

3913 words

# The Café

Ivy leans on the host stand and feels Grant's body next to hers. They stand a few feet apart, each under a duct of air conditioning. In this space, a few feet is a wide berth. After the owner bought the narrow Victorian, he gutted it, painted it gray, and put in minimalist light fixtures, but he didn't expand it because he wants to keep things intimate. He loves that word. Intimate. He says it over and over again. "You're both on the schedule because two is more intimate than one."

They stand with a wide berth because two weeks ago Grant was promoted from host to manager, which he knew when they hooked up, while Ivy did not.

Ivy and Grant face the big windows in anticipation of the customers who won't arrive for an hour or two, if at all. Outside, Hurricane Gladys is having her way with stray palm fronds and trash. Technically, Gladys was downgraded to a tropical storm before she made landfall, still, most of the businesses on the block are shuttered. The Café is dead, but Ivy doesn't blame Doug for not closing. It's rainy and windy, but the sky is gray and flat. It's nothing compared to the party with the blue drink.

That night Hurricane Bertha turned the sky black. On the way to the St. Charles streetcar, she ran into Grant locking up his family's funeral home. Based on the sky, she wasn't sure if she should go to the party, but Grant convinced her. "Katrina is it for the next 50 years and I've never attended a hurricane party I regretted," he said and put the key in his pocket. Truth be told, Ivy was fascinated by her first hurricane. The clouds moved across the sky so fast her gut stirred. Grant held her hand and they ran to the streetcar in the hot rain.

The storm petered out by the time they got to the party, but the clouds were still otherworldly. They glowed with a dark outline, frozen in time for her perfect evening, as they danced to a brass band in a yard strung with lights. When she woke in the morning, she looked

out the window to see if the night was real. The clouds were white and fluffy, but then she saw Grant asleep next to her. His phone rang, and he stumbled out of bed and threw on her vintage t-shirt off the floor as if the person on the phone could see him. She sat up in bed and watched as he paced around the room. His dimples and green eyes, made electric by his black skin, stared back at her. How can he be that guy and the guy is he at work?

A yellow blob catches Ivy's attention. Doug's shirt is so bright it's astringent to the eye. Next to it, his skin looks sickly. He has close-set eyes and a short, quick smile which often saves him, but he wears too much hair gel and he is working on a gut.

"Hey man, where y'at?" Doug says to Grant.

"Awrite," Grant says.

Ivy understands this greeting even if it wasn't covered at Tulane's convocation along with po-boy, down at the bayou, parish, Fat Tuesday, suck da heads, peench the tails, and zydeco. It's when Doug gets going with his boudin, holy trinity and mirliton that she has no idea what he is talking about.

"I told the dishwashers the martini rack has three prongs and the wine rack two," Grant says to Doug.

Two weeks ago, Grant, who had no restaurant experience, did not know the difference between a martini and wine rack and yet he was promoted over Ivy and the head-hostess Patricia.

"We can't have that broken glass all down the line," Doug mutters. Ivy is still taken aback by their familiarity.

At the beginning of orientation, Doug was skeptical of Grant, who was the only black person in the room. But, unlike the lone black students in Ivy's classes, Grant is not quiet. He introduced himself as, "the only back freshman at Tulane who is not an athlete."

Doug's perception shifted when he found out Grant is a local. He moved from Philadelphia a few years ago for his family's funeral business. He doesn't speak the local vernacular, but he understands it. By the end of orientation, Doug picked Grant to demonstrate tasks or guess at an answer.

"Oh Doug, I have a question," Ivy says. "Simone wanted me to order hot tea for her table, but I couldn't find the button under beverages."

"Order what?" he asks with raised eyebrows.

In her best Midwest nasal accent, Ivy says, "Hot tea."

"What are you saying?"

Ivy sighs. New Orleanians wax on about gris-gis, lagniappe and erster po-boy, and they don't understand hot tea.

