

h) Mutt and Jeff

After that year, in the depths of winter, Mutt and Jeff go downstairs from their hotel on the farm floor, where they have stubbornly remained despite the fact that a hotel is very difficult to heat properly. They join a little party welcoming Charlotte back home from D.C. She is threatening to be a one-term wonder, and some people want to talk her into re-upping, while others want her to come back to New York. No doubt there are those who would like to see her disappeared at sea, but most of the occupants of the Met are proud of her and want to tell her that, and celebrate. There's a big crowd in the common room, and Mutt and Jeff sit against a wall watching the action and behaving like the wallflowers they are. Mr. Hexter comes over and sits with them.

"Nice party," he says.

Mutt agrees; Jeff squints. "But where's Charlotte?"

"She was delayed, she just got in. She'll be here in a minute, she said."

And in fact she comes out of the elevator that very moment, with Franklin Garr. They are laughing, and Garr steps back and holds out his hands to present her to the crowd. People cheer.

"So those two are a couple now?" Jeff asks Mutt.

"So I'm told."

"But that's absurd."

"How so? She kept saying he's a nice young man."

"But I thought she was supposed to be smart."

"I think she is."

"And yet."

"Well, tastes differ. And besides, he's been good on the crash. In fact you could say he managed to actually do what you tried to do. What you just waved at with your graffiti hack."

Jeff grumbles some kind of objection to this characterization, but Mutt is having none of it.

"Come on, Jeff. Your sixteen rules of the global economy, remember? Turn the key on those, you said, and we could fix everything. And now our young comrade here has not only called out the fixes for Charlotte, he also designed the crash that allowed the key to start turning."

"Okay, whatever, but *nice young man*? No. Only a shark could do what he did."

"But Charlotte is kind of a shark too."

"Not at all. She's just someone who gets things done."

"Like sharks do! Because she has good judgment!"

"Usually she does."

"So she's probably seeing something in this guy we don't."

"Obviously."

"Shut up, she's coming over to say hi."

Which she does. She looks tired, but happy to be back home among friends. Stefan and Roberto are running around serving drinks to people, and it's looking like they have filched a few too many sips, as they are glassy-eyed and perhaps might have to do like Romans and go spew and then carry on.

Charlotte regards them. "Boys, don't get drunk. You'll regret it."

They nod like owls and shear off to get more.

She sits down wearily beside Mutt and Jeff and Mr. Hexter. "How are you guys?"

"Cold."

"I bet. Don't you want to be the quants who came in from the cold?"

They shrug. "It's nice to be outside," Mutt explains. "I think it may be a while before that feeling goes away for us."

"Like forever," Jeff adds.

"I understand. So, other than that? How's work going?"

The two men shrug again. They are like a synchronized shrugging team.

"We're trying to light up the dark pools. Build a little spoof-catching program."

"It would stop front-running too."

"Good to hear," Charlotte said. "Have you spoken to Larry Jackman about it?"

"He knows. It's one of the outstanding problems. Of which there are many."

"What are you going to do with all the money coming in?" Mutt asks her.

She laughs. "Spend it!"

"But on what?"

"We'll find things. Maybe just up the living wage. Free people up to work on what they want. Like you guys."

"Some people like to fuck things up."

She nods. "Like about half the members of Congress."

"So how do you deal with them?"

"I don't. I yell at them. Right now we've got the momentum, so I do my best to steamroll them. Introduce a bill a day. Like a flurry in boxing. So far it's been working."

"So you can't quit, right?"

"Oh yes I can! I want to come back here. There's things to do here. And D.C. will take care of itself. It doesn't need me."

"I hope that's true," Mutt says.

"Sure it is. They don't need me."

They do their shrug. They're not so sure. There's only one Charlotte. With an effort she gets up. "Okay, I'm going to mingle. Good to see you guys."

"You too. Thanks."

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Then Inspector Gen emerges from the elevator and walks by:

"Hey Inspector!" Mutt says. "How are ya?"

She stops. Cop on the beat, hang with her people. "I'm okay. Working. How are you guys?"

"We're good."

She grabs a free chair from the nearest table and sits down heavily beside them. "I was just here for a shower and now I'm on my way back out. My assistants are gonna come get me and we're going back to work."

