

Stampede continued

CHOU-CHOU: The Chinese potscrubber. A four-hundred-year-old-face. Ageless. Smiled once when Pierre dropped a frozen pail of sour cherries on his foot. Smiled again when she handed over the sleeping draught for rodents made of Ergot, an imported fungus from Rumania, and chamomile tea. Always washing cake pans and pots stuck up with caramelized sugar and grease and tar and pitch and dried egg from the Creme Caramels and fried the burnt Choux Paste, and sticky rotary beaters that were just HUGE, and stacks and stacks of dirty bowls. I felt sorry for her. Her job could very politely be classified as a MEDIUM TORTURE. Sometimes she'd stop working. She would wipe her reddened hands on her dirty apron and slam through the wide stainless steel swing doors and smoke her potent herbal cigarettes. She'd open up a folded Chinese racing form from her uniform pocket and squat. So squatting with her back against the Convention Hall doors she'd refuse to work. It would take a lot of time before she'd start up again. She was obviously living in some other time and space. Sometimes Pierre broke down first and was forced to phone upstairs MANAGEMENT and very, very, politely, so as not to alarm either of the two christ-like Mr. Brown's, who might become uneasy and come down for a chat with Pierre "to see what exactly the situation was," in fact Pierre would ask so politely if it was possible that one of the Chinese translators could pop

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downstairs whenever one of them had a moment...there was something reptile about his politeness. He would grimace and then smile, using the same muscles. His tongue protruding from between his teeth. You see Chou-Chou spoke not one word of English whenever Pierre was in the kitchen. And she was mean. She once shook her fist at him and said something really frightening in Chinese.

I think the part that I'll never forget was the moment before the fall. They'd decorated the Convention Hall to look like an aviary. Several speakers had given papers on the Nuthatches and the threatened Burrowing Owl and White Pelican species. The DESSERT was waiting in the wings. There was Edgar standing watch with his carving knife in his hands. There was something oddball about the momentum that threatened to capsize the several hundred banquet slaves who stood at the ready. When a signal was given the electronically operated swing doors would open. We only knew there was safety in numbers. Fifteen-hundred-squares of Black Forest Cake already apportioned in the Royal Dulton china would soon be driven into place. We manned our silver trolleys just a little too eagerly.

But right now waiting to be fired again for being late for the third time this week, I began to sweat in my uniform. I pulled one bare foot from my batter-spattered clogs and slid the cool sole up the slightly bristled surface of my inner calf. I hadn't shaved my legs in days. I'd been too busy. And standing like that I cut cookie-cutter petals out of pink marzipan to begin the roses for the day. My standing in that way appealed to...

NELLO: An eighteen-year-old Italian scamp. Born in Venice. As small and mean and fast as a water-shrew, close relative to the rat. An illegal alien and brilliant artist. His medium...cakes. He once topped a carrot cake with a miniature English garden made out of marzipan and called it "Lilacs in Bloom Near the Water Fountain." He dreamed

about all things English; Shakespeare was his personal poet. He would shout blood-curdling things out of *King Lear* and *Macbeth*. I swooped my nose in close to the cake to get the scent of the lilac a couple of times and each time I would be hit by what I swear was a cool spray of mist. He was always bumping and smearing me in the chocolate room. Once he asked me to marry him and I recognized the words from *Romeo and Juliet* and I had to say no.

When I put my foot back in the clog, Nello smiled. I couldn't help but notice that it was held filled with strawberry jam. This was the kind of year that it would continue to be.

With my foot glued securely in my clog, I took a tray of freshly baked sugar cookies into the chocolate room where I had ABSOLUTELY NO REASON to be and walked straight into Pierre's spun sugar hummingbird sitting in its delicate spun sugar birdcage and watched wordlessly as it crumbled onto the counters and the floor. My blood started bubbling in my chest, I walked blindly back into the pastry kitchen and started stammering. "I just locked up...I...the damn...it's broken." Pierre got up off his office chair and moved towards me. It was then that I realized how beady his little boot black eyes really were. He'd made the spun sugar sculpture the day before as the centerpiece for the Ruling Inner Circle of the Audubon Society of North America: an elitist birdwatching group of naturalists with big bucks. I began seriously to pray for a miraculous self-combustion: I wanted to dissolve into air like the flash from two chemicals reacting only in the presence of each other. Pierre looked at me. My face twitching, I noticed how tight the skin was drawn back on his reptilian cheekbones. I saw the corded muscles of his neck like shiny, fat coils, tighten, tighten. I saw him wet his bottom lip and then pull that deadly tongue over and back inside his dark mouth. I looked down and saw that he was wearing his pointy black dress shoes and they gleamed like mirrors and I noticed I was looking at myself, looking to see how it looks just before they stone you to death or bake you in the ovens. I was staring at my own reflection in his narrow shoes. I slowly looked up and counted every black hair on his bare forearms. It seemed like another Dark Age but finally I found his eyes.

I mumbled something like, "I quit."

Pierre said, in the quietest voice I'd ever heard him use, "Why don't you take an early coffee today, Zeldia?" I walked straight towards the door and left Pierre speak before he did. "Just a minute. Why don't you take a longer break and show your face in here at about three o'clock. I want you to work the afternoon shift."

