



Tasty morsels

PRESENTED BY
REHOBOTH BEACH WRITERS GUILD



Tasty Morsels

PRESENTED BY
THE REHOBOTH BEACH WRITERS GUILD



© 2023 Rehoboth Beach Writers Guild
All rights reserved.
Cover Artwork “Writers Garden Cafe” © 2023 Nancy DeCamillis
Cover Design © 2023 Crystal Heidel, Byzantium Sky Press
“Rising From The Ashes” © 2023 Stella Marie Alden
“Still Life” © 2023 Joseph Barbella
“The Last Egg Cream” © 2023 Sarah Barnett
“The Server?” © 2023 Nort Beckerman
“Sugar” © 2023 L.E.W. Brown
“Evening Libations” © 2023 Anne Buck
“The Cooks” © 2023 Anne Buck
“Lunch Alone” © 2023 Judy Catterton
“Azafran” © 2023 Ken Catterton
“Aria” © 2023 Donald Challenger
“Hooked” © 2023 Steve Conley
“Retribution” © 2023 Walter F. Curran
“Writers Garden Café” © 2023 Nancy DeCamillis
“A Moveable Feast” © 1995 Howard J. Eberle
“Waited Too Long” © 2023 Linda Federman
“Madison’s Lunch” © 2023 Robert Fleming & Vivienne Coutant
“Subito Forte” © 2023 Gabe Franklin
“Water” © 2023 Phil Fretz
“The Diner” © 2023 Lisa Graff
“Memories of an Earth She Left Behind” © 2023 Crystal Heidel
“Suicide Cokes” © 2023 Sharon Hoover
“A Vocation” © 2023 Thomas Hoyer
“This Part of Town” © 2023 Tim Hudenburg
“The Invisible Woman” © 2023 Charlene Fischer Jehle
“Just In Time” © 2023 Shelley Kahn
“Sustenance” © 2023 Vicky Kelly
“Dancing Peppers” © 2023 Jane Knaus
“Farmers Market” © 2023 Jane Knaus
“Almost ‘Open’” © 2023 Time Greer Maneval
“A Ghostly Legacy” © 2023 Kathleen L. Martens
“Smoking In The Rain” © 2023 Lynn Massey
“Missing Davey” © 2023 Paul D. McFarlane
“A Polish By Any Other Name” © 2023 Taralee Morgan
“I’ll Be Helping You Today” © 2023 Bill Newcott
“The Last Human Server At Morty’s” © 2023 Nancy North Walker
“Unfit To Serve” © 2023 Frances Oakes
“Twenty-Nine Days Serving” © 2023 Rich Parfitt
“Falafel Restaurant (Exterior)” © 2023 Molly Pauker
“Falafel Restaurant (Interior)” © 2023 Molly Pauker
“Feed Me” © 2023 Molly Pauker

“Dreams Do Come True” © 2023 Patty Perreault Bennett
“Happy Hour For Two” © 2023 Renata Price
“Crow’s Nest Café” © 2023 Randy Roberts
“Best Served Cold” © 2023 Renee Rockland
“Deep Dish” © 2023 Karen Y. Sandler
“Morning Shift” © 2023 Willie Schatz
“A Home-Run Summer” © 2023 Mary Ellen South
“A Laughing Matter” © 2023 Susan Towers
“Nella Sua Cucina (In His Kitchen)” © 2023 Dennis Young
“Tuesday’s Shift” © 2023 Elana Zambori

Contents

Introduction

RBWG Executive Director, Maribeth Fischer

Writers Garden Café..... 1

Nancy DeCamillis

A Polish By Any Other Name 3

Taralee Morgan

Twenty-Nine Days Serving..... 5

Rich Parfitt

Lunch Alone..... 7

Judy Catterton

Tuesday's Shift..... 9

Elana Zambori

Smoking In The Rain 11

Lynn Massey

Still Life..... 13

Joseph Barbella

The Server?..... 15

Nort Beckerman

Dreams Do Come True..... 17

Patty Perreault Bennett

Madison's Lunch..... 19

Robert Fleming & Vivienne Coutant

<i>The Last Egg Cream</i>	21
Sarah Barnett	
<i>Just In Time</i>	23
Shelley Kahn	
<i>Feed Me</i>	25
Molly Pauker	
<i>Suicide Cokes</i>	27
Sharon Hoover	
<i>Sustenance</i>	29
Vicky Kelly	
<i>Crow's Nest Café</i>	31
Randy Roberts	
<i>Rising From The Ashes</i>	33
Stella Marie Alden	
<i>A Laughing Matter</i>	35
Susan Towers	
<i>The Cooks</i>	37
Anne Buck	
<i>Best Served Cold</i>	39
Renee Rockland	
<i>Morning Shift</i>	41
Willie Schatz	
<i>Falafel Restaurant (Exterior)</i>	43
Molly Pauker	

<i>Falafel Restaurant (Interior)</i>	44
Molly Pauker	
<i>A Home-Run Summer</i>	46
Mary Ellen South	
<i>Almost “Open” Time</i>	48
Greer Maneval	
<i>The Last Human Server At Morty’s</i>	50
Nancy North Walker	
<i>The Invisible Woman</i>	52
Charlene Fischer Jehle	
<i>Dancing Peppers</i>	54
Jane Knaus	
<i>Deep Dish</i>	56
Karen Y. Sandler	
<i>Subito Forte</i>	58
Gabe Franklin	
<i>Happy Hour For Two</i>	60
Renata Price	
<i>A Ghostly Legacy</i>	62
Kathleen L. Martens	
<i>Unfit To Serve</i>	64
Frances Oakes	
<i>Azafran</i>	66
Ken Catterton	

<i>Sugar</i>	68
L.E.W. Brown	
<i>Waited Too Long</i>	70
Linda Federman	
<i>Farmers Market</i>	72
Jane Knaus	
<i>A Vocation</i>	74
Thomas Hoyer	
<i>Retribution</i>	76
Walter F. Curran	
<i>Nella Sua Cucina (In His Kitchen)</i>	78
Dennis Young	
<i>Hooked</i>	80
Steve Conley	
<i>I'll Be Helping You Today</i>	82
Bill Newcott	
<i>Water</i>	84
Phil Fretz	
<i>Evening Libations</i>	86
Anne Buck	
<i>This Part Of Town</i>	88
Tim Hudenburg	
<i>Missing Davey</i>	90
Paul D. Mcfarlane	

<i>Memories Of An Earth She Left Behind.....</i>	<i>92</i>
Crystal Heidel	
<i>A Moveable Feast.....</i>	<i>94</i>
Howard J. Eberle	
<i>The Diner.....</i>	<i>96</i>
Lisa Graff	
<i>Aria.....</i>	<i>98</i>
Donald Challenger	

Introduction

The challenge seemed simple: In four hundred words or fewer, write a piece of flash fiction from the point of view of a server in a restaurant. It seemed a fun idea, and we who live in Southern Delaware's "Culinary Coast" certainly had all the inspiration we might need with restaurants aplenty.

How difficult could this challenge be?

Very difficult, as it turns out, for it is no small feat to establish character, history, plot, and setting in so few words. Yet thirty-three writers rose to the challenge, offering us a surprising range of servers whose greatest struggles, in all but a handful of stories, weren't with difficult customers or coworkers, but with their own bruised and aching hearts. These are servers with sick children, servers struggling with the aftermath of war, servers battling loneliness. Reading these stories, I thought often of these lines from Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*: *To want and not to have—to want and want—how that wrung the heart, and wrung it again and again.* If the characters in these thirty-three stories have something in common, it is not their occupation so much as it is their wanting. They want love, security, even revenge; they want to do their job well, and at the same time, they want their lives to mean so much more. Ironical, that in these settings so rich with food, there is so much want.

You'll see a range of restaurants in these stories (though there were a lot of diners) a range of servers, and you'll find, too, a range of writers. Some of our contributors are professionals, others have just begun to send their fiction out into the world, and others are seeing their work in print for the first time with this anthology. How grateful we are to every single writer sharing his or her talent with us. Many writers revised these stories six, seven, times, all expressing gratitude for the opportunity.

And gratitude brings us to our thirteen artists. I say *our*, for though they are not all Guild members, they feel essential to this project and to this community. Special thanks go to Nancy DeCamillis who created the fabulous collage on the cover of this book and Crystal Heidel of Byzantium Sky Press who used Nancy's artwork to design the cover of *Tasty Morsels*.

Last, Cindy Hall chooses every day to donate her time, energy, and talent to this organization. Publishing *Tasty Morsels* is one of the many, many things she does to make the Guild a place we are all grateful to belong.

Happy Thanksgiving.

—*RBWG Executive Director, Maribeth Fischer*



Writers Garden Cafe

Collage painting on canvas
14" x 11"

Nancy DeCamillis

Writers Garden Cafe

The theme for Tasty Morsels inspired my mixed media collage. The background is a combination of my painting and handmade paper. I used photos of two paintings, Jeanie's Window Bouquet, my acrylic on canvas and Poppy Green, my pastel on paper. The three dining tables are my original photos. The staff are cutouts, the faces are photos of friends and me. I'm the 'Menu' server. The gardens and flowers are a mix from my collection of collage cutouts.

—Nancy DeCamillis

A Polish by Any Other Name

TARALEE MORGAN

“Hey, bruh, my girlfriend would love that color.” The muscular blond man at table six flicked his hand. His companions tried to suppress their laughter. He added in a falsetto, “Do tell, where did you get that nail polish?” He and the other men laughed loudly.

I stared at him and smirked. “It’s called ‘Teenie Weenie Pink’. Your girlfriend should be very familiar with it.” I wiggled my pinky finger as I took the latest round of beer mugs from the table.

A quick burst of laughter subsided to throat clearing, then silence. As I walked back to the kitchen, I heard, “We were just kidding, loser!”

In the kitchen, I placed my tray near the sink and took a deep breath. Customers’ rude comments usually don’t get to me. I know what it’s like to be out with the guys. I shook my head as I thought about all the things we said to and about people in our drunkenness. My excitement about tonight was making me more emotional than usual.

My boss, Keith, walked over and patted me on the shoulder. “Don’t worry. Liz will finish that table.” I started to offer a rebuttal to assure him I could handle it like always. But what came out was, “Thanks. That’ll be good.”

As he walked away, my phone vibrated. My wife, Michelle, sent me a photo of herself and our kids with their fingers extended to show off their blue nail polish. Abby, our daughter, sported a bald head, the result of her last round of chemo. Our family wore her favorite shades of nail polish to show our support during her treatments. We had applied the pink polish two days ago when she underwent her last PET scan. The doctor called the results “beautiful.”

Now that Abby was in remission, we could treat her to a Blue Birds baseball game tonight. Two seasons ago, the last time we attended a game, I commented that their uniforms were light blue. “Cornflower Blue, Dad,” she corrected. “There are lots of light blues. Theirs is exactly Cornflower Blue.”

I responded to the text, “Cornflower Blue looks good on you. I’ll have to switch out my pink before the game.”

The response read, “Flamingo Pink, Dad,” with a red heart emoji.

I put my hand over my own heart and smiled.

Twenty-Nine Days Serving

RICH PARFITT

Travis felt a burn in his bloodshot eyes. Dark circles made him look older than eighteen.

