

## *Late Night Bite*

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by Mila Burton

They are sitting at the restaurant, the four friends. The booth is crowded with them. Paul and Sarah sit side-by-side, nursing their sodas and munching on french-fries. They giggle and kiss. Ansel takes slow drags of his cigarette and occasionally sips his coffee. Tess watches Paul and Sarah and rolls her eyes.

"Must you?" she asks.

They stop and sip their drinks.

Ansel pulls a pen out of the back pocket of his jeans and doodles on his napkin. The pen moves hurriedly in his long fingers. He is still waiting for his food.

Tess lights a cigarette; she holds it tightly in clenched hands.

"How is your job hunt going?" Sarah asks. The question is directed at Ansel: the only one searching for a job right now.

He shrugs and rolls his shoulders out of their perpetual stoop. "Okay, I guess. I've been making a lot of phone calls and still have two interviews this week."

Paul swallows what he was chewing. "So, that computer thing hasn't come through yet?" He plays with the straw in his drink. "When did you call them?"

"Last week," Tess answers the question and sits up. Ansel returns to his stoop. She straightens the watch on her wrist and looks around. "And the grocery thing is a long time coming.... Jeeze, where is our waitress? I'd like to order something to eat."

Sarah fidgets with her beads. "I don't know."

Tess purses her lips. "I wasn't asking you."

Paul brushes his hair out of his eyes and leans over to. "So, uh... how are things at the music store?"

Tess runs a finger along her eyebrow and takes a slow drag off her cigarette. "I hate it... It's okay... I guess... It's a job."

He straightens his shirt. "I would love to work there. Someday I want to own my own music store. It'll be great."

"I guess it beats the hell out of washing dishes," she responds. "You must find that a very demeaning job--like waiting tables."

"You can make good money waiting tables," Ansel interjects. He doesn't even look up from his doodle on the napkin.

"How would you know?" is her response. "I thought you quit because you weren't making anything."

"But there were nights I could bring home seventy bucks after two hours."

"And there were nights you didn't make enough for a pack of cigarettes!" Tess' temper is barely controlled to night. "Never mind the fact that while I'm working, making your half of the rent, you're out having a good time with your friends..."

Ansel puts down his pen and starts cracking his knuckles. "I told you I'd have the money by the end of the month..."

"So where is it?" Tess snaps. Her dark eyes flash behind her glasses.

Sarah tries to relieve the tension. "You remember that time we all drove out to the middle of nowhere and lit fireworks?"

"That was a couple of months ago," Paul adds. "We had a good time."

"I remember that," Ansel states.

"Will was setting off bottle rockets in his hands...." interrupts Sarah. "And at the end of the night his hand was black and numb and he couldn't figure out why..."

"Moron," hisses Tess.

"Like setting them off in his hand didn't have anything to do with it..." Paul munches his fries and offers them to the rest of the booth. "Don't forget when we raced that one..."

Ansel picks up from there. "And it was going straight in front of the car and we were driving right behind it..."

"All of us packed into Tess' car," Sarah sips her drink, satisfied that her gambit to calm things down has worked. "And somehow there was room for all of us, even Will, and the box of fireworks...."

"But, anyway," Paul continues. "It was in front of us, and then it was beside us--we were racing it..."

Tess stubs out her cigarette. "We know; we were there."

"And it went under the car," Sarah doesn't miss a beat. "And Tess started freaking out because she thought it would set the gas tank off."

Tess stops her there. "It could have. Oh, that'd be real flippin' funny if the car had blown up, ha-ha. Then we could all be dead and not just Will."

The booth falls silent. Tess shifts uncomfortably for a moment and excuses herself. The others watch her go.

Ansel picks up his pen and resumes his doodle. "I can't believe we're sitting here talking about Will like nothing happened."

The others nod and Ansel puts his pen down. "Death is a trip where you can't write back." His voice is barely audible.

Sarah plays with the ice in her glass. "Did Will say that?"

Ansel laughs softly and puts the cap back on his pen. "No, uh..." He wiggles out of his jacket. "No, Tess said that."

"Was that before or after she screamed, 'Fire-bomb the casket'?" Paul asks. He loosens the collar on his shirt. It's getting hot.

Sarah runs her fingers through her hair. "I can't believe she did that..."

"In the car..." Ansel starts. He looks around nervously. "Where is our waitress?"

Sarah starts applying eye make-up. She blinks and rubs. "I don't know but I'm getting kinda thirsty."

"That's what Will wanted," Paul returns to an earlier subject. "He wanted to be cremated--not buried with relatives he didn't know or didn't like."

"That asshole's laughing at us right now," Ansel mutters.

"He's roasting in hell and you know it." Paul finishes his fries.

Tess comes back. Her knuckles are bruised and her hands shake as she lights her cigarette.

"Do you think he'll come back?" Sarah asks. The question isn't meant to be answered.

