

T E D B O W E N



Chill



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A Cosmo7 book

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All characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

For storytelling purposes this story may occasionally refer to certain characters as retards. It is not my intention to denigrate the retards of America or to suggest that it is in any way acceptable to use the word retard when describing these people.

Chill

The sun shone brightly as Baum Dieter stared into the midwestern haze outside. He forced his attention back to the letter from the bank. Even if he cut all of his staff, even Pinault, even that miserable ratbag Marilyn, it would still be a struggle to pay his suppliers. The ice-cream just wasn't selling. No one liked it. Even Baum didn't like it. It tasted like a wet dog. Why couldn't he be a huge success like his father? Was success genetic? Did he just not get the success gene? There were two sets of genes, one from each parent, weren't there? It had something to do with letters or numbers. How did that work? Obviously not that well for him because he was about to be bankrupt. He snapped out of the pessimism that came from thinking about money and forced himself to not care. It was just a bad patch; things would work out somehow. Anyway he had to check on Pinault at the factory.

On the way from his apartment to the factory he dropped in to the store. It was early evening and the weather was warm, but the place was as silent as a morgue. No

customers sat eating his ice-cream and, for some reason, only Crystal Chong was at the counter. Where was Julie and that new boy?

“Hello Mr Dieter! Can I, like, get you a cup?” beamed Crystal.

“Fuck, no” said Baum. He had come to terms with hating his own ice-cream and now only ate it if he was trying to sell it. “Where’s Julie and that other one?”

Crystal didn’t say anything but her eyes flickered towards the stockroom door at the back of the store. Oh right. Baum had hired Julie because she looked a little flirty. A little bit naughty. How could people have sex in a stockroom surrounded by cleaning supplies and dead mice? Not ethically or aesthetically how, but physically how. Could people really do it standing up? What if you got a cramp? Or were they doing something else, perhaps oral sex? Would that be easier standing up? The floor was rather sticky in there. This thought stream was interrupted by Julie and the other one stumbling out, awkwardly buttoning their uniforms. They noticed Baum and regarded him with a curious mixture of shame, shock and insolence.

“Sorry Mr Dieter, we were just taking a break” said Julie. Baum ignored her because she was flirty and naughty and he didn’t want to fire her. The boy was another matter. What was wrong with young people today? When Baum was a teenager he knew how to behave responsibly. Perhaps it was because nowadays you could get pornography so easily on the internet. These young people didn’t know how lucky they were. And they end up being so boring, fussing about their stupid grades in college, and being afraid of taking drugs. Baum’s generation had all been expert drug enthusiasts, and Baum himself had been a particular tearaway, he remembered fondly.

“Williams isn’t it?” said Baum as though he employed hundreds of workers, rather than half a dozen. The store alone once had six employees; now it had three.

“Yes sir.”

“You’re fired. Get out of here.” Now the store had just two employees.

“Whatever” said the boy, apparently considerably less disappointed than Baum had hoped. Some pleading would have been nice. The boy slouched away, exchanging

glances with Julie.

“Julie, I expect better from you” he began, sensing that he might be able to reduce her to tears. “If I find you doing anything like that again then you’ll be out of here too. Look at this place. It’s filthy. Clean these counters. It’s no wonder there’s no one in here. And for God’s sake fetch some new product from the factory” he said, waving at the almost full bins of ice-cream. “These must be weeks old.”

Before he had even entered the small whitewashed factory building he could hear Pinault wailing over the hum of the machine. The last of the cream and sugar were chugging away, being mixed into a custard before being packaged and frozen in the Gelatomaton; a system invented by Baum’s father. Baum Senior had spent his life designing and building meat processing machines, a heritage evident in the twenty foot tall Dieter Gelatomaton. Although a commercial failure, the Gelatomaton was a triumph of industrial ice-cream engineering, producing thousands of gallons of the stuff in a continual process of mixing and freezing. Except for a slight problem with ice buildup on some of the exposed parts, it required virtually no maintenance.

The Dieter Gelatomaton® is the last word in economy-of-scale ice-cream manufacturing. The Gelatomaton® blends nitrogen, processed whey, cream, high fructose corn syrup, antioxidant, stabilizers and emulsifiers into a high-quality cost-effective pre-chilled custard. This custard is channeled into up to thirty two flavor lines before being packaged and frozen in an automated cryogenic finishing line. Raw ingredients become packaged ice-cream in just three hours. Talk to an authorized Gelatomaton® reseller today!

The best feature of the Gelatomaton was the speed with which it worked; by making and packaging the ice-cream in just three hours a smart manufacturer could reduce the necessary amount of potassium sorbate, an unsettlingly expensive preservative. Another feature, and one which will become quite relevant before the end of this story, was the salvage filter. Should a bolt or a screw somehow fall into the mixing vat it is guaranteed to be caught in the salvage filter, rather going through the output channel and then into an ice-cream container and then into a publicity nightmare.