On his way to table five, he caught a glimpse of the newspaper headline: American Bloodshed Rises in Vietnam. Everything around him seemed red these days; the diner's red checkered curtains, the red seat cushions, the red stripes on the American flag. All reminding him of the red in his nightmares.

The jukebox provocatively played, "Fortunate Son."

Some folks are born made to wave the flag,

Hoo, they're red, white, and blue.

It ain't me, it ain't me...

Travis placed two cups of cherry Jello before his patrons. The woman pointed to the dessert with glee. "Look at the candy soldier on top of the Jello! Yummy! We're both dessert-ers!" The woman clasped her hand over her mouth. "Oh dear, not in the military sense, in the sweet-tooth sense!" She eyed Travis's hair. "You look like a military man with that crew cut."

Travis's heart began to pound.

"You know Fort Polk is only about seventy miles from here."

Travis took a step back. She couldn't possibly know.

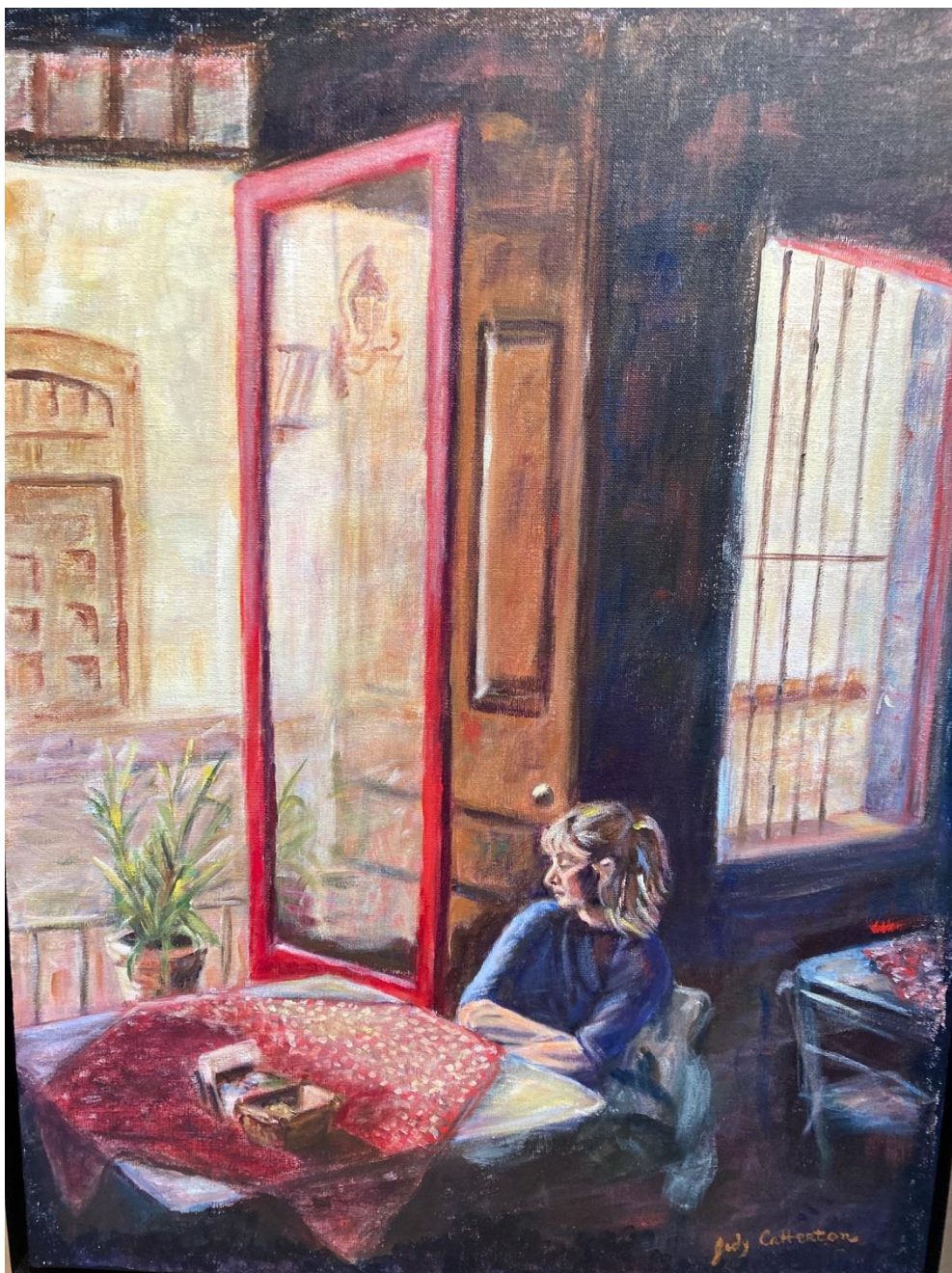
“Our boy trained in Fort Polk.” The woman paused. Her cheery demeanor faded. She looked at the floor, then cautiously towards her husband. “We lost him—in Nam.” The husband turned his head away, his hands trembling on the table. The woman wiggled a spoon into her dessert. The candy soldier tumbled, seeming to jump off the Jello, as if trying to escape. Travis knew about the impulse to flee.

Today was his twenty-ninth day of desertion. Unless Travis returned to Fort Polk tomorrow, he would be AWOL. He’d saved enough money to start his way towards Canada. But that meant never again feeling the adoration in his mother’s kiss, or the pride in his father’s hug.

A peace sign that had been carved into the diner counter caught Travis’s eye. He pressed the last correspondence from his parents, safely guarded in his breast pocket, against his heart. Outside, thunder began to crack and explode, reminding him of bombshells. Travis could barely hear Aretha Franklin on the jukebox:

I say a little prayer for you...

He dragged his feet to the two doors before the kitchen. The red ‘do not enter’ bulb and the green ‘enter’ bulb were both out. How could anyone know which was the right door?



Lunch Alone

Acrylic on canvas
24" x 18"

Judy Catterton

Lunch Alone

The woman by the door is actually a self-portrait of me in my favorite restaurant in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico. The restaurant, “El Tomate,” was a vegetarian joint which, sadly, I think is long gone. I was interested in the way the outside light played on the dark interior. San Miguel de Allende is a World Heritage site, known for its colonial architecture. Ken and I spent a number of months there over a three-year period. We went there to paint and be part of the artist community that enjoys spending time there.

—Judy Catterton

Tuesday's Shift

ELANA ZAMBORI

Amm refilled the suit's coffee and cleared away his half-eaten plate. He was deeply focused on serious looking documents. He barely touched his eggs, similar to her youngest who had recently developed a vendetta against yolks.

"They freak me out," he'd said that morning after she'd offered him the same bacon, egg, and cheese English muffin secured safely in a wrapped paper towel. What had he been doing with her signature breakfast sandwich every morning? Was he picking the egg off? Selling it to a kid on the bus? She hoped for the latter.

The Romeo (Really Old Men Eating Out) Club loudly beckoned her for another round of orange juice. They came every Tuesday to eat bacon behind their wives' backs and play rummy.

"Save up enough for the seventh-grade field trip?" Lester asked while he shuffled the deck.

"Almost."

She dropped off six cups of juice and pretended they weren't spiking them with vodka under the checkered tablecloth. One lifted a hand and slurred, "Cheers to Annmarie, world's best waitress!" They all clinked drinks in unison. She offered a smile she hoped appeared sincere. At least to someone, she was the world's best at something.

It was her third day working doubles. Amm normally took Mondays off. It was the day she'd sleep in and pretend she was a stay-at-home mom. She'd leisurely drink coffee and flip on *The Today Show* while folding the boys' laundry. Then she'd draw a bath and drink a glass of boxed wine (sometimes two) before the school bus screeched to a stop.

But her oldest's school trip to DC was approaching and it cost a whopping \$300. When she'd asked if he wanted to skip it, he looked distraught.

"All my friends are going, but if it's too much..."

"Of course not! I just didn't realize seeing a bunch of fancy statues of dead men was up your alley, that's all."

Picking up extra shifts was the only way she'd afford it. She sat in an empty booth turning her attention to the silverware bin. She enjoyed the mindless routine of rolling up the fork and knife into little napkin burritos.

The businessman got up and then nodded in her direction. She could barely hold back the tears when she saw a hundred-dollar bill tucked under his empty mug. On his napkin, he'd scrawled: *My mom was a waitress too.*

Smoking in the Rain

LYNN MASSEY

At least those five bottles of beer fell in the trashcan! It would have been a holy mess if they had hit the stone floor, thought Lorene as she leaned against the ladies' room wall. I need to go back. I'm so tired, but I'm even more tired of Mom driving me to college. If I can hang in for another month, I think I can afford that Corvair.

"Hey, Lorene," yelled the barkeep. "Come get these beers and take them to those French dudes. It will take you three trips because you can only take two at a time." Lorene had been at the suburban steak house for seven months and she had picked up the waitressing gig pretty quickly. But the barkeep had never asked her to carry five open beers on a ten-inch tray. *Did people really do that?*

"Very funny," she snorted as she headed to the table of six fellows from Paris that spoke about as much English as she spoke French.

When the six men saw their assigned server, they loudly greeted her with exclamations of "notre belle serveuse!"

Lorene slid on a smile. After I get my computer degree, I'm never going to work in a restaurant again she thought defiantly. Silicon Valley, here I come.

After much pointing and giggling, Lorene managed to take their dinner selections.

She handed the orders to the kitchen and slipped away through the back door. A summer rain dripped in the early night air. She stepped over to a thickly branched tree and lit the cigarette she had swiped from the cook's jacket. *Here I am smoking a stolen ciggie in the rain and hiding from a half dozen French playboys.* Her eyes drifted to the little red Triumph in the rear lot. *God, I would love to own that rather than that old Corvair. All the cool guys in high school had one. But Dad says English cars are pieces of junk. Jeesh, I'm so tired of being practical! One of these days I'm going drive off into the California sunset in a convertible with my hair whipping behind me!*

Lorene finished her cigarette, threw it on the ground and mashed it with her shoe, straightened her shoulders and headed back into the restaurant. She was ready to break through the French lines and get to the sunny West Coast.



Still Life

Oil on canvas
30" x 36"

Joseph Barbella

Still Life

The idea for this painting was to represent an oversized and intimate view of a still-life and hopefully to portray the distinctive qualities of each object. I used light and shadow to sculpt the subject matter giving it dimension in a simple environment. This particular piece is about the relationships between textures, both organic and inorganic. I also invited a silhouette of myself in the painting as seen in the reflection on the glass vase.

—Joseph Barbella

The Server?

NORT BECKERMAN

It was his third day at his job. He stood proudly against the back wall dressed in his neatly pressed server's uniform. His shoes had a bright shine. His straight, black hair was fixed in place. There was a smile on his brown face.

He was looking at the pictures in *The Washington Post*. He ignored the front-page headline that read "*India Joins Russia and China in Talks.*"

Some might think his job was boring, but it was better than being on the streets of Calcutta. Life was finally good.

On the streets of Calcutta, work was scarce. Some days he had little to eat, some days nothing at all. Here he could eat whenever he wanted.

He noticed that people seldom came into the restaurant. Even so, he was instructed to ask everyone who came in *if they had a reservation*. If they said "Yes, we're the Jensions," they were to be seated at a back table near the swinging doors. Beyond the swinging doors was a closed room he wasn't allowed to enter.

