

OKLAHOMA PLATES

My friend Hazel says she's trying to be a writer. When we got out of high school, she moved to a little town up in Connecticut. She said she needed peace and quiet and "real people" around her instead of city strangers. She didn't tell me, but I knew she needed to be where she could live on what she could earn waiting tables. When we talk on the phone some-times while I'm on night duty at the nursing home where I work, she complains about how nothing ever happens out in the sticks. Then she tells me this story.

Hazel works at the Fresh Café across the street from the railroad station. It's kind of your standard fifties-style diner with some nice touches like butcher-block tables and a floor made of worn, wide boards. They have live plants too, mostly spider plants and Swedish ivy that can take the sun through the plate glass windows. Constantine Spaneas has owned the place as long as it's been there. Everybody in town knows he cooks like an angel.

Hazel says working there is great because she doesn't have to memorize a long list of specials with French names, including what's in them and how they're prepared, she doesn't have to learn all the rigmarole that goes with serving wine, and she can be as

friendly as she wants with the customers (or not) because they aren't going to spend fifty bucks on a single meal. I know what she really means is, she can pick their brains. She calls it "assessing character."

Anyway, she says one day last August, a family stops in too late for lunch, and takes one of the tables near the counter. Hazel hands out menus, tells them, "Today's special is *spanakopida*. That's a kind of strudel with spinach and cheese inside." She's standing between the man and his wife, looking down at his greasy hair with a part that reminds her of a worm working its way through wires. When the guy looks up at her, she thinks his eyes must be stinging, they're so bloodshot.

Hazel says, "Can I get you anything to drink?" "Water." His voice sounds like his throat's sore.

"I want pop," one of the kids whines. The man looks at Hazel. "Whaddaya have?" She runs through some of the popular items.

The customer tosses the menu onto the table. "Dr. Pepper and two glasses. And gimme a cheeseburger." He keeps his eyes on the woman across the table when he talks. "You got burgers, don't you?" He hasn't even opened the menu or looked at Hazel.

"Sure do," she tells him.

The woman's hefty and ruddy complexioned. "What's the soup today?" She has a voice like a little girl's—high-pitched and breathy.

"Vegetable with rice. It's homemade."

One of the kids is swinging his legs so hard his chair's inching back from the table. "You said we could have pizza," he whines again.

"Yeah," prods the smaller boy in a voice hinting at tears.

“We can do pizza,” Hazel says, foreseeing a scene if somebody doesn’t try to keep peace. She’s decided they’re near the end of their rope. All four look haggard. She’s noticed the kids sneaking shy looks at the man now and then, like they don’t want to get caught doing it. She leaves for the kitchen, wondering if they’ve come to town for a funeral. She gives her boss the order. While she sets up the burger plate with chips and slaw and a pickle, he peeks through the pass-through.

“Where they from?” Spaneas whispers to Hazel.

She takes a look out at the street while he’s putting pizza slices in the oven. There’s a dusty Chevy van, but she can’t see the plates, so she takes a water pitcher and goes out to fill glasses.

“You folks come a long way?”

“Long enough.” The man bites off the words. He gulps his water down like somebody who’s been for a twenty-mile hike in July. Hazel pours more.

“Where’s the rest rooms?” the woman asks. Hazel points. The woman reaches for one of the kids, and the man snaps, “Leave ‘em here!” like a drill sergeant. She gives him a glare that would scorch paint, but he doesn’t see it because he has his face in his hands, scrubbing them up and down.

“Your food’ll be along in just a minute,” Hazel tells him, while she goes the long way around the room, straightening salt and pepper shakers and napkin holders, so she can sneak a look at the van from an angle where she can see the license plate.

Back in the kitchen, “Oklahoma,” she tells Spaneas. He flips sizzling meat on the grill and shovels onions around. Hazel peeks through the window of the oven and sees a triangle of *spanakopida* in front of the pizza slices.

“They didn’t order the sp....”

“She’s gonna need more than just a bowl of soup,” Spaneas says, laying the burger on the bun.

Hazel calls that typical. He’s a worrier, she says. So when the food’s ready, she takes it in. Everybody’s sitting not looking at each other. Hazel gets the feeling they’ve been arguing, but no one says anything except the woman, when Hazel puts her extra dish in front of her.

