

Carbon's Café, at the edge of the Bowery, opened at 5:00 a.m. sharp. Catering to working people, and down and outers who had accumulated enough for a hot cup of coffee and a nickel doughnut, the steamy cafe was already half filled with people. There were a few wanderers of the street, four laborers, two women regulars meeting for sustenance and companionship before going on to the hotels where they worked as maids, and three members of the Tenderloin Knights, an eastside gang who still operated with impunity. The TKs as they were known had not yet been to bed but had met to discuss last night's muggings and brag to one another about the mooches they had dealt with.

The cafe specialized in doughnuts, but there were no doughnuts for Mark Redding. Mark was a sturdy dock worker and needed all the calories he could get. He had a standing order for a stack of pancakes slathered with butter and swimming in maple syrup, six eggs over easy, a mess of fried potatoes with onions and green peppers, four slices of toast (and they had better be heavily buttered) a double thick cut of ham, and topping it off, three steaming cups of coffee with a large cinnamon bun. You'd think that after starting with a meal like that, (and you just knew there would be two more like it coming later in the day) that the man sitting at the counter quietly talking to the waitress would be a three hundred pounder at the very least. But he wasn't.

Mark was a sturdy two hundred and ten pounds of slabbed muscle, with a barrel chest, stomach so flat he looked top heavy, thighs that threatened to burst through his work pants at any moment, and biceps bulging over his rolled up sleeves. One of his favorite sports at the dock was to dare a co-worker to punch him in the belly or chest as hard as he could, and if the blow could take the casual smile off Mark's rugged face, the fellow could have a free poke at his massive, square jaw. If he couldn't he would hand over his lunch to Mark who would proceed to eat both his and the unlucky loser's with gusto. No one ever got to poke his jaw but many a dock worker lost a day's pay in addition to lunch, after spraining a wrist on the steel chest or rock hard stomach. One man went so far as to make the same offer to Mark, his lunch against a poke on the jaw if Mark could remove a smile with a blow to his stomach. Three days later, when the fellow was released from the hospital, he decided to leave the docks. Not that he feared Mark, Mark was the friendliest guy there and visited the man daily, teasing him about the fact that he was owed a right to the jaw. The gent was just so broken up inside that his doctor recommended a less strenuous type of work.

Mark polished off the pancakes and was working on his eggs. He put five of them on top of the potatoes, cutting into the yolks with the side of his fork so that the golden liquid could run through and flavor them. Then he picked up the sixth egg and put it whole into his mouth. He loved to bite into an unbroken yolk and mush the egg between his teeth before swallowing. With the egg masticating in his mouth and the fork slicing the others into the potatoes, he glanced up at the mirror. He stopped chewing and stared. A dream had stepped into the cafe.

After arranging for an apartment at the Dakota, Loreosa found herself walking the city streets; deep in thought. She left Sherman, still in a deep trance in the bushes behind

the park bench. She noted the café called Carbon's and suddenly felt the need of liquids and the company of people.

Opening the door, she felt a blast of air warmed by the stove, the hot food, and the people inside. Outside, the atmosphere was crisp with the early morning cold. The transition was so sudden it required a step back for balance. But it was a good change, with pleasant, delicious smells. The people in the cafe were for the most part regulars who created a warm, satisfying ambiance. She took a seat at a back table, blew into her cupped hands and ordered coffee. She paid no attention to the people in the cafe, although the big fellow with a chunk of egg hanging from the side of his mouth did catch her glance as she walked to the table, heels clicking on the hard floor.

Mark chewed quickly, swallowed with a gulp, leaned over the counter, and asked the waitress, "Who's that Nancy?"

The waitress stretched her neck looking at Loreosa while reaching for a menu to bring her. She shook her head, "First time I've seen her, Mark."

She wrote out his check and slipped it under the glass of water. "She's some looker, aint she?"

Mark nodded dumbly in reply. He stared at the young lady with the golden hair falling in a cascade over her shoulders. Finishing his meal with a long swallow of coffee, he once again glanced into the mirror. He couldn't keep his eyes off her. Sitting with her back straight as a plank she reeked of royalty, she was stunningly out of place in Carbon's.

Loreosa was noticed by one of the Tenderloin Knights as well. Winking at his companions he scooted out from the corner booth and swaggered to the pretty lady's table.

Standing over Loreosa, he drew the corners of his mouth down in a sneering smile and nodded his head. "Where you been all my life, baby?" he asked, after looking under the table at her legs.

Throwing a quarter on the table he continued, "Lemme buy you breakfast, what do you say?" His eyes seemed to feast on the lady who returned the look in a bland and neutral manner. She pushed the money off the table where it clanked on to the floor.

The man picked it up as though she had done it accidentally. He smiled again and said. "Hey, you are one sweet mama."

He swung himself down next to Loreosa and introduced himself brusquely, "Hey baby, what's your name? Me, I'm Tulle, Tulle Finny."

Loreosa had not looked at the man. Still investigating her thoughts she didn't want to be bothered with anyone. She had a lot of reflecting to do and did not wish to be disturbed. Looking into the eyes of Tulle Finny she felt a blast of lust so strong it disgusted her. "If you don't mind, I'd like to be alone right now please." she said turning away from him and back to her coffee.

