

Tupie's Diner

One night, while I was working at Tupie's Diner, a man left me the following note as a tip:

As I stood by the cashier stand, waiting for a table, a waitress approached from behind with a pot of hot coffee. Perhaps thinking that she might accidentally burn me with the coffee pot when she walked by, she placed her hand on my forearm to let me know that she was passing.

The sleeves were rolled up on my shirt so when she touched my forearm there was contact between her fingertips and my skin. The touch was more than a fleeting brush but less than a grasp and I could tell before having seen her that she was not heavy, nor was she petite. During that brief moment I felt that her fingers had a gentle and kind quality but they were not pampered. Though soft, she possessed working class fingers that frequently touched hot plates and were stabbed with silverware. The calluses that were formed and healed made her skin tougher but the lotions or creams that she rubbed on her hands helped to maintain their femininity. There may have even been the occasional splurging on manicures.

The more important truths that were transferred came as a result of the way she touched my forearm. Her fingers landed softly and conveyed a level of consideration with which all humans should treat one another. Her decency brought with it the feeling that there was hope for mankind.

When I looked at her I saw that she had tied a narrow segment of her hair, which fell along the left side of her face, into a braid. While walking past she said, "Excuse me, I didn't want to burn you with the coffee pot."

"Your braid looks pretty," I replied.

She paused for a moment and touched her braid, as though she had been unaware of it before I mentioned it. I felt it was clear that my comment was returned kindness rather than attempted seduction. She seemed satisfied that I was being sincere so she said, "Thank you," as she continued on her way.

The man who left the note was seated at one of my tables so our association continued through his meal but after he sat down, the only time he spoke to me was when he placed his order. While waiting for his meal, and during the time he was eating, he wrote frantically in a notebook. He must have written additional narratives because my note only took up one page and he was at it constantly. Whenever I looked at him he was filling up the notebook pages with a near manic intensity. As intriguing as my one-page *tip* was, I have been very curious about what else he was writing.

Upon reading my *tip* I immediately felt that I should commit as much of the experience to memory as possible so I ran through every detail I could think of. He looked to be about forty years old but his five o'clock shadow made him seem older, like a haggard middle-aged man. He was wearing an inexpensive dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows and his tie was pulled down enough to undo the top button of his shirt. It looked like he used some sort of gel on his dark hair, which was showing some signs of gray, but the sections of hair the gel was supposed to hold in place were hanging loose and limp. There was no doubt that he'd been through a long and difficult day. He looked like someone who kept a flask of bourbon with him at all times.

Almost as peculiar as his note was his order. The man calmly ordered pancakes with French fries and a glass of chocolate milk. He requested Grade A Amber syrup with no additives and he said he would gladly pay extra for it. I let him know that in Tupie's Diner there aren't any high-end condiments. When I brought him his food he momentarily stopped writing and poured our cheap restaurant supply syrup all over his pancakes, almost drowning them, and get this, he also poured syrup over his fries. Later on, when I came back to check on him, every bite of food on his plate was gone and his glass of chocolate milk was empty. When I tried to make a joke about how there wasn't any syrup left on his plate he just smiled, asked for a piece of apple pie, another glass of chocolate milk, and then he continued writing.

While I was taking an order at another table I saw him walk up to the cashier, pay his bill, and leave. When I went by his table I saw that there wasn't a single crumb of pie on his plate or a drop of

chocolate milk left in his glass. All that remained was the note. At first I was a little pissed that he hadn't left a tip but after reading the note I was quite pleased. It was so cool that he noticed my braid because most of the time when I'm doing my hair, I wonder why the hell I bother.

The next day I was keeping an eye out for him but he didn't come in. I certainly hadn't developed any sort of crush on the cheapskate who left me a somewhat touching note but I do keep it in the pocket of my uniform while I'm working. It makes me happy to take it out and read it from time to time, especially when men make comments about me that are in reference to areas other than my hair. That's all part of being a waitress in a diner though and I accept that, but it was nice that on this one night, one person saw me as something more than a servant or a curvy woman. I love that he wrote; *Her decency brought with it the feeling that there was hope for mankind.* What kind of person writes something like that?

One time I showed the note to Tupie. It was kind of slow in the diner and he was standing in front of the grill looking lost and forlorn so I said, "Hey Tupie, would you like to read something interesting?"

He immediately spun around, looked at me with wide eyes and said, "Yeah, I'd love to, whaddya got?" I handed him the note and after he read it he asked, "Where the hell did you get this?"

I told him the whole story, including what the guy ordered, and after he handed the note back to me he said, "Wow, amazing things happen in diners." He then spun back around and went back to doing nothing at the grill. That same night, around quitting time, Tupie and I were the only two left cleaning up and when we were done he asked, "Would you like to sit down and have a beer with me?" I gave him a thumbs-up and then settled into a booth.

