



TOWN HILL

Problem is Zooby and I are underage. The solution is getting past Rodney Jenkins, the bouncer at Town Hill, so we've invited Billy along. Since Rodney and Billy played football together at Erasmus Hall High, we're hoping for old times' sake, plus some grease, the doors of the nightclub will swing open for us. For Billy, the deal is sweet—he gets us in and the show's on us.

Town Hill features the best R&B and doo-wop singers: from Dinah Washington to Sam Cooke, from the Platters to the Drifters. It's the coolest place. Tonight the great Earl "Speedo" Carroll, former lead singer of the Cadillacs, is debuting with the Coasters.

Handing Billy a ten-spot, I say, "You got the ball, now get us over the line."

When Rodney sees Billy, he goes, "Hey, my man, hear 'Rasmus lost to Tilden. Should be ashamed of themselves."

"Never happened when we played, Jenkins. We had the team."

"Ain't that the truth." They slap each other five while Billy slips him the ten. Jenkins nods and in we go.

Over the buzz of the jukebox, boisterous laughter and conversation fill the Hill. Cigarette smoke creates a silvery, chiffon ambience. The room is swaying.

The maître d' leads us to a table in the back near the horse-shoe-shaped bar. When our waitress arrives, Billy orders a beer. Attempting to project some hipness, Zooby and I order rum and coke. Two black couples are at the next table, the guys, in pastel jackets and open-collared shirts, have their arms draped over the shoulders of their dates who are wearing tight, short dresses with plunging necklines.

"Man, those cats dress so cool," Billy whispers.

"They're dressed to party. We look like we're going to temple," I say.

"We've reached the promised land," Zooby adds.

Almost as proof, Billy leans in and nods toward the bar, “There he is—Speedo.”

Sure enough, laughing it up with some people is Earl Carroll, Mr. Cool.

The curtain opens with Big Al Sears and the band getting into the groove with rocking renditions of “Night Train” and “Honky Tonk.”

The emcee announces, “Ladies and gentlemen, direct from the land of the pyramids where she drove the Nile wild, the dancer who makes the mummies murmur for more, the one, the only, Little Egypt.”

With the band playing “Satin Doll,” Little Egypt, dressed all in gold, gyrates onto the stage, wearing a halter top, a skirt with slits to her hips, and arms coiled in bracelets. Her skin is a shimmering gold and her body’s beyond beyond.

Shimmying and shaking, twirling and whirling, strutting and stripping, she mesmerizes every guy in the joint. Undressing to the legal limit, she hesitates. The crowd urges her on, and just as it seems she’s going to give in, she throws a kiss and dashes offstage.

The lights go up. It takes a while for the crowd to settle down. The Coasters are next.

We’re astonished, speechless.

Finally, Billy says, “Let’s get another round.”

Seeing our waitress talking with the bartender, I volunteer to give her our order. Moving toward the bar, I notice a chick in a tight skirt and even tighter top moving my way. I realize it’s Little Egypt.

Why not be bold? My voice climbs a register or two. “Miss Egypt, can I buy you a drink?”

Several bar patrons turn. Earl Carroll, his smile gone, rises deliberately from his stool. I hear Billy say, “Mark’s a dead man.” It hits me, oh, no, she’s Speedo’s girl.

Stopping a foot from me, Little Egypt slowly looks me up and down, pauses, and, in a stage whisper, says, “Sonny . . . when I want a baby, I’ll have one.”

The bar erupts with laughter. Speedo's smiling too. I sit down trying my best to become invisible. When the waitress appears, I order coffee.

The emcee introduces the Coasters, featuring Earl "Speedo" Carroll. Coming onstage in green tuxedos, they belt out "Charlie Brown." The audience is all theirs, mouthing the words to their hits like "Under the Boardwalk," "Poison Ivy" and the doo-wop classic, "Zing Went the Strings of My Heart." The guys next to us are holding their ladies close and rocking back and forth. Pure fun.

Afterwards, walking in the cool night air down Eastern Parkway, I tell my pals, "I'm not sorry I did it. I'd rather be bold than boring."

Zooby puts in his two cents. "Do what the Coasters do: first they learn the song, then they sing it."

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