

The New Bag Men

*How it is in New Haven
when you don't win the
lottery*

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Brown Sugar stands outside the door of the bar in New Haven

where I work, under the eaves at closing time. At first he's patient; then he isn't, and he raps on the plate-glass window, just above the name of the place, painted in silver sans-serif script. "Let's go, babygirl, let's go," he says to me through the glass, shouting over the rain, the wind, the students stumbling out of the bar to their warm, dry dormitories. "Let me in. Brown sugar melts." There is always an emphasis on the last syllable.

His voice is always urgent. He pushes the door open with caution, assessing what's behind him and with a quick mental inventory of what's been taken away already. The wind can bear back on the door's weight sometimes, and Brown Sugar and I begin our nightly ritual, handing over the ale-brown plastic garbage bins. Bottles and cans and bits of fruit and broken glass, cigarette and cigar butts, so many ashes, water that we dumped into the bins when we thought we smelled a fire starting; they all are handed to Brown Sugar. Our pale bare hands, some more calloused than others, struggle with all the heft of what others have discarded, until Brown Sugar takes it from us, helping us to tie knots into the black plastic as we go. Brown Sugar hauls trash for Yale and Yale's buildings. The bar isn't in one of Yale's buildings, but he does the job for us anyway, right at closing time, which is more than the city or a private will do.

"Now, the other guys, they ain't gonna do this for you, because they don't have our bond," Brown Sugar reminds me, nodding his head on the last word. "And don't you tell nobody that I do this for you."

Brown Sugar always wears a navy wool hat, even when it's warm, over a navy blue sweatshirt with YALE spelled out in that tell-tale white lettering. If there's a remote reference made to the city in our negotiations—Commencement Week, when no trash is to go out, but trash must go somewhere—Brown Sugar stops it before it

crosses that threshold: “I work for Yale,” he says, like we are customers about to spit in the ashtrays. “I work for Yale,” he’ll say again, as clear and bold as the letters on his sweatshirt.

Brown Sugar used to come around with the Boogie Man, a man with ash-black skin, slicked-back, Jheri-curved hair, wild eyes, and a sly smile that stays to the ground. “Evenin’, beautiful,” the Boogie Man would say, strutting, hands in the pockets of his dress slacks, shirt unbuttoned down his sternum and tucked under his pot belly, looking at the bins, waiting on Brown Sugar. His big ol’ bucket jalopy would loiter outside.

“Don’t open that gray one,” I said to the Boogie Man one night.

“Why, what happened?” Brown Sugar shouted.

“Someone pissed in it.”

“Oh, why they gotta do that!” Brown Sugar shouted like he was the one who just had to bleach down a bathroom. The Boogie Man chuckled and stared at the ground. “I’ll take that bag,” Brown Sugar laughed, shaking his head from side to side. “Yale’s got a compactor for the piss!”

One December, the Boogie Man stopped coming around the bar, before or after hours. His absence from the dark corners at last call—his skin no brighter under the unforgiving lights of closing time, but his sly smile a little wider—did not go unnoticed.

Brown Sugar was taking the garbage from the bins. It was getting cold and he was careful, as he always is, to remind us all that he is, in his words, a tropical person, when he announced his concerns to the babygirls—all of us who worked at the bar, in slinky black, layers of mascara and eyeliner smudged into bruises under our red eyes, hunched over our shift drinks and plastic ashtrays, running someone else’s money in our hands, trying to figure out what our take would be.

“I think the Boogie Man died,” Brown Sugar shrugged.

Sarah, the manager, ran her fingers through the pile of singles in front of her, looked at the night’s sales report, then Brown Sugar,

and laughed. “Now why would you think that? That’s a little morbid. It’s the holidays. He probably went away. Why is that the first thing you come up with, Brown Sugar?”

“I don’t know. I ain’t seen him with his bucket. He don’t wear no jacket either, he could catch a real bad cold like that. Ima go to the Elks Club this week. The Boogie Man likes to hang out there. I’ll see where he is.”