After returning with a couple of cold bottles, Tupie sat down opposite me and then we zoned in on our beers. The ale had a pleasant citrus flavor and I was wishing I could keep taking first sips over and over rather than continuing on to the second sip. I looked out the window and saw the same city street I walk down every day when I come to work. The street is ugly and it seems our city is perennially gray. I detest graffiti and it jumps out at me from every wall I see. I like to imagine how

this city looked when men wore fedoras and ladies wore tea dresses but when I open my eyes all I can see is filth.

Out of the corner of my eye I noticed that Tupie was watching me look out the window. His facial expression suggested that he was wondering what I found so fascinating on the other side of the glass. Without altering my gaze I asked, "did you ever wonder what it would be like to travel through time?"

"Of course," Tupie replied, "doesn't everyone?"

I faced him, took another swig of beer, and asked, "what period of time would you travel to?"

"I would travel back to the Big Bang," Tupie immediately replied. "I know it doesn't make any sense since humans hadn't come into being and there was no place to *be*, but if I could project some sort of awareness and maintain a presence from which to witness the event, that is what I would most like to see."

"What do you think you would see," I asked.

"Perhaps see isn't the right word. It probably wouldn't involve vision as we know it. I imagine it would require a God perspective. What that might consist of I don't know but if it could be observed, I would choose to experience the most colossal event in the history of the universe. I think about it when I can't sleep at night and I try to reach deep into my mind to come up with an idea of what it might have been like but those concepts are buried too deep. Somewhere in our DNA the answers to everything may be hidden but it seems that the longer we evolve, the farther we distance ourselves from the source."

That wasn't the type of response I was expecting and as Tupie sat across from me with a smile on his face I peeled the label off of my beer bottle while the *whoosh* of cars passing by on the street provided a background melody. The neon sign above the window cast a reddish glow down to the sidewalk and it filled me with a sense of bewilderment, as it always did. Every night that I worked in the diner I felt like that glow could transport me to another era.

"I have a more interesting question for you," Tupie said as I tried to process what giving visible form to something as abstract as the Big Bang might consist of. After I nodded for him to continue he asked, "What do you think would happen if the earth stopped spinning?"

I didn't see that one coming and being that I'd never thought about it before, I didn't have an immediate answer for him. We sat in silence as I tried to work it out and eventually I came up with a response. "I don't know what would happen to the planet. I suppose only one side would face the sun so one hemisphere would always be cold and the other hot. Other than that, I don't know but I suspect it would be catastrophic."

"I'm curious about the human perspective," Tupie replied. "We are spinning very fast as we sit here, let's say 800 miles per hour. We can't feel that the earth is spinning but nonetheless, it is. Do you think our thoughts would be different, or our bodies would be different, if we weren't in a state of perpetual spin?"

Even if I'd had the time to mull this over I doubt I would have been able to come up with a good answer. "It's hard to say if the motion of spinning maintains a particular mental or physical state in our lives. I suspect not since our bodies and thoughts don't change when we're in motion in a car or in a plane. We seem to be, for the most part, unaffected by motion. It would obviously have a devastating affect on our planet but speaking strictly from a personal point of view, I don't see how anything would be different."

Tupie downed the rest of his beer and then said, "I think that being in motion does affect our thought patterns. Think about the way your imagination soars when you're staring at a fire and watching the motion of the flames, or at the beach watching the motion of the waves. Those types of thoughts are different from the considerations we have when the world around us is still. I believe the constant spinning we are subjected to influences our thoughts even though we're unaware of the spin. I often wonder how our perspective would change if that spin were to cease. What kind of hidden thoughts might we have access to if that were the case?"

"Obviously, there is no way to know," I replied. "I've heard that objects can be altered by acts of observation so I suppose it makes sense that objects would be changed based on whether they were exposed to spin or not. "

At that point we decided to call it a night and after I gathered my coat and purse I said goodnight to Tupie. Just as I was about to leave the diner he slammed his hands on the counter. I was startled and when I turned around Tupie immediately shouted, "Our planet just stopped spinning, what are you thinking about?" I smiled and then continued on into the night. I could hear Tupie laughing inside as I walked through the neon-red glow.

While I was walking home I thought about whether my thoughts generally went down a different path while under the influence of an ambling motion. I couldn't come to a definitive conclusion and I was too tired to ponder the matter for more than a minute or so. After the short walk to my apartment I went inside, kicked my shoes off, sat down on the sofa, and rubbed my achy feet. My roommate had left her bedroom door open and I could hear her snoring softly, but other than that, the apartment was silent.

