

The Tasty Spoon Diner

Dale Diggins sat at his regular spot at the counter and ordered the usual: salmon with green beans, mashed potatoes, extra tartar sauce on the side. Given this was Nappanee, Indiana and the fact that Dale was dining in a rail car diner, it seemed improbable, if not geographically impossible that this was the very best dish on the dinner specials. But he'd sampled the entire menu several times over. Not to mention Dale knew a thing or two about quality seafood, having ordered fish in a candlelit restaurant in New York once—the trip he got to wave to Noreen on TV as he waited in the cold outside the Today Show, before she left him—and had dined twice in Chicago on business, before he got laid off.

Carol said no one ever ordered salmon at the The Tasty Spoon Diner except him, and Dale enjoyed this fact about himself, that he was more or less the Tony Bourdain of Nappanee. A bit heavier around the middle, maybe. But no slouch.

He was also the sort of man who didn't mind sitting and eating alone. Some folks got all worked up about that sort of thing—but not Dale. And “alone” was hardly it: Carol was always there to gab, his favorite waitress going on a decade, as close to him as his own Aunt Gert (god rest her soul). And of course Ruthanne, who still kept it friendly even after refusing to go on a date with him after Noreen left. No accounting for taste. He tried not to hold it against her.

But Carol wasn't in today. Toothache, Arnie yelled from the kitchen. *Not tonight!* Dale thought, panicked. Of all nights. He needed Carol to see him off. Needed her peppy optimism. And now she wasn't even there to say goodbye?

In Carol's place was a young blond—tidy lipstick, thickish, a bundle of nerves. Mid thirties? He could never be sure about these things, but he was certain he'd never seen her before. It looked like she'd never waitressed in her whole life. Alert like a prairie dog, she hovered near the kitchen. When Arnie shoved his entree on the line she spirited it over with two hands, no eye contact.

"Let me know if I can—"

"Sure. No...Wait! Can I ask you sumpthin?"

Startled, she nearly tripped. Jumpy little thing.

"You new here?"

Reluctant, the waitress paused. "Just visiting my cousin for a little while, up from Toledo. Mr. Arnold said I could fill in."

"I come in here a lot, so I knew you were new. Ha! Get it? I *knew* you were new." She didn't smile back.

"How're you liking Nappanee so far?"

The girl, woman, whatever she was, looked like she was struggling to find the words. "It's...pretty here." She hesitated. "A little boring, maybe."

Dale put his napkin to his lips and pushed away from the counter, thoughtful. "Huh. Yeah." How right she was. He nodded. "It *is*, isn't it? Boring, I mean. What's your name? I'm Dale. Dale Diggins."

"Joan...Durfee."

"Are you from Toledo originally? And are you staying long?"

She shifted, fidgety. "Not long, no. Just passin through."

"What, you on the lam or somethin'?" Dale chided, tickled by his own joke and suddenly in a good mood. Carol or no, this was still his farewell dinner, time to make it count. "Listen, instead of that merlot—I changed my mind. I'd like one of those fancy coffees Arnie's got back there. With rum, or yeah, Irish Cream. Tell Arnie not to be stingy with the sprinkles, either." He smiled widely. "It's my birthday."

"Your birthday! Well, then." It was the first time she softened. "You got it."

While Dale waited, he double checked his breast pocket for the all-important envelope, his entire life savings, seed money for the new business. When you can live like a king for the price of a pauper, who needed a retirement account? Soon, Dale knew, he'd be swimming in cash, probably women, too. And not just any women. Tourist women, beach women. Ideally, hungry women, who wanted to snack between daiquiris. Nest egg in hand, the taste of possibilities in the air, Dale felt luck was about to rain down on him like liquid sun.

When Joan returned with more custard pie he couldn't help but ask, "So if you're only passing through, are you running from something, *or someone?*"

Her eyes stayed shy, but flickered. "More of a fresh start kind of thing."

"Now why would a pretty girl like you need a fresh start?" He knew he was being nosey, flirty even, but hell, he'd never see her again. His flight took off in a matter of hours. "Not to pry, of course. But I'm an excellent confidant." He winked. Arnie coughed in the background.

