

They sat in the front seat smoking dope and listening to a Muddy Waters tape until Hugh ripped open his door, dragged him into the street and screamed, "What the fuck do you think you're doin', man? She's nineteen years old."

A GOOD-LOOKING TOMATO

The strongest thread holding Bill to his ten years now of grill cooking at the Loma Alta Cafe is the opportunity the job affords him to prey on the steady stream of come-and-go waitresses that roll in and out of the place. A slobbering and hedonistic opportunist is Bill, but lately the old girl, Betty, has been cramping his style.

Betty was hired on three years ago as a waitress but she has evolved into a de facto assistant manager, running the joint when the owner is away, and she has taken it upon herself to warn all the new girls about Bill's proclivities, bringing up the specter of venereal disease, since, "...that rutting pig has stuck his little thing in 'bout every dirty hole between San Diego and L.A."

Some of the girls find that type of unprincipled behavior perversely appealing — a challenge in wild animal domestication — and Bill still gets his share, considering his low station in life, but what he wants now is the newest of the new girls, even though Betty threatened him with castration, and a quick sauteeing of the severed gonads, if he so much as lays a hand on this one, because this one is Betty's eighteen-year-old granddaughter, Nichole.

"You know why," Nichole says to Bill, stopping her task of placing cold butter pats in the monkey dishes she has lined up on the wooden work table just long enough to give the man's too-close body an elbow to the ribs, "Grandma doesn't like you?" Bill grunts at the jab to his side and says, "because she is a nasty, mean-spirited old bitch who can't stand to see a guy have a little fun?" "No," Nichole replies, placing the monkey dishes on a tray so she can carry them out to the dining room. "It's because you come on to all the young girls but you ignore her," and Nichole's eyes widen for emphasis as she tacks on the word, "Stupid." And then she is gone, pushing out into the dining room, leaving the doors swinging behind her.

Bill scratches his elbow and rubs the sore spot on his ribs. He looks at the service window as Betty's scowling and suspicious face appears. She puts a ticket on the wheel and says, "Order up, shithead," and then she is gone, too, shouting to Nichole to hurry up and clear table seven.

"Think about it," says Nichole as she bumps into the kitchen with a stack of dirty dishes. "Just show her a little attention, a little compliment; she'll ease up on you then."

Bill, out in the dining room on his post-lunch-rush break, didn't mean to pull Betty down on his lap; he just meant to grab her wrist and pull her up alongside him, up against his leg to call her a good-looking tomato (a phrase he had heard one of her contemporaries, his father, use) and to tell her she looked like she was losing weight. But Betty had worked a full shift and her old gams were tired. She folded up when the back of her knee hit Bill's thigh, and Bill, in his attempt to scoot across the bench away from the dropping butt, only succeeded in wedging himself, with plump Betty on his lap, between the booth's bench seat and the bottom of the table, very snuggly.

There was an initial burst from Betty of mortified and outraged screaming and thrashing and stuck-tight squirming, the sugar and napkin dispensers toppling, the salt and pepper shakers vibrating across the table and over the edge and to the floor. When Betty dislodged herself — scraped thighs, two big runs in her panty hose — and turned to slap Bill silly, Bill bounced out of the other side of the booth and ran, beating Betty to the front door by a step, while Dolores and Nichole laughed themselves sick up by the register.

After a short but unsuccessful chase across the parking lot, Betty stomped back into the restaurant and slapped Nichole hard enough to knock her off her feet, and then she fired her and she fired Dolores, too. But she hired them back the next day, since she'd almost killed herself finishing up their shifts for them along with running the grill for Bill.

Everybody walked on eggshells around Betty for a while, but when she was out of earshot they made merciless fun of Bill, calling him Casanova, and asking him how it felt, those old buns pressed down hard on his lap.

DECOY BLUES

After two hours with Baby Babette, Great Grandma Betty was sorry she had agreed to baby-sit the unweaned child. Even though it was breast milk in the bottle — expressed over the last three days and frozen into amorphous four-ounce globs of murky ice inside Ziploc sandwich bags until microwave time — Babette was having none of it. It was not her mother. So she writhed and twisted and wailed and craned her neck away from the rubber nipple, while Great Grandma