

1992

Tumbleweed

John Fehrmann

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BY

John Fehrmann

THESIS

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Abstract

"Tumbleweed" is a short fiction piece depicting the lifestyle of a group of young adults living in Santa Fe, New Mexico during the late 1980's. These people comprise a subculture of wanderers who travel the country on whims and who rely on tourism-related work for their ventures. In the manner of such works as On the Road, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, and The Catcher in the Rye, "Tumbleweed" examines the role of the restless journeyman, a role which has played an important part of the American character.

This picaresque story gives an account of an ordinary day in the life of these young travelers. The narrator is a young man from the Midwest who has been led to Santa Fe to get a taste of the West and gain the experience of travel before settling into a more conventional lifestyle. He's like the other characters of the story in this way, motivated by a desire to quest and discover. With his reminiscences and flashbacks, the narrator provides a fuller sense of this subculture, its characters, and their way of life. The story does not have a conventional plot since it's intended to provide a flavor of this sub-

culture rather than to focus on any particular occurrence.

In addition to the American travel theme, the story also explores the American idea of history, or more precisely, the unimportance of history in our culture. By world standards, Americans are historyless. What history and culture we do have tends to be borrowed. We're a society not so concerned with the way things were as with how they can be. This ties in with our adventurous nature and is a theme also expressed in "Tumbleweed." In addition, the story examines the influence of mass media in our society and how pop culture functions to bond Americans when history and common backgrounds fail to.

These themes and ideas are brought forward in the fiction and begin to influence the narrator. As the story progresses, a spark of the American journeyman fire begins to kindle within him as he realizes those things about this subculture which he enjoys and which tempt him. Hopefully the reader will get caught up in the narrator's zeal and share in his "vision," inspiring the reader to undertake similar ventures as well.

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This story originated after I spent a year living in Santa Fe, New Mexico. I moved out to Santa Fe in the summer of 1987 with the intention of seeing the American West. While living in Santa Fe, I took a job at a local restaurant and soon discovered that a large portion of the city's employment force consisted of people who had done as I had: moved out to Santa Fe to see and experience the West. They comprised a type of subculture of journeyers, young adults who traveled the country almost on whims and who relied primarily on tourism-related work for their livelihood.

"Go West:" The phrase suggests the promise and opportunity that America represents. The United States has a rich history of explorers; and from our pilgrim forefathers traveling the Atlantic to reach this country, to Lewis and Clark mapping the land, to Apollo 11 seeking new frontiers, the role of the journeyman has played an important part of the American character.

Perhaps the freedom of this country and its great size creates this sense of restlessness and the desire to satisfy that feeling through travel, to seek and discover. Whatever the cause, that journeyman spirit was still quite alive amid this subculture in Santa Fe. These people possessed a remarkable enthusiasm for travel. They had made it into a career, traveling coast to coast with

the same fervor of the early American frontiersmen. It was this distinctive trait I wanted to capture with my story.

Of course, my fiction would not be entirely unique. This theme of the restless or traveling American has been voiced in other literary work as well. Jack Kerouac's novel On the Road perhaps serves as the Bible for modern Americans who possess this yearning to travel and explore the country. The novel gives an account of the years Kerouac spent hitchhiking and driving through the United States, crisscrossing the land with a zeal to rediscover America. On the Road and its travel motif struck a chord with its readers and influenced an entire generation to undertake similar adventures. The hitchhiking craze of the 1960's and the traveling trend I discovered among the young adults in Santa Fe were undoubtedly strongly inspired by On the Road and the movement it created in the 1950's. I wanted my story to resemble Kerouac's novel in a similar manner, to somehow express this American journeyman spirit and to give an account of a unique and fascinating lifestyle.

J.D. Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye also examines this subject of the restless American. While its narrator Holden Caulfield does not travel farther than the streets of New York City, he still expresses the yearning to journey, and he senses the value of it:

"Look," I said. "Here's my idea. How would you like to get the hell out of here? Here's my idea. I know this guy down in

Greenwich Village that we can borrow his car for a couple of weeks . . . What we could do is, tomorrow morning we could drive up to Massachusetts and Vermont, and all around there, see. It's beautiful as hell up there. It really is." I was getting excited as hell, the more I thought of it . . . (132).

Holden's wishes epitomize the spirit of the American journeyman. He wants to act on his restlessness. He wants to travel and experience the unique freedom which accompanies it. His desires reflect those of this subculture I explore with my story. The yearning for travel and change which Holden feels is further illustrated with these comments to his sister Phoebe:

" . . . In the first place, I'm going away. What I may do, I may get a job on a ranch or something for a while. I know this guy whose grandfather's got a ranch in Colorado. I may get a job out there," I said (165).

Holden wants to move out West because it seems to offer something his current life lacks. He sees the promise of change, a fresh start, and it's this value he seeks in a journeyman existence. It is this characteristic I find interesting and worthy of examination and which I hope serves as a type of binding force for my story and perhaps places it in the company of Salinger's work. Although differences in style exist, both stories are

concerned with this portrayal of the young wanderer.

" . . . I was powerful glad to get away from the feuds, and so was Jim to get away from the swamp. We said there warn't no home like a raft, after all. Other places do seem so cramped up and smothery, but a raft don't. You feel mighty free and easy and comfortable on a raft" (389).

These words of Huck Finn resound this theme of the American journeyer. Mark Twain's The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn explores the subject unlike any other American literary work. Twain's novel takes young Finn down the waters of the Mississippi, the river setting representing life and change, the Mississippi's size complimenting the great land mass of America, and narrator Huck finding fulfillment in the act of traveling itself. This life on the raft provides a freedom Huck has never known. Twain also uses Jim as an effective foil character to illustrate this theme. Jim is a slave who discovers that by traveling the river with Huck, he is free. Twain's strong ideas on these matters reflect those I wanted to create in my story. He combines setting and character together with an adventurous plot to create this American-journey story which serves as another model for the fiction I've written.

I wanted this story to portray the lifestyle of the

modern-day journeyers I discovered in Santa Fe. I decided to tell the story in the present tense with a narrator who works in the restaurant which would serve as the setting. It would be a picaresque story revolving around the workers at the restaurant. With reminiscences and flashbacks, the narrator would provide a fuller sense of this subculture, its characters, and their way of life. The story would not be given a conventional plot since my objective was more to provide a flavor of the subculture than to focus on any particular occurrence.

The characters have come to Santa Fe from different parts of the United States, just as their forefathers had come to the United States from different parts of the world. They possess this desire to explore, but unlike their forefathers, these twentieth-century travelers are perhaps more restless. Instead of settling, they continue to travel the country with no specific destination point in mind, Santa Fe being a mere stopover. They travel for the sake of travel. They enjoy it. In a sense, they are like Holden Caulfield. They want to escape from conventional society. Unlike Holden, they are not so anti-social. The traveling is not done to get away from someplace so much as it is to get to someplace, to journey and explore before joining conventional society. These characters understand the need to enjoy the freedom of youth before growing into a middle-class life which might

not allow this type of opportunity. It's this distinction which makes my story different. My characters aren't motivated by any kind of conflict, but more by the desire to seek and discover. What they do share with Holden and Huck, however, is the value they place on the freedom which comes with traveling, that special feeling of life on the raft, so to speak.

