

The Peanut Man

In those days, long before “shopping mall” was part of our vocabulary, big city downtowns were vital, bustling places that teemed with retail, commerce, and entertainment venues. Movie theater marquees boasted Hollywood’s best in flashing lights, department stores perched on every corner, their windows filled with the season’s latest fashions, and a Krystal burger, served on a porcelain plate, could be purchased for a nickel.

It all seemed so unbelievably big. I suppose, when you’re five years old, everything seems big, but this was different. It was the first time I’d gone downtown with my mother, and it was like being enveloped in a whole new world of heady sensations.

The sidewalks swarmed with people—a kaleidoscope of continuous movement, like ants swarming on a kicked-over anthill. Cars filled the streets—not the ones that came later in the decade: sleek, finned, and pastel-colored. These cars were darker, portentous, with teeth-like grillwork, looking more apt to pounce than take flight. The sweet, rumbling hum of their motors washed over the streets, interrupted only by the occasional blare of a horn or the dry-bones rattle of diesel-powered buses.

Rushing together down the sidewalk, my small hand held tightly by her larger one, the passing windows melted into a blur of color. The air, redolent with exhaust fumes, also carried the more delightful promise of popcorn, coffee, and onions frying—a *mélange* of street-side fragrances forever and indelibly stamped upon my sensory memory banks.

It was no different with the Planters’ Peanut Man.

My nose detected the aroma of roasting nuts at least three storefronts away. Slightly sweet, undeniably nutty, and tanged with salt, the smell alone almost stopped me in my tracks.

What came next actually did.

My mother yanked me from the streaming pedestrian traffic just in time to keep the both of us from being trampled. I was hardly aware of it. Instead, I stared gaping and awe-struck at the costumed figure on the sidewalk. His head and torso was the dimpled likeness of a peanut. Black shirt and slacks, white gloves and spats, a top hat and monocle completed the elaborate outfit.

I glanced up at my mother and she was smiling at me. When I returned my gaze to the peanut man, he was bending down toward me holding a spoonful of nuts.

“Hold out your hand, Charlie,” my mother said.

I did and the costumed figure filled my palm with half a dozen red-skinned, roasted peanuts, which disappeared into my mouth like dust bunnies into my mother’s Electro-Lux. Then he handed some to my mother. She thanked him, nibbled a few and said, “I can never stop with just a few, Charlie. I guess we’ll just have to go inside and buy a bag.”

The peanut store was narrow and long, with roasters along one wall, fronted by a glass case brimming with the most amazing array of nuts I’d ever seen. Customers jostled each other inside the confining space, handing over coins and bills and then hurrying back outside with their salty treasures.

A mostly bald man dressed in white looked over the glass case and down at me. “What’ll it be, young man?”

I looked at my mother, overwhelmed by the choices lying before me.

“You choose, Charlie, any one you want.”

I placed a finger on the glass next to the red-skinned ones, my most recent point of taste reference.

“A dime’s worth, please,” my mother said.

The man used a silver scoop to shovel up the peanuts, then slid them into a sleeve-like paper bag. I could hardly believe my luck. First the peanut man himself, now this. I held the bag to my chest, felt the warmth of it through my clothing. The nutty scent went straight to my nose, and already I could see oil beginning to stain the paper of the Planters’ bag.

My mother put a hand on my back and ushered me outside. “Come along, dear, we have to hurry or we’ll miss our bus.

I could hardly wait to dig into the peanuts, but was afraid of losing some while we were racing to the bus stop. We arrived just in time and clambered aboard. Once in our seats, I could just slip my hand into the narrow bag. Coming out with a fistful of nuts, though, I ripped the top a little.

“Here,” my mother said. “Do it this way.” She grasped the bag in the middle and shook several peanuts into her palm.

I tried it and it worked. I tossed handfuls into my mouth while my mother more delicately ate hers one at a time. We were halfway home when she confiscated the bag. “That’s enough for now. If you eat more, you’ll spoil your supper.”

Then, when my face clouded over, she grinned and said, “Well, it’s not every day you get to meet the peanut man. I suppose a few more won’t really hurt.”

