

COVER PAGE

A Red-Letter Day

Wally Parker

~ 1717 words

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Printed December 4, 2006

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Rufus Birdlime awoke in an unfamiliar room.

His heart was a jackhammer pounding against his ribs. His skin was taut and cold with sweat. His eyes sought out in the faintly shadowed blackness any motion, any threatening shape. His ears strained for a sound.

But there was none.

Where was he? He'd gone to lunch with the Quazon sisters, Karen and Twisted. They'd consumed many cocktails and gotten incredibly drunk. Instead of growing more svelte and seductive as the booze wore on, like they were supposed to, the Quazon sisters had become ever more gross and repulsive, until, when they accompanied one another to the bathroom, no doubt to decide which of them should suck his manhood into her spongy corpulence, Rufus bolted from the table, fled the restaurant, and for half an hour fled through streets and alleyways, back yards and parking lots, until, bruised and exhausted, he found himself in yet another bar.

It wasn't often one found any bar open on Easter, and it wasn't often his birthday, just at the end of March, fell on Easter either. This, Rufus reflected, was a special day.

"VO and soda," he said to the bartender, who regarded him with an eye one reserves for oddities.

Rufus smoothed his hair and laid a twenty on the bar. Nothing like a twenty to make a person look normal.

The bartender placed a paper napkin and then the drink in front of him. "Two-fifty out of twenty," he said, picking up the bill.

The bar was dark, soft, empty but for himself and the bartender.

"Name's Leon," the bartender said as he laid the change on the bar.

Rufus gazed into quite a few VO-and-sodas before he realized a woman was sitting next to him. She was young and beautiful. And fragrant. Her long legs dangled

dangerously near his own. She spoke to the bartender.

“Jack neat, Leon.”

“You have to say, ‘please,’ Anna.”

“You know me, baby,” she said; “I *always* say ‘please.’”

He grinned as he poured the whiskey in front of her, finishing with a flourish when she responded, “single,” to his question.

“Oh, ah, Anna,” Leon said, gesturing toward Rufus, “this is, ah, my old friend...”

“Rufus,” Rufus said.

She’d been waiting all her life to meet someone named Rufus. She’d had a dream about him, when she was a little girl. A dream that had haunted her ever since the tall, lanky cowboy in levis, with a face made of supple rawhide, had begun visiting her, like an incubus, in the quiet of the night.

All this he could see in her eyes. Warm, liquid, languid, longing eyes, big and brown, turned up to him as her legs wound around his, drawing him into her.

“Sir,” she said.

“Sir...”

Rufus awoke with a start, spilling his drink across the polished faux rosewood of the bar.

The barmaid righted the glass and smiled tolerantly at the glistening liquid as she mopped it up with a towel. “That’s the second one, sir,” she said. “I’m afraid you’ll have to go.”

The bright sunlight stabbed at his eyes. He raised his forearm to his brow, shading it. The street was milling with people, neatly dressed, about their business, not looking at him. He shuffled down the sidewalk, stumbling occasionally and stopping then to regain his composure, such as it was. Everything seemed thick and vague. Then a speeding truck came by, just as he reached the intersection. Good thing he hadn’t been crossing the street. On the door there were painted yellow words. “Asbury Zoo,” they

said. As it passed he saw standing on its straw-strewn bed, largely hidden by the slatted sides, a hippopotamus, round and pink, and then the truck hit the half-filled trench the utility company had plowed across the street and the hippo went flying, up into the air like a ponderous monster ballon in a big-city parade, its yawning mouth gaping to reveal the peglike teeth, begging for white bread with big, dumb eyes, and then it hit the hot summer asphalt with a “whoomp,” and exploded like a watermelon, bloody pink and brown chunks flying everywhere.

Rufus’ mind swirled through a series of labyrinthine caves, running, searching. Where was Anna? Suddenly he found himself standing at the edge of a cliff, overhanging a vast peaceful green valley, so far below, and the cliff’s edge crumbling. You can’t see, he thought, what’s just under you. Is the ground secure here? Should he step back? The earth disintegrated under one foot, and he staggered backwards just as it fell, clattering, revealing the yawning emptiness below.

“Rufe!”

“Anna!” he shouted, reaching out for her as he fell, his voice emerging from him in a reluctant whisper, gravelly, churning, like the sound of pebbles choking in the dark throat of Demosthenes. His beloved...

“Rufus, wake up.”