The narrator serves as a fairly typical representation of this modern wanderer. He's a young man from the Midwest who's traveled to Santa Fe to get a taste of the West and to gain the experience travel provides before he settles into a more common lifestyle. He's like the other characters in this way, motivated by this desire to quest and discover. Because the narrator has only been recently exposed to the subculture, he has a quality with which the reader can identify as well.

Being from the Midwest, the narrator has a traditional background, and that acts as a contrast to the unc customary existence he discovers in Santa Fe. His Midwest upbringing also gives weight to the setting, for the strangeness of the desert landscape creates within him a sense of wonder which plays such an important role in this travel theme. At first, he wanted only to spend a short time in Santa Fe, but the spirit of the people he encounters moves him to reconsider. He begins to think about other travel undertakings and contemplates joining the

ranks of this subculture. A spark of the journeyman fire begins to kindle within him as the story progresses, as he realizes those things about this way of life which he enjoys and which tempt him. Hopefully the reader will become caught up in his zeal and share in the "vision" he experiences at the end, inspiring the reader to undertake similar travels as well.

I chose Santa Fe, New Mexico as the story's setting because it was as much a point of destination in the late 1980's as it was in the late 1880's. This supported the theme of the American journeyer. Unlike the cities of California, for example, which also have historical destination significance and which could have served as the setting, Santa Fe is secluded and unpopulous. People tend to settle in California, but in Santa Fe there is more coming and going, whether with tourists or transients, and this fact is more in keeping with the nature of these modern, restless wanderers who move on to other destinations rather than to settle at one. The great desert surroundings of Santa Fe also made the city a proper choice. As Twain's Mississippi effectively illustrates the size of America, so does the desert, and it's this American vastness which lends itself to the great opportunities for travel.

The members of this present subculture spend much

of their time together in restaurants, so I decided to set my story appropriately in a restaurant and have its workers serve as the main characters. Santa Fe fit with this strategy as well. Tourism is a major industry in Santa Fe, the city having more four-star restaurants per capita than any other city in the United States, and this subculture I wished to examine flourishes there.

Because so much of the action occurs within the restaurant, I thought the story should be told in the present tense. Something about the immediacy of restaurant work, the table-by-table and order-by-order activity, lends itself to this. The workers must be concerned primarily with what is happening in the moment, to be attentive to the present in order to provide effective service. Their whimsical journeyman existence also does not concern itself so much with what has occurred or will occur, but with what is occurring. These characters come together in the present and live for the moment.

This sentiment also accounts for the virtual absence of last names and personal background on the characters. A biography about Remington, the famous Western American artist and sculptor, stated that when Remington was living in the East, he felt he was a man without a future. But when he moved out West, he discovered he was a man without a past. The West offered the chance to begin again, and it still represents that idea today. The

members of this current subculture aren't so interested in their pasts as they are with their experiences together in the present.

This fact also gives the story American flavor. By world standards, Americans are historyless. From our city names to our surnames, what history and culture we do have tends to be borrowed. Democracy and capitalism are relatively new ideas. Americans pride themselves on leading the way: politically, economically, technologically, and so forth. Henry Ford, an American legend, once said that history is bunk. We're a society not so concerned with the way things were as with how they can be. It's our adventurous nature, and this same spirit was present within the subculture of travelers. Just as our forefathers came together from different parts of the world to begin a new life in this land, so did these young workers come together to experience a different way of life in Santa Fe. Both "abandoned" their histories in favor of a new and different future.

In a similar manner, Americans are bounded not so much by an old, traditional history as by a young, personal history, the history of our present life: Where were you when Kennedy was shot? Who shot J.R.? Our relationships and friendships are formed more by common interests, our taste in music and movies, than

by blood lines and ethnic kinship. Our mass media has a strong influence in this regard, and so my story has many popular movie, music, and television allusions. Even though two characters were raised in distinct communities hundreds of miles from each other--he in Atlanta, she in Seattle, for instance--, they've each seen Easy Rider five times. They both know the words to "American Pie." A kinship develops.

These are the traits of the American character which my story explores: our restlessness and our sense of adventure, our history and our historylessness. While the story draws no conclusions, it ponders certain questions: Who are we, and what binds us? Why do we seek to find ourselves by journeying, and why do we move West? What do we hope to find?

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Tumbleweed

One New Mexico Dawn

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Dim amber and white glow beyond the rocky peaks of the Sangre De Cristo mountains. High above, the darkness turns deep ocean blue as night and its silver stars yield the dawn and the day's turquoise skies. The four-stroke engine of my Subaru mutters calm and steady as a frigate, the window open as I cruise through the New Mexico morning, down 84, the lonely passage between Española and Santa Fe. Next to me, quiet as a sack of hog feed, sleeps Mark McAtee, a bus boy. I'm a waiter. We work the breakfast-lunch shift at Alfredo's, the restaurant at the Inn of St. Francis.

The highway turns out across the desert. A blue pickup passes fast, three Native Americans sitting in the cab, two dark men and a young boy. Not much other traffic, an occasional car northbound with green Colorado plates, but the Indians and I seem to be the only ones heading south. Once we cross the Los Alamos exit, we'll meet scientists on their way to the labs. But now the lanes are empty.

Look away from the highway and there's nothing.

Nothing but waves of low hills and miles of open desert. They say it's a small world. Maybe. You wouldn't know it out here. Out here it's one big world. The desert valley lies wide open, wide as a sea bottom, and schools of dusty sagebrush and buffalo grass swim up into Colorado and down beyond Albuquerque and Las Cruces and into the ocean of Mexico. It's big. A lot of nowhere between anywhere. Cities and towns are specks, a few small islands in the great sea of New Mexico: Taos, Los Alamos, Santa Fe, Albuquerque, Alamogordo, Las Cruces. I grew up in the Midwest. Bunker Hill, Illinois. Back there it's town upon town, held together by a net of backroads, forests, and fields. Out here it's just that thin string of civilization running north to south. North is Colorado, Wyoming, Montana. Arizona and Utah stand west. In the east lie Kansas and Oklahoma, the Great Plains, and of course, most of this state borders endless Texas. The Great States. States larger than foreign countries. New Mexico. The wide open West.

"Where are we?" Mark asks. His eyes look shot, redder than the freckles dotting his cheeks.

"Just passed the Los Alamos exit," I say. We spent last night at a party in Española, Dolly Mandrin's

place in the foothills. Mostly co-workers. Mark was half asleep when I threw him in the car this morning. Now he looks out the window and nods. Far to the west, the Jemez mountains look like humpbacks surfacing on the horizon.

"What time is it?" he asks.

"About quarter of." Our shift begins at 6:30.

He laughs. "Six?"

"Yeah, six," I say. "What?"

"It's only twenty minutes to downtown from here," he says. "Shit. I could've gotten another half hour of sleep." He curls in the seat and closes his eyes.

"Yeah?" I say. "I had no idea."