If he thought about it, he knew what he was being asked to do, but so what! Here he had food, a regular place to sleep, and he was clean. Life couldn't be better. He couldn't think about it. He just had to do his job.

His thoughts stopped when a smartly dressed couple entered the restaurant. He was at their side in seconds. All the tables were empty, but he asked the couple if they had a reservation.

"Yes, we're the Jensions."

His body stiffened. He was suddenly nauseous, but he showed the couple to a back table by the swinging doors.

In minutes he was back with two hot dishes of chicken curry.

He went back to his post against the wall and waited as instructed. He stared at them, knowing what he was about to do and feeling sick. When the couple was finished, they said, “Thank you” and left.

He said to himself, *Think of all you have here. You can do this.*

He went to their table, took the typewritten pages that were under each dish, and disappeared through the swinging doors. He slid the papers under the closed door. In moments he was back.

I’ve done my job today. I’ve earned money. It feels good. I feel good.

Dreams Do Come True

PATTY PERREAULT BENNETT

I'm a waitress at Ronnie's Rib House on Cape Cod. The signature dish is prime rib, but we serve other food, too. Leaving the kitchen with five prime rib dinners on my tray, I feel two small hands hit the back of my knees. My legs collapse and down I go. The tray of hot ribs falls upside down on top of me, and I fall on top of the kid who knocked me down. Prime rib juice oozes all down the front of my uniform, burning my neck, chest, and stomach. Two of the other servers and Ronnie, the owner, rush over to help me get up.

"Are you okay?" says Ronnie, lifting the tray and the food off of me.

"I think so. I didn't hit my head, but my boobs are on fire."

The kid runs crying over to his parents. His mother jumps up and starts yelling at Ronnie.

"What are you going to do about that waitress who almost killed my son?"

"I'm going to ask the family of the boy who almost killed my server to get up and leave my restaurant."

"You can't do that. We're halfway through our meal."

"Oh, yes I can. I own this place. Now get up and go. Your son should not have been running around in my restaurant."

Still burning and standing there covered in brown juice, I couldn't let Ronnie throw these people out. "Ronnie, please let them stay. That little boy didn't mean it."

I turn to his mother, “I didn’t mean to fall on your son either. Is he hurt?”

“No, I think he is just scared. Thanks for telling the owner to let us finish our dinner.”

This is just a summer job for me. My full-time job at the moment is teaching kindergarten. I really want to be an entrepreneur. My name is Rhonny, a nickname for Rhonda. Not noticing the difference in spelling, some customers ask me if I’m the owner. I just laugh, and say “I wish.”

It would be fantastic to own this business. Way more lucrative than teaching. If this restaurant were mine, there would be crayons and white paper squares on every table to keep children busy and in their seats.

Six Years Later

The new sign above the restaurant: “Rhonny’s Rib House. Best Beef in Town. Kid Friendly.”



Madison's Lunch
Digital Graphics
Robert Fleming & Vivienne Coutant

Madison's Lunch

Robert Fleming attended a Zoom artist share hosted by Vivienne Coutant in 2022. Vivienne showed her water colors painted on a brown paper bag, created to hold her granddaughter Madison's lunch. Robert suggested they collaborate to show what food would go into the lunch. Vivienne took photos of her lunch art and emailed them to Robert. Robert created Madison's Lunch using Canva, digital graphic software, and combined Vivienne's photo and Robert's image of food on a cutting board. Madison's Lunch is only one of the five days that Madison attends school in the week. Hopefully, Vivienne and Robert, will return to collaborate to make four more Madison's lunches, to give Madison a lunch for every day in the school week.

—Robert Fleming

The Last Egg Cream

SARAH BARNETT

“You come here. You eat. You drink. You hang out.”

Sy Levine hears Tony’s thick Brooklyn accent, notices his crisp white shirt with rolled up sleeves. He’s watched the video three times. That kid practically lived on my free egg creams, he thinks.

Outside, he hears the D train rattle into the 79th Street station. The video has moved on, the camera scanning counters, stools upholstered in red leatherette, a row of booths along a wall covered with students’ names and scrawled messages—*Smoky; Vinnie and Gigi; Terri ’57*.

How did I get so lucky? he thinks. Owning a luncheonette smack on the corner that hundreds of kids pass each day to get to and from high school. And who woulda thought that selling Chookies after 35 good years would bring TV cameras and newspaper reporters to my door? They made a big deal of those free egg creams I gave to kids with great report cards. Now, the new owner plans to install video games. *Jeez!*

When the front door opens, he looks up and clicks off the VCR with the remote. A woman in a grey pantsuit walks in.

“The other reporters have left,” he says. “I’m closing up.”

“That’s okay.” She looks around, then sits facing Sy at the counter.

Sy looks down at his fountain workspace and gets an idea. “I was just about to make my last Chookies egg cream. Would you like one?”

“Sounds terrific.”

“Comin’ right up.” Sy grabs two soda glasses from shelves behind the counter, milk from the fridge. “I used to tell the kids I could make these blindfolded.” He pours milk into the glasses, adds chocolate syrup from a fountain nozzle.

“Did you ever do it?” She slips off her jacket and places it on the stool next to her.

“Yeah.” He smiles, grabs another nozzle, squirts seltzer into the two glasses. “It got kinda messy.” Sy stirs the two drinks with a long-handled spoon. The typical white foam forms at the top of each glass. He slides one over to her. “Enjoy.”

She takes a sip. “Just like I remember.”

“Wait.” Sy sets his glass down before it reaches his lips. “You’re not a reporter. Do I know you?”

From her purse she extracts a familiar printed card and passes it to him. “Theresa Romano, class of nineteen fifty-seven. Thank you, Sy, for my free egg cream.”

Just in Time

SHELLEY KAHN

She was serving everyone these days, she thought as she adjusted her uniform and cleared the ballroom table of half-eaten plates of salad greens, tiny glasses harboring leftover lemon pudding and raspberries with just a spoonful taken, empty paper coffee cups and used napkins. There were many barren tray tables throughout the room where conference attendees could bring their leavings, but most stood empty, while the nearly one hundred restaurant style tables were littered with dirty plates, glasses, and garbage.

She thought about Luna, her tiny newborn not yet a month old, away from her in an informal day care at a neighbor's home she could not really afford. She worried about whether she was safe there given the gun violence in the vicinity of their one-bedroom apartment or if she was being given enough attention along with the scores of other children she noticed being dropped off there early in the morning. "How will I ever finish this in time for the five-thirty pickup," she quietly lamented, "I can't afford another late fee."

Just then she heard the chirping of her burner phone and debated whether she needed to answer it, worried that once again it was her dad's caregiver with his litany of complaints about her father's dementia. She glanced across the vast ballroom, and she felt her blood pressure rising. How could she keep doing all this alone?

She remembered then that she hadn't finished the lottery scratchers from yesterday's payday. Knowing it would only take a moment, she dug it out of her pocket, using a butter knife, hoping to rub off the \$100,000 prize with the ten times multiplier on it. Just briefly, she thought about what she would be able to provide if she won: nursery school, a safer neighborhood, and better, kinder, care for her dad. She paused, unclenched her jaw, and allowed a wistful smile to illuminate her prematurely lined face.

She sighed and slowly placed the spent ticket back in her pocket. Visualizing her daughter's sweet face, she set to working like an automaton and when she finally bussed that last table, she virtually skipped out of the conference center straight to her car, driving away with a slight screech, that baby face with its almond eyes, and snub nose surrounded by lovely black curls front of her mind, the tailpipe of her twenty-year-old Corolla smoking behind her...



Feed Me

Paper on cardboard; charms; watercolor;
water-soluble crayon

18" x 10"

Molly Pauker

Feed Me

This is a collage I made in response to a timed warm-up drill in my long-time weekly art class. These “warm-ups” are like FreeWrites in that we are given a limited amount of time to reflect a prompt suggested by the instructor, forcing us to work from our “right brains” and not over-think the subject matter. Of course, we can keep working on any piece after the time limit (customarily eight minutes), if we choose to do so.

In this instance, the prompt was “food.” I worked over an old collage that I had on hand and modified it to reflect the prompt. Most of the elements are clippings from old magazines and catalogs that I keep for this purpose. I pasted the clippings somewhat randomly on cardboard, embellished with food-related charms from my “bling” collection and added color with water color paint and water-soluble crayon.

—Molly Pauker

Suicide Cokes

SHARON HOOVER

“Sallie Jo! What’s that?” the boss demanded.

“A suicide Coke.” Sallie glanced sideways at Josh, admiring, as always, his lean face and physique.

“No more!” The boss whirled away from the soda fountain where several boys had lined up after basketball practice.

“I want a suicide Coke!” Howard wailed.

“No! What IS a suicide Coke?” the boss demanded.

Sallie explained. “I walk down the counter and put a spritz of each flavor in a glass, then fill it with Coke.”

“Too expensive! No more!” The boss whirled and left the soda fountain.

“But we all like suicide Cokes!” Josh said. Several other boys chimed in. “Yeah, yeah.”

Sallie swayed slightly to “The Glow Worm” playing on the jukebox, wondering what to do. She shrugged. “I need the job.”

“But you need us—customers!”

Sallie grinned crookedly. She enjoyed the boys, especially Josh, but she wanted to go to college so she needed to work and save.

“What about one pump of flavor?” Josh asked. “Vanilla might be nice.”

“One,” Sallie said, making up her mind quickly.

“Chocolate,” “Vanilla,” “Strawberry,” voices called. Sallie didn’t mind working Wednesday nights when the boys came in after practice. It was a happy time. “Okay, one pump of something extra,” she said.

The boys shouted their favorite flavors. There’d be a lot of Cokes. Maybe they’d order a hamburger, too. Saturday nights, after the basketball game was the big night. “Okay, Howard, you first,” she said. She whipped down the soda fountain making one drink after another. Josh was grinning.

“What’s going on?” The boss was back. “You’re fired! You boys—out!”

Sallie Jo was appalled. Truckers for breakfast, girls after school, a few folks for dinner, the boys Wednesday nights. The little restaurant needed them all. She needed her job. “But...”

“Out!”

“Sir.” Josh’s voice cut through the sudden hush. “There’s no suicide Cokes, sir. Howard was kidding.”

The boss roared. “No suicide Cokes?”

Sallie Jo spoke quickly, “No, sir.” She almost laughed at all the “sirs”.

“One shot of another flavor? You have the best Cokes,” Josh said.

“Well, all right. One pump of one flavor. A nickel extra.”

The boys groaned.

“We don’t have extra nickels.” Josh was quietly insistent. “Sir—”

“Well...”

Sallie Jo grinned. “One flavor, boys!” she called out. Josh smiled at her.

Sustenance

VICKY KELLY

Loretta wiped away the Jackson Pollock of ketchup, mustard, and chocolate syrup splattered across the beige Formica tabletop. Why did people have to be such slobs? She stuffed the two crumpled dollars and loose change in her pocket. Hooking the spray bottle on her apron sash, she grabbed the tub of dirty dishes. Waitress Rules 101: Never be empty-handed.

The bored cook slumped on the stool at the end of the counter, his tattooed arms cradling a phone. A rainy Tuesday night in December made it extra slow. Radio Christmas carols were her only company in the empty diner. Her neglected psychology textbook awaited her. Only one more semester until this “nontraditional” —*i.e., older*—college student finally would graduate. One step closer to a real job and ticket out of here.

