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The Angel of Lead Belly's

According to new rules, Michele walked to the dumpster and flicked her butt directly inside. As she pivoted away, she saw an arm partly eclipsed by a drooping bag. She turned back, stared through the side panel, and wondered if nicotine was jangling her perception. She leaned in close and almost stuck her head through. The stench. Was it normal? Like how the dumpster gets? Or something worse? She backed away. From this angle, it seemed like an old rag or strand of dough. She scanned for a random stick, anything long enough, but there were no sticks or boxes or bent silverware because Liz had mandated the backside of Lead Belly's would no longer be a sprawl of filth. Everyone had been doing their best. No near-misses. No butts on the ground. Just an old grease teardrop on the contoured pavement.

"Michele, you got a table!" It was one of the kitchen guys.

"Okay!" she said. "Don't blow a gasket."

Saturday made its usual demands. Dinner rush wouldn't relent. A line formed. Jason had come in late and needed help. Liz was extra vocal about half-empty drinks because, by God, that's where we all make money, and Ruth was a little off, too busy counting the minutes to her impending twelve-day vacation.

After 10:00, Michele took another break. Jason joined her, thinking he might work up some conversation beyond work issues because Michele had a somber allure. They lit, inhaled, and blew tandem vertical plumes.

"Cold out," he said.

“Feels good.”

The moon was rising yellow and big. They both studied it, inhaled again, and blew straight out, their smoke writhing into one mass.

“Okay,” she said. “Confession time.”

“Confessing a sin?”

“Maybe. I saw an arm in the dumpster.”

“You saw an arm, a human arm, in the dumpster? That dumpster?”

“Yes.”

“When?”

“Earlier.”

“Today?”

“Yes. Earlier today.”

“Only an arm? Nothing else?”

“All I saw was the arm.”

“Just lying there? Waving? What? Speak, woman.”

“It was tucked under some bags.”

“Did you tell Liz?”

“I didn’t tell anyone.”

“You’re telling me, right now, if I look in that dumpster, I’ll see an arm?”

“You might.”

He approached, felt the grimace forming. He’d always hated dumpsters, the uncertainty and depth, the terrifying things that lurk. It’s why, he once said, the Star Wars trash compactor scene, brilliant really, made the movie real.

He turned back. “Man or woman?”

“Would it matter?”

He leaned toward the side panel and looked through. “I see a wall of trash bags.”

“It’s too dark now.”

“Let’s get a flashlight.”

Michele didn’t nod, didn’t agree, didn’t want to deal with it. Part of her didn’t. Another part felt panic. She should’ve raced in earlier, called the cops maybe.

Back inside, some tables wanted another round, others dessert. And then came everything that transpires after dinner—cashing out, doling out, and wiping all surfaces. It took a good hour. In the swirl of it, Jason nabbed a flashlight from Liz’s office. Ruth got wind of it and came along because she liked action of any sort. The three of them stood now, two cigarettes passing among them.

“You saw it this afternoon?” she said to Michele.

“Before rush. 5:30 or so.”

“Scale of one to ten, how sure are you?”

“That it’s an arm? Seven. Maybe eight. Or six.”

“Pretty sure then?”

“Pretty sure.”

“You didn’t tell anyone?”

“Jason.”

“Not Liz.”

“No, not Liz.”

Ruth nodded and passed the cigarette to Jason. He took a long drag, snubbed it out against the building, then walked toward the dumpster, soft-stepping his way, mostly regretting the quick compliance that gets you into such things. He hoped it’d be nothing so they could head

for the bar. Tonight, it'd be a classic martini, especially after this morbid business. He clicked the light, was disappointed by its meekness. Old batteries. He pushed it forward like a torch. Bloated gray bags reflected the weak corona. He scanned back and forth, saw nothing, and let himself breathe again.

"You're going too fast," Ruth said. She was close behind him now. They both were.

"It was down more," Michele said, "right and under that sideways bag."

He bent at the knees, aimed right, and saw a long pale strand. He walked away. "Holy shit," he kept saying into the dark. It turned mantric. "Holy, holy shit." Michele mumbled "Oh, man" several times now feeling the weight, the passing of time, some wisp of connection like how you feel watching a circle of bullies harass another girl in the bathroom, her ugly or fat or perfect face aimed at the floor, while you do your business and then quickly leave.

"Give me that," Ruth said. She removed the light from his hand, marched back to get this over with, and held her breath against the stench. Her face breached the side. She saw it, pulled her head out, and stood straight. "That's not an arm," she said.

"The hell it isn't," Jason said.

"It's something weird but it's not an arm. Not even close. It's too soft and globby."

"What else could it be?"

"Anything. But it's not an arm. There's no muscle or joint. And it's too pale."

"Well, it hasn't been getting sun lately."

They stood stiff, fixed in a triangle, each thinking how the day, this whole life, had been stranger than planned.

"I'm drinking now," Jason said out to the scraggily field, an unclaimed expanse between here and the working-class neighborhood where he grew up, the darkened swath of old sycamore and oak like a thick quilt over homes and streets, brambles of interstate beyond.

Michele looked at Ruth, the dumpster, the gray cinderblock wall, milky parking lot light splashing over the Lead Belly's sign. She decided not to look inside again because whatever, whomever, had landed in the dumpster was gone—beyond saving, beyond knowing. She started to feel nauseous.

