

MARTIN'S COUNTRY DINER

Martin was polishing the silverware for the second-time today, and it wasn't even ten o'clock in the morning. His Diner had the shiniest silverware anywhere, because they were never used, and he found handling them a good diversion, including the knives. Everything he had financially; he threw into buying the Diner from " The Greek " two years ago and the decision seemed like a sure thing, because the only restaurant in town was destroyed by a mysterious fire, and everyone involved left town. The plastics factory two miles north of Martin's place was running three shifts (24 /7), making the air perpetually smell like something was burning. On windy days, the burning smell reached as far as the Interstate ramp which was ten miles south along the river road. Back then the smell outside was bad, but the smell inside the Diner was promising. Business was good, and Martin employed three waitresses, two cooks, and one cashier (Chrissy) who liked to pretend she was a hostess. He found Chrissy annoying, but everyone else adored her. She was paid a full time salary, and between coming in late, leaving early, taking excessive amounts of time off, and socializing, Martin felt like she was working part time for him. He let her behavior go on longer than he should have because she was the Town Clerk's daughter. She was the only person Martin ever had to fire in his life. The firing was a very dramatic scene that afternoon in the Diner, and overall it did not go as Martin expected, but he had to do it. Her mother stopped in the next day, for a cup of coffee, wondering if Martin would reconsider, and give Chrissy a second chance. He did not waiver in his decision and suggested that maybe she could work for the Town in some capacity. His actions did not bode well with the highway department employees who were regular customers. All the town employees then stopped coming in, and developed the habit of blowing their truck or car horns whenever they drove by the Diner. This habit eventually caught on with everyone who went by the place. It became an ongoing joke to lean on your horn while going by, and on certain occasions, Martin heard the police do it also. Even the delivery people did it when they were

coming and going, but what annoyed Martin the most was when he saw the driver's education car from the high school with an instructor, and three students drive by laughing with the horn blaring. In retrospect, he should have gone up to the high school and complained, but what did it matter now. The Diner was open from 5.30am to 11pm seven days a week. All though, they rarely had any customers after eight thirty, and when Martin left at night; the employees would wait fifteen minutes and then close. They never got caught, and Martin at no time ever caught on. He created all the entree specials, which began at one o'clock in the afternoon an hour before the change of shifts at the plastics factory, and the specials concluded at 10pm. Naturally, the breakfast specials were served all day long. Between the breakfast and entree specials, Martin believed he had the traffic from the three shifts covered from the factory which were; 6 am - 2 pm, 2 pm - 10 pm, and 10 pm - 6 am. Initially, there was a large senior citizen crowd, and Martin could never figure out why they stopped coming in. He intended on being an absentee owner showing up occasionally to distribute pay checks, check receipts, monitor inventory, and conduct banking transactions, but only until he could afford to hire a manager. Martin had plans; he wanted to own a simple down - to - earth business like a diner, that would make him a lot of money, so he could buy more of them, and someday retire comfortably to Florida. One of the first things he did after acquiring the Diner was to purchase a new sign. He knew what he wanted and exactly where it would go. The sign was going to be five feet from the ground, three feet high, and six feet long displaying a nice simple name in bright green neon lettering; MARTINS COUNTRY DINER. An apostrophe would have cost extra, so he didn't see the need to spend the money on it. When it wasn't electrical problems with the sign, it was with vandals' spray painting in black certain letters' on the sign for different outcomes / phrases. The initial vandalism resulted in the appearance of a simple phrase after the entire word MARTIN was sprayed over along with the letters' C, N, R, and Y, in the word country. The third word DINER had the letters' D, I, and N covered over in spray paint producing the

appearance of the word / phrase OUT - ER. Which resulted in his diner being referred to as the OUTER diner by everyone, including some of his employees. Living up to its name, the Diner's location was out of town by the river road, but the prevailing local joke was, you would have to be out of your mind to eat there. Martin was unaware of this joke, but some of the vandalism was what you would expect from this rural location, while some were just plain vulgar.

