead gettin' off our stretch a sidewalk before we got to them. They were all goin' home, I guess.

"Where do you live, Red?" I said.

"Over dare." He pointed somewhere; I wasn't payin' attention. He started to giggle every now and then so I took my Musk back and took a little swig, just enough to wet my gums. The sun with one tiny cloud blockin' a corner of it looked like a half-eatin' apple; it made me hungry. That apple hit its peak in the sky shinin' in my eyes makin' them water. Nobody should have to be up that early in the afternoon.

"Why do you cwuy?" he said.

"I'm not cryin'."

"Yes," he honked at me.

"No," I said. "Yes. Maybe. I don't know." I wiped the sun from my eyes and the sweat from under my arms. "I live over there." I pointed down the block and looked in his face while he tried

uselessly to stuff his oversized hands into his pockets. He had Henry's eyes, drunk as a brewer's fart all droopy and flushed. "Mrs. Kingstead keeps me up; room and board for the price a my S.S. check."

"S.S. check?" His glasses slid down his nose.

"Yeah, Social Security, you know. All my money for a space with just enough room for me and maybe a dog. It's too much dough; anythin's too much for that war lord." He giggled and belched into his lobster hands. "Can't hardly buy a good bottle no more, or even a bad one; have to look for quarters on the ground. She won't let me have a dog; just a little one, I say. No pets, says she. Not good for me, not clean. Bitch. Afraid of a few fleas, the mutt. She pro'bly would get along well with a little beast."

"Kiw her," he said pushin' up his glasses bouncin' along side a me.

"Kill her? Never thought of that. No, no. Should fight her though; should show her what clean's all about." I scratched my head. I couldn't figure out why Kingstead didn't like me. She was just like me far as I could tell. She spitted and farted just like me, only she did it when my back was turned; I did it to say hello. "Just a little dog is all I want. Not much to ask."

"Then stwangle her and get one." He twisted his cucumber fingers out in front a him.

"And ruin a perfectly good dream, no chance. I spent too much time thinkin' about this one. Then what would I do?" A dog sounded nice, a little one to jump on my lap and lick my dirty face. I scratched my head. Yes, that's a good dream to have, a dog with half its tongue hangin' out a its mouth drippin' little drops a spit.

We were gettin' close to "Mr. Enchilada's."

"Ever eat here?" I said.

"My mom won' let me."

"Is your mom here?"

"No."

"Take another drink." I stuck out my paper bottle; he drank down two big gulps. "Whoa, save a drop for the old man." He giggled, reached over and scratched my head. "We'll eat here; it's on you."

"My mom onwy gave me five dowars."

"That's enough." I went up to the order window. The place was owned by a Chinese couple raised in Mexico. They spoke Spanish good, far as I could tell, but they spoke English with their tongues twisted like they didn't know if they was supposed to be Chinese or Mexican aliens.

"Is Mr. Enchilada here?" I said.

"No, Mista Enchilda not here," said the tiny Panda bear behind the counter. Her brown jelly bean eyes were stuck in a thick doughy yellow face. Greased black hair clumped atop her head pushed inside her ears and bunched in little tufts in her chin, framin' that face. I wanted to mold those puffy cheeks a dough,

squeeze them in my fists, then leave a thumb print. "You have money, Mista?" I showed her Leo's five, and she gave me a crooked smile with three black teeth and a whole lot a yellow ones. Her white shirt was grey as a rat's hide and had red and brown blotches and drip stains runnin' down the front. I liked her; we had the same tailor.

"What you order, man?" I ordered a taco burger, a bean and cheeze omelet, and chili fries then moved back to one a the two red, white and blue benches. Some Mexican woman and her little boy moved away from the bench just then leavin' me alone. She said somethin' in Spanish to the air with a hard look on her face, and the little boy was holdin' his nose. I was glad to get the table. A big cockroach with long brown whiskers ran out in front a me, stopped, looked around then shit on the table. It was such a pretty thing; I squashed it and flicked it away with my finger.

"What you order, boy?" Mrs. Enchilada pointed to Leo with a chewed pencil and bit-off eraser. He honked out his order, sound-ed somethin' like a tofu burrito, and his glasses slid to the tip a his nose. She had a good hard time tryin' to figure out what he was sayin'. Course, he didn't much know what she was sayin' either. He told her about his dreams ringin' his hands together, chokin' an imaginary neck. She looked pleased and showed him all her bad teeth.

We sat to eat while the place started to fill up. Leo's glasses were just about to fall off his face. "Here, let me get that before you hurt yourself," I said pushin' up his glasses for him.

"My mom won' let anyone touch my glasses. Says they'll get broked."