Tulle Finny reached over and grabbed at her arm, causing the hot brew to spill onto the table. "Hey moma. I'm just trying to be nice. Don't shut me out like that. You never know baby, I might be the answer to your dreams."

Loreosa pulled some napkins out of the holder and wiped the table, gathering spilled coffee into the bundle of napkins. She muttered, "Only if I was having a nightmare."

The last thing Loreosa wanted was another episode. She wanted to handle this

pest like any normal, bright eighteen year old woman would do. But she wasn't a normal eighteen year old. Her maturity was far beyond the norm, she was an alien. That day had given her much to think about. In this society she had power beyond contemplation. Mulling over the night's incidents, her mind soaring with decimating information, she continued wiping the table hardly noticing the waitress refilling her cup. Tulle Finny hadn't moved. Loreosa looked at him and asked, "You still here?"

"Hey," Tulle said, head pulling back in imagined insult, "you giving me the brush?"

Loreosa answered sweetly. "The broom, and the carpet sweeper, along with the dust pan as well.

"Aw gimme a break sweet mama. Just a little time, that's all I need mama, just a little time." He said, picking up her hand.

A serious look came over her face. She daintily took her free hand and with her thumb and index finger, as though she did not want to touch too much of his flesh, she removed his hand from hers. Leaning in to him, she said in a saccharine tone, "I've asked you nicely. I am now telling you. Get up—walk away—and leave me alone."

Tulle Finny was not used to rejection. He dealt with people who feared him; with good reason. Tulle was very handy with a knife and more than one of his victims could attest to that fact. He jumped up angrily. "Screw you, bitch, I was just trying to be nice."

He looked over at his two friends who were snickering at the incident. Tulle's face grew dark with anger, he reached down and grabbed her hand again, this time yanking her arm as he pulled her up from the chair.

Taken by surprise, Loreosa said loudly, "Stop that, you're hurting me."

"Oh I'm hurting her." Tulle said sarcastically. "Well I'm not going to hurt you any more. I'm just going to give you a little good-bye kiss. How about it momma? Want to kiss the lips of the greatest lover in town?" With that he pulled her closer to him.

Loreosa was about to throw the man through the ceiling when a hand like iron grabbed Tulle where the neck meets the shoulder. The hand squeezed. It was like Tulle's shoulder had been caught in a vise. He dropped Loreosa's arm and yelped. "Hey man. Whatchoo doing?"

He turned and looked into the powder blue eyes of Mark Redding who said, "The lady wants you to leave her alone."

Tulle looked to his companions who were still snickering. They were getting a big kick out of the scene having seen Tulle get his way so often it was refreshing to see someone say no. Turning back to the big man Tulle reached into a pocket for his switch blade. It came out and clicked open, six inches of carefully honed, sharpened steel. The blade was held in an underhand grip. Tulle was no amateur at this. A wicked smile split his face. He whipped the knife up and caught Mark at the corner of his chin. A spray of blood flew into the air. Mark pulled his hands apart, clenched them into fists and banged them together on the ears of Tulle Finny who felt as though he'd been struck by a two sledge hammers. He dropped to the floor like a stone.

Mark did not notice his chin was cut. He saw blood on the fallen man's face but did not realize it was his own, dripping on the man. He became solicitous and sympathetic. As he bent over to help the man the other two come up from behind him. They enjoyed seeing Tulle rejected by the girl but he was family, and it had turned serious. One of them kicked Mark in the stomach while the other threw a punch at his head. The stomach kick glanced off Mark's body, but the punch landed, throwing his

head back and spraying blood over Loreosa, who sat thoughtfully watching.

Mark swooped the kicker into his arms, rolled him into a position to throw, lifted him over his head and threw him into the other man. Both went down. One got up only to be met by the mighty fist of Mark Redding. Now there were three of them on the floor, two unconscious, the third feigning unconsciousness.

Mark looked at Loreosa. Her face was sprinkled with blood. "You all right Miss?" he asked.

Loreosa nodded. Mark wet a handkerchief in water and wiped her face, which she allowed. She directed him to the chair beside her, took the wet handkerchief and pressed it lightly to his chin.

"You're bleeding," she said, dabbing at the surface cut.

Mark held his chin out, enjoying her ministrations. "It's nothing," he said, looking out of the corner of his eyes at her hair, bare inches from his face.

She allowed herself to sense his emotional field. She felt respect, embarrassment, a low grade love, protectiveness, friendship. She got a strong feeling of goodness. She smiled, "Thank you," nodding at the three who were beginning to stir, "for that."

Mark shrugged, self consciousness coloring his face.

"Would you join me for coffee?" she asked, motioning towards her cup, knowing in advance what the answer would be.

Mark waved for the waitress to bring him a fresh cup of coffee. The three men on the floor, after coming to their senses, walked quickly out of the cafe with the help of Loreosa, who for the first time since entering the cafe used a bit of her power. She hosed a fear of the cafe over them. There was a buzz of conversation from the others in the place who had all watched but not wanting to become involved, carefully averted their eyes, as though if they did not look directly at the action they would be protected from it.

