

WORD COUNT: 2,800

POACHED EGGS

Her teeth are dazzling. They steal the show. Her ruby lips pucker with glimpses of the ivory-white stage. Perfect like piano keys. A Broadway song of a smile. Her brown eyes are off-kilter, sexy in a brooding way. The rest of her face is obscured by the curtain bangs of her dark raven hair that spills over her shoulders like a sash, swerves down the modest contours of her sailor-striped shirt. Her slender arms are rested on the cushioned back of the diner booth. Her pistachio-colored fingernails dig into the red tufted leather.

Our starlet is listening (or pretending to listen over the squawk-box noise) to a grey-haired gentleman seated across from her. He's sporting tiny oval glasses like a German banker. He's dressed in an all-black suit like an undertaker. Very prim. Taupe-collared shirt underneath. Silver crescent cufflinks. His somber presence is as emotionless and expired of humor as the broken jukebox with its busted numbers. There's something almost sinister about the way he folds his hands whenever he finishes a sentence, the way he lifts his fork and cuts into his fried eggs like he's performing surgery on a frail heart.

Whenever she talks, the gloom is momentarily dispelled, the booth illuminated by her movie-star smile. He nods to her every word with the utmost seriousness. He waits his turn and speaks high chin. He talks in a muddled foreign accent that sounds as if he's speaking through his nose.

"Why hang wind chimes where there is no wind?" he says.

She shuffles out a silver cigarette case and unlatches it, "So that's why you're such a cynic?"

She draws a slim cigarette to her eager lips. He strikes a match with his thumb and lights it for her. She takes a kiss of smoke and blows it out. She licks her teeth afterward.

Our starlet leans into the table with her elbow down and cigarette at her ear, “But you honestly can’t believe that everything’s for nothing.”

“I don’t pretend to... I know,” he butters his toast, spreads gingerly, and lets her soak in his confidence, “To comfort ourselves, we delight in collective fantasies, refusing to face the fact that life is meaningless and mercilessly random. But only when we shuck off all illusion can we truly understand who we are.”

“And who’s that? Who are we?”

“The fallen,” he says and takes a bite of toast. “Why else would we be here?”

A waitress sidles in and blocks the view down the aisle from the far hook of the horseshoe diner.

“Would you like some more coffee, honey?” she says, holding the orange-lipped pot over my cup.

“Yeah, sure. Why not?” I give the waitress a short look of affection as she fills the cup to the brim. “Thanks.”

“There you are,” she says. “Your order should be up shortly.”

I take a cordial slurp of burnt coffee and watch her walk away. She has the practiced strut of a middle-aged waitress who’s known passion and heartbreak, once the candy apple of desire for every drifter who came tottering in, stinking of sin. Once a young woman with hopes of a better life somewhere off Interstate 50, down the desert highway, just one final hitch away from sun-choked freedom and everlasting fame. She sasses her motherly hips under waist-hiked blue jeans for the uninvited scrutiny of her grumbling customers.

When I return to the foreigner and our smoking starlet, the mood's gone sour. Her nose flares in defiance. She flicks the ash off the end of her cigarette, "It just seems rather morbid."

"Morbid? Just because they are no rules doesn't mean the world is dark and heartless. It simply is as you make of it," the foreigner pushes his spectacles up from his nose for emphasis. "Don't act like you aren't searching for something. There is no Shangri-La, my dear. No matter how far you travel, no matter how much time you spend wandering the highway line. We are all searching, that's just our nature. But nobody ever said we're going to like what we find."

"I'm going to Los Angeles," she says. "I'm not stopping before I get there."

He scrapes the hashbrowns away from his eggs, "What if I were to prove it to you?"

"Prove what?"

"Prove that I'm serious," he says. "And then you'll have no other choice than to come away with me."

The odd proposition gives her pause. She taps her cigarette twice over the ashtray.

"And where would we be going?" she asks.

"Ah, that would ruin the surprise, now wouldn't it?" he says.

She forks the forgotten omelet on her plate and peeks inside, "You still haven't even told me your name."

"True," the foreigner says. "How about this? We'll wage a bet. If I can convince you that I'm telling the truth, you'll come, no questions asked. If I fail to do so, I'll drive you all the way to Los Angeles and even pay for your half-eaten breakfast."

"Really?"

"Yes. Do we have a deal then?"

"Alright," she says. "Do your damndest."

The foreigner places his fork aside and smiles. He folds his hands on the table edge and shuts his eyes. His smugness gives way to solemn contemplation, a slow and steady breathing. His fingers unclench and rise like a conductor before the violin cue, tapping methodically—one, two, three, four, and back—as if playing Stravinsky on air.

“Think of something,” he tells her.

“You must be joking.”

“Never.”

“This is ridiculous,” she pulls a stiff drag and blows it out. “What should I think about?”

