

PATTERSON'S LUNCH

Poor kid, the other employees at the messenger service said on the day Patterson disappeared in an alley off Wall Street. That little guy never got a break in his whole life. First, he's born with one leg shorter than the other and has to limp around on a four-inch heel. Then he gets cheated on his facial features: pretzel ears, a mug that reminds you of fried rice, glasses as thick as a ham steak. You'd be a loner too if you started life that way. His father runs off when he's six months old and his mother's a drunk. She leaves him on the doorstep of an orphanage and is gone for good. Thank god for that social worker who took him to heart. If it hadn't been for her, he'd probably be on drugs or something. But he works hard, gives no lip and sticks to it. Now this. A pool of blood, a mangled ball cap, a shattered cassette player and a crumpled blue bandanna scattered in an alley that's oily with grime and smells like sin, the last remains of a cheated life. And then they must have drug off his body. Probably in the river. Poor kid.

But had they checked with Patterson about the confusing events of that special day, he might have told them a different story. All he knows is that he woke as usual at six a.m. to the driving rock music of an auto alarm in his one room studio apartment. He heard the familiar clang of delivery trucks hitting a grate and, well, something else. Whatever it was, he began to feel he might be waking to a slightly altered type of set up. The day offered an unusual sense of brightness, uncommon in that neighborhood of dingy, smelly apartments. Even in spring and summer the block said, "dreary," even with his eyeglasses. The clanging of the trucks and the shouts and sobs of waking humans in close, too close, proximity sounded even more bothersome and testy, downright very

loud. Clatter on the cobblestones. Metal clashing against metal. Perhaps, Patterson feared, he might be in for another seizure or migraine. Even at that, his heightened sensual expository had an edge to it not heretofore within his experience. Ka-boom is what it said in the fashion of a thunderclap. Flash and blinko is what struck at first light. He thought he could smell the pungency of cordite in the air, not an unwelcome scent in a generally stinky neighborhood. His head felt large, his skull open to the atmosphere, his brain exposed and naked.

Nonetheless, he had to pay his bills and proceeded with his wakeup routine as usual. He had his standard bowl of fruit wheels, a glass of cranberry juice for his troubled urinary track and two leftover drumsticks from last night's deli dinner.

Patterson was very sensible about his health and read the paper every day and health care magazines and self-help books to be certain he was putting the right things into his system. He liked to say to himself he was the perfect specimen of the human animal.

As usual, he chose to postpone his first cup of coffee until he reached the deli next to the dispatch office. Why make a pot for one person when all you want is a cup or two and someone already has it made? Be sensible about it, he told himself. Cut corners. Pick up a penny here and there. Adds up.

After a shower and shampoo, he stared for a while out the lone window at the dust and papers blowing haphazardly up and down the street. It was going to be hot again and, with the wind, his face would break out even more. Gosh, he had to get out of here. He turned for a second to the stack of brochures he collected every time he made a delivery at a travel agent's office. Fares were down and, if he could save a few dollars, maybe he could get away, go for a cruise. If it weren't for the weekends, he'd be on the

boat by now. That's where it all went. The damn street sales on Broadway. Imitation Rolex watches. Ball caps. He must have one of each. Sneakers. Bandannas. Ghetto blasters. Tapes for his cassette. Comic books. It just had to stop. His apartment couldn't hold any more. But what else could he do? Even the movies were becoming expensive. Sure, he had an old television, a black and white hand-me-down, but he couldn't afford cable, much less one of those VCR's. He didn't drink. Couldn't handle the stuff. Made him crazy. And those knock-out New York girls in their tight jeans and high heels wouldn't even look at him. Street sales on the weekends were all he had. The hubbub of the crowd, the shouts of the vendors, the cacophony of the record stores, the allure of the shirt shops. Maybe a burger at an outside café in the summertime. A stroll and a sit on a beach at Bowling Green Park. A subway ride to look in the windows on Fifth Avenue. Free outdoor concerts. Central Park now and then. At least he could be out and about. He only stayed at the apartment long enough to sleep, listen to music, close his eyes and daydream about faraway places. One of those resorts where young single people took off their clothes. Thinking that he looked down at his rotten foot and felt a tinge of despair.

Yet Carribean beaches was his first choice. Closer than Hawaii and a lot cheaper. The only beach he ever saw was on a field trip once to the Jersey Shore. Not so great. He needed to get out of Manhattan. He lost himself looking at the pictures and of palm trees, sand, dark young women in bikinis. He could hear steel drums, reggae and calypso music, turquoise waters edging up in a white froth on the sand. Kaleidoscopic sunsets. Barbados, St. Thomas, Sint Maarten, Guadalupe, Martinique. He could feel the breezes, fresh air. None of this garbage truck, sewer grate, exhaust pipe, sour city stink.