I didn’t look up from the pile of cash in front of me, and there was still bourbon in my mouth when I told Brown Sugar, “You let us know if you hear anything.”

Stonybrook is a private community within a private community.

It’s tucked away in a corner of Weston, Connecticut. In the early twentieth century—when Weston was not yet an enclave exclusively for the wealthy—a band of Zionists bought up a tract of land along the river and operated it as a commune. In those days, before Israel, Zion could be anywhere.

By the 1950s, Zion had a home and a name on a map across the sea, but new communists arrived. Ring Lardner moved in, along with several other members of the Hollywood Ten. In the sixties, a group of nuns sat on the porch of a Cape Cod and talked about kidnapping Henry Kissinger. There were community square dances every October.

Then came the yuppies, the magazine editors, the art school professors, the keepers of second homes. The clay tennis courts and the community newsletters, the speed bumps placed every three feet on one-lane unmarked roads, all to remind the visitors that they were visitors, and the people here, they belonged.

It was here where my parents settled, having sold first Koonabura Farms (really a house with some stables, two paddocks, and cherry trees lining the driveway), and then the house on Hill Farm Road (a pre-Revolutionary farmhouse that had once attended to a dairy farm). Koonabura Farms, my mother told me, had been built

by a prominent archaeologist who had spent some time somewhere in Africa, maybe Kenya, but my parents didn't buy it from an archaeologist. They bought it from the mistress of a French banker—a billionaire, my mother swore—who was impressed by my nurse's Guyanese accent. My mother told the mistress she could have my nurse. My parents always found ways to complain about “the help,” ways that I didn't know could bristle a person, ways that would lock my jaw and wrinkle my nose and send me swearing under my breath to the wait station when I grew up to become other people's help. With my parents, it was a low murmuring in the house, over bagels and orange juice and the Sunday paper and the local university's classical station, the manifestation of their casual irritation with a competent but not spectacular hiring decision, like the au pairs who lasted six weeks, six months, rarely a year; not unlike the pony they bought, who would only canter for sweet feed.

My mother uses the same voice when she talks about my father now, when she tells me decades later that he paid the asking price, plus an extra \$50,000, for Koonabura Farms. She uses the same voice when she says he's late with her modest alimony, and then she will whisper and shriek at once: It wasn't even his money.

Ralph Buonotto moves like a great walrus, shoulders rolled over and around his great frame, his gait a steady side-to-side waddle, his face shining, always smiling. He doesn't care for Block Island, like the rest of the service industry workers: the owners who run off for quiet weekends with mistresses; the managers who swap shifts to fall asleep in the sun with plastic drinks in their hands, for once, no customers to interrupt them; the barflies and regulars and friends of the house who need a change of scene and scrutiny.

“If you don't drink, there's nothing to do,” Ralph says. His deliberate waddle leads him behind the counter of the bar—a privilege reserved for the few remaining from the previous owners, what Harry calls “the old regime”—to pull a cigar from its case every Saturday morning, as unobtrusively as a man of his girth could.

“Behind you,” he’ll say, if he sees you working, as if you could miss him. Ralph and his wife, Linda, run the vegetarian restaurant on the corner. It is the sort of pre-Gwyneth Paltrow vegetarian food that made the place popular in the seventies, when they were pioneers. There was no Brown Sugar to pick up the trash, the city ran on pay-back and fixed tickets, and there was no guarantee that the students who patronized the restaurant would be able to cross the intersection of Chapel and College Streets, since renamed Bishop Desmond Tutu Corner, without getting mugged.

Ralph and Linda are loved, by neighbors, by former employees, by the blue-and-white Ivy League institution across the street that is their landlord. Their employees have health insurance and earn a living wage, so the spare change that would go in the tip jar goes to curing cancer, or feeding stray dogs, or whatever charity of the month Linda and Ralph have chosen.

It is a busy Wednesday night when Brown Sugar stops his Yale-appointed golf cart outside the bar and walks in. Brown Sugar and the others who pick up Yale’s trash do not typically go past the threshold of the bar, but this is an emergency.

