

Change of Heart

Richard finally lowered his newspaper and inhaled the roasted scent of the fresh cup of coffee now sitting just inches away on the table in front of him. The waitress had asked if he needed anything else, sugar, cream, milk? But in return he gave an audible grunt from behind the paper and she smiled and moved on to the diner's other customers.

He took a few sips before checking the silver watch wrapped around his wrist. It was Friday, and on Fridays Richard made it a habit to give himself an extra half hour to enjoy the local paper and a coffee before starting his weekend of overnight shifts at the Comfort Inn a few blocks down the street. He didn't have to be there; the property had been under his thumb for years. But a lack of family provided the free time and the sense of calm achieved by control lead to sleep so peaceful, Richard didn't even have to worry about going to bed at ten in the morning.

But tonight was different. Tonight, Richard couldn't help noticing how often the waitress who had delivered his dosage of caffeine was checking back on the last table in his row, tucked away in the corner of the room. Her curls bounced as she quickly shifted from one table to the next. Richard noticed them settle, grazing her freckled copper shoulders as she stopped at the corner once more; this time pausing just long enough to plant a kiss on the cheek of a young boy who was seated there alone. As she kneeled down the boy grinned from ear to ear, his smile radiating against his dark complexion. She removed a colorful cloth from his backpack and, in just a few swift motions, wrapped it tightly around her head securing most of the curls out of sight. As she was about to walk away from the boy once more, he grabbed her hand. The waitress gently patted him on the head and motioned to the books, pencils, and papers scattered across the tabletop. The boy sighed, picked up a pencil, and began to write.

"Evenin' Richard! How's it goin' tonight, hun? I see you're gearin' up for another fun weekend!"

Richard's gaze moved from the boy's table to the plump, blonde woman now standing beside his own, peering down at him waiting for a response.

"Oh, hey Martha. I'm alright, just thinking about this story I was reading..." Richard nodded his head towards the newspaper as his voice trailed off.

“Well then, I won’t bother you no more and let you get back to it,” she responded.

Richard never said much of anything during his brief interactions with the diner’s oldest waitress, no matter how pleasant she always tried to be. She had to be in her fifties at least, just like him, yet here she was still waiting tables. To Richard this was simply a lack of true ambition or a lack of perusing education or perhaps a mixture of both. But tonight his curiosity had gotten the better of him.

“Uh, actually I was just wondering. I noticed that boy over there, he’s just sitting there by himself. Where are his parents? He doesn’t look like he could be much older than nine, maybe ten years old...” Richard nodded his head again, this time towards the direction of the corner table.

Martha glanced at the boy and then back down at Richard. She leaned in closer and whispered, “Oh, the new girl, the one servin’ you. That’s her son. Poor girl, her sitter canceled and I don’t think his dad is around much...”

“Yeah, that would sound about right,” Richard scoffed. Martha ignored the comment and continued.

“...anyway she’s been here about a week now and we needed the extra hands tonight, boss said he didn’t mind it since she’s only here for a few hours,” she explained.

“Well, it’s a little ridiculous if you ask me. If there’s nobody to watch your child then she doesn’t need to be bringing him to her job, that’s no way to be a mother. She should have stayed home with him, not dragged him in here unsupervised,” Richard responded.

Martha shrugged her shoulders.

“Well, I guess we all got our opinions...” she said while looking around the diner, clearly avoiding eye contact.

Richard scoffed again before swallowing the last of his coffee.



The grandfather clock in the hotel lobby let out three distinct chimes. *Is it really three in the morning already?* Richard thought as he confirmed the time on his watch to be the same.

It required a bit of effort to push himself up out of the chair he had been glued to since his shift started at ten o' clock. He had been feeling a little under the weather on Saturday morning, some slight pains in his chest, so throughout the night he forced himself to drink a full cleaned-out gallon milk jug of water. And now that water was ready to make its comeback.

Richard began to walk towards the bathroom. He quickened his pace as the urge to release intensified, but suddenly stopped. He could feel a pain sharper than any before vibrate in his chest and then down throughout his body. Another strong vibration forced him to the floor, screaming out for help. His vision blurred until he could no longer see the woman approaching yelling into her cellphone.



“Sir? Hello! Sir? Can you hear me?”

Richard's eyes fluttered as he regained consciousness... *Where have I heard that voice?*

“Sir, I'm a paramedic I'm here to help you. Can you hear me?”

Light from the lobby chandelier ricocheted off the paramedic's ebony curls gathered into a high ponytail. Richard blinked several times to make sure he was seeing things correctly.

“Sir, how are you feeling? Can you speak?” she asked. Richard looked directly at her face.

“It's... you...” he managed to get out between rapid breaths. He felt a hand tighten around his right wrist.

“He definitely has a bounding pulse, we need to check his blood pressure,” another voice said over him.

Richard struggled to hear what the paramedics were saying as he repurposed his strength attempting to watch what was happening. He was being carried out the hotel doors, blinded by red lights stretching across the sides of the building. But soon enough edges were blurring and his dilated pupils found themselves focusing on the deep, hazel pair above that belonged to the waitress now running a bunch of tests on his cold, clammy body.

“...pressure at 150... transported right away...”

“Sir... nitroglycerin?”

Richard recognized the word, he let his lids fall and managed to speak.

“What?”

“Are you prescribed nitroglycerin?” he heard her voice, strong yet gentle.

“Yes...” he replied.

He could feel his mouth being opened and something dissolving under his tongue. The minutes passed liked hours, but eventually his breathing had slowed enough for him to finally face her.

“Sir, I just need to ask you a few questions while I can,” she said.

Richard wasted no time. He reached out to hold one of her hands in both of his own. She was startled by the unexpected gesture, but did not withdraw her arm.

“Thank you for all that you have done for me,” he spoke softly, placing equal emphasis on each word.

She smiled, a perfect dupe of her son’s grin from back at the diner.