He looks at me and then out the windshield. "How long have you been living here?" he asks.

Mark grew up in Santa Fe and knows the area well. He's seen the city grow from a simple state capital to the booming desert paradise it's becoming today, with more people moving here every year. He takes pride that at twenty-three, he's lived here longer than most other residents. He likes to let them know it.

"Jesus," he says, "I feel like shit." He rolls his window down and sticks his head out into the passing wind. His red hair blows wildly, like flames.

He must feel like I do. My head's cracking from a hangover, but the desert air rushing in through the window feels as cool and soothing as an icepack. The air out here could cure cancer.

Over the mountains, the sun rises, and the desert comes to life in the daylight. Every day seems the same here. The same mountains, the same desert, the same clear sun. But every day feels different, too. New. Like it's my first day here. The colors change in the hills, and the shadows of clouds change shape across the desert. More snow whitens the mountains, or more snow melts, leaving the gray.

Mark hangs out the window, like a dog. More and more homes appear scattered through the rolling Sangre De Cristo foothills, modern brown adobe homes, their windows gleaming like signal lamps from small ships, telling me I'm closing on Santa Fe. I steer over a few steep hills and pass the sign which reads "Santa Fe City Limits."

"Get off on Guadalupe and take it to Alameda," Mark advises. "You'll know where you are then."

We drive to the top of another hill, and the city spreads out before us, out across the foothills and down into the valley.

"You'll be surprised," the man told me when I

first arrived. "People out here don't think about it, all this open country. They expect to travel hundreds of miles to get between here and there. It's not like anywhere else." I'm beginning to understand what he meant. Beginning to. Sometimes when I'm in the right mood, when I'm focused in a certain way, like now, with Santa Fe and the vast valley spreading out before me, the desert's size is comforting, like the deck of a colossal ocean liner. I feel safe knowing I'll never fall overboard.

Two Days

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We maneuver through the narrow maze of downtown streets, paths first intended for horses, cattle, and coaches, not the pickups, foreign coupés, and R.V.'s which clog them today. Brown adobe buildings and Old West stores with log columns and wood railing line the way. It's like stepping back through time. Mark, of course, has pointed out the truth before, telling me how this building was once the local Sears, that one a hardware store. After work, the staff usually go for drinks at the Coyote Café, an Old West bar and

grill, with hardwood floors, rustic tables, chairs, and barstools. Cattle skulls and antlers hang on the walls, and old ceiling fans spin shadows across the room. A café right out of nineteenth century America. Ten years ago the building housed the Greyhound bus station. Most of the Spanish and Old West look of the city has only a fifteen-year history, a recent effort to make it more attractive to tourists. To fool people like me. Still, in the morning sun, with the tan and brown structures and the dark pines against the high desert mountains, the city has magical charm.

We drive up Don Gaspar Avenue and park in a lot just west of the capitol. "All right, let's go," I say as I climb out of the car.

Mark stretches. "Christ," he says. He grabs his dufflebag from the back seat and starts changing into his uniform. I'd changed at Dolly's.

Mark's short and perfect for bussing. I bussed when I started here. Loved it. Easy work, easy money, and I was sort of my own boss, answering only to the wait staff. But I'm tall, about six foot, and all the bending and lifting of bussing wore on my back, so I began waiting when I got the chance. Now after every shift, I don't sit in the tub for an hour.

Mark changes clothes with amazing speed, struggling and squirming, like a magician breaking from a strait jacket while submerged in a glass water tank. Then, presto, Mark emerges, fully dressed, black pants, tux shirt, burgundy cummerbund and bowtie. A true professional.

"All right," he says.

We walk down Don Gaspar and cut through an alley. For some reason, I wonder if we're even working today, restaurant scheduling being so odd, a Thursday off here, a Monday there.

"What day is it?" I ask.

The question doesn't strike Mark odd. He doesn't turn to look at me, as though he's been wondering the same thing.

"If I'm not on today--" he says. "No, it's Wednesday. I almost always work Wednesdays. We watched thirtysomething last night, remember? That's on Tuesday night."

I laugh. "You keep a T.V. calendar just like I do," I say.

"Pathetic, isn't it? All we do is work and watch T.V."

"Pathetic? What are you talking about?" I say.

"I've always thought we had it made."

We walk through another alley and come in the rear entrance of the Inn. From here it looks like a prison, only five windows on this side of the large adobe building. A man in a gray uniform unloads crates of fresh vegetables from the back of a white truck parked at the dock. Hector, one of our line cooks, helps out and marks in a notebook as the items are delivered. The heavy scent of citrus fruit, spinach, and dark greens hangs in the air. We nod to Hector as we climb up on the dock and walk in.

At the time clock, we find our cards and punch in. We're early. As we go down the narrow hallway which leads to the kitchen, we pass Marilyn, the bakery chef. She's already here working in her small room just off the kitchen. The heat from the ovens warms me. Marilyn bends over the wood counter, rolling dough into croissants as delicately as she'd diaper a baby, her hands, arms, and face dusted with flour. Her radio quietly plays oldies.

I say hello. My voice echos through the empty kitchen.

"Hey, guy," she says.

I proceed up to the line to begin the sidework.

The place feels like a church this time of day. Silent and mysterious. Mark hurries out to the bus station in front of me. It's peaceful. Just the hymns of oldies singing out from the bakery. I reach the line, the altar-like stainless steel counter where the orders are served, and I begin the prep work. At the sink, I turn on the faucet and run my hands under the water. Lord, wash away my iniquities, cleanse me from my sins.

Before long, I've finished the sidework ritual. I grab a napkin, wipe my hands, and clean off my uniform. Marilyn leans out from the bakery and points into the air, at the song playing on the radio.

"Hey," she says, her blonde hair hanging off her shoulders. "'Please Come to Boston.'"

"They always play this," I say. The song about the man traveling America is popular on this station. I listen as Dave Logan sings the praises of Boston, Denver, and L.A. Marilyn smiles at the part about Denver, her hometown, and then steps back into the bakery.

Everyone who works here seems a little like the guy in the song. Everyone's from somewhere else. People come to work in Santa Fe for the same reason people work at Disney World. It's something they've

wanted to do, something they thought would be fun. Some co-workers and I were at the Coyote Café after work one afternoon, no one from New Mexico except Mark. We ordered drinks, and the waitress checked our I.D.'s. "You all must work together here in town, right?" she asked. That's the way the city is. A melting pot within the Melting Pot. "Actually we're running from the law," Peter said. "For manufacturing false I.D.'s."

The first day I worked with Peter, he was telling Christine, a cocktail waitress, his theory that Yuppies would begin naming their children after herbal teas: "Earl Grey," "Darjeling," "Peppermint Spice," "Chamomile." That was back around Thanksgiving, when he and his girlfriend came to town from Fort Lauderdale. They'd moved there from Myrtle Beach where they'd met working together in a restaurant. It's been his lifestyle since high school, hers since she dropped out of college two years ago.

I look up at the schedule to see who's working today. It's posted above the microwave, right alongside the Heimlich Maneuver poster, with the guy they say looks like me, only with unhumanly red lips, coughing up a chunk of ham fat in six easy steps.