Later, he could do Europe, Paris, London and The Beatles, Hard Rock Cafe, Buckingham Palace, Stuttgart, Rome, the whole smear. Then on to Bangkok, China, Japan, the Pyramids. There was a whole wide world out there just waiting for Patterson to show up. Some day, he sighed.

Before he dressed, Patterson had to spend a good ten minutes wrapping the heel and ankle of his bad foot with a special gauze, another lousy expense. It was getting worse, the huge callus that oozed clear fluid and smelled bad. He cleaned it every night and every morning as the doctor at the city clinic recommended. Walking all day and not having the best of orthopedic shoes caused it, he figured.

The nosebleeds were another problem. Had them as long as he could remember. Allergies. One minute everything normal, next minute the strange tingle inside his nostrils and then the massive eruption, the ruination of many shirts. So, after pulling down the bill of his "I Love New York" ballcap, slipping on his new imitation gold Rolex, tucking his short sleeved flannel shirt into his fake designer jeans, both purchased at street side, he tied a blue bandanna into a knot and fixed it in front cowboy style so he could pull it up quickly over his nose if he had to. He stuffed a wad of tissues in his left front pocket. Never knew when they'd come in handy.

But the most important piece of equipment was the portable cassette player. Without it, hobbling around the fungal cobblestones of the financial district could put a guy on the railing of a bridge. Patterson lifted up his ballcap, fixed the receptors to his outsized ears, tugged the bill of his ballcap back down again and twisted the tarnished knob of the apartment door to enter the hallway. Fully equipped as he was, a hidden money belt firmly in place, he scuttled five floors down the stairway to the street

resembling one of those species of insects that mutate atop skyscrapers in large cities and are as yet unclassified.

Patterson followed his normal routine. A short subway ride. Up the cement steps and into the deli. But again, a premonition. Was that Puerto Rican girl actually looking at him in a seductive way or was she still half asleep? He shouldn't get his hopes up but maybe things were changing. Next, to the dispatch office.

Hazel awaited him as usual. In her early sixties, she had long ago ceased giving the appearance of woman, man or vegetable. The brittle dark whiskers above her lips and across her chin didn't help. But Hazel was friendly and she was easy to get along with. In fact, all the people at the delivery service were. His job was one of Patterson's few blessings.

He took his first assignment from Hazel and headed off. A law firm. His favorite. Their offices always seemed cooler than other offices and he could stand there for a minute while the receptionist answered the phone and signed for the package. He could spend a second enjoying her coiffure, her perfume and her flawless skin. He could pretend for that tiny fraction of time that she was truly interested in him and that her smile when she handed over the receipt meant more than just a courtesy. Patterson also knew to be strictly businesslike. He knew his boundaries and left without saying more than, "Thank you."

At the first telephone booth he dialed Hazel and got new instructions, a pickup at the NYSE. That's how the day would go and, if the route allowed, he'd return to the office, sit a few minutes on the wooden bench and catch part of a soap opera before making the next delivery.

As he rode up and down elevators,, observed by others as an odd looking but not so troublesome character slouched in one corner and absorbed in low level noise that resonated in cicada chants, Patterson tried to understand the remarkable sensations he was beginning to feel. His skin felt peeled away, delicate as a naked onion. Sounds were too loud, colors too bright, the edges of the brown delivery envelopes too sharp, the glimmer off tall glass buildings distracting.

At the office again, seated between Shorty and Cosmo on the wooden bench, he couldn't keep his mind focused on the two starlets on the television screen worming their way into a kiss. His stomach growled, anticipating lunch. Those sounds he heard, what were they? No, he wasn't hearing voices, just sounds, smacking sounds, crunching sounds, slobbering sounds. He was picking up some kind of undercurrent. The undercurrent of what, he wasn't sure. Things as disharmonious as yogurt, garlic and chocolate. Or put another way, jangling steel drums, tubas and castanets. But it was there. It had something to do with food, with eating. For example, he said to his alter ego, it's like eating raw celery or crunching an ice cube. You feel it from your teeth to your hair. Something like that. Gosh, he had to get a handle on it.

Hazel called out so suddenly he spilled his diet cola, the second of that morning. It was an urgent request, a jewelry store that needed a pouch delivered.