"I should really get back to it. This is my first day on the job and Mr. Arnold is watching—"

Dale raised his voice, loud so he'd hear: "Arnie? Oh poo, he's a teddy bear. All bark, no bite." The tall, thin, craggily line cook never glanced from the grill to throw him the bird. The old coot. Dale was certainly going to miss it around here.

Joan kept her eyes on Arnie as she set a table nearby and Dale kept his eyes on Joan: thin hair and doughy thighs weren't usually his type yet he couldn't help but imagine both, clinging and moist, in the tropics.

"So you're the adventurous type? All the way from Toledo? I bet you've seen some of the world."

She shrugged. "Maybe. Been to Mexico a couple times."

"Thought so. I can tell these things." Dale looked at her squarely. "I'm very sensitive. To *energies*, that is. They call it an 'aura' and I can see yours quite clearly. It's very bright."

She considered this, and him, for a moment. Maybe for the first time.

"Yep. I can always tell when someone has that *little* something, that spark. And I get it. For some of us, maybe it's just that we have a little more—" he said this under his breath, glancing to Arnie who was blasting whipped cream. "—*worldliness*? For folks like us it can be hard to fit in, particularly around here. I know from experience." Dale gave a low whistle. "Plain jealousy, is what it is."

Joan glanced around the diner. There was an elderly woman eating a pork chop and a man, combing his hair, drinking coffee. She turned back to Dale.

"That seems like exactly it," she agreed.

He brightened. "Funny you should mention Mexico. I'm headed to the Caribbean, myself."

Joan paused. "Oh?"

"Yessiree-bob. Flying out tonight." It was too bad he had to tell all this to a perfect stranger instead of getting a final pep talk from Carol. But at least the new waitress seemed fun.

"Around here everyone knows that on my birthday, I treat myself to something special. A few years ago it was this coat," Dale fingered it fondly. A thought darkened his face. "Actually, darn it, starting tomorrow I won't even need this old thing anymore. I meant to give it away." Dale lifted it up, inspected it, held it out. "Would you like to have it? It's worth good money—quality wool."

She took mock offense. "I'm not destitute! Just workin here for the experience really. But anyway, it's not even 40 degrees out there, why are you giving away your coat?"

Dale, grateful for the opening, sighed for effect.

"The short version? Let's just say last year for my birthday I bought my ex-wife a divorce. So this year, I'm cutting town and buying myself a brand new life."

"A life...without coats?"

"Better. A life without *cares*." Dale practically cackle with glee. He loved watching folks' faces when he told them. "Only white sand, blue waters and frosted piña coladas for me, my friend."

Joan studied Dale. "And what white-sand, frosted-beverage beach are you headed to, Mr...what was it again?"

"Call me Dale," he grinned. "Yep, got myself a one way ticket to St. Thomas. The *island*, not the church in Hammond," he clarified.

Contemplative, Joan seemed to be warming to him like melted cheese. She twirled a spoon between her fingers.

"Yep, gonna open a little restaurant." From the kitchen, again Arnie coughed. "Well, more of a snack bar really, but right on the beach. Not just drinks, but food for the early bird crowd, surfers and such. I'll have breakfast burritos, omelets, sort of like what Arnie—"

The twirling spoon stopped. Joan drew a long, audible breath.

"*Unbelievable.*" She paused. "St. Thomas, you said? No." She shook her head in amazement. "Not possible. That's exactly where *I* was headed! Been planning a vacation there for *forever*—since I was just girl. I still carry around this beat-up old postcard from there and everything. You could say it's my secret 'happy place'"

"You're...headed to St. Thomas?" Dale let this information sink in.

"Can you believe it? I'm finally doing it! Been a rough year for me. So...carpe diem, right?"

Familiar with both Latin, and what a rough year feels like, Dale nodded.

"Yep. I'm just in town for a bit, waiting for a settlement check to come through at the post office, then I'm outta here... But wow, what are the odds, huh?"

Dale, stupefied, could only agree. "I'll say." But today—his birthday, and the very day he was about to change his life forever—Dale knew that just about anything was possible.

