

P.E. JOHNSTON

Casey Smithers Jones

AS SOON AS CASEY SAW the big guy, a good foot taller, come out from behind the counter, he knew it was over, there would be no money coming from this department today.

“I want you out of here in two seconds flat,” the big guy roared.

“Alright, alright—Jesus—don’t holler at me,” Casey cried. He rolled back his shoulders and righted his frayed sports coat, really his brother Garfield’s sports coat, except Garfield dropped dead of a blood clot, so the coat was Casey’s now, but it was on its last legs, like so much else in Casey’s world.

It was almost five o’clock and dusk had set in on this cold evening when Casey walked onto the street. He stood by the government building he had just left and lit a cigarette.

“Well, if it ain’t ole Casey Smithers—long time no see,” he heard a voice say.

Casey looked at the man who was about his age and height and he squinted.

“It’s Royden, you know, from Rose’s place—remember—you had a room there too, back five or six years ago. Rose’s place, you know, near College and Spadina—what have you been up to?”

Casey remembered him now. He hadn’t seen him since leaving Rose’s to move in with Moira. Yeah, it had to be at least six years ago, because he stayed with Moira three years, then with Hilda for two-and-a-half hellish years, and he had been with Beety almost six months now—so, yeah, it had to be six years back.

Royden continued, “what were you doing in there,” pointing to the government building, “trying to get poge or something?”

“Yeah,” Casey replied. Royden always could make him talk. “Not poge—compensation—cause I broke my hand, well really my little finger—this one,” Casey held up his left hand to show Royden his bandage

work. “A pile of catalogues fell on my hand, but those bastards,” Casey pointed to the government building, “say you don’t need your little finger for work —what in hell do they know, I’d like to know ...”

Royden laughed. “Did you tell them you can’t work if your little finger hurts?”

“I’ll tell them goddamn nothing, effin’ bastards.”

Casey puffed on his cigarette.

“You get back home much?” Royden asked him.

“Na—there’s nobody left there—they’ve all moved to BC.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty bleak back there, I hear,” Royden remarked.

Casey only nodded. Now too cold to talk much, he shoved his hands into his frayed pockets, dropped his chin to his chest, yet still kept his eyes glancing upward every so often to look at Royden.

Royden wore a black leather jacket lined with what looked like mink fur. His black leather pants, skin-tight to his thin frame, looked good on him, and Casey had to admire Royden’s shiny black jack boots complete with red-and-yellow laces. The laces more or less matched the crimson-and-gold scarf that Royden had wound around his neck twice. Royden’s hair was drawn back into a ponytail and his receding hair line was only partially hidden under his black leather peaked cap. His only jewelry was a long silver chain falling from his left ear. On the end of the chain perched a silver heart.

“You look all dressed up with nowhere to go,” Casey mused.

“I’ll be going somewhere soon.”

“Oh?”

“When the right car comes along.”

“Oh,” Casey acknowledged, now patting his arms to keep warm, wishing he had a fur-lined coat like Royden’s.

In all, the two acquaintances stood in front of the government building for twenty minutes and chatted sporadically as government workers filed out. Casey even thought he saw the big guy, a good foot taller, saunter out, going in the opposite direction toward the subway station. He was thinking about heading in the same direction now that he had no more cigarettes, and Royden didn’t smoke anymore, and no amount of arm patting could stave off the chilly November air, when, darting out of the streams of headlights approaching them, a shiny, navy BMW drove up to the curb. The car’s passenger window rolled down and Casey saw Royden rush to the passenger door. Royden pushed up on the door’s handle, but the door was locked. He stood in front of the passenger door and poked his head into the car’s interior. Casey heard a woman’s voice say, “who’s your friend, Roy?”

“This here’s Casey—Casey, this here’s Dora,” Royden said, standing upright and moving aside about a foot to let the driver and Casey make eye contact.

Casey bent down and said hi to the long-haired brunette wearing a black leather cap and black leather jacket.

“I like your car,” Casey grinned.

“Well—hop in then,” Dora replied.

Casey heard the door lock click. He opened the car’s passenger door and got in. He heard the lock click shut.