“I didn’t order this.”

“The chef wanted you to have it.” She looks up at Hazel and then back at the plate. “It smells good.”

“Wait’ll you taste it!” Hazel is nothing if not loyal to her employer. “I’ll be right back with the pizza.”

“I ain’t payin’ for that,” the man says, his mouth already full of burger and bun.

“It’s on the house,” Hazel tells him. She goes for the pizza cut in half for the kids.

“Can I get you anything else?”

They’re all eating so hard they don’t even hear the question, which is only a courtesy anyway, so she goes on back to the kitchen and keeps an eye on them from the pass-through. She sees the man yank one of the kids by the arm to pull him off his chair and aim him for the rest room. When that one comes back, the man jerks his head to signal for the other one to go next. The woman keeps her eyes down on her food and never looks up.

Spaneas sits down behind Hazel at the work table to read the local paper. He says, “They done yet?”

“Just about.”

The man has finished, his plate so clean he must have mopped it with the last of the bun. Now he's standing next to the front window, his body to one side, looking first one way and then the other, like somebody trying not to be seen from the street. One of the kids has quit eating, leaving the outside edge of his pizza crust on the plate, but the other's still working on his. The wife's just pulling the fork out of her mouth. Her soup bowl is empty, and the plate with her spinach pie has only a few crumbs left on it. The littler boy's sucking up the last drops of soda. Now the woman is watching her husband, like a cat at a mouse hole, which he doesn't seem to notice.

Spaneas says from behind his paper, “See where they're going.”

“What for?”

“I hope it ain't too far. They ain't gonna be safe onna highway—too tired.”

Spaneas reads, following along the lines with one finger. “Says here a man escaped from Green Haven Prison yesterday. It says he's dangerous.”

“Well, they'll catch up with him soon, I'm sure,” Hazel tells him.

“Says he's pro'bly got a weapon. What do they mean?” Spaneas looks up at her.

“A gun? A knife?”

Hazel tries to reassure him. “Green Haven's a pretty long way off.”

Her boss shakes his head. “That man out there, he's tired—tired and a-scared.”

“Mr. Spaneas,” Hazel says, “you have to learn you can't be grandpa to every customer that comes in your place. What do you mean, scared?”

He shrugs his special Greek shrug, which means it's too big for a short man. “I just think he is.”

Hazel goes out with the tray then to check if anyone wants dessert. The man jumps when she speaks, but he leaves the window and comes back to the table without answering.

“Coffee?” He nods and the woman does too.

While Hazel’s behind the counter at the hot plate, she hears the man say something like, “...when we get to Burlington, like I told you.” Carrying cups over to the table, she notices the woman isn’t looking at him. She’s got her lips pressed together like she’s afraid a word might escape. The kids are sitting like blocks.

Suddenly the room darkens. The sun has gone under a cloud, and now they’re all like people in a cave. Outside, shadows have disappeared, colors sharpened and changed. Hazel goes to the window and looks up at the sky. Above the roof of the railroad station, charcoal-colored clouds have come down so close they look like you could reach up and touch them. They feel more than hear a rumble.

Hazel looks around at her customers. “You have far to go today?”

The man snaps, “None a yer business.”

“Sorry. I only asked because it looks like there’s a storm coming.”

The man picks up his cup and drains it, then bashes it into the saucer. “Check.” Hazel rings their meals into the register. While she waits for the tape, trying to look as if she isn’t watching them, the man suddenly snarls, “Whaddaya think yer lookin’ at?” She snatches the tape out and takes it over. He grabs it and pushes it at his wife, who opens her purse and takes out a small wad of bills.

“Don’t forget what I told you,” the man snarls at her. Then he gets up and heads for the rest rooms. She watches his every move, now his back is turned.

When he's gone, she says to Hazel, "Have you got a pay phone?"

"No, I'm sorry. The nearest one's at the gas station on your way back to the highway." Hazel hands over the change.

The wife sighs, snaps her purse shut, and sits looking straight ahead. The big kid is swinging his legs again. The little one whines, "Ma, when are we gonna...?" She ignores him. "Sit still," she says in a flat voice to the other one. He acts like he doesn't hear her.

The man comes back and heads straight for the door. "Let's go."