Anita walks in behind me just as I read her name. It must be about 6:30. Anita's a local. I think she

and Mark went to high school together. She says good morning and looks over my shoulder at the schedule. She's got room service this morning.

"Great," she mumbles as she walks out to the dining room.

Peter's coming in around ten to help prep for lunch, and then he finishes the afternoon helping out in the pub. I hear Mary, our hostess, coming in from the back, talking to Marilyn. Louis is right on Mary's heels as they walk to the front. They look sleepy. Mary's a local, but Louis is from North Carolina, bartended in L.A. and Las Vegas before coming here. I see my name and Mark's on the schedule. Thomas, from New York, will be working lunch, and Christine and Paige will handle the pub later this afternoon. Texas and California respectively. I wonder if some of these people are running from the law.

Paige. I started work here last August, during what some call the Santa Fe monsoon season, about a three-week period when rain showers pour across the valley almost every afternoon. It was about the time of the Fiesta and the burning of Zozobra. That's when I met Paige.

Marilyn comes up from the bakery with a tray of fresh blueberry muffins. I grab a couple then walk

out to the bus station for coffee. Clouds of steam rise from the cake as I bite into it. In the dining room, Louis floats quickly from table to table, like a hummingbird, as he checks the sugar bowls and fills them with packets of sweetener. Mary follows behind him, straightening the silverware placements. Sunlight gleams in through the large, monolith-sized windows.

I step out to the patio, just out back off the dining room. Mark sits at a table near the small fountain in the corner. A thick adobe surrounds the patio, and ivy grows around the fountain and across the far wall.

"Did you see the schedule?" Mark asks. The table's red umbrella spreads open above him, and he sits in the shadow.

"We're both here," I say. He nods, as though that's what he'd figured.

My shoes clap as I walk across the slate floor. The air is cool and dry, like I've stepped into the walk-in refrigerator. As I pull a chair across from Mark, its legs grate on the floor. He winces. I sit and sip coffee.

"Ruth?" he asks, one eye open, arms crossed.

"Not that I saw," I say. Ruth's a busser. "I

could have misread it, though."

He frowns and waves his hand to dismiss the whole thought. Neither of us speaks. I sit and relax in the sun. By noon all twelve of these tables will swell with the lunch crowd, all the bright umbrellas popped open above them.

Two birds land on the wall, then fly off chirping. Like in a war movie, just before all hell breaks loose. Some days the restaurant's like a battlefield. The pots and pans bang like artillery, the grill throws flames, and orders get shouted left and right. It's chaos. The public can turn like an enemy, smiling and benign one second, cruel and assailing the next, shelling the kitchen with returned orders, shooting the waitstaff with deadly tips. Corny, but true. And when it's like that, the staff seems to come together, to work together, I suppose the way soldiers do.

I sip some coffee. I hear Hector talking to someone in the kitchen. Must be Virginia, our other line cook. Hector's laughing about something. Most days are nice, when things go smoothly, each table ordering in a musical rhythm, each order delivered in measure, the staff moving together with ballet-team perfection, the tips like roses thrown at our feet.

The patio door opens. Mary steps out, her red dress swaying. She looks confident as a first violinist.

"Table three," she says.

My first customers. Another day. Time to face the music.

Three Nights
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A steady flow of customers comes and goes in the restaurant. Out on the floor, Mark busses tables six and seven, working his magic. Bussers usually come and go in the restaurant business like ants at a picnic, but Mark has been at it here for nearly four months. He's the best I've seen, clearing and setting two tables in the time most bussers are starting their first. He's got a knack for it.

Louis and I have been handling the dining room easily, and when Anita finishes with room service, we'll have a full staff on the floor. An easy morning. Peter is in later to prep lunch, so if we get a late rush, we'll have his help.

We seemed to hit it off from the start, me and Peter. About two weeks after he started, we'd be at

the Coyote Café nearly every evening, then cruise Santa Fe nearly every night. At first I thought it was odd since we have so little in common. He grew up near Boston, in the "cultured East," as he says. I'm from a small farm town in the Heartland. But Peter says it's because of television, that television has become this common denominator for Americans.

"I was touring Europe about two summers ago," he told me. I met this girl from Salem, Oregon, and we got along great. We spent the rest of the summer traveling together. She said the reason Americans hit it off so well like that is because of television, television and the mass media and everything."

"Or just natural human balance," I said. "I mean, you were a guy, she was a girl."

"Yeah, but it was mostly Platonic," Peter said. "And she has a point. No matter where you're from, New York or Seattle or El Paso or wherever, you have this entire background in common with other Americans. You share a common past: Television, radio, the shows, the songs, the reruns. It's strange. You share this common life."

Maybe television does have something to do with it. Maybe pop radio as well. I remember first going out with Paige, dancing at the local clubs, both of us sing-

ing the songs, knowing the words. There's something miraculous about that.

Both Ellen and Paige work nights, so Peter and I have our evenings free. When Mark started on, we became a regular trio, hitting clubs and just driving around the city at night. Maybe television does bound us, or maybe it's some soldier-camaraderie thing. Maybe it's just because we're guys. But it could be, as I found out the other night, that we each played the outfield in little league.

"It's because we have no lives," Peter said, offering another theory. We were driving around Santa Fe, the way we always do, looking for a restaurant, then deciding we weren't hungry, looking for a video, then arguing over which to get.

"I was at Wal-Mart the other day," I said. "Back to the Future was playing on the T.V.'s there, you know? I stood there and watched the last hour of the movie pretending to be shopping for a set."

Peter shook his head. "That's pathetic," he said. "You win."

"New topic," Mark said from the backseat darkness.

"New topic?" Peter said. "Okay. Ruth. I think she's a case."

"She's got a thing for Mark," I said. We drove

out on Cerrillos, out near the mall. The streetlights shone brightly along the avenue, flashing light into the car as we went.

"That's what I hear," Mark said. "But she never gives any strong feeling either way. You know how she is, always flirting around, sort of teasing."

"She's a case. I don't know what you see in her," Peter said.

"She's a sweet girl, but I know what you mean," I said. "She was being really weird the other day, trying to be deep or something. She asked me who I am. You know, Who I am. I couldn't tell if she was serious or what, so I told her, 'I am the All Being, Master of Time, Space, and Dimension.'"

"That's great," Peter said.

"It's a line from a Steve Martin album. I've always liked it. But for some reason I really pissed her off."

"Why?" Mark said. "What did she do?"

"Well, she sort of scowled at me and said, 'You really believe that.'"

"That's great," Peter said. "She's a case."

And that's the way it went. We were all silent as we drove out on Rodeo Road, out by the interstate, heading into the desert as the city lights faded behind us. Then there was complete darkness like we were floating

off into space. Nights are marvelous in Santa Fe, especially out away from the glow of the city. The night sky seems bigger out here than in the Midwest. The desert's empty. No forests or hills or fields to form any definite and close horizon, just the mountains off miles in the distance. It's like you're seeing more sky, open and immense over the dark desert land. Up in the hills, the lights from homes glow like campfires, and car headlights move like fireflies across the endless landscape.

