Neptune Diner

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I followed Lyle through the kitchen and out the back door.

"You see the moon last night, Dot?"

"Full was it?"

"Waxing gibbous—on its way to full. Saw the Bay of Rainbows, Jura Mountains up there."

Bays and mountains—topography: topo" from the Greek "*topos*," meaning place; "graphy" from the Greek "*graphia*," meaning writing. Place writing. What would be the word for moon writing? Lunagraphy. I looked out across the empty lot beyond the narrow gravel yard. Cicadas rasped in the tall weeds where a rotting barn once sat lopsided, falling over on itself.

It was Labor Day, only eight in the morning, and the air was already burdened with soggy heat. After the regulars at dawn—a handful of retirees from the nearby electrical plant—there hadn't been a single customer. The car dealerships lining 222 were closed and the roads were bare. Locals were not thinking of dropping by for burgers and shakes; most planned on firing up a backyard grill and plunging beer and sodas into a cooler.

I was coming up on my 18th year waitressing at the diner, was glad Lyle opened the place on the holiday even if there weren't any takers. I've been on my own since Mama passed in March and

home alone on a flag-waving day seemed a little sad. I guessed Lyle didn't have anywhere else to be either. Who wouldn't prefer working to standing alone on some parade route?

He'd first shown up on a breezy June morning just after the butterfly weed had sprung to life in the neighborhood fields and begun luring monarchs with its sweet-smelling nectar. Lyle and the wildflowers and the butterflies all arriving at the same time. He introduced himself as the new owner of the Neptune. He was new to town too, he said, and had just moved into a farmhouse in Palmyra.

"Hodgepodge kind of place," he'd said, "looks like they built it out of stones from the cleared fields."

"Yep," I told him, "That's how it was done back then."

"The fields are long gone but the house endures," he said.

"I'm familiar." I nodded. "You'll see a lot of that around here."

One Sunday morning on my way to the Wash and Dry I spotted him walking into the Mennonite Church on Orange Street, but, other than that, I knew almost nothing about him or his habits. Sometimes we'd start up a brief conversation on general matters and let it wind down on a pleasant note. I imagined we'd each been made shy by little contact with a bigger world and did not have a lot to say. Diners were good places for people like us to work in because talk with customers, especially regulars, remained in the category of light banter. It was a little bit like play acting. It was safe.

Each of us inhaled only once before a motor idled into silence out front. I stubbed my cigarette in an empty flower pot and pressed my face to the screen, cupping my eyes with my hands. Four shadows crowded in through the front door. I stepped into the kitchen and glanced at the group in the doorway, then beyond them, spotting a shiny red import in the front lot.

“Rich college kids,” I said over my shoulder.

We scrubbed our hands in the double sinks and Lyle moved over to the grill. He flipped on the little radio that shared an overhead shelf with a can of Crisco. Merle Haggard was singing a mournful ballad.

“You’ins sit wherever you like,” I called out to the dining room while re-tying my apron.
“You’ins,” one of the boys whispered not softly and a female titter followed.
Already, I was not fond of this bunch.

The boys, all arms and legs, loomed over the girls. One of the girls—the titterer— had a broad face that reminded me of one of Lyle’s full moons. The other girl, darker with brown eyes, was pretty in the way smart girls have of being pretty without paying too much attention to themselves—a quality I’d always admired because it meant a girl knew she had more going for herself than her looks and looks alone could get a girl in trouble.
Three of them glanced around the diner, their eyes roving over the arched metal ceiling, then following the parallel streams of neon lights that rimmed the walls.

The dark one was studying me. I looked away, grabbed four menus, and followed them. The boys wore deck shoes with white soles that looked too clean to have touched the ground. Slouching into the farthest booth, they sat face to face, hands in pockets. The dark girl sat on the aisle facing the titterer and looked at me. I wondered if the girl had noticed something off—like maybe a speck of tobacco on my lip or something. I pressed my lips with a tissue from my apron pocket.

"Do you have rye bread for toast?"

"We do."

"Fresh squeezed orange juice?"

"Yes. You'ins home from school for the weekend?"