I quickly made my way into the women's changing room and locked myself inside one

of the cubicles. At that moment, with my big throbbing head and red wet eyes, I heard a knock on the cubicle door. It had the voice of an angel.

DONALD: Thirty-two-years-old. Sous Chef for the dining room upstairs. Incredible face. Monogamous as a raccoon and looking for a mate. I had fallen in love with him in the freight elevator, the very first time he and I'd gotten stuck in there.

He went down on his knees and bent his head to look up underneath the cubicle at my watery face.

"Hi, beautiful!"

"I've known a few cocks in my time but here's one I can't seem to get the hang of," I said. "What the hell are you doing in here? Can't I plan my suicide in peace?"

"I just thought you might want to hear about my hot date last night," said Donald. "I had to crawl out of bed in the middle of the night because I was steaming hot. I mean water was dripping off my body, running down my face. My God, I couldn't even see. I had to get out of bed."

"Donald, is this going to hurt me?" "Listen, I'm giving you a scientific blow by blow account of an extraordinary experience I had last night. So I got up from the bed and had to sit near an open window just to cool off a little before plunging back in."

"Donald, who were you sleeping with last night?"

"My housekeeper must have turned up the heat on the waterbed again."

"Donald, I'm going to be muchos fired or something. IN ABOUT FIVE MINUTES and now Pierre wants me to work today's afternoon shift. For Christ's sake, I've been here since 7:30 this morning."

"Listen, he won't fire you because you're his best assistant even if you are a little istsy bitsy teemy weeny bit clumsy."

"Oh God."

"What?" "Donald, I'm going to be sick, my life is such a mess."

"Listen, you're not going to be sick, and you can't quit, and you're not going to get fired because we have a date at 2 o'clock remember?"

"How am I gonna forget? Do you know how many times you remind me about our 2 o'clock dates in the freight elevator?"

"You know something, I've just noticed, and I think you'll appreciate my sensitivity on this...you're in a bad mood."

"Yes, Donald...I'm about to lose my mind and when I get back to work, at any moment, I expect to feel a long cold piece of steel between my shoulder blades when my back

is turned. Have you ever seen the knife that Edgar carries for self-preservation, or what-ever it's for?"

"Fired, schmired, lose my mind. Come on, get out of there. I want to talk to you."

"Donald...I'm not your love slave, okay. I'm sick of being screamed at by Pierre and I want to sit on the john and cry or scream or something. I just want to let of a little steam SO WOULD YOU GET OFF MY CASE and go pick on some teenager for awhile."

That's the thing I always liked about Donald. He never could take no for an answer. Meanwhile he's slunk underneath the cubicle and is standing over me in his white Sous Chef uniform. And boy does he smell good. It's enough to make you want to eat him up or tear off his clothes or something. But it's only half past nine. Lucky thing we're all alone in the changing rooms. Lucky, I guess if you like the smooth operator type. And I don't happen to mind. He's leaning forward and kissing the back of my neck, well, more nuzzling actually, or, well, biting and leaving definite teeth marks, would be more exact. It's a little tight in this space and I've got no choice but to sit here and... "Donald, just what the hell are you..."

Have you ever kissed a Sous Chef before? I mean deeply. They taste of that good French cologne that really makes some women squirm, and radishes, yes, of radishes and

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carrotions, and that bitter tobacco taste of a dark upper lip moustache... "Donald that's beginning to feel very nice." "Well, take off that stupid Chef's coat and it will feel a lot better, I don't even know why they let you wear one, you're female, I can tell, and you're only an assistant." "If you think I was going to wear one of those little nursery-type dress uniforms...forget it, you're crazy. I get more respect in these white trousers and this white blazer. Well I used to before you." "So what have you really got on your mind." "Donald, do you know anybody in the elimination business?" "Not personally, remember I'm from Florida not Sicily. I'm just a good-lookin' American." "No, really...come on, you know everyone upstairs...is there anyone I could talk to?" "Well, yes, I suppose I could introduce you to our new upstairs potscrubber... Joe the Tomato." "I've got this idea and I want the whole thing to work like clockwork." "Okay, listen to me, I'm telling you to go talk to Joe the Tomato." "Alright, it's a deal, now let's get out of this damn cubicle... I'm getting claustrophobic."

It had taken time to talk to everyone and to plan a getaway for that many people. Buses were chartered and were going to pick us up at the side door of the hotel and take us all to Florida. We'd finished the factory assembly-line work and produced 1500 luscious squares of Black Forest Cake, lovingly layered over little sleeping beauties for tomorrow's Audubon luncheon. All was quiet in the kitchen. Everyone else had gone home, and I was waiting for Joe to get off his shift and come downstairs and talk to me. I was sitting in Pierre's office at around 11 p.m., because the Japanese floor washers had come in to hose down the floor and it was the only dry spot. Suddenly a man wearing a tomato costume skated in on the watery concrete.

"Oh, very funny, Donald."

"Hey, you've got your sense of humor back."

"So do you still want to help?"

"Sure, Zeldia."

"Well go and take a look in the middle fridge and tell me what you think."

"I don't hear any squeaks."

"Alright, everything's set for tomorrow."

Have you ever made love to a tomato?

EDITOR'S NOTE: The Four Seasons Hotel continues to deny that anything happened on Sunday, June 15, 1976.

by Linda Zelda Schulz