“Where my man in the hat!” Brown Sugar demands.

This is how more than one person asks for my manager, Frankie the Hat, so named for the fedora that rests above his bulldog face. Frank has been married and divorced three times, dates only the young or the married, and drinks most of his meals, even though he is a diabetic who sleeps with an insulin pump attached to his hip. Because of this aversion to eating, Frankie is distinguished not just by his hat, but by his temper, and has, in the past, been asked to attend anger management seminars.

“Where’s the old man, with the glasses?”

Now Brown Sugar is asking for Harry, who has been at the bar longer than most white-collar workers get to be at their jobs: forty-five years. Harry holds a master’s degree in Spanish literature. He has never married, though he proposed to someone, once, and he spends

his days keeping stock and “watering the garden,” his euphemism for refilling the humidifiers. For many, Harry is the face of the bar, and most assume he’s the owner. He isn’t.

“Harry goes home at six, you know that,” I say.

“I need to speak with a manager.”

“I can give them a message.” Brown Sugar and I don’t have that much of a bond.

“Ralph,” Brown Sugar says. “You know Ralph. From round the corner. Comes here and gets cigars. Ralph died tonight.”

“How do you know?” There is always skepticism on what we call the Block, the stretch of College that runs between Chapel and Crown, just feet away from Yale’s Phelps Gate and Old Campus and all the places that seem so safe and old, ivy crawling around, with no trash in sight.

“I work for Yale. I take care of the building.”

Brown Sugar picks up two bags of trash and leaves.

I tell the owner, I tell the managers, I come in to tell Harry in the morning. They all whisper their sadness and oh, noes, but denying something doesn’t make it less true.

It was winter when Min was struck by a car, running across the roadside somewhere in the privileged hinterland on the border of Westport and Weston. The roads were one way, mostly, and marked with speed bumps, though there are few signs. Min had made his way to the turnpike that ran between Westport and Weston, a whole two lanes with few lights along the way, and my mother found him when she was driving home, a bloody black and white bear of a Maine Coon, and she nestled him in the silk lining of her camel hair coat and sobbed all the way to the veterinarian, and then ate two chocolate bars and a frozen pizza when she came home, telling my sister and brother the same thing she did every Sunday: “The diet starts tomorrow.”

The ground was frozen then, and Min came to rest in our freezer, packed in a cardboard box, mummified in black plastic garbage

bags. My mother came to like having him there. At the time, her joys were mostly Prosecco bought wholesale and on credit, entertainment television—the network shows that happen after the evening news—and napping. Min had been one of her few joys then, too, and she was not prepared to part with another thing. We had parted with so much already, or rather, my father had wagered them and lost them for us. My mother's inheritance, run over and flattened; the credit rating of any household member over eighteen, mangled and bleeding red; the house, as underwater as it would have been had it sank into the Saugatuck itself. We were left with the ugly accounting of what could you sell to fix it.

We learned to start paying our rent ourselves. One sister found a job as a personal assistant to a well-to-do couple and eBayed the wife's designer clothing. Another stayed an extra year in college, taking out loans, and slept in her friends' guest rooms over the summer. My brother was stuck with our family, moving between houses that had sat on the market too long, rented at a discount rate as part of a home staging service. My mother worked two jobs, more than she ever had in her entire life. My father slept mostly in his Prius, in friends' guest houses, and in rooms rented by the week. I drank heavily, waited tables, and eventually convinced someone to just let me bartend. Or write. Or rent from them. The someone was almost always a man.

"It's dead tonight," I whine to Paulie Maggadinno, undertaker to New Haven's stars.

"Yeah, I know," says Paulie, chewing on a giant cigar. "It's dead in my office, too."

We both know it's funny but neither of us can laugh. We draw tired smiles out of the sides of our mouths and snort through our noses. Paulie's nose is so prominent that before I knew his name, before we had a bond, I simply called him the Roman Nose.