Dora peered beyond Casey’s body to where Royden stood. “Good-night, Roy,” she smiled. The window rolled up and she sped off onto the busy street.

“Casey? Are you Casey Jones—like the song?”

“Who?” Casey asked, enjoying the warm air from the car’s heater.

“You know, Casey Jones—the train engineer—haven’t you ever heard that song?”

“Never.”

“You’re young—are you Roy’s age?”

“I don’t know Roy’s age,” Casey lied. He knew that Royden was twenty-six, a year younger than himself.

“Casey Jones—dec-dec-dec-dec-dec . . .” Dora sang. “That’s the tune.”

“I’ve heard it,” Casey lied again.

Over the next five minutes of listening to Dora sing and answering her inquiring questions with more lies, Casey sized up his driver. Dora looked a lot older close up. He guessed her to be in her forties, maybe even fifties when he took a second look at the bag of loose flesh that lived below her chin line. Her eyes were circled with black eyeliner and her cheeks held a lot of bright rouge. Her lips were painted crimson red and they looked crooked when she smiled, as if not all the flesh tucked under when it was suppose to. He hadn’t thought about lip muscles not working in sync before, but he guessed it could happen to older people. Casey thought he smelled a hint of whisky as soon as he sat in the car, but they had been cruising westward for fifteen minutes before Dora produced the opened bottle of scotch.

“Sorry—no ice,” she said.

“Don’t need it,” Casey replied. After his first chug of mellow sting, he followed it with two more in rapid succession.

“What happened to your hand?” she asked.

“It’s nothing,” he replied, whereupon he unwrapped the bandage and stuffed the white gauze in his jacket pocket. Then he held up his left hand for her to see. She took hold of his hand and kissed it.

“I guess it was nothing—wore it to provoke questions, did you?”

“Yeah,” he took another swig of whisky. “Where are we going, anyway?”

“Where would you like to go?” she replied softly.

“Oh, anywhere.” he said, letting her hold onto his left hand. He even let her guide his left hand to her abundant thigh.

“Would you like to go there?” she cooed.

“Oh - kay,” he took another swig.



Dora dropped him off a block from Beety’s place at 11:30 that night. Beety was still up and just getting around to bathing Precious. The three-year-old girl ran naked into Casey’s waiting arms.

“Get back here and get your pajamas on,” Beety hollered.

“It’s Casey, Mommy—you smell funny, Casey,” the little girl said to Casey, who knee-bent to her level.

“Give Casey a big hug,” he said, smiling into her shiny clean face.

“Casey smells funny, Mommy,” Precious looked up to her mother who now stood very near them.

“Casey always smells funny. Here—get into these *now!*” Beety pushed the pajamas into Precious’ little arms, turned the girl in the direction of the bedroom and smacked her bum.

Precious scowled at her mother.

“Wipe that frown off your face, missy,” Beety shouted at Precious.

Beety then looked at Casey. “Where the hell have you been—down at O’Reilly’s again? You must have got that compensation money then? I just bet . . .”

“I should say,” he interrupted her.

He hauled three one-hundred dollar bills from his jacket pocket.

“Got it cashed too—here . . .”

He gave her two of the bills.

“That doesn’t come anywhere near to half the rent. What about the rest then?” she shouted at him.

“I’ll get it—don’t worry . . .”

Precious appeared before them wearing only her pajama tops. “I got to pee, Mommy.”

“The bathroom hasn’t moved,” Beety said, disgustedly.

“I want Casey to take me . . .”

“Okay, my Precious.” He took her hand, then called back to Beety, “Got any cigs?”

She underhanded them. He turned and began the trek to the apartment's small bathroom.

"Blow smoke rings, Casey," Precious begged, as she watched Casey light a cigarette.

When he returned to the living room, he found Beety sitting on the sofa, still holding her two one-hundred dollar bills, fingering them with a light touch. Casey waltz-glided up to her.

"You're in a good mood tonight, Case," Beety said to him.

"The sight of you, my dear."

She smiled a half smile.

He sat beside her and kissed her, then fondled her and had her down on the sofa when they heard screeches coming from the bedroom.

