

BLOOD MONEY

Gerry prided himself on being the kind of waiter who tried to make some kind of meaningful connection with his customers. It might have been that he was a solid generation older than most of the other waiters, kids in their early twenties, every one of them dying to make it big in theater or film. He himself had just drifted into acting; he didn't place his steady string of bit parts far above his work at the restaurant.

It might have been because he was older, and supposedly wiser, that he connected well with so many of the patrons. After only a few months in Marvin Gardens, an unpretentious establishment on the Upper West Side, several of the regulars asked to be seated in his section, and some admitted to him that they'd come in on a particular night because they knew it was one of his shifts. He knew these people by name--the old actor who came in late after rehearsals early in the week, the novelist who took his eight year old daughter to dinner every other Tuesday, and the art book reviewer who wanted a quiet corner booth to pore over his advance copies.

He remembered facts about their lives, asked about new developments, remembered colds and other troubles from the time before, offered drink and food suggestions in line with their customary orders. He bantered, might even pry the slightest bit, but he had a good nose for when to back off and let that precious shell of public privacy close loosely about a table. He was always well tipped.

He might have even gotten a bit arrogant about how good he was. He was an actor, true, but his waiting wasn't an act. He loved these people. In fact, he was deeply glad to be participating in the mostly normal, healthy lives of his patrons. He craved their wonderful normalcy, which he recognized as a genuine achievement. He'd come to the restaurant directly from a wrecked life barely salvaged by an expensive detoxification center. Once, he'd been a successful audiologist, but detox fees and his divorce settlement had drained away the last stacks of cash that he hadn't thrown away on cocaine. Before that release date there had been five long, black years of surprising denial: Lawyers had drug habits, musicians had drug habits, but not an audiologist, especially one with a thriving practice and a six-figure annual income.

Gerry took to acting as easily as he took to waiting on tables. His reclaimed ego was wondrously unencumbered by his old hunger for upward mobility. Relaxed and chatty during some Off-Broadway cattle call, he'd chum it up with the veterans or tease the tense

kids pacing about with sheaves of damp photocopy in their hands. "You'll be fine," he'd called to one or the other. His heart went out to all of them, some so young, many without even a college degree, every tip going to acting lessons, gambling all.

One night an incident at the restaurant really threw him, though. It shook his confidence in his own re-established worth, and yet it was such a tiny incident, really. He'd brought a patron's credit card to the cash register, as he did dozens of times a day, but this time the verification machine had sent back a confiscation message. That had happened to him on two other occasions, so there was no great mystery at work. The procedure was that he would return to the table and quietly inform the card owner that he'd been ordered to confiscate the card. He would then ask the customer to step back to the register with him, where John, the manager, would hold the card out of public view and cut it in half with a scissors. The customer had to witness this act, so that there would be no later charges that the card had been snatched for illegal use. Gerry, or whoever had received the confiscation command, would eventually be rewarded with a fifty-dollar check from the credit card company. The other waiters regarded these incidents as analogous to winning a minor lottery.

This time, the third time that Gerry had drawn a confiscation command, involved the card of a young black male on a date. Gerry had liked the guy immediately. He was, well, *sweet*. That was the word, sweet. He was neatly dressed in a brown suit, built bulkily, like a Teddy Bear, square and sort of huggable. His date was a sharp looking young woman with absolutely coal black eyes that kept sliding around slyly above lips that opened intermittently into flashing smiles.

Gerry delighted in the intimacy that these two young people were so evidently building between them. He kept sneaking glances at them, back where they were both leaning way forward across the table in their private booth. At times, their two heads were nearly touching. The young man kept wagging a finger along his brow as if he couldn't believe what he was hearing. Each time, the girl would duck her head away, sometimes with an audible, "Oh" or "Oh yeah." Twice that he could see, she swatted his temple ever so gently with the tips of two or three slim fingers.

They drank slowly. They also ate slowly. The young man called Gerry over often, and not always for anything terribly important. He seemed to need a bit of third party intrusion to spell the dazzle that he was tumbling into. The two young people dawdled

forever over desert, strawberries in Kirsch sauce over a small Belgian waffle, Gerry's recommendation.

Gerry had hoped, in fact, that he was part of the reason why they were staying on and on. There might have been a movie or jazz spot in their evening plans, but there seemed to be no other place they'd rather be at the moment. But the time finally arrived when the check was called for and Gerry slipped off to the register and then the little gray box pulsed in blue letters, "Retrieve Card."

