

People's Park at Night

by Jerry Ratch

“You got a cigarette, man?”

“Hey, mister, you got a cigarette?”

“You got a cigarette, mister?”

“Hey, mister, you listening to me? You got any spare change?”

The voice was coming from the despicably filthy bearded face of a man in a worker's cap who was suddenly there at the open window of Darrell's truck near People's Park, and before he could roll up the window, a hand appeared on his shoulder, pulling on his shirt like a little beggar child that could be anywhere in the world, including Berkeley.

“You got a cigarette? Hey, you got a cigarette? You got any change you could spare?”

The bum smelled real bad, like he'd puked on his long filthy coat. He stood next to Darrell's truck in the dead of the night begging for a cigarette and spare change and his hands were so blackened with dirt that they shone in what little light there was left in the night sky of the world. Darrell looked at the clock ticking away on the dashboard. It was 2 a.m. and he looked cruelly at the bum and grinned mechanically. “I don't smoke, muthafucka!” he said. And the bum dropped his hand and turned away from the truck and kept on walking into the park.

Now Darrell really had to pee, really pee, and there was no more avoiding it. He'd been tracking his wife half the night already and drinking a lot of beer as he drove wildly around town searching for her and the adrenaline was coursing through his veins and his heart was pumping madly in his chest and every other minute all he wanted to do was shout FUCK! FUCK! He could just smell her,

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where she had been, who she was sleeping with, he was convinced of it. As if she had just stepped out of the sea and was dripping and covered with seaweed, twisted up in that long blonde hair of hers. As if he had just saved her life at the beach in Santa Cruz again, like he did the first time he kissed her. The BITCH!

Darrell got out of the truck and plodded into the darkness of People's Park, where nobody in their right mind went at 2 a.m. Three Port-O-Potty toilets stood in the grass toward the edge of the park and he walked over to them. Occasionally people crossed through the park on a straight line as if on a mission and they would disappear into the darkness as mysteriously as they appeared.

Darrell tested the door of the first one, and it was locked. "Shit," he mumbled.

He tried the second one and that was locked too. "Shit. Shit!"

He lurched toward the third toilet and when he found that door locked, he started jumping up and down, and chanting, "Fuck, fuck, fuck!"

He waited for a few moments and jumped on one foot, then a little on the other foot, and he looked all around and waited a few seconds more and there was no sound from any of the portable toilets. So he banged on one of the doors loudly. "Get fucked," the portable toilet said.

Darrell banged on the second toilet door and this one said: "Get the fuck out of here, will you? This one's mine."

He looked dumbly at the third portable toilet. Then he put his shoulder to the side of it and shoved hard and over it went, with a whole lot of yelling and cursing from inside. And he went further

into the darkness of the park and found a big tree, where he unzipped and began pissing an enormous stream, like a horse.

A voice — that same bum's voice! — came out of nowhere. “What you got in your hand there, muthafucka?”

“I got a gun, man,” Darrell replied. He looked around at the bum, standing there in his long coat, smelling of puke.

“Hey, mister, you got a cigarette? You got any change you could spare?”