Once my pajamas were on and I was feeling comfy, I decided to have another beer while listening to the quiet. It's always very loud at the diner; people are talking, dishes are clanking, and there is usually music playing on the jukebox so I appreciate a quiet environment when I get home. I generally don't even realize how much noise there is at work until I kick back on my sofa and experience the eerie silence. While sitting in the dark and sipping my beer I wondered if anything that Tupie and I discussed is of any significance. Even if we could find a way to access knowledge or memories, buried deep in our DNA, what difference would it make? We'll just die in the end so what's the point in discussing it? Whether I have spinning thoughts, or non-spinning thoughts, the grim reaper will still arrive one day that will be the end of it.

A week later the man who left me the note for a *tip* came back and once again he was seated at one of my tables. He was dressed in the same type of fatigued businessman's uniform. We didn't discuss the *tip* he left last time and he didn't seem to recognize me from our prior encounter. In a

repetition of his previous behavior, he began writing in his journal like a madman when he sat down and he also placed the same order; pancakes, fries, and chocolate milk, but this time he didn't ask for a syrup upgrade. After I brought him his food, I asked if he needed anything else and sticking with tradition he said that when he was done with dinner he would like a slice of apple pie and another glass of chocolate milk.

He immediately started writing again after I left his table but I watched him out of the corner of my eye as I waited on other customers. Shortly after I delivered his dinner I saw him take a break from his writing. He set his pencil down, reached into his pocket, and pulled out a bottle that was in the shape of a maple leaf. After covering his food with Grade A syrup his eyes darted around the diner to see if anyone noticed that he had smuggled in his own condiment and he looked like he was worried that someone might ask him to share his prized possession. I wondered what it would be like to watch a glass blower create the shape of a maple leaf. After the bottle was returned to his pocket he started digging in. He broke up the continuity of shoveling pancakes and fries down his pie hole with periods of highly focused writing. I was anxious to find out if he was writing me another note and then I had the thought that I should write something for him.

I delivered his pie and chocolate milk after he was done with his pancakes and when I asked if he wanted anything else, he said, "Just the check please." Since I hadn't come up with anything brilliant or interesting to write in a note, I wrote a question on his check; *The world just stopped spinning, what are you thinking about?*

I delivered his check and then went to pick up another order. While I was waiting at the counter I spied on him from behind a stack of plates. He looked at the bill, took his wallet out, and extracted some cash. Before going up to the cashier he tore one of the pages out of the notebook, added another sentence or two, and left me another *tip*.

I was curious to see what he had written this time but I waited patiently for him to finish his transaction with the cashier and then mosey out into the night. As he passed in front of the diner the red glow seemed to cast him as a different character. When he was out of sight I headed for his table

because I was dying to see what the note said but customers needed my attention and it was a while before I could get to it. While taking an order I noticed a busboy heading over to the man's table and I knew that he would throw the note away so after excusing myself, I ran over to the table and shoved the note in my pocket. After I returned to finish taking the order the lady gave me a dirty look and it probably cost me some tip percentage but I didn't care. I was intrigued.

For the rest of my shift I felt the note in my pocket and I desperately wanted to read it but I forced myself to wait until I could linger over it in the quiet of my apartment. The night dragged on but eventually my shift ended and after I said goodnight to Tupie, he said, "See you tomorrow, I think it's going to be another great day in the diner."

When I arrived home I slipped into my pajamas, opened a beer, sat down on the sofa, and unfolded the note. My roommate was sleeping but I couldn't hear her snoring this time. The silence was perfect. I turned the table lamp on to the softest setting so that I had just enough light to read by.

It's been a week since I last saw her and I'm wondering why she didn't braid her hair today. She seems like a different person without the braid but she is still quite lovely. I was unable to determine if she recognized me or remembered when I left her a note for a tip. The way she moves through the diner reminds me of a cat walking along a ledge, seemingly oblivious to the perils that could occur with one misstep. I think she saw me pour my smuggled-in syrup and I'm fairly certain she grinned. The importance of proper syrup can't be overemphasized but it's difficult to explain so if there isn't anything other than bargain-bin syrup in the dining establishments I frequent I have to rely on covert operations. When she brought my pie I looked at her name badge and found it odd that I hadn't noticed it before. The letters on her badge spelled "Olivia" and I mulled over the significance of her name during the final bites of pie and the last sip of chocolate milk. What kind of woman is this Olivia? From the moment I first laid eyes on her I knew she was extraordinary and as the name Olivia spins through my mind I wonder where it will land and what my life will be like when it settles. Has the act of observing her name badge altered my perspective?

With the check comes a question. I'm going to ask the cashier if I can keep the check as a souvenir. What a strange and wondrous question Olivia has presented me with in Tupie's Diner. I can't help but feel that I'll forever be under her spell, even if the world stops spinning.