

TWO BITS, FOUR BITS

A short story

by

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He came from the south, following a dust devil down the narrow gravel road. The gritty brown dirt swirled and danced, blurring his image until he looked like a ghost floating down the street toward her. If Irene had seen him coming she might have considered it an evil omen and saved them all a lot of grief, but she was too busy with her own troubles to pay any attention to what was going on outside the dumpy café.

The day had started out badly for Irene. Her old alarm clock had given up and quit ticking sometime during the night and she'd overslept. She worked the morning shift in a small restaurant across the street from a grungy old industrial plant that rumbled and roared and spewed black smoke into the air several times a day. They manufactured grinding balls, whatever the heck they were. The day shift started at eight. A lot of the workers stopped at the restaurant for breakfast before they went to work. Quite a few of the night shift came in when they got off, grimy soot and steel dust clinging to them like jealous lovers. They reminded Irene of raccoons. Only their

masks were white instead of black, their eyes protected from the smut by the safety glasses they wore.

Clyde, the old guy who owned the restaurant where Irene worked, would be ugly as a hungry bear if she didn't get there on time. He might even fire her. Irene cringed at the thought. Her job wasn't much, but it paid the rent.

Hurrying to get dressed, she snagged her last good pair of nylons on a nail sticking out of the beat up old dresser in the tiny furnished apartment she rented from old man Murphy. She'd asked him to fix it about a hundred times. Finally, she'd given up and pounded the nail as far as she could with a heel. Now she had a run half an inch wide.

On the way out the door she yelled at Jimmy to get up and get ready for school, then she stopped cold. There was no school in July. And there was no Jimmy. He'd gone to live with his dad for the summer, but Irene knew he wouldn't be coming back in the fall, or ever. Why should he? Her ex husband could provide all the things that were important to a fourteen year old boy. Things she couldn't afford. A mother's love, with its constant harping about homework and chores, didn't compare favorably to thirty dollar designer jeans and eighty dollar purple sneakers. A lump grew in Irene's throat and, blinking back tears, she stumbled down the steps.

The odometer in her old car read thirty-seven thousand miles, but it had turned over once for sure, probably two or three times. She opened the door, slid in, making sure she didn't catch her dress on the broken spring, slammed the door twice before it finally latched, and turned the key. The engine groaned pitifully, then something clicked twice, and it stopped altogether. She turned the key again. Nothing. Not even a click.

She got out of the car and slammed the door as hard as she could. The window rattled and almost fell out. Barely managing to stifle a scream of frustration, she pounded on the roof with a small bunched fist. Lot of good that did. Now the roof now had another dent, and her hand hurt.

Irene lived six blocks from the restaurant. Rubbing her sore hand, she glanced at her watch. She was already late. Taking a deep breath, she shaded her eyes with her hand and peered down the deserted street. Even though the sun was still low in the east, heat waves shimmered and danced above the parched earth. She'd heard that the United States was the world's bread basket. Well if that was true, this patch of Arizona had to be the oven.

Twenty minutes later, she stumbled up on the restaurant's front porch and glanced at her reflection in the front window. The sweltering sun had ironed every vestige of curl out of her damp, lank hair. Her dress had wilted. It looked worse than the lettuce Clyde served on his hamburgers, and that was pretty limp. Irene could feel sweat trickling down her back. Large dark spots stained the material under her arms. And of course there was the run in her hose. The overall image staring back at her from the window reminded Irene of a bag lady she'd seen once while she and Jimmy and her ex had vacationed in San Francisco. He hadn't been her ex then. A happy time. About a thousand years and a million miles ago. She'd gotten over her ex, but, damn, she missed Jimmy so bad it hurt, really hurt, down deep in her heart.

But life goes on. Taking a deep breath, she squared her shoulders and glanced in the window again. At thirty-four she didn't really look *that* bad. Under the dress she still had all the hills and valleys in the right places. Her legs were firm and shapely. Walking about a zillion miles a day while serving a jillion burgers and fries kept them

that way. Maybe no one would notice the run in her nylons. Right. And maybe Jimmy would come back in the fall.

Mopping the perspiration from her brow, she opened the door. A little bell jangled overhead. Clyde looked up and glared at her through the serving window. Irene looked at the big clock over the counter. 7:10. Only forty minutes late. Not bad, considering.

