

Real People

By Fred Miller

“Two over light, bacon crisp, grits, wheat toast, no butter!” A similar order echoes from the far end of the counter. Bertie nods and drops bacon on the sizzling grill. And soon she’ll rattle off her own litany as if life itself were at stake.

“Wonder where Crystal is?” Darlene says, looking up at the clock.

“She don’t usually check in with me.”

With ten years behind the counter, I guess they’d call me seasoned experience here, the kind that’s jettisoned three worthless husbands and a string of could-have-beens. I’m Wanda, and I can carry six plates and shovel sass back to male egos so fast they’re left reeling in my wake. Call it an acquired talent.

“Well...I was just wonderin’,” Darlene says.

Darlene’s a pug-nosed brunette whose live-in skipped town without a word and left her with nothing but shattered dreams, baby Ev, and this job. Sam’s Café’s the only option a single dropout with a kid could expect to find in this town. And soon she’ll celebrate three years of tip-driven sustenance in this chrome and glass citadel that guards the far edge of Rutledge toward the freeway.

Rutledge is my home, my town, where I grew up. The town square features a weathered statue of some forgotten soldier, a few messy pigeons, and some old men who try to cheat at checkers and tell lies in the shade of an oak that’s older than anyone here can remember. A new interstate west of town brought the town’s commerce to a halt and left us with an aging state bank, a drugstore with every cheap cosmetic on the market, and a farmers’ co-op where daily gossip is readily shared. And a few modest dwellings still lie here and there for folks unable or too lazy to seek better elsewhere.

Nothing much changed here ‘til some Hollywood folks arrived a few days ago to do background shoots for a new movie. Now the whole town is abuzz over possibilities of instant stardom. Go figure.

It’s early here, not daylight yet, and at the counter two of our locals sit working on steaming breakfast plates. The town’s newspaper carrier, Mitch, studies a buttered slice of toast before taking a bite. He’s got limited abilities to grasp much beyond simple instruction, but he’s long been accepted as a town fixture in Rutledge. A quick gaze into his wide-eyed face is enough for anyone to sense his friendly, immutable nature.

“What say, Mitch?” I smile, refilling a napkin dispenser at the counter.

“Nothin’ much, Wanda.”

“You gonna go to spring trainin’ this year?”

“Uh, naw, got too much goin’ on now. Buildin’ my tradin’ card collection, ya know. Maybe next year.”

“Sure, Mitch.”

Each winter he vows to hitch a ride to Florida to watch his favorite teams in spring practice. He’ll never go, but it makes for small talk, and I like Mitch a lot.

At the far end of the counter a man rumored around town to possess vast knowledge sits alone. Cedric comes in at precisely 5:45 each morning and says little to anyone, but because he maintains an air of dignity and wears a jacket with worn leather elbows, he’s deemed a man of wisdom by everyone in the diner, including the morning crew.

As predictable as a wind-up toy, he’ll eat a morsel of egg, then bacon, then grits and toast in that order, then dab his lips gingerly with a napkin after every second bite. Darlene’s noticed he sips his coffee in no discernible pattern. Wonder why, she’s asked me several times. Why her fascination with his routine never seems to wane is a mystery to me. Between bites he’ll lift his head, close his eyes, and purse his lips as if tasting a fine French wine and, oh yes, the man always leave a dime tip. That’s something I’d remember.

Darlene watches the glass doors open and usher in a gust and one belated waitress carrying a tattered valise. The girls behind the counter study her new-styled curls laced with flakes of glitter and a lip gloss called “Purple Passion,” a new feature I’ve seen at the local emporium our friend’s applied with carefree abandon. And soon everyone in the place will inhale a heavy slipstream of perfume in Crystal’s wake.

“Hey girl. Where you been?” Darlene asks.

“Went to the country club cotillion last night. Stayed too late.” Everyone laughs.

“What’s in the suitcase?”

“My prom dress.” Another guffaw erupts.