He tried as best as he could on his way to the jewelry store to concentrate on his mission. What struck him funny as he hobbled along from one heel to the other was that now his ability to see had also been heightened. He poked his heavy lensed eyeglasses back up his nose a time or two to test whether his vision was being distorted by heat waves off the pavement, perspiration seeping into his eyes or dust causing his eyes to

water. Instead of simply imagining how people looked without their clothes, he could actually see through their clothes, see them in their nakedness. He could hear what they were thinking too, couldn't he? Wow! Did you see that little redhead? Patterson's new gift forced him to concentrate as never before. He had to hum to drown out the competing conversations. He stared down at the sidewalk to be polite.

He paused a minute outside the jewelry store to get his head straight. The store had a narrow front. Its windows were stacked with tiny boxes of precious stones jammed so closely together they had lost some of their glamour. He entered the door and nodded to a younger female clerk behind the counter wearing, but not owning, Patterson surmised, one of the store's diamond brooches. She didn't bother to smile. It was no law firm, that was for sure. She wasn't a looker either, he judged, dressed or undressed. He asked for the gentleman whose name Hazel had given him and stood, as he often did, waiting for a package, uncomfortably, hobbling short leg to long leg, long leg to short leg, followed by a ritualized dance to keep his balance.

He was startled when she actually spoke. "Mr. Alexis wants to have a word with you," she said. "Just go through the curtains," she pointed.

Patterson complied and found himself in a short narrow hallway. Mr. Alexis was not there but Patterson could hear the voices of two men speaking in thick accents. We don't have the text of the entire conversation but, based on the little we know, we can postulate that Patterson heard remarks similar to:

"But it's not normally done...."

"That's the beauty of it...."

"Don't you see, it's all cash...."

“Doesn’t matter. Cash doesn’t have our names....”

“But if something happens, if it disappears....”

“Trust me on this one. It’s only a ten minute walk....”

Suddenly two men in their fifties, possibly brothers, poked their heads through a stained beige doorway curtain. Their heads were pointed like partially plucked artichokes. They looked Patterson up and down, looked at each other and pulled back into their office. Buzz. Buzz. Buzz.

“I don’t think he heard us. He has one of those things tucked into his ears....”

“Risky, very risky....”

“Do you want to deliver....?”

“Hell, no....”

“You make my point. Who would suspect....?”

“Ok. You’ve sold me then. Let’s get it going....”

The two men, dressed in clothes Patterson had seen at one time or another hanging from racks on Broadway, came out of the doorway simultaneously to meet him.

“So. You are from the delivery service,” the older one began. Both of them smiled in an exaggerated way that reminded Patterson of a newly carved watermelon.

“That is good,” the older one continued. “You see we have a most important package and it must be delivered immediately. Can we be guaranteed confidentiality? Of course, you seem to be trustworthy.”

Patterson read to them from a tattered laminated card he was required to keep in his pocket. It contained all the rules and procedures of the delivery service. Basically, it

said if a customer had any questions they should call the management, i.e. Hazel. They waved it away.

“No. No. That won’t be necessary. We think you are most honest in your appearance. But let us stress a few points. The pouch must be delivered with the seal unbroken. Of course, I suppose you know that already. It must be delivered by 1:30 p.m. Is this possible?”

Patterson looked at his imitation gold Rolex watch.

“No problem,” he said.

“Good. Good,” they kept saying at Patterson left the store. “Good. Good.”

After Patterson left them, he allowed himself a minor grin. The older man on the left was wearing a skimpy red brief shaped like a jockstrap. The man on the right was going to die soon. His breath foretold it.

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Outside the noise was even louder and more distracting than ever. A tower of tofu in its many forms. A cornucopia of digestive sounds. A virtual picnic of gustative and gastronomic retorts. Across the square, a woman dressed somberly like a nun, although she was not a nun, opened a package of potato chips with the sound of an avalanche. When she crunched into a chip, thunder rippled over the cobblestones. Next to her on the steps of the same building, a mustachioed man, her companion Patterson assumed, finely tailored and bow-tied, created a cataclysm biting deep into his veggie sandwich. The heat of the day, the stench of lower Manhattan, the inescapable sound of crunching teeth echoing off the hard edges of buildings, grated against Patterson’s ears. His ever-rustling music could not disguise it. In fact, the sound of the man up the street

peeling the wrapper off his chocolate bar and gnashing into its chopped peanuts was only amplified by the truck that roared around the corner almost running Patterson down.

The ruminations of consumption rattled through the rows of skyscrapers and old stone buildings. Patterson could hear a sound as remote as a roach feeding off left overs.

Pouch over his shoulder, he had the volume on his cassette player rolled to its widest arc. The Rolling Stones were more than preempted by the para-metropolitan sounds of the downtown munchers.

