

The Last Minute Diner

A Short Story by Ryan Dallett

According to the sign, the hotel restaurant would close in thirty minutes and the small wait staff was busy straightening tables and setting places for the following day. He had worked in a kitchen before and knew that a last minute diner was hardly a welcome sight, a thought that only added to his growing anxiety.

He stood uncertainly, just inside the entrance of the restaurant, caught between his need to eat and desire to flee. A waiter glanced up from his work, surprise, disgust, and disappointment mingling on his face, before turning away to continue smoothing a tablecloth.

The restaurant was softly lit and the only remaining customers were a couple seated at a table along the wall opposite the entrance.

A waiter hurriedly emerged from the kitchen, intent on some purpose that would no doubt quicken his exit, but he slowed, and then stopped upon noticing the new diner. His shoulders seemed to slump slightly and he now moved more slowly as he made his way to a counter where he reached for a menu. He used it to gesture the man forward.

The last minute diner obliged and was placed at the table next to the couple and handed the menu. The waiter stood over him, pen in hand, anxious for the order.

Though unspoken and undefined, it was this moment the man had been dreading. It had begun when he had closed the door to his room. It had continued during the walk down the hallway, and then grown as he rode the elevator down to the second floor. Now, it was upon him and was made all the worse by the waiter who hovered impatiently over him.

He could not read the menu, or rather, he couldn't understand it. It was likely he was familiar with several of the dishes, but the words on the pages offered him few clues as to what exactly each one was. And there was no time. The waiter

was poised. The last minute diner's underarms felt warm and damp. His palms were sweaty. His face was warm. The couple next to him sat in silence, unmoving. They too were poised. He must pick something. And so he did; something with a couple of words he vaguely recognized. He communicated the order to the waiter, his words sounding awkward; his words sounding wrong, his finger pointing pathetically to the item on the menu. The waiter asked if this was all he wanted, a touch of surprise in his voice. *What did I order?* the man wondered, feeling defeated. He was very hungry and wanted enough food, but he didn't want to seem unsure and dared not look at the menu again. And so he hesitated briefly before finally saying "yes," the small word sounding weak and uncertain as it left his mouth; not at all as he had intended it to sound. And though he would have loved a glass of wine, when the waiter prompted him for a drink order, he said, "just water," smiling meekly and gesturing to the already full glass before him.

His mouth was dry and he took a long drink from the ice water after the waiter had left. For the first time, the girl next to him spoke and her companion laughed, a little too loudly. She used the local language and the last minute diner had no idea what she had said. They were laughing at him, though, he knew that much. His face flushed. They continued to speak to one another; a little too clearly, a little too loudly. They spoke to one another the way children do in elementary school when they've picked up Pig Latin; not so much to communicate but as to be heard speaking, and not to be understood. They spoke over him. They spoke around him.

The joke eventually ran its course and a silence fell over the couple and over the room. The girl spoke again, some mundane comment about a person back home or an item on their travel agenda. She spoke in English. The man uttered a disinterested, half-hearted response. Like the last minute diner, they too were American.

Coastlines

When he could, and without being too obvious, the last minute diner looked over at the couple. The man had curly hair and a patchy beard. The girl was plain-looking and wore frameless glasses. They dressed simply. He was in a plaid shirt and khaki shorts, she in a cotton dress. They wore rings. They were academics, maybe grad students.

The couple received their meal, and ate mostly in silence. The woman would occasionally make a comment, searching, but little was said in the way of a response. She looked around the room as if to find some item of interest.

When the last minute diner received his meal, it was a simple course of cold cuts and cheese; an appetizer really. He understood now why the waiter had questioned him.

He ate quickly and settled his bill the same. As he exited the restaurant, the couple was still sitting in silence, both of them now looking around the room. Riding the elevator back to his floor, he felt relief, exhaustion, and a slight chill as his clothes began to dry.

The last minute diner opened the door to his room quietly and closed it the same. There was just enough light slipping through the gap in the curtains that he was able to tip toe over to a chair and slip off his shoes. He could make out her form on the bed; her head on the pillow. It had been a long trip and she had been so tired.

He needed a shower, he knew. He could feel the film of dried perspiration on his skin. Even so, he gently lowered himself onto the bed and next to her, the comforter separating them. She was warm, and soft. He put his arm around her, slowly, so as not to wake her. And, in the darkness, his hand found hers.