"So I suppose you know St. Thomas is one of the world's best snorkeling destinations then? Do you snorkel?" He could picture her wet, hair knotted by the surf, snorkel in mouth.

"You bet! Learned when I was in Mexico." Joan threw a quick glance in Arnie's direction and scurried from behind the counter to sit next to him. "I even stayed with a local host

family for a time, so I learned to cook all this authentic stuff. Tacos, margaritas, rice and beans." She paused. "Breakfast Burritos."

The universe certainly has a sense of humor, Dale thought. Why couldn't he have met this woman weeks ago? When Dale had convinced himself not another single interesting thing could ever happen in this one-horse town. Yet here she was. A perfectly decent woman—alone in all the right ways, receptive even—arriving just as he was leaving. Headed in the same direction at least, but still.

"Wow. Just—wow. Of all days to meet you." He paused, and then added, "Mrs...?"

She glanced down at her hand and, startled, and gave the gold band a slow rotation. "Not a 'Mrs'," then added softly, "anymore, anyway. I just forget to stop wearing the ring."

"Oh?"

Stricken, Joan's eyes drifted toward the kitchen, glistening. "Actually, my husband got into a boating accident a few months ago. He's gone."

Dale tried hard not to think of this new development as another stroke of good luck—that's just bad karma—but couldn't help but notice the good fortunes piling up, burying him like sand. And he hadn't even left Nappanee yet.

"I am so terribly sorry to hear that," Dale said solemnly. He could see Arnie watching them from the kitchen and tried to ignore this. Joan, still misty, composed herself.

"Don't be. It was very tragic, I was a mess over it for months. But now I'm just trying to move on best I can. Live my life, you know?" Suddenly, she hopped up, startled. "Oh! Your coffee drink!" While Dale waited for her return, pulled out his bus and plane tickets to flip through them. All was in order. Joan returned with a mug topped with a bouffant of whipped

cream and indeed, extra sprinkles. Dale scooped some of it with his finger and licked.

Sweet—and strong.

Joan waited a beat before asking, "And you? If not a wife, are you traveling with anyone?"

"Nope. All alone."

They blinked at each other.

"Simply amazing, isn't it?" She tisked. Overcome, she sank back down into the padded bar seat next to him, the air escaping with a whine. "How, we both lost spouses. We both love St. Thomas. We're both traveling alone..." She trailed off, then feigned flirty alarm. "You're not some mass murderer are you? Some kind of stalker, following me around for weeks?"

Dale pondered this. "Well, maybe I *have* been following you around, my whole life, and it took up until now to catch up to you." He grinned and licked his coffee spoon. "That's what some people think anyway. Like past lives stuff. Do you believe in past lives?"

"Hmm." She squinted her eyes at him. "Yes. Yes, I think I do."

Dale pointed his spoon at her. "Knew it! I get the sense that you and I are a lot more alike than just a few coincidences." His goofy smile furrowed.

You only live once, he thought. And sure, maybe there'd been a time in his life, not even that long ago, when once felt like more than enough. But today... It dawned on him what he needed to do.

"Listen. Joan, was it? I don't want to be too forward. But I feel like you and I have a connection—"

She interrupted, voice soft. "Really? Because I was thinking the exact same thing." She inched closer.

He took a deep breath.

"Would you like to come with me? To St. Thomas? Because I have an extra ticket."

June's eyes widened, if only slightly.

"I'd really love the company. Plus, I'll be hiring staff soon for my business, so you'd have a job when you got there." Dale could hardly believe how logical it all sounded, coming out of his mouth. "Heck, you might even be a business asset, what with your cooking experience. Plus you obviously get along great with people. And with me." He smiled at her.

Joan no longer seemed in control of the corners of her lips. "Why on earth did you buy an extra ticket?"

"Technically it's a 'use anytime' but I can transfer names. It was a just-in-case thing anyway. For a way back." He tapped the table, knocking twice. "Like an escape hatch...or insurance. But hey, like you said—carpe diem! "

"...Insurance?"

"Yeah, you know. Like an insurance policy on life, or plans, or whatever. But who needs it ya know? "

June nodded, but strangely.