It was Karen. Her voice, her eyes in the shadows. Her sour smell. An echo from far away, like the wind caressing the trees. Puffy pig eyes with little black centers. A tiny mouth, shaped like a cinnabar moth, receding into the doughy depths between her cheeks, above her chin, like a penny at the bottom of a dark well.

“Leon’s downstairs,” she said.

“Leon? Why Leon? Where’s Anna?”

Leon appeared in the doorway. He bent down and switched on a lamp. His red beard jiggled as he spoke. “Hey buddy! You okay?”

He approached the bed as Karen faded away. Leon said something to her as she

passed him. She nodded and left the room.

“Just resting my eyes,” Rufus said, sitting up. “I’m fine. What’s going on?” He threw off the covers, revealing himself fully clothed but shoeless. He rubbed his brow and pulled the feeling down over his face with his hand.

“You look like shit,” Leon said, standing before him now. “And you stink. Listen, grab some clean clothes and go take a quick shower. I mean quick, understand? I’ll wait right here. When you get done, I’ll tell you everything.”

Rufus stood up unsteadily, taking the lapel of Leon’s jacket in his hands. “Tell me something now,” he hissed, his voice rasping against his tongue, which was stuck somewhere between his teeth. “What’s going on? Why are you here?”

“Hey,” Leon laughed, stepping back and lifting Rufus’ hands from his coat. “Too many questions, bud. Think about it. It’s your birthday. Look at me. Dressed up, eh? Now take a shower. People are waiting for you.”

The hot water was thundering in the shower stall and slowly it filled the bathroom with steam while Rufus shaved. The mirror grew foggier. It was his birthday. There were people downstairs. He could hear their laughter and the clinking of the glasses.

He took out a new razor. He liked shaving with a new razor. It cut clean and easy. He went after a single black hair that grew from the corner of his mouth, just at the margin of his lip. It required some contortion of his face to expose it to the blade. “Gotcha!” he said, and in that instant he cut himself.

“Damn,” he said, and after a moment the blood welled up into a miniature dome that burst, sending a torrent of crimson downwards over glistening wet skin onto the nub of his chin.

He wiped the mirror with his palm and peered into it. The hair was gone. A Pyrrhic victory, but a victory nonetheless. “Ha!” he said aloud. Then he groped his way through the thick warm fog to the shower stall door and slid it open. He felt around for

the temperature control knob. His fingers closed over something round and smooth. Too soft to be plastic. A breast. A naked human breast. A female breast.

“Anna!” his cry bounced from every wall, from the ceiling, from the tub, the sink, the floor, the shower stall, where it spun around and around, louder each time it passed him, slurring down cavernous hallways whose endless innards spoke and shouted and groaned their hollow cries, echoing everything, carrying the red blood of Rufus Birdlime and the red beard of Leon the bartender and the tremulous red lips of Karen Quazon and the suffused red eyes of poor Anna down from the showerpipe to which they’d been mated with a blue coat hanger.

The body was stiff. She’d been dead for hours. He opened the bathroom door and softly buzzing clouds of steam swarmed out, trying to escape the awful scene. “Leon!” he shouted, but only a dry whisper issued from his lips. A hand emerged through the swirling fog before him and bade him retreat. Then a face appeared from the grayness. It was Karen.

“Leon’s gone,” she said. “They’re all gone.”

She crossed the white tile floor and knelt beside the grimacing corpse, its face gaping and wooden. The wire coathanger was so tight around her neck he’d been unable to remove it. He’d got her down by unscrewing the showerhead. The loop of wire stuck out stiffly from her neck. Karen twisted and broke it and peeled it away from—out of, really—the distended purplish flesh of her neck. Then she pried a wad of paper from Anna’s gaping mouth. It was a note. She unfolded it, glanced at it, and handed it to him. “Happy birthday,” it said.

Karen lay naked on his bed like an uncooked pancake, clad only in gigantic white panties. Her mouth reached out to him like a red garden hose tipped with morning glory lips, sucking, sucking. And then the police burst in. They said nothing but took everyone into custody. Karen seemed suddenly small again, childlike, coy, innocent. Anna! She reached beneath her little blue-and-white starched pinafore and withdrew the

bloodstained panties.

Suddenly he was running again, the police in hot pursuit. Dashing down a long hallway, up the stairs, then darting into this room, then another, then another, all small and windowless traps. At the far wall another door. He flung it open. Empty space yawned beneath him, eight, maybe ten stories to the rocky ground below. It took his breath away. A police battering ram shuddered against the door behind him and then with a shout imploded through the splintering wood. There was no other exit. He jumped.