The others get up, the kids dragging their feet, and follow him out. They get in the van just as the first big drops of rain begin to fall. There's a flash, a rumble of thunder, and it starts to pour.

Hazel picks up the dishes, takes them into the kitchen, and starts to load them into the washer.

Spaneas says, "Where they goin'?"

"I don't know. I think he said something about Burlington."

"Vermont?"

"I suppose."

"Says in the paper here, the man from the prison—he's from Maine."

Hazel sits down. "Oh?"

"Says they gonna look for him up there. The paper says this man's thirty-nine years old, five feet, eleven inches, a hunnerd and thirty pounds...."

"Mr. Spaneas, that group was from Oklahoma." Hazel's thinking he's got a vivid imagination.

“Yeah, well, I dunno,” he mumbles, and goes back to the paper. Suddenly there’s a horrendous crash of thunder, and the lights flicker. At the same time, the bell on the door clangs. Someone probably coming in to get out of the rain.

Hazel goes out, and there’s the man who’s just had lunch. “What can we do for you?”

His hair’s hanging in strings over his pale forehead. Behind him, through the curtains of rain, she sees the van parked crooked at the curb.

“Gimme your cash,” the guy snaps.

“What?”

“Goddamn van’s slipping the clutch.” He looks over his shoulder through the glass door. “Hurry up!” he barks. He’s facing her, standing with his knees bent a little and his hands hanging free of his body, like a wrestler.

There are times when Hazel’s pretty slow on the uptake, and this is one of them. “Tony’s garage can fix it for you,” she tells him. “They’re right over on Route...”

“Open the fucking register!” the man yells, at the same time whipping a long hunting knife out from somewhere. He takes a long step, almost a lunge, toward her at the same time. She jumps back. The register is at one end of the counter, almost in front of the pass-through. She doesn’t dare take her eyes off the man, so she has to feel behind her to keep from falling over a stool or something. Stupid notions flit through her head, things she might try that would make time for Spaneas to do something, though she can’t think what. As she’s ringing “No Sale,” she thinks how the robber might even throw that knife if he thinks somebody’s coming.

Out of the corner of her eye, she catches a glimpse of Spaneas through the pass-

through. He's standing with the cleaver in one hand. "Oh great!" she thinks. "Ready to defend his cash, and here I am in the middle." The drawer springs out and hits her in the stomach, and she reaches in, not taking her eyes off the guy in front of her. He's crouched, the knife balanced in a loose grip, and looks like nothing would faze him. He's breathing fast and noisy so she can hear him even over the noise of the storm.

He waits till she's put the money in a sloppy pile, then with a leap like a panther, he snatches it up, stuffs it into his pants pocket, and runs for the door. He opens it right into Ted Romer's face, almost knocking him down.

Ted's one of the town cops. He always comes in for a cup of coffee and a pastry at the end of his shift. With his head down against the wind and rain, he doesn't know anything's wrong until he gets inside, and by then the van has pulled away and disappeared. It's so dark the street lights have come on.

Spaneas comes out of the kitchen without his cleaver, and the two men sit down. So Hazel gets cups and pours coffee for all of them. "I'm sorry, Mr. Spaneas, but I didn't know what else to do," she says while her hand is shaking and she's trying not spill the coffee.

She tells Ted what happened. He jumps up and heads for the phone on the wall in the kitchen. Spaneas calls to him, "'S okay. Don't do nothing."

"Don't— Why not?"

"Let him go," Spaneas says, pouring sugar into his coffee and stirring at the same time. "He got a woman and a coupla kids. Let him go."

"But he robbed you!" Hazel says.

"He could be that guy from Green Haven," Ted points out.

“Yeah,” Spaneas says. “That’s what I think. He snatched the car, he gotta take them with him.”

Hazel looks at her boss calmly stirring his coffee, and then at Ted, who’s taken his uniform hat off. After a minute, he puts the hat on the table and sits down again. He looks at Hazel with his eyebrows raised and shakes his head.

“Mr. Spaneas,” Ted says, “you know I can’t do that.”

Hazel goes and gets the pastry stand and sits down in front of her coffee cup. She raises one shoulder and looks at Ted as if to say, What can I do? Ted takes a Danish. “But I’ll have a cuppa coffee first, okay, Hazel?” Ted winks at her.

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