Because few folks wander in at this hour, tardiness could hardly be called a mortal sin around here. That’s not to imply that our town’s economy’s got no spark left. Why, I can tell you, the village council ordered four new stop signs from State Maintenance about a year ago, and these ruby gems are expected any day. And the rails the other side of Town Creek carry a string of late-night freights, though no one can recall the last to stop here. Once I heard Cedric say the town of Rutledge is littered with self-effacing souls suspended in solitude like boxcars rusting on forgotten sidings, whatever that means.

Crystal ties an apron around her tiny waist and greets our cook, Bertie, who gestures with a simple nod. At the grill Bertie's a fierce commander who can take heat from any direction and turn it into an organized, well-executed battle plan. But beyond Sam's she's painfully conscious of her plainness and that leaves her social life wanting, bless her heart.

Now, after six months of meager tips, Crystal's resolved that this place is just a launching pad to lift her out of this hapless burg. I've seen this scene before, believe me. She glances up at the clock as the first crowd arrives for breakfast, two local mechanics with names stitched across khaki pockets, Clem Penney, a local senior citizen, and two others behind him.

But poor Clem didn't enter the cafe for breakfast, his mind can no longer handle such routines. I suspect he's been lured in from the cold rain by our place, now a neon fortress against a coal-dust sky.

"Howdy, gents...hi, Clem, how you doin'?" Darlene says, her words met with a blank stare from the old man.

"H'lo, Darlene," one of the mechanics mumbles as they slide over stools. I watch and busy myself pouring cups of steaming coffee in a line along the countertop.

Clem's mind has yet to register the greeting or even where he is. In a faded baseball cap and a drab coat that reeks of mothballs, he stands by the door swaying like a willow in a gentle breeze, his yellowed eyes wide with hopes he might discover the source of the water beading along the bill of his cap. Outside a drizzle that anointed all life overnight has just morphed into a fierce storm that sounds like a herd of cattle across our roof.

It's precisely 6:35 and at the far end of the counter Cedric rises from his stool as he does every morning at this time and drops exact change plus a dime on the counter. He nods to the staff, turns toward the door, spots Clem, and curls his lip. "Trampish wastrel," he mutters as he passes Clem, but no one seems to notice above the voice of Loretta Lynn petitioning a lovesick world on the jukebox.

"Come on in and stay awhile, Clem," Darlene shouts above the music, and a spumy, toothless grin dawns across the old man's stubbled face.

"Definitely over-served at the Thirsty Scotsman last night," I whisper to Crystal with a smile. "Take a seat, hon, we'll get you some hot coffee," I say, knowing his ability to pay is iffy at best. Sputtering and wheezing, he shuffles toward a stool. And a pungent odor of unknown origin rises from his tattered coat, one that'll no doubt allow him ample elbowroom at the counter. Narrowing his eyes, he peruses our one-page menu he once knew by heart. Stroking his whiskers, he mumbles, "Uh, huh."

"Cream an' sugar's right there, Clem."

“Uh huh...getting and spending, we lay waste our powers.” He’s pulled this from a thicket of fragmented memories that mean nothing to anyone in the café, but that’s just Clem.

“You tell ’em, Clem,” I say.

Aromas of sizzling bacon, steamy coffee, and sweet waffle syrup begin to fuse as two truckers push through the door, shake off the rain and sit. A new number on the jukebox joins the clatter of utensils and a din of banter that have elevated Sam’s to a place of high regard with the locals for the past forty years or so. I see Crystal purse her lips and twice eye the hands of the clock as if playing a game of cat and mouse with it.

A symphony of movements keeps time with the ebb and flow of customers wheeling through the door, and business continues to perk as three more truckers shamble in, cackling and pummeling each other’s shoulders as if they’ve just been named the winning pit crew in a recent NASCAR race.

Darlene pauses to glance at a folded newspaper left gratis by the paper carrier, and says to no one in particular, “Says here I got powerful good news comin’.”

“Yeah? What’s it say about Capricorns?” A reply is muffled by a sputter of flatulence as Clem reaches down the counter to retrieve a piece of toast left by another customer. New country talent begins to wail from the jukebox and obscures an off-color remark from Bertie.

