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HERE LIES A MYRIAD

“Hi, I’m Darrel and I’ll be your server. Can I start you off with some fear, honor or disinformation?”

“Just water for now. We’ll have a look at the menus.”

As soon as he left them, she giggled and lifted the silverware, noticing the weight. “I’ve heard so much about this place!”

He looked around. “Everyone who works here is a hero. Every last one of them.”

The interior hummed with vibrations from many rooms. She opened her menu. “You know, my grandfather used to work here.”

“Really? Mine, too!”

Darrel returned and poured ice water. He stood attentively at their side.

“We’ll need a minute.”

He clicked his heels and left them.

“I suppose it was different then,” she said. “Back in the day, pretty much everybody served. It

wasn't a professional outfit."

"Well, they might've been amateurs but their generation was the greatest."

"Yes," she agreed. "The greatest."

They fell silent as they perused the listings. It was hard to know where to begin. They'd heard the portions at this place were huge, but it seemed indelicate to say so. A busboy's cart whizzed by so fast that it made a sonic boom. Startled, they looked up, and Darrel stepped forward.

"May I take your orders?"

They weren't ready but he was poised and they felt obliged to tell him something. She quickly ran her finger down the menu. "I'll go with one of your specials. How about the psych ops?"

"Very good. It comes with cyber."

"That would be very nice, thank you."

Darrel turned. "And you, sir?"

"I'm sort of hesitating between a naval destroyer and the infantry."

Darrel leaned forward. "In that case, if you look a little further down, you'll see we offer surf and turf."

"Right. I'll try that."

"Might I suggest a starter of air strikes, to soften up your target?"

"Perfect!"

They were relieved when he left them—their decisions had been made—but in truth they weren't sure what to expect.

"Funny," he said. "You hear so much about this place but I've never seen it up close."

“I’d like to know what really goes on in the kitchen.”

“Well, they have the latest equipment, the best in the world. That’s what they say.”

She leaned forward. “Don’t you sometimes wonder how they treat their employees?”

“Darrel seems all right.”

“True.” She looked at nearby tables where birds circled overhead, and she observed the female servers. “You have to admit, there’s more diversity than at our workplace.”

He nodded. Although he hadn’t said it aloud, he’d noticed how Darrel was polite and well-spoken. Not a single grammar mistake.

For a moment they fiddled with the napkins on their laps, sharing identical thoughts: no way would they choose to work *here*. It was hard even to imagine. Maybe as a chef in the kitchen—that could be interesting—but it wasn’t an entry-level position and you would have to work your way up the ranks, which was tedious, all that travel and low pay, no thanks. This place might have nice tablecloths but behind it all was something unmistakably grubby. Real success waited elsewhere. Might as well leave this place to the folks who didn’t know how to do better.

“I wonder,” he offered slowly, “how many people here will get into substance abuse. Just saying.”

“Tell me about it. Spousal abuse, too.”

They nodded.

“That surely accounts for the divorce statistics. Off the charts!”

“And the children? Now that’s harder to quantify, the price of unhappy, screwed-up kids, but the social cost is enormous.”

“But everybody ends up paying for it. We’re paying for it.”

“Oh hell yes.”

“Word.”

They nodded.

Now she blurted: “Homelessness.”

“Prisons!” he countered.

“Suicides!”

He hesitated, groping for another example to hold up his end of the dinner conversation. He cast his eyes around the room. Then it came to him.

“Some things,” he murmured, “aren’t on the menu. I heard that in season they do torture.”

She frowned and looked away. Instantly he regretted his words. Had he gone too far? Was that subject still supposed to be unmentionable? And then—oh my, what bad timing—a server in dress whites glided by, balancing a platter of purple hearts and scarred minds.

“Understand me,” he added, “I mean no disrespect to all the good apples.”

“Of course not.”

There was another silence, readjusting their napkins while once more their thoughts were identical: images of tombstones like teeth protruding from immaculate green grounds and darting eyes of amputees and the intubated and the noseless and skin-grafted who watched the light change in the windows while waiting for visitors who didn’t come, imploring: Will you change my diaper? Where is my morphine? Will someone come and change my diaper? Where are you? Why am I alone? What does it mean?

“Freshen that up for you?”

Darrel refilled their glasses, ice-cubes clinking.

They wished he wouldn't hover. Where were their orders? Damn, the kitchen was slow. And in Darrel's manner was something they hadn't noticed before, a weariness, or maybe an exasperation, as if he didn't like them.

But that was unfair. Why, he didn't even know them!

"We need to talk," she said softly.

He turned to Darrel. "Could you leave us for a minute?"

"Is there nothing else I can get you?"

"No. Thank you for your service."