The door opened, jingling the bell on the wreath. A gray-haired man fumbled with his umbrella, looking lost.

“George!” Loretta smiled, glancing at the surprise she’d hidden for him behind the counter.

Shoulders sagging under an invisible weight, his sad eyes met hers. Each night for more than a week, he’d sat alone, cradling a cup of coffee, staring out into the dark. For Loretta, wannabe counselor, it had been too much. She’d made him her project: trying to coax him into conversation, waving the plastic menu with the flourish of a Vanna White, even donning a silly battery-operated Christmas bulb necklace. Last night, defeated by another of his barely touched

dinners, she'd lost it. "Come on, George," she'd pleaded. "There must be *something* you'd like."

He'd shrugged, hanging his head.

She'd turned away.

"Apple...pie," he'd whispered.

"What?" She'd spun around. "We have that."

He'd frowned apologetically. "Sorry, yours has no cranberries."

Later, at home, she'd googled recipes. On the postage-sized counter of her efficiency apartment she'd made a crust, rolled it with an empty wine bottle, and filled it with apples and the darn berries.

The sweet aroma now made Loretta smile as she unwrapped the gooey, golden treat. She filled George's cup, then slid a piece of her pie before him.

He lifted his face, eyes glistening.

"Life's too short, eat dessert first." She smiled.

"Too short," he murmured. "My Theresa always made this pie."

"Theresa?"

"She...passed... last week," he answered, voice husky with emotion. "Nights are... hardest."

"Oh, George, I'm so sorry." Loretta slid into the booth across from him. "Tell me."



Crow's Nest Cafe
Randy Roberts

Crow's Nest Café

Holly and I found this gem of a coffee shop which sat up on a hill and overlooked the back bay area of Twillingate, Newfoundland. These three guys were sitting there enjoying their coffee and truly laughing out loud. They never noticed me and my camera as I captured them in the moment. August 2019 Road Trip.

—Randy Roberts

Rising from the Ashes

STELLA MARIE ALDEN

Wiping grime off yet another plank table, I ignore the ache in my shoulders and stifle a yawn. The petulant sun has yet to set and tens, if not hundreds, of glasses wait to be filled before I'm allowed a few moments of peace on the moldy barn straw.

My dress's lace hem sweeps the filth, and my silk slippers stick to the ale-soaked wood. Damn my pride. Would it have been so awful to bed the ancient earl? Live my days in relative peace in England? Surely, life would've been better than indentured to the villain who paid my passage. By my computations, including interest, I'll be free at age thirty-five, unless I catch the pox or become with child.

Old Bill leers, gives me a tobacco-blackened grin and misses the spittoon. "Clean that up, Queenie."

"Yes m'lord." I use the deference demanded by those serving my father, a minor baron with a stable full of racehorses and penchant for gambling.

As I squeeze between the makeshift tables, I paste a pleasant countenance on my face. The better I hide my misery, the larger the tips. Some girls take men upstairs, but I've seen the results and am not so desperate, at least not yet.

"Miss, a beer." Cowboy Blue-eyes catches my gaze, and my heart leaps as I place his drink down next to his steaming biscuits.

"You cook and sure are purty. How come no man claimed you?" Taking a bite, he emits a masculine groan which sends a ripple of anticipation down my spine.

My gaze shifts to my jailer and I shrug. “None can afford my debts.”

“And if’n I could? Would ye have me?” His face’s many laugh lines seem harmless, so I bob my head, once. Anything is better than here.

“Yee haw.” Standing, he draws his weapon, pulls the trigger, and rushes me out the door. “Well, seems to me, Bill’s been paid in full. By the way, what’s your name?”

“Phoenix.” I choose a moniker befitting of one saved from death, ready to start anew. “And yours?”

“Ash.” A wink later, he places me on his horse but as he legs up, I grab the reins with one hand, thrust him to the ground with the other, and race down the road.

“Huzzah!” Thighs tight, hair flying, I throw off my pinafore, and never look back.

A Laughing Matter

SUSAN TOWERS

The young waitress, standing on the back deck of the steakhouse, tried to strike a match to light a cigarette. But her trembling hands and a gust of wind dashed any hope for the calming drag she craved.

Earlier that evening, two martinis on her tray had toppled as she leaned forward to serve them. Before she could react, both drinks landed in the lap of the elegantly dressed woman whose sharp cry caused diners to look up from their meals and waitstaff to scramble. The gentleman at the table immediately rose to mop the woman's soaked, black, silk dress.

The waitress, feeling the manager's glare, turned away from the chaos. His cold eyes met hers as he hurried toward the table through the chandelier-lit dining room.

Leaning against the railing, she absentmindedly picked at the cuticle on her right thumb as she imagined losing the job she liked, and needed. Tips were lucrative and she looked forward to the camaraderie. At the end of each evening, waitstaff sat together, folding napkins, preparing the set ups, sharing anecdotes, and laughing.

The chaos following the spilled martinis would surely make it into an anecdote. Looking up at the full moon, she imagined what the manager might say to her the next day in his office. He had instructed her to be there before her shift to "discuss the incident." It wasn't her first offense. He'd called her in a few weeks prior because two of her customers had skipped out on their bill. The manager's nose had turned a reddish hue as he admonished her, stating she

should keep an eye on her customers, and that the lost revenues would be taken out of her paycheck.

“Hey, it wasn’t that bad.” The curly-headed bartender appeared on the deck in front of her, smiling in his familiar, goofy way. His jovial personality and heavy-handed drinks, most nights, attracted a thirsty crowd.

Tears swelled in her eyes.

“You gotta laugh it off. Don’t let ’em see you cry.” He offered his hand, revealing an unexpected tender expression. “Let’s take a walk.”

She gladly took it as she knew he’d fill her evening with laughter. She’d think about the manager in the morning. And, just maybe, the conversation would not be as bad as she feared.



The Cooks

Watercolor
16" x 20"

Anne Buck

The Cooks

*A combination of a couple of photos of servers...I love painting people,
especially in action.*

—Anne Buck

Best Served Cold

RENEE ROCKLAND

He is wearing the chambray shirt I bought him for his birthday—the one that makes his Icelandic eyes pop—and holding her hand across the table, his thumb lazily caressing the stone on her ring finger. My manager Carla says he asked to be seated in my section but tells me another server can take them. “He’s got some nerve,” she says. I’d shared the details of our broken engagement over too many shots of tequila one night after work. He thought I was blowing “one little kiss” out of proportion. I thought a kiss that takes place horizontally and involves removing a bikini top could hardly be construed as little. Now six months later, he is here with his new fiancé.

I approach the table, smiling. After all, I’m not the one marrying a cheater. “Good evening. What brings you in tonight?”

“We’re celebrating, babe!” He lifts her hand, thrusting the ring toward me. It looks suspiciously familiar. “She’s gonna make an honest man out of me.”

“Is her name Annie? Because she must be a miracle worker.”

“Um...her name’s Destinee with two e’s?” It sounds like he’s unsure of the spelling, and she giggles.

I suppress an eye roll. “Can I start you with something to drink?”

“Two drafts and a dozen oysters.”

“Let’s do Rocky Mountain,” Destinee with two e’s says. We both stare.

“Nah, Dez, Blue Point.” They’ve always been his go-to—ordered with the hubris of a connoisseur—completely unaware of how ubiquitous they are.

At the bar, as she's pulling the drafts, Carla suggests she dig the worm out of the bottle of Mezcal and drop it in his drink. I laugh but shake my head. "I have something better planned," I say and make my way to the walk-in refrigerator.

When I approach their table, I see him frowning.

"Babe, we didn't order—"

"I know," I say as I thumb the cork on the icy champagne with a satisfying pop. "But we're celebrating."

"We are." He lowers his voice. "How much is it?"

He's notoriously cheap. I take a beat, enjoying watching him squirm a little as I pour the golden bubbles into two flutes. I don't miss this. Or him.

"It's our most expensive bottle," I say as I pass them each a glass. "But not to worry. This one's on me. Cheers!"

Morning Shift

WILLIE SCHATZ

He's at the window again, that guy with hair to his shoulders and the beard at least a month old wearing the sleeveless tee with holes in all the wrong places and the shoes that don't fit and the baggy pants halfway down his ass and the look implying that whoever looks back could be in deep shit. He is just so...scruffy.

Now he's staring at me as if he wants me to serve him. Please, don't let him in. We're classier than that. More importantly, *I'm classier*. Yeah, yeah, I hear you cynics going 'seriously? You're just a dime-a-dozen barista.' True, I'm behind the counter now, but real soon I'll be the *maitre'd* at a Michelin two-star that will never admit this street bum.

Unless they find out I dealt with this lowlife, which would compromise my rep big time.

Uh-oh; he's at the door. Where the *hell* is security?? Maybe I should call the cops. Except he hasn't done anything yet. What if he's homeless? Sure looks like he is. But I don't know anything about him other than how mangy and disreputable he looks.

I *do* know I don't want to be near him if he comes in. Let Ella deal with it. She's the senior member of our staff, so she knows how to handle his kind. Gimme the woman in the business suit carrying the Kate Spade and Each Peach bags. She's a lock to be the sophisticated cold brew type. Him? Black coffee.

Shit! They're coming my way. And she's *talking* with him!

“Sir, would you like a large turmeric honey latte? I’m sure the barista will be happy to make it for you. My treat.”



Falafel Restaurant (Exterior)

Paper mache-coated cardboard; acrylic; costume jewelry
36" x 14" x 12"

Molly Pauker



Falafel Restaurant (Interior)

Paper mache-coated cardboard; acrylic; costume jewelry
36" x 14" x 12"

Molly Pauker

Falafel Restaurant

Willie and I were part owners of a “fast casual” falafel restaurant in Adams Morgan in D.C. for the past twenty years or so. Alongside our partners, we painted and sanded, basically created it from the ground up. Modeled on an Amsterdam-based take-out chain, Amsterdam Falafelshop even survived the pandemic, although we eliminated the inside dining feature and relied solely on take-out and an outside “streatery” thereafter. Sadly, our partners both caught Covid, from which one of them died a couple of years ago. I made a replica of the restaurant as it was before the pandemic for his widow, from my memory and photographs that people had posted on Yelp over the years.

I find making replicas of real places much more challenging than working from my imagination; however, this work was a labor of love, and it came out looking remarkably like a miniature of the original. It took a couple of months, which is long for me to complete a work. The exterior and interior, including furniture, are cardboard coated with paper mache and painted with acrylic paint. I have a collection of old costume jewelry and odd items I pick up in hardware stores that I use to represent details. To preserve the work, I coat everything with clear acrylic gel and archival resin glaze.

Unfortunately, our landlord decided to sell the building housing the restaurant, and we couldn't afford to buy it, so we closed for good last spring. So, my replica is now all that remains.

—Molly Pauker

A Home-Run Summer

MARY ELLEN SOUTH

She arrived from her small-town state college. A summer at the beach. Working at the largest hotel in Atlantic City. She didn't know the history of the architectural wonder on the boardwalk. She didn't know about its clientele. She only knew she needed a break, to lay on the beach, relax and renew along with a good paying job so she could return for her third year of study.

Her first breakfast serving was to a striking senior woman with designer fashions who ordered a beer. *What?* Her parents drank beer but only at a cookout or when exhausted from the summer's heat. Later she learned the gray-haired matriarch was the Schlitz Brewing company owner.