"Bout time," Clyde mumbled. "The ham and eggs," he pointed a pudgy finger at a plate sitting under the heat lamp, "belongs to table four."

For the next two hours Irene didn't have time to think about anything except pouring coffee and getting the right greasy breakfast in front of the right grimy factory worker. Finally, around 9:00, the crowd thinned out. Irene spent the next hour washing dishes, wiping down the counter, tables, and booths, and filling the catsup bottles.

When she finally got a chance to take a break, Irene glanced at Clyde out of the corner of her eye. She couldn't tell if he was still angry at her for being late or not. He hadn't said anything more, but then he never said much. She crossed her fingers. Maybe he'd forget about it.

At the front window, Irene looked out at the pale blue sky. A mirage wavered at the end of the road, blurring the buildings in the distance. God had turned the oven up to broil.

A few factory workers ventured across the street for lunch, but by one o'clock the restaurant was deserted. Irene dug the change out of the pocket of her apron and, shaking her head, dropped it in a jar under the counter. She'd made the mind boggling sum of four dollars and twenty cents in tips.

Clyde was banging pots and pans around in the kitchen. Without thinking, Irene mopped her brow with the rag she'd used to wipe the counter top. It smelled of dish soap and disinfectant. Wrinkling her nose, she tossed it in the sink.

Outside a gust of wind kicked up a cloud of dust. Across the street, heat waves rose from the factory's tin roof. In the distance a thunder head boiled high into the sky. The old air conditioner on the roof rumbled and groaned. Irene squinted at the thermostat. Someone had turned it all the way down, but it still registered almost ninety degrees inside the dining room. Probably a hundred and twenty outside. Fanning herself with a menu, Irene wondered what Jimmy was doing. Her ex lived in Denver, at the foot of the Rocky Mountains. Cool and green. At least Jimmy wouldn't be sweating.

Irene didn't see the teenage boy walking down the middle of the road, following a dust devil. She didn't see him stop and glance both ways before looking in the window. When the bell over the door jangled, she looked up and her heart leaped at the sight of her son.

But it wasn't Jimmy. This boy was older, closer to sixteen, she'd guess. His jeans were dirty, his T-shirt torn, and his dark hair hung to his shoulders. Irene cringed at the thought of her son looking like that. Surely, his father wouldn't . . .

The kid swaggered over to a table, plopped down, and propped his dusty sneakers up on a chair. In keeping with the current teenage fashion, his red laces were untied. Irene marveled at how the kids kept from tripping over them. If she left her shoes untied, she break her neck for sure.

"If you can get chubby cheeks there," the kid said, eyes smiling merrily at Irene while he motioned toward Clyde who had ventured out of the kitchen, "to move his fat

a..., uh, rear end, I'll have a cheeseburger, fries, and a large Coke. Extra pickles on the burger."

Irene looked at Clyde. The only thing he hated worse than smart remarks about his weight were smart remarks about his shiny bald head. She'd seen him kick people out for less than what the kid had just said.

Clyde stood, hands on hips, hairy beer belly hanging out from under his grease splattered T-shirt, glaring at the young man. Fire flickered behind his dark little eyes as he tried to make up his mind if tossing the kid out on his ear would be worth losing a sale.

Dollar signs won. Muttering to himself, Clyde turned and waddled back to the kitchen.

When Irene set his plate in front of him the boy looked around her toward the back of the room. "You don't think he poisoned me do you?" he whispered.

"Probably not." Irene shook her head and kept her voice low. "You might croak before you paid the check."

For an instant fear clouded the young eyes, then the boy laughed and he raised his voice loud enough so Clyde could hear. "I'll bet he pays good too, don't he?"

Leaning on the counter, Irene watched the boy wolf down his food. His hands were dirty, his nails chewed down to the quick. Looking at his face, she couldn't tell for sure if he was dark complected or just dirty. But he had clear, bright eyes.

He caught her staring and she looked away. When she looked back he'd wiped his plate clean and was noisily slurping the last of his Coke.

She picked up the dirty plate. "Can I get you anything else?"

"I was going to have cherries jubilee for desert, but I thought better of it."
Grinning, he raise his voice. "Wouldn't want the *chef* to singe his eyebrows."

Stifling a laugh, Irene lay the check on the table.