“Whatcha fellas gonna have?” Crystal’s dimples pucker in a smile.

“Now, what you got worth havin’?” one of the truckers asks.

She’s new, but not that new. “Nothin’ you could afford, sweetie, but Bertie makes a mean Western omelet.” The new arrivals laugh and slap each other in camaraderie, and the inquisitor, with leather and zippers, drowsy eyes, and a bushy beard, offers her a big toothy smile. He reminds me of Ellis Island immigrants I saw once in a discarded magazine in a bus depot.

“Okay, gimme the omelet, sausage, and grits and coffee. And, o’ yeah, that waffle, too.”

“How ’bout you, Hon?” she addresses the youngest of the three, who appears too clean-cut for this bunch.

“Two fried eggs, bacon, toast, coffee and some o’ what he couldn’t afford.”

“Food’ll come soon. You gotta grow some for the other.” Another roar echoes about the café as she scribbles down the order for the third, checking the clock between each exchange. The minute hand continues its fluid sweep, unaware of its newly found importance, and I wonder what’s up with her.

“Spectin’ somebody?” I say in low tones.

“Nope,” Crystal says and moves down the counter, dropping a damp rag on an already clean

countertop, her raw, pink hand pumping to the rhythms of a country tune. I look at Darlene, then Crystal, then scan coffee cups for warm-ups.

Darlene moves toward Crystal, whose eyes are now focused on her own tireless efforts.

“Them movie people still in town, Crystal?”

“Couldn’t say.”

“Said in the Sunday paper they might be here all week.”

“So?”

“Nothin’, just wonderin’ if they lookin’ for local talent.” Darlene pulls a pencil from behind her ear and pretends to examine her tickets.

“Say, that a new perfume, Hon?” Crystal ignores the question.

I gab and giggle with the mechanics and truckers at the other end of the counter, replenishing coffee cups left and right, and gaze at the bearded trucker who’s downed his omelet and waffle in record time.

Suddenly Clem’s hands rise in an agitated wave as if a new speech might be forthcoming.

“You want some eggs, Hon?” I ask. He nods and drops his head like a remorseful child. “Two scrambled, bacon, toast!” I sing out, realizing he’ll be wearing most of it before he finally shuffles out the door.

Crystal’s eyes are locked on the rain through a halo around the streetlamp down the road, a scene reminiscent of tiny fireflies in a mad race to nowhere. She seems distant, her mind lost in a memory until a gust of fresh air jars her into the urgency of the moment. Locals stroll in and she forces a wan smile, then cuts her eyes to the clock and back toward the newcomers. Ten more minutes have passed.

“One scrambled, patty sausage, grits, raisin toast up,” Bertie snaps. Waves of heat from the grill give her cheeks a hue that matches the tiny bow she’d hooked in the back of her hairnet. She blends bowls of egg, flips strips of bacon, and pops the toaster with the judiciousness of an Old Testament prophet, then echoes commands to us that might sound cheeky to anyone who doesn’t know her.

A quarter in the metal slot summons the record changer into a predictable routine that brings a pause in the café chatter, the crowd awaiting the next tonal surprise. Shoes begin to tap to a George Strait favorite and the banter resumes.

Above the noise, no one seems to hear the first ring of our wall phone at the far end of the counter. I certainly didn’t, but on the second, Crystal passes Darlene and me in a mad streak. Her hand on its way to the receiver catches the top of a glass on the counter and a loud crash suspends all activity in the place.

“Hello, Sam’s Café, this is Crystal...Hello?...Hello?” She stares in disbelief at the dead phone, unaware

she's become the sole object of everyone's attention. Quietly, I sweep the broken glass into a dustpan.

"Lightning probably knocked out the phones," I say.

"Yeah, probably."

Three truckers move to the register, the first handing Darlene a twenty. "We'll be leavin' a tip for the food and one for future service," the stout trucker announces with a grin. Darlene smiles and punches in the totals. The register bell rings and the cash drawer opens.