"Now? It's late, isn't it?"

"We're on a case. There's something I want to find as soon as we can."

"Hey speaking of cases," Mutt says. "did you ever find out anything more about whoever it was who kept us in that container?"

She shook her head. "No, nothing much. Nothing I could prove. I think I know who might have done it, but we never got evidence solid enough for a conviction."

"That's too bad. I don't like the idea that they're still out there."

"Or that they got away with it," Jeff adds grimly.

She nods. "Well, that's right. But, you know. Some of the people involved with that might have thought they were doing you a favor. Might have thought they were saving you from something worse."

"I wondered about that," Jeff says.

"It's just a theory. I'll be keeping my eye on the people who might have been involved. Not the ones who thought they were helping you, just the ones who actually did it. They're a bunch of idiots, so they're bound to fuck up sooner or later in a way where we can nail them."

"We hope so," Mutt says.

Inspector Gen nods wearily. "Meanwhile, my assistant Sean finally got a package out of the SEC, some stuff they got in a bundle when the Chicago exchange got hacked. Sean said it was mostly a bunch of crazy political stuff, SEC couldn't make anything of it, but there were some financial fixes in it that they've actually put to use. You boys know anything about that?"

"Not me," Mutt says. "Sounds like some different kind of idiot."

"Maybe so." The inspector stares at them. "Well, you take help where you can get it, right?"

"Oh definitely, certainly. That's what we do all the time."

Then her two assistants show up, a young man and woman in uniforms, bags of sandwiches in hand.

"Okay, back to work," the inspector says, standing up with a groan.

"I'll see you guys up on the farm."

Off the three officers go, headed for another long night in front of their screens. Mutt and Jeff know what that's like, and give each other a glance.

"She works hard."

"She likes to work."

"I guess that's right. Also, it passes the time."

It passes the time; and then you don't have to think. Don't have to have a life. This is what they know, and so they watch the inspector leave with puzzled expressions on their faces. How can they help their friend, caught as they are in the same trap themselves? It's a mystery to be gnawed at.

"So the SEC is using the contributions of some lunatic?"

"Fuck you."

"You're welcome."

Then, just as the Institute of Murt and Jeff is about to call it a night and retire to their hotello, Amelia Black breezes by and grabs them by the arm.

"Come on guys, it's time to go dancing."

"No way!"

"Way. I want to hear this band, and I need company. I need an escort."

"Can't you hire escorts?" Jeff asks grumpily.

Amelia pretends to be offended. "Please!" she retorts. "I mean, please?" They can't really say no to her. For one thing, she is a lot stronger than even the two of them put together, not just physically but in terms of will. What Lola wants Lola gets: another New York story. So they are swept along on each side of her, their arms firmly clamped by hers. Down to the boathouse, out onto the ice covering the bacino. They tramp up Madison with all the other walkers on the iced-over canal, staying near the buildings and leaving midcanal for skaters, of which there are many. The avenues are well lit, the streets are dark. Amelia steers them up a few blocks and then hangs a right on Thirty-third. Very few people on this canal. Closed shops at canal level, apartments in the three or four stories above. A quiet night. She guides them in a door and down some basement stairs, take a turn and down again, down and down into some submarine speakeasy. A door with MEZZROW's painted on it opens its Judas window, and Amelia puts her face on view. Door quickly opens, and in they go.

Long bar here, barely room to move behind the people occupying the stools or standing as they belly up to the bar. Bartenders madly busy. A clatter of talk and clinking glasses. Squeezing behind these people, Amelia leads the guys to the back, where there is another door, and a doorman taking a fee for entering. Amelia shows him her wristpad and they are all three waved in.

Nearly empty room, very small. Tin ceiling painted blood red and crimped in square patterns. At the far end a band is setting up in a leisurely

way, tuning electric guitars, trying out licks, chatting to each other in French. Half of them black Africans, half of them whites, no one seems local. After a while the guitarists settle down in folding chairs against the far wall and begin playing. It's some kind of West African pop, fast and intricate. Two guitar players, an electric bass man, a drummer playing fast but quietly, mostly on one cymbal. The two guitars have different tones, one clean and sharp, the other fuzzy. They lay down complicated lines, crossing each other and the bass. Then a trumpet and a trombone player join in and pop some choruses in harmony. A man and a woman trade off on the vocals, which are in some language neither French nor English: very complicated shouting, followed by long howling melodies, wonderfully accentuated by the horns.

