

John Farris

TALKING HEADS

Willy Soto picked up the fare near Gramercy Park. Tall reedy guy in a wilted tan Boss suit, the July thermometer pushing ninety at eleven in the morning. Willy driving today in an undershirt, khaki shorts and sandals. The fare had with him an attaché case and a large picnic hamper. He shoved the hamper into the cab first with a heavy sigh. As if it contained an inexpressible burden. He wanted 67th and Park. Climbed into the back seat and sniffed at the accommodations.

"You need an oil change," he said to Willy. He had a bony face and a petulant expression.

"I need a new cab," Willy said, yanking the one he owned into a break in traffic on third, the old hulk shuddering but not stalling from the demands Willy made on it. Pay for the medallion, pay all the taxes the city kept piling on its working slobs, who had money for anything else? He glanced into the rearview. The guy was pale for high summer and had red-rimmed nostrils. Might have been fumes or allergies but then he was a twitchy sort Willy grimaced. Inflation out of control, the dollar was crap, no jobs, still some guys seemed to have the sugar to indulge themselves.

The fare opened his attaché case and took out a Daily Racing Form. He tried to get his butt comfortable on the lumpy seat. He folded the paper a couple of times to an inside page, then seemed to lose interest. He opened one half of the lid of the hamper and tucked his tout sheet inside. Some cabrons had a wad to blow on the races, too, as well as stick it up their noses.

What the hell, Willy thought. He religiously played the lottery.

"I could use some air-conditioning," the fare complained.

"So could I," Willy said. His undershirt was sticking to and his stomach was upset. One more negative remark and dude could find himself another hack.

Unexpectedly Willy's fare said in a more agreeable tone, "Listen, I left my smokes in the apartment. If you wouldn't mind stopping at the Korean's up ahead, treat you to a pack."

"I chew gum," Willy said.

"Gum it is, pal. Spearmint?"

"Yeah, thanks," Willy said, then wondered if he should have held out for cigarettes, which he then could have sold to the super of his building for a few bucks' profit. Also -- the thought gave him a twinge of guilt -- he knew of at least two young putas in that neighborhood who would do him for not even a full pack and maybe some spare change. But, no. He was a devoted family man. He didn't want whores on his conscience.

Willy was on the wrong side of Third for the Korean's and there was high-rise construction going on in the middle of the block. Big buckets of concrete lifted by crane from ready-mix trucks blocking the inside lane over there; the Korean's looked nearly inaccessible, dimly visible within a maze of protective sidewalk scaffolding. And traffic was near gridlock, with the usual cacaphony.

"Make it faster on foot than I can drive, man," Willy suggested.

"Yeah, you're right," the fare said, getting out of the cab on the Street side. Four lanes of traffic although, Willy thought, it couldn't be called "traffic" with nothing hardly moving. Probably some of the street had collapsed into a sewer up ahead. Commonplace all over Manhattan now. The city bankrupt, months or years behind on even essential repairs. What a life. What a world.

Willy's fare loped nervily around fits and starts of vehicles. Willy let a Peppid AC melt on his tongue and watched -- as Willy confided later to his brother-in-law -- his date with destiny.

Above the din of horns Willy heard shouts from the construction crews on the building site. He looked over and saw one of the big loaded buckets coming down way too fast. Saw his fare reach the sidewalk as the bucket, with a trailing whiplash of broken cable, plunged through the scaffolding in an explosion of planks and pipe framework and cratered the sidewalk with enough force to shatter the Korean's storefront window.

What it did to Willy's fare was a matter of guesswork from where Willy was sitting and sweating;

almost instantly thick dust obscured the scene of the accident.

Sweet Christ and gentle Mary! Willy crossed himself.

His next move was to shut off the meter. Then he put up the windows in spite of the heat because the thick cloud of dust and debris were rolling across Third toward him. Then he took a couple of deep breaths to settle his nerves, crossed himself again. If his late fare hadn't been directly under the falling bucket, he'd been close enough.

Willy turned and looked at the attaché case and the picnic hamper on the back seat, the Racing Form sticking up out of the hamper. He made his decision with that glance: couldn't afford to get involved and lose, what? Half a day's fares? Times were just too tough to voluntarily give up even a few bucks while he waited around for the cops to question him. Like he'd known the dude intimately.

Day like this, it could change your luck for the worst. If you had any luck to begin with.