Beety sat up quick and hollered, "Jesus, Precious, did you wake Tyrone up? I told you not to go in there for chrissake—"

"I didn't—" The little girl ran out to the adults, followed close on her heels by a fifteen-month-old toddler. "I didn't wake you, Ty—did I?" she sobbed to the little boy.

The little boy screeched and held out his arms for his mother to pick him up.

"Not now, Ty," Beety said to the little boy.

He cried harder, pulsing his arms up in the air.

"For chrissakes," Beety hollered.

"Come on up, Ty." Casey picked up the boy and put him on the couch and sat him down. But the position only seemed to give Ty's lungs more momentum, for he cried louder, saturating the room with high, ear-piercing shrieks.

"Here's a cookie," Precious said, giving him a half of cookie that she picked up from the floor.

Ty threw the cookie into a corner.

"For godsakes—pick him up," Casey shouted at Beety.

"Yeah, right," Beety exploded, as she picked up the distraught child and put him on her knee. "Yeah, right—pick him up—I haven't had a fun time tonight, have I? I haven't come home smelling like whiskey and perfume, have I? I have to put my two one-hundred dollar bills on the rent, don't I? What are you doing with yours, then?—yeah, right." Beety stood up with Ty in her arms and continued shouting at the sitting Casey. "Jesus—the sight of you makes me want to puke, Casey Smithers..." She began walking toward her bedroom with Ty in her arms, picking up a plastic tumbler from the table along the way. Before disappearing into the hallway, she turned and pitched the tumbler at Casey. "Goddamn idiot," she cried.

The tumbler hit his knee, then dropped to the floor and rolled under the sofa.

Casey turned on the TV, looked at Precious and smiled. The little girl climbed up onto the couch and snuggled up to Casey.



Three nights later, as Casey lounged on the king-sized bed in Dora's Mississauga condo, Dora appeared before him wearing a huge pair of grey striped overalls and nothing else. Folds of grey material, enough to encase Dora's ample bust, midriff and hips, with room to spare, reminded Casey of the large grey whales he used to see from his uncle's fishing boat. Their massive bodies always looked at ease and comfortable as they leapt, rolled and dived in the cold waters of the Atlantic. Perched on Dora's head was a funny looking peaked cap of the same material. She threw down on the bed another pair of the overalls, much smaller in size, with an identical cap.

"What's this?" Casey asked.

"Your Casey Jones get-up—the railroad engineer—dee-dee-dee-dee-dee-dee—remember? the railroad song?" Dora swung her large body into circular movements as she 'dee-deed' a few more bars. "The clothes stay here, though," she added, when she had finished her gyrations. "They're our play clothes, right?"

"Okay," Casey replied, absent-mindedly. His attention was really focused on the bottle of scotch whisky in his once-injured left hand.

One evening, after their love-making, Dora folded a piece of paper into the front pocket of Casey's railroad overalls, which lay draped over the edge of the bed.

"What's this?" he asked, afraid she was going to replace the crisp hundred dollar bills with useless pieces of paper. Those bills certainly had helped ease relations with Beety, who, once handed the money, did not concern herself with commenting on his smell, his nightly absences or his new suede coat.

Dora opened the paper and said, "don't you know what this is?"

"Nope."

"It's a stock—a railroad stock."

Casey furrowed his brow.

"A stock," she repeated, "like a stock market stock—this stock was worth fifty dollars last month—today it's worth sixty-five."

"It's not very big."

"Sometimes little is best, if you know what it's worth," she replied.

He pondered those words for a few seconds, then asked. “What do you do with it? Cash it?”

“You wait,” she replied and folded it up, placing it again in his overall’s pocket.

Ever after, the stock remained in that front pocket. The bills, however, Dora continued to lovingly fold into a pocket of Casey’s new brown suede coat, especially bought by Dora at a Mississauga discount store to match the one she had bought for herself at the same time.



