

...continued from page 20 took a small table at the far end. Ralphie and Finch sat and relaxed. -Bugsy was again perplexed.

"You guys can drink?" he asked. "Yes and no. We can drink but it doesn't really have an impact, the body that you see is only a manifestation. We can eat too, but we don't need food. It's more of an enjoyment, not a necessity."

Bugsy said nothing. He was finished with trying to figure these two out. "Besides, we're here on business," Ralphie said as a waitress came up to the table and smiled.

"Yeah, it's business," said Finch, "it's not personal."

"What can I get for you?" the waitress asked. She was in her late twenties, with raven hair and blue eyes. A flashing Christmas tree button on her white shirt flickered red. Her demeanor was that of genuine kindness.

They ordered drinks and declined a food menu.

"So what's the business here," asked the thief.

"Her. Lisa Jane." He pointed at the waitress. "She has three kids at home and she's really hurting in a financial way. But you'll also notice that she is not carrying that around with her. She's here being cheerful and kind on a night when she would absolutely rather be home with her children. But to provide for them, she's working and she doesn't say a thing to anyone about how much she would rather be home.

"So what does that mean?" asked Bugsy.

"It means that she is brightness—a small glowing radiance in the gloom of the world of man," said Ralphie.

Lisa Jane returned with three green bottles of beer and Ralphie paid her.

"Oh, and another thing. You robbed her house six months ago. Remember the place with the green shutters in Grey's Ferry? You took her jewelry as well as the cash she was saving for, yep, you guessed it, Christmas." Ralphie said it in a very general tone, without accusation, as if he were relating a story on the weather.

Bugsy was in silence, stunned. He vaguely remembered the house being a really good score at the time, but now there was a face to what he had done. In his line of work a face was never a good thing. He looked down dejectedly at his bottle of beer.

"But that's not your problem Bugsy, is it? You were just getting yours. Right?" said Ralphie.

When they had finished their drinks and were about to leave, Ralphie stopped Lisa Jane as he was heading out of the door. In his hand an envelope appeared with her name on it.

"Excuse me, is your name Lisa Jane?" he asked the waitress. She said it was.

"You must have dropped this or someone must have left it for you. I found it behind the drink menu on the table," said Ralphie as he handed it to her and walked out. Bugsy kept his head low. They were a few steps down the street when Lisa Jane opened the envelope to discover it contained \$5,000 in cash.

"What was in that envelope?" asked Bugsy.

"A bunch of money," he answered. "Really? I wouldn't have thought angels to have a lot of cash."

"Then you'd be thinking right. We don't have any money," stated Ralphie.

"So where did the cash come from? Did you just conjure it up out of thin air?" he said and flailed his arms around to dramatize the statement.

"Not exactly. I conjured it out of the fake air duct in your house. You really

should be more clever about hiding you valuables, Bugsy, there are some very bad people out there." Ralphie said and smiled.

They continued to walk and Ralphie regaled Bugsy with stories of the thief's career. He told Bugsy how, yes, he had stolen only things but in those acts he had also stolen trust and hope. Bugsy simply accepted it. The stories were true and he could not deny them. They gave Bugsy a new sense of himself, a strange new sense that if he could get over himself, over his want and over the need to take from the outside to fill himself—that insatiable never-ending need—then there might be a new day for him. Ralphie answered his thoughts with a yes.

Just on the south side of Chestnut on 5th Ralphie, Finch and Bugsy stopped in front of a store where in a large window a neon sign hung suspended by wire. The sign read Danny's Flowers and festooned around it were red and white poinsettias, green garland and silver tinsel. Behind the window the two angels and the thief could see people inside. The shop was owned by Dan Columbo who had a special appreciation for the season.

"Want to go in?" Ralphie asked Finch. He didn't address Bugsy. "Danny's on Christmas Eve? I wouldn't miss this for the world," said Finch who was wearing a huge smile.

Inside the small flower shop were about twenty people. There was also music, talk and laughter. When the three entered they were greeted with a loud 'Merry Christmas!' from all. Mrs. Columbo, a small round woman with dark curly hair brought them glasses of bright red wine. On a work bench, among green plastic buckets of fresh flowers were trays of food; fried cod and haddock, crab claws, scallops and shrimp, calamari and scungilli. Other trays had sweets; Russian tea cookies, pizzelles, macaroons, and cannoli.