The light had changed and Willy eased his hack around the corner onto 23rd. He headed for Park, religious medals swaying and twisting from the rearview pedestal. So okay -- maybe his decision was something, uh, morally questionable he was obligated to mention at Confession. Worth a few Hail Marys at best. He definitely was not planning to steal his recent, non-paying fare's effects, even though there had been time on the meter. Whenever he was near the pobre's building he'd just drop off the attaché case and the hamper where the doorman would find it.

Willy put the windows down again. He was close to Park when he heard a woman's songbird voice.

"Jeez Marie, it's an oven in here! McNulty? I need a spritz!"

Something like terror seized Willy's heart; his eyes were popping when he looked in the rearview. Then he got a crick in his neck whipping his head around to look at the back seat.

"Who's that?"

"Who are you?" she chirped.

"Willy. This's my cab."

"What happened to McNulty?"

"That's his name? He had an accident. Construction site, Bucket of wet concrete fell on his head."

"Jeez Marie! Poor McNulty."

"I'm sorry. Listen, you want me to drop you off somewhere?"

"No. What I need is a goddamn spritz, Willy, honest to Pete I am perishing in this hamper. I think my rejuv's starting to boil."

"I'm in the middle of traffic."

"Well, do something quick. Please. I'll owe you one." She sounded desperate. "Believe me, I always make good on my obligations.

"Hokay, hokay, here's Park. I'm just gonna pull over to the curb a minute." His fright had subsided; obviously she wasn't a bruja. But this day just didn't seem to want to go right.

He got out from behind the wheel as a bus blasted by him, then climbed into the back seat. This close to the hamper he could hear the whine and cheep of servomechs, and a faint steady bubbling sound. He opened the hamper and put the folded Racing Form aside. Surprise. The headcase was young and pretty. She was a ratty blond, all-over freckles, snubnosed. And in distress her complexion between tomato and beet.

"Hi, Willy. I'm Peppermint Patty. Like in the Peanuts comic strip? Spittin' image when I was a kid, so the moniker stuck. I need a cool one, 'mano."

Willy picked up the atomizer that had been packed in the hamper along with spare vials of rejuv and of course the petite headcase herself. He spritzed her carefully, forehead, behind the ears, nape of her slender neck, feeling a pang of regret that she was so young.

Peppermint Patty closed her eyes, breathing in the alcohol-based spritzer. She licked her flaky lips and sighed. Someone had done a good job of removing the rest of Patty. It hadn't been crude run-of-the-mill broker surgery. Wasn't a head-and-shoulders job, but she had all of her neck and throat, reservoir-mounted. The reservoir looked low on artificial blood.

She opened her eyes when the spritzer stopped and smiled gratefully. Already her violent color had faded, except for hot spots on each delicate cheekbone.

"Thanks, man."

"De nada. How old are you, Chica?"

"Twenty-five. I think. You lose track of time, you know, being boxed up. But I like to travel, so that's the trade-off."

"Who was McNulty, your boy friend?"

"Oh, ha-ha. He was just another guy I was supporting after his brokerage went under. Before Mac there was Morrie, and that Eurotrash nightmare Paolo, and Big-Dog Brosnan -- "

"The comedian? No kidding. That dude's on Leno all the time."

"Big-Dog would've been nowhere without me," Peppermint Patty said, her green eyes flashing. "He was doing a lousy standup routine with a dumpster for a stage when we got together. I wrote all new material for him, set him up with a good agent. Thanks I get? He traded me to Paolo soon as he slipped a Tiffany onto the finger of that hip-hop princess from Chi." She paused to swallow, but a little saliva ran down from a corner of her mouth. Willy reached for his handkerchief and blotted her without thinking about it. Patty didn't seem to mind. "Frankly, I don't believe she could've handled the competition. Meaning me. I can't tap dance and I don't have opposable thumbs but I like to think I'm pretty terrific still. Long as you have brains you'll get by just fine in this world."

Willy might have thought she was hallucinating, which was common among headcases, but the clarity and intelligence of her eyes persuaded him that she might indeed be someone special.

"Yeah -- well." He figured a compliment wouldn't hurt. "You seem to be doing hokay. So how did the body-brokers get hold of you?"

"My idea, really. I had to convince my husband."

"To sell the rest of you?"

"We needed the money to pay my medical bills. I used to be a jockey. Came out of a six-horse spill at Bay Meadows a quadriplegic.

"Hey, tough break, man."