"Insurance. Gotcha. Well, lordy, if you ever need advice about that Dale, I'm your gal." She leaned in close again, conspiratorial. "Got a pretty big sum after my husband's passing. "

"What, like, you're rich?"

"I should be good for a long while I think," she smiled, adding, "Thanks to Ron's good planning. I'd really be really up you-know what's creek without it. You have life insurance, Dale?"

Dale thought a moment. "Can't remember. Probably? Maybe through my old job?"

"A cousin of mine wasn't so lucky. His wife got hit by a bus and then WHAMMO, lost everything. Couldn't keep up with the medical bills, the business. Started drinkin', got his kids taken away. Tragic." She shook her head. "Speaking of which. Kids? Have any?"

"Hell no. Noreen couldn't have 'em, thankfully. "

Relieved, Joan started untying her apron. "Better that way, right? It wasn't in the cards for Ron and I, either, and I'm glad for it. Kids are such a...liability."

She pulled some cash from the apron pocket, and counted it.

"When did you say your flight was, Dale?"

Startled, he glanced at his watch. "Oh! In just about two hours. Doesn't leave you much time to pack, does it? I mean, there's probably quite a bit for you to consider before you—".

"Nope, not really. Isn't this wild?" she said, a bit giddy. "I accept! Caribbean, here we come! Shall I meet you somewhere? Go together?"

"Bus station? Need to drop my wheels there anyway—"

Joan frowned. "Wouldn't a taxi be more comfortable, Dale? More private?" She dropped her voice. "I mean, we're still getting to know each other. We should probably get more acquainted, don't you think?"

She was right, Dale thought. Clever girl.

She scurried now, rummaging under the counter for her things, ticking off an imaginary list in her mind.

"First I'll need to get my mail forwarded because like I said, I'm still waiting on that check. Would you be able to cover my expenses until then, Dale? Of course I'll pay you back, and then some."

"Well sure, that's no trouble."

"And, on account of not having time to pack 'n all, I'll probably need to pick up a few things when we get there."

"S'pose that's only fair. I did spring this on you," Dale chuckled.

She continued. "You know how insurance is...it's just heaps of paperwork—" She was gathering her raincoat, a large tote bag, and a purse. Dale looked over at Arnie who had his arms out, indignant. Dale just grinned and shrugged.

"—thank you enough for the invitation. You're absolutely right." Her eyes flashed, and she looked deeply into Dale's. "We're a lot alike, you and I. We're...different from everyone else." She made movements toward the door. "It's like we both know exactly what we want out of life, you know?"

As an afterthought, she turned back towards Arnie. "Mr. Arnold, I've been very obliged for the opportunity but I won't be needing to work here anymore." She bowed ever so slightly and Arnie waved her off, exasperated and grumbling. Joan turned back to Dale. "I suppose we ought to be going then, if we're gonna make your flight?"

Dale had to hand it to this cheery, intoxicating, urgent woman—she certainly knew how to get a man moving.

Too quickly, he stood up. "To 'da Islands, mon!" As Dale righted himself, he realized just how tipsy he was. That rascal, Arnie. Always had to get in the last jab. Probably poured him a double, maybe even a triple.

"I dunno, Joan. I just have this weird feeling we're about to start a really wonderful life together. I can *feel* it." He closed his eyes, imagining, and added, "And I'm basically never wrong about these things." Dale wondered how long it'd be before they'd kiss. He hoped it was soon.

Dale grabbed the umbrella from his saddlebag and shook it vigorously. "I'm done with you, old thing! Only SUNbrellas from here on out!" He ceremoniously hung the wool coat and umbrella on the rack by the door, tipping a victorious, imaginary hat to Arnie, who turned around in protest to go back to the kitchen. But just as the kitchen doors swung shut they heard him bellow, "Good luck to you, Dale Diggins, and good riddance!" and Dale was glad to have heard it.

Joan stood by the door, waiting to take his arm. Just as he did the wool coat fell to the floor and Joan, thinking twice, picked it up and tucked it under her arm, along with his.

"Just in case. Like...insurance, remember?"

Dale shrugged. Whether from booze or anticipation, a yellow glow had started to form around the edges of his eyes, a lovely shade. Maybe it really was Joan's aura. He felt like he could swim in it.

