

Bad Boys, Bad Boys, 2

by Jerry Ratch

I ran into Geary Marston in front of the French Hotel Café, across the street from Chez Panisse. I was sitting outside at a small round metal table. A girl that looked like a Degas model was selling flowers on the sidewalk in front of the hotel. Her short stocky body and large nose, as she walked barefoot, plodding in an untrained way about the cut flowers in their containers, and among the people as they passed by. A tall thin girl in a short skirt standing watching her as she sold her flowers. The broad, quick smile for everyone. Her calves thick, and her chest like a Degas model. (I had come back recently from Paris, but was it ever any different?) Her hazel eyes. The hair hanging down in strings beside her broad face, earrings dangling, mixed in, pale and red with her dark chestnut hair.

Just then the handsome young waiter from Chez Panisse was standing in the midst of a group of young men in front of the restaurant across the street, looking around them in the sunlight, each wearing an earring in one ear. He was dressed in a new black leather jacket, his curly reddened hair almost the same heavy bronzed color as his skin. And he wandered slowly across the street through the traffic without malice to buy a white long-stemmed rose from the flower girl, then back through the traffic and up the stairs into the restaurant. And the busboy who'd been sitting on the bench with the Degas model, caressed both of her arms, smiling and looking in her face.

That's when Geary spotted me, alone at my little green metal table.

"Bonjour," he said. "You've been eying her, haven't you? She's quite the little French wench, no? She puts out for just about anyone, you know."

"No."

"So, how's it going, since you've been back in America?"

"Uchh!"

"Exactly!"

He sat down across from me. He'd caught me spying on the flower girl, of course.

"And so, how's life with the Mrs.?"

"We've been doing nothing but drinking and shouting at each other since we got back from Europe. It can't go on."

"Didn't I tell you life would never be the same? Well, didn't I?"

I nodded. Really my head dropped, more than nodded. It grew immensely heavy for some reason. I was having these massive headaches that kept coming out of nowhere, whenever I thought about the direction of my life.

We both noticed a well-dressed but shabby older man, a bum, stoop over and pick up a shiny new penny from the sidewalk, just a few feet away. He was without teeth, and wore a baseball cap. Gray whiskers stood out on his chin. He dropped the penny in his pocket and started to shuffle on.

"Watch this," said Geary.

He jumped up, smiling that weird shit-eating smile. He walked three feet away from the bum and dropped another shiny penny on the sidewalk, then walked away. The old bum moved over to where the new penny was, bent down stiffly and picked it up, putting that one into his pocket.

Geary signaled for me to watch again. He repeated what he'd just done, dropping another penny, but starting back toward our table in a large circle. He repeated this two more times until the bum was fairly near our little table, where Geary sat down.

"He must have been a pigeon in a previous life."

"What do you mean?" I asked. I was growing annoyed.

"In his other life. Watch."

Geary got up and repeated the same cycle again until the bum came back toward our table and stood waiting, but at a distance. He was bowed over slightly, and walked with a limp. His shoes were untied, but he never tripped on the shoelaces because he moved so slowly. It might have gone on all afternoon if I hadn't stood up suddenly.

"I've got to go."

"I'm waiting on someone myself," Geary said. He would never ever let you have the last word, on anything. "They'll be along." He pulled out a packet of French cigarettes. Gauloise.

I crossed the street through the traffic and went up the stairs into Chez Panisse. At the bar I ordered a flute of champagne. The bar maid had the exact same impersonal stare as the girl in Manet's painting, "The Bar at the Folies-Bergere." Same red in her cheeks.

She took a good look at me. "What's with you?" she said.

I shook my head and kept smiling like a man who'd just cheated on his wife. Like a fool who was in love with something impossible.

"What?" she begged. "What is it?" She poured another flute without asking. But I just kept shaking my head, sipping from my flute. I was in love, and she knew it. Though not with her. Geary knew it, the bar maid at Chez Panisse knew it. I think even my wife knew it, deep in her heart, and she kept growing even more afraid of everything as I withdrew from her.

I had to tell someone, I was bursting with it. And a man cannot keep a secret, contrary to public opinion. That was when I called up Daniel and asked him to come have a drink with me. I was at the bar upstairs at Chez Panisse. It was urgent. Could he come right over, right now? I had a confession to make.

That got his interest.

"Is this about the nurse?" he asked.

"No. No way in hell. Well ... in a way."

He groaned way back in his throat. So deep in his throat that the groan extended to his beer belly. Wine belly, really. That would be more accurate. Wine and cheese from all the stuffy book parties he attended.

"Where are you, Chez Panisse?"

"Look, I'm paying."

"Do I need to bring my gun?"

"This is Chez Panisse," I said, "not the fucking O.K. Corral."