One evening, in mid-December, Casey waited by the government building at their usual meeting time, but Dora did not come. He waited two cold hours, then shrugged his shoulders at no one in particular and headed for the subway station. He went back the next night, but still no Dora. He went to that exact spot every evening, even Christmas Eve and New Year’s Eve, not staying as long as he had that first night, but still braving freezing temperatures for thirty minutes or so, until he felt that he had given the hope of earning a few bucks his best shot. On several occasions he noticed that some passers-by slowed down and glanced around his feet and hands for his can, then resumed their street gait. He wasn’t going to do that. And one evening, in early January, he had to rationalize his whereabouts to a cop. When he didn’t do a very good job of it, he took the cop’s warning and left. Worst of all, though, was coming home to a cranky Beety. Having gotten used to having a few extra hundred dollars in her purse for herself and her children, not to mention buying up a storm for the best Christmas in memory, Beety was not too happy to go back to a level of comfort a notch below subsistence. So unbearable was Beety’s rage, that Casey even had to go back to the warehouse the second week in January, where he was given some morning shifts at minimum wage, mostly counting inventory.

It wasn’t until January 25th, just six days before the rent was due and Beety had been on his case for a week, that the navy BMW pulled up to the curb. When Casey saw Dora he got angry. “Where the hell have you been?” he scolded her, noticing that she was not wearing her brown suede coat.

“South,” Dora replied. “Did you miss me?”

“Of course,” he snapped. His manner was too brusque he knew. He had better calm down and soon or there would be no loot tonight.

That night, she folded the railroad stock into his coat pocket along with three one-hundred dollar bills.

“You’re giving me this?” he asked, pulling the stock back out.

“Sure—why not?”

“Yeah—why not,” Casey smiled.

He waited the next night, and the next, and the next. Three days until the first and he didn't have all the rent. Beety told him that this was it. Even welfare was better than him, at least it was reliable. Standing by the government building, shivering through a late-January cold snap and cursing Dora, he glanced up at the approaching stream of people coming his way. Then he saw him, was it really him? Yes, it was Royden, coming toward him.

“No Dora tonight?” Royden laughed.

Casey smiled, but said nothing.

“She's a fickle bitch,” Royden continued. “Or maybe her old man is keeping her home—maybe he's given up his women—it's only Dora from now on. Mr R. Jonathan Mossly is keeping his little woman home—ha ha! Well, don't stay out here too long,” Royden instructed Casey. “Even that coat won't protect you from frostbite.” Royden laughed as he walked away.

Casey memorized the name, R. Jonathan Mossly, all the way to the nearest phone booth—and there it was, listed as Mossly R.J. He would go to her house tomorrow, just one more romp on her king-sized bed would be enough.

Even in winter, the streets of Rosedale emitted a superiority, as if their snow and their cold and their barren trees were somehow of a higher order, the most expensive of their kind and the most coveted by others. Armed with only word-of-mouth directions, Casey got lost a few times, but eventually he found the magnificent stone house and promptly marched up to the oak front door. A lady about Dora's age answered the door.

“I'd like to see Mrs Mossly,” Casey said.

The woman, who was wearing a navy uniform-styled dress, curtly replied, “Mrs. Mossly is not at home.”

“Is she at her other place in Mississauga?” he asked.

The lady frowned at Casey. “Mr and Mrs Mossly are at their home in the Caribbean—they've been there since before Christmas.”

“But I saw her only three nights ago.”

The lady's frown deepened, “I said Mr and Mrs Mossly are not here—they have been away for a month and a half.” She moved the door toward him.

“If you're speaking to her,” Casey said hurriedly, afraid the lady was going to slam the door in his face, “tell her Casey Smithers was asking for her.” Then he remembered that Dora did not know his real last name, she only knew him as Casey Jones. “Tell her Casey Smithers, that is, Casey Jones was asking for her.”

“Casey Smithers Jones?” the lady asked, perplexed.

“No—yeah—Casey Smithers Jones,” he repeated. “Tell her he was asking for her.”

“Okay.” With that, she began to close the door. “Good-bye,” she said as she swung the large oak door against its frame.