"Bet you fellas think we're just a bunch o' rag dolls waitin' to flop down for you on command," she sasses.

"Well, we was hopin'." Another peal of laughter bounces off the walls as the trio cuts palm waves to the staff and saunters out into morning darkness. Raucous palaver from truckers is tolerated here, their intent benign, their tips generous. Odd, Crystal ignored them after taking their orders.

"They harmless, Crystal. They don't mean nothin' by what they say."

"I know." She eyes the silverware she and Darlene are folding into paper napkins.

Silence fills the moment, and we wait to see if our co-worker will respond further. Crystal continues to look at the flatware, her upper teeth pressed against her lower lip.

"You okay, Crystal?"

"Yeah, just tired."

"Out late last night, huh?"

"Uh huh."

"Seein' somebody new?"

"Orders up!" Crystal barks before Bertie can call them out. She scoots down to waiting hot plates, picks up three and wheels in one smooth motion. Darlene stands watching, her arms folded across her waist. She catches my eye and shakes her head.

Almost in a whisper, Crystal speaks to a customer—slim, blonde, around thirty, and new to the café.

"You with the movie people?"

A forkful of grits hesitates in mid air. "Um, no, I'm the new track coach and social studies teacher at Elgin High."

"Oh," she says, unsure of what next to say. "Crystal's my name, I grew up here."

"I know."

"Oh, you've heard?" Her voice drops.

"No, I mean I saw your nametag...Crystal."

"Oh, yeah." She blushes.

"Where you from?"

"Upstate. Um, nice town you've got here, Crystal."

"S all right, I guess. More coffee?"

"Sure. Say, you gonna be in that movie?"

Her mouth opens. She appears to want to say something, but can't. Now she's aware we're watching, both of us wondering why she's paused so long at this spot. She smiles, swallows hard, and turns to replace the coffee pot on the burner.

A shy sun breaks through a gray, uncertain dawn as Crystal gazes out the front window. An emaciated hound, soaked to the ribs and oblivious to the eighteen-wheelers rushing by, ambles down the other side of the road sniffing discarded morsels that lie in his path. Crystal looks stunned, struck by something she's seen or imagined.

"More coffee?" Darlene asks the newcomer though she can see his cup is still three-quarters full. Like the rest of us, she spotted the open windbreaker and drenched tee hugging a well-muscled six pack when he strolled into Sam's. The sweat pants and Nikes peg him as a disciplined runner come to breakfast after a cross-country run in the rain. And his looks plus a hint of aftershave qualify him instantly as the most eligible hunk in Rutledge.

"No, but thanks. I'd stay longer, if I could."

"Do come back." Darlene's cheeks warm as he hands her a five. Scooting to the register, she makes change and stretches out a chapped hand. "Name's Darlene."

"Thanks, Darla," he says looking down at his change, and turns toward the door. Her face drops, a reflection of countless first encounters I've known her to endure.

A draft from the door chases a lazy blue haze toward the ceiling, and the county sheriff with his posse of deputy bubbas in cotton blues and boots lumbers in. And behind them, a local vendor saunters in with a belt ring of keys jingling with each step. Lane's here like clockwork every Tuesday and Friday morning to hit on the female staff. And beneath his pomaded hair looms a celestial brilliance unknown to any save himself...brainpower, he's concluded, to be focused on the pursuit of women, the sole reason for man's existence. The idea that his spiel might be trapped in a bygone era has yet to occur to this guy. And the girls constantly joke behind his back that his greasy hair might be the result of dripping oil from a backyard lube job.

Lane pauses at the jukebox, then takes the last stool. The peak breakfast hour has arrived. Crystal

blinks as the second hand made its tireless trek around the clock.

I wait in front of the sheriff whose memory has a long-term attachment to his belly. “Three scrambled with cheese, double orders of bacon and toast, a side of grits and coffee,” his routine order, but I wait for confirmation before writing it down. His minions settle for powdered doughnuts and coffee. I’ve been out with the sheriff a few times, and it was fun, but I quickly realized it was going nowhere, so now we’re just good friends. I call out the orders, pour coffee, and ask, “How’s it goin’, Brad?”

