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Headline News

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HEADLINE NEWS

VICTOR J. WASSERMAN

The door beeps. They used to cling, or clang, once upon a time, but now they beep, and they give old ladies heart attacks.

We are sitting in the corner booth: room to seat five, sufficient leg room for two, and Jeanine is a kicker. The restaurant isn't crowded, but we're still waiting on an order we placed twenty minutes ago. I guess there is a reason it isn't called fast food, in any case mid-century-themed diners are no longer my forte. If we had gone to the Mediterranean place, like I'd said, we'd be stuffing our faces by now and complaining to each other how we really shouldn't be eating so many carbohydrates -- they simply aren't in our diet. But no, we're here, waiting on an eighteen-year-old in roller-skates, waiting to stuff our faces, waiting to complain about how French fries aren't in our diets either, because there simply isn't room in my closet for the clothes I could wear when I was in my teens and the clothes I can wear now. One of them has to go, and I'll be damned if I'm going to be seen throwing away tube tops and tank tops and short-shorts and pink skorts in a gray sweatsuit.

I kick Jeanine. "From now on, I'm going to do it back to you every time you kick me!" She scoots away; I'm irritable when I'm hungry. The roller waitress does a one-eighty as she moves to greet the people that just came in; she thinks she's so cute just because she can make her skirt fly out like a figure skater, I'm going to trip her when she passes by again without our food. The new people are interesting. I was making snide comments about "the Heavy-Weight Champion of the World" as I had come to call him. He had come in with "Bride of the Champ" and "Champ Jr.," masters of their division all, but the head of the family had enough body for the rest of this chronologically displaced delicatessen, and so the full weight of my hunger-driven fury fell upon his overburdened brow. He had already stuffed his face with a pleasant cornucopia of deep-fried, extra-rare, well-done, heavily-salted, heavily-battered, deep-dish heart attacks and I could see from his nonchalant gestures that he was gearing up for more. Then he pointed to a picture on the menu as the waitress goes by, a chocolate éclair. I double-checked my menu -- why on earth would a fifty's restaurant serve a French desert? Did it matter? No, not really. The Champion was about to buy himself a trip home in a hearse. I could imagine the headlines, MAN EATS HIMSELF STUPID, CONFIDES TO WIFE ON DEATH BED: "IT WAS THE THIRD COURSE THAT DID IT." It is so fun to dream. In any case, these new people were more interesting.

Tall, Caucasian, snappy dresser: he was cute, but he was insecure. I could see from his face that he was having second thoughts about something. He kept talking to the waitress as she was leading them to be seated, gesturing towards his companion, an elderly woman, the whole way. I suspect that he wanted to be in a quiet space, but I couldn't hear; the jukebox was loud. She put them right in the center; that twit, I'm going to break her face. She leaves them with two menus and glides past our table as I withdraw my foot; I chicken out.

Unlike the guy, the woman seems quite excited to be out. The noise of jukebox, the chatter of people, a blast from the past for her, she must have been sixty. Being in this place, it must be like being sixteen again. I'm close enough to hear her wonderment, "What a hip joint, this is so much better than Monty's on fourth." Note to self: avoid Monty's on fourth. If this is better, I don't want to see worse. "Don't you think, Roger?"

The younger guy is half-listening, he's looking around behind him, distracted or distraught, I've never figured out the difference. "Ya, mom, much better. Did you have a nice

day?" So he's her son, could of figured that, but there are some people out there. She takes a while in answering, she's slow to get to the point, and, in all honesty, I can't really hear what she's saying; some argument is getting started in the kitchen and it's drifting into the dining room. "Mom, what's the—," I lose his voice in the deeper voice of a disgruntled cook. Damn it, no wonder my food isn't here yet. I want to eat my belt loops, I don't have a belt, figured I wouldn't need one since I would be getting bloated on fried food tonight. The irony does not fill my belly.

"Nine fifty-seven," she says. That's the time? Really? I check my cell, more like seven thirty— Grr! I want food! The chef and the cook are going all-out now. New headline: SPATULA WARS! Do they even do exclamation marks in newspapers? Jeanine would know this, but she's gone over there to complain about how long the food is taking. I know what the papers would call her: COLLATERAL DAMAGE.

