

## At the Diner

A short story by Neil S. Plakcy

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We buried my mom in a cemetery just north of Albany, in a plot that looks out over the Hudson River. I liked that. I thought maybe she could look out from her grave sometimes, if there was anything left of her that could see, or feel, and the river would be there moving along on its way to the sea, and it would be good. It was a bitter cold day in February, and we stayed around just long enough to see the coffin begin to drop down into the earth.

My father didn't say anything to me the whole day, not at the house, the funeral home, in the limousine or at the cemetery. He had not spoken to me for about three weeks before she died, and it was another two months before he said anything at all.

"A regular coffee and a donut, please," he said finally, standing in front of me at the diner where I work in the mornings. "To go."

I was surprised. But I was cool. I gave him his coffee and a donut in a little white paper bag, with sweet and low and extra cream, the way he likes it. I said, "A dollar eighty, please," and he gave me a five and left. I had to go in the back and sit down for a minute, I was shaking so bad.

You could pass the Shaker Square a dozen times and never notice it. It's just outside the city limits on Washington Avenue, and if you're doing the speed limit (or maybe a little more) it wouldn't look like much. It's just a standard roadside diner like a railroad car, with a long stainless steel counter, a row of stools and a couple of booths against the front window.

My regulars and I feel like a family in the mornings. We get a pretty good class of people in, guys that work out at the power plant, businessmen, suburban widows who love to have somebody else do the dishes, and a couple of doctors, too. I talk to everybody and they tell me their problems, sort of like a bartender.

I love to see how everybody likes to hang out together. I went to college once, for a semester, and going to meals was my favorite thing. Of course, that probably comes from my mom, who was a great cook. I used to hang out in the kitchen with her while she cooked dinner or baked cookies, watching and learning and talking to her. And even when she wasn't cooking, we'd sit in the living room together after all my homework was done and read her food magazines, passing back and forth the recipes and the pictures. She could only make us the most basic things, because my dad was a real meat-and-potatoes guy, but we read those magazines anyway and imagined how those fancy recipes tasted.

My father and I never got along. I was a disappointment from day one, when I wouldn't go out and play ball with the other boys in the neighborhood. I dropped out of college, I hung around with the wrong kind of people, and I came to work here at the Shaker Square. He was worried his friends would see me behind the counter, in my grease-stained apron, with my hair tied into a ponytail and an earring in my ear. "Men don't wear earrings," he told me once, but I didn't tell him then just what kind of man I was.

The trouble really started last year at Christmas, when I was sitting with my parents in the kitchen of their house out in Clifton Park and my mom told me that her breast cancer had come back, stronger and more spread out, and that the doctors were giving her only a few more months, and I told her that I was gay.

She took it pretty well. My father just got up and left the room, but my mother put her hand on mine and said, "I can't say I approve of this, dear, but I'll always love you."

My father got me in the living room a while later and started yelling. He said, "Why did you choose this particular time to break this news? Don't you think your mother and I have enough to worry about? You only think of yourself, don't you?"

He started to shake me by the shoulders, and I broke away and said, "I didn't want her to die without knowing who I was," and then I ran out the front door.

I was in and out of the house and the hospital while she was dying, but my father never spoke to me. He was so angry you could see his eyes steam up every time I came into the room, so he'd just leave.

I was surprised at the way he reacted at first. See, he works for an advertising agency downtown, so he knows a lot of gays. He always seemed to accept them, so I figured it'd be all right. I was wrong.

We didn't say a single word to each other until he showed up here at the Shaker Square, cool as a cucumber. I never asked him why he came in. I mean, he knew where I worked, and it's on his way to the office, but after we didn't even talk at the funeral I figured he was gone.

My father came back a few days later. This time he sat at the counter, said good morning, and ordered eggs over easy with hash browns. It was the same breakfast I had cooked for him a hundred times at home. He read the paper, and said thank you when he left.

I didn't say anything about my father coming in to any of my friends. I didn't want to get my hopes up for a reunion, because every time he left I thought he might never come back. But he started coming in two or three times a week during the winter. There was no regular pattern, and every morning when I woke up I wondered if I'd see him that day. We talked a little more each day, discussing the weather or driving conditions or what was in the paper.

My father became a regular, complimenting the cooking and the companionship. I got to know more about his life than I had ever known while I was growing up. He talked about his coworkers and his advertising accounts. He talked about shoveling snow and having the car repaired and about the places where he ate dinner. He ate fast food, and he ate at little neighborhood restaurants like Christie's, up the street. They have checkered tablecloths and candles in wine bottles, and the food isn't bad.

Our relationship achieved a stability it never had when we were father and son. I was a character to him, like the blind man at the newsstand in his office building, the nice couple

who ran Christie's, and the mechanic who serviced his car. He loves to talk to strangers, and I guess by then I was a stranger to him. But he and I never once discussed a personal topic that might have let on to anyone else that I was his kid.