The aromas in the shop were overwhelming to Bugsy. He could smell the melting snow on a rubber runner mingled with the sweet scent of flowers and earth. Then there was the aroma of food and the scent of the sweet red wine. He felt himself go, for just a moment, into a state of dizziness. When it had passed he was surprised to find himself smiling wide.

"It's something, isn't it, Bugsy?" Ralphie said. "the pure aroma of human kindness." Ralphie breathed in deep. "It's has so much...promise in it, doesn't it?"

After a moment Ralphie told Bugsy how, on every Christmas Eve after the last orders were completed and all the deliveries were done and the drivers returned, the Columbos would put up a feast of food and any who entered were welcomed as family. In their minds all were one on this night, and none refused. They even gave away any flowers that happened to be left over.

Bugsy was still slightly high from the visceral experience but he managed to ask why they could be seen here, at this gathering, and not be seen at the other party.

"Because this is where you want to be seen," said Finch, ambling over to the food. Mrs. Columbo came up to them again and handed them each a flower. A red rose to Ralphie and Finch, a marigold for Bugsy. She smiled demurely and said 'Merry Christmas'.

While the three were standing and eating, a middle aged woman and a young girl with long dark hair were passing and they paused when the girl saw them. The mother and child were dressed in heavy coats and were about

to leave. The little girl clutched a pink carnation to her chest.

"Hello sir," she said softly with a quit smile.

"Hi Breezy," Ralphie and Finch responded almost at the same time. Bugsy just said 'hello'.

They exchanged Christmas greetings and some small talk when the girl's mother motioned it was time to leave.

As they walked through the door, the girl's mother asked Breezy who the three men were. She replied that she wasn't sure, but she thought she knew them somehow.

"Who was the kid?" Bugsy asked in between bites of food.

"She," replied Ralphie who was considering the simple beauty of the flower he held in his hand, "is Brianna Bradley and she, my friend, is your problem."

Ralphie, Bugsy, and Finch did not stay much longer until Ralphie said it was time to go. Finch laid the rose he held on the table and reached for one of the sweets from the tray.

"I'm gonna leave the flower and take the cannoli," he said, and the three of them left the warmth of the flower shop and walked into the cold night. The snow had accumulated to a few inches and the footing was somewhat slippery. They walked west in silence on Chestnut Street. Ahead of them they could see Breezy and her mother walking on the same side of the street that was surprisingly void of traffic on this Christmas Eve. The mother and child stopped in front of a convenience store where Mrs. Bradley wanted to buy milk before heading home. Breezy did not want to go in. She told her mother she wanted to stay out in the falling snow. Her mother told her to stay right there, she would be only a minute and that was where she was as Ralphie, Bugsy and Finch approached.

"So what does she need help with?" Bugsy asked, still unclear as to what was desired of him on this strange night. He had now resigned himself to whatever was required.

"You'll know when it happens," Ralphie said, still carrying the rose in his hand as did Bugsy with the marigold. Finch was finishing his cannoli.

And as he spoke those words, Ralphie could see in the distance a bus careening down the narrow street toward him. The bus moved in an awkward way, jerking left and then right, and then left again on the snow covered street. They were now only about a quarter of a block away from Breezy. Bugsy looked at the little girl who was enjoying the falling snow and the flower she held in her hand, then he looked back up the street as the bus came barreling toward them. It was empty, Bugsy could see, except for the driver who didn't seem to have control of the vehicle.

Bugsy was nearing Breezy and he became swept with a feeling of dread. "That bus...she's in danger," he said looking to his left and right for Ralphie and Finch. They were gone. He was alone. And this little girl was in trouble. As he spoke he could see the bus turn and head straight for the child on the sidewalk who was unaware of any peril. He raced toward her in the snow. In his mind he could think of only one thing. This is my problem.

And so on a snow covered Christmas Eve, Bugsy Sullivan, a self absorbed, self serving thief who had always been concerned with simply getting his, for the first time in his life, considered another human being before himself. He was just to the girl as the bus rolled up on the

sidewalk.