A majority of the vandalism sprayed upon Martin's sign disgusted him, even though he bought a cleaning product from a hardware store that removed the spray paint rather effortlessly. The alterations and defacements ranged from juvenile to stupid. Anybody driving by the diner under Martin's ownership was likely to see any of the following handiwork;

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|-----------|--------------|--------------|----------|---------------|
| in-un-er | s-t-d | t-ur-d | r-oun-d | as-country |
| a-cunt | ur-in | in-out-in | m-oun-d | man - country |
| try-inner | m- ount - er | in-out-diner | mis-t-er | ar-u-in |
| try-er | s-iner | mart-er | s-oun-d | s-cor-n |
| co-der | rin-t-in | r-un-er | ins-in | cor-n |
| un-der | mat-t-er | co-in | r-o-d | cry-er |
| m-iner | tin-t-in | r-u-in | mans-o-n | s-in-er |

There might have been more, but Martin wished to forget. He assumed every possible variation, and combination had already been used by the bastards who were responsible for defacing his sign, which was why the Out - er selection was the one that kept appearing the most. He stopped reporting the vandalism to the police, because it proved to be a source of entertainment for the two inbred officers who always answered the complaint. Martin believed the two officers were doing the spray painting the whole time. At this point, he gave up cleaning and restoring the sign. Martin wondered if it would be more sensible to convert the place over to a bar, because people drink more when they are unemployed. He shook his head, knowing that would require a liquor license, conversion costs for the inside of the building, and new employees. He stopped pumping money into the place weeks ago, and was thankful for never having borrowed the money to fix the leaky roof. Martin sighed; Crystal was his longest and oldest employee. She was a fixture. Everybody else left. The local newspaper that came

out once a week, which was three days ago, was laying on the counter untouched with a front-page headline of the impending closing of the Amalgamated Plastic's Factory. Yesterday, the cook said he didn't see the handwriting on the grease stained kitchen wall, instead it was a mural, and then he folded up his pristine apron and left abruptly. Martin missed the opportunity to tell him that he would never provide a good job reference for him, because the cook didn't spend time preparing meals while he worked at the diner. Where do you want them? Crystal asked, as she stood by the cash register. She was referring to the ketchup bottles she had collected from all the tables and booths. Crystal had a compulsion about ketchup bottles; it wasn't until yesterday that she stopped checking to make sure they had equal amounts in them, and if not, she would redistribute the ketchup accordingly through an ambitious re-pouring process. In addition, Crystal always made sure the shades were up in the morning, and later in the afternoon after her shift somebody would have to go around and lower them. The sun would shine in on the booths which were along the west side of the Diner, and had a view of the parking lot and the dumpster. Crystal for some unknown reason, decided to leave the small decrepit wicker baskets on each table, which contained those individual square (teaspoon size) plastic containers of jelly that had expired a long time ago, and on rare occasions a strawberry jam one would surface from beneath a layer of pink imitation sugar packets. Very rarely would anybody in their right mind open a jelly container, and spread it on their toast, because it had the same physical characteristics as the cranberry sauce used by people during Thanksgiving dinner that came out of a can making a suctioning sound before plopping out in one piece onto a serving plate. Unfortunately, these little white containers were more useful as ash trays for smokers until they eventually melted away. She was a very good waitress. Martin still did not answer her. He was too busy staring out the window, as if the answers to his problems would be showing up soon. Crystal did not wait for Martin to reply, instead she placed the ketchup bottles on the table closest to the cash register, and reminded Martin that she was