The boys snickered and the moon-faced girl stifled laughter, ducking behind her menu when I gave her a dirty look.

"We have the week off." The dark one answered. "I'm Rachel," she said. "Nice to meet you, Dot."

I fidgeted with my nametag.

"How do you know it's nice? You haven't tried the food yet."

The girls forced hard laughter. The boys snorted.

"A break? Already?" I asked, pulling a pen and tablet from my pocket. "September just started. Shippensburg State?"

"U Penn. We've been in class a month already," Rachel said, "coming home for my birthday."

"Home?"

“Carlisle.”

“Carlisle? You’re pretty far from the turnpike.”

“Rachel wanted to show us an authentic diner,” the girl friend said.

“I see,” I replied, “field trip, is it?” I clicked my pen.

“What would you like?"

After taking orange juice and coffee to the table, I slid on to a stool at the counter across from the pass-through window where I could keep an eye on Lyle’s progress. I emptied ceramic cubes of Sweet and Low, swabbing the insides, and resettling the little packets, lining them up neatly, half listening to the chatter behind me. It took me back.

My high school English teacher, Mrs. Stackpole, went to the University of Pennsylvania. University. University from the Latin “*universitas*” for “the whole,” linked with “society or guild.” A community of scholars—it had a promising ring to it. A community that had nothing to do with huddling baby goats around a kitchen stove to get them through a freeze or with sleeplessness brought on by worry of blight taking out a corn crop.

I remembered the day Mrs. Stackpole asked my folks to come to school. They scrubbed themselves clean of farm work early that day. I watched Mama bend over her small belly on the edge of the bed, pulling on pantyhose, how thin she looked, the bone in her back ridged up through the taut polyester dress fabric. Daddy, knotting his tie with bent fingers, studied his progress in a window’s dim reflection. He was the local night time wanderer. That very morning,

the township police had found him walking out on Piketown Road near Mt. Laurel Park around dawn and brought him home. He couldn't remember where he'd been or why.

Both of my folks were uncomfortable in the company of educated people and I'd known this as a child, having seen their shyness when forced to talk with teachers and doctors, as if their lack of education showed too much.

"Mrs. Stackpole said you have a lot on the ball, Dot," Mama observed as we dried the dishes that night, "said you could get a scholarship. Isn't that right, Dad?"
"Yep," Daddy said, not looking up from the cylinder head he was scrubbing with a nylon brush, "… 'scholarship,' she said."

I was guessing they had no idea what a scholarship was and, not wanting to appear stupid, they hadn't asked. They'd carried that word home where it would soon be shelved in remote parts of their minds, along with other mysterious words and useless facts, such as the best way to remove coffee stains from silk.

The next day, when I went looking for Mrs. Stackpole in the teachers' lounge, I found the door propped open and cigarette smoke floating into the hallway. Mrs. Stackpole was on the pay phone inside the room, saying she couldn't wait for her husband to finish his residency at Hershey Med so they could move out of this hick town.
Hick town.

There was no way this hick was going to ask for her help with the Penn application. In the end, I decided to appeal to the Ladies Aid Society at church. They found a scholarship and a spot for me at the Baptist College in York. I glanced over my shoulder at the four in the booth, wondering how different things would have been if I'd gotten into Penn.

"She looks like a little mouse," Rachel's friend giggled, "why do you think she wears those white shoes?"

"Sue Li," barked Rachel "she's right there."

Sue Li tittered again. "Uh oops."

Whatever happened to manners, I wondered, feeling sweat trickle down my back. I stepped behind the counter just as Lyle called out "orders up" and slid the breakfasts to the pass-through counter. I arranged the warm meals on my tray, making space for a bottle of ketchup, another for hot sauce. At the table, the two boys and Sue Li had their heads together, whispering. Rachel looked up at me. Again.

"Here we go," I announced, handing the boys their plates, placing the girls' meals in front of them. Only Rachel thanked me.

"Anyone for more coffee?"

A chorus of declines.

"Do you have an espresso machine?"