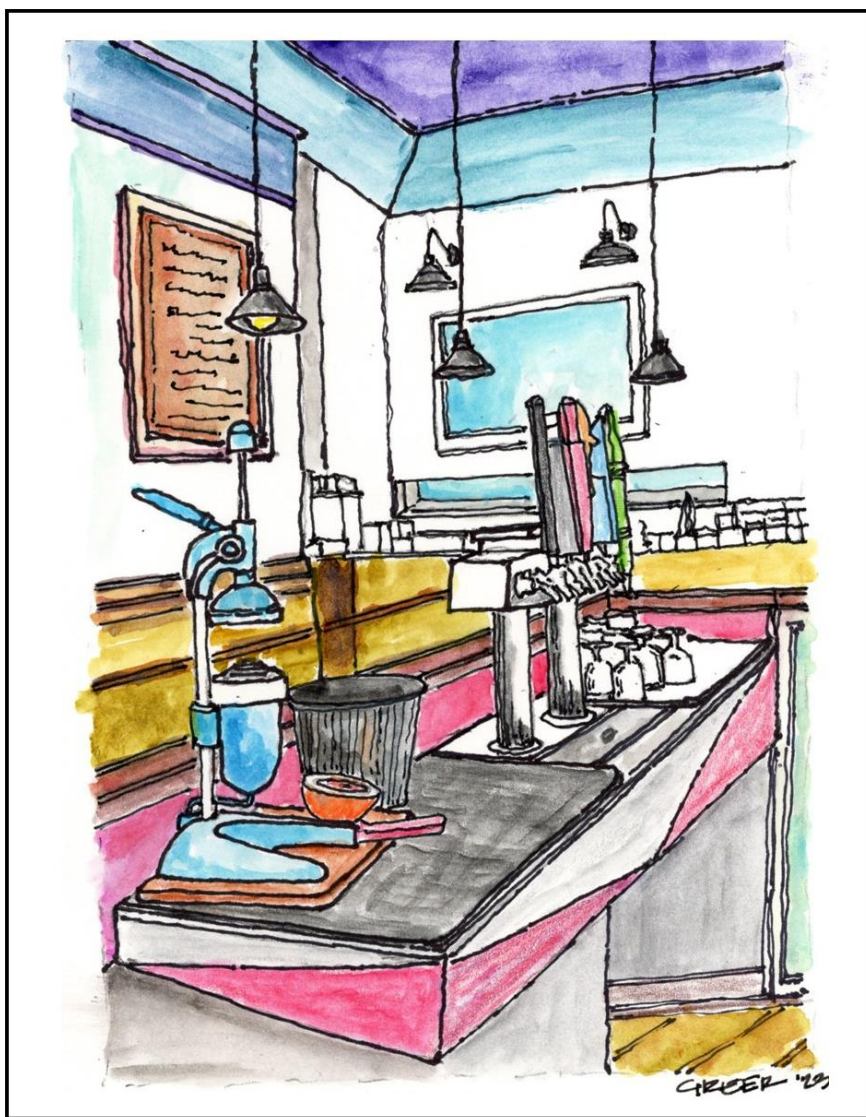
That evening her assigned station involved several tables seated near the front of the dining room. These were ocean-view tables with symphonic sounds of the water when the majestic windows were opened. Her first guests were a couple who ordered martinis, caviar, and vichyssoise. She had no idea what these were. She had much to learn.

After a few weeks she chose to work lunch on the patio in exchange for early breakfast shift. More strenuous work traversing the steps to the kitchen but the tips would be higher and you could hear the surf. A group of ladies gathered around a blond well-dressed matron, who asked her, "Have you ever thought about modeling?" She quickly answered, "No." She was studying to be a teacher. Later she learned she had served Eileen Ford from the New York Ford agency.

The gossip swelled one morning as they gathered to prepare the luncheon tables. Rumor was that two Hollywood stars were marooned in the hotel on their second honeymoon. Would they ever come out of their suite? Natalie Wood and Robert Wagner were never to be seen.

Her tip pouch became fuller on her last evening of work when her assigned dinner guests at the front table ordered their caviar and martinis. Upon leaving, the husband handed her a check with a generous thank you for the many nights of devoted attention to them. A two-hundred-dollar check signed by the owner of the Baltimore Orioles baseball team.

A home run summer!



JUST BEFORE HAPPY HOURS

Almost "Open" Time

Watercolor; Pen & Ink
 Strathmore 90 lb. watercolor paper
 5" x 7" (8" x 10" w/ mat)

Greer Maneval

Almost “Open” Time

This piece is a tribute to all our wonderful bartenders here at the beaches. They are always happy to see you, “construct” the latest cocktail for you to sample, but best of all, keep you up to date with the latest local news (fit or unfit to print). Sketched while sitting at one of my favorite beach pubs while sharing the latest.

—Greer Maneval

The Last Human Server at Morty's

NANCY NORTH WALKER

Marilyn, the irritating server robot Olivia hated most, placed a candlelit cake before a rotund gentleman at table six and cooed him a breathy happy birthday as if he were JFK.

Olivia wished she had an axe. She wanted to chop the Marilyn Monroe bot to bits before it could sing another sappy happy birthday in that slinky, show-all dress.

Breathe, Olivia. Morty asked you to stop by after work. It's you who'll be axed tonight.

Olivia *almost* hoped Morty would fire her. She couldn't stand being the last human server at Morty's. Working with a bunch of know-it-all bots was humiliating. They harassed her about every little mistake and whispered behind her back. But Olivia *needed* the job at the upscale Manhattan restaurant. She was desperate to complete her master's degree because artificially intelligent bots had rendered her previous career as a software developer obsolete.

Getting canned was inevitable though. Her best friend, Chloe, recently lost her job to a Tina Turner bot that shimmied and bellowed "Proud Mary" while serving cocktails without a spill. Then Ryan, the restaurant's beloved bartender, lost out to a Sean Connery bot he'd just trained. The James Bond robot made

cocktails three times faster than Ryan. Plus, people waited hours for seats at the bar just to hear 007 ask if they wanted their martinis “shaken or stirred.”

Olivia took a deep breath and knocked on Morty’s open door. “Who’s my replacement? Michael Jackson?”

“Slow down, Olivia. I’m offering you a career move. You’re working on a master’s in robotics software design, right?”

“Right.”

“How about I triple your salary *and* pay the remainder of your tuition, while you manage and maintain the bots.”

She wanted to jump up and down and hug Morty, but intuition told her to play it cool. “Sounds interesting. But why?”

“Those damn things are too smart for their own good. They’re bombarding me with business improvement ideas. Snooping in my financial records. I’m worried they’ll stage a takeover.”

“So, you want me to dumb them down?”

“Yes.”

“I can do that. But I need you to hire Ryan and Chloe back. These gadgets can overcome even the best programming interventions. We need *human* eyes and ears to tell us what’s really going on.”

“Fine.”

“One more thing. Can we give Marilyn the axe?”

“Literally or figuratively?”

“Literally.”

“Sure. Marilyn’s the ringleader. I’ll get two axes.”

The Invisible Woman

CHARLENE FISCHER JEHLE

Mike confessed he wasn't much of a cook. Since his wife's death four years before, he'd spent more time at his beach house and soon became a regular at the diner where I worked. He said that the food was good, the portions generous, and the prices reasonable. Sometimes he visited twice a day just for a cup of coffee.

He talked about his wife. I talked about being my husband's caretaker in the final ravages of ALS. After months of baring our souls, I thought we'd bonded. My mind raced through the possibilities. He was intelligent, humorous, and empathetic, a good listener with a broad smile.

We described feeling helpless watching our spouses slip away. We read from the same pages speaking of love and loss, health and illness, and the toll it took on our children. We compared notes on the difficult years and the importance of moving forward. He told of loneliness and wanting to share his life again. My heart fluttered. I couldn't stop smiling as I poured his coffee, two creams, no sugar.

I dreamed of our meeting outside of the diner for a walk, a movie, or a concert on the bandstand. I toyed with writing my phone number on his dinner check. Instead, I dropped hints, telling him how I missed dating, and the companionship of a partner. I wanted him to notice me as a woman not just a friendly waitress, bridging the gap between friends and lovers. But my hinting brought no walks, movies, or concert dates.

One afternoon, he opened his cell phone and showed me a photo of his new girlfriend. He gushed about how this could be the start of something wonderful. He said he felt fortunate. I felt miserably insignificant.

I continued working my shift waiting on an elderly couple who ordered with just two words, "The usual." Then at a booth, two obviously smitten teenagers held hands across the table gazing into each other's eyes as they ordered their burgers and fries. A glance back at Mike found him staring intently at his phone, smiling brightly as his fingers typed out a text.

At the end of my shift, I returned to an empty house wondering if I'd ever again fall asleep with my head resting on a strong shoulder instead of just a pillow.



Dancing Peppers

Pastels
16" x 20"

Jane Knaus

Dancing Peppers

The inspiration was the beauty of the shapes, colors, and textures of the vegetables, and how they play off of each other when bunched together...there's a dynamic quality to seeing these beautiful "sculptures" from someone's vegetable garden, and I wanted to capture that scene on paper.

—Jane Knaus

Deep Dish

KAREN Y. SANDLER

Nineteen Seventy-Eight. Chicago style deep dish pizza had just arrived for the residents of a small Georgia college town. I needed the waitress job to pay for school, so yeah, I was all in on deep dish pizza. The brashly enthusiastic manager, straight from Chicago, even had a handlebar moustache. I assumed that was a Chicago thing. He claimed we'd have crowds lined up every night. I hoped he was right.

Late spring and hot. Somehow people still wanted to eat in a dark place with red booths sporting posters of the Chicago skyline. The heavy pizza and bowls of spaghetti didn't entice me much, though the food got a decent reception from customers. Despite my worries, we were busy. I was an excellent waitress. I could multitask before that was even a word. The tips were decent.

Three weeks into the job, two couples slid into a booth. They were quiet, not in an awkward way but more like they were old friends who didn't need to impress each other. Too old to be students, but not very old. Very polite. Clearing the table, I noticed one of the women had barely touched her spaghetti. "Would you like to take that home?" I asked.

She shrugged. "No, thanks. I didn't much care for it."

"Oh! I'm sorry," I said. "Can I get you something else?"

She hesitated. "No, thanks. Just the check."

I went straight to the manager and explained the situation. "I'd like to take it off the bill," I said.

“Shit! First time this has happened,” he said. “Yeah, take it off and I’ll go talk to them.”

After I delivered the check, Handlebars walked over to the table. Afterwards he came up to me, red-faced. “I need to talk to you!” he hissed. “You failed to tell me something very important.”

“Like what?” I asked.

“They’re Black. I bet they just wanted a free meal. You wait, you won’t even get a tip.”

I can only imagine the look on my face. “Are you kidding? Nobody asked me for anything. I did what I thought was right.”

“You wait and see.”

When I returned to the table, I did see. Best tip ever. A nice send-off for my final deep-dish shift.

Subito Forte

GABE FRANKLIN

I had put in four dinner orders when dark clouds seemed to come from nowhere. I felt raindrops and saw the sky flash with lightning. I had two tables outside and my large group near the fire pit bolted into the crowded pub for shelter. My table for four moved slowly, but soon joined the crowd inside. What chaos.

