

# The Kiss

by G. Arthur Brown

After the lunch rush ended, which had consisted of only six patrons to begin with, the pizzeria was vacant except for the four: James, Peter, the greasy man behind the counter, and one other patron. The man behind the counter, with a frown on his swarthy face, counted the cash in his till. James sat facing Peter and tapping his fingers on the battered wood-like table, which felt rough and chalky except where it was covered in a slimy film. Peter sat facing sideways on the pew-like booth, knees bent, feet on the bench, legs scrunched close to his body. The other patron sat at a two-seater and faced away from the two high school boys as she sipped a large birch beer.

Sun shone in on James's strategically disarranged sandy hair as he took the last noisy slurp of his milkshake. It made the vacuuming sound that only especially unconscientious people, like toddlers, allow openly in public. He looked at Peter, the boy's knees in his own face. "Are you trying to kiss your knees?" he said to Peter.

Peter looked up and over at James. His long, limp hair danced as he turned his head, and then closed like a brown umbrella to conceal most of his face. "Um..."

In a mocking tone, James said, "That's what I said to your mom last night."

Peter huffed, blowing his hair about.

The man behind the counter, a small Sicilian goblin with armpit stains that helped to explain the scent of overripe peaches that hung about the cafe, coughed in the strained tones of a cat overfed on its own hair. He then went on to work the pizza dough by hand without putting on gloves.

Peter winced. "Remind me why we come here again." He reached over and grabbed the last of his oily, boardwalk-style fries. They

tasted of the dirt in which the potatoes were grown and the filth of unwashed hands. He grimaced. "I foresee death in my future."

James smirked and gave an exaggerated shrug. "Food is cheap here. We are poor. Ergo—"

There was a loud crash as an aluminum pizza lift hit the floor.

The small man peered wide eyed at his clientele, the dough falling haphazardly about his hands like the wax melting from an off-white candle. All three customers faced him. "I didn't do that," he said with a slight quaver in his voice.

"Huh?" James said.

"I didn't drop the lift. I been tossing dough, you seen me! Was-a the ghost!" The man dropped the dough and made the sign of the cross, then said, "O Dio!" He bent over, revealing a carpet-like patch of thick, black back hair, and scurried to pick up the lift. Then he replaced it without washing it on a hook beside the pizza oven.

Peter brushed his hair from his eyes and stared with his mouth open at James in mock terror. James returned his gaze with a sprightly gleam in his eye. "Yeah," said James loudly enough for the man behind the counter to hear him. "There's all kinds of Civil War ghosts around here. Like that one guy who got shot and didn't realize he's dead. He still haunts the area to this day."

Peter was trying not to laugh. The man behind the counter watched the two with one eyebrow raised.

In the tone of an old horror movie trailer, James said, "And he was always trying to make himself a pizza!"

"The horror!" Peter said and shook deliberately. His arm and legs quaked, and his hair did a 60s mop top swoosh. He gave out a high pitched shriek, which grated like nails on a chalkboard.

"Shut up-a, you!" the man behind the counter said and then grabbed his pizza cutter and pointed it at Peter. Then he looked with narrowed eyes at James. "And no smart lip from-a you, either. You think I'm-a joking?"

"We keep you in business, old man," James said quietly. The man didn't appear to hear him. But the other patron, a girl in her late teens with an impish grin turned and looked squarely at James. Her

skin was smooth and her face was fresh and beautiful, like that of an angel of pure alabaster. She turned away once more and resumed eating a piece of pepperoni pizza, picking each pepperoni off before eating it, then consuming the remainder of the pock-marked slice.

"Crap," said James, even quieter this time. "Did you see that chick?"

Peter turned around and stared at the girl, trying to make it as obvious as possible. But she was facing the opposite direction.

"Dude!" James smacked Peter's head. "Don't be a jerk. Did you get a look at her or not?"

Peter said, "I didn't really see her face. Is she hot? Do you wanna kiss her face?"

James blanched. "Seriously, man. Don't humiliate me. I just wanted to know if you saw her. You don't need to make a big deal of it."