"It's like life in a Hemingway novel," Peter said, breaking the silence. "We work, we drink, we loaf. We live in a Spanish city." He looked out the window. "We have no lives."

"You make it sound so romantic," Mark said.

We drove around like that the rest of the night. Nothing exciting. We do it often, drive out to the edge of town, out to the desert or up into the foothills. Sometimes I feel I could spend my whole life just driving around Santa Fe at night, with Peter and Mark, with Paige, or maybe just alone, driving around the outskirts of town, up in the hills and gliding back down. There's a strange sense of magnitude and abandon alive in the desert at night. I don't feel insignificant under the stars and sky. I feel more free and strong,

omnipotent maybe, like a hawk or an eagle. Like an All Being, Master of Time, Space, and Dimension.

Four Love

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"How do you make a woman happy?"

It's Peter. He startled me, I didn't hear him come into the kitchen. He moves alongside me, his red bow tie dangling from his neck as he pulls the lunch garnish out of the refrigerator.

I check the clock, high on the wall behind Hector who's pressing a burger to the grill. Peter's an hour early, probably out of boredom. He took Ellen to Albuquerque last night so she could fly to Chicago for a friend's wedding. Mark always says he only goes in to Albuquerque to fly out.

"I don't know. How?" I say to Peter.

"Who cares?!" he says.

I grin and wait on my order. Peter stops prepping and stares across the counter.

"You know," he says, "I'm in my twenties. I should be dating as many different women as possible." He runs his fingers through his hair. Peter looks like a young Robert Redford. He says people tell him that all the time. He probably could be dating as many women as he wanted.

"Ellen's been gone, what? Ten, twelve hours?"
I joke.

Peter nods and clenches his fists. "I know, I know," he says. "I'm going out of my skull. The thing is, I was happy when she got on that plane last night. I don't know. We needed to get away from each other for awhile."

Hector's large Hispanic frame fills the line window in front of me. He puts one of my entrées up under the lamp. He winks and nods at the dish. "You're coming up here in a second, bro," he says.

Peter stirs the fruit garnish. "I mean, let's face it," he says. "There are a lot of nice girls out there. I'm young. I should be exploring life. Don't you feel that way?"

We've had this conversation before. Peter wanted to leave Ellen last winter for a waitress at Comme Chez Vous. He went back and forth on that forever before deciding not to do anything. It was a hot topic back during those night drives before Mark joined in. I think maybe Peter's forgotten.

"Seriously, huh?" I say.

"Just this once while no one's listening."

"I'm listening, bro," Hector says from the grill.

"All right," I say. "Let me adjust." I reach and grab some garnish for my entrée. "You know how

I feel. I like a nice one-on-one, girlfriend-boyfriend sort of relation--"

"But is that just because you're too lazy or too scared to date around?"

"I don't know. You know Paige. Why would I want to?"

There's silence. Hector puts another plate up in the window.

"I'm leaving Ellen," Peter says. His tone has dropped, more serious now. He grabs a towel, wipes the counter, then stops and leans back and sighs.

It's not a good sign. "You know what, yeah, you're probably right," I say. "You guys just need to get away from each other. See how you feel in a week." I hate when he's like this. I never know how to take him.

"Maybe I just need to move on. It's spring. I always get restless this time of year," he says. He crosses his arms. "It's in my blood. My family moved around a lot when I was a kid, because of my father."

My order's about up. Hector spoons up some hash browns and places the plate on the stainless steel counter. "Traveling salesman?" I ask Peter.

He forget what he said and doesn't seem interested in continuing it. "No, no," he says.

But I'm curious. "Are you an army brat?"

He shrugs. "No," he says and waves his hand to dismiss the topic.

I grab a tray from beneath the counter and begin putting my order together. "Well, what?"

Peter looks away absently. "He's a federal witness."

I pull down another plate of eggs. "What?" I say.

Peter's agitated. I think he'd rather discuss Ellen. "No," he says. "He's a head honcho with the circus. I've told you that."

"And you hate the circus because the clowns smell." For some reason I forgot. "That's right."

"It's all the make-up," he says. "They're plain disgusting anyway."

The kitchen printer begins to hum as an order comes in from the bus station register. Hector reaches over and tears off the paper, then clips it on the line board. A moment later Anita walks into the kitchen and waits next to me at the counter.

"I'm all stirred up," Peter says. "It's a golden opportunity. Ellen's going to be gone for ten days. I could go out with Candace, and Ellen would never know."

Anita looks over at Peter. "What do you think about that?" I ask her.

"Lust, lust, lust," she says smiling.

Peter shakes his head. "Lust is all there is," he says. "Lust, desperation, and fear. Love is a mere

manifestation of insecurity and dependence."

I finish garnishing my order. It's a big deal. Everything has to look just right. "You missed the party last night," I say to Anita.

"Yeah," she says, sort of sighing. "My boyfriend had to work."

"Ah, you should have gone anyway," Peter says.

Anita smiles and looks at Peter. "Yeah," she says, "but when I'm drinking, I like to be kissing someone."

Hector spins suddenly and points his knife at Peter. "You hear that, bro?" Hector says. "That's love!"

He had been listening.

"Yeah, yeah." Peter says, somewhat startled.

I balance the tray and take my order out. The dining room's almost empty, maybe four tables. I serve the order and return to the kitchen.

Anita's waiting on her order as she straightens the dress on her dark slim body. She fills that modest waitress uniform better than any girl on staff.

Peter slices a loaf of sour dough bread, his sleeves rolled up to his elbows. "I just need to decide how I want to play the next ten days," he says.

"Maybe you're right," I tell him. "I mean, when I first started going out with Paige, it was totally self-serving. She's attractive, intelligent. So long as she didn't object, I wasn't going to question my

motives or anything."

"See?" Peter says.

"Maybe, maybe," I say.

Anita puts two entrées on her tray and carries them out to the kitchen. Hector watches her, and when the door swings back behind her, he says, "Man, if she wants someone to kiss her while she's drinking . . . "

Clowns to the left of me, jokers to the right. Peter finishes slicing the loaves, and I help him place them into the warmer.

"I don't know. Ellen's good people," he says. "Maybe I'll just ask her to marry me, try to get a managing job somewhere, and begin life as a working stiff. Mortgages, taxes, loans, bills on bills."

"Insurance. Tuition. Sick children," I say. I lean against the counter and relax.

"Affairs," Peter says. He moves around the kitchen looking for something to do.

"You know who Timothy Leary is, right?" he asks.

"Yeah. L.S.D."

"Right," he says. "Anyway, Ellen and I were in Las Vegas last summer, before we came here. We were at this restaurant and Tim Leary's there. We couldn't believe it. I almost even asked for his autograph. I mean, here was Leary, this Sixties icon, you know?"

"Yeah."