"Did I break them?"

"No."

"Well, there you go."

"Yeah," he said laughin', "There I go."

Most people huddled at the other end a the stand far away from us. They were mostly Mexican but some slants and blacks came. The place was always open, everyday, all day, and at least one a the Enchilada couple was always there behind the counter takin' orders. They took turns, one worked the other slept; pro'bly hardly ever saw each other. I never knew them to take a vacation, and they been here goin' on ten years. They owned the stand and built it from nothin' to what it was today. They weren't finished though. They could never make enough or work enough; they just kept on makin' it what it was.

As we ate Leo chomped up and down on his tofu burrito, chewin' each bite about a hundred times, finished his food even faster than me. Course he didn't get much after what I got. I scratched my head and wondered if his mom taught him how to eat. Kingstead always chewed like that except she was never eatin', just chewin'.

Mrs. Enchilada screamed out some orders, and I heard seventeen different people talkin' at once, all these different languages goin' on about what they plan to do or what their kids plan on doin'. Leo was gigglin' after every bite really enjoyin' himself. He took one last gulp a my Musk and tossed away the polished off paper bottle. My head started to clear, and I felt hot and wet, flustered from that burnin' copper sun, like a meltin' penny in the sky. Just then this big ugly black hooker came up swingin' a little purse with her first finger and sat at our bench. She wore scarlet spiked heel shoes, black leather pants, and a bright blushin' halter that squeezed the blood from her body up into her real red lips. She had a large chest pushed way up high like she was ready to fight with it and supertracked arms with small rosey purple bruises a joy. Her eyes were big oil drops alive and beatin', surrounded with green welts she pro'bly got in a brawl with some john. She couldn't feel those shiners, not through that snow she shot in her arms.

"Hey ol' man, what chew up to?" she chomped on too much gum.

"I'm up to no good. What else?"

"Yeah, like I figured. Who's the gorilla?"

"He's my friend, Leo."

"Pleased as punch, Leo," she said strokin' her black head.

"My name's Wenard." He stuck out his big hand; she just looked at him.

"No tanks, Leo," she said. "I had enough squeez'n big thick sweaty things today." His lobster hand stayed stuck out there in the air, his pink face droopy with his lower lip pushed out and his eyes red and puffy. Her jaw worked the gum, and her head bobbed back and forth. She looked at his sorry face., "All right," she said shakin' his hand, "Have a thrill." He laughed like a happy goose.

"Takin' a break?," I asked.

"Oh yeah, don't chew know it." She spoke so fast I could hardly understand her; I was gettin' annoyed. "I just scored some super-blow for me and my ol' man over on Beverly, a little sugar candy for my peace a mind, you know. Gett'n damn expensive for a rock now-a-days." Leo stared hard at her with two cucumber fingers in his smilin' mouth.

"Slow down, will you," I said. "Jesus." She didn't hear me.

"Yeah, that stuff's my bread and water lately, you know what I mean."

"Damn it," I said. "Will you shut up?"

"No man. I'm talk'n, I'm talk'n," she said.

"Yeah," Leo said. "She talkin', she talkin'." Hell, I just let her talk; what could I do? It wasn't so bad.

"Everyth'n's gett'n expensive now-a-days," she went on. "My ol' man he says to me last night, he says, 'Girl, you better bring in some more dough else I whip your ass.' I says to him, I say, 'Look nigger, you want it so bad, you get on your back, or stick your ass up in the air,' I says. And you know what that nigger done? He beat the shit out a me. Said someth'n about a dream to get out a this shit hole

before he turn fifty. I say I'll give the sucker fifty cent right now and he be gone. But I'll never leave him. Can't. He my ol' man."

A lot a the customers looked over at us blustered and embarrassed because the hooker was talkin' so loud and wavin' her hands. We were causin' quite a scene with Leo laughin' and me belchin'. Mrs. Enchilada looked out from behind the counter with her hands on her hips and her head cocked to one side, mad as a wet rooster.

"Hey, you sista," she yelled over at the hooker. "You go away from here."

"Oh, up yours," said the hooker flippin' her off.

"We don't want your kind here."

"Tell it to the Mayor." Mrs. Enchilada went into the back for a while because she couldn't do nothin' with the hooker. Then she came back to the counter and it was business as usual. The hooker went on about her man and her johns, and I sat back watchin' her. She bobbed her head and chewed the big wad a gum sometimes nibblin' it in her front teeth. She waved her hands, pointed at Leo, pointed at me and stroked her black hair. Her big mouth was movin' fast, but I couldn't hear what she said, and I couldn't hear Mrs. Enchilada callin' out orders. I just saw those real red lips workin' faster and faster. It was pretty funny, me sittin' there with my arms folded like I was payin' attention so close. I started to laugh, first just a little giggly, then out loud until I was clutchin' my belly and wipin' my eyes.