"I don't believe in re-incarnation," Paul states.

"What do you want to come back as?" she asks him.

"I SAID," his voice is terse. "I don't believe in re-incarnation. If you just look at how the population has grown in the past fifty years.... I just don't think there are enough souls to account for that."

"What about extinct species?" Sarah asks. "I bet enough trees were cut down in the rain forest to populate the planet."

"Don't forget the bugs and birds that lived there," Tess adds. "That could explain China right there."

"Trees coming back as people," Ansel muses. "That could explain the rise of environmental activists in the world."

"You're studying to be a scientist," Tess starts. The discussion has distracted her from whatever was bothering her. "It's just the law of the conservation of energy. Nothing can be created or destroyed; so, there are so many souls in the world. This tree thing could explain the population explosion right there."

"I want to come back as a dolphin," Sarah says.

"Trees don't have souls!" shouts Paul.

"Oh...." moans Ansel. "Sarah the dolphin. I'll never eat tuna again...."

Sarah stirs her ice. "What do you mean, 'trees don't have souls'?"

"How simple can it be?" Paul asks. "Trees don't have souls!"

"Do animals have souls?"

Paul looks indignant and rolls his blue eyes. "No."

Sarah sits up straight and fusses with her beads. "So people don't have souls either?"

Paul wiggles in the booth to better face her. "Of course people have souls."

"But," Sarah knits her eyebrows. "You said animals don't have souls and man is an animal. At what stage in the evolution did the soul form?"

"There's no such thing as evolution," Paul states it calmly, as if he were giving the time of day. The others stare.

"I thought he was going to be a scientist," Tess mumbles.

"There's plenty of truth in the creation theory," Paul sips at the water in his glass. "If the evolutionist would just look at the proof with more than a mocking eye...."

"What about Neanderthals?" pipes Sarah.

"They never existed," Paul explains.

Tess laughs. "Oh, boy."

"So what are the bones?" inquires Ansel. "Just some sort of plot or trick put there by the devil? Or did God put them there to test our faith?"

Paul looks around at the others. "Of course."

Tess is still laughing. "You're kidding of course..."

"No," Paul frowns. "I'm perfectly serious."

"Where the hell is our waitress?" Ansel looks around impatiently. "That's it! No one's getting a tip from me! No service--no tip! I can't believe this! How hard is it to just come over here and ask me what I want? Jeeze!"

"I'd like to come back as some kind of sea-bird," Sarah stares into space. "I could live in the air... like an albatross or something."

"Like 'The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner'?" Ansel asks. "Cool."

Tess takes a sip of her coffee and gags. It's cold. "This is the worst service I've ever had. Whose idea was it to come here anyway?"

"I think it was yours," Paul states.

"I'd like to come back as a storm and level this place," she finishes. "This is awful."

"Stop talking about it!" shouts Paul. "I don't believe it!"

"You want to come back as a storm?" Sarah is fascinated by the idea.

"Sure," Ansel talks for her. "Hurricane Tess."

Tess starts another cigarette. "I'd start in the Gulf of Mexico and work my way north. First I'd take out Galveston and all those beach brats on spring break. They'd be trapped in storm shelters when all along they just wanted to get stupid on the beach. Ha ha... Once finished there, I'd flood Houston. No shuttle launches that day."

Ansel shuts his eyes to better see Tess' vision. She continues. "Then Dallas... I'd meet up with the jet stream and really get going. The mid-cities would cower under me. Streets would flood and children and old people would drown. I reach down from the heavens...."

"With what?" Paul interrupts.

"What?"

Paul taps the top of the table. "You said you'd reach down from the heavens.... Reach down with what?"

Tess takes a drag. "My fingers."

"You said you were a storm," Paul points out. "Storms don't have fingers,.... do they?"

"Tornadoes..." Tess explains. "I'd reach down with funnel clouds and scoop up whole trailer parks at a time." She takes another drag. "It's all so simple... The fingers of God...."

"What a lovely image," Ansel tries to wave the waitress over from where she'd smoking a cigarette. "Nice idea... now it's mine."

Tess is ignoring him, much like the waitress. "I could take out whole power grids. I could set fire to the suburbs, stop traffic, twenty-four hour businesses would lose millions of dollars, I could DESTROY THIS SHIT-HOLE RESTAURANT!"

The waitress glances up from the bar and returns to her cigarette.

Tess wads her place mat into a ball and hurls it at the waitress. "Excuse me, Miss? We'd like some service; could we have a waitress, please?"

"Oh, nice one, Tess," Sarah groans. "Now she'll spit in our food."

"I think we're the only ones here," observes Paul.

Ansel takes the cap off his pen and starts a new doodle. "At least I took care of my tables."

"Were you a good waiter?" asks Sarah.

"One of the best," Paul teases.