"No, we do not. Let me know if you need anything else," I said, turning my attention to the swabbing of salt and pepper shakers gathered at the counter. There was no chatter from the kids

anymore, only murmurs and the faint click of flatware. I glanced into the kitchen where Lyle was scraping the grill with a spatula while singing along with Jim Reeves on the radio. For several minutes I worked on cleaning fingerprints from the glass cylinders with one cloth, polishing the perforated stainless tops with another, listening to Lyle, wondering if he sang like that at the Mennonite Church. Did Mennonites sing? I'd never been inside any church other than the one I was raised in. Even at the Baptist College, where attendance was optional. A lot of us weren't Baptist.

The air conditioner whirred, then stuttered. I turned in my seat to shoot the wall unit a threatening stare. There were only two kids in the booth now. One of the boys had crawled over the seat back into the next booth and shoved quarters in the last working tabletop jukebox. Rachel was nowhere to be seen.

Van Halen broke into song and the kid jumped back into his seat, beating out the rhythm with his fork and knife. The other two started in, singing and drumming. Sue Li, I noticed, was off key. Rachel came walking out of the restroom and stopped next to me.

"Something wrong with your meal?" I asked.

"Oh no," the girl replied, "Dot."

"Yes?"

"Dot. It's a very short name."

“A nickname,” I told her, “short for Dorothy. Means ‘gift of God’: from Greek: ‘*doron*’ for gift, ‘*theos*’ for god.”

“Your parents thought of you as a gift,” Rachel observed, holding my gaze like a hostage. I laughed uneasily, finally breaking away, turning my head down to the salt shaker in hand. It was nearly empty and I would have to get the salt box out of the kitchen to fill it up.

“I don’t think they knew what the name means,” I said, “but, sure, I think people are usually happy when there’s a new baby. Excuse me,” I said, sliding off the stool.

“Maybe not always.”

I sat back down.

“Excuse me? Maybe not always…what?”

“Maybe people aren’t always happy when there’s a new baby,” Rachel said, “my mom gave me up for adoption.”

She was standing close enough that I recognized the faint line of down over the girl’s upper lip, the sprinkle of freckles on either side of her nose. I turned to look at the table behind her. Rachel had ordered the ham and cheese omelet, a side of hash browns and wheat toast—all of which, from what I could see, remained untouched. The other three had torn through their meals.

The three in the booth wailed loudly. I shifted on the stool, felt more sweat roll down my back. I caught a glimpse of Lyle in the pass-through window. He turned off the radio. Then he vanished.

I was sweating all over now; my upper lip, my forehead, my chin. I could feel it all beaded up. I kept my eyes on the salt shaker in front of me, picked it up, polished it as casually as I could.

“Not here to eat, are you?” I said. “Just because your mother…did that doesn’t mean she wasn’t happy you were born. Only means she couldn’t keep you.”

I ran the back of my arm across my forehead, pressed my lip and chin with the back of my hand.

“You’re a smart girl. You can understand that, can’t you?”

I looked at her. Waited.

Rachel shrugged.

“She’d have found a way if she’d wanted to.”

“That’s what people like you think.” I said this before I had a chance to think about it. It just came out.

“People like me?”

“People who grow up on the West Shore and go to good schools,” I said, “so sure of yourselves. So…sure you can do whatever you want. That everybody can do whatever they want, whenever they want to.”

“You sound bitter.”

Oh boy, I wished I’d left on ‘excuse me.’ I wished I’d gone after that salt box.

But then that wouldn’t have stopped her. I took a deep breath.

“You’re the one with the chip on your shoulder. You think you’re the first child in this world to be adopted? Looks like it worked out for you—,” I said, turning and nodding toward the parking lot, “nice car.”

“You trying to change the subject, Dot?”

I tossed my cloth on the counter.

“Quit using my name,” I said, “we’re not friends.”

“Didn’t think you’d be so mean.”

“How would you like it if I showed up at your work and started badgering you?”

“Keep being mean. I don’t care, I’m not leaving.”

I stood up, pulling the back of my skirt free from my legs.

“Take a seat,” I said crossing my arms and drawing my shoulders back, “we’ll talk for a minute and then I want you to be on your way. Your friends are getting out of hand.”