"Well, you know, I wasn't going to get any better, but all of my vital organs were tickety-boo. We both cried about it but I told Sean, 'Love should be the companionship of another mind,' to quote my favorite author, Isak Dinesen -- "

"He the one wrote that baseball book, The Natural?"

"No So what did it matter, I said to Sean, if I was missing a few appendages, we were soulmates forever."

"So he arrange everything, this Sean?"

"Yeah." Patty sniffed and Willy saw a tear fall.

"Drive a hard bargain?"

"Two million."

"I think I know what happen next," Willy said, knuckling his thick mustache.

"Two weeks after we got the final payment, Sean took off with a cocktail waitress from the Supernova Destination Resort in Vegas."

"Now there's a scumbag."

"Our suite was paid for the rest of the week, but hotel management wanted to get rid of me. Even though I was only using the ice bucket. But they said I was freaking the maids. Well, sheesh. I was going through this -- " another tear fell " -- little period of adjustment."

"Fuckin' cabrons."

"Fortunately I was friendly with a guy who's a lawyer with the ACLU."

"Oh, yeah. Those guys doan take any shit."

"Everybody has legal rights, Willy, even us headcases. But I never asked for charity. Since Vegas I've paid my own way. Five years now. I can make out anywhere there's a horse book."

Willy glanced at the Racing Form, and wiped his own face with his handkerchief. He could've used a spritz from Peppermint Patty's atomizer, but the refresher was laced with steroids he probably

didn't need to absorb through his pores.

"You good at picking winners?"

"Oh, Willy! I grew up around the tracks! I can pick 'em, all right. Hey, you've been so sweet. We anywhere near an OTB shop?"

"Yeah, few blocks."

"Got twenty bucks on you."

"About that."

"It's a speed track at Belmont this week. Two year old maidens in the third, put ten on Bite Me Betty. The other ten down on Plato's Midget to win in the Sixth. Great closer; he took a photo his last time out."

Such conviction in her voice. And Willy didn't need much of an itch to play. Peppermint Patty took his hesitation for lack of confidence in her advice.

"Trust me, Willy. You won't be sorry. Happen to notice the three thousand dollar Hugo Boss McNulty got buried in? Also the building on Gramercy where you picked us up. We had the penthouse. Last week I hit two Trifectas." Willy gave a whistle of appreciation. Patty grinned. "Telling you true, I deliver. If today doesn't pay off for you, just drop me at the Salvation Army, no hard feelings,"

"Bite Me Betty?"

"Look that sweet filly up in the Racing Form. Twenty-four to one. Do the math. Meantime -- how about another spritz? You do them just right,"

There was a hydrant open on 133rd near St. Nicholas, the street blocked off while kids romped in the spray. Willy parked where the afternoon sun was blocked by buildings on one side, listened to a Yankees' game and counted the cash he'd received at an OTB outlet. His winnings. A cool 360 bucks.

Peppermint Patty had napped for an hour. Willy had moved and the hamper to the front seat. She woke up while he eating a cheeseburger from MacDonald's.

"Some things you don't forget," Patty said, sniffing. "I could still go for a Big Mac. Yummy." A little saliva escaped from the corner of her mouth and Willy removed it deftly with a paper napkin. "So how did we make out, Willy?"

He told her. If she'd had thumbs, they'd have been up.

"Yesss É " But he wasn't joining in the celebration. She looked him over. "Hey, what does it take to trip your trigger, Willy?"

"Oh, I'm hoppy! I just been thinking, you know."

"Where are we, by the way?"

"Hondred thirty-third."

"This where you live?" Her usually bright eyes dimmed a little. Her still face was pensive, tinged with melancholy. "Got a family, Willy? Noticed your wedding band the first time you spritzed me."

"Yeah, I'm married."

"So what's your wife's name?"

"Margarita."

"Kids?"

"Rufo and Frankie. Rufo's the oldest, he's twelve."

"Good kids?"

"The best. Don't give me anxieties."

"So let me guess what you've been mulling over. How does Peppermint Patty fit into your scheme of things?"

"Yeah, like that."

"I don't take up much room, Willy. Just close the hamper, it's like I'm not there. I don't play my radio too loud, or make demands. Everybody likes me, sooner or later. I've only been with single guys up to now, but I know I could just be good ol' Aunt Patty to the boys. Have any pets?"

"Couple gerbils. A chocolate Lab."

"I'm good with dogs! Cats, well they gave me the heebie-jeebies. McNulty had a couple of Persians. He came home drunk one time and forgot to put me in the fridge, and those damn cats kept me awake all night trying to get into my hamper."