The first thing that Gerry thought when he saw the message was, "Fifty dollars." He had been to three auditions that week and had received only one call back. It was for an Off Broadway gig anyway, limited run, small money. He was over the days of doing it for the dues but not yet at the place where he could forgo doing it only for the connections.

He went back to the table and leaned a bit over the couple. "I'm Sorry, Mr. Robbins," he said quietly, "but we're having a problem with your card. Could you step to the register with me for a moment?"

He knew the young man's first name, had been asked to use it earlier. The guy had introduced himself--Dave--and then slapped his hand into Gerry's with his elbow still planted neatly on the table. It was a big, warm hand, with some strength to it. Gerry had thought, strangely, that the woman would love to feel that hand running along her body, an experience that he intuited the couple had not shared yet.

Dave's eyes searched his face. "You're kidding, right?"

They had joked around enough that Gerry realized it would not be strange if he were joking. "No, sorry. The company zaps us with these nasty little messages. It could be anything--a mistake, or a problem with a duplicate card. It happens a lot."

Dave shook his head. "Well, shit. What happens now?"

"No biggie. Have you got another card?"

"No, I don't got another card."

"Can you pay in cash?"

Dave blinked down at the check. The young woman's eyes slid from the check to Dave to Gerry. "Hell, I don't have that kind of cash on me."

"Manager might take a check."

"I don't have no checkbook with me, Gerry. My card does all my talkin' for me."

He reached for the card, but Gerry lifted it just out of reach. "I got to keep this, Dave. Let's step back and chat with the manager. He's a good guy."

Back at the register, Gerry flagged John and the three men conferred quietly. John suggested that Dave ask his date to cover the check, a loan, and when Dave returned with her credit card, John held Dave's confiscated card down by his belt buckle and ceremoniously snipped it in half. Gerry slipped off to the kitchen to check on orders, and when he came out a few moments later the couple had gone.

It had all happened quickly, but over the next two weeks bits and pieces of the incident kept slipping back into Gerry's mind. It saddened him a lot, and to a degree that surprised him. He could remember how the fragile, shimmering energy around the table had dissolved like a soap bubble as Dave had realized that he wasn't kidding about the card. He could feel a kind of wall drop into place around Dave, though the young woman's eyes had struggled so gamely to penetrate it, to reach across that short space and keep connecting with the young man. Now Dave realized why she had so quietly reached for her purse; not to bolt, but to pay up quick. But then she'd held off, waiting.

At the register with John, Dave had seemed smaller. His mouth had remained open between words, his lower lip slack. His earlier aplomb had vanished. He must have known that when somebody is standing with the manager by the register that everyone watching knows that that somebody is in some sort of trouble. When he'd gone back to the table to speak to the young woman, his head had been nearly invisible from behind, and he'd lurched awkwardly side to side. In fact, he had bumped another patron's chair and had not noticed when she swung her head around for an apology. And then, sixty seconds later, that awful metallic snap of the scissors.

And they had left without saying goodbye to him. The fact sort of hurt his feelings.

He talked about it with John, and the manager owned that it was the worst thing about his job. "I hate it," he said, out flat. "In fact, once I ignored the goddam message and kind of covered for this one guy. Told him, Hey, check out your card there's something wrong with it, but damn if the company didn't follow up with a letter to Marvin," the restaurant's owner. "The bastards threatened to drop service."

Strangely, the story was a relief to hear for Gerry. So, he'd really had no choice in the matter. Besides, it was Dave's fault for not watching his own spending. Gerry saw the kid's

smooth sweetness in another light, as if he might have been an affable loser trying to impress a young woman who was out of his league.

But the relief was short lived. The guy had been just too damned nice to write off as a loser. Gerry had seen how that young woman, with her two arms so neatly crossed on the table before her, had opened to that boy like a tender blossom. Dave watching her, nodding with her words, and how the words just came from her.

By the time Gerry's reward check came, he wanted to do the whole thing over. He ached to be back there two weeks earlier when that message had flashed and then have come up with some clever way to cover for the kid. Get him to step away, maybe with a wink to the girl, and work something out over by the bar. He even toyed with the idea of finding out Dave's address from the company and mailing him a note, a kind of apology, maybe even send him the fifty bucks. Tell the two of them to have another dinner, this time on him!

