

An Encounter in the Diner

Alice slid into the booth across from her father at the diner. While he checked the day's specials, she counted the dots and flowers that marched across the wallpaper, dots like bass notes and flowers like those brushes they slide across drums.

A teenager in squeaky shoes walked by.

Around her, all the conversations slid together under the tinny music, as if everyone was saying "Tuscaloosa, armadillo, grits and snakes" over and over. It went along with the drumbeats on the wallpaper.

Then a man in the booth behind her bellowed, "You bought Harold's truck? What a piece o' shit!" Another added, "That ain't worth shit!"

Alice peered around the side of the booth.

"Just look at the menu," her father said, tapping the table.

She picked up the menu and ran her hand over the plastic casing that was torn at the corner. Under the plastic the letters were getting restless, like the fourth grade boys who got into fights right after Mr. Draper walked past. One by one the letters gave up their tidy rows and twisted into different forms.

"Do you want me to read it for you?"

"No," Alice answered. "They'll get tired after a while."

Her father sighed.

“Hi,” their waitress said when she reached the table. “I’m Evelyn. I’ll be taking care of you today. Do you need a few more minutes to decide what you want?”

Alice watched the woman’s hair – a sweeping collection of thin braids that draped down below her ears and then, past the tie at the back of her neck, swung back and forth. She wondered if they made a sound like the bamboo wind chimes in the store that didn’t really clink.

“I’ll have the #4 lunch special and coffee,” Alice’s father said. “And Alice will have a hamburger and sweet potato fries. That’s what she always orders. And orange juice.”

“I had a waffle once, with whipped cream and strawberries. Do you like wind chimes?” Alice asked, watching the braids sway.

“I do,” Evelyn answered, turning to the girl, “but not if they make too much noise. I like the ones with only one bell. Then I can lie in bed and know the wind is rising.”

Alice looked at the woman’s long brown fingers that ended in transparent pink polish.

Across the way, a toddler in a high chair at the end of the booth twisted around, dropped down until he couldn’t go any farther, and then, stuck, kicked his feet and yelled for help. Outside, two men unloaded cases from a truck, stomping down the metal ramp, clutching their boxes of Cokes. On the window, a sign advertised the high school production of “Beauty and the Beast.” Next to it, a hand-printed sign called for new players on the church baseball team. “No experience necessary. We’ll teach you what you need to know.”

“What do you need to know about baseball?” Alice asked Evelyn.

The waitress shrugged. “That it’s boring?”

“Grass is boring. It’s empty. Waffles are too full.”

“Alice is – a little different,” her father explained. “She lives in her own world.”

Evelyn put one hand on the table, bent over, and said to Alice, “I can hear colors.”

Alice put her hand over Evelyn’s long fingers and answered, “I can see pain.”

Straightening up, Evelyn said to Alice’s father, “Nothing wrong with this girl’s world.
Nothing at all.”