He didn't have money for the subway. On his long walk down Yonge Street, with the sun's rays under assault from a raw wind, he pondered his brief conversation at Mossly's front door. 'Casey Smithers Jones' didn't sound so bad after all. Maybe he would take on a new identity, change his name, after he got rid of Beety, which wouldn't be too hard; she had half thrown him out already. He should really try to look for a serious relationship, perhaps find a girl from home, someone who would understand him, not holler at every little thing he did. His thoughts ate up the time and before long he was at Bloor. He strolled along Bloor, getting into the rhythm of the crowd. At Bay Street he headed southward.

The building's grand foyer, despite its marble columns and art work, was threatening to Casey. He did not know where to go. The man in the uniform looked too austere to be helpful, but when Casey asked for directions to a stockbroker's office, the uniformed man smiled and told Casey exactly what he wanted to hear.

“I'm afraid this company no longer exists,” the young stockbroker concluded, ten minutes after having consulted his computer screen and every book on his desk. “This railroad closed down in the fifties.”

Casey was stunned. “You mean I can't cash it for sixty-five dollars?” He held out the stock and waved it up and down.

The man smiled. “'Fraid not.”

Casey had been planning on that money to appease Beety for a day or so, and if that didn't work, to buy himself a warm bed until he found lodgings elsewhere.

Casey picked up the stock and began to fold it into his pocket.

“Just a minute,” the young man said. He disappeared down a hall. Five minutes later, he and another much older man returned to where Casey stood.

The older man said, “I hear you have an old railroad stock—one for a company that no longer exists. I'll give you twenty dollars for it.”

Casey unfolded the stock and showed it to the older man, who, in turn, reached into his pants' pocket, pulled out a twenty-dollar bill and handed it to Casey.

Casey took it and smiled. As he was about to close the office door, Casey heard laughter coming from the two men. He supposed they were laughing at him and the charity they had just given him, but Casey did not care. He had twenty bucks. He glided a few waltz glides down the empty hall until he reached the elevator door.



“Hiya Case,” little Precious cried, hugging Casey’s leg as soon as he opened the door. Then Tyrone came waddling along, tried to push his sister aside, but she was that much bigger, so Casey took hold of the little boy’s shoulder and directed him to his other leg.

“Did you bring me something?” Precious asked, looking up Casey’s leg to meet his eyes with her sunshine smile.

“Sure did.” He handed her a small package of red licorice.

Tyrone whimpered, then reached for the licorice, but Precious turned away from him, which immediately prompted earth-shaking wails to rise up from the little boy’s lungs.

“I’ve got something for you, too.” Casey smiled down, then bent down to Ty’s level. “Here—your favourite—chocolate buds.”

“They’re my favorite,” Precious pouted. “Trade you, Ty.”

Now it was Tyrone’s turn to reach far in the direction opposite his sister’s grasp.

“I want the chocolate buds,” Precious cried. “I hate these.” And she threw her package of licorice on the floor.

“What in christ’sname’s the problem now?” Beety hollered from the bedroom. Seeing Casey, her face grew an instant scowl.

Casey threw out his arms to her and sang, “my love.”

“Hmmm,” she grunted. “Got any cigs?”

“An unopened package for my love,” he winked, then underhanded them to her.

“I want chocolate buds,” Precious demanded, stamped her feet and folded her arms.

Soon Beety had opened both packages of treats, set Tyrone on the new couch to enjoy his chocolate candies, and broken off a piece of the red licorice for herself.

“That’s mine,” Precious warned her mother. “Casey gave those to me.”

Beety handed her daughter the licorice, then lit herself a cigarette.

It was little Tyrone who first brought Casey an offering. He toddled over to Casey, who stood near the door, and opened his hand to reveal a gooey brown ball.

“Why thank you, Ty—thank you very much,” Casey said, unsticking the clump of chocolate from Tyrone’s damp palm.

“Here Casey,” Precious offered next. “Here’s a piece of licorice for you,” handing him the stump end of the piece she had been chewing on.

Then Beety lifted the cigarette package in his direction and he gladly accepted.

“Come over here, Casey.” Precious patted the cushion beside her. “Here’s a little seat.” Casey straddled the two cushions between Tyrone and Precious, turned to Precious, winked and said, “sometimes little is best, if you know what it’s worth.” Then he lit his cigarette with Beety’s lighter and blew out a smoke ring on his first try, much to the children’s delight.

