

Light, Extra Sugar, No Patsy

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“1992: A slice of life when dollars to donuts sometimes bought more than an even dozen”

The moon-faced toddler in her tiny aerobic sneakers with neon pink shoelaces that read ‘I’m spoiled rotten’ sat gurgling in her stroller. She looked like an over-sized hothouse tomato ripening in its plastic tray. The pink cap plunked on her head, a soggy flower petal, disappeared into the chubby folds of her neck, only to reappear shortly. Her mother pushed the carriage back and forth in a mechanical rhythm with one arm and stared absently off into space.

A big man, three or four days of stubble staking out a beard, walked up to the pair and handed the mother a twenty creased into a little tent between thumb and index finger. He insisted, “Git me a light, extra sugar, Patsy,” in a voice at once gravelly and high-pitched. It sounded first like the needle wobbling on an old fashioned record player broadcasting scratchy static, and then like a keening whine. Patsy just stood there, no visible response, not even a light in her eyes or a crease in the bland features of her grayish face. He gave her a light thwack on the behind.

Patsy showed no sign of being annoyed, took the bill from the big man in her free hand and looked at it dumbly for a long moment, all the while still rocking.

“Patsy!” the man bellowed. “Git me a light, ex- . . .”

Patsy looked up, let go of the stroller handle and held the bill with two hands. She examined it as if there were a message written in secret ink somewhere in the delicate green engraving. Seeming to find what she was looking for, she placed it slowly and deliberately on the Pepto-Bismol pink Formica® counter. She held Andrew Jackson with one hand and with the palm of the other smoothed his handsome yet homely face into a pretty little rectangle.

“B-rb-l-lll, brpll, brp-ll, br-brble.” The toddler made bubbling and burbling noises while dribbling baby spittle onto a corduroy bib with a circus elephant appliqué. Patsy grabbed the stroller arm with one hand and once again started rocking. With the other, she pushed on the whitish borders of the money as if carefully ironing the pleats in a skirt. Her lips struggled with a smile that was cool, then flirtatious, then mildly clever—two novices in a convent trying unsuccessfully not to fidget. Her eyes, however, remained unanimated and dull.

Chita had just put the wire tray of new donuts down when she heard the grating, gravelly voice. She had turned in time to see the man slap Patsy on her *nalgas*, and thought to herself, “*Cochino gordo!* That *cabron* wouldn’t have a left hand if he tried that on me.” She was nobody’s *tonto*, no man’s *chiquitita bonita*. When the man opened his mouth, Chita began to laugh at that weird voice, but stifled it quickly, having learned *hace muchas semanas* that to laugh at big ugly white men in this place was just not smart. Best leave that to *una hermana morena poca inteligente*. Still, that hand on the *nalgas* was too much; Chita was now primed and ready for action.

She snatched a white paper square from the cardboard box and whirled to pick a freshly glazed French Cruller from the display rack

while relaying the order to Tommy, "Laight, Estra Shucar." She paused a moment to add an exaggerated, "Plees," in her best "I-know-I'm-not-pronouncing-it-right-but-you-can-barely-speak-one-language" tone of voice. Chita looked hard at the woman across the counter, who was still toying with the twenty dollar bill, and dropped the donut next to it. "On da'house" she said looking right into the woman's dull eyes and sending the silent message "you are not alone, I am here." The message was a diamond cutting the sad glassy stare. Although it may have been merely the spark of her earrings returning a glint from the pastry case, Chita noticed the dull film of sorrow lift in the woman's eyes and took heart.

Tommy mimicked "Laight, estra shucar. Plees" in a squeaky, funny voice. As he turned to grab the paper cup from a stack, his glossy black hair shimmered under the fluorescent lights. His eyes were smiling playfully; they would have been 'crinkly' except he was Cambodian and Asian eyelids with their epicanthic fold don't really crinkle. His fun-loving spirit shone through his glance; his playful repetition of Chita's Spanish signaled, "Order up."

Chita kicked him deftly in the ankle with her sneaker, as she placed the donut on the counter like a party favor. "A free donaght for you. Ees der anything else I can get you, Ma'am?"

The woman looked up, rather stupidly Chita thought, but she seemed to see Chita for the first time. She then glanced away and looked down at the donut like it was an alien spaceship. Chita just shook her head, her kissing rams-head earrings bobbling against her neck. She sighed, sort of regretting her generosity to the stranger.

At that moment the toddler let out an ear splitting scream. The big man's neck slunk deeper into his shoulders and he started to turn red. "Patsy, do... something.... with the brat..." he growled, the words pushed from between his teeth like sausage extruding from a grinder.

Patsy continued to look dumbly at the donut. Chita, now anxious to get the annoying threesome away from her counter, smiled ferociously. She pushed one dimple into her broad smile, and then another, to punctuate her friendliness. She thought of the way Tommy finished off the donuts after filling them with cream rosettes to make them more appealing to the customers.

The toddler continued to bawl and bawl for a long time. Really, it was an eternity.

Without responding to the man or her child, Patsy slowly reached one hand out to pick up the donut. Gingerly, with all the care of a jeweler examining a gemstone for faults, she looked over its loops and grooves, its sugar icing.

As the toddler wailed, the big man, deep scarlet becoming crimson, spit, "Patsy!....You dense broad....frickin' do something." His eyes receded into his face in pinpoints of helpless fury as Patsy stood there fixating on the donut.

Exasperated, Chita didn't know who she wanted to murder most: Patsy, the big man, or their screaming child. When will these *loca gente del imperio* learn how to take care of their kids?

Patsy placed the donut back on the counter. When she spoke, she met the Hispanic worker's gaze with clear-eyed candor. Her voice was firm as she said, "I'll have twenty dollars worth," pointing to the French Cruller and pushing the bill forward on the counter.

The big man, face now puce, sputtered like a factory whistle starting to blow. Chita herself almost panicked, until she realized the zany logic of it, and for the second time that morning fully stifled a laugh. She latched the donut box together, grabbed French Crullers by the fistfuls, and kept the giggle from expanding to a guffaw.

Without hesitation, Tommy joined her, and quicker than any type of eyelid could blink, Chita and Tommy boxed eight dozen French Crullers and set them on the counter in two short towers: the mother lode of all donutdom.

Her gaze unwavering, her motions slow and determined, Patsy began to place the boxes one by one in the arms of the man she once believed she had loved. He looked back at her, dumbfounded, and down at the toddler, who looked up in fascination at the brightly colored boxes being stacked one on top of the other in her father's arms. Remarkably, the little girl had stopped crying.

"Just what you wanted?" Patsy inquired cheerfully.

"Wha—?" the man started, but before he could respond, Patsy added airily, "Light, extra sugar?" The big man began to splutter and burst into rage, but his hands were so full of boxes he couldn't really do anything without dropping them and looking a fool.

Before he could say or do anything else, Patsy scooped her daughter from the stroller, pivoted on her heel, and walked through the heavy glass door—out of the donut shop and into her life. □