“Stop it!” Rachel shouted to the kids before sitting down.

The music died.

Rachel was looking straight ahead at the pass-through window.

“You might have noticed it’s not that nice on this side of the river,” I started, “a lot of factories closed up, farms gone, people’s lives pulled out from under them. They can’t see a way out. They get stuck.

“I got stuck. Kicked out of college by the Baptists. My daddy was nuts and my mama was tired, worn out. I could not let myself bring a child home to that when I knew she could do much better somewhere else, with a different kind of family.”

I saw the hard muscle in her jawline melt away, but she kept her eyes glued to that pass-through window.

“If I’d have brought you home, you’d have gone to the same schools I went to. Pretty soon, you’d get sick and tired of being that mixed girl with the loose mother; you’d of ended up dropping out, getting a work permit, cashiering at K-Mart. Or worse—you’d of run off with some random dude from the truck stop just to get the hell away.”

“Not necessarily,” Rachel said, shaking her head, “that’s just how the world looks to you.”

“You think it would have looked differently to you?”

I left her sitting there with that question and began clearing dishes from the table, working fast so the kids wouldn’t notice my shaky hands. But it didn’t matter. Nobody was watching me.

“Anything else? No? Okay, then. Thank you very much. Enjoy the day.”

I tore the slip from my tablet and pressed it face down on the edge of the table. I walked past Rachel, who sat pulling a packet of Sweet and Low free and resettling it in its little ceramic dish. I strode into the kitchen, lay the stack of dishes on a sideboard, and sank into a chair. Lyle tiptoed over and kneeled in front of me, placing a hand on my shoulder. We’d never touched before, not even an accidental bump during a noon rush.

“Should we close up, Dot?”

His voice softened the edges of my ache. For the first time I allowed myself to study Lyle’s blue eyes, the stubble on his chin. He wasn’t that young—maybe early forties, I guessed, but he might have spent a lot of time outside. Maybe now, after all this, I could ask him about things like that.

The bell on the front door rang. A minute later, a car started up and backed away, turning on to North Prince Street. It was silent. No sound at all.

“Why’d you turn off the radio?”

“I was keeping an ear open. Those three in the booth... Where’s she headed?’

“Carlisle.”

“She came so far from the turnpike.”

“Her daddy was from a good black family. When I got in trouble, they whisked him out of York and sent him off to Europe, not wanting his education interrupted by a trashy white girl.”

I looked at the floor and Lyle nudged my chin so that we were looking each other in the eye again.

“Did I ever tell you why I bought this place?” Lyle paused, a rare crooked smile showing the whiteness of his teeth. “There are plenty of diners for sale around here, you know.”

His hand was still on my shoulder. I liked the weight of it.

“It was the name,” he said. “Neptune was discovered without having been seen— people, astronomers, only knew it was there because it was tugging Uranus toward the edge of its orbit. Another 65 years passed before anyone actually saw it.”

“Why are you talking about this now, Lyle?” I asked, leaning back in the chair.

His hand slipped away and I was sorry I’d moved.

“To know that a heavenly body exists only because of its tug, to need to see it—that is so human—don’t you think? The need to see for yourself, with your own two eyes, what you already know is there.”

“You think I was too hard,” I said, turning my face away.

“You got ambushed,” he said.

Lyle stood, put out his hand, and pulled me to my feet.

Following him to the back door, I started thinking about the way that hospital bed was pushed to the side of a room—a room too big and empty for birthing, but it was what they had there.

Curtains on the window by the bed were open and the sun's heat blazed and retreated, blazed and retreated, as if it could not decide what kind of day to bring. Then it glowered and the temperature in the room soared.

When I felt the baby come, I yanked my head sideways, looking out the window, my eyes following the path of a monarch coming to rest on a low hedge brushing the glass. The baby wailed and was carried away, down a hall, in minutes, but I kept my head turned away. Sweat covered my forehead, my throat. It trickled down my neck and lay between my breasts. The crying grew fainter, fading in seconds, but the seconds were lasting a lifetime.