“Anything. Doesn’t matter.” His fingers slow, as if searching for the right tempo to pair with an unheard melody. Our smoking starlet flips her bangs aside like Greta Garbo before the camera call. She lays her cigarette aside the ashtray and closes her eyes too.

“Keep a clear picture of it,” he says, twiddling. “Stay on the thought and focus.”

Smoke trails drift from the ashtray and twirl in the still air with her thoughts. Our starlet’s face is flushed and calm, returned to a simplistic grace, no longer animated by those rebellious inquisitive eyes. It’s obvious that she’s hunting for the thought and she looks years younger for it. Her edginess replaced by a quiet innocence to match those perfect teeth. Her life scars smoothed over to unveil her true self in this silent meditation. A teenaged girl on the road and out of her league. A runaway perhaps.

The foreigner’s fingers spider-dance at a rapid pace over his eggs. His eyes roll behind the lids in circles, clockwise and in reverse. His fingers dance faster, faster, rhythmic and erratic, accelerate the tempo. His eyes flail wide without warning, the dark pupils engorged. Our starlet opens her eyes with a long-lashed flutter. She picks up her smoke and sucks in the poison.

“Marilyn Monroe,” the foreigner says.

“Oh come on, I must have been mouthing the words,” she crushes out her cigarette in the ashtray. “There’s no way...”

“At first, you were thinking about the salt shaker, then that lovely smear on the windowpane, then your boyfriend back in Mississippi... the mechanic, right? What’s his name? Jacob?”

“What? Who are you?” she crushes out her cigarette in the ashtray. “He sent you, didn’t he? I knew my father wouldn’t...”

“Sent me?” the foreigner laughs. “There’s a funny notion. No, it’s simpler than you’d imagine once you master the concentration part. Digging deeper, now that takes practice, that takes discipline.” He swipes his fogged glasses with a napkin and readjusts the ovals on the bridge of his nose. “But that trick is just child’s play. Pay attention and watch this.”

A plate clanks down on my table. Two poached eggs stew in hollandaise sauce.

“There you go,” the waitress says and refills my cup with black coffee. “Do you need anything else? Glass of water?”

“No... nothing,” I blurt out, straining my ears to hear the conversation in the corner booth. “You can go now.”

“Excuse me?”

“Sorry,” I turn to correct my mistake. The waitress is already fuming, arms crossed, hips sassed, ready to clock me upside the head with the coffee pot.

“Look, I’ve got everything I need. Thank you very much. You’re a wonderful waitress.”

“Waitress?” she stammers. “Are you blind?” Her finger stabs a nametag on her breast: MABEL. I read the name and follow a curious stain down the frills of her white apron. Mustard? Relish? “The name’s Mabel as in Mabel’s Diner,” she says. “And I don’t like your tone, mister. I have had enough of you creeps coming in here all boozed up and ogling the customers.”

“Boozed up?” I say. “It’s eight in the morning.”

“Don’t you talk back to me, young man. I’ve been watching the way you been looking at that girl in the corner, undressing her with your filthy mind. And I think it’s sick. I didn’t say nothing before but—”

“I was admiring her teeth.”

“Sure you were,” she says. “You’re all the same, you know that?”

“Wait a second, lady.”

“No, you look here. Any more trouble out of you and I’ll have Eddie take you out back and teach you some manners.”

At the end of the chrome bar, a huge hunchback of a man turns his pig-fat neck and raps his fingers on the diner counter.

“I’m not trying to cause any trouble,” I say.

“Just keep your eyes on your eggs, pervert.”

A sudden burst of laughter erupts the opposite end of the chrome bar where a trucker has planted his face in a bowl of grits. His friend buckles over in hysterics as the poor trucker wipes the slop out of his beard.

“Fall asleep there, Danny? You know, most people use a spoon.”

The trucker shrieks and shoves the bowl away, as though he’s seen a ghost in his grits. He snatches up his spoon and bangs it on the counter, swatting at something unseen.

His friend steadies his hand, “What’s the matter with you? Calm down. You’re going to get us kicked out of here.”

The trucker pulls away, so ashamed and confused he can't even look at his friend straight on. He stares at the spoon and a vacant space on the laminated counter of no concern, "I'm getting too old for these valley hauls. Hey Mabel? Can we get some more coffee over here?"

The waitress passes by in a huff, coffee pot in one hand, wet rag in the other. I quickly avert my eyes to the poached eggs. While she argues with the truckers, I can hear the starlet's giddy little laugh.

"That's incredible. Do it again," she says.

