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*Fred Ferraris*

## Back in the Cradle Again

I walked off the street and into the Lonesome Lizard Saloon. The air conditioning hit me like a shotgun blast of similes. Before I could adjust to the gloom, Ricky Ricardo was in my face.

“Hey man, I have an *espina* to pick with you.” He wasn’t smiling.

“Shoot, partner.” I sat down. The table was black from years of being handled by Night Soil Party members. Ricky leaned across the sticky surface.

“Last time you placed me here, *náufrago*, you filled my mouth with dialect.”

“What’s your point?”

“Dialect is out, *chicarrón*. Hinting at a character’s ethnic background is okay, but you don’t go around spelling funny. Intelligent readers hate funny spelling.” Ricky brought out a gun and placed it on the table. I recognized it immediately as Jesaru Durango’s favorite smokepole, his coffee mill carbide.

I looked out the window. Storm clouds were blowing in. “Are we finished here, Rick?”

He shook his head. “Stick around for the show, *sacudida*. Lucy and I have something especial in mind for you.”

The waitress sauntered over. She put a dog collar on my neck. Once again I was being forced to redouble my efforts to ignore the obvious. “I’ll have a *caffè ristretto*,” I said.

“Sure you want a *ristretto* this early in the day?” She smiled and attached a leash to my collar with one hand, while she picked up Jesaru’s gun, wrote down my order, and lit a cigarette with the other. I was impressed.

“I know how to handle my caffeine,” I said in a level tone, but I couldn’t take my eyes off that leash. “You know what you’re doing with that thing?”

“You bet I do, Twitch. ” She looped the leash around my head and winked. “Tell me why you’re really here and I’ll give you a free piece of heyduck strudel.” Her lips were the color of bruised liver. I wondered if she was hooked on petrochemical derivatives.

“Just tell Osama I’m here.”

All the warmth went out of her voice. “What do you want with Osama?”

“That’s for me to know and you to find out.”

She snapped her bubble gum, hard. “You’re a Philistine and a pitch man,

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Ophonic.”

I could see I'd stung her, but I couldn't let up. “I know you are, but what am I?”

She was fighting back tears when she came back with the attaché case, the one I'd assigned her to deliver to my old friend, Jesaru Durango. She shoved it across the table at me. “What the hell are you doing in Jesaru's story, dog?”

Fifty years later, Jesaru Durango and I sat at a table on my veranda, playing *go*. I had just been hired by the Permanent Puppet Government to supervise the newly reformed hotel system and my apartment on the eleventh floor of the Hotel Gryphius provided a nice view of the Euphrates. A gaggle of guests in orange jump suits were picking up litter down by the river. Their faces were the color of bruised eggplant. An image worth repeating? You bet! But at the moment expository prose was the last thing on my mind. Osama had delivered a message, a very nasty message. Sooner or later Jesaru and I, as leaders of The Free World, would have to respond. Jesaru cleared his ear with a matchbook cover from the Baghdad Exxon Inn. “What do you think of this idea: a *Worldwide Imperial Kleptocracy*?” he asked.

“It might be worth killing for, but my paycheck isn't,” I said, as I walked out and left him brooding over the way we had laid down the stones.