

Bad Boys, Bad Boys, 1

by Jerry Ratch

My wife and I were sitting at the bar at Brennan's down on 4th Street one night, drinking too much without eating. Geary had convinced us to come down there with him, for two reasons. One, to give us the lowdown on where to stay and what to do in New York City, on our way to Europe for the first time ever, for me. And second because he wanted us to accompany him on a special secretive "art mission" as he called it, though he would not reveal what it was over the phone. He had an extraordinary sense of paranoia sometimes that was bewildering, all things considered. I mean, this was Berkeley we were living in. You couldn't get much more liberal than that. But what did I know? I'd been in Berkeley way too long frankly, and was growing bored to death with it.

"When you get on the subway," Geary told us, "don't make eye contact with anyone. Keep your head down. Take the bus if you can, it's safer. Never carry your wallet in your back pocket. Stay on the Upper East Side as much as possible. Here's the address of a great new sushi place on 1st Avenue and East 71st. You've got to go visit the Cedar Bar near NYU, but don't hang out for long. It's a very seedy joint. It's just that you have to visit the place at least once in your life, because that's where Jackson Pollock hung out with all his hard-drinking buddies. You're going to love it there. Both of you."

Geary tossed back a shot from the bar, and slammed down the empty shot glass, squinting his eyes and blinking. It rang on the old scarred bar top at Brennan's. He held up two fingers and the bartender made a silent move toward the bottle with a black label.

"Your life will never be the same," he said. He gazed at us. Always there was a smile on his lips, insincere as ever. "Rent control helps people stay alive. You'll be a renter again some day. So fuck you."

"Never!" I responded.

"Don't you two start in again," said my wife. "I can't take any more of that shit. I'm sick and tired of politics. Let's talk about art."

"Ugh, art!" Geary sneered.

"Yeah," I said. "Who needs it?"

Geary and I both laughed. He held up another two fingers. The bartender pointed at the two full shots on the bar in front of our noses.

"Sorry," Geary said. He gave a stiff wave of the hand, saying, "He's got an attitude!" as he turned his back to the bar. "Isn't there somewhere else we can go have a drink, for Chrissake?"

"They've got cheap turkey dinners," I said. "I thought you liked them."

"Turkey dinners," Geary said, nodding as if in agreement. "Turkey clogs you up. I've given it up."

"So, what about Daniel and the nurse, now?" I asked.

"What about her?" He looked irked that I would bring it up.

"You're going to not ever talk things out with Daniel? After what, twenty plus years you've known each other, or something?"

He said nothing. You could see the tendons hardening underneath his jaw. I noticed he was starting to color the hair at the sides of his head. My brother Darrell was doing the same thing now.

"Since college in Missoula?" I asked, prodding him. Daniel was pretty sore about the subject, and told me so himself. These guys had been about as thick as it gets, without being lovers, or brothers themselves.

"That's right," Geary admitted. "So what?"

"Daniel's heart-broken, I mean. He doesn't want to live without Haley."

"I don't own her. She does what she wants." There was a pause. "I wasn't the first, you know. There've been others. She told me so herself."

He gave a sheepish look. He looked at my wife too, same look. Everyone loved the cad. You couldn't help it. You couldn't

entirely blame Haley alone. Daniel could be pretty boring, going on about the stuffy academic world of printing all the time. Nice guy though. It was a shame. I liked him. What are you going to do? Most of life wasn't in our own hands. It's the animal that keeps tracking down our souls, that keeps us on the prowl. It's something out of our deep, deep past, way beyond our control, if you ask me.

The rumor was Geary had a rich woman in Europe who was considering coming back to America, and a wealthy girl in San Francisco looking for a house in Berkeley, and he was trying to balance the two of them before making a decision. Neither of them knew about the other. Truth is, when I was younger we would have given our eye teeth to be like him, though maybe things have changed somewhat. He was such a pretty boy the ladies couldn't resist him, and he did have a certain *savoir faire*. We never knew how he made his living exactly, other than dabbling in the occasional sale as an art rep, nothing much to speak of, but somehow he always got by. I happen to know for a fact that he'd been arrested for shoplifting an expensive duck liver pate one time, but was let go on a technicality. And then one day I caught him at Oliveira's Café in the Rockridge, right over the border from Berkeley, with his hand on the ass of Daniel's girlfriend Haley, the nurse, while they stood waiting for *caffé lattes*. He didn't know I was sitting at my usual table, writing poems from art books. When he turned and saw me, his hand fell away from her ass. He never said anything to Haley about me seeing them together. Well, there it was. The hand on her ass — that was the story, I guess you could say, of Geary Marston's life. It was like a painting of the Girl with the Pearl Earring, except with a hand on the young girl's ass added in, if the painting had been extended downward a little further to give it all some levity.