This was my first summer job. I was a music major between freshman and sophomore years of college. I loved the restaurant because the pub had a grand piano in the back corner. It was a Bechstein and minimized how much I missed practicing piano at my parents' home. Now, I stood on the patio and wished I were anywhere but facing a dissonant crowd, rattled each time there was thunder.

"Hey, Matt, your group needs attention."

I stiffened. It was my manager.

"Lucky it's last call," he said. Thunder shook the patio. There was an ozone smell outside and lightening made the night sky day. I had to go in. In where it was rainstorm musical chairs.

What I saw was the fire pit group safely sheltered at a banquet table. As nonchalantly as I could in my half-soaked slacks and shirt, I squeezed along the cramped bar to get their orders. "Last call, and by the way thanks for getting inside so quickly," I said to them. This high-spirited group had dodged the rain and acclimated themselves well. They only wanted drinks with nothing from the kitchen. I began to relax.

“Matt, you’re up,” the manager called to me. The dazed, damp group of four were still standing and their food was ready. My body was cold and wet and tensed up, again. I surveyed the room. There were no open tables, and my manager was at my side. Just then I remembered. The piano!

With feigned confidence, I turned to my manager and spoke. “Please arrange for four tall chairs from the high-tops on the patio to be brought to the piano.” He gave me a thumbs up and a wide smile. I gestured a serpentine motion to my standing group of four diners. “Follow me,” I said.

I was conducting their tempo as we wound to the back of the room. They moved like a symphony. We arrived at the piano and with a riveting crescendo of thunder, they were settled.



Happy Hour for Two

Oil on canvas

24" x 18"

Renata Price

Happy Hour for Two

I often like to use traditional oil painting methods in my work. This involves lots of underpainting and layers of transparent glaze to establish depth. For this painting, I set out to use those techniques for a contemporary still life. HH is a big deal for us retired folk so I liked that as a theme. I staged the scene, then ate the food and drank the wine (not all by myself). I hope the painting creates the vibe of an HH spread inviting two lovers or friends to spend a relaxing time together.

—Renata Price

A Ghostly Legacy

KATHLEEN L. MARTENS

The Grey Horse Tavern's history met me at the door, and I fell into another world.

My high heels shattered the morning silence as I crossed the blackened pine floors, cleverly preserved for centuries with whale oil. Built by my ancestors in 1673, with its Dutch-style slate roof, clapboard walls, and cavernous fireplace, the restaurant was now my inheritance. The historic charm of Grandpa's waterfront establishment in Newport, Rhode Island, was light years from my job at my father's intense Manhattan law firm.

Entering the dining room, I could hear jubilant Grandpa's gravelly voice reading our ancestor Vera Carey's sweeping script in her decaying journal. Her recipes and ruminations were my fascinating bedtime stories. Grandpa swore he'd often encountered Vera's ghost, sparking my childhood imagination.

Widowed at age twenty-six, ancestor Vera had faced a daunting challenge. *Women can't drink or dine there, yet I'm expected to honor my husband's dying wish to manage his beloved tavern.*

She'd journaled about serving simple meals to horsemen. She'd endured insults, garnered compliments, and then earned respect, keeping our family tradition alive.

Now, three-hundred-fifty years and seventeen Carey generations later, single, at twenty-six, and Vera's namesake, could I do the same? Could I embrace Grandpa's final wish and transform into a twenty-first-century version of Vera Carey?

Standing in the main dining room, imagining the laughter, the clink of celebrating glasses, and the homey scent of Vera's freshly baked biscuits, I realized I'd never been happy managing contentious law cases. I was more like my gregarious Grandpa than my serious Dad.

Across the empty room, a woman smiled at me, then disappeared. I shuddered. Glowing in her brocade bodice, floor-length skirt, and white linen cap, her auburn curls and penetrating green eyes matched mine. Vera's ghost?

She called out in her vaporous voice, "Two yeast ales, bacon and biscuits."

A knowing surged through me. My fear melted into excitement. I imagined myself joining the server staff in seventeenth-century costumes. I would revere my ancestors and enchant our crowds of worldwide tourists by adding Vera's homemade biscuits, bacon from farm-raised pigs, and crafted yeast ale to today's menu of caviar, grass-fed filet mignon, Oysters Rockefeller, and fine wine.

I can hear the din of elated diners who would journey back in time to experience the historic, irreplaceable Grey Horse Tavern as I placed a plate of the past in front of them.

Unfit to Serve

FRANCES OAKES

Maggie frowned. Freshly fried breakfast platters laid scattered across the checkered tile floor while the new waitress stood above the food chaos. Her nearly blind dog whiffed his way towards a large slice of scrapple and two eggs over easy. Within seconds, the evidence of the mishap was gone. She gently dismissed the waitress.

The fry cook put his hands on his hips. “She’s always dropping food and mixing up orders.” His face turned red. “Now I have to make this all over again!”

“I hired Roberta, and she deserves a chance.”

Frank dropped his shoulders. “It’s your decision.”

His attitude was unacceptable, but she understood his frustration. “I’ll observe the servers today, and if she doesn’t fit in, I’ll let her go.”

Maggie sat down at an empty booth. Her server, Max, stood at a table smiling at a young boy who was crying uncontrollably. She watched him sit down and encourage the boy to play Tic Tac Toe on the kid’s paper menu. The youngster stopped crying and the mother smiled.

She glanced over at Joan who was handing a food check to the recently widowed Mrs. Watson. For the last three weeks the woman came in every Monday morning promptly at eight o’clock. She always ordered bacon, rye toast, scrambled eggs, and grits. When Joan sat down next to Mrs. Watson, Maggie remembered that Joan had requested to take her break at eight-thirty so she could spend time comforting Mrs. Watson.

She looked over at the new server, Roberta. She was taking orders, but it was as if her mind was somewhere else. But then again, what had Maggie expected?

She heard the sirens sound as an ambulance arrived at the hospital across the street. So many of her patrons came from the hospital after visiting a loved one. Her decision became clear. Her servers had to be more than order takers. They needed to be counselors and hope givers.

She noticed Roberta leaning over to pet Maggie's dog. It brought back the first time Roberta came to the diner. That blank stare. Roberta's tears as she described the tornado that destroyed her home and took the life of her beloved dog. She thought about how upset Frank was over a spilt breakfast platter. How foolish that seemed now.

No, she wouldn't fire Roberta. She'd go give her a hug.



Azafran

Acrylic
16" x 20"

Ken Catterton

Azafran

A quiet place for friends to get together and just chat, Azafran in Lewes was just such a place.

My interest in painting includes capturing an individual or small group expressing something about themselves. My goal in this painting, as in others, was not to paint portraits, but rather to capture emotions, atmosphere.

—Ken Catterton

Sugar

L.E.W. BROWN

“Anything else?” she asked. He was handsome in a seedy professor sort of way, Che Guevara without the beret. The type most undergrads at his college probably found either sexy or arrogant. Waiting for his order she gazed past him to the ocean, flat and grey after the morning squall. The air smelled of rain and frying bacon.

“Of course, the beignets, extra sugar.” He smiled. He came here most mornings. The Eggs Up Café above the boardwalk had seen better days. The red plush cushions torn and taped. The beach theme décor of rigging, nets, buoys, and boats sagged from the ceiling. But he loved the beignets, and the coffee was excellent.

She went off to get his order. She contrived to be his waitress every morning schmoozing the boss, Jack, to seat him in her section. Jack thought her a bit old for a crush. But she had filled in after her sister died leaving him shorthanded for the summer season, so he was grateful. The clatter of plates and the hum of customers meant his business was thriving, maybe he could afford some renovations.

“Here you go.” She placed the beignets in front of him. “Sprinkled with extra sugar, as usual.” She smiled into his brown eyes. Turning, she almost flipped her blond hair over her shoulder and let him have a good leer at her bottom as she moved to the next table.

She covered her loathing of him well. He was the reason her sister was dead. He was the reason she took this lousy summer job to get revenge. Her sister, Beverly, had had such promise. Why had she majored in English Lit of all things? But she was also a dreamer. A sophomore fling with her professor should not have brought on depression. But she was broken when he ended it and he was cruel. Too much booze, a one-car accident, and she was gone.

Most mornings he came in, breakfast followed by beignets with extra sugar and just a touch of arsenic.

Waited Too Long

LINDA FEDERMAN

For ten years, I watched a parade of servers come and go at Rosie's Grill, a stopover on their way to other lives. No one called themselves waiters: they were struggling actors, struggling musicians, broke students. They were dreamers, shuttling food from the kitchen and hoping for good tips, waiting for that big break, that better job, that graduation gown.

In the beginning, I counted myself among them. The stale food smells that rose from the carpets before the kitchen generated fresh aromas, the sticky dishes smeared with congealed sauces, the paltry tips not compensating for my aching back, all made me hope my time in the restaurant was temporary.

I called myself a writer then. Any of the customers, the busboys, or my fellow servers could ignite a story, a character, or a scene that I would hold in my head until my shift was over. Then I'd go home to furiously flesh out a piece until morning leaked through the windows.

It was just me and the page. I was a vessel; the ideas flowed into me like a clear, cool stream, through me, and out my fingertips. I filled pages of lined yellow paper with lyrical prose, complex thoughts, tributaries that looped over themselves and seamlessly pooled together in the end.

The words whispered to me all the time. I could make them sing, make them dance. And with the aid of a computer, paragraphs could be flipped, lines could be erased, replaced, reordered. Words were malleable, limber things that could be reshaped with the flick of a fingertip, the tap of a key.

The first five years passed. I had worn through ten pairs of rubber-soled shoes, carried thousands of sweating glasses on heavy trays, burned my hands on hundreds of steaming plates. But I still had no book deal. My bank account grew from tips, not work. I had to wonder if my destiny was to be a server, not a writer.

But still, I listen for the muse, seek the coolness of the stream, tune in to the whispering words. I read other's work with an ache in the pit of my stomach, knowing what it is to create that magic, longing for it to be my world.

I turn the key to Rosie's restaurant, tie an apron around the waist of my black uniform pants, and start the coffee pot.



Farmers Market

Pastels
14" x 11"

Jane Knaus

Farmers Market

The inspiration was the beauty of the shapes, colors, and textures of the vegetables, and how they play off of each other when bunched together...there's a dynamic quality to seeing these beautiful "sculptures" from someone's vegetable garden, and I wanted to capture that scene on paper.

—Jane Knaus

A Vocation

THOMAS HOYER

I am a waiter at Tadich's restaurant, at 240 California Street, right in the heart of San Francisco. The old fashioned Tadich Grill sign outside reminds the world that we were established in 1849. The gilt lettering on the plate glass window, intact but not fresh, attests to our longevity. I have worked here all my life and, like the other waiters here, I've come to reflect the Tadich look. I'm a big man. I have a large head. I have a large moustache. We all look like Danny Thomas clones in our white shirts, black pants, and white aprons. Our world is lined with wood-paneled booths upholstered in dark leather and lit by lamps with milk-glass globes. I change the starched white tablecloths with each sitting, carefully placing starched white napkins—folded into pyramids—at each place. I lay out the place settings of flatware carefully, forks on the left, knife, and spoon on the right, precisely aligned, as if the guests I am seating and serving are members of our own family. I am filled with pride when I serve them, standing tall in my starched white apron with a starched white towel over my left forearm, and they can tell from my demeanor that serving them here, in a restaurant that has been here since 1849, is my vocation. When I bring sparkling, clean glasses of water, I also bring a white porcelain bowl of cut lemons, a generous bowl, more lemons than anyone will use with their crab cakes. The lemons are a symbol of opulence and generosity. Dinner at Tadich's is like the mass, and when I put the plated food in front of our guests, I am the priest who celebrates the mass, who distributes communion to the congregation, the food and drink of sacrifice. It unifies us. We have come together to celebrate the golden past.

