

JUST PASSIN' THROUGH

A Short Story

by

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It was the only place with lights still on in the storm. The stranger--not a small man--leaned his shoulder into the door to close it against the wind. Relative quiet restored, he looked around the diner, then removed his mackinaw. There were no customers, just an old cook, and a waitress who was leaning against the counter reading a videozine. She was young, about twenty-five, with light brown, shoulder length hair. He nodded and smiled at her. "You open?"

She looked up from her videozine. "All night." She didn't smile back. Her eyes were too old for a twenty-five-year-old, ancient eyes that had seen too much.

"This Angelino's?" he asked.

"That's what the sign says."

"Have to take your word for it. Can't make it out for the snow. My uh... travel agent said you're the only place open for miles. Okay if I wait out the storm here?"

"You gonna order?"

He shook the snow off his mackinaw and hung it on the coat rack, then walked over to the counter and sat on a stool. He leaned on the counter, his fingers laced in front of his chest, then flashed her a toothy smile. "What's good tonight?"

She put the videozine down and handed him a menu. "I just came on." She turned away and leaned over the order counter. "Hey, Grady, fella wants to know what's good tonight."

Grady walked out of the kitchen, wiping his hands on his apron. The end of a cigarette hung out of the side of his mouth, smoke stream drifting up in front of his face. He had on a chef's cap--a disposable one made of paper. "You from around here?"

"Nope. Just passin' through. Got business up in Cicero. Guess it'll have to wait for the storm." He glanced toward the window front of the diner. "It's a howler, ain't it?"

Grady followed his look. A passing snowplow, chains rattling against the cleared pavement, lit up their faces with the yellow glow from its rotating beacon. "Lake effect. Sposed to clear by morning."

"Lake effect?"

"Yeah, wind blows in off the lake; dumps a couple three feet on everything. How hungry are ya?"

The stranger peeked at the waitress. She'd gone back to her videozine. "Oh, I could eat. That pie fresh?"

Grady looked at the waitress, then grinned back at the stranger. "Yeah, it's fresh. I got some lasagna I could warm up, or I could make you a steak. You wanna steak? Got some nice Delmonico's if ya got the dough."

He raised his eyebrows. "They real? Not syntho?"

Grady raised his head a little. "Want me to make one 'moo' for ya?"

The stranger laughed. "Well, that's good enough for me. And some potatoes. Yeah, lots of potatoes."