“Drinking,” Ruth said, “is the correct path. Let us commence.” And so they went in and made their way to the bar. Jason told Liz after she'd placed his martini on a napkin. He told her what Michele saw, what he saw. Ruth shook her head slowly, eyes half-closed, that older-person grin doing its work. Jason spewed air. “It's definitely an arm,” he said. “It's definitely not an arm,” Ruth said back. Sitting between them, Michele stared at the lemon wedge perched on her summer ale glass. It wasn't summer but you can't tell your taste buds what to like just because it's October, and she appreciated Liz's extra effort here and now because Liz was generally a brute, the most disciplinary and bare-knuckled boss in history, but she treated her people like foreign diplomats at night's end.

“Ask the kitchen guys,” Liz said.

“Already did,” Jason said. “They both shrugged, thought it was probably an arm. Or not.”

Ruth shook her head again, took a long drink of gimlet.

“I don't see why you find it hard to believe,” he said. “People disappear. It happens constantly. Several hundred per year in Toledo alone. Think about it. Every week, usually twice, someone within walking distance asks themselves where to dump a body. The river? Well, bodies float. Everyone knows that. Cement loafers? Too much work. Way too much. But a random dumpster behind a building, now that's a serious option. It's 4:00 in the morning. You drive up. A few good heaves later, you're driving away, and I'm saying, too, we should all be ashamed sitting here like this, delicious beverages in our hands. Someone is likely attached to that arm.”

“Okay,” Ruth said. “Consider this. A year or two back, before you and Michele came along, we were all convinced someone had dropped a dead puppy into the dumpster. Same situation. Someone saw it among the bags. Everyone got clenched. We gathered out there, ready for the worst. One of the kitchen guys reached in. We stood there expecting little Fido but out comes a goddamned teddy bear. Someone had come by and tossed it. No offense to you both, but it’s likely some packaging, a hunk of plastic, or even a mannequin. It’s not a person.”

“Well,” he said, “I saw what I saw. As did Michele, so I’m formally right now and forever done with the dumpster and its zone out back. No more hanging out. No more smoke breaks. I’m getting the patch, and I’m staying inside where hearts are mostly still beating.”

Liz stood behind her bar, hands flat on the lacquered wood. She looked at Michele, who seemed more sullen than usual, but then again, Michele was in her rollercoaster years, early twenties when constant boyfriend and car problems ratchet you up and plunge you down. And Jason. Short and punchy. A fidget machine who’d use any prompt to showcase his talking ability. Good kids, both of them. Liz wished she’d had some of her own, a boy and girl with self-defeating habits and undying sweetness. “Well, there’s one way to find out,” she said. “Be here Monday morning when the truck comes.”

“Or just climb in there now and look,” Ruth said.

“Nobody’s climbing in there,” Liz said. “Don’t even think it.”

“I’ll be here Monday,” Michele said. “I’ve got lunch.”

“I’ll be gone, aiming for the airport,” Ruth said, her hand swooping toward the sky.

Jason held up his martini, saluted Liz, and hailed the decades before any of them would land in a dumpster or the river or the cold, cold ground. And because of the arm waiting outside or because it was now Ruth’s vacation or because it was a big Saturday night and everyone had made giant tips, they stayed through two more rounds. Jason shifted to beer but still went to the

brink. He told Michele she was utterly awesome, that Ruth was too smart for her own good, case in point, and that he was never leaving Lead Belly's on account of the cruelty and malice that hammers the world everywhere beyond these walls. Michele said she'd been planning to bolt every other minute, to leave and never return, because Toledo was killing her on the inside. She meant that. But any other city—Chicago, Austin, Seattle, Denver—seemed like places losers go so they can pretend they haven't lost. To this, Ruth laughed at the ceiling, put her arm around Michele, and invited her to join her on vacation because getting the hell out of Dodge does something good for your insides. Travel, she said, is the second-best drug invented yet. Everyone knew her first choice, cocaine, and that she'd sworn it off years ago.

On Monday, Michele clocked in by 10:30. Jason showed up at 11:00 for a pre-lunch drink and to make sure he hadn't said anything ridiculous to Michele. He sat under the main screen watching a muted news anchor map out the Yemen terrorist attack. He kept Michele in his periphery while she attended to three women wanting tea service. And then came Ruth. Well, well. Her car was packed. She had one hour before check-in, and then off to Belize. She stood next to Jason and asked if the truck had come. He shook his head, grinning some. "This'd better happen fast," she said while pouring sugar.

They all felt the rumble. Michele put a full tray onto the server station, a no-no if there ever was one. Jason hammered his lager. Ruth kept her coffee cup in hand. Liz left her office desk drawer open. And here they stood, an immense white truck gleaming before them, its hydraulic silver appendages reaching outward, making the dumpster twitch. They tightened into a diamond, their necks craning in unison, tracing the slow arc up and beyond the roofline. As it reached its zenith and tilted, those black flaps opened like a tongue-less gaping mouth. First came bags, then random debris. Among rancid vegetables, animal juices, and old fries raining down like tickertape, the body came free. Pure morning sun featured this pale man or woman in

short-sleeves performing an effortless swan dive. Jason backed into Ruth. Liz clawed Michele's arm. The four of them fell into hushed revelation, captured by the theatrics of oblivion and its graceful silence, the one that waits and welcomes us all.