Loreosa sipped from her cup, looking at the large package of muscle across from her. He seemed to be in his mid or late twenties, as rugged a man as she'd ever seen, and shy to the extreme. Enormous chest, heavy beard so that although he'd obviously just shaved there was a dark shadow on this face. He had such a large frame that he didn't appear to be tall so much as massive.

Loreosa was not especially attracted to big men, and this fellow was as big as they come. He looked as though he could push a tree over with his hands. She smiled and Mark's head lit up with the light of it.

He wanted to speak but could think of nothing to say. He just stared into her eyes. Loreosa stared back, amused. She'd obviously made a conquest. Finally, she broke the silence asking, "Do you come here often?"

His eyes broke away and his head bobbed up and down. The question relieved him of the burden of indecision. Questions he could answer. It was initiating a conversation with a beautiful woman that he had a problem with. Looking around the dining room he said, "I've been eating breakfast here for two years. Since I went to work on the docks," he said slowly. There was another period of silence. Loreosa did not want to use any power on him, she wanted this one natural.

Finally he added, "I'm a stevedore." and the quiet settled over them. Mark embarrassed, Loreosa amused. She didn't want to interfere but decided to give him a little shove. Besides, she wanted him to speak. She still had much to discover. Her eyes tensed and she squeezed them into a bare squint, hardly noticeable. She feathered into his mind and sprayed him with loquaciousness.

Mark's eyes grew round, his head suddenly filled with a waterfall of information pouring in. Images, words, flew around his brain and suddenly gushed from him. The words spewed from his mouth. "I've got a good job. They made me dockhand of the year last month, and I get good pay, too. I don't have a steady partner, although I work a lot with Eddy Calvert, he's a good guy, you would like him. Eddy and I talk almost every night. He likes to read about cowboys and Indians, but I like to read adventure dime novels. Neither one of us likes romances much. I like to work with different people, to hear what they have to say, and what they think about. Sometimes I work with an Irish guy, sometimes a Russian. Yesterday my partner was a black guy. We unloaded a cargo of whiskey. Him and me, we unloaded sixteen skids by ourselves. The closest anyone else came to that was the Swede and his regular partner, Aaron Wyskowski. We had a pool, me and the black guy won it. We always have a pool when we unload whiskey."

Mark stopped for a moment as though he was shifting gears, a new thought came and out of his mouth spewed more. "I'm not married. Don't go with anyone either, I just never could find the right girl. Actually, I don't have much to do with girls as a rule. I'm just too shy around them. You're the first one that I just walked over to, so I guess something good came out of those tough guys bothering you. If it weren't for them I wouldn't be here now. I'm twenty seven. I quit school in the sixth grade. They wanted me to play baseball, but every time I slid into someone he got hurt, so I quit. I don't live far from here. I don't do much at night, just read or watch TV, but I'm not a drinker. I have a beer once in awhile, but not often. I only drink when it's hot and I'm real thirsty, except when I go to a bar with Eddy or the Swede. The food here is pretty good, I like the way they serve the ham and eggs. They make it just right. The waitress's name is Nancy, I've been coming here so much that we're friends. Not that I've ever taken her out or anything, but she's my friend. I've got to be at the docks in a half hour."

Mark grabbed at his mouth, mystified. He looked around the room as though seeking someone to help him. Taking a breath, he turned back to Loreosa and asked, "What's the matter with me? I can't stop talking. I'm telling you things I don't bother to tell anyone. I don't even think I'm interested in what I'm saying but I can't stop talking."

"I've got to stop. I'm going to stop. Excuse me. I'm going to shut up. Right now."

Once again there was silence. Mark squirmed a bit, sighed, and waited for a minute like a person who just got rid of the hiccups waited for the next spasm. He smiled, it was over. He shook his head and said, "Sorry, I don't know what got into me, I never go on like that. I guess I goofed. I really wanted to make a good impression."

Loreosa withdrew from his mind took another sip of coffee and asked, "Why?"

Mark shrugged, brushed back a hair from his rugged face and answered, "I don't know exactly. I guess it's because you're so beautiful. You—you, I don't know. I just do."

He examined the back of his hand, turned it over and stared at the thick calluses, then added, "Does that sound nuts? I just saw you in the mirror when you came in, and I got this feeling that I should know you."

"I'm sorry. I never did this before. I mean talk to a strange girl." Mark's face turned red, he stuttered, "I mean, I don't mean that you're strange, I just mean that.."

Loreosa interrupted. She looked into his eyes and said, "I know what you mean."

Mark beamed. He put out a hand that looked to be the size of a leg of lamb. Loreosa took it and smiled. Her own hand was buried to the wrist in the great paw. He introduced himself in his most formal manner. His face grew serious as he said, "My name is Redding. Mark Redding."

Loreosa smiled, and her smile lit Mark's face as would a beam of light. She shook his hand and said, "Loreosa. I'm Loreosa."

He looked at her, waiting for the rest. She shook her head, "Just Loreosa," she continued, "that's all."

That was how Loreosa met the second member of what would ultimately be known as 'L's Inner Circle.'