Doug turns to Grant. "Did you hear that?"

Grant grunts and flashes his eyes at Ivy.

She doesn't want to say it again, especially in front of Grant, but Doug is waiting. "Hot. Tea."

"Hotty? Hot toddy? No, it's more like haut-ty. Haughty?" Doug says in his extremely yellow shirt.

"Hot tea," Grant says.

"Yeah, green tea, black tea, in a kettle, it's hot," Ivy says.

"Oh. Haut tea." Doug waves his hand. "You're not a server, you don't have to worry about that." He rubs his palms together. "Let's look alive, we never know who we'll pick off from Jacque Imo's waitlist." People who will wait two hours for Jacque Imo's want Jacque Imo's, but somehow, Grant nods at Doug with confidence, which makes Ivy grimace. Last night

Doug made Grant seat a black couple at the shittiest table. Grant, of all people. He's not even a host anymore. Doug the yellow blob darts away and settles near the kitchen, ever present in the corner of Ivy's eye.

"Tea is under Specialty Items," Grant says.

"Thanks."

"You want to be a server?"

She shrugs. "I was in Ohio, but the restaurant had more of a Chili's vibe, so that didn't fly at this farm-to-table joint." She makes a snobby face and smiles. She would never talk to Doug like this, but this is Grant.

Grant does not smile. He flicks a comment card with his fingers.

At the party with the blue drink, Grant had a looseness about him. At work, his jaw is tight, and his gaze doesn't wander. He moves in predictable patterns. When he isn't on the floor, he sits in the basement and reads the comment cards.

She turns to the window and watches a tree limb bounce around the street. When it slams into the glass, she flinches. "Come on now, you're no rookie, it's not your first hurricane," he says, referencing their night together. For a moment, she can't see Doug at all. "So, you're what I like to call our heady hostess."

"Heady?"

He sighs. "A thinking person's hostess. For most things, that's what we want. For assigning tables, running the floor, and quoting wait times."

"Okay." She does not like where this is going. Rain swirls and patters on the window.

"But here, it's just one card so let's not take it to heart, but some customers think you should smile more."

“Oh.” She aims for playful and settles for aloof. She can’t tell if he’s joking.

He looks at her blankly. He is not joking.

“I always smile when customers come and go. And when I seat them.”

“Yeah, I guess this means in between.”

She nods, comprehending that she should paste a smile on her face. Doug snaps at her for seating regulars at the wrong table and misquoting wait times, but he would never reprimand her for this. “Customers? Was it just the one card?”

“Yeah. As far as I know.”

They both know he reads every card.

“Look, you’re smart,” he says.

She hesitates. She knows this sounds like a compliment, but it doesn’t feel like one. Nope, not at all. In fact, she knows he does not mean the face value of his words, but what does he mean? He said it casually, but it’s a manipulation, an insinuation.

He looks at her like he expects a response. Her high school English teacher told her never to apologize, except when she’s in the wrong. Not when there’s a miscommunication or when another person disapproves of her, as most women do. Ivy took this advice to heart, but right now she’s so caught off guard she stammers, “Sorry.”

Five days later Ivy hurries down Maple Street running late for the staff meeting. Doug mentioned some sort of training exercise. She hopes she won’t be paired with Dani, who Grant will fawn over the entire time. She checks her watch. She has one minute. She runs the last block, rounds a corner, swings open the glass door, ignores the body next to her and clocks in before the clock strikes 10 AM.

Proud of herself, she removes her purse with a smile, only to see Grant kiss Dani on the lips. “Have a good shift,” he says googly eyed.

“It’s a meeting,” Dani says as if the sun shines only on her.

“Have a good meeting.”

Ivy clutches her purse and walks past them. Forget fawning, they’re dating.

“Bonjour y’all,” Doug says and waves everyone into the dining room. The tables are pushed aside, and scattered aluminum chairs crowd the middle. “One month left in hurricane season and we’re in the clear. Laissez les bons temps rouler.” Chairs screech into position.