"I can feel it, too, Dale. We're just the sort of people who don't let anything get in our way, aren't we? Nothing. At. All." Joan cuffed his nose playfully. He blushed.

The slyest of smiles played on her lips as a buoyant Joan Durfee slipped a wobbly, gallant Dale Diggins out of the Tasty Spoon diner and into the cold shock of autumn night. This woman's aura, a rich perfume, trailed after her with hints of burnt coffee, bacon, fresh pineapple, and whipped cream—and Dale, humbled, followed her scent like breadcrumbs.

No longer did Joan have that jumpy thing about her as she stood tall outside the bus station using Dale's cell phone to call a taxi service, something Dale in his whole life had never thought to do—and suddenly he was glad to have such a take-charge woman along for good ideas like this. Especially now that his main new goal in life was going to be living it up.

The fogginess from the booze had made it so that the last hour was a bit of a blur, but Dale counted his bags, two, and felt the thickness of his breast pocket—and knew he had all he needed. Joan, bless her heart, had offered to drive his Fiat, first to the Post office to stop her mail and then to the bus station to drop the car and keys where Big Dan, Carol's husband, had plans to pick it up. He hadn't gotten much for it but the Fiat money plus his apartment deposit had both come through, a nice cushion on top of what he'd saved since the divorce. Plus he'd heard that in the Caribbean you could live on just a few dollars a day. By his calculations then, there'd be hundreds and hundreds of days to kick back and drink piña coladas before the snack bar money had to start rolling in. Plenty of time to get into the Island vibe. He made a mental note to buy a straw hat when they got to where they were going, which, let's be honest, was looking more and more like a nice hotel tonight. Dale wondered if they'd splurge for one room or two.

As it were, they were now sitting rather stiffly in the backseat of an honest-to-goodness checkered cab driving to the South Bend airport, and Dale couldn't remember the last time he'd

ridden one and in fact wondered if he ever had, unless you counted the airport shuttles in Chicago and the four taxis in New York on the Today Show trip. In one Dale had gripped the seat as they sailed through yellow traffic lights, ten in a row!— and Dale remembered thinking how Noreen would have hated it. As she did everything he found thrilling.

Well, no doubt about it, she'd be sour about this ride, too: the ample woman sitting next to him, his thick breast pocket, the brash and indecent way he'd sprung this whole thing on basically everyone.

Typical Dale, Noreen would say. Only got half brain but thinks he's got two.

Well screw 'em all. And screw her.

Glancing over to his seat partner snapping her gum and toying with her rimmed hat and sunglasses in a pocket mirror beside him, Dale could clearly see that Joan Durfee was not anything at all like Noreen Diggins — a sign that The Universe not *only* had a sense of humor, but that maybe it'd had something special up its sleeve for him all along. Because today, right now, his life was about to get as different as different could be, and to Dale, that's all that mattered.

Storm clouds roiled in the sky as the cab hummed down Highway 20. Joan broke their silence.

“Would you be a dear and grab my tote from the back, love? I'd like to touch up my lipstick. Unless, of course, you think I shouldn't,” she winked at him.

Dale wasn't sure about the wink but figured if she was calling him her 'love' and a 'dear' in a single sentence, then it had to be good. As he pulled out the tote a rolled up People magazine

caught and fell, and paper ephemeral flew around them. As Joan scrambled to sweep up the mess Dale's eye caught on a colorful swatch, a dog-eared postcard with a sparkling blue ocean.

“Well now, how-do-you-do. What's this? Is that the postcard from when you were a little girl?”

Joan gathered it up with a nest of her papers and said, “Dale Diggins, I could eat a horse, couldn't you? Let's stop at that darling lunch counter before our flight, I think I have to insist.”

Dale reached for the postcard. “No wait, I want to see *your* St. Thomas, the place you thought—no, *fantasized* about,” Dale let the word ‘fantasized’ hang in the air, for effect, “because Girl, your dreams are about to come TRUE!” He beamed at her. And then, in a flash, he knew what they had to do.

