

LUNCH AT THE DINER

by
Rick Baber

It's a blustery day. As we walk in, the cold wind peppers our backs with dust and sand and little bits of gum wrappers and tiny trash it snatched up off the parking lot. Then, the heavy glass door sucks shut behind us, and we're safe and warm inside.

We step across the *Arkansas Razorbacks* welcome mat and search for an empty seat among the orange Naugahyde tuck'n'roll booths. Then the music hits us and all the clashing colors fade into a sepia tone.

"Johnny Yuma," in the vibrating baritone of Johnny Cash.

We take our seats on each side of the Formica-top table at the only unoccupied booth – just beside the register – and the young waitress with the jet black hair and eyelashes immediately sets small plastic glasses of ice water before us. Back on the inside of the entry door is a faded cardboard sign, with the words "**We reserve the right to refuse service to anyone**". Looking around the long, narrow room, we have to wonder what they mean by that. Non-smokers, perhaps. About the only group not represented here. Even the cook, standing over the griddles in plain sight across the counter from our booth, has a Lucky dangling from his bottom lip. The two-inch ash falls and he scoops it up and it disappears somewhere among the sunny-side-up eggs, and the hash browns, and the hamburger patties, and grilled cheese sandwiches. All with onions. Lots of onions. The smoke rises from the cooking surface and swirls around the short pyramids of sepia-toned, previously red & white Campbell's Tomato Soup cans and single-serving Rice Krispies boxes, looking like some Warhol/Dali hybrid work of art. Up there, above that shelf, is the chalkboard.

"SPECIAL"

One half pound

"All Beef" Burger

with lettuce, tomato, onion & dressing

on sesame seed bun –

complete with French Fries

only \$3.99

"Whattle ya have?" Asks the waitress with the jet black hair and eyelashes.

Becky orders soup and grilled cheese.

"I'll have an Anthrax Burger and a side of smallpox." I say.

She doesn't even look up. Just keeps on writing on that little pad.

"Cheese?"

"Huh?" She caught me off guard.

"You want that Anthrax Burger with cheese?" she repeats.

“Uh. Oh, yeah.”

“Bowl or cup?”

“Excuse me?”

“Your smallpox. You want a bowl or a cup?”

“Bowl.” I say.

God, she’s cool. She leaves without ever asking what I *really* want. I suppose I’ll just take what she brings me. And a Coke.

The path between the two rows of booths is about two feet wide. Windows along one side. The counter, then the grille, on the other. Most of the booths have, like ours, one person on each side. Like I said, every one of them smoking. The two old ladies with their chrome walkers parked beside them. The grease-covered long haired man in the blue shirt with “Duane” on the tag above his breast pocket, having a quiet conversation with the tattooed lady on the other side of the ham and cheese omelet. A couple of girls who look like sisters, leaning across the table, talking about some “sonofabitch,” that must be one or the other’s boyfriend. Back at the end of the narrow path a sign on the wall says, simply, “PHONE”. And, sure enough, right there below the sign, is a payphone. The other waitress squints to protect her eyes from the smoke engulfing her face. Her cigarette between her painted lips. One hand on the receiver, the other dropping coins into the slot.

Looking out the window, we see the American flags, standing at attention in the stiff wind on every car in the parking lot. Old Lincolns, mostly. One old LTD. A late 70’s Dodge pickup with a “These Colors Don’t Run” bumper sticker on the front. Then there’s my ’93 Chevy van. The one with the bearing going out. The one in which I have to leave my window rolled down some because the doors won’t open from the outside. My flag has blown off but the little white stick is still there. I notice that my van is the newest vehicle in the parking lot.

Johnny’s finished, and Merle has taken over. *“If you don’t love it, leave it. Let this song that I’m singin’ be a warnin’. When you’re walkin’ on your country, man, you’re walkin’ on the fightin’ side of me.”*

Our food arrives. I end up with a cheeseburger and a bowl of chili. That’s fine. I sure as hell don’t want to try any smart ass stuff with the waitress with the jet black hair and eyelashes. It’s great. Very tasty.

Fifteen minutes, tops, and we’re paying out. Well, I’m rolling a toothpick out of the little dispenser on the counter while the wife pays out. I can always tell the waiters and waitresses that are married, because they have the good sense to give the check to the woman. The one with the money.

The wind slaps our faces as we open the heavy glass door. Behind us, we hear the jukebox saying “goodbye”. It’s Tom Jones. *“They call the wind Mariah.”* Beyond the parking lot, out on the highway, creeps by a purple mid-90’s Honda Civic, with ½ inch of rubber between the bright chrome wheels and the blacktop. So low the big woolly caterpillars crossing the road have to duck when it passes over. Horribly distorted bass notes, blasting out through the sheet metal some Mexican version of a Metallica song. With horns. There’s

really nothing else like Metallica with trumpets. Huge white “scribe” font letters across the back windshield, “El Loco” something or other.

I reach through the window and open the driver’s door to the van, take my seat, and lean across to open Becky’s door. As I start it up, the waitress with the jet black hair and eyelashes comes running across the parking lot – holding up my cell phone. I had left it lying on the table.

“How sweet of you!” Becky smiles. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” She replies. “See ya next Monday.” A stiff gust parts her flat black hair and she turns her head slightly to one side to shield her ebony eyes from the dust.

“Ebola soup?” I ask.

“For you,” she says, “Red measles and rice.” Then she smiles and backs into the wind toward the Diner. She places both hands in position to hold down her little skirt – shorter than the tiny white apron – cheating Mariah of her opportunity to reveal more of the waitress with the jet black hair and eyelashes.

We pull out toward the highway.

“You know what?” Becky says, “She looks good in color.”

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