Ivy tells herself it’s a coincidence that she sits in the perfect eyeline between Dani and Grant, who stands against the wall. Dani waves at Ivy excitedly. Everyone at The Café flirts with Dani. Everyone. It’s like high school. She has olive skin, big, brown dairy cow eyes and straightened hair that looks edgy because it’s cropped right above her shoulders.

Against all odds, Dani likes Ivy. She likes that Ivy gives customers their actual wait time instead of Doug’s patented response of twenty minutes. She specifically liked that after Jason the chef wouldn’t let Dani try the tomato bisque even though she asked nicely and called him by his name, Ivy said, “It’s not worth getting upset by such drones. Even once you learn their names, they all want to be called chef.” That time Dani hugged Ivy, which surprised her. They live in the same dorm and sometimes they wave at each other, but they don’t know each other that well. Ivy waves back at Dani, but she can’t quite muster the same enthusiasm.

As Doug rambles on, Grant looks drained. Like a dish rag drooped over the side of the sink. The night before a man in a suit approached the host stand to make a reservation for Friday. Ivy knew they didn’t have the table, but she checked the log anyway. Then she frowned and said,

“Unfortunately, we’re a small restaurant and Friday is a busy night. For six people, we can do 6:30 or 8:30.”

“I really need 7:30.”

“Are you interested in another night?”

“No, I’d like to speak to a manager.”

Grant was only a few feet away, so he turned and said, “How may I help you?”

“I said a man-ager,” the man snapped at Ivy.

“This is the man-ager,” Ivy replied.

The man straightened and Grant explained the same thing as Ivy while showing no reaction to the man’s blatant racism. As the man left, she wanted to trip him, apologize to Grant or do something, but she didn’t know how to enter the conversation.

They’ve talked about race, a few times. He teased her for acting different when they were around another black person. *White people. Get two black people together and they freak out.* He bristled when he retold a story from class and impersonated a teary-eyed female classmate, “Black lives matter. We need to respect black people the way we respect other immigrants.”

“We’re not immigrants. We’re from here,” he boomed at Ivy.

In Philly, he lived in a white suburb and was a popular athlete, so everyone knew him, but still stuff happened. People shifted away from him on the train, moved their purses, crossed the street. He was invisible until the moment white people decided he was very visible.

At the party with the blue drink, he sat with her on the garden ledge and said, “In some ways being a black man in the South is better. Northerners know they’re not supposed to act racist, but some of them are. I’d rather know who I’m dealing with upfront.” Shortly after he arrived in New Orleans, he was called the N word. It was shouted across the street at night, by

people who knew it was bad. In broad daylight, people in New Orleans call him things they don't know are bad. *Son, work horse, buddy*. That's what he misses most about the North. Black and white people agreed on what was offensive.

Sometimes, she sees it in other white people. She's never once read a white author's description of black skin that didn't make her cringe. Even when they try to make it sound beautiful, it reminds her how black bodies have been ogled and used. But then there are other times.

A week after Grant became manager, money went missing from the basement safe. It happened during family meal, when Grant ate alone in the basement, because they'd had a tiff. At the end of family meal as everyone cleared their dishes, Doug announced a full-fledged robbery. When sentiments of guilt landed on Grant, he looked at Ivy and said, "I was only downstairs because we had a fight."

"A fight? Is that what that was? Or was it a power trip?" she snapped. His insults felt fresh and raw. She told herself she couldn't be his alibi and logistically he could have done it. Would she have thought that if Doug was in the basement? Dani? Likely not.

On the garden ledge, he gave her a sad smile, but his eyes looked alive. "I don't have any good choices. People either think I'm a black kid who wants to be white, which isn't true, or they expect me to be an OG. What the hell? Society trained me to believe racism is not real. When I see it, I feel rage at society, and at myself. I don't want to see it. I don't want to be tarnished and hardened. I don't want the awareness to eat me alive."