Infectious music, for sure. People from the bar drift in and some begin to dance. Pretty soon the room is full; this only takes thirty people. Amelia and the guys have been sitting against the back wall, but now Amelia pulls them to their feet and they join the dancing. The guys are not dancers. Some are born bad, some achieve badness. . . . Murt, the situation having been thrust upon him, moves in tiny abrupt jerks. Jeff flails so spasmodically he achieves some kind of nerd sublime. Amelia, somewhat to their surprise, was just born bad. Hands over her head, she twirls, she waves; she could not be more off the rhythm.

Jeff yells in Murt's ear, "Our gal is a terrible dancer!"

"Yeah, but can you take your eyes off her?"

"Of course not!"

"That's Amelia for ya. Our klutz goddess."

Everyone in the room is now grooving to the tightest West African pop any of them have ever heard. The guitar players' licks are like metal shavings coming off a lathe. The vocalists are wailing, the horns are a freight train.

Then another musician comes into the room carrying two instrument cases, one small, one big. Tall skinny guy, very pale white skin, black beard. The rest of the band waves to him, gestures for him to hurry and join in. He sits down and opens the large case and assembles something bizarre, the guys don't even recognize it. "Bass clarinet!" Amelia shouts at them. She knows this band, she's excited this guy is here. He also fits a mouthpiece onto a tiny saxophone, soprano sax no doubt, but curved like

an alto rather than straight. Together the two reeds look like instruments from a clown circus.

Finally the young reed man stands up and gives the sax mouthpiece a lick, joins right in with the song already going. Okay, this is the star of the band. Immediately he is zooming around in the tune like a maniac. The other horn players instantly get better, the guitar players even more precise and intricate. The vocalists are grinning and shouting duets in harmony. It's like they've all just plugged into an electrical jack through their shoes. The young reed man sounds like he is maybe a klezmer star in his other bands, and it might not have been obvious before that klezmer fits so well with West African pop, but now it's very clear. He swoops up and down the scale, screeches across the supersonic, jams in a perfect driving rhythm with the others. It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing, but it does. Crowd goes crazy, dancing swells the room. There is barely clearance for the band, they are pressed against the back wall, dancers occasionally elbow them. Jeff is a dancing fool: there are so many rhythms in this music that he almost matches one. In fact it's pretty amazing he can miss all of them at once, but he can. And he is Nureyev compared to Amelia. Murt can't stop laughing at the sight of his two friends' gyrations; Amelia is grinning at him. Very few gals dance so badly, she's got a knack. The guys can't help enjoying the sight of such a clumsy babe. Their friend, their dance partner! Might be some of the people in the room recognize her, but no one lets on, and maybe they don't. It's a big world. The reed man picks up the bass clarinet and plays it the same way he played the soprano sax, following the bass player through a chase the dancers mostly hear in their bellies. It's weirdly thrilling. People start howling to release the vibrations.

Many songs later Amelia makes a gesture, and the guys nod. All things must pass, and it's late. The dancing might go on all night, but they are content. They'll freeze their ass on the trip home, they are so sweaty. But home they must go.

Back out through the jammed bar, louder than ever, where already people don't seem aware of what they're missing just one wall away. Up the steps, onto the frozen canal. Standing there, outside the hole running down to the bar.

It's something like 4 a.m., so for once the city is quiet. Of course there

are some people out and about, but still, it's pretty empty, pretty quiet. There's no indication whatsoever of what's going on in the rooms beneath them.

They stare at each other like they are coming out from under a spell, shake their heads. They walk out onto the frozen canal, Amelia holding on to the guys, all stepping carefully. It is indeed cold. They will indeed freeze on the way home.

"Could you believe that guy on the whatever?"

"I know. Fucking amazing. Best music I ever heard."

"And now, look at this, here we are right on top of the place, and it's like they're not even there!"

"It's true. And there was hardly anyone there anyway. I never even caught the band's name."

"They might not even have a name."

"Heck, there's probably fifty bands like them playing tonight in this city. Dances like that going on right now, all over town."

"It's true. Fucking New York."