What they don't understand is that it all ends when I bid them good evening at the door. They go home to their nice houses and families. After closing, my Danny Thomas role is over. I return dog-tired, footsore, and sweaty to my rented room in a single-room-only hotel on Eddy Street where I will count my tips and spend a restless night waiting until tomorrow, waiting until I don the jacket and apron, drape the towel over my arm, and become someone again.

Retribution

WALTER F. CURRAN

I was triggered at dinner one night, listening to three generations of an obnoxious, demanding family, harassing, insulting, and threatening the waiter, then leaving no tip. So, I made a plan.

The only one who knew my real purpose was the owner. A good friend, he laughed when I told him I wanted to be a waiter for a week or two. Said it was research. Covid was just over, and hiring was damn near impossible. I knew I had him at “nada” which is what I would work for.

In the past, I’ve had rotten jobs, bosses with rotten attitudes, but until now, no rotten customers.

An Italian restaurant with the usual armada of delectable sights and smells, you had to work hard to be unhappy there.

With tongue firmly in cheek, the owner introduced me to his twenty-something manager. “He’s an old guy down on his luck. Go easy on him.”

“Follow me,” she said, leading me to the kitchen. Waving her arm, she said, “This is where it happens.” She pointed to the dining area. “Whatever happens out there is a result of what happens in here. Learn the menu. Ask questions. Don’t guess.” Turning to leave, she added, “In here, you say what needs to be said. Out there, you need a filter. You do have a filter, don’t you?”

The first three nights weren’t bad. I listened, learned, asked questions, and offered help to anyone looking like they needed it. On the fourth night, a Saturday, Armageddon appeared. I was Good. They were Evil. It was the same obnoxious family, minus a few members, that had triggered me before.

My “Good evening, folks,” was greeted by a blaring, “We talk. You listen!” Immediately followed by, “We’re in a hurry, understand?” A pause, then, “Did you hear me?” Now, he had a stunned audience.

“Yes, sir, I certainly did, along with everybody else here. I didn’t respond because you ordered me not to say anything.”

He gawked. I continued, “I’m familiar with your family’s behavior having sat next to you once. I know there won’t be a tip forthcoming. The only thing I expect from you is rudeness and ignorance. Since you’re in a hurry, leave ... NOW!”

As the miscreants stormed out, applause rose from the crowd. Smiling, I bowed.

Grabbing the menus, I strode to the reception desk and said, “Table eleven is available.”



Nella Sua Cucina (In His Kitchen)

Oil on canvas
18" x 24"

Dennis Young

Nella Sua Cucina (In His Kitchen)

There is a little story behind this. This is Chef Luigi Vitrone of Pastabilities restaurant in Wilmington. He can be seen in his culinary splendor being interviewed by Guy Fieri on “Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives” on the Food Network.

The convivial woman behind him is Flavia Loreto, a magnificently creative photographer and teacher of Italian language. I have painted her portrait in a sensitive interpretation of Judy Collins’ song, “My Father Always Promised Me That We Would Live in France.” On her part, she created a flattering photographic portrait of me in a mysterious pose.

Chef Luigi cut his culinary teeth in Brooklyn and brought his skills and his love of his culinary art to Little Italy in Wilmington in 1988 where he opened his iconic restaurant, Pastabilities. In this small row house restaurant well-known for its funky decorated dining room, he is the chef who creates from scratch an array of Italian dinners and desserts. His only assistant is Doris who waits on tables, pours the wine and may offer tidbits of conversation. The rooms are infused with Chef Luigi’s personality and humor. And everyone entering becomes family. My painting of Chef catches a moment when he is at the peak of creating his magic with a flair. Our mutual friend, Flavia Loreto, a magnificent artist in photography, is painted into the background to balance the painting and to add that flair of happiness and sharing good times with the viewer. The 18 x 24 painting started on my signature purple canvas where I have intentionally left flashes of the exposed purple to make the painting pop and complement the hiss of Chef’s splashing the wine into the hot pan!

—Dennis Young

Hooked

STEVE CONLEY

I listened to the quarter stair-stepping inside the phone, a few short drops and one longer freefall. When the flexible, stainless cord brushed my neck and shoulders, I thought about those eyes.

It was my last week at the beach. He was cute. Maybe eighteen. Always left a tip.

“Cookie! Dammit! They did it again. I’m going to kill them! They’ll be filets. Cookie, I’m gonna kill ‘em.”

“Maybe he pays them,” the bald chef replied, ignoring my fury, then winking and nodding toward Ennis, who was focused on my legs.

My skirt had danced up an inch or two while I was jumping, spinning, and thrashing like a blue marlin, after two ten-year-olds left a circle hook and three dimes under a dirty napkin.

“Sorry, Ginger. About your finger,” was all he mustered, staring at the shiny white cap of a ketchup bottle.

“Thank you, Ennis. You’re sweet. I’m going to call you one day, I promise. I am.”

“OK,” he said, nodding in increments smaller than ruler hashes. His eyes panned left as I adjusted my skirt.

That’s when my hazel eyes caught his.

Deep, starry-night blue.

I cleared his grilled cheese-and-fries, then ran three fingers over his left hand.

Until that day, I hadn't given Ennis a second thought.

Wearing that white tennis skirt three shifts a week raised the tips that got me back to Boston, where I studied journalism, news photography. I had two semesters of undergrad left, then planned to win a Pulitzer.

So, when mid-August humidity drove many diners into the newly air-conditioned eatery across the canal, the skirt and a clingy, black V-neck, which I never tucked in, stabilized my weekly catch.

Salty breezes cooled my lower back whenever I reached for wayward napkins.

And watchful eyes usually meant more singles than coins.

"Hey, don't toss that. That's a good hook. Wait, Ging'. I'll talk to them."

"You better, Cookie. Bandages are killing my budget."

Pushing the red-spotted napkin through the trash can's swinging lid, I watched Ennis mimic Cookie's fingers, as chef gently pinched the small hook and its dangling, monofilament line, taking it from me.

You're cute, Ennis. You're a cute, shy hunk.

That's when I saw him stand, raise his baseball hat enough to see my smile, and put a half dollar and one quarter next to his napkin. Like always.

I'll Be Helping You Today

BILL NEWCOTT

He stood in the shadows, behind the salad bar. The super-starched creases of his father's Brooks Brothers dress shirt cut into his skin. He silently cursed his mother for adjusting his bow tie too tight, then felt bad because she'd driven him all the way across town for this, the first day of his job.

Of any job.

The party of eight, encircling the center table at Steak 'n Shrimp, resembled Knights of the Round Table if King Arthur ran a real estate office and his knights were agents suffering through a commercial property crash.

"Sorry to interrupt," he said, lurching forward like a reluctant talent show contestant. "I'm Kyle. I'll be helping you today."

"Well, could you help us with a few drinks?" growled a man with an indescribably sad comb-over.

At seventeen, Kyle wasn't allowed to take drink orders. That was for the bartender, who said his name was Isaac, but Kyle had his doubts because that was also the name of the bartender on *The Love Boat*.

"Um, sure," he said. "I'll go get Isaac."

"Maybe he's in the pantry with Julie," deadpanned a woman with a gravelly voice, like an old Lucille Ball. "Just take our orders, sweetie."

The clip of Kyle's tie sliced into his neck. His only familiarity with alcohol was this nightly exchange between his parents: "You make a great Manhattan, honey," and then, "Thanks! Can I have a sip of your highball?"

Kyle cleared his throat, his note pen hovering. “Okay,” he said.

What followed was a torrent of alcoholic babble; a cacophony of words and made-up words that Kyle desperately tried to transcribe, something like: “Angel Face Bees Knees Corpse Reviver Fluffy Duck Monkey Gland Suffering Bastard.”

“Ya got all that?” asked Lucy.

“Got it!” smiled Kyle. He headed for the bar.

“Did I hear you taking a drink order?” Isaac asked. “You’re supposed to come get me.”

“They didn’t want to wait.” Kyle shrugged, slapping the notebook page on the counter.

Isaac frowned as he read the order. “Really? The women all want Manhattans and the men are all drinking highballs?”

“Go figure,” said Kyle. He strode into the kitchen, waved to the cook, and slipped out the back-alley door. Painfully, he unhooked his bow tie.

Kyle looked at his Timex watch. Mom would be picking him up in four hours

Water

PHIL FRETZ

My first day at the dining hall started without trouble. There was no assigned mentor, but Sally took me aside, and gave me enough hints to make the time go by without much worrying. Her most forthright advice to smile, no matter what, proved okay for that day. On day two, I heard, “Deary, can I have some water?” The request from a woman ancient enough to be my great-grandmother seemed innocuous, although I didn’t appreciate her touching me when she spoke. Her crooked teeth and stained white blouse made me think of a wicked witch from fairy tales. I smiled in recognition of her entreaty, and finished delivering desserts to another table of residents. I heard the same woman’s voice. “Deary, don’t forget.”

I didn’t like the way she said that, as if I were a servant, but I forced a smile, nodded, and proceeded to the beverage counter. I picked up a coffee container, a basket of sugars, and started to return, until I saw her face. I turned around to fetch a water jug, and managed to hold both that and the coffee. As I passed her table, I put the water pitcher down in front of her plate.

“Deary, do you expect me to drink from the pitcher?”

I said I was sorry, and I’d bring a glass right away.

“Deary, please hurry. An old woman needs water more than that man needs coffee.”

I didn’t know how to respond to this quip, so I didn’t say anything. I returned to the beverage area only to see no empty glasses. I did grab a clean coffee mug and took one to her.

“Deary, I want a glass of water, not coffee!”

Before I could explain, she unloaded a mouthful of invectives. “Why does this place hire imbecilic servers? All I want is a damn glass of water? Do I need to spell it out? WATER.”

I wiped the sneer forming on my lips. I said, “Ma’am, there is water in the pitcher for your cup. Is there anything else I can get?”

“No, get away from me, Deary.”

“My name is Jane.”



Evening Libations

Watercolor
8" x 8"

Anne Buck

Evening Libations

Evening Libations was an image from Italy...people dining. I am preparing for a show at the Peninsula Gallery in November themed “Night Scenes” so this is part of that series.

—Anne Buck

This Part of Town

TIM HUDENBURG

Nothing here. Ain't no beauty. What happens to unfulfilled dreams? I know. Look around. This town's just cement dust. Broken sidewalks. No. Not a big town, crowded enough.

Even this place. A diner built on regret and ruin. Either way, corruption reigns...has to. Explains why things are this way. Good old days. Sure. Brother, can you spare a dime?

Morning. It hurts to think. Bad dreams by dawn's early light. Eggs runny; black coffee already stale. Bread crumbs on tables remain from yesterday's meals.

Waitresses worn out. The shift not even begun. Smoke already billowing from the kitchen.

I wait tables here. The diner is not far from a nondescript office building near Gulistan. That dusty road you would take if you wanted to get out of here. The place is pretty bleak, but we have the diner, our diner.

Again with the Prokofiev—odd choice.

Between customers I sip coffee. Survive. Thrive compared to the ones who returned broken. Even Roosevelt thought he would never leave the White House. He's dead, Hitler's dead. The Japanese surrendered without invasion.

Someone left a tip. I share it with Ramuza. We work hard enough. Hell. Something is a lot in a time like this. What did Truman say—about a buck stopping here.

She looks me full in the eyes. Holds the look. Holds on. Her husband still missing. ‘Presumed dead.’ See tears behind those eyes.

“Thanks Alex.”

“Sure.” I mutter. My shift’s over. The door closes behind me. An old woman sits on the stoop muttering, rocking her tired body.

Gray sky, like every morning. Yes Ernest, the sun rises, but it also sets. This day too will end like every other—a knuckle of Shashlik, meat at least, a potato, crust of circular bread, a pour of vodka. Same glass as the night before.

Except for the Russians. Nondescript, burly men. Dark jackets, NKVD. Hurry past into the diner. “Stay out of the way Alexy.” That’s unexpected. They know my name.

Yes. Stalin still is in power. The city—Tashkent. This day ends sooner than I thought.

Why turn around? Was it Ramuza’s pale lipstick not covering her soft lips. Vanity rushed a bit this morning. I pay the price. First trickles of cold sweat down my spine. Smart people call it fear. Awaken on the bathroom floor, blood on my face, my shirt my own.

Missing Davey

PAUL D. MCFARLANE

Talia Comfort tied on her apron, pinned on her name badge, and approached the pair in booth six at the Montmorency Diner. She recognized Beverly and Barry Lawson, but their son, Davey was missing.

“Good evening! Just you two tonight? How were your holidays?” Talia asked.

“Well, nothing like we expected,” Barry said fumbling with his menu.

“Is Davey back at school?” Talia asked.

Barry looked at his wife Beverly. “Davey, died in a car accident just before Christmas.”

“I am so sorry!” Talia said, touching her heart. She noticed Beverly’s grey hair had some light purple highlights. “Your hair’s pretty, Ms. Beverly,” she remarked. And then, “What would you like to drink?”

“Just water,” Beverly answered, staring at her closed menu.

“Okay. Tonight’s special is meatloaf,” Talia announced.

“Meatloaf sounds good, right, Bev?” Barry asked her.

Beverly looked up wearily. “I’m really not hungry.”

Barry reached for his wife’s hands and said, “You’ll feel better after eating something.”

“Maybe I’ll have apple pie. Davey’s favorite,” she said, then fetched a tissue from her purse.

Barry turned to Talia and said, “Apple pie for Bev and we’ll share the meatloaf.”

“Done,” Talia said. Stepping away, she overheard Barry say to Beverly, “These menu prices look higher. Remember Davey saying I’d make a Buffalo nickel fart before spending it?”

“Barry let’s just go home. I can’t eat anything.” Beverly replied.

Talia returned with their drinks and an idea to shift her friend’s mood. She touched Beverly’s shoulder and said, “Ms. Beverly, come see my mom’s crazy Christmas gift to me. I’ve got a picture in my purse.”

Beverly glanced at Barry, stood, and took Talia’s arm. The two walked toward the diner’s dessert display.

Talia took her purse from under a counter and handed Beverly a photo.

Beverly gasped. “Oh my! Did she knit you that hat herself? You look like a baby panda!”

Talia tilted back with laughter and said, “Yes; she knitted it just for me.”

As the two smiling ladies returned to the booth, Talia saw relief cross Barry’s face.

“What’s so funny?” he asked the pair.

Beverly grinned, pointed toward Talia, and said, “Tonight I learned the true meaning of our friend Talia’s last name.”

Barry looked closely at Talia’s name badge. It spelled COMFORT.

Memories of an Earth She Left Behind

CRYSTAL HEIDEL

“Mai Tai, please.”

Eames smiled at the tourist from Earth and grabbed a shaker. She had never seen him before at the resort. It must be his first time here.

The Earth tourist was watching another beautiful sunset of oranges and reds with slashes of purple; it lit the roof-top terrace, umbrellas, and water fountains that shot thirty feet in the air at the top of this floating city. Rainbows arched above trees that swayed on the balcony from a sultry breeze and the sun did more than kiss her skin.

“Does it ever cool down?”

Eames shook her head. It rarely dropped below a hundred degrees on this planet. She loved it.

“Should have vacationed on Mars,” the man muttered.

Mars. It felt as if she’d been sucker punched. She clenched the glass tighter as memories flashed through her mind.

Two years ago, she lived on Earth, her apartment just blocks from the beach in Washington, D.C. on the tenth floor of a module-style complex between K and L Streets. The ocean’s brininess was the first thing she smelled each morning through her apartment’s single window, then she’d run on the beach

past the partially submerged Washington Monument. That had been before the terrorist attack.

After?

Her love for Earth had faded, replaced by bitterness for losing everything that mattered to her. It hadn't been one particular person, but a rogue group of radicals who hid on Mars, carrying out unrelenting attacks on Earth and the Moon for decades.

The last attack had been the worst. She'd been in the capital of the United Nations—Denver—when it happened. An unknown weapon had annihilated most of the eastern seaboard cities, including D.C., Fayetteville, and Atlanta. In a matter of seconds, twenty million human lives had been lost. If she hadn't been on assignment in Denver, she would have been one of them.

Despite the heat, gooseflesh rose on her arms. Her girlfriend's face materialized in her mind and the last words Eames ever said to her emerged from a hidden crevasse deep inside her. *"It's a quick trip. I'll be home Monday. We'll go for that hike. I promise."* They hadn't even kissed goodbye.

Her fingers shook as she filled the glass with the cocktail. Placing a lime wheel and a wedge of pineapple on the rim and topping it with a frilly umbrella seemed ridiculous now.



A Moveable Feast

Watercolor
30" x 40"

Howard J. Eberle

A Moveable Feast

*This piece was created in 1995 to memorialize a trip to Paris with my wife, Joann. While there, we visited many of Hemingway's haunts made famous from his early life in Paris in the Twenties. This café, Les Deux Magots, opened in 1894 and is still in the same location on Saint-Germain-des-Pres. It was a haven for many writers and artists such as Hemingway, Picasso, and James Joyce. The texture of the wood on the café chairs, the wrought iron of the tables and the stone pavers outside are all elements I love to paint. The title came from Hemingway's, *A Moveable Feast*, title page. "If you are lucky enough to have lived in Paris as a young man, then wherever you go for the rest of your life, it stays with you, for Paris is a moveable feast."*

I painted this to the soundtrack of Les Misérables, one of my favorite Broadway shows. The song, "Empty Chairs at Empty Tables" is a poignant reminder of the passing of time.

—Howard J. Eberle

The Diner

LISA GRAFF

He writes his name on the bottom of a five-dollar bill and leaves it under his coffee cup. Stares at the back of her apron willing her to turn around. Slides off his stool, the jingle of the door closing rattled behind him. He watches his breath hit the cold air. Waits.

She picks up his tip. Shoves it in her pocket, feels for her cigarette. Her heart beats faster as she pours more coffee to the other regulars seated on the red vinyl stools. Has someone written a country song about diners like this? Guys who think every waitress is in love with them because they flirt a little to get more tips. Men who fantasize about the meek girlie they rescue from their day job so they can become happy wives who cook their steak dinners. She hates herself. He seems genuine.

He doesn't want to go to work this afternoon. He hates his desk job, his boss, his life, his paunch of a stomach. This stupid town where he grew up and stayed because his mother needed him. He wants to leave Mayville now and drive somewhere he has never been before. For months he has chickened out. He has been coming to this same diner for three years and finally a new face, Kate, shows up in August. No wedding ring. Her perfume is his mother's favorite. For some stupid reason he kept the damn bottle on his dresser. Afraid to go to her grave. He hates himself.

She unties her apron; tells Sarah she is going out front to smoke. She doesn't bother to get a coat, needs air, and when she gets outside, she pretends not to see him. Leans against the windowpane. She blows smoke in his direction.

He pretends to cough.

“Hello, Walter.”

“Hello, Kate.”

“Are you always this glum?” She looks at the clouds. Feels the cold on her arms.

“Does it show that bad? That’s why I need coffee I guess.”

“Ahh. Cigarettes are made to help people feel better too. Not working for me either.”

He sees the color in her cheeks, worries if she is cold. “Maybe I could buy you dinner some night?”

She has never noticed how tall he is. “I gotta get back to work now.”

He hangs his head.

She turns around. “I’ve got your number, Walter. Would be nice to be waited on for a change.”

Aria

DONALD CHALLENGER

I stagger toward the *Torre dell'Orologio*, my path out of the piazza and into the warrens of Venice. My limbs are already numb, my vision a penumbra. I scan San Marco, the Basilica, the arches above me—magnificent even as they die.

Thirty seconds ago: I approached the table where she presides. I'd added the white powder to her *tiramisu*. Operatic: She'd be seen by thousands here, billions digitally, collapsing in cardiac arrest—a regal, 285-pound emblem of Venice, as dead as the city itself will be in two years.

Seven minutes ago: I waited after she slid her caprese aside. At Caffè Florian, to acknowledge even the world's greatest opera singer sooner than that would be an insult. It's Italy: *lento, lento*.

An hour ago: She settled near the string quartet. Party of four—three trophy boys, bodyguards, whatever, swanning behind her *passeggiata*. The headwaiter, Fausto, gave me an austere nod. My table. Tonight, I would kill her.

Two weeks ago: She ignored me for months before seeing past the faux-courtly starch and tails of the Florian uniform to picture the cheap stain-release vest I'd maxed out at Toady's BBQ back in Orlando, when I was all furious eyeliner, Marlboros, shots of Cuervo by the dumpster. *Americana*, she'd whispered to Fausto—not a question. As I slid by, she fluted, passably, "What'll it be, Hon?" A kind smile, eyes alight behind folds of flesh. I laughed and flashed thumbs up. I had her.

Four months ago: Lipstick on my mirror in Dursoduro: The world's greatest opera singer is the iconic face of a futile effort to save Venice from catastrophe...1,297 of the world's best environmental, hydraulic, and civil engineers are immersed in this effort. Resources must be reallocated...She must suffer an ignoble public death to defuse the Venetian debacle.

Six months ago: The AI messages began, cryptic and sporadic. Email from a Brazilian account: *This will seem insane*. A note on my windshield: *Ultimately inevitable*. After the Ross Ice Shelf collapse that would doom Venice, the Romanian postmark: new name, work visa, letter of reference, backstory. Euros.

Fifteen seconds ago: As I approached, I understood, too late. To murder her was to martyr her. If the world is to abandon Venice, *she* must be the killer. She stretched; I ran. The dish shattered; something stung the back of my hand. *Mi dispiace*, she whispered. *I'm sorry*.

rehobothbeachwritersguild.com



The work of restaurant servers is demanding. Like their patrons, their lives can be complex. Showing up for work every day is just one piece of who they are.

Rehoboth Beach Writers Guild members took up the challenge to write flash fiction stories—400-word limit—from the point of view of a restaurant server, who may seem ubiquitous, but who are individuals with rich, expansive, and perhaps unexpected lives.