Pinault was alone in the factory, the others having clocked out at four thirty. He was on the catwalk surrounding the top of the Gelatomaton’s mixing vat, twenty feet up

in the air. As usual he was watching the huge blades blending the milky custard, as if hypnotized. Could retards be hypnotized or did you need to have a certain level of intelligence to be hypnotized? You couldn't hypnotize a fish, could you? How would you be able to tell if it was hypnotized? Anyway, Pinault had been with the company all his life and was blissfully happy to be working in an ice-cream factory. Not that anyone else would look after him. As far as Baum knew, Pinault had no friends or relations other than his mother who was probably in some sort of psychiatric hospital somewhere. Up on the catwalk he was singing a Britney Spears song.

“Hello Pinault” shouted Baum over the rumble of the machine and the strangled phonemes of Pinault's singing.

“Hella Missa Bomb I love ya” shouted Pinault before resuming his interpretation of *Toxic*.

Baum checked the gauges at the control panel at the foot of the machine, making a few insignificant adjustments to the thermostats. At least the machine wasn't giving him any problems. Perhaps he would be able to sell it. Maybe there were rich people who collected industrial machines and showed them off to each other for bragging rights. He would have to find out. At the other end of the factory was a desk, a filing cabinet and a dead potted plant. On the desk was an engraved picture of a saint or angel or something. Baum wasn't sure if Marilyn was Jewish or Muslim. Or possibly a Catholic with very bad handwriting. She didn't eat pork on Fridays. Weren't Muslims not supposed to have pictures of people? Or was that just the violent terrorist kind? Above the desk on the wall was a large whiteboard sales chart that graphically displayed the abysmal state of their business. He sat at the desk and wrote a note for Marilyn telling her not to pay Williams when she did the wages.

The staff was down to five now; Marilyn, Crystal, Julie, Tyrone the delivery guy, and Pinault. No one really knew what was wrong with Pinault, if he was autistic or retarded or had a really bad case of ADHD or was just plain stupid. Was it politically correct to call retards stupid? Were there smart retards? There were smart and stupid dogs and cats, why not retards? Baum had once seen a Pug nearly decapitate a Labrador with a car's sunroof. It had looked deliberate; the Pug having a very guilty expression. Would that be murder? Why would you murder a Labrador? They always seemed so reasonable and friendly.

At some point he noticed that Pinault had stopped singing.

When Baum finally climbed up the ladder to the catwalk and investigated, it was clear that Pinault had slipped on a thick patch of ice buildup and plunged into the vat. The Gelatomaton's blades, originally designed to convert horses into dog food, had liquidized him; the only evidence of his fall was a pinkish tinge to the custard.

Was he supposed to call the police? They would want to dismantle the machine. Would he be charged? Pinault wasn't even an official employee; there would be charges of safety violations. When was their last inspection? Never. The inspectors only inspect places they know about. Would he be charged separately for having an unlicensed ice-cream machine? Would that be a felony? Would that be a single charge or one for every year they had been in business? Wasn't there a statute of limitations for ice-cream machine inspections? Carefully he climbed back down the ladder and stood, absorbed in the magnitude of the moment. Everything was happening too fast. The machine was still running, still producing frozen packages of ice-cream. This really would be the end of Dieter ice-cream. There was no way out of this.

Baum Dieter, ice-cream maker, froze. Eventually his hand slipped from the controls and he walked away from the machine.

The next day, Baum struggled out of bed after a night that was both sleepless and nightmare-ridden. He had managed to drink an entire bottle of single malt scotch before vomiting copiously and then sleeping for twelve hours. During the night Baum's dog, Chad, had eaten his vomit and had then vomited himself. Dogs were so stupid. Baum didn't bother to shave and was still wearing the previous day's clothes. He walked out of his apartment building into the mid-day drizzle. He had spent all night figuring out over and over again exactly what he would do today. He would walk to the factory and call his attorney, who would probably come over and ask to be paid first and then tell him to call the police and then he wouldn't have to care about anything because he would be bankrupt and in prison. There was no point in worrying about anything because he couldn't do anything, as though he was on a raft being sucked into a whirlpool. What would you do, jump off the raft or ride it all the way in? You're probably just going to be hit by the raft if you jump off anyway. If you're being chased by a rhinoceros you're supposed to run in zig-zags because rhinoceroses are lousy at changing direction. As he drifted down the street past the

store he was a little surprised to realize that there were customers in there.