"That's why he made such outrageous tips," smirks Tess.

Ansel ignores her and continues to draw.

Finally, the waitress stubs out her cigarette and saunters over to the booth. She pours fresh coffee for Tess and Ansel, and picks up empty glasses from Paul and Sarah. Tess asks for her bill.

"It'll be an hour before you get it," Paul says under his breath.

"I know," hums Tess. "That's why I'm asking for it now."

The waitress sends a sidelong glance at the booth.

"Just don't charge us for the grilled cheese sandwich you never brought us," snaps Ansel. "And don't expect any kind of gratuity!"

"Tip, bullshit," growls Tess. "Don't expect to have a job tomorrow."

The waitress sighs and turns her back on them. "I'm off tomorrow, and I wouldn't expect a tip from you brats anyway..."

"Brats?" Ansel barks.

"May I talk to your manager?" Sarah asks. She's trying to be nice.

The waitress won't even look at her. "He's not here."

"While the cat's away..." Tess starts.

"The mice will fuck up." Paul finishes.

"In thirty minutes this place is going to be crawling with drunks from down the street." The waitress lights another cigarette. "And I've got two kids waiting for me when I get home. I don't have to take any shit from a pack of kids who still live with their folks...."

"Two kids?" Sarah mouths the words.

"When did she start?" Paul asks. "Junior high?"

Tess is fuming mildly over the 'live at home' remark. "How nice to be able to pull shit like that at work and still know you have a job."

"Jeezus, I hate my job," Sarah starts. "I got written up for being five minutes late. I can't believe that..."

Paul interrupts. "Yeah, I used to get that. But the bus was late sometimes. You can always blame the bus."

"I had to walk," Ansel adds. "I was late because I was late."

"I just don't get it," Sarah buzzes on. "Anna's late all the time and she never gets written up or anything. He never writes her up."

"Maybe she's screwing your boss," Paul thinks out loud.

"I think she is," Sarah declares. "She doesn't even know how to do her stupid job. She always tells people the wrong thing and then I have to deal with them. It's a royal pain in the ass. They're always saying shit like: 'but the girl I talked to yesterday said blah, blah, blah...' and I have to explain to them: No, it's not like that at all..."

Tess fishes out her wallet and throws five bucks on the table. "That ought to cover it. I can't wait until world war three. I need to be somewhere tomorrow morning." She stands up.

Ansel stubs out his cigarette. "Wait a minute, I'll come with you. There's no reason to make someone else drive me home when you can."

Tess sighs, "Oh, you're welcome, Ansel."

"Well, we live together," he states.

Sarah checks her watch. "Uh, one-thirty. Be careful."

Tess laughs and points at Ansel. "Tell him; I watch where I'm going."

Ansel wrinkles his nose at her. They leave.

The waitress passes the booth but doesn't stop. The remaining two watch her and scowl.

Outside, there is the squeal of tires and a thud. They jump to see what's going on but can't see out the windows. Now there's high-pitched yelling and shouting.

Paul runs his fingers through his long black hair and rubs his eyes. "I bet Tess just backed into someone. She needs to slow down."

Sarah starts to pack her stuff. "We better go see."

Paul pulls Sarah down from her now-standing-position. "They'll come in here to work it out... trade information... call tow trucks."

But they don't. And the yelling outside has only gotten worse. The waitress has been watching from the door and now goes running back to the cook, "Jesse! Call nine one one! Hurry!"

Now they know something horrible has happened. Panic has set in.

"Oh god oh god oh god oh god..." Paul keeps repeating.

Sarah has started crying already.

They can see the parking lot from the door. Tess has a drunk by the collar and is shaking the shit out of him. He is crying. The drunk's friend tries to pull Tess off but she's not going to let go.

Paul trips on the stairs. Sarah has started screaming hysterically.

Ansel looks like a broken doll: his legs point one way, the rest of his body another. A thin line of blood runs from the corner of his mouth to collect in a small pool on the side of his face.

Tess is shouting at the top of her lungs and starting to go hoarse. "Mother fucker! I'll fucking KILL you! YOU NO GOOD GOD DAMNED DRUNK!"

The drunk's friend tries again to peel her off and her anger takes a new turn. She drops the drunk and grabs his friend. "How the hell could you let him drive in this state?!!! It's YOU! YOU'RE the one I should kill!!! It's all YOUR fault!!!"

Paul switches into computer mode and becomes horribly rational. He writes the license plate number on the back of his hand. Sarah kneels down to where Ansel is. She's afraid to touch him. Her hands hover over his face.

Tess has clocked the drunk's friend and he falls like a wooden peg. She returns to the drunk and hits him in the gut. He pukes as she yells at him, "I hope every time you shut your eyes this is what you see!"

On the pavement, Ansel gasps. Sarah gives him a weak smile. He grins and shuts his eyes.

In the distance, thunder rolls.