"So he's there with this girl. A beautiful girl, but, like, half his age. She could have been his daughter. And when we were leaving, they had this cloak room there, and Leary was in there with this girl, making out with a capital M O." Peter rolls his eyes. "I couldn't believe it. So now I have this theory that all this 'inner beauty' stuff, all this it's-who-you-are-on-the-inside stuff simply goes out the door once you hit a certain, forty or fifty maybe. I mean, here's Timothy Leary, a genius, and he's after this girl who's my age, and there's no way this was any kind of intellectual relationship. You could tell the chick was no scholar. What sort of brainchild gets her thrills in a cloak room? No, it was lust," he says. "Lust, love, what's the difference?"

"You got me," I say.

"I don't know," he says.

Mary walks into the kitchen and points at me.

"Three at table five," she says.

"All right."

Five Fame and Fortune

It's a tempting lifestyle, just working here in

the Rio Grande Valley, in this wonderful climate, making this easy money. Raul, one of our managers, has been traveling and working in restaurants for over twenty years, since he came to the States from Peru when he was eighteen. "The work is not too bad," he says, "and the money, you know, is good," rubbing his fingers together whenever he talks about money. Peter's been traveling and living this way since high school. The night is almost entirely made up of people like this, college-aged kids who travel the country almost on whims and who rely primarily on tourism jobs for their livelihood. It's like a subculture, and I feel a sort of kinship with them.

"I think I'm definitely moving on," Peter says. It's about 12:30, and the lunch rush is finished. We stand around the bus station, relaxing. "I'll probably stay through the summer for the money, but then that's it. I've got to get out of here. I'm not going to spend another winter hell in a semi-comatose state trying to amuse myself by staring at the beams in my living room and going to dollar night at the movies." He stares out to the dining room.

"That old highway's a callin'," I say.

Peter turns and smiles. "What's that from?"

"Originally?" I say. "I have no idea. It's what Pee Wee Herman says in his Big Adventure movie."

"That's a classic," Mark says, joining in. "I love when he says 'I remember . . . the Alamo,' and then everyone cheers."

"Texans," I say. "I know what you mean, though, that restlessness," I say to Peter. It's just the three of us in the bus station. "I mean, that's why I came out here. I had to get out of the Midwest. It's that whole stagnant lifestyle. I'm just not ready to settle down like that, having to attend this social function, join that club, and so on, with my parents hounding me every step of the way."

"Your parents would make you do that shit?" Peter asks.

"Well, not exactly. It's more like if you don't, you become sort of an outcast. People think you're trying to be some bad-ass rebel."

"And are you? A rebel?" he asks.

"Only in the same way that Pee Wee is," I say. "I don't know. I just couldn't see myself becoming like that. At least not yet."

"Here, here," Peter says. He looks back out to the diningroom and sighs. The ten top he took about an hour ago is still here, lingering, camping. Peter hates it when tables camp. "After I serve dessert and drop that check, that's it. I should have no obligation

to them after that," he says. It rarely works that way, though. Most often when a table camps like this, they still expect a hot cup of coffee and a full glass of water. And if the waiter's not around for that, people read it as a sign of poor service. It's the last thing they remember, and so they usually leave a lousy tip.

So now Peter's walking around with a bit of an attitude. He gets more tense each time someone asks for "a little more coffee." He clenches his fist and fake-punches me in the gut. "Go home!" he cries back out to the dining room. "This tip had better be worth it."

Mark stretches in the rear of the bus station, almost knocking over a coffee pot. "Did you hear about Jodie Foster?" he says.

"Yeah, she left a forty dollar tip or something," Peter says. "I wish I'd get half that."

"Jodie Foster was in here?" I ask. "When was that?"

"About a week ago," Mark says. "Didn't you hear?"

"No."

"Oh, yeah," Mark says. "And get this. Thomas ran her credit card through the machine, punched in something like \$80,000 or \$100,000 or something--"

"And it got approved," Peter says, poking his finger in my chest.

"Incredible," I say.

"Incredible?" Peter says. "Un-fucking-believable."

There's a silence as we all think about that.

"It just shows the wealth of these people, how much difference exists between us and them," Peter says. He jingles the change in his pocket.

"A guy I know back home, his mom works in the Cardinals' front office," I say. "She has a xeroxed copy of one of Ozzie Smith's paychecks. It was either weekly or bi-weekly or something, but it was for something like \$200,000. I couldn't believe it, seeing this million dollar contract boiled down to this weekly total. It was amazing."

"Wow," Peter says. Then he walks out to check on his table.

I follow him, making a quick trip through the dining room. Swan Lake plays over the speakers in the ceiling. I drop a couple of checks, scoop up a three-dollar tip, and head back to the bus station. Mark carries an empty tray out to the floor and passes me as I reach the station.

I start writing "Thank you"'s on my remaining checks. Peter's talking to some guy at his table. The guy looks like he has a question about the check. I can almost see Peter's jaw tightening. He straightens up and comes back to the bus station.

"Lawyers," he says. His customers stand around

their table, adjusting their ties and jackets. Six men and four women. They must work for the state.

"How could anyone go into law?"

"What did that guy want?" I ask.

"Oh, he was trying to make some joke about the check. I guess he wanted to impress his dork colleagues."

We both smile and nod as his ten top walks by the bus station and files out of the restaurant into the inn's lobby.

"You know," Peter says, "I think I could be a pretty good salesman." He turns away as the last guy in the party passes by. "But the business world is so distasteful to me. The restaurant scene's not bad. I don't know what else I'd do. Teaching maybe, but it's so political."

Mark walks by with a trayload heavy on his shoulder. The silverware jingles with each step. Peter goes out to check on that table. I've heard him tell that story before. Usually he goes on saying how waiting tables is a profession in Europe and how no one here like to admit to being a waiter or waitress. They always say they're actually artists or writers or something, that waiting tables merely serves as a temporary means of support. Peter hates that. He really takes pride that this is his chosen career, and he knows this trade well.

He says if he's anything, he's a drifter who's in it for the money.

"Fifteen bucks on a seventy-five dollar check. Not bad," Peter says, back from the floor. "I've got a friend back home, an engineer. He loves the money, but he says he just can't imagine working that kind of job for the next forty years. I mean, there's no point doing something you don't enjoy. It's just not worth it, you know, life's short. Restaurant work is good. Easy in, easy out. You can travel and live in the nicest places in the world. What else could you want?" he says. "What else would I do anyway? I'm an unskilled middle-class male. I'll never be a doctor or lawyer or engineer. This work is as good as anything I'm qualified for. And I don't mind living modestly."

"And it's a great type of education," I say.
"Traveling around and everything."

"I know," Peter says. "My parents hate it, though. My dad tells me I'm wasting my life." Peter sighs.
"Who knows. Maybe I am wasting my life. But this is good for me right now. Besides," he says, flicking a check like a winning lottery ticket, "this beats the navy."

Six New Mexico Dusk

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We take a few more tables, and before I know it, the end of the shift is nearly here, like dusk. I feel a little weary, in my legs and back, as I begin cleaning in the kitchen.

For some reason Ruth's here. She checked the schedule a minute ago, but now she's just hanging around, dressed in her street clothes, jeans and a white blouse. Ruth's an art student from some college in New York. A pretty girl, fair-skinned and freckled, from the roots of her almond-brown hair to the backs of her small hands. From behind, she could be Paige's twin.