Now, leaning against the wall, he looks glazed over. It seems impossible they had that personal of a conversation.

“Every Sunday in September, we’ll engage in training sessions. We’ll be closed until noon while people are in church,” Doug says and breaks everyone into groups. With two kitchen managers, the owner, Doug and Grant, Ivy has a 1/5 chance of being in Grant’s group. She likes her odds.

A moment later she sits in a commercial grade chair a few feet from Grant, surrounded by four other employees. As he drones on about service scenarios, every few seconds he makes eye contact with her. He doesn’t do it with confidence, he does it as if he’s been caught. His charisma, so bright at orientation, has vanished. His words are not his. They seem plucked from Doug’s mouth. When he looks at Ivy, she does not smirk. She does not look at anyone else. There is too much going on.

“Okay, that’s it for today. Same groups next Sunday,” Doug bellows to the room. Chairs scrape the floor. Ivy grabs her purse from the back of the chair.

“Ivy, hang out a minute,” Grant says.

She freezes. “Okay.”

He makes sure no one is listening before he says, “Are we going to be able to do this?”

We. This. Ivy feels like she can hold up her part of the bargain. She can be an employee in his group. “Yes?”

“It feels like you’re staring at me.”

He was the speaker. She had indeed looked at him.

“You’re looking at me with those eyes. It’s like your laser beam eyes are looking through me.” Ivy shifts her weight. At work, are her thoughts under his purview? Because he is the boss? Because she is not reassuring him? Because she is not completely submissive? “Ya know, you’re smart, act like it.”

Ivy weathers the comment's sinking blow, but as he paces back and forth and gazes absently around the room, she feels new clarity. He doesn't say it casually, he says it involuntarily. It's a habitual, go-to response. Someone said it to him, multiple times and now he's parroting it back. He doesn't even know what it means.

The next day several primary-colored buckets are placed strategically throughout Josephine Louise House's entryway and study lounge. A stack also rests on the front desk where Ivy waits in line behind two students. The lounge has gold peeling wallpaper, green couches, and pink carpet. Josephine Louise House, better known as JL, is the oldest dorm on campus. Historic is one word for it. Leaky is another. She can't help but picture the worn, wet spot on her dorm room gray mat carpeting.

A student employee puts masking tape x's on the windows. Considering it rains in sheets and palm trees pushed to one side wave goodbye, the yellow, stringy masking tape doesn't offer much security. Hurricane Jane is many miles away but will not be underestimated.

Ivy turns to the young woman behind her. "What are you going to do?"

The woman twists a dreadlock. "There's a campus bus to the Superdome."

Underwhelmed, Ivy takes a bucket.

Dani walks through the lobby with a large weekender Vera Bradley bag. "Ivy."

"Hi." The wind forces open the double doors. Hurricane-level gusts take the breath out of everyone in the entryway. The front desk girl hurries to shut the doors but not before Ivy is splashed in the face and Dani is engulfed in a wind tunnel.

"This is crazy."

"Yeah." Ivy wipes her face and looks at Dani's suitcase. "Where you headed?"

“Kansas City. My mom’s house.”

“That sounds far.” And dry.

“Straight up the Lake Pontchartrain Causeway and beyond. What about you?”

Ivy lifts the bucket as if to say this is her plan.

“You know what. You should come. Yeah. Just come.” Dani gestures to the Jeep Wrangler idling outside.

“Oh. You don’t have to. I mean. How would I?” Ivy rambles. She doesn’t know what to say. She thinks there’s a passenger in Dani’s car but she’s not sure. It’s not necessarily Grant. Dani has lots of friends. People adore her.

“Just come. I’ll help you pack. It’ll take five minutes,” Dani says. The wind whistles into a piercing wine and rain hammers on the roof.

“I.” Ivy looks at the car. She is dying to know who is inside.

