



Fiction

Juicy Fruit Was Down That Day

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HE TURNED the handle of the door marked KENNEDY SIGN COMPANY, New York, and entered. The young girl typing behind the desk looked up hopefully, but he was disappointingly old.

“May I help you?” she asked.

“Mr. Kennedy sent for me.”

“Oh, you must be Mr. Collins. You’re to go in right away.”

“Thanks,” he said, as he walked to the inner office. He tugged at the unaccustomed tie and straightened his vest. I wonder what he wants, he thought. The door to the inner office responded easily to his work-tired hand.

“Come in, Collie!” Mr. Kennedy said.

Collie shut the door of the private office. He saw the personification of the KENNEDY SIGN COMPANY lounging behind an enormous steel efficiency desk in a gray leather chair. There was a cloud of blue smoke writhing in the air-conditioned draft.

“I hurried over from the warehouse as quickly as I could, Mr. Kennedy.”

“I’m glad you did, Collie. I have something important to talk over with you. You realize, of course, that you were eligible for retirement two years ago.”

“Yes, I know, sir, and I turned it down then, as I’ll turn it down now. Sign painting is my life. Without it I’m no good. It’s almost like—like I was God when I paint a sign. What I paint, people read.

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Knowingly or not they start to think what I put up for them to read. They get used to a sign. Why, you know what it's like to be going to work some morning and to see that a new picture has been put up on your favorite billboard. It's sort of like a new commandment all painted up in bright colors, and you feel glad to see it all shining in the morning sun."

"I know how you feel, Collie. We've been through all this before." He looked at the old man standing before him. "Sit down, Collie." The old man sat down in a patch of sunlight which filtered through the Venetian blinds on the forty-second story, illuminating the blue tufts of the carpeting.

"As you know, Collie, business is bad."

Collie ran his fingers along the arm of the leather-and-chrome chair.

"And we've got to cut down on some of our crews. We've been losing money lately on our hand-painted billboards. The thing these days is a printed board." He looked at the old man sitting before him. The plush furnishings of the room made his tired blue suit appear even more worn than it was. I'm not convincing him, he thought.

"Besides, you're a liabil—" he stopped. No sense in hurting the old fellow's feelings. "Besides, you're liable to, get hurt." He knew his argument was beginning to limp.

Collie looked down at his hands. The palms were hardened from years of hard work. The nails were surrounded by blotches of paint — the flamboyant colors of his last sign.

"Mr. Kennedy, I've been with this company for thirty-three years, and I've been painting all my life. Not always signs—there were other things. But like I said, when I paint signs—well, you probably think I'm a crazy old man."

"No, I don't think you're a crazy old man. But I do know you're old." He said "old" in a lustrous way. It made the word seem rich in experience. It was not offensive. "And it was time for you to retire long ago."

"But, Mr. Kennedy..."

"I'm sorry, Collie, this time you either have to resign, or I'll have to fire you. And I don't want to do that," he paused, "because you've been with us too long."

Mr. Kennedy wondered exactly what made a man like that love his work so much. It's not the money, he awkwardly admitted to himself. There was something, though, when he talked about the signs. There had been a far-away look in his eyes, and his wrinkled brow had cleared. Oh well, it's not my worry. We're all good for a time. Then we get old. Then we die. It's just the way it happened that I have to do this to him. Why me? Why do I have to tell him he's finished—that all that's left for him are a few more shabby years in that shabby tenement district? Why me?

Collie stood up, breaking Kennedy's reverie.

"I'll resign, Mr. Kennedy, but if you ever need someone for a job, if you're ever short of help, could you..."

"Certainly, certainly, Collie," he said, "we'll get in touch with you." Kennedy was so pleased with his easy victory and with himself that he would have promised anything. For over a year he had been mustering the courage to force the old man to retire.

"I'll get my things from my locker at the warehouse, Mr. Kennedy. Then I'll go." The two men rose and shook hands. Collie started to leave. As he neared the door, he turned to Mr. Kennedy. "You'll call?" he asked.

"I'll call."

Collie turned, and Kennedy saw that his shoulders were stooped. He looked older now than when he had entered the office.

"Collie!" Kennedy said. Then he paused.

"Yes, sir?"

"Good luck!"

* * * *

Collie entered the almost deserted warehouse. Only a few stragglers were still cleaning their equipment. He waited until they had gone that he might perform the sacred ritual of packing his equipment alone.

He picked up each clean brush and wrapped it carefully in a long roll of newspaper. The other tools he placed in a box. That was all there was after so many years of work. He looked around himself. Here was the darkened warehouse, its air pungent with turpentine and the night. It's strange, he thought, that we don't miss things until we don't have them anymore. Then we wish we had held them tighter when we did.

He put his bundle under his arm and trudged to the door. Half way he stopped and looked back at his empty locker. The door was hanging open, and the yellow night light cast its shadow grotesquely on the floor. He walked impulsively back to his locker and placed the newspaper roll of paint brushes in the rear corner. They'll call me, like Mr. Kennedy said, he thought. And when I come back, my brushes will be here and I can say, "See, I knew you'd need me. I knew I could paint again." Oh, that will be the day!

But the day was long in coming. Fall slipped quietly to the ground in Central Park. Collie walked there often—breathing nature in the city. His hands were restless, and he would paint again when Mr. Kennedy called. But Mr. Kennedy did not call.

The sun melted the last snows of winter and sent them swirling down the city gutters. It was spring, and the telephone rang.

"Mr. Collins?"

"Yes."

"This is Mr. Kennedy's secretary. Could you please come over to the office. We've got something for..."

"Yes, yes, I'll be right down!" he interrupted her happily. "Goodbye."

Transportation downtown was fast and exciting. Collie could not decide whether to read the advertisements in the train or watch the gigantic billboards that flashed by the speeding windows. By the time he reached downtown he had decided the Juicy Fruit posters were not all they could have been.

He stepped from the car into a crowd that swirled and eddied in the wake of the train as it roared away from the platform. The electric quality of the long-awaited moment made him feel impulsive and young.

He began the short walk to the office building. The color and cacophony of the surging city swelled around him. It grew. It intensified. He saw, high up, the office where Mr. Kennedy was waiting. He walked faster. I knew, I knew, he thought, he'd want me back. Just a minute. I'll be right up!

* * * *

"Nobody knew exactly what happened. Someone said it was an old man who hadn't stopped at the intersection. He had kept on walking, holding his head up high. Then he stepped into the path of the car. I got there too late to see him. The police had already covered him up with a blanket. Isn't it awful, Mr. Kennedy? I could have gotten there before the police, but I had to pay my check at the cafeteria. You know how busy they are. And I've never seen an accident case—except on TV."

"Yes, it's too bad," Mr. Kennedy agreed, as he turned to enter his private office. Then he stopped. "Oh, by the way, Miss Mohn, if you haven't called Mr. Collins yet about those paint brushes the warehouse sent over, don't bother. We can mail them to him."