One day a couple of weeks after my father started coming to the Shaker Square, a middle-aged business lady was berating me for wasting my talents behind a diner counter. I had gone back to all those food magazines my mother had saved, reading through them and looking for recipes. I started adding spices, experimenting, putting new things on the menu. The owner of the diner didn't care what went on as long as we made money, so I began buying my milk from an organic dairy in Slingerlands, fresh fruit from a little orchard outside Troy, meat from a hippie butcher in downtown Albany. The Shaker Square was turning into a little gourmet kitchen, as I made my own jams, fried my own donuts, baked fresh bread and croissants each morning.

"You should be cooking in a fine restaurant," the business lady said, after she'd polished off a couple of almond croissants and a cup of Mexican hot chocolate, my own recipe, with cinnamon and just a pinch of chili powder. "Someplace where they'd appreciate you."

"She's right," my father said. "Take a restaurant like Christie's. I know for a fact they're looking for an assistant chef. A job like that would be a real stepping stone for you."

It was an old theme of his. He's always been disappointed that a smart boy like me couldn't seem to make much out of my life. I didn't listen before; why should I listen now? "I'm happy back here behind this counter," I told the business lady. "No reason to move on."

"Son, you can't live your life like that," my father said, using the word in a disembodied way, like any older man might. I was pleased to hear he'd use it on me even so formally. It was the first time he called me son in years. "If you want, I'd be happy to put in a good word for you at Christie's. I'm a pretty good customer over there."

The business lady said, "Don't pass up the chance. You'll regret it."

I shrugged and said, "Sure, go ahead." That was the last I heard of it for a couple of days. One morning there was an older couple at the counter, the man white-haired and

courtly, his wife a little bitty lady with a Southern accent. He ordered the eggs Florentine, made with organic spinach, and she had the croissant French toast with a side of applewood sausage. They were real friendly, carrying on conversations with all the regulars. My dad wasn't there.

"That was a delicious breakfast," the husband said when he had finished. "Where did you learn to cook?"

"Just watching my mother," I said. I pointed to the stack of magazines behind the counter, where I kept them for reference and some light reading when things got slow. "With a little help from *Gourmet* and *Bon Appetit*."

"I'm Emma Burley," the woman said, her voice soft and mellow, like it had been soaked in the grade-A maple syrup I served with pancakes. "This is my husband Jim. We own Christie's over on Western. One of our regular customers recommended you for a job we've got open, for an assistant chef. He told us if we ate your cooking we'd be sold, and we are. Would you like the job?"

"Was this customer's name Phil Eckell?" I asked. "About five-nine, graying hair, looks kind of like me?"

Emma Burley looked at me, and the rest of the regulars watched her. "I never would have made the connection, but, yes, I guess he looks like you. That's the man. He comes in for dinner a couple of nights a week."

"Did he tell you he was my father?" I asked.

Jim shook his head. "No. But it doesn't matter. I'd hire the son of the King of Jebru if he cooked as well as you do."

"That man is your father?" the business lady asked.

"Yeah, but don't let it get around," I said. "We're not exactly a happy family."

"He certainly spoke highly of you to us," Emma said.

"Well, I appreciate your offer," I said. "I'd like to think it over for a couple days." They agreed, and left.

My father came in the next morning for breakfast. "I understand the Burleys offered you the job," he said when I served him his eggs. "It's a good opportunity."

"You can't help it, can you?"

"Help what?"

"You can't help being my father, no matter how hard you try." I turned to the rest of the people at the counter and said, "This is my father. He comes in here a couple days a week to eat, praise my cooking, and discuss the weather. But he'll never admit to anybody that I'm his son. Did you ever see a father act like that?"

"You always want to make things hard, Jerry," my father said. "I wouldn't come in here all the time if I didn't care about you. I wouldn't recommend you to people and talk about you."

Bacon was blackening on the grill, and eggs were curling and turning brown around the edges but I just stood there, tears filling my eyes. "Ever since your mother died I missed you," he said. "Before I first came in here, I used to drive past this place, slowly, looking in to see if I could see you, trying to get up the courage to come in here. You know I don't approve of you. I probably never will. But you're my boy, and I can't help loving you. You don't know how hard it was for me to come in here, but it was even harder being all alone after your mother died. I just want what's best for you. Why don't you take that job, son? They're good people, and you can learn a lot from them. Maybe some day you can have your own place."

I turned around to the griddle. The food there was ruined; I had to start over. "I'll do it," I said, scraping the grill clean, and wiping the tears from my eyes. "It's been a long time since I made you dinner."

"Our old kitchen's still in the same place," my father said. "If you want a little practice before you start your new job."

"Thanks, dad," I said. It was spring, and the roads out to the suburbs were all clear, and the trees were starting to blossom. I put fresh eggs and bacon on the grill and started over again.