paid up until the close of her shift today, which was this afternoon, and then we are done Martin. Over and done, was what Crystal told him. Martin has always been full of illusion and delusion concerning his Diner, but he was beginning to realize what had happened up at the plastics factory would finish him off. The place was now decorated in despair, frustration, and failure making him feel used, and not in a good way. Actually, the place was serving coffee, fountain drinks, and anything Martin might place in a Microwave or a toaster, because Crystal refused to cook anything, she had no intentions of becoming a short-order cook. He saw a car pull into the parking lot with its horn beeping drifting into its usual parking spot next to the dumpster. The dumpster was in the front of the parking lot out by the road, because the garbage company insisted, it would be easier to pick up from there. Even though people were prone to stop by after hours and pile stuff into it. A feud erupted about its location in the parking lot along with what was being dumped by others into the dumpster, but the company in spite of their complaints always picked up the garbage, whether it was from Martin's diner or not. Because of the dumpster's location, the bright yellow clothes bin belonging to the Catholic Church was in the rear of the parking lot, which meant somebody would have to drive further from the road to donate an article of clothing than to throw something out. Martin should have insisted they were switched back when it did matter. The car that arrived, belonged to the only person who came in these days..... Reed. He drove a swamp green colored car that looked darker when it was parked in the bright sun or under a street light. The interior was the same color which gave the impression that the car was formed from a one-piece mold making it look like a toy. It was a large luxury car at least twenty five model years old with no rust, low mileage, consumed an excessive amount of gasoline, and was rarely driven long distances. It was excellent for someone with a short commute to work or in Reed's case to drive to a Diner. Slowly, Reed got out of the car and checked twice to make sure his shirt was tucked in, and then Reed quietly

closed the car door looking at the landscape in all directions as if he was under some kind of surveillance, forgetting that when he arrived, he was beeping his horn. Making his way up to the front steps, Reed tiptoed precariously while opening the front door. Reed was aware that Martin was watching him; it was the usual routine. Reed was trying not to disturb the bell on top of the door. He told Martin, one day he would enter without setting off the bell. Reed was an interesting if not a confusing individual to figure out. His clothes were clean, but there was no variety. The type of clothes one would wear to their elementary school on picture day, except Reed always dressed this way. A white collared shirt with dark polyester pants with brown shoes, and black socks. Martin should have asked Crystal more questions concerning Reed when he had the chance. It was hard to understand why Reed was still coming into the Diner. Martin hoped that Reed didn't find some kind of perverse entertainment about the Diner, but Reed was never malicious in his comments or actions when he came in. Reed appeared to be the type of guy who liked to laugh, and was neither employed nor retired, and when Martin asked Crystal, she would laugh and say both. Reed was too old for Crystal, romantically, but there was something between them, and Martin was unable to figure it out. He believed they were somehow family; not an uncle, but a distant relative. Every day at two o'clock in the afternoon, Reed would arrive and go through his usual routine with Crystal, including the jokes. He would sit at the far end of the counter across from the coffee maker in front of the pay phone that has not rung in years asking what today's specials were, and she would tell him, pointing towards the worn-out white dry eraser board indicating the meals that have not been prepared in the Diner for a very long time. They both found the routine very comical and did it in front of Martin, and his shining silverware. Then Crystal would say the board should be changed to reflect the true house special now. It's coffee Reed, and you should have some because only the good lord knows if Martin is making another pot. They both would laugh, and Reed would ask if the pot was at least made this week, and then he would order the special. Coffee black excessive amounts of sugar,

it would be two cups spaced fifteen minutes apart, and he would leave a five dollar tip every time for Crystal. Reed asked Crystal, if today was here last day, and if she made her intentions crystal clear to the owner. Reed laughed at his own joke while Martin dropped a fork. Crystal told him to pick it up and stick it somewhere in the diner, and Reed indicated it's done, and for some reason; they all laughed. Martin moved away from them, and found himself looking out the window again since he had nothing else to do, because there was only so much handling of silverware, one person could do in a day. A vehicle sped by beeping its horn, at first he thought it was a police car with its siren and lights off, but he was wrong; it was Simon, in his lunch wagon - truck or whatever it was called, that Simon used to park next to the front gate of the plastics factory selling tepid coffee and stale sandwiches. Realistically, it was safer to drink Simon's coffee than to eat the sandwiches he sold. He never looked upon Simon as competition, nor did he care what would happen to Simon now that the factory was closed, maybe Simon could drive down to the river and peddle his stuff to the garbage barges that went by. The first week Martin owned the Diner. Simon came rushing in stuttering, hyperventilating, and yelling about running out of paper coffee cups. Martin berated Simon and told him to leave, just leave. Martin asked where Simon could be going in such a rush. Crystal said even Simon knew it was time to leave town while Reed proposed that maybe Simon was rushing to find another location to work from. Reed finished his final cup of coffee and placed the cup upside down in the saucer like he always did as the last drop of coffee circled the inverted cup and the indentation in the saucer. He peeled off Crystal's tip from a roll of five - dollar bills that were rubber banded together in his right front pants pocket. He smiled dramatically to Crystal, and then laughed. Reed stood up and backed away from the counter, and said one more time for old times sake as he spun the counter seat in a clockwise motion acting as if he was in front of some kind of gambling wheel at a carnival asking if he should wait and see where it would land. The seat kept spinning, as Crystal slowly removed her apron folding it into a perfect square