The guy has seemed to have calm down, the one with the old lady, not the apron, but I prefer to focus on more pleasant things. He's stopped fidgeting, Roger has; that's his name, isn't it? He's holding his mother's hand and describing the restaurant to her, she must be losing her eyesight. She seems to like the music box in the corner a lot. It's bright and flashes every once in a while, and in her haze it must seem like an amusement park. He seems very sweet. They begin to look over their menus and she suddenly becomes agitated. What's with this family? "Mom, it's ok. I can pay."

"This is ridiculous, Roger, twelve ninety-five? It's too much! For a hamburger? Lets go to Monty's. Come on." She goes to move, but he stops her. A calming touch of some kind. Sweet guy, but too much baggage. Probably lives with his mom, too. That kind of calming skill doesn't come from just visiting. Oh well.

Damn it! She noticed me staring. Look away, look away! Where's Jeanine? She was supposed to be my cover. She's shouting at the chef right along with the cook. We're going to get thrown out at this rate. I am not going home with just a Diet Pepsi in my stomach. I can hear her whispering to her son as I sip at my loudly sputtering straw, sucking up those last few drops of cola-flavored melted ice. "There's a girl staring at us, Roger. I think she likes you. How do you like that? Who does she think she is? Eyeing my Roger up and down like that."

I don't have to look: I can feel his embarrassment, poor guy. He'll never get a girl at this rate. Overprotective-mother syndrome. They wouldn't make a headline for that, not really big news. Not like an overweight man having a coronary or a brawl at a cliché diner, no, not news worthy at all. I leave them to their dinner when it comes, and quit my eavesdropping all together for the night. They finish rather quickly, have another scoff about paying (I wasn't eavesdropping, she made quite a commotion. Deaf people noticed), he flashes a credit card at the register (the card says Michael Dayton. Roommate? Dad? Either way, someone lied about paying) and they scoot to the door. He flashes a quick look in my direction and our eyes meet for a second. Poor guy, if he had come in alone I would have given him my number. Such is life. Which I won't be living much longer if I don't get my blasted food! Stupid diet. I can't even remember what we ordered.

Did we order?

It's a warm night and Mom doesn't need a coat, but I want her to wear it. She's been getting weaker lately. We get home around nine and I hurry to her side to help her out. She doesn't know her own strength tonight, and she keeps trying to do things faster than she's done them in years. Oh, to be young again. Perhaps it isn't all that bad then, if you can at least feel young in your mind. There is a patrol car parked in front of the apartments. When we get to ours, I find the driver. He's a big fellow, shorter than me, but not by enough to make him feel small. I'm eye-level with that trademark hat that police wear, three points and a badge staring me straight in the nose; I'm glad he's on my side.

"May I ask your business here, sir?" he calls to us as we approach. I explain that we are in front of my home. He asks for my ID and then hands it back. "Mr. Dayton, one of your neighbors reported your door as being open. The call was placed at about seven thirty this evening. Now I've checked out your residence and there doesn't appear to have been any forced invasion, but you may want to check for anything that might be missing." I pause for a moment; Mom was the last one out tonight. She probably forgot to shut it. I explain this to the officer. He peers over my shoulder at Mom. He tries to flash a light over her but I stop him.

"She's sensitive." He looks at me for a moment, squints at her hiding in the shadows, and then turns his attention back to me. I ask Mom to wait outside for a minute while we look around. I can see she feels unappreciated, being forced to wait outside while the men go in. She forgets herself like that, and just feels indignant more and more often. It's becoming more difficult everyday.

I don't see anything missing, so I thank the cop and he departs. I bring Mom in and sit her down on the couch. I check the messages and while they're rolling I go to make her some tea. "Will you see if Doctor Limos called?" I ask her as the tea comes to a boil. The whistle blows, I pour some for myself, and drop a few cubes of ice in hers. I set them on the coffee table before her on the couch as she sits lost in thought. "Did Doctor Limos call, Mom?"

"What, Roger?" I give a big sigh, and squat down between her and the table. I put my hands on her knees to give support to her and balance to myself. I look her in the eye. "I'm Michael, Mom. Mike. Remember? Its not nineteen fifty-seven. Dad is not here. Call me Mike, Mom. Please."

She brushes the hair over my ear behind it. She tries to speak a few times and nothing comes out. Finally, "Rog— Michael. My little Michael. That's my son's name, you know? He's such a sweet boy." I drop my head.

"Ya, Mom, I know. How old is he?"

"Sixteen. He's taking a girl out tonight."

"Is he? Good for him, Mom. Did Doctor Limos call?"

"Who?"

"No one, Mom. Drink up, before it gets cold."

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