Paulie and I have a bond, but not like Sarah and him have a bond. Paulie and Sarah are two closed-off people thrust into a world of smiling and shaking hands and wearing hair product and backing a

guy up. There are obligations in their world, and I feel like I am doing fieldwork whenever I enter it. Maybe they do, too, but Sarah and Paulie are from here and they don't call it *mozzarella*, but *mootz*. Their people have their houses down by the airport, their elaborate nativity displays for Christmas, their Columbus Day Parade, their old "connections", their private clubs on Grand Avenue from before the Mexicans took over the neighborhood. Their great-grandparents were immigrants. Their grandparents owned delis and grocery stores and were aldermen. Their parents went into construction and made the right donations. They run contracting businesses and restaurants and own property and work in banks, and they are Paulie's and Sarah's people, whether Paulie and Sarah like it or not.

So it is Paulie's job to collect Ralph's great blubbery body on Wednesday night, and the wake is on Friday evening. Ralph's financial managers are at the bar, laughing into their glasses of scotch. One of them, a short man with expensive taste, and the salary to afford the alterations his suits must require, stands on a footrest to get eye level with his peers. He's gesturing like he's conducting an orchestra and laughing at his own jokes. It's only two days after Ralph has died. They are "on their way" to the wake, they tell me.

I follow the wake revelers from the bar to the Maggadino Funeral Home and all of us line up in the cold, the service industry workers and the regulars all smoking cigarettes and cigars and riding out the weather in Wooster Square, still delivering the handshakes and the smiles and the say-hello-to-your-father-for-me gestures, just a little quieter, with their eyes to the ground and the air thick, waiting to move into the bright room inside. Wooster Square is filled with Christmas lights and nativity displays, and the char from the pizza ovens a block over mixes with the cigar smoke and everybody's frozen breath.

Inside, Linda dabs her eyes and tells me and Frank how much the bar meant to Ralph. That it is such a special place. Frank and I prop each other up; I am as full of scotch as the rest of us, and don't

know whether to feel less or more guilty than those who were closer to Ralph.

Outside the funeral home, with char in the air and lines stretching as far as the Christmas lights and nativity scenes, I am sharing in someone's sadness that isn't mine. When my mother moves to New Haven, I take her through Wooster Square's brownstones and cobblestones and parks. "I will never have anything to do with the guineas again," she tells me.

It's mid-January when the Boogie Man rolls back around. He struts in with snakeskin loafers like he was in the night before, like there has been no lost time or change in seasons. Jacketless in the snow, he has a dinged-up brown-black pick-up truck to show for his travels. The big ol' bucket jalopy is retired to its station outside the Elks Club on Dixwell Avenue.

"We were worried about you!" I say, scolding him.

"I was in Arkansas! That's where my people are." And the Boogie Man sizes up the trash cans and waits in the corner. At 1 A.M., Brown Sugar yells for him in relief.

"The Boogie Man is always out there, chasin' that bread," Brown Sugar says.

A few months later, Yale tells Brown Sugar not to pick up our trash. We are "causing a problem," he is told to say, but that problem is really that we aren't a Yale building. The owner demands that we lug the garbage down the block and through an alley under a parking garage, past several other less economical dumpsters, to a dumpster that is located at the corner of rapey and sketchy. We babygirls all take turns refusing to do so and threatening to quit. Each time, we all get a little closer. But it doesn't stop the Boogie Man from strutting through, every night, to say his heeeey, babys and evening, beautifuls. And it doesn't break our bond with Brown Sugar, doesn't stop us from blowing kisses to him through the plate glass window and asking him how his daughter is. Eventually, we all quit, having

outgrown something that was bigger than any of us in the first place.

Brown Sugar says that he knew someone who won the lottery. He hasn't seen them since, but he doesn't think they're dead; they just left the ivy on the university and the trash on College Street and the lights on Wooster Square and the private clubs on Grand Avenue and the Elks Club on Dixwell Avenue, just set out of New Haven and never saw a reason to come back. And when the Boogie Man goes missing again, it is because he has made his way to the casinos in his bucket, turning the black bags into the rough dollars that we run through our fingers, every night, after the revelers have left and other people's waste and sadness stop being ours to handle.