asking Martin where do you want me to put it. Martin wasn't thinking. He should have asked Reed if he wanted that photograph between the men's and women's restrooms that was never moved, for some reason. The photograph was in a decrepit frame which hung next to a bulletin board awaiting its final bulletin that it was going to fall off the wall, with bulletins that were insignificant when they were innately posted, and the passage of time did not increase their importance. The photograph was an old undated black-and-white photograph from an Amalgamated Plastic's Factory picnic or function, which had the company's banner hung lopsided between two trees, and judging from the hair styles, clothing, and cars in the picture it could have been taken in the late sixties or early seventies. The way Reed used to go on about the photograph made it sound like he knew everyone and everything concerning it. Even though Martin, was unsure if Reed ever worked an hour in the factory. Martin now regretted not asking Reed more questions about the photograph. Most likely, there was more information in it, than Martin could have imagined. The photograph was more disturbing to Martin than mysterious, with some of the people wearing tee shirts with APF across the front in big black letters, and some not. He assumed they were family members or guests. One individual in the back by the banner used what appeared to be white medical tape to obscure the A. & P. letters of his tee shirt so that only the letter F was visible. Standing next to this idiot was a woman who was laughing with two cigarettes in her mouth. Martin thought the guy might have been one of the ancestors of the bastards who were always vandalizing his sign. Some of the revelers were playing with the contents of a box located in the middle of the table. Flexible rod-shaped objects that were a flesh toned color, which matched the skin of the people who were playing with them. They were about a foot long, and three inches in diameter. People were tormenting and teasing each other in the photograph with them, but mostly they were shaking them around, and everyone there was having a good laugh over what they had recently produced and stole from work that day. For some reason, the objects were the focal point within the photograph taking

the attention away from everything else. Everyone in the picture had a can of beer in their hands; some had two, and everyone in the picture appeared beyond drunk, except for a young boy seated behind a picnic table near the front of the picture with a rather simplistic look eating a sandwich, and drinking something out of a white paper cup. The boy was looking at something off in the distance. A teenager that didn't appear to belong at the gathering was sitting behind a picnic table in the foreground wearing a white collared shirt, and laughing with some people who were wearing those tee shirts. He was sitting next to a woman who was rocking a baby stroller draped in a flower orientated blanket which had a big letter C embroidered in the middle and she appeared beyond drunk. There was a grill to the right of the picnic tables that was smoking excessively that nobody was paying any attention to. Martin did not know who they were. Initially, when he took over the Diner, he was going to throw it out, but reconsidered. He was afraid somebody in the picture one day would come in and complain about it not being there. Back then, he did not want to lose any business from the factory employees about taking it down, so it was better to just leave it there. Reed used to be a practical joker sometimes saying he was different people in the photograph. Martin stopped listening when Reed said he was the child in the stroller. Martin decided to keep busy dusting around the clock on top of the imitation fire place. The clock always reads three fifteen. Reed enjoyed mentioning the obvious, that the clock was right twice a day. The clock stopped last year, because Martin lost the key to wind it. Martin heard a car skid in the parking lot. He did not hear a car horn. It figures; the one time he wasn't staring out the window, so he went by the one next to the cash register to see what was going on. A fluorescent yellow sports car came sliding towards the steps of his diner, and before the car came to a complete stop, the front door on the driver's side flew open barely clearing the bottom step, while the ensuing dust cloud from the skid in the dirt driveway caught up with its source. He watched as the cloud dissipated. An obese woman very agilely bounded up the steps, and her fat hand engulfed the entire handle of the front door as she yanked on it, and she