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It had been so fast that Bugsy really didn't remember any of it. He saw Breezy sitting on the sidewalk in the snow with a dazed look upon her face. He heard police sirens and he saw the bus in the wall of a building next to the convenience store. A single yellow marigold lay crushed in the snow behind a front tire. The thief stood looking and wondering if it were all real or not. Then he saw Ralphie and Finch standing across the street and he went to them as police cars came and officers piled out and Breezy's mother ran out of the store looking for her daughter. The policemen did not notice Bugsy as they passed.

"You did well, Bugsy. Good job," Ralphie said, smiling.

"Thanks. It didn't seem too hard," Bugsy said as the police went to the front of the bus. They were talking of how the vehicle had been stolen from the depot not ten minutes before, but they ignored the white haired man who was walking off it. They were more interested in something else, some thing in front of the bus.

The white haired man walked toward Bugsy and Ralphie and Finch. The now numerous police paid no attention to him. One officer came around from the front of the bus shaking his head. Others were talking to Breezy and her mother. She was pointing to the bus.

"Those new buses are something else. All kinds of buttons and lights and stuff, they're nothing like my old trackless trolleys. I wasn't sure I could do it," said the white haired man.

"You did fine Sammy, well done," Ralphie replied.

"You know this guy?" Bugsy asked. "Of course I do. This is Sam Miller, and he works for me. Sam, I'd like you to meet another new guy on the crew, Bugsy Sullivan."

Bugsy Sullivan thought for a moment. There was confusion on his face.

"You mean..." he looked over at the bus again

"Yep, you sleep with the fishes," said Finch.

"Was that what this whole night was about? This was your special assignment?" asked Bugsy.

"It wasn't really a special assignment. Like I told you before, I'm in recruitment," said Ralphie, "this is what I do. I get angels. You needed some work before you could make it in, but you're in now."

"Yeah, you're a made guy now. The technicality clause. You give your life for another and you're in---the greatest gift," Finch said, "you know, like the Kid did." On the sidewalk across the street, police were milling quietly. There was no hurry now. A few of the officers recognized the dead man in front of the bus. He was a known perp. A thief. When Breezy told them how he had rushed up just as the bus was upon her and then pushed her aside in the nick of time, the officers no longer referred to Bugsy Sullivan as a thief, he was now a hero, a man who had given his life to save a little girl.

And if there was an unwritten sentiment on the force it would have been that 'little girls don't die at Christmas'. This man, a thief, had brought that sentiment to life. Breezy looked across the street and saw the four men standing there. She stooped to pick up her pink carnation that had dropped into the snow and walked over to the gathering of angels. She stood in front of Bugsy and looked up at him with warm brown eyes.

"Sir," she said, not sure what she should say, "thank you for helping me."

The End

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# Coco 'Nut' Funnies

## Top 10 Signs No One Wants to be Your Valentine

10. Phone sex operators keep hanging up on you.
9. Fox is starting a new show about you, "Americas Least Wanted".
8. The Pope asks you for tips on celibacy.
7. You get a heart shaped box filled with palmetto bugs.
6. Instead of roses you get a poisonwood plant.
5. The last time you had sex was during the Kennedy Administration.
4. Everyone admires your beard - and you're a woman.
3. The local tattoo artist wants to ink the letter "L" on your forehead.
2. You hear voices all around you whispering..."She is not taking her meds..."
1. The tag on your lingerie reads "Victoria's Secretions".



## Blonde Horseback Rider

A blonde decides to try horseback riding, even though she has had no lessons, nor prior experience. She mounts the horse unassisted, and the horse immediately springs into motion.

It gallops along at a steady and rhythmic pace, but the blonde begins to slide from the saddle. In terror, she grabs for the horse's mane, but cannot seem to get a firm grip. She tries to throw her arms around the horse's neck, but she slides down the horse's side anyway. The horse gallops along, seemingly impervious to its slipping rider. Finally, giving up her frail grip, the blonde attempts to leap away from the horse and throw herself to safety. Unfortunately, her foot has become entangled in the stirrup, she is now at the mercy of the horse's pounding hooves as her head is struck against the ground over and over.

As her head is battered against the ground, she is mere moments away from unconsciousness when to her great fortune... Frank, the Wal-Mart greeter, sees her dilemma and unplugs the horse.

And you thought all they did was say "Hello".