"What chew laugh'n at ol' man? Don't chew laugh at me." I gasped a little and caught myself.

"Oh don't get your dander up," I said.

"Don't chew laugh at me. Nobody laughs at me."

"I'm not laughin at you. I'm just tight."

"Well, you go drink some place else."

"Yeah," said Leo.

"You be laugh'n at me," she said. "I don't go in for that shit." All the chuckle went out a my belly, and I sat holdin' on to a smile while she went on talkin' just to Leo. He layed his big hands on the table and pouted his happy flushed face at her.

Just then, I saw this little runty dog scamper by the front a the stand. Half his white red tongue hung out the corner a his mouth drippin' tiny drops a spit. Its brown skinny body hurried over to the trash can a few feet away and pushed a long snout into the scraps on the ground around it. Flies buzzed about, some crawlin' into his ears. I watched the dog chomp down on a crusty old bun and thought about Henry and that wrecked car he called home. He wanted a small dog just like me, one that could sleep in the back seat on top a the stack a newspapers. I thought about Kingstead too, bitch. I never really asked for much, but she could never give in. I started to feel sober thinkin' about her.

While the hooker went on yappin' I all of a sudden heard this little cryin' burst a siren comin' down the street, just enough to get our attention. Leo jumped up at the sound, jerked the table, and

started screamin', "Ambuwince! Ambuwince!" The hooker stopped gabbin' real fast and turned to look. When this clean black and white pulled up I saw that Leo wasn't too happy that it wasn't an ambulance. Mrs. Enchilada stood behind the counter with her crooked smile pasted back on, rubbin' the tuffs a hair on her chin.

A salt and pepper team got out and got their billy clubs ready. The white cop straightened out his pretty blue suit, pushin' the knot in his tie up to his throat. He smoothed back his slick hair, then put his cap on. The black dude motioned for the hooker, so she got up and strutted over to them. I didn't move and only heard a little a their muffled voices over the traffic. Pretty soon a crowd started formin'.

The black cop said somethin' to the hooker and pointed up the street. She put her hands on her hips.

"I don't care what you say," she said. "You got the wrong information." The white guy butted in with somethin' smart, and she got pissed. "I don't care, Honky. You can't do shit." There were some more words mostly from the white cop. "No. No, you're wrong, man. She's full a shit," she said. "I don't care who you talked to. You fuck with me, you better be wait'n for some serious trouble, man. I got connections."

She turned to walk away, but the black cop grabbed her, twisted her around, puttin' her cheek hard on the squad car's hood. He held both her wrists in his one hand behind her back.

Just as the crowd saw about as much as it could with a lot a people stoppin' and rubber-neckin', Leo came crashin' through the bodies and grabbed the throat a the white cop twistin' it with his cold cucumber fingers. Then there was a whole lot a commotion and people were yellin' and pushin' close, and I had a tough time seein' them wrestle Leo to the ground while the hooker kicked and scratched. Before it was over, they had both Leo and the hooker handcuffed and stuffed into the back a their squad car, and the hooker was screamin' somethin' about injustices and police brutality.

That squad car drove away with them both, leavin' me to sit alone with nothin' but my thoughts and dreams. The crowd a people was gone and Mrs. Enchilada was back to normal business. The customers still huddled on one side a the stand away from me even though I was sober now, my head achin' behind my eyes. I rubbed my forehead and wished Henry were here to drink with me.

I looked up and saw the sun was like a tired red fist cocked in the sky. It sort a looked like Henry's cracked bloody knuckles after that brawl we had at "Little Steve's" back when we were respectable. They threw us out on our asses. That tired fist dripped blood from the sky and shot pink daggers a light into my eyes. It was makin' them water, and I couldn't stop wipin' that sun from my face.

The runty dog was still diggin' through the trash pantin' with its pink tongue. I got up and patted it on the head and was just about to leave when he licked my dirty wet face, his tail waggin'. I picked

him up and his tongue gave me a good work over glazin' my cheeks with a thin film a doggie spit; he was such a pretty thing. Hell with Kingstead.

As I walked away with the little runt under my arm, tiny drops a sweat ran from behind my ears and raced down my neck. About half way down the block, I looked back. In the street the traffic snarled with horns honkin' and smog blowin'. Mrs. Enchilada was screamin' out some orders, and all those people were huddled around the window screamin' back. I wiped the sweat from the back a my neck, scratched my head, and kept goin'.