was surprised when it opened. Martin ran for a menu intercepting her as she came through the front door. She came in yelling; I couldn't tell if you were open or closed, because it's rather hard to tell. Her jet -black pants suit was peppered with dust from the parking lot, and he felt like asking her for some of it back. The white blouse was tucked in at the back, and not in the front highlighting just how large her thighs were, and her shoes no longer had that shiny black sheen to them from when she started out in her travels earlier in the day. She screamed at him; I need directions to get back to civilization. My phone died, and I can't find the charger, so I have no idea where I am. Do you? She was desperate for directions, and whether he was unstable or just an idiot, she needed directions from him. Hopefully, the directions would be accurate, or something close enough. The possibility of driving around endlessly this afternoon was something she did not want to chance. Martin continued looking her over. She was getting angrier, and for some unknown reason, he started to act and sound like a carnival Barker. Martin never did this before to a customer. Bellowing at her, he said, come on in, take a load off those feet, and welcome to Martin's Country Diner, prefer a counter seat or a booth by the window. We have booths that provide a restricted view of either the dumpster or the tree line. I would highly recommend the latter, but since all the windows are closed it would be impossible to smell the dumpster today. Today's specials are listed over there, as he pointed to the faded words on the white board by the cash register. He assured her that all the ingredients are fresh from the farm prepared to your liking. In reality, Martin had no idea how to prepare any of the food he was pointing to on the board, but he continued on. Our omelettes are available all, the day long. They are a three egg omelette served with hash browns, and two pieces of any type of test you might prefer. Naturally, the coffee comes with free refills. That will fill you up for sure, and then he laughed. How about something heavier, today's entree special is pot roast, or how about a cheeseburger deluxe. So where do you want to sit, please take your time, and a silence filled the place. Finally, Martin spoke in a very demure voice asking why she wasn't hungry. She

should have been furious with him, but instead she laughed telling him he was a fool, adding I don't know what you're doing in here, maybe you should lay down or see a doctor. Pointing at his head, she said you directions, I need directions. What don't you understand? You think your funny Martin asked her in a very calm tone. She shook her head, and said, listen how many times do I. Martin stopped her in mid sentence. We're not open. He wanted her to leave, telling her to make a left from the parking lot, and drive awhile the interstate ramp would be on your right. On her way out, she laughed, pointing to the plastic desserts that were behind the glass display case behind the counter where the cash register was. The plastic desserts were there a long time, because their white color faded to gray while dust accumulated in the groves and ridges. They were next to a few bright - red menus with gold colored lettering turned upside down in the display case. Martin always thought it best to conceal them from public view, for they were from when the place was called the Ambrosia Diner, and he believed it would be bad luck to throw them out. All the match books showing The Ambrosia Diner disappeared the first week Martin opened. She stopped and turned around to face Martin and said I'll let you get back to whatever you were doing in here by yourself, motioning with her right hand and wrist in a rapid back and forth movement asking, why anybody in their right mind would have a sign like that outside, is that the real name? Seriously, is this some kind of a joke, and not waiting, for an answer, she left. Martin threw the menus on the counter. One slid off, landing on the floor. He told her to drive safe, but under his breath, he called her a bitch. The nerve of some people he thought to come in here with such a bossy attitude just because their phone died and were in need of directions. He didn't bother to watch her leave, but knew when she did because the little bell on top of the front door jingled and fell to the floor. Funny, he didn't watch his second wife leave either. Martin was unaware that her car slowly pulled out of the parking lot, maybe because she knew where she was going or at least, the thought of the Interstate ramp made the world a little smaller. Perhaps, her turn signal went down to indicate a left turn from the parking

lot. Florida never looked so good to Martin now, as long as he avoided the coasts, because he had an ex-wife on each one. He could not remember the towns they were in and it would be best to settle somewhere in the middle of the state where he could blend into some community where nobody knew him or his past. Kind of like a fresh start for his future, and his past. Martin could create something more interesting about his past in his new life. Meeting a possible third wife wouldn't be all that bad either. The southern women would be a welcome change to what he was subjected to up here. He was now thinking about up and down, and here and there. It was time. It was time to go. The pay phone rang, and it startled him, because he never heard it ring before. The phone was loud as it reverberated throughout the Diner, at least something was still working in here. Martin thought that was funny, because there was nothing more he could do, maybe it was someone calling for takeout.