John held the check aloft by the register. "Do you want this cashed?" It was early in the shift.

"Burn the damned thing."

"You burn it. Here." He flapped the check at him.

Gerry stepped over and took it and looked at it. They made them so big, as if you'd really done something great. The fact is, they knew that if they flashed fifty bucks at you that you'd do what they wanted. He could be bought.

"Want me to cash it, Gerry?"

"I guess so. I feel so tainted, though."

"If the guy can't handle a credit card then he shouldn't have one. It's that simple."

Gerry endorsed the check and John handed him a brand new fifty from under the cash tray. "I could've given it to you in ones, but this'll make it seem smaller."

The incident was now officially over, and it did help to know the rent would be easier to meet. When he collected his divvy of the tips at closing time, he shoved the other bills around the tainted fifty in his billfold.

It was cold outside at closing time, Broadway almost wholly darkened at two A.M. on a weeknight. Always wary of the streets at that hour, Gerry hurried for home, a four-block walk. Not twenty feet from the door, he could see that the dark figure of a man in the

crosswalk ahead had shifted direction to catch Gerry's trajectory at the next block. A bum on the make, rarely dangerous, but who needed it?

One option was to swing immediately at the corner and then outpace the man along the cross street or, that failing, simply take to his heels. Gerry had read the man's body language as non-violent. He was thin, not so healthy it seemed, underdressed for the temperature, and moving with a kind of suppliant stoop. Gerry kept his body erect, his pace sure, and his eyes directly on the man. Learned behavior.

The man began speaking at him when they were still yards apart. "Excuse me, sir, excuse me, sir, but can you give me just a few moments of your time. I am in an awful situation."

Gerry did not slow down. (Never seem intimidated.) "What's up?"

The man was soon beside him, keeping pace. "I am in a heap of trouble. My car's stopped out on the West End Highway with my poor wife sitting in the front seat. My battery's dead and the all night garage says I need twelve bucks for a recharge. I got to haul the goddam thing down to them, and I'm five bucks short. Can you help me out a bit?"

Gerry had started laughing before the guy even finished speaking. He came to a halt and turned to face him. "Your wife must be awful cold, pal."

"She is, sir." The man smiled uncertainly, exposing a gap where he'd lost a bicuspid. "And it's so late."

"She must be *really* cold--because she's been out there for six months."

The man's face flinched, but then it began to rapidly recompose by degrees. It was becoming more self-possessed, its planes more solid. He knew.

"You remember me now, don't you," said Gerry. "You played that same routine for me back in the fall. I gave you five bucks then."

The man shook his head and then raised a thumb. "Okay, brother, you win. Have a nice night."

They parted with a laugh, but a few yards farther on, Gerry turned on his heel. The cold had closed around him so quickly. He called after the man, "Hold on!"

The fellow had covered nearly half the block, hurrying for whatever other mark he might find at that lonely hour.

"Here, I'll give you something," Gerry called. He had his wallet out already.

The man hurried up. "Really? Hey, this is damned decent."

"So this routine you do, is it like your job or something?"

"You could say that. I wouldn't friggin' recommend it, though."

"I guess we're both actors. Here."

The fellow stared at the bill as if it were foreign currency. "You're kidding. Fifty bucks?"

"Just please, don't drink it up."

The man snickered, nothing suppliant about him anymore. "I can't promise that, but I won't drink it *all* up."

"Fair enough. Have a good night."

"I sure will. And listen, brother, I'm going to say a little prayer for you. This is heavy generosity here."

Gerry had stepped away, but again he halted. He called after the man. "Don't pray for me. Say a prayer for Dave, okay?"

"Who's Dave?"

"It doesn't matter." It was so cold, a shiver passed through Gerry and riffled his speech. "Just remember to pray for Dave. You got that?"

"I got it. Pray for Dave."

Gerry hurried off, genuinely cold now, but his relief was immense. The prayer would help Dave. It would be the little extra help he needed. It would speed back through time and revise history, if need be. By the time he reached his building, he knew that later that night between those two kids the first stings had passed. Oh, they had mumbled for a while, Dave and his lady, and they had bumbled through a few long minutes, but little by little the connections had come back, maybe even stronger, more real than before, and then, surely, that sly girl had used her long slim fingers to rub the last traces of shame from his heart.