After she'd put the dirty plate in the sink, she watched the young man crunch the ice from his Coke. Where did a street kid learn about cherries jubilee? She'd bet Jimmy didn't know what the flaming desert was. Her heart twisted at the thought of her son. Big brown eyes that sparkled when he laughed. Dark wavy hair. Cute little nose, and a smile that lit up a room. She wondered if he missed her as much as she missed him. Or was he too busy making new friends to even think about her? She clenched her fists. Colorado was so far away.

The young man wiped his forehead with a napkin. "Man, it's hot in here." He waved a hand toward the kitchen. "Old Baldy too cheap to run the air conditioner or are you trying to sweat some of the lard off him?"

A pot clanged in the back room.

Irene hid a grin behind her hand.

Clyde came huffing around the end of the counter, brandishing a butcher knife.
"Pay your bill and get out."

"Hey, man. That any way to talk to a customer?"

"Out!"

"Yeah, sure man." Hands raised, the kid edged toward the door.

Clyde swung the knife toward the cash register. "Pay up, smart ass."

Irene moved toward the register. The butcher knife glistened like a sword. She sent a silent message to the kid--no more fun and games.

The kid hunched his shoulders. "I got no money, man."

Clyde lurched forward, the tip of the knife waving in front of the kid's face.

"What?"

"Hey, man. Watch it."

"I've taken all the crap I'm going to from you, punk," Clyde said, holding out his hand. "Now, pay your check."

"Hey I told you, man. I got no bread." He patted his pockets. "Look for yourself if you don't believe me."

Clyde stiff armed the kid in the chest. He stumbled backwards and dropped into a booth. "Hey, man. What--"

"Shut up!" The tip of the knife rested against the skinny adams apple. "Call the cops," Clyde yelled over his shoulder.

Frozen, Irene stood in front of the register. She blinked, swallowed hard, and finally found her voice. "Come on, Clyde. He was hungry. It's only a couple of bucks."

"Call the cops!"

"But--"

"Do it now, or you'll have to mop this punk's blood off the floor."

"I..."

The point of the knife pressed harder. The kid's eyes grew big and round.

"I'll pay for his lunch, okay?"

"Ain't your place. Now do like I told you and call the cops." A tiny drop of blood appeared on the point of the knife.

Horrified, Irene watched it grow. "Okay. Okay. Just don't hurt him."

Irene took a quarter out of her tip jar and dropped it in the pay phone hanging on the wall. The sheriff's office told her they'd have a man there in a couple of minutes.

When she looked back at the kid, Clyde was saying, "So you still think I'm a fat ass, punk?"

"I was just joking, man. Can't you take a joke? I didn't mean anything by it."

Clyde leaned closer, his voice a deep growl. "Well what if I just accidently slit your throat, punk? Be okay if I didn't mean anything by it, right?"

"Listen, man. I..." Tears welled in the kids eyes and trickled down his face.

Irene pushed Clyde away and stepped between them. "That's enough."

Thunder rumbled in the distance.

Knuckles white on the handle of the butcher knife, Clyde moved closer. "Don't tell me--"

The bell over the door jangled, cutting Clyde off. Deputy Ralph Simmons stepped inside. "What seems to be the problem here, folks?"

"This kid won't pay his bill. Arrest him."

"He tried to kill me," the kid wailed.

Clyde spun back toward the kid. "If I'd--"

"Hold it right there. Both of you." Deputy Simmons stood, feet apart, sweat stained hat pushed back on his head, hand resting on the butt of his revolver.

"Everyone just settle down now, ya'll hear?" Except for a slight budge around his waist and a little less hair on the top of his head, Deputy Simmons hadn't changed since the days he'd played outside linebacker at the University of Arizona, where he'd gained a reputation as a head knocker. He glared at the kid for a moment then shifted his gaze to Clyde.

Clyde stepped back and lowered the knife.

"Okay, that's better" the deputy said. "How much was the bill, Clyde? Maybe the kid would be willing to work it off."

"The little hoodlum should live so long. Lock him up with the rest of the trash you keep in that cockroach infested jail of yours."

"Come on, give the kid a break. Let him wash dishes, mop the floor or something."

Clyde's eyes flashed. "I believe you're losing track of something here, Ralph. You ain't no judge. You're a deputy. I'm a citizen. A taxpayer. You work for me. Now do your duty." Clyde pointed the knife at the kid who was still cowering in the booth. "I want that scum behind bars."