Peter shifted positions so that he now sat properly, facing James directly, and he leaned forward, then reached into his pocket and produced a twenty dollar bill. "I have here in my hand an ordinary twenty dollar bill." He took it, one corner in each hand, and proceeded to tug on it to demonstrate its authenticity. "Which can be yours, if you accept today's challenge."

James slumped back, and allowed his head to knock gently against the back of the seat, producing a half-hearted plastic clunk. He closed his eyes and muttered, "No, no, no, no." He jimmied his legs up and down, producing a rhythmic patter. Peter kicked one of his feet, breaking the rhythm and snapping James back into the conversation. "She's cute, okay? Is that what you want me to say? Geez, man. I don't know why you always do this to me."

"Because," Peter said with a grin, "it's fun." He pulled the bill tight to produce a small snap. "Cold hard cash, my man. If you walk right up to that girl and ask if you can kiss her."

"You think I'm crazy? I don't even know her. I am not about to just kiss a stranger."

"Eh, eh! You don't have to kiss her. You just have to ask if you can kiss her. And the money is all yours. Or are you still scared of

girls?" Peter spat into his hand, then looked at the contents of his spittle, shuddered, and wiped his hand off on a paper napkin. He offered his mostly dry hand to James and waited.

James stared at the hand for a second, exhaled heavily, and then shook to seal the bargain. Peter smiled and nodded. James pulled his hand back. It was moist from the remainder of Peter's spit and the scent of garlic clung to his hand. "That was unnecessary."

Peter's face became serious. "Yeah, the spit thing. I won't do that again. I'm not sure why they do that in old movies."

"It's nasty, dude."

The girl cleared her throat quietly, but loud enough to attract James's attention. He froze. Peter kicked his foot again under the table. "Go now," Peter said in a gruff whisper.

James stood up like a droid with sand in its joints.

"Are you crippled? Go!" Peter balled up a straw wrapper and threw it at James. The impact felt like a fly landing on his head, and caused him to rearrange his hair by pushing it to one side. Then he reconsidered and tried to put it back to how it was originally.

The girl faced the other way. Her hair was long and golden and shone in the afternoon sunlight that drifted through the lettered windows. When it was still, on the back of her head was a clearly visible G, a dim shadow amidst the brightness.

As he approached her table, James fidgeted with the buttons on his shirt, and toyed with where to place his hands, first in the pockets, then out again and onto his hips. When he came into view of her face, he forgot anything he'd planned to say. "Hi. You've got a G on your head."

She chuckled nervously. "Excuse me?"

"Oh. That came out all wrong. M-my name's James. And that's my friend Peter." He pointed to their table.

She turned her head as if she was going to look, but her eyes remained fixed on James. "Okay. Hi. Can I help you?"

"Maybe." He sighed. "My friend is going to pay me twenty dollars if I ask you if I can kiss you. So..."

She pursed her lips and bobbed her head about awkwardly. "So..."

"So can you help me with that?"

She chuckled again. "I think you just asked me if you could kiss me. And if that's the deal, then I guess your friend owes you twenty bucks."

"Oh." James looked down at his feet. He cocked his head to the side. "Then, I guess you won't let me kiss you."

"Sorry, but I've got something else I need to do." The girl frowned and vanished.

James looked back up to find the girl gone and started violently. He turned to look at Peter, whose mouth was entirely agape, this time in genuine awe.

The pizza lift fell again, producing a loud clash, followed by the tinkling of several other utensils being tossed against the floor.

"It's-a these damn ghosts!" shouted the man behind the counter. He threw his hands up over his head. "Always I tell them to go away. Bad for business!"

James hurried back to the table. Peter was already scrambling to get up. "We are outta here, man," Peter said.

"Fine with me," James said. The two exited the pizzeria and headed down the boulevard.

The man behind the counter sauntered to the window and looked out at the two fleeing boys. He laughed, holding his belly. "Tell-a you friends," he said and laughed some more. "Tell all-a you friends."