"Holy shit."

"Yeah, I was scared, all right and no matter how loud I yelled Mac wouldn't wake up. You know, God rest and all that, but I'm probably better off without him. He had this mean streak. Liked to tease me about the great bodies of all the bimbos he was doing the horizontal boogie with. While I financed his little flings."

"Man, I mean everything costs an ass and a half these days. I drive two shifts sometimes. The back, forget about it."

"I could make your life a lot easier, Willy,"

"I know, Chica. You walk it like you talk it today -- oh, sorry."

"No problemo."

"But how it is, I got to work it out with the family, Hokay?"

"Sure, Willy."

"Easiest way, they just meet you and, you know, everybody like hit it off or they don't."

"Sure, that's fair. How about a spritz before we go? I want to look my best, Willy."

He spritzed Peppermint Patty, then put his cab in gear and drove up St. Nicholas toward Broadway.

"Uh, Willy?"

"Yeah, man?"

"Didn't you say your building was close by where we parked?"

"That's right. Only we doan live there no more. I just keep the building as investment property, for when the boys go to college."

"Investment property?"

"Like we move out to Ardsley couple years ago. Just off the Thruway. Good schools. Education is the most important thing in life, which I keep telling Rufo and Frankie when they let the books slide."

"Good for you, Willy. But isn't Westchester kind of on the pricey side?"

"Sure, but we all got to make sacrifices. Like I tole you, sixteen hours a day in the cab, two operations on my sacroiliac."

"Does your wife work?"

"Oh, Margarita, she has this thing, like she does it on the telephone."

"Telemarketing?"

"Yeah," Willy said, after a pause. "That's close."

"Willy, I know I can make a real difference where income is concerned. Maybe get you out of this cab for keeps."

"Your mouth, God's ears."

The house was a fifties brick ranch on a quiet shady street within hearing of the traffic drone on the New York State Thruway. There was a big fenced side yard -- as Willy described the place, walking Peppermint Patty in her hamper to the front porch -- and a patio he'd bricked himself. He'd also recently repainted the trim and the apple-green shutters.

"Sounds terrific," Patty said. "Can't wait to see it all for myself."

The living room was cool, the blinds half-closed. A teenage girl was sitting cross-legged on the floor playing a video game on the big-screen TV. She turned it off when Willy came in and stood, glancing at the large hamper in his hand.

"How you doin' today, Rosemary?"

"Just fine, Mr. Soto."

"Everybody hokay? Boys give you a lot of smack today?"

The girl grinned. "Running thick like always. But when I can't talk better trash than boys I better

give up babysitting." Willy handed her three tens. "See you tomorrow."

"Thanks, Mr. Soto."

When the girl had closed the front door behind her Willy opened the hamper and looked down at Peppermint Patty.

"My hairbrush is in my makeup kit," Patty said. "Think you could give me a quick comb-out before, you know. Girl wants to have her best face on."

"Sure. Well, let's go on back to the kitchen, I could use a cold one."

In the kitchen Willy lifted Patty from the hamper and set her and her reservoir pedestal on the granite-topped island. Patty had a look around while Willy brushed her hair.

"Willy! What a fab kitchen! It's so huge; I love it."

"We remodel last year. Because, you know, is where we hang out most of the time. Got a Jenn-Air range, Bosch appliances, most of the cabinet work I do myself, didn't get much sleep for a couple weeks but hey, you want to have nice things, everybody got to sacrifice. a little."

"Two refrigerators?" Patty twinkled. "Growing boys eat a lot, huh?"

"No, but they need their space," Willy said. And he threw open both refrigerator doors at once.

Margarita, wearing her telephone headset, was getting some guy in Rochester or Topeka all lathered up in his boxer shorts with her sexy line of patter, but she glanced up from the middle shelf of the restaurant-size refrigerator and winked a welcome at Willy, made a kissing mouth. On two shelves of the other refrigerator twelve-year-old Rufo and ten-year-old Frankie ogled Peppermint Patty and called out to Willy. Popí!! Popí!! Precocious Frankie was the first to say, "Can she stay in here with us?"

Willy plucked a long-neck Bud from one of the shelves in Margarita's fridge, twisted the cap off, put his head back and drank deeply. Then he wiped foam from his wiry mustache and beamed proudly at Peppermint Patty.

"Meet the wife and kids," he said.

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