

## Fatz Cafe

Robin came in every other week for a hair trim and I was amazed at how fast her hair grew. She said it must have been all the supplements she was taking. I didn't really know Robin, just that she was a hostess at the restaurant next door, but I knew about her home shopping escapades. Ground up plants and deer antler velvet, all that natural stuff that sounds like it's gotta work. The supplements didn't help her split ends. I told her she needed conditioner.

I worked part time at A Flair For Hair, a dingy salon tucked in a downtown plaza. The owner, Sunny, was a friend of my mother. Sunny was a petite Korean woman with faded tattooed eyeliner and an annual perm. Mother didn't like that I went to school so far away, and so Sunny was tasked with reporting back if I was paying rent or grocery shopping.

Sunny never charged Robin's hair trims and I thought at first it was because she didn't care about it, like the magazine subscriptions that came in the name of the previous owner. After a while, I thought this had to bother her. She waved it off when I asked.

"We're business neighbors," she said.

"Do you eat at her restaurant for free then?"

She snorted. "Oh no, I usually eat at the Chinese buffet."

Robin worked at Fatz Cafe, a casual diner with a southern menu. From what I heard, they had good dinner rolls, but served burgers with whole pickles. You would be forced to take a bite from your burger, then another one from the pickle before you could chew.

On a cold day, Robin's hair was static. She chastised Sunny for her betrayal, perhaps lack of companionship.

“How could you eat at the Chinese buffet? Putting money right into our rival’s pocket, that’s what you’re doing!”

Sunny rolled her eyes. “*Your* rival, Robin.”

Robin huffed and turned back around just as I sprayed water. It was only mist, but she yelped, holding the side of her face. I pumped her chair until her head reached my chin.

“Sorry ‘bout that. It’s okay if I take care of you today right?”

“Of course, love. Sunny’s been a lil’ faulty these days anyways — her eyes aren’t so young anymore, I tell her.”

I could see Sunny shake her head and flip the magazine page through the mirror. “Careful there, Robin. One day she’ll stop the special treatment,” I laughed, glancing at Sunny.

“I’m just messing, of course!” Robin said. “Say, why don’t you guys come over for lunch later?”

“Already ate,” Sunny said. “Thank you though,” she added, before Robin could try to convince her.

Robin clicked her tongue. “One of these days, I’ll get ‘ya!” She looked up at me. “What about you, darling?”

I nodded, but didn’t answer. Maybe she would think I was trying to concentrate on cutting her hair.

“You don’t have any appointments booked for the rest of the day,” Sunny said. “I’ll call you over if there’s any walk-in’s.”

I shot her a desperate look. Sunny raised an eyebrow before going back to her magazine.

Fatz Cafe was dimly lit. Robin seated me next to the bar in a four person booth and poured me a glass of sweet tea. A football game was playing on the TV, but there was no one to watch it. The restaurant was reserved for some guests later, Robin told me. She placed a menu and a basket of dinner rolls on my table. The dinner rolls *were* good. They were soft and buttery and I thought this was how business worked. How they hooked you in.

Robin looked smug as she refilled my sweet tea. “Dunno how ‘ya managed to work here for a month without stopping by! You and Sunny sure keep to yourselves.”

“Just never got the chance, I guess,” I shrugged.

She leaned against the table. “You’re always sticking to Sunny, that’s why! No problem with that though, Sunny really tends to you. She’s not as cold as she looks- that’s just her act. I know she don’t ever come over because she doesn’t wanna freeload. Ridiculous, right? But there’s just no convincing her.”

A flurry of kids then walked in, letting in cold air and treading through the restaurant in a single file line. Robin refilled my dinner roll basket.

“Are those the guests?”

“Yep. The first grade class from Clear Creek come every year for a field trip.”

I reached for a dinner roll. “Am I not supposed to be here?”

She waved her hand. “Don’t worry about it, you’re also our guest!”

I nodded and chewed on the bread. “Why here? For a field trip, I mean, it’s just a restaurant.”

“Oh honey, you