"Let me just ask one thing? Is Geary Marston anywhere near there?"

"He's at the French Hotel, across the street."

There was a long pause. Daniel cleared his throat.

"Was he with the nurse?"

"No. Not to my knowledge."

"I'm bringing my gun."

"You don't even own a gun. Do you?"

"We're from Montana, me and Geary, what do you think this is?"

"Berkeley!" I said. I was trying to make light of it.

Jesus! I thought to myself. *How did I ever get mixed up with these people?*

But before Daniel could show up, my brother Darrell came upstairs to the bar at Chez Panisse. Darrell was half a foot taller than me, and always looked lean and hungry. He'd forgotten to shave and always wore clothes that were much too young for him.

"Philip," he said, taking off the sunglasses he always wore. "Fancy meeting you here. Have you seen Geary Marston, by any chance?"

"Yeah, across the street."

"At the French Hotel? He was supposed to meet me, but wasn't there. Huh! You never know what's going to happen with that prick, do you?"

He looked around the upstairs café, like he was waiting for something.

"Did you expect me to answer that?"

"What? No, of course not. What's wrong with you? Say, there's something different about you."

"I've been to Europe," I said.

"Other than that, I mean. What is it? Have you lost some weight?"

The bar maid was watching my brother, and smiled at him. Darrell could cut quite a figure. He used to be a lifeguard, for one thing. That was where he met his wife, Vivian. Saved her life at the beach in Half Moon Bay. And he always wore this little matador ponytail.

"I think he's been getting some," the bar maid said. She looked right through me. *Jesus!* I thought, *I was that obvious? I can't go home like this. I can't. I won't!*

"So, what do you have going with Marston?" I asked.

"What do you mean?" Darrell look surprised. "What did he say?"

I glanced at the bar maid, who was looking at us both, soberly, but amused.

"Nothing much."

"Whatever it was, keep it under your fucking hat." To the bar maid Darrell said, "You interested in dating a tall handsome dealer in mushrooms? Shitake, of course."

She shook her head ever so slightly, still amused though. "I, I don't think so."

"How about Portobello?" he asked.

"Oh, you're the mushroom guy from Half Moon Bay, right? That's different."

"I thought so." My brother turned to face me directly. "Listen, there's no way you've seen Vivian around here, is there?"

"Your wife?"

"Who in a fuck do you think I mean?" He practically sneered when he said this, and this was my own brother we're talking about.

"I ain't shitting," he said. "I want to know. Have you seen snappy little Vivian and her skinny little ass? The bitch. I think she's been sneaking around on me."

"What? No."

While my brother watched my face turning various shades of color, I tried to imagine what must be passing through his mind,

though his brains had gotten fairly scrambled since he'd started dealing in the magic variety of mushrooms.

"No," I repeated. "No."

"Fucking-A!" he said. "What are you now, retarded? Go and get your ear wax cleaned out."

Then Geary Marston appeared at the bar, with the nurse, Haley, next to him. He had his hand on her back. And he was smiling that smile of his, of course.

He stubbed out his cigarette against the sole of his shoe and inserted it back into his pack of Gauloise. In those days you could still smoke in a bar or restaurant, though everyone in Berkeley put a huge frown on their face when you did, and turned up their noses and began a fake cough of some sort. My wife paid no attention to those people whatsoever. She had smoked her way all the way across the Atlantic Ocean when we'd gone on our vacation to Europe, and back as well. She didn't have time to think about health issues. She had three kids of her own and a lot of useless paintings to paint, that never left the house. They just kept piling up in the attic at home. I'd begun to fear that the weight of all the art up there would one day come crashing down through the ceiling and kill us. When I'd mentioned this to Geary one time, he just laughed. Art! He exclaimed. If you can't sell it, fuck it! Why don't you just haul them to the dump and set them on fire? Geary saw pretty much everything in a utilitarian way.

"Hi, Haley," I said.

She was always on the verge of sucking you in with her eyes. Her eyes were brown. I was very attracted to brown eyes. They were like my mother's. My wife's eyes were that cold kind of blue that seemed almost transparent.

I don't know quite what it was that was so appealing about Haley. She was very short, and her chest seemed to stick out even further as a result, I think. And she always looked somehow fresh, and not quite innocent.

I was about to say something about Daniel, who was on his way there, but I stopped myself.

"You're looking good," I said. Haley smiled. Her hair was cut short, like a boy.

"Of course," said Geary.

You really did want to hit him.

"So," said Darrell, "Who is this lovely creature? I don't think we've met. I'm Darrell Janov, this guy's older and wiser brother." He jerked his thumb toward me like I was a side of beef. He held out his large hand. Darrell towered over Haley.

"I'm Haley," she said.

"I didn't know you were dating anyone," Darrell said to Geary.