I felt myself in a compromised position. Isn't that always the case for an agent? I'd sold Daniel and Haley the house they were living in on Cornell Street in West Berkeley, near Fanny's Café, after Daniel left his first wife for her. But I'd also had a number of transactions that had been sent my way by Geary. So I found I had to keep my lips sealed either way, which was frustrating in the greatest

sense, because I am a man who loves his fill of good gossip. I admit I am terrible in that way.

"So what about going with me on our little art jaunt?"

Geary asked. "I need someone to drive the get-away car."

Elizabeth shook her head. "There is no way you're going to find me doing that kind of crap. I *won't!*" The way she emphasized the word "*won't*" somehow came out wrong. Or maybe it was right, for her. It was a little belligerent.

Geary stayed focused on me. He knew me pretty well.

"C'mon. Are we going down to the waterfront or not? We're going to destroy that piece of crap sculpture, the Guardian. What a travesty foisted off on the art community. He just installed that piece of junk down there himself one night, you know. Without anyone's permission even, at the city." Geary practically snorted. "You of all people should be offended, Elizabeth."

"What do I care? I'm not destroying anything," she said.

She lit another one of her infernal cigarettes, thinking the one in her other hand had gone out. Now she had two of the things going. I began waving a hand in front of me, and she blew a puff of smoke in my face, laughing her deep throaty smoker's laugh. These things were going to kill her someday, if the wine and booze didn't get her first like her mother.

"Wimp!" she said, a little too loudly. I'd quit smoking myself the day I started selling homes. You can't expect clients to climb into a car smelling of cigarettes with their babies. Not around Berkeley anyway. Maybe in Paris, but here? Uh-uh. You wouldn't make a dime. Unless you were also peddling dope.

"C'mon. It'll be fun," Geary prodded. "It's not really dynamite, just a few M-1000's strapped together. It'll be great fun. And it deserves to be destroyed, the piece of crap!" He grew even redder, thinking about it, apparently.

"No, no! You take me right home right now, Philip!" She twisted off her barstool, and got all wrapped up in her coat, trying to get an arm in. She fled out the door with her scraggly hair trailing

after her. She'd gotten so red in the face I thought she was having a stroke.

"What's wrong with her?"

"She's ... I don't know what's wrong with her."

I heard our old classic 1970 Mercedes Benz start up out in front of the bar, and suddenly she whooshed away with her foot to the floor, after honking loudly four or five times.

"All right then, I'm in, I guess," I said. "My ride just left."

"Good," said Geary, and he grinned that knowing, shit-eating grin that was his signature. He must have practiced that grin the day he turned fourteen and saw that he needed to start shaving.

Geary drove. It was getting cold out, and the usual fog was coming in low over the bay on its way north and to the east. Berkeley was basically a gray town, for all its brilliance in its heyday. The sun never seemed to shine here anymore. The day of the Beats was way in the past, and it had been living off its reputation, whatever that was worth, for some time already. I don't even know why I was here myself anymore. The people here were so bizarre and backwards that the Berkeley police were called to a violent confrontation one day between neighbors where they found them attempting to assault each other with hedge trimmers. You can look it up online. It happened at 6:48 p.m. to be exact, on August 10th. I read it in the Berkeley Voice. You can't make that sort of stuff up. I've tried. Reality is way funnier than fiction, or even dreams. Can you imagine what would happen to our lives if we ended up laughing all night in our dreams? Ah, the creases that would cause in our faces!

As we pulled up to the "Guardian" at the foot of University Avenue, a scowl came over Geary's face and he grew yet more incensed. He began breathing hard, looking first one way, then another. He jerked the steering wheel and spun the car around into a parking space. The area was completely deserted. I heard a lone sea gull squawking down by the water. You could smell the sea. It was fucking cold out there.

He looked over at me in the car. "All you've got to do is keep the motor running. Leave the lights turned off even when we're leaving, until you absolutely can't see anything. Hear?"

I nodded. I felt cold, and far away. It didn't matter that much to me. I was thinking of something else entirely, though for the life of me I can't say what.

"Your brother Darrell and I have started a little joint venture, you know. Did he say anything about it?"

"Darrell? Why, no." I was absolutely certain what that had to be, knowing what my brother was into with the amount of magic mushrooms he was growing at his property out in Half Moon Bay.

"I think Vivian is really hot," Geary said. "Slide over here into the driver's seat. And keep the damn engine running. Don't shut it off, no matter what you hear, okay?"

