

Yellowbird Diner

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Johnny enters the mid-afternoon diner like Fonzie coming on stage, hands in his black leather pockets, collar shrugged up under his DA like he's cold. He's not. He's hot, he's hyped, he's jazzed; his blood runs through his veins like jabbering red army ants, his heart pounding like a freight car. Behind his mirrored shades, his eyes are bloodshot manholes.

Rule number one: establish yourself in space. All right. He's gotten good at this, and it takes him half a second.

The room is long and narrow, (one two three) five booths backed up to the wall on your right, a long walkway passing their open ends, from the door at your back to another door down at the end. On your left, a row of spinny red barstools belly up to the counter, and behind the counter, all the usual behind-the-counter stuff of a busy diner.

Rule number two: establish your players. All right. Another half second.

Exhibit A: In the first booth, her back to the window: female, late eighties, early nineties. One of those biddies you see everywhere, her hair in a pale grey bun on the back of her head, little round glasses with a chain. Tea in front of her in a cup, a teapot beside it, her pen cane-tapping down the row of Across hints for a puzzle as big as a gameboard. Exhibit A, dismissed.

Exhibit B: On a stool halfway down the counter: male, late thirties, early forties. One of those ex-sports jocks you also see everywhere, big but gone soft, shoveling a messy scramble of eggs and corned beef and hash browns with one hand, forefinger of the other tracing his laborious progress on the sports page. Of course. Exhibit B, noted.

Exhibit C: All the way down by the other door, his back to the wall: male, late fifties, early sixties. A seedy, shifty-eyed shrew of a man, about four feet tall, maybe ninety pounds soaking wet. One of those men Dad would call a milk-toast. Johnny's not sure what that means, but knowing Dad, it's probably something sexual. Dad's favorite insults are *milk-toast*, *pansy*, and *fag*. If you're not a fellow Teamster, chances are pretty good you're at least a couple of those three. Exhibit C, dismissed.

So the only one he has to be leery of is Sports-boy. He's pretty sure Sports-boy'd love to tell you about the bazillion yards he rushed and the bazillion quarterbacks he sacked, but that was half his lifetime ago, at two-thirds of his current weight. Even if he has a God complex, and wants to save the day, he won't be much of a threat. Betchya twenty bucks he hasn't got a 357 in *his* pocket, like the one Johnny pulls out now, points right between the eyes of Exhibit D, coming down the space behind the counter, watching him. Female, maybe nineteen, face like a bowl of diced tomatoes and cottage cheese. She stops dead, looking at the gun like she's scared. Well, duh. She'd better be.

"Nobody move!" he shouts. "Nobody move, and nobody gets hurt!" He hates this part. He always sounds like a cardboard bad guy in a low-budget flick, but there's a reason it's a cliché – it's what you've gotta tell them. He swings his cannon around to his right, aiming at Sports-boy, but Sports-boy still has his mouth open like he needs it to breathe with, his eyes blinking like a Saturday-morning cartoon above the mess in his pie-hole. Down to the far end, but all he sees there is Shrew-boy's butt scuttling under the table. Around to Granny, but Granny's dropped her pen in her tea-cup, hands coming up now to her open mouth. She's starting to quiver, like Jello, like Santa's belly, just shaking all over like she's scared. Well, duh. She'd better be.

Gun back around to Pizza-face now, right in her eyes again. "Ok, Pizza-face, you know the routine, all the money in here, and hurry up about it!" giving her the paper bag he stole from the store down the street. She opens the drawer, starts to pull ones out like she's counting, afraid her till's going to be off tonight.

"Come on! Come on! Dump it! Pop all the little thingies, and just dump it!" Come on, you've gotta be *told* how to get robbed? Sports-boy shifts his weight, like his brain's begun to process things now, adding one plus one and coming up with hero-time. He swings the gun around again, speaks slowly and clearly.

"Hey, Sports-boy. This is a gun. You know, bang-bang? You move, you get a hole in your forehead like those dots

the Hindus wear, and the back of your head just goes away, like that watermelon in the slow-mo film. You got it? You move, I go bang, you drop dead, ok?” Down at the far end, Shrew-boy has completely disappeared, and on his right, Granny’s shaking so hard, she’s got ripples in the tea-cup she isn’t even touching.

Pizza-face folds the top of the bag down like Mommy making your lunch, sets it on the counter. She’s saying something, but she’s crying pretty hard now, and he’s not sure what she said. It sounded for all the world like “Have a nice day, sir!” and he wants to laugh at her, but now Sports-boy makes his move.

Well, it’s not all that much of a move, but he turns the stool like he’s going to get up, and Johnny brings the gun back around to his face, like go-ahead-make-my-day, and Sports-boy puts his hands up by his ears and just goes soft all over, and Johnny smiles. *This* is what it’s for. *This* is why he does it. Oh, it’s a pretty decent living, but *this* is the real reason. He just put a gun in a man’s face and made the man back down, and it just doesn’t get any better than that!

“Oh, you bet, Pizza-face! I’ll have a real nice day, *now!*” he says, taking his bag and turning to the door. “I’ll have a *great* day, now!”

But the universe takes a funny little tilt, sort of shifts over sideways half a tooth, and somehow, he’s not sure how, he gets a little out-of-place in the scheme of things. He’s on his knees, arms windmilling beside his head, trying hard not to go over backward. He’s not sure where his bag and his gun went. The thing actually keeping him from going over is Granny’s left hand, twisted into his black leather jacket. One saggy-baggy brown nylon knee is pressed hard into his crotch, and she’s got her right elbow up by her ear, sighting like an archer down two of the ugliest, wickedest, longest, sharpest knitting needles he’s ever seen, extending through her fisted fingers like two of Wolverine’s blades.

“One move, sonny,” she pleads, the needles an inch from his eyes. “One move, and you cry eyeball pus all afternoon, and you live in the dark the rest of your life! Please, punk, I’m begging you, make one move!” But Johnny goes dead-man still, his arms stopped now, his fingers spread as empty-wide as they can go, his whole body gone please-ma’am still.

A long ticking moment goes by, and then Granny says “Somebody call 911.”