

The rube at the Garden.

Inspired in part by Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Rappaccini's Garden."

AGENT JOHN Ruben's two new friends, Peter Baglioni and Nate Wilson, took him to the Garden for a beer and a few laughs. All three were agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and all three wore dark sport jackets. Agent Ruben, from rural Oklahoma, had recently finished training and was newly assigned to the FBI's Detroit office. He was looking forward to some fun after work.

The full name of the Garden was Rappaccini's Garden, after the owner, but nobody called it that except the police and the prosecutors. The red neon sign over the door simply flashed BAR. It was on Third Avenue. Parked in front of the door were a late model Cadillac and a silver 1979 Anniversary Edition Corvette. The Garden faced west, so on a sunny day in the late afternoon, whenever anyone opened the door, sunshine slashed through the smoky interior. The floor was cracked linoleum on which sat wobbly tables fit for a Jesus Saves homeless shelter.

"Thanks for taking me to a high class joint! What do you call this style? Detroit Industrial?" Agent Ruben laughed at his own joke. Agent Baglioni, the oldest and most jovial of the three, returned the quip. "It's on us!"

They passed a shuffleboard table and found seats in back next to a pinball machine and a Top 40 juke box. Blondie's "Call Me" filled the bar. "There sure are a lot of women here," Agent Ruben observed. "I think I'm going to like Detroit." "They're the flowers in the Garden," Agent Wilson said, winking.

The waitress came over. She was as wide as the shuffleboard table and waddled when she walked. "What can I get you," she said. Her voice said, don't mess with me.

Agents Baglioni and Wilson ordered drafts. Agent Ruben said, "water and a menu, please."

"We don't serve water. Don't have a menu."

"No menu?"

This isn't a restaurant. You have to order a drink if you want to sit here."

"Really? Guess I'll have a Schlitz if you got that in a bottle." The waitress left.

"That reminds me of a joke," said Agent Baglioni. "What do you call 24 naked women upside down in a box?"

"Case full of slits!" said Agent Wilson. They told a few more jokes of that ilk until the waitress returned with their beers. "Three bucks for the drafts," she said, "two for the bottle."

"One fifty for a a draft?" asked Agent Ruben. "Are you kidding?"

"Big city prices," said Agent Wilson, putting down a five spot. "We got you covered."

"You're not from around here," the waitress told Agent Ruben.

"I'm from Oklahoma. My first week here."

"You?" she asked the other agents.

"Detroit."

“Oohhh.” The corners of her mouth shifted; you couldn’t tell if it was a grin or a grimace or both. “Oh, I see.” To Agent Ruben she said slowly, “welcome to Detroit. I’ll make sure you have a welcoming committee.” Baglioni and Wilson laughed heartily.

The waitress went behind the bar and Baglioni and Wilson got up to play some pinball. Agent Ruben quaffed his expensive cheap beer and took it all in. At the bar but facing out, not in, were three women. They all wore dresses and heels. They looked young from that distance. Two of them sauntered up to Agents Baglioni and Wilson at the pinball machine, and the third repositioned a chair next to Agent Ruben and sat down. Up close it was clear that the women’s youth flowed from bottles and tubes.

The woman with Agent Ruben waved a hand in the direction of the waitress. “Big Beatrice,” she said, “thought you might like some company. Care if I join you?” She smiled and glanced at his crotch.

“Please do!”

The two women at the pinball machine moved close to Agents Baglioni and Wilson and leaned into them. The woman sitting next to Agent Ruben became more familiar with him as well. She had adventurous hands.

Agent Ruben made small talk. But in the midst of him telling her about Oklahoma farming, the woman pulled her hands back from his leg and the smile dropped from her lips. “Powder room” was all Agent Ruben heard as she abruptly left. On her way she said something to Big Beatrice. The other two women also headed for the powder room. Agents Baglioni and Wilson sat back down with Agent Ruben.

“These women sure are friendly!” Agent Ruben said. His friends exploded in a paroxysm of laughter.

“What’s so funny?” Agent Ruben looked around. All the women in the bar had disappeared. Only Big Beatrice remained, her head down, nonchalantly wiping the bar.

“That is so strange,” he said, looking right and left. “Where’d all the ladies go?”

“John,” said Agent Wilson. “Are you wearing your piece?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“Leg holster?”

“Yeah. Is that a problem?”

“Not for us, but it is for them. That woman had her hands all over you, right? She found your piece.”

Agent Ruben looked perplexed.

“She found your piece. She told the waitress. The waitress let everyone else know. They all left. We put them out of business.”

“At least while we’re here,” snickered Baglioni.

Ruben huffed. “I don’t understand why they left.”

“C’mon, Rube, get with it!” Baglioni said. “You think whores want to get busted in a recession?”

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