"Yeah," I said, nodding. "Yeah."

"Got it?"

"Roger."

"Fucking *Roger*?" he asked.

There was an unparalleled silence. Again the seagull squawked above the Berkeley pier. The gray fog slid right past the side windows of the car, engulfing us. I let my tongue slide over my upper lip, tasting the salt.

"Boy, you really need some European pussy," he remarked. I know for a fact, without looking his way, that he was staring at the growth of beard on my chin.

Another silence across the universe.

"That Vivian. She's really got a healthy set of jugs, doesn't she? And that skin. She's like a teenager still. She's a lot younger than Darrell, isn't she?"

"They've got a daughter, Geary."

"Still. It's like it didn't even faze her."

"My brother would kill you as soon as look at you. I'd watch out for him."

Again, that silence. Geary grinned that shit-eating grin of his. He always seemed to leave more to the imagination than he should. He liked it that way.

"Keep the engine warm. Gun it every now and then. This won't take long."

And he slipped out into the gray fog. In less than two minutes time I heard an enormous *Kaboom!* And he came running, laughing like an idiot. Laughing and running like any teenaged idiot from Montana, or anywhere else.

Life around him really was more fun.

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But the "Guardian" sat unfazed, facing the West, with a little chip taken out of its mouth, that's about all. And Geary grew still more incensed.

We read it in the Berkeley Voice the next day that some vandals had apparently set off some kind of explosive device on the waterfront. Anyone with any knowledge of who the vandals might be, were urged to contact the Berkeley police at once, blah, blah, blah. What a joke.

Though if Daniel only knew, I am sure he would have done just that. With the hole that Haley had left gaping in his side. Because of Geary, I mean.

After we got back from Europe, that's when things really started changing for me. That trip changed my life, just as Geary had predicted it would. That's what was so maddening about him — he was always so damned right about everything. He could be absolutely annoying, if he weren't so accurate. When we got back, I simply could not get myself to stop partying. I didn't want to go back to business as usual. And at this art party at a loft in West Oakland, I kept dancing and dancing, with anyone who would let me. Even when my wife complained about having a headache and wanted to go home and rest. I took her home, but came back to the party looking for anyone who would dance with me, including Haley, the

nurse. I was drunk, sure, but she was drunk too, and I couldn't stop my hands from roaming all over her chest and up and down her hips, and she let me, and I was growing more and more drunk and more and more excited about touching someone new, someone other than the same woman I'd been with for a dozen years and whose passion had ebbed away years ago already, just exactly when or why, neither of us knew. But I felt it for a certainty, with a thud in my chest, in my stomach and my bowels, right there in the tunnels on a highway in Italy outside Rapallo when Elizabeth wouldn't stop screaming that we were going to die, oh, oh, we were going to die! She was so afraid of dying. Always, she thought she was going to die. Well, get a grip, as they say — *we're all going to die!*

"So, how's everything?" I asked Haley while we were dancing, just to be cordial.

She leaned in toward my ear and in the lowest of voices said, "Ennui."

"What?" It was loud at the party.

Haley pulled her head back for just a moment, then leaned in and breathed in my ear, "Ennui."

A new, faster rock-and-roll song came on, and that was when I started feeling her up as we danced, passing my hands all over her chest, her hips. And I began feeling something stir inside. Haley smiled with her eyes. But when she went back to Daniel after the dancing was through, she told him that I had been feeling her up on the dance floor, looking at me all the while. Her face was flushed red.

"I'm drunk," I said. "Daniel, I'm drunk. What do I know from anything? I'm drunk, that's all."

"Keep your hands off the nurse," Daniel said. He peered at me through his narrow steel-rimmed glasses, like an academic John Lennon, if that was possible.

"Danny! Come on. You know me."

"Yeah? Keep your mitts off the goods."

Haley was smiling from behind Daniel. *The little bitch*, I thought. *What the hell is she up to? I know she was egging me on. What's going on with her?*

Then I thought: *I know what happened with Geary. Who are you trying to fool? Okay, okay, maybe I'm just too drunk. Jeez, get a grip. You're out of control!*

But right then I blurted out, "What about Geary?"

Daniel and the nurse shot each other this look, as if they'd suddenly grabbed hold of either end of a live wire.

Daniel's mouth started moving, as though he'd just now started chewing on something he'd forgotten was in his mouth all along.

"We're not talking anymore," Daniel said, real low and slow. Haley was nodding as he said it, but looking down.

And I found myself asking: *Why does Daniel keep hanging onto his lost dreams?*

Then I thought: *Why do any of us keep hanging on to our lost dreams? Any of us?*