I devoured them all, of course, but still managed to ingest enough supper so as to not jeopardize future purchases. That night as I was changing into my pajamas, I discovered several peanuts in the pocket of the shirt I’d worn earlier in the day—the fortuitous result, no doubt, of a few errant tosses. I transferred them to my pajama pocket, and after my mother’s kiss good night, I munched them one by one as visions of my wonderful adventure replayed themselves over and over in my mind.

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It is a *good* day. Her pale, watery eyes light up with recognition when I enter the room. She is quite lucid today, I think. I will stay for a while. I never know how many more such days we will have.

She’s sitting on the edge of her bed, a lavender sweater providing the only contrast to an almost colorless nursing home gown. I place the small paper grocery bag on the bed beside her and raise my other hand, holding the six-pack of Coca-Colas. Not the cans—she doesn’t like drinking from cans. These are the eight-ounce reproductions of the old Coke bottles, the ones that had the bottlers’ town names on the underside—the ones she and I used to play “faraway” with. There’s no fridge in this room like there was in the assisted living wing. Mom’s moved up a couple of steps in the retirement-living hierarchy. But the nurses have one and will keep them cold for her.

“Thank you, Charlie,” she says. Her voice is weak now, but still carries a hint of the melodious lilt from her youth.

I lean down and kiss her forehead, then point to the paper bag. “I brought you some snacks, Mom.” We always do this, although many days—most days, really—I carry the snacks back home with me and save them for another day, a *good* day.

“You’re a sweet boy,” she says, and peels open the bag, peering inside with what seems genuine delight. I reach into the drawer of her bedside table, find the bottle opener we keep there,

and pop the lid from one of the Cokes. It's still pretty cold, the sides just beginning to sweat. Her hand trembles a little when she takes it from me.

My cell phone rings. I excuse myself and step out into the hallway. It's my kid sister, Marcie.

"Hi, Charlie," she says. "How's she doing today?"

I look back into the room where my mother sits framed in the sunlight slanting in from the room's one window. She's going through the bag of goodies I brought. "She's like her old self so far."

"Huh," Marcie says and then falls silent for a moment.

I don't push her. There's no need to. We both know what's facing us; we just don't like talking about it. The proceeds from selling Mom's house and car are dwindling rapidly. Soon, Marcie and I will have to come up with the money to keep her here. It wouldn't have been a problem a few years ago. We were riding high on the dot com bubble then. Now we're both struggling to stay above water.

"Maybe you could come by," I say. "She'd love to see you." She won't come. I know this but ask anyway. Says it's too hard to see her mother this way. It's true. It eats me alive some days, too, but then there's a day like today.

"I don't know, Charlie. I have a hard time coming up with something to talk about."

"You wouldn't have to say much. I'd take the weight."

There's another pause, then Marcie says, "Maybe on her birthday."

"That would be nice, kiddo. I'll tell her you called."

Back in the room Mom asks if it was business. I wish that were the case, but my business calls are practically non-existent these days.

"No, it was Marcie calling to ask about you."

"That's nice," she says. "I wish Marcie would come and see me. I miss her."

I reach over and pat her knee. It feels thin and bony under the gown. "She does come by, Mom," The lie rolls easily off my tongue. "You just don't remember."

"I know," she says, and her eyes fill with moisture.

I hand her a tissue from the box on the table. She has spread the snacks out on the bed beside her, and after she wipes her eyes, she picks up the narrow Planters cellophane bag emblazoned with the iconic, top-hatted figure.

"Will you open it for me?"

I do, and she says, "Hold out your hand, Charlie."

The peanuts are not hot, but they still taste the same. I lick the salt from my lips and grin at my mother. She shakes a few nuts into her palm and nibbles at them just like she did when I was five. For a moment her wrinkles fade away and she looks like a young woman again. When she was showing me the world—the wonderful world I had to look forward to, before it all started to fold in on itself.

She licks her lips, too, and grins back at me. It's the kind of grin where only one corner of her mouth turns up, an expression that seems to suggest regret as much as happiness. "You know what, Charlie? I *sure* would like to see that peanut man again."

"Me, too, Mom," I say.