“The picture! Whatever it is, where ever it says, Joan—let's *do* it. Let's make that our first stop in St. Thomas.” He nodded, certain now. THIS was going to be the snack shop's new home. Dale could already see the sign, colorful paint on a sunbleached surfboard swinging in the breeze: “Get Your Breakfast Fixins at Diggin's.” It'd hang right over the front door of the shack—just as soon as he got in tight with the locals for some help to build it. And, got permission about where it'd go. Things like that.

“Sure, Hon. But don't forget about that paperwork we talked about—”

Dale nodded. There was such beauty to this idea, such simplicity: Destiny. How else could you explain how this vivacious woman, all the way from Toledo, would end up being *his* waitress, on the very day he'd mustered up the means, method, and motivation to become the best, most appealing man he'd ever be? Dale playfully plucked the postcard from the pile.

“—custard pie? Tasty Spoon was hours ago now Hon, and know how awful plane food is—”

Dale flipped the card over where the typeface was only barely readable, so old it'd all but rubbed off.

Bahia Honda State Park, Florida Keys, FL.

Dale blinked once, confused. Florida? There was a Florida in St. Thomas?

Joan snatched the postcard back and rolled it back up in the magazine before putting it back in her bag.

“Wait—why does this say Florida? You said at the ‘Spoon it was St. Thomas.”

Joan slowed her movements. “What now? Florida? No, is that what it says?” She giggled. “Do you know all this time I’ve just assumed it was the Caribbean? I was always terrible at Geography. Isn’t that funny?” Joan shook her head, rolling her eyes as she pulled more gum from her bag, offering one to Dale.

He hesitated. Why would Joan lie? Why would she say all those things about St. Thomas? And then fib to cover it up?

Dale considered this, and her, maybe for the first time. She was already talking again, and he watched her fingers move in a hypnotic blur, ticking off more items in the sky.

“—and of course I’ll need my meds transferred so we’ll need to figure out how health insurance works down there, for both of our sake’s—Wait. Dale. Your face looks funny. Let’s be calm, now. I swear you’ll feel better if you eat something.”

He shook his head no. A beach is a beach, sure. But to give him the impression that she'd been headed there, to exactly where *he* happened to be going...it was too much. Dale wasn't born yesterday. There had to be another explanation.

“Joan Durfee, did you lie to me about St. Thomas so I would invite you along on this once-in-a-lifetime trip?”

Joan turned to face him slowly, squarely, but waited to lift her eyes until she was already speaking, this time in a husky whisper.

“I'm sorry, Dale. I shouldn't have lied. It's true. My 'happy place' *is* in Florida, like the postcard says—that's where I was headed next. But only on my way to the Caribbean, I swear! Or maybe back to Mexico. But listen,” she moved closer. “I don't know what came over me, truly. There was just something about you, from the moment we talked I just thought, ‘now here's a man who isn't afraid of the world’—and that's exactly who I try to be. You're an inspiration.”

Joan took her hand and laid it gently, cooily, on his leg. “I just wanted to be...with you. *Needed* to be with you, almost. I couldn't help myself. I was hoping you'd let me come. So I lied. Can you...forgive me?” Her hand didn't move, but her fingers splayed outwards, ever so slightly. Dale exhaled.

It was just as he thought. She *wanted* to come with him, because she *wanted* him, in *that* way, and had since the Tasty Spoon Diner. You hear of women like this, mused Dale. Sex-crazed women. He could see it plainly now, those bedroom eyes, those lipstick winks. It all made sense. Dale felt himself getting hard, hoped the corner of his mouth didn't give him away. He wondered if they'd make their flight now. They were almost there.

It was enough that he was enough for her, his 'half-brain' and thick middle, and by George, he was going to fill her with so much happiness. The Big-Man-Upstairs Himself seemed to have orchestrated it, Dale thought, and for a moment he wondered how long this life had been waiting in the wings for him, waiting for him to take action. To be bold. Joan searched Dale's face again, as if to be sure, but smiled sweetly when she noticed the lump in his pants. She turned back to the window. In the distance, a steel grey radar tower spun on a purple skyline. And just as the cabbie took the South Bend exit off the interstate, Dale's stomach gurgled in hunger.

"See?" Joan said, grinning out the window. And then she snapped her gum like a shotgun.

The end