Still in the sort of daze that can only be caused by witnessing a fatal industrial accident followed by alcohol abuse, Baum floated into the store. Crystal was handing out tastes to a clutch of customers who, breaking with tradition, didn't wrinkle their noses and swiftly exit the store. They were ordering ice-cream. They weren't the usual bunch of winos either, they were proper people wearing shirts with collars. Crystal saw him and straightened, smiling nervously, still a little cowed by their encounter the previous day. If she noticed his dishevelled appearance she didn't show it. Baum nodded and floated out of the store again.

At the factory a surreal normality reigned. Baum had been expecting a couple of squad cars and some newspaper reporters, possibly with flashbulbs. Did they still have flashbulbs? Flashguns. Did they still have those or was it different now everything was digital? Maybe there would be TV cameras and he would have to make a speech. What would he say? Or would he be bundled with a coat over his head? It was summer, why would anyone have a coat? Instead there was just Marilyn at the desk doing the bought ledger. She smiled at him and noticed his crumpled appearance.

“Good afternoon Mr Dieter. Did you get hit by a truck?”

“Jogging” said Baum, entirely unconvincingly.

“Have you seen Pinault?”

“What?”

“Pinault. Have you seen him?”

It was at this point that Baum discovered that he was willing to lie to postpone going to jail. “He went to see his mother” he said, slightly surprising himself.

“Mmm hmmm.”

To get away from Marilyn, Baum turned to the Gelatomaton. It was just idling

now, the entire payload of cream, syrup and other low-cost crap now magically transformed into high-price low-demand ice-cream. Tyrone was loading the last batch into a decrepid Ford Windstar to inflict upon the remaining supermarkets and restaurants that had yet to escape their contracts. Baum wondered when this bubble of reality would end and the cops would arrive. Wait and see, he thought. It can't get any worse. Or would he be rewarded for honesty if he came forward first? Probably not. Then he thought about Pinault. Then he thought about the ice-cream with bits of Pinault in it. He decided that he should give alcohol another chance and was about to leave when he heard Marilyn taking a phone call.

“We can only send samples if you're thinking about a wholesale order” she barked in her least abrasive manner, which was still quite abrasive. “Oh.” She reached for a notepad. “Let me check.” She held the phone to her chest and asked Baum, “someone from Huge Rabbit went into the store and had an ice-cream and now they want to know if we can do five thousand gallons?”

Five thousand gallons meant a net profit of a hundred and twenty thousand dollars. Per month. Giant figures danced across Baum's cerebral cortex. Huge Rabbit was the leading supermarket chain in the state. Or possibly the second biggest chain after Krieger. What made it the biggest? Was it better to have lots of poor customers or half as many rich customers? Was there a supermarket where you could take your dog? Baum took the phone from Marilyn. “This is Baum Dieter, I am the CEO. Yes, with our Gelatomaton technology we can do that sort of order per month. Yes, per week. Yes, of course, you won't be disappointed.”

Five thousand gallons a week. Jesus. He arranged a meeting with this new fountain of money unsure if he would still be free to attend it. It was strange that they should land such a big sale just before he drank another bottle of scotch and then went to jail. Maybe the business would survive and they could do a flavor called Gaolato or something. Not that people would ever buy Dieter ice-cream once they found out about Pinault being mashed into it. He fished out the attorney's number and was about to call, but then decided didn't want Marilyn to hear him explain what had happened. Not that it was his fault that Pinault was dead. Unless you counted the safety violations. Was that corporate manslaughter? They were just an LLC, was that enough to be allowed to manslaughter people?

Baum and Marilyn celebrated the Huge Rabbit sale at Futon, the wine bar next door. Marilyn brought a cup of ice-cream over from the store and they sipped reasonably-priced champagne.

“Have some” she said, waving a spoonful of the ice-cream. Baum had already raised his hand in refusal. He hated people trying to feed him, especially when they were trying to feed him crap that he had made. Somehow the spoonful of ice-cream entered his mouth. Then came the sudden shock.

“Oh my God this is... good!”

Then came another sudden shock as Baum realized that the ice-cream must contain about two percent Pinault. Which was funny because it didn’t taste retarded.

Across the street they could see the line of customers at the store grow out of the door.

“I guess everyone likes Pinault” said Marilyn. Baum was confused.

“Of course everyone likes Pinault.” And then “what do you mean?”

“Baum.” She put her hand on his. “I found part of his underpants in the salvage filter.”

“Oh. Are you going to tell the police?”

“Hell no; I couldn’t give a shit about the boy. But look what’s happened.” Marilyn waved at the happy line of customers at the store. “Look at all this new business!”

“You think the ice-cream is better because of Pinault?”

“Ugh, of course” said Marilyn, irritated at Baum’s slow uptake. “Of course it is. And I’ll tell you this: We’re going to be rich, but we’re going to need more bodies.”