

Forlorn Traveler

Her head lifted at the sound of people coming through the front door of the unassuming diner. She spied a couple of no older than 30 and a young girl desperately attached to the woman's hip. The child looked none too happy, seemingly ready to burst into full-throated tears at any second. A life-long resident of Minnesota's rough and rugged North Shore, Jane silently mused what the Lake Superior shoreline had to offer a child of that age. While one of the most naturally beautiful locations in the country, there wasn't much in the way of activities for young children. She shook her head in silent judgement; another city family on summer vacation who didn't take their child into consideration. It was an all-too common sight during the summer months. She saw it often, a born and raised native of Silver Bay for all her 17 years. She couldn't wait to leave.

The tingle of the overhead bell attached to the front door was a jarring sound to nearly everyone else, but over the years it evolved into background white noise. Jane worked every summer for her parents since she could remember. It was her sixth summer doing so although it felt like decades in the exaggerated way teenagers are known to exaggerate. These working summers all ran together, separated by the cold, harsh winters Minnesota is invariably noted for. In this sleepy Northern Minnesota town, no one ever thought twice about a teenager working long hours in the family diner. Everyone she knew and grew up with did similarly when family businesses finally dug out from under the winter cover. Though winter months were predictably slow – only the most rugged lover of the outdoors ventured into this part of the country during the dead of January – summers along US Highway 61 moved at a frenetic pace from Memorial Day to Labor Day. It was all hands-on deck for every business along the highway made famous by Minnesota's Poet Laureate, Bob Dylan.

The young family took a seat in the back of the diner and Jane offered a small thank you that they didn't sit at her counter. The child indeed reached her breaking point and started

wailing into her mother's shoulder as one of the other waitresses stood impatiently in front of the table. Jane saw her share of crying, unsatisfied children over the years, certainly enough for her to think there's no way she'd ever want kids. She didn't wasn't going to be that common North Shore girl; married to her high school boyfriend at age 19, two children at 23, working in a Grand Marais tourist shop for the rest of her life. As soon as she could, she was going off to college far, far away from the only world she ever knew.

The bell on the front door rang again and though she reflexively looked up and back down, her head lifted a second time to face a man entering the diner. Something about this man caused Jane to stare at him longer than what would be considered polite. He appeared around 50 years old, graying hair at his temples and wearing wire-rimmed glasses that were maybe a size too big for his narrow face. He carried a slight frame as he walked through the doorway, but unlike the North Shore's frequent vacationers, his walk was one of trepidation and uncertainty. His attentive eyes were up, and he scanned the diner before choosing to sit at the end of her counter.

It was his eyes - "isn't it always the eyes" - that made Jane linger in her study. Watching so many people come and go through the front door of that diner every summer for the last six years, it occurred to her she'd never seen someone who held such profound sadness in his eyes. Those sad eyes were a muted blue and appeared clouded with something, what exactly, she couldn't pinpoint. Regret? Anger? Resignation? She wasn't sure. She cocked her head and watched as he took a menu and rubbed his forehead as he perused the offerings. His whole body seemed calm; his movements were well-controlled and his breathing normal. It was only his eyes that betrayed a deeper wound. Her brow momentarily furrowed. She could be wrong and she could be reading way too much into the body language and appearance of a complete and total stranger. She chided herself as lunch rush was about to hit and setting about preparing the counter for that rush was a better use of her time.

She couldn't move past the seemingly ordinary man at the end of her counter with the sad eyes. She was inexplicably drawn to him.

Every so often a person came into the diner and earned more than the perfunctory glance. Jane prided herself in noticing the smallest and unique minutiae about people. Sometimes a person had brand-new shoes that didn't match the beat-up bucket hat and accompanying outdoor gear. Other times it was an indicator of a visitor from a far-off location; she once waited on a man who had the name of a Canberra, Australia business on the pocket of his t-shirt, and his thick Australian accent confirmed her observation.

As she noticed these details about particularly exceptional visitors, she quickly spun a detailed account of that person's life in her own head before ever speaking a word to the object of her self-guided investigation. When she had opportunity to wait on these people, conversation always remained on a superficial level; though she engaged in her own silent evaluation, the focus of her study was simply passing through, looking for something to eat before continuing further into the rustic lands of the North Shore. Larger details - where someone lived or who was traveling with them - were modified and corrected based on small talk while she waited on them. But the smaller, life-sculpting details she conceived remained hers to own. She envisioned travelers from around the world, employed in the broadest range of occupations, experiencing every life moment offered to a man or woman, enjoying grand successes and bemoaning tragic failures, simply based on her quick, sixty-second observation on walking through the wood-framed doorway.

This man, perfectly normal from all appearances, spoke volumes with his melancholy blue eyes.

She walked over to him, her order pad in hand, and offered a cheerful "what can I get for you today?"

His head raised and met her eyes level. “Is this hot turkey sandwich good? Does the gravy come on the side or on the sandwich?”