"We're not exclusive," Geary said. You really never knew what the hell was going to come out of his mouth, but you could be quite certain it was bound to embarrass someone. Haley's face turned crimson when he said that, and she looked down.

"Oh," said Darrell.

"I date plenty of girls," Geary continued. "I don't see the reason to be exclusive. That's so ... *American*." And with that he began eying everyone else in the entire café, men included. He looked everyone up and down as they walked past. *Jesus*, I thought. *Jesus! How do women put up with him?* But they certainly did.

"Don't you agree, Haley?" he said.

"Yes, I guess so."

"She's been living with a friend of Philip's."

"Really!" said Darrell, and he looked at her up and down, drawing his head back to see her better.

Halley's face turned more to the purple side. It used to be just red. I considered the possibility that she had stopped breathing.

"Daniel is..."

"He's a printer. Small press, esoteric stuff," Geary interrupted. "Nothing you would have heard of."

"Actually," I said, "I was just on the phone with Daniel."

Everyone turned to look at me. I was the center of attention. I took a sip from my flute of champagne and smiled broadly at the barmaid. I may have winked at her, I'm not sure.

"And?" said Geary.

"Nothing," I said. I pushed my empty flute across the bar, and she refilled it one more time.

"Saucy," she said. "I like that in a man."

"And," I said. But I stopped for effect.

"And?"

"And I whistle in the shower too."

The corners of the barmaid's eyes crinkled up when she smiled. Lovely. Very lovely.

"What about you and Vivian?" Geary asked all of a sudden. He looked flatly at Darrell. "Certainly you guys aren't exclusive, are you?"

Darrell looked flustered. He sputtered.

"Wh ... what? Well, of course. What did you think?"

"How would it make you feel if she came home with a load of cum in her panties?"

Darrell looked shocked, then suddenly sick. His face grew sour. He gripped his stomach and bent over for air.

"Fuck!" he spit out. "Fuck, Marston, you sonofabitch. Fuck!"

Darrell kept panting for breath. Geary just smiled that shit-eating grin of his. He knew he'd hit a pretty deep nerve. He was elated, and began looking all around the bar until he caught some woman's eye, and nodded, taking a sip off his glass of red wine. Girls could not resist him, that's all there was to it. He certainly had a pretty face. It would be too bad if someone came along and messed it up for him.

And that was when Vivian came upstairs at Chez Panisse. Geary shot Darrell a look that was astounding, for him. It was a moment of terror, as if he'd been confronted by a black bear in the mountains outside Missoula.

And my brother's face just froze. No one said anything for about two hundred years.

"Well, look who's here ... speaking of the devil," Geary said finally.

Vivian was pretty tall herself, wore her hair long. It dropped straight down her back. Half the men in the restaurant turned to look at her. Who wouldn't? She was still something to look at. I couldn't help looking at Vivian myself, and I am Darrell's brother, for Chrissake.

For some reason Vivian couldn't take her eyes off Haley. Finally she looked at Geary. "Who's the new bitch in town?"

"Someone you don't need to know."

"You're always a little too overconfident, aren't you?"

Vivian smiled at Haley, rolling her big eyes. "He a little quick on the draw, isn't he?"

I saw the horrified look on my brother's face. I knew that look from his past, and it meant trouble. He'd been through a lot with Vivian, ever since the birth of their daughter, because he'd gotten Vivian pregnant in his Volkswagen van practically five minutes after saving her life at the beach at Half Moon Bay. I don't think she ever got the chance to grow up herself, and their age difference made Darrell a little fidgety, which was why he always tried to dress so young, in his tank-tops and cut-offs. It made him look, somehow, ridiculous. And that earring in his ear! I mean, come on. He should have been out in front of the restaurant hanging out with the waiters and the busboys, instead of... Well, instead of what? Selling specious mushrooms to them?

I tried to picture what my own clients would say when they got into the car with me to go see some expensive little bungalow and took a gander at some earring in my ear. It was bad enough with my goatee. And yet, something needed to change in my life. And indeed, something was changing. Something huge.

"Philip," Darrell said. His jaw had grown rigid. "I need to talk with you. Outside." He yanked my arm.

"But, I haven't finished my champagne."

"Now!" he growled. "Right now!"

"No way, Darrell. I'm talking with the barmaid here. Can't you see I'm busy?"

“You're married, for Chrissake! What are you doing, talking with a barmaid? What do you mean?”

The barmaid looked at me soberly, then at Darrell.

“So am I,” she said, and a broad smile opened up on her lovely Manet face. My heart began to thaw after its cold ten year winter. I shoved my flute across the bar, pointing a finger to fill it up to the brim. And that was exactly what she did. To the brim, like my life, which had just begun bubbling over again.