“Kinda rough, Wanda. Pulled an all nighter.”

“Stake out?” I know better.

“Naw, those movie people paid me to watch their trucks and equipment last night.”

“Oh.” I glance down the counter to see if Crystal has taken this in as Darlene approaches Lane with a fresh pot of coffee.

“Darlene, you look lovelier than ever,” Lane says.

“Coffee?”

“Sounds grand. How’ve you been, Hon?”

“Peachy. Want your usual?”

“No, doughnuts are out for a while, doll. Gotta watch the waist, you know. Say, you busy tonight?”

“Sure am. Cheese eggs are good today.”

“No, no. Just black coffee, thanks.”

Lane swivels on his stool, his roving eye searching, and sings out, “Why Crystal, my dear, how are you this fine morning?” His voice rises as she delivers plates of food near the far end of the counter.

“Fine, Lane!” she says, never looking his way. He long ago gave up on me as a potential date. A frosty stare met him each time he attempted to lure me out of the café. I know his kind. For a moment he sits mute among the diners. But, never one to admit defeat, he shouts, “I ’spose you ladies have been approached to make your movie debuts this weekend!”

“Ain’t gonna happen,” the Sheriff offers in a benign growl.

“Why’s that?” Crystal wails, forgetting herself.

“Pullin’ out this mornin’. Told me so ’bout an hour ago. Through filmin’ here.” His square face reminds me of a bulldog. Sometimes I think I see drool in the corners of his mouth, though none’s really ever there. With a fork clinched in his fist, he resumes his attack on his eggs.

Crystal’s back is stiff, her face drained.

“Crystal, man at the end needs some coffee,” I snap. Startled, Crystal blinks and scurries down the

counter with the coffeepot.

“Only thing I could think to do,” I whisper to Darlene.

“I know.”

The sheriff rises and the rest of his crew jump like puppets on a string. Brad peels off several bills from a wad from his pocket, and I gaze at his face, a map of countless lonely winters. A toothpick stands erect in the side of his mouth, a visual reminder of his imagined virility. He nods with a grin and turns to go.

The café begins to empty as the clock signals Sam’s crew to prepare for the upcoming lunch crowd.

Lane, last to rise from his stool, smiles broadly at Darlene as he hands her bills and coins. He’s maintained a long-term habit of attempting to underpay his tab and over-tip for service, but it’s never worked here.

“Darlene, I got a two-for-one drink ticket at the Thirsty Scotsman whenever you’re free,” he says with a sheepish grin.

“We’ll have to do that sometime, Lane.”

His eyes sparkle as he takes a deep breath and struts toward the door.

“Lane?” she calls.

“Yeah, hon?”

“Would you mind playing a George Jones on your way out?”

“Sure, doll. Anything for you.”

The three of us work in uneasy silence in the almost empty café, removing dishes, wiping down the counter, and listening to a country crooner on the jukebox bemoan lost loves. The sun plays peek-a-boo through the clouds, flashing reflections of its power over watery ruts in the road, and at the sound of revving engines and grinding gears, we turn like meerkats startled by a caravan of movie trucks pulling out onto the nearby highway.

I signal Darlene to busy herself at the other end of the café and turn to Crystal, whose eyes are locked on the empty wet road. “Them Hollywood types don’t come with no truth in ’em, hon. Those folks dance around in a fairyland just pretendin’, but they ain’t the people who really count in the world. We are. We smile, we feed ’em, we clean up after ’em. Those kind just come and go. We’re what it’s all about, not them...you and me and Darlene and Bertie—real people. We make it happen, you know,...Crystal?”

Crystal buries her small hands in her apron, her glassy eyes lost in an unseen drama.

“You hear me, girl?”

“Uh huh.” Crystal turns with a sad smile. “I ’spose we oughta get the fries out o’ the fridge, huh?”

“Yeah, I ’spose so.” I smile and glance up to see an early lunch patron stroll in, nod, and drop a coin in the jukebox.

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