“What exactly are your other options?” Dani asks with a smile. “You can’t go to the Superdome.” Officially, this is Ivy’s only option. She doesn’t have a car and her spending money is basically gone for the month. “You don’t want to be mashed together with a bunch of random people. In New Orleans? In this?” A crack of lightning mars the sky.

Ivy looks at Dani’s car, but all she sees is a blurry shape.

Wearing a pathetic raincoat in blinding rain, Ivy lifts her roller bag into Dani’s trunk. The brim of a baseball cap protrudes from the passenger seat. Dani shuts the trunk. Through pages of rain, Ivy hurries to the backseat, opens the door, removes her drenched hood, and there is Grant.

“Hi,” he says, surprised. Then he gives her a muted smile.

“Hey.”

Dani rifles through the center counsel and glove compartment “Aahh! Be right back. Y’all hold tight,” she says and slams the door. Ivy grips the door handle. You’re smart, you’re smart. She wants to run. She doesn’t need Grant, Dani, or the Superdome. She can survive the storm by herself. Rain hammers on the Jeep’s soft top. Workers in rain suits haul giant tubes into the adjacent building.

“You look thin,” Grant says. He winces at his tone. It’s obvious he means it in a bad way. “Are you still hanging out with that girl Mae?”

“Yeah. Are you still...” Ivy started the question without knowing how to finish it.

“At the funeral home, no.”

“No. I.” She doesn’t want to fan the fire. She knows it’s not the best situation for Grant.

“Am I still with Dani? Yeah.” He seems confident when he says it, so she sticks with this. “She surprised me. She’s a tough nut to crack.”

Ivy does not think Dani is a tough nut to crack. In fact, she thinks Dani of all people wears her feelings on her sleeve. “Not really,” she mumbles.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“I mean, we’re not, it’s not forever.”

She never gets why people say this. Why be with someone you don’t want to be with?

“Oh.”

“Yeah, I mean, we can’t talk about movies or music how-”

“We did?”

“Uh huh. And she-”

“She what?”

“Everyone has so many opinions about what I should be doing. You just let me be me.”

“Oh.” Why is he telling her this? How does she take it further? She’s dying to have a real, open conversation with him.

“I mean, this isn’t my first hurricane, but this is nuts,” she says, trying to remind him of their night together. “I’m surprised you’re leaving.”

“Yeah, I don’t want to be home right now, and this is pretty serious. The most serious since I’ve been here.” He won’t be escorted down memory lane, but he wants to talk. “It’s confusing. I guess I don’t know what type of man I’m supposed to be.”

Now seems as good a time as any. “What does you’re smart mean?”

“I. Uh. What does it mean?”

“Who said it to you?”

Taken aback, Grant turns to her and stares. Then, he relaxes. “My uncle.”

Ivy turns to the window.

“It’s a compliment.”

“No, it isn’t. It’s...”

“It’s a whadda ya call it? An olive wreath?”

“An olive branch?”

“Yeah.”

“No. It isn’t. It’s...” She grasps for words.

“It’s you know how things work. It’s let’s do business together.”

“No, it’s not. It’s I know I’m abusing my power and you know I’m abusing my power so just do what I want.”

The air is still. Grant adjusts his position. He exhales. “I never thought about it that way. It’s kind of whack, but you’re right.” The guy she’s sort of with now kisses her each time they get a conversation going. On the rare chance she gets a sentence out, he looks at her like it’s the cutest thing he’s ever heard.

Rain ricochets off the car. He leans toward her. In the hot car, his body is warm and fragrant. His smells like olive oil and orange peel.

Ivy only hears two of Dani’s footsteps before she jerks open the door. She removes her hood and shakes the water from her hair. They turn away from each other. It’s difficult to say who turned first. Ivy looks at the drenched campus lawn. She could still run. She is fast. Even if Grant tries to stop her, she could escape. Dani shoves her dripping raincoat in the backseat and starts the car.

“Ready?” She looks at Grant and Ivy.

They nod.