Her mind started to churn. She knew immediately he wasn’t from the region, or even from Minnesota. What he referred to as a “hot turkey sandwich” was a Turkey Commercial to locals, and of course gravy comes on top of the sandwich.

“It sells pretty well for us, and yes, it comes with the gravy on top of the sandwich. The mashed potato also goes on top of the sandwich,” she explained in detail as to inform the out-of-place traveler the customary preparation for one of Minnesota’s best-known homemade meals.

He slowly nodded his head yes. “I think that sounds good. I’ll have that and a Pepsi with no ice. Thank you.” He set down his menu in between the salt and pepper shakers and reached into his jacket, pulling out a pocket calendar.

Jane finished noting the order on her pad, thanked him, and walked toward the server’s window. She ripped his order from the pad, set it on the turnstile and whipped it around until it rang the bell to notify her mother, who was deep in the bowels of the kitchen.

As she stood in front of the pop fountain and readied his Pepsi with no ice, her internal study intensified. She surmised he was happily married for several years until recently when he and his wife began to grow apart, under the guise of “needing different things from life.” He was decidedly urban; his hands were very clean and didn’t have the dirt under the fingernails she always saw from the men who lived up north. He spoke slowly and deliberately; while Minnesotans also speak slowly, he enunciated his words so clearly and this made him stand out among the regular area vacationers.

She walked back over to him and set the Pepsi down on the counter. His head remained focused on the pocket calendar, yet he managed a curt “thank you” before Jane turned and walked back toward the wait staff station. She made a perfunctory check on the three

other customers sitting at her counter, settled the bill of a fourth, and then checked the kitchen window to see if Jack's lunch was ready. She determined his name was Jackson, Jack for short. It was a guess, but an educated one. She hoped he'd pay for his meal with a check or credit card to validate her hypothesis. All she really needed to complete her study was some nugget of information about what his pocket calendar contained, and more specifically, what in it had so captivated his attention.

The sound of a ceramic plate sliding across stainless steel interrupted her reverie and Jack's Turkey Commercial appeared in front of her. She grasped it with her hand and turned smoothly on her heel, both actions joined in an effortless motion perfected over several thousand trials. She sat the plate down in front of Jack, who set aside the mysterious pocket calendar next to his napkin and silverware, looked up, and for the first time, smiled at her.

He leaned over his plate and inhaled deeply. "This smells delicious. I've never had one of these before, but it has all my soft spots; turkey, potatoes, gravy. I can enjoy Thanksgiving all year around" he said, taking a fork in one hand and reaching for the salt and pepper with another. He paused and looked to her. "Do you recommend salt and pepper on this? I tell myself I should eat less salt, but I can't help myself sometimes."

Jane raised her brows and a subtle grin tugged at the corner of her mouth. This disclosure was a goldmine of information from someone who had otherwise offered little. "Well, the turkey and gravy already have a lot of salt in it, so I never add salt to mine. I think pepper is good, as long as you don't use too much," she replied.

He nodded emphatically and took the pepper shaker in hand. "Pepper it is, then," he offered succinctly.

Jane watched as he shook the pepper shaker evenly in a circular motion around his plate, seemingly calculated as to ensure each bite would contain a bit of the added flavoring. He used his fork to cut into the first bite of bread and turkey, scraped a bit of the mashed

potato smothered in gravy on top of that bite, and lifted the fork to his mouth. He paused and looked up at Jane, who was still lost in observation and quizzically raised his eyebrows.

Suddenly feeling intrusive, Jane mumbled something close to “enjoy your meal” and quickly scurried away. It was the rare occasion she felt like she was intruding on her customers, but, she’d never been as obvious in her investigations. Not only was she curious about her new customer, but she now needed to figure out his story. At the very least, she wanted to know where he was from. She could easily just come out and ask him; one of the very first guidelines of small-talk with vacationers is to make them feel at ease by discussing their home.

She felt above that, however. She wanted to find out on her own through a much more unique process. She likened her methods to fresh-water fishing; it’s all fine and good to buy your fish for supper at the market, but each and every time, the fish you pull out of the lake all on your own is much more satisfying.

A burst of frenetic motion interrupted her thoughts and she saw her customer stand quickly, reach into his pocket, and set down a few bills in front of his now empty plate. Before she could walk over to him, he turned to face the door and quickly strode out, the bell ringing in his wake.

She looked over at the money set on the table; it was more than enough to cover the meal even though she didn’t even give him the bill before he hurried out the door. She took a deep breath and exhaled in a fashion that could only be described as disappointed. No credit card to run to learn his name, no check either to see where he came from. She was left with nothing other than her unfinished portrait of this most intriguing stranger.

She almost felt like crying, then stopped and chided herself. “Why?” she asked out loud to no one in particular. Why was she so upset? She had no attachment to this man, would

likely never see him again, and her life would move forward as if nothing special happened today.

An involuntary tear came to her eye. That was precisely the problem. It was always the problem.

She couldn't wait to leave.