Shrugging his shoulders, the deputy removed a note pad from his shirt pocket. "Okay, who wants to tell me what happened? Irene?"

By the time they'd finished it was almost three, an hour and a half after Irene's shift ended. She watched the deputy's car kick up dust as it pulled away. The last she saw of the kid was the top of his head through the rear window, outlined against a black sky.

Irene felt empty. Struggling to hold back the tears, she sat down at the table where the kid had sat. Nothing seemed fair. One day she'd had Jimmy, the next she hadn't. One moment there had been a boy sitting here, now only an empty glass and a crumpled napkin remained. Maybe that's all life really amounted to, alive one minute, garbage the next. Maybe Jimmy was better off with his father.

Clyde stood in front of the window, glaring after the car, the butcher knife still clutched in his hand. He stepped back and waved it toward Irene. "It's your fault. You should have known that punk kid didn't have any money. I'm going to dock you for

being late this morning and don't expect me to pay you because you had to stay past quitting time. Now clean up this mess." He started to walk away, then stopped and turned back. "Oh, by the way, since you volunteered to pay the kids' bill, don't forget to put the money in the register."

Her anger slowly built as she watched him walk back to the kitchen. What did he think she was, a mind reader? How was she supposed to know if every person who walked through the door had money in their pocket? And did he actually expect her to pay for the kid's lunch now that he'd had him arrested? Fuming, she snatched the glass and the napkin off the table.

And sat dumbfounded, staring down at the tabletop.

Two worn quarters had been tucked under the napkin. Irene picked them up and turned them over in her hand. She'd seen Clyde drop a burger patty on the dirty floor and, rather than throw it away and lose the fifty cents, scoop it up and put it on the grille. Those tightwads from across the street drove shiny new SUVs and pickup trucks and complained about working overtime. She considered herself lucky if they left her a quarter tip. Irene shook her head. The kid would go to jail because he couldn't pay for his lunch, but he'd left her his last four bits.

Squeezing the two quarters in her hand, she dropped the napkin and the glass back on the table. The tumbler shattered, sending bright shards of glass skittering across the tabletop.

"What's going on out there?" Clyde yelled. "If you broke something, you're gonna damn well pay for it."

Without answering, Irene walked out the door.

The wind had picked up and the scent of rain filled the air. Big, fat, cool, drops fell, sending spurts of dust skyward. The temperature had dropped thirty degrees. From the moment the door had swung closed, cutting off Clyde's angry grumbling, Irene had felt like the world had been lifted from her shoulders. Standing in the middle of the street laughing, she put her head back and let the rain wash over her. Goose bumps popped out on her bare arms.

Smiling like a crazy person, she brushed the water off her face. The rain slacked off and a cool breeze gusted down the street. Hugging herself, she wondered what would happen to the kid. He'd looked so small with Deputy Simmon's big hand on his shoulder, guiding him out to the patrol car. Irene shivered and her smile faded. She'd heard stories about what happened to young boys in jail.

Halfway home, she made up her mind. She'd get her neighbor to give her old car a jump start. She'd been saving for a new battery, but what the heck. She'd take the few bucks she had squirreled away in her cookie jar and go downtown and make the kid's bail. How much could it be? Maybe she'd even have enough left for a new battery. If not, she'd take the pay that Clyde owed her and buy a used one. Then she'd pack her meager belongings in her beat up old car, kiss this hell hole goodbye, and head for San Diego. Her sister and brother-in-law would put her up until she could find a job and make a fresh start. Fresh start. Irene liked the sound of that. What the heck, maybe she'd even meet a nice guy out there in California. After all, it was the land of golden opportunity.

A toothless old man stood on his front porch peering out at the drizzle. He wore faded Levis, scuffed boots with run down heels, a dirty undershirt, and a battered old Stetson. His shoulders were stooped and his leathery brown face was a sea of

wrinkles. Smoke curled from a cigarette dangling between his lips. Fifty years ago he was probably a proud young cowboy.

Smiling, Irene waved. Her clothes were soaked, her shoes muddy, and her hair looked like a mop. The old man looked at her like she'd lost her mind. Maybe she had. No job. No money. But the air was cool and fresh and she felt twenty again. And that wasn't even the best part. She didn't know how she knew, but somehow she *knew* that tomorrow there would be a letter from Jimmy, telling her he was coming home.

the end

If you enjoyed this story, feel free to forward it to all your friends.

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