He headed in the direction of his destination clomping at a less than frantic pace. All this chewing and slurping and gulping stirred his own need for nourishment. It was well past his lunchtime. He knew the address. He had made deliveries in the same vicinity many times. Maybe he should stop to grab a bite.

As he passed a certain deli, made memorable to him by its pea soup, he heard a voice call out to him.

Sure, he was hungry, he answered automatically. At his reply the entire contents of the deli case began conversing among themselves, hobnobbing like old war buddies at a reunion. A lover of hero sandwiches, Patterson could not ignore the beauty of the buns and rolls, the color of the ripe tomatoes, the crispiness of a sliced dill pickle, the haphazard dribble of mustard and mayonnaise. He stood staring at the possibilities. Yum, yum, he thought.

It was the salami on a round whole wheat bun who spoke to him first.

"Hey, bud. Must be hot out there."

"Yeah. Windy and dusty too," Patterson said.

"Come on in and cool off a little."

"Can't. Have a delivery. Gotta be there in ten minutes."

"Sure you do. But look. This could be your one chance."

"My one chance for what?"

"To break free, stupid."

"Hey, don't call me stupid."

"Look, you ain't really stupid, just sorta stupid."

"Ok, just don't make fun of me."

"You're too sensitive, bud," the salami counseled exhaling garlic into the air.

"Just step inside. Join us. You'll see what I mean."

Patterson looked down at the salami and felt a high comfort level. After all, a salami was a salami but a lawyer could be a thief, a drug addict or a PTA president.

As he stepped inside the deli and moved directly in front of the deli case, all the sandwiches greeted him in unison.

"Hiya, kid!"

Even the chef salad shuffled its lettuce and rolled its cherry tomatoes.

"Ya see, kid, the salami jabbered on, it's all relative. Ya just gotta make a decision. Once and for all. Does youse wanna be ham and cheese? Does youse wanna add lettuce, pickle, and tomato? Does youse want a little Dijon? The choices are endless. Once ya slap down the first slice, you're in business."

The salami belched up more garlic and moved the gerkin that hung from his crusts from one side to the other.

"Yeah, do sumpin. Keep messing around and you'll end up being just another turkey with mayo," the hot dog threw in, laughing mustard and relish all over the place.

"Ehhh, that hot dog," the salami sneered. "Whatta chump. That guy's got sausage for brains. Ignore the bastard. But take it from me, kid, you're gonna get gobbled up anyway. Ya might as well get swallowed in style. Come on, give youse a break."

Without knowing why, Patterson like the salami. It had a certain texture about it. Reminded him of pizza for some reason. Heck, if he could be a sandwich, he'd go for a hero deluxe, Patterson speculated. The instant he began imagining all the goodies he'd have slapped on his whole wheat buns, he felt himself descending, as if from a high place. He passed easily through the glass, landed softly and was immediately turned to one side.

"It's to show all the meats ya's gots," the salami explained. "Really glad you decided to sign up, kid. Before ya know, somebody will come along and find youse to be very filling."

It wasn't twenty minutes before the salami was gone. He stubbed out his gherkin and waved goodbye to Patterson with his romaine. Several ham and Swiss on rye waiting next to Patterson were pulled up and out and the remaining sandwiches quickly rearranged. The hot dog went next, guffawing mustard and relish and crumbs as it was wrapped in clear plastic and stuck into the microwave.

As he watched the hot dog being dropped into a sack with a bag of chips, a cookie and some napkins, Patterson felt the sensation of rising quickly upward, being wrapped in wax coated paper and tumbling down into a brown bag. He appeared calm as his journey continued, calm as he was lifted out of the bag and unwrapped. Everything was quiet now. The noise was gone, stopped in midair with a click. He remained calm as he stared

ahead into the wide chasm that opened red and black in turns like a ferocious sunset, calm as he began to slide down the smooth passage, calm as he heard the echo, the slurps and gurgles, the chunka, chunka, chunka of rows and rows of advancing teeth....

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Bare breasted female tourists and middle-aged men with swollen bellies and undersized swimsuits glanced sideways in their somnolence as the ocean spewed up an unshapely boyish looking man in a purplish striped swimsuit and tumbled him in a ball onto the Caribbean beach. Patterson sat there stupefied, rubbing the salt from his eyes and then mused his way back toward his towel, spreading it out meticulously before he sat down. He reached into a worn leather pouch, pulled out his eyeglasses, cleaned them on the edge of the towel and put them on. He looked backward at the tall luxury hotel where he may have spent the night and then to the ocean which transfixed him. He didn't know what he would do the rest of the day or even tomorrow. He didn't know much of anything. Only that the sun and the breeze felt good on his tender, slightly burned skin. It was a fine amnesia.