Mark treads into the kitchen hauling a bus tub of dirty glasses. He glances at Ruth, and I can tell it's the first time he's seen her today. There's a certain storm in his eyes. He says hello to Ruth. She smiles and waves excitedly.

The printer types out an order, and a few seconds later, Peter enters the kitchen. Mark manages to strike up a conversation with Ruth. I continue to wipe the counter, and although I try not to listen, it's a small kitchen and the four of us are crowded behind the line. I catch every word, with each flirtatious overtone, between Mark and Ruth.

Finally Mark says, "Well, maybe you could meet up with us later, for drinks."

Ruth pauses. "I can't," she says. "I've got something going tonight. Maybe some other time. Is Anita working today?"

Mark nods, and Ruth says, "Great" and she darts out of the kitchen.

Peter smiles and turns to Mark. "Your seduction attempt is foiled," Peter says. Mark flips him off.

I wander out to check on my three tables. Paige. Things look fine, people talking, finishing their meals, laughing and drinking, like the day I met Paige, on the first night of the Fiesta.

I'd just watched the burning of Zozobra, the giant papier-mâché Old Man Gloom exploding in flame against the blue Santa Fe evening sky. Then the whole city was manic, people hollaring and drinking. Small fireworks flashed up everywhere, and a feeling of jubilation swept through the town and across the land of enchantment. The burning of Zozobra is an annual tradition, marking the end of summer and the coming of winter. Winter's depression and gloom burns up with Zozobra. The ceremony's aim is to sustain summer spirits into the coming dark months. It worked. I felt alive, coltish, and I started down to the Plaza to get caught up in the celebration.

The crowd glutted the streets, with children running through in pinball patterns, and small bright fires ignited everywhere as people burned their own Zozobra dolls, their private gloom. I followed along Palace Avenue, past the shops with log columns and eaves. Then the crowd poured out onto the Plaza. Mariachi bands played. People danced and sang. More fireworks blasted brightly. Strings of Spanish lanterns crowned the Plaza, and booths for crafts and refreshments cluttered the square. The smell of frijoles and fried dough hung heavy as fog.

The sun was setting, and it was getting dark. Then there she was. Standing at a booth on a far corner of the Plaza was an elegant woman with long brown hair. I walked over slowly for a closer look. I worked through the crowd, then finally, I stood beside the woman. She had biscuit brown skin. I just stood there. She didn't notice me. I was about to speak when a huge man appeared from nowhere. He seemed large as Zozobra, and he and the woman went off together.

I was about to follow them when the girl behind the counter asked if I'd like to order. I turned to wave her off, but her hand caught my eye as she pulled the hair back away from her face.

"Can I get you something?" she asked again. Her eyes were brown as pinto beans. Then I noticed the

large white nametag on her shirt, the red looping letters which spelled out the word. Paige.

It was that stupid. I bought something, I think it was funnel cake, and I tried to make conversation, talking about the city and the celebration and other things I knew nothing about. She kept pace with me, breaking off only to take orders. We talked about baseball and the Beatles, astrology and hobbies. I discovered she was a Virgo Giants fan who does yoga and like the slow version of "Revolution." Like me, she'd just finished school, a biology student from Sacramento. She and a friend decided to do some traveling before settling into their lives. We got into a rhythm and talked through the night. We decided to go out the next day. More firecrackers popped off in the distance.

We had lunch at The Shed. Paige wore a white, sleeveless summer dress, with blue and yellow flowers printed on it. After lunch, we walked down around the Plaza and stopped in a store where they sold Western clothing, leather boots and belts, chaps and ponchos. Paige pulled back her hair and tried on a straw hat. She twirled and the dress fanned out around her knees. She looked beautiful.

We bought the hat and went back out to the street. The sun was bright and hot, so we went up to the Plaza and sat under a tree. Along San Francisco Street, the

Indians were kneeling like nuns, selling their bright blankets and silver jewelry. People wandered in and out of the shops. We walked around downtown the rest of the afternoon and into the evening. As the sun went down, long shadows from the buildings and trees laid across the Plaza.

"I know a great place to watch the sunset," Paige said. "Near Galisteo."

So we drove south out of Santa Fe, over the last high hills, out into the desert on a lonely road near Galisteo. We were near the town, but couldn't yet see it. Out west, along the horizon, stretched the long gray arms of the mesas, with dark mountains beyond them, and in the east sprawled the large knuckles of the Sangre De Cristo range. Over the vast, unbroken desert between, a storm moved up from Albuquerque, a calm late-summer rain drifting across the sky.

It was nearly sunset. I slowed the car and then drove off into the desert, dodging the huddles of sagebrush. We parked and climbed to the top of a small hill. The storm rumbled, and the desert seemed to float.

"Look out here!" Paige said, pointing out east. The sun gradually faded behind the western mountains, and its light against the eastern hills was watermelon red and brilliant, the shades mixing from red to pink to orange, like light bleeding through color slides.

We felt the breeze cool as the storm closed in. The far soil darkened beneath the shadow of the great blue-gray thunderhead, the tremendous clouds surging and swelling above the desert.

The first drops started to hit, one, two pellets of rain, and then a steady, hard fall, towering sheets of rain sparkling down across the land. Paige took my hands, her arms stretched tight, and she leaned back into the rain. The valley glowed in the last sunlight.

Paige's hands were warm and slick, her legs gleaming.

"Let's dance," she said.

She laughed and put her arms around me. We pulled off our shoes and danced. The rain water darkened her hair, and it dripped into my eyes and mouth. I was drowning. Our feet swirled in the mud. Paige's laughter deepened, from down in her throat, and rain glazed over her cheeks and lips. We danced. My shirt had soaked through, and Paige's dress had thinned to nothing. She glowed in the evening sun. I pulled her close against me, and she put her warm hands on my neck and kissed me as we danced barefoot in the desert storm. I felt I would live to be a hundred.

Seven Life and Death

It's about 1:45. We close the dining room at two,

then reopen at 4:30 for dinner. I take two steps out of the bus station and check out the table I just got. A man and a lady and their two boys at table six. I probably won't get out of here until after three since we'll have to wait for them to finish before we can start dropping table cloths to prepare for dinner. I see the boys arguing with their parents about something on the menu, so it'll be another minute before they're ready to order.

Anita rushes by, taking an empty tray out to the floor. At the hostess desk, Mary's saying "Thank you, Have a nice day" to a group of elderly as they slowly file out of the restaurant. I can tell she's itching to get back out to the floor to return the checks, credit cards, and piles of change she has lined on the desktop. She wants out of here. Mark's polishing off a half of club sandwich some customer didn't finish. He stands back in the bus station behind me, telling me to watch for Raul. Mark doesn't want to get caught eating on the job. I look out to the table with the two boys and then over at my other table. Nothing's happening.

Christine walks out from the kitchen. She works the pub this afternoon.

"Hey, dudes," she says, her soft Texas accent cutting the air.