The foreigner smiles and leers about the diner behind those oval spectacles, looking out toward the open kitchen behind the counter where the cooks are busy dicing vegetables and cracking eggs on the grill. A cook at the chopping board is dissecting a stalk of scallions with razor-thin slices. Each slice, the glistening knife treads closer to his index finger in rapid succession. Chop. Chop. Chop. Chop. Chop. He pauses to wipe the goo from the sharp blade and resumes dicing, presses down the last leg of the stalk gently with two fingers. Chop. Chop. Chop. Chop. Chop. Chop.

A scream sends the kitchen into a panic. The bus boy, coming in, trips and an armful dishes shatter on the tile floor. The dicing chef whirls around, slips on a patch of grease, and latches onto the pot rack to prevent himself from falling. The grill is a slick metal bed of crackling flames, rising higher and higher. The dishwasher rushes in to save the day and hesitates, unsure whether to douse the malfunctioning grill or the grill chef who is screaming with his frock on fire.

Mabel busts through the saloon doors and makes the decision for him. She wrests the bucket of water from his hands and tosses it on the flaming chef. She flicks on the ventilation fan and storms out of the kitchen. The extinguished chef stomps the wet smoke from his apron. He

doubles back to turn down the temperamental grill, only to discover it has died down of its own accord to a low sizzle. A lone egg lies charred in the aftermath.

The starlet watches with delight. She slips another cigarette from her case, and before she can reach for the matches, it's already lit and the foreigner is charming her with his wolfish grin. "You're starting to understand, aren't you?" he says. "Anything you want. Anything you need. I can teach you."

"Maybe," she says and lets a finger slide along her scarlet lips. "Whatever I want?"

"Whatever you want. Just say the word."

I sneak a peek down the aisle as our starlet lays her sights on me. A glimmer of mischief twinkles in her iridescent eyes. She sucks on the cigarette, seducing the fire. She smirks and concentrates on the slow draw, taming the ember. Her lips part. An elegant stream of smoke seethes through her pearly white teeth.

Eddie clears his throat and stares me down with a snarl. The waitress casts a cold eye over her shoulder. I hunch down into my breakfast and begin shoveling it in. My hands are hot and sweaty. My fork stings my fingers. I lance the gooey eggs and try to bring a forkful to my mouth when I see the oily blood dripping, the slimy slice of brain pierced on the prongs. A gorged cranium sits on my plate like a hunk of sculpted meatloaf in hollandaise sauce.

In the same instant, the broken jukebox comes alive, flipping a record from the stack, spinning inside the glass while the song numbers flash on and off in random sequence. I blink a second time and the illusion is gone, the jukebox dead again, the egg returned to its proper place on my fork. My fingers are frozen to the stainless steel. They thaw apart when an intense heat conducts through the metal. The fork prongs fold over, one by one as if melting in surrender, all

except the middle prong. I wrestle the fork to the table as it struggles to free itself from my fist. But there is no hope. My fork is possessed.

The fork flies across the diner, over the chrome bar, over Eddie, narrowly winging past the waitress's ear, off the day-glo wall clock where the egg takes flight, the fork clanging to the floor, the egg soaring elegantly to land smack in the lap of a pregnant woman.

To which she screams, "Eeeee!"

And her husband, "What in the name of—"

The waitress turns ever so slowly as if allowing me time to bolt out the door and be saved. But I, like an idiot, just sit there gawking at the foreigner who blots his forehead and puts his oval glasses back on.

"You again!" the waitress screams.

"Wait, I can explain—"

"No explanation needed, honey," she snatches up the offending utensil, prongs folded with the metal middle finger erect. She threatens me with it, "I think your fork speaks for itself."

The mob is riled. Every eye is pinned on me. Heads poke out from every nook, out from the booths, out from the kitchen, the haggard truckers at the counter damning me with twitchy scowls. Even my fork is flipping me the bird. Eddie and a few regulars rise from their seats like elephants beckoned to a primal call.

The waitress jabs the mangled fork in my direction, "How dare you come into my diner and disrespect these people? Who the heck do you think you are?"

Out the corner of my eye, I see the foreigner and the starlet put a few bills on the table and throw on their jackets to leave.

The waitress snaps, “Think you’re some clever little devil, don’t you? Don’t you? A real comedian. Get the hell out of here, and you better never show your face in this place again.”

Eddie slings an arm around her waist and pats her there with his goliath hand.

“Easy there, Mabel,” he says, rolling up his sleeves. “Let me handle this.”

Time slows when our starlet strides by down the aisle, the foreigner tugging her along by the hand. Once again I am seduced by the swish of her raven hair sweeping her candid face as she teases me with a final smile. A smile that ultimately breaks my heart when the enamel glistens in the phosphorescent light to betray the slightest gap between her two front teeth. And after the screen door bangs shut, after the tires squeal and the black hearse screeches away from the truck-stop parking lot, Eddie drags me out the back of the diner and makes a few corrections to my own dental alignment with his fist.