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The Postman Always Rings Twice

JAMES M. CAIN

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THE POSTMAN
ALWAYS RINGS
TWICE



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TO

VINCENT LAWRENCE

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They threw me off the hay truck about noon. I had swung on the night before, down at the border, and as soon as I got up there under the canvas, I went to sleep. I needed plenty of that, after three weeks in Tia Juana, and I was still getting it when they pulled off to one side to let the engine cool. Then they saw a foot sticking out and threw me off. I tried some comical stuff, but all I got was a dead pan, so that gag was out. They gave me a cigarette, though, and I hiked down the road to find something to eat.

That was when I hit this Twin Oaks Tavern. It was nothing but a roadside sandwich joint, like a million others in California. There was a lunchroom part, and over that a house part, where they lived, and off to one side a filling station, and out back a half dozen shacks that they called an auto court. I blew in there in a hurry and began looking down the road. When the Greek showed, I asked if a guy had been by in a Cadillac. He was to pick me up here, I said, and we were to have lunch. Not today, said the Greek. He layed a place at one of the tables and asked me what I was going to have. I said orange juice, corn flakes, fried eggs and bacon, enchilada, flapjacks, and coffee. Pretty soon he came out with the orange juice and the corn flakes.

“Hold on, now. One thing I got to tell you. If this guy don’t show up, you’ll have to trust me for it. This was to be on him, and I’m kind of short, myself.”

“Hokay, fill’m up.”

I saw he was on, and quit talking about the guy in the Cadillac. Pretty soon I saw he wanted something.

“What you do, what kind of work, hey?”

“Oh, one thing and another, one thing and another. Why?”

“How old you?”

“Twenty-four.”

“Young fellow, hey? I could use young fellow right now. In my business.”

“Nice place you got here.”

“Air. Is a nice. No fog, like in a Los Angeles. No fog at all. Nice, a clear, all a time nice a clear.”

“Must be swell at night. I can smell it now.”

“Sleep fine. You understand automobile? Fix’m up?”

“Sure. I’m a born mechanic.”

He gave me some more about the air, and how healthy he’s been since he bought this place, and how he can’t figure it out, why his help won’t stay with him. I can figure it out, but I stay with the grub.

“Hey? You think you like it here?”

By that time I had put down the rest of the coffee, and lit the cigar he gave me. “I tell you how it is. I got a couple of other propositions, that’s my trouble. But I’ll think about it. I sure will do that all right.”

Then I saw her. She had been out back, in the kitchen, but she came in to gather up my dishes. Except for the shape, she really wasn’t any raving beauty, but she had a sulky look to her, and her lips stuck out in a way that made me want to mash them in for her.

“Meet my wife.”

She didn’t look at me. I nodded at the Greek, gave my cigar a kind of wave, and that was all. She went out with the dishes, and so far as he and I were concerned, she hadn’t even been there. I left, then, but in five minutes I was back, to leave a message for the guy in the

Cadillac. It took me a half hour to get sold on the job, but at the end of it I was in the filling station, fixing flats.

“What’s your name, hey?”

“Frank Chambers.”

“Nick Papadakis, mine.”

We shook hands, and he went. In a minute I heard him singing. He had a swell voice. From the filling station I could just get a good view of the kitchen.

About three o'clock a guy came along that was all burned up because somebody had pasted a sticker on his wind wing. I had to go in the kitchen to steam it off for him.

“Enchiladas? Well, you people sure know how to make them.”

“What do you mean, you people?”

“Why, you and Mr. Papadakis. You and Nick. That one I had for lunch, it was a peach.”

“Oh.”

“You got a cloth? That I can hold on to this thing with?”

“That’s not what you meant.”

“Sure it is.”

“You think I’m Mex.”

“Nothing like it.”

“Yes, you do. You’re not the first one. Well, get this. I’m just as white as you are, see? I may have dark hair and look a little that way, but I’m just as white as you are. You want to get along good around here, you won’t forget that.”

“Why, you don’t look Mex.”

“I’m telling you. I’m just as white as you are.”

“No, you don’t look even a little bit Mex. Those Mexican women, they all got big hips and bum legs and breasts up under their chin and yellow skin and hair that looks like it had bacon fat on it. You don’t look like that. You’re small, and got nice white skin, and your hair is soft and curly, even if it is black. Only thing you’ve got that’s

Mex is your teeth. They all got white teeth, you've got to hand that to them."

"My name was Smith before I was married. That don't sound much like a Mex, does it?"

"Not much."

"What's more, I don't even come from around here. I come from Iowa."

"Smith, hey. What's your first name?"

"Cora. You can call me that, if you want to."

I knew for certain, then, what I had just taken a chance on when I went in there. It wasn't those enchiladas that she had to cook, and it wasn't having black hair. It was being married to that Greek that made her feel she wasn't white, and she was even afraid I would begin calling her Mrs. Papadakis.

"Cora. Sure. And how about calling me Frank?"

She came over and began helping me with the wind wing. She was so close I could smell her. I shot it right close to her ear, almost in a whisper. "How come you married this Greek, anyway?"

She jumped like I had cut her with a whip. "Is that any of your business?"

"Yeah. Plenty."

"Here's your wind wing."

"Thanks."

I went out. I had what I wanted. I had socked one in under her guard, and socked it in deep, so it hurt. From now on, it would be business between her and me. She might not say yes, but she wouldn't stall me. She knew what I meant, and she knew I had her number.

That night at supper, the Greek got sore at her for not giving me more fried potatoes. He wanted me to like it there, and not walk out on him like the others had.

"Give a man something to eat."