She looks so energetic and awake. "You should have been here last night," she says to Mark, whose cheeks are ballooning from the sandwich. "The bus squad got into a bottle of Merlot. They were worthless the rest of the night." Mark smiles and sits up to rest on the counter.

It's crazy around here this time of day. Half the staff is shakey-legged and weary from a day of endless trayloads and table turns, pockets filled with the day's tips, and the other half of the crew wandering in for the later shifts, bright-eyed, bushy-tailed, fresh from their showers and afternoon breakfasts.

"I don't know how you work the day shift," Christine says. "It sucks. It's running for nothing."

"It's not that bad," I say. "I have my evenings free."

"Big deal. You spend your evenings here anyway," she says. "I worked a breakfast shift for Angela last weekend. I was completely in the weeds, and this lady ordered a fruit salad. I wanted to say, 'Mam, you don't know how hard those are to make, it's going to put me so far behind and screw up my other orders, and you know, it's just not going to be worth that dollar you're going to leave me.'"

I laugh. "Yeah, it's got its downside."

"I don't know how you can stand it." She sighs.

"I guess the pub's not a lot better. You and Paige should come out to San Diego with us this summer. The money's fantastic. The beaches, the ocean. It's going to be great."

"That old highway's a callin'," I say.

Christine smiles. She and her boyfriend have been planning this move for months. I look out at my table. The family seems to have made a decision. I head out to take their order. I'm glad I'm not bussing. Kids make the biggest messes.

I get the order. A spinach salad for the lady, an Alfredo special for the gentleman, two burgers and two cokes for the boys. Easy enough. As I start back to the bus station, the lady at table four tries to catch my eye. I try to avoid hers.

"Waiter," she says.

There's no way out. "Yes," I say, trying to sound surprised, even startled, by her call. She points to her coffee cup.

"More coffee?" I say, realizing she's in Peter's section.

"Yes, please," she says.

"Right away."

I head straight to the bus station and punch my order into the machine. As it whirls, I glance out

to the dining room, then grab the check and head into the kitchen. Peter and Louis are there sealing garnish buckets.

"Your lady at four needs coffee," I say to Peter.

"Great," he says.

Hector and Virginia clean their side of the line. He scrubs the stove top while she wraps ground beef for the walk-in. Julian wanders about behind the line, too, prepping for the night shift.

"Bro," he says. "How many tables are out there?"

"Just mine and Louis's, I think. The others are eating or finished."

He nods. He has other things to do for dinner, and he hates dealing with late-lunch interruptions. He looks at my ticket. "Maria!" he yells back to the pantry.

"Yes?!"

"Spinach salad!" he yells.

"Okay!"

Julian smiles at me. This should be my last order of the day. As soon as I take this out and drop the check, I'm finished. It's over. Not always pretty, not always fun. But when I drop that last check, I always feel a wonderful kind of relief. It's the way death must be.

Of course, we still have more sidework to do, small

matters, like turning the dining room, dropping white cloths like shrouds on the tables, adding fresh flowers. And another feeling comes forward, and I know that tomorrow offers another shift, like reincarnation, another life. I suppose I could quit, but someone new would simply fill my shoes, the way the bussers continually replenish themselves, one leaves and another takes his place, like ants or bees. But once I'm finished, I can hang around here or head out into the streets, free.

Eight The Hereafter

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We're closed. It's 2:10. I still have two tables, but the orders are out, and we've stopped serving. Peter and I stand around the bus station. He flips through some New Age magazine a customer left in the restaurant. Joyce Dewitt smiles on the cover.

"The New Age," Peter scoffs.

I pull the cash from my pockets and count the bills, putting aside a percentage for the bussers, hostess, and the bar. After that, I have sixty-three bucks and change. Not bad. And with the coming of summer and the tourist season, fat times lie ahead.

"Check this out," Peter says. He holds out the

magazine and points to the black-and-white of a middle-aged man standing, or walking, on gray stones. "'This man walks across red-hot coals while chanting his mantra,'" Peter says, reading the caption. "Yeah," he says, "his mantra is 'Arrghhhh!'"

I smile and look out to my two tables. Still just sitting. The family looks ready to leave, so I pull out their check. Then I feel a tug on my arm. It's Paige.

"Hey, kid," I say, still watching the boys at table six. Paige came out of nowhere. She reaches for my chin, pulls me around, and kisses me.

"What's up?" she asks. She's wearing her cocktail uniform.

I give her a long kiss back.

"What?" she asks, grinning.

"Nothing," I say. "One more check and I'm done." I grab her hand for a moment and then walk out to the floor.

For some reason I feel great as I walk across the dining room. Sunlight from the streets shines through the windows and fills the room. I watch the people walking by. The boys at table six blow Coke spray through their straws. The lady give them a stern stare as I approach the table. I drop the check and clear off a couple of plates. Then I head straight for the

bus station. Paige is still there waiting, grinning the same grin, like a piñata. I'm smiling.

"What?" she asks, helping me put the plates into a bus tub.

"Nothing," I say.

"Susie Night was awake when I got home last night," Paige says.

"Wonderful," I say. Paige lives on the top floor of a house on the east side of town, just off the end of Canyon Road. Her landlady, an alcoholic holistic art therapist, lives downstairs. A bizarre woman. Depending on the lady's mood, Paige calls her Susie Day or Susie Night.

"I come in the door, and Susie's there, with a bottle of scotch, sitting alone at the kitchen table," Paige says. "She stands up, looks at me, and says, 'You are the solstice witch.'"

I look at Paige. "And?"

"That was it. That's all she said. 'You are the solstice witch.'"

"You need to move," Peter says.

"Come on. Susie's too much fun," I say. "'The solstice witch.' I like that. I'll have to commend Susie next time I see her."

"She's insane," Paige says.

I kiss her again.

She smiles. "What?" she asks. Then she chuckles.

"What what?" I say. The family with the boys walks out of the dining room and passed the bus station. They smile. Once they're gone, I stroll out to the floor to clear the rest of the table and get the check to take to the hostess desk.

I'm smiling as I pass the bus station, and Paige notices. Mary totals out the check and hands me the tip. When I get back to Paige, she kisses me on the neck.

"Come on, you clowns," Peter says, walking in from the floor. "Let's go. Move aside. I've got to add a couple desserts to this check. My faggots want out of here."

Paige and I step out of the bus station and lean against the wall. "What's with you?" she asks.

"Nothing," I say. Then I figure she'll drag it out of me anyway. "I don't know. I just feel good. Come on, don't you see it?"

"Don't I see what?" She sighs. "I hate it when you get all Sixties-ish."

I feel her hold my hand again. I think about this morning and the desert in the early sun. "I don't know," I say. "I just feel good." I think about Paige in the rain. "Don't you see it?"

I squeeze her hand and walk out to the dining room.

I make a fast sweep. The dining room is peaceful, only four or five tables with customers talking and preparing to head out into the city. Through the large windows, I see the people walking by, up and down the streets of Santa Fe. I smile. Suddenly everything seems alive, and I feel I'm the only one here to notice. I take a couple dishes from an empty table and head back to the bus station. Paige is there. She's smiling.

"Yes," she says.