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Dust, Rust, and No Charge for Family

by Kris Thompson

I pull off the dusty road into the diner parking lot. Calling it a parking lot is generous. It's more of a gravel field. There is dust everywhere. Not like the dust under the sofa you can't be bothered to move when you vacuum. This dust, this west Texas dust, is thick...more dirt than dust.

My 1970 Chevrolet Chevelle SS causes a big dust storm. Oh, don't get too excited. It's not "Mint Condition" or "Single Owner!" or even "Always Garaged". Her name is Audrey and Audrey's rust has rust. So much rust, in fact, that it's difficult to tell she's red...or used to be. Of course that was years before I was born. She's a hunk of junk. She's on her last leg. But she's mine free and clear. Audrey brought me half way across the country without breaking down although I'm not as confident about the trip home. Bonus: No one wants to steal her.

There are only two other vehicles in the lot, both pickups. I wonder if that means the food is no good or if this place is just as remote as it feels. I wonder if there's a town nearby and grab my map from the glove compartment in which I keep not even one glove. Stop. I'm totally procrastinating. I need to get off my ass and do what I came here to do. My feet are not cooperating and I think seriously about turning around and heading home. Coward. Instead, I open my door and force my feet to do their duty.

The huge wooden sign, which looks hand painted a zillion years ago, reads Medina Family Diner. Family. I wonder for the millionth time why I hadn't just called to see if she was even still working here. Nope. I'd rather drive for three days, spend every penny I have on gas, gas station junk food, and cheap motels.

A bell above the door tinkles my arrival. The aroma of meat on a hot griddle hits me like a wave and reminds me I missed lunch. And breakfast. No one is around except the men that likely belong to the pickups. Those two sit at the counter, eating, not talking, an empty seat between them.

An older man with sweat on his brow, a kitchen towel over his shoulder, and a dirty apron tied around his waist...I get the impression he's the cook...hurries out from the kitchen, tells me to take a seat anywhere. He disappears into the kitchen. I briefly think about sitting at the counter between the two men and wonder what they would think.

Instead, I take a seat at a table by the window. Another pickup arrives in a cloud. Moments later it has a layer of dust on it. I suspect everything around here has a layer of dust. The bell tinkles the man's arrival, his boots and baseball cap proving my suspicions.

Batchelor number three joins the other men at the counter, leaving another empty seat between himself and one of the others. I recall a psychology class. A study of seat choices, stall choices, line choices, patterns of strangers moving around each other. Wait. Perhaps that was a sociology class.

“What'll it be?”

I was startled by Doris, or so claimed her nametag. She was obviously not Gabriela who I'd come all this way to meet. Perhaps it was Gabriela's day off. Perhaps she didn't work here anymore.

With a stubby pencil Doris tapped out her impatience on her ticket book.

“Well?”

My god the lines crisscrossing Doris' face said she was closing in on a hundred. She wore a loose polyester dress...used to be white...under a sad red and white gingham apron. Apparently she'd only worn one pair of shoes her whole life which she'd spent traipsing through the muddy woods schlepping coffee. She smelled of cigarette smoke. I suddenly longed for a cigarette and contemplated bumming one from Doris but I needed to focus on my task before Doris came at me with her pencil stub.

“Is Gabriela working today?” I blurted, trying to sound casual.

“You know Gabby?”

“Not really.” It wasn't a lie. “She took my order last time I was here.” That one was a lie. I guess you could say we spent time together in utero and when we were born...I wonder who came first...but I only recently discovered her name on a document I'm sure I was never meant to read.

“She left 'bout six months back.”

“Left?”

“Quit. Walked out. Middle of her shift. That Medina family's always feuding over one thing or another.”

“Oh. Ok.”

“Sorry to disappoint. You gonna order or what?”

“Oh. Sorry. I haven’t looked at the menu yet.”

I took off my sunglasses and looked down at the menu which was sandwiched between the also red gingham table cloth and glass topper.

“Hollar when you’re ready,” Doris shouted over her shoulder, already halfway to the kitchen. Stealthy, that Doris. Perhaps it was the shoes.

I look over the menu and was ready with my hamburger, fries, and a coke order when she returned. A few minutes later she returned again with my lunch and my ticket.

“Pay at the register when you’re done.”

I’m surprised to find my hamburger is delicious. Perhaps because I’d been subsiding on jerky, Twix, and hot Cheetos. I wonder if Gabriela is still around this dusty place or if she kept walking. I wonder if any of the other Medinas know where she went. I wonder if I am brave enough to ask them.

I finish my lunch and take my ticket to the register. As I wait for Doris to come ring me up I resist the urge to get a piece of pie. There are several in a case. I spy my favorite...cherry. I decide to save my money.

The man from the kitchen comes out and just stares at me.

“Is this where I pay or...” my voice trails off as he steps closer. This is weird.

He has warm brown eyes with the same shade skin, smooth despite his obvious age, and interrupted only by the lines of his developing smile. I hand him my ticket and lay my twenty on the counter. He takes my ticket and begins poking the register.

As is my habit, I avoid eye contact. I look at photos on the wall. They appear to be family photos rather than customer photos you sometime see at restaurants.

“Don’t recognize you. You from around here?”

“No.”

I see him on the wall...a much younger version of him...standing in front of the restaurant which looked new. Next to him is a woman who is holding the hand of a little girl who looks like me but is not. My heart skips a beat. I know I’m looking at Gabby.

“Passing through?”

I swallow hard. “Yea.”

The register drawer pops open. He slips my ticket in and slides it closed. I push the bill closer to him. He pushes it back.

“No charge for family.”

I look up and meet his gaze.

“It’s remarkable. You look just like her.”

I don’t know what to say. I can feel the blood rushing to my face.

“Any chance you’ll stay for a piece of pie? I can tell you all about Gabby and maybe you’ll tell me about yourself.”

This is what I came for. Am I ready for my life to change forever?

“Cherry,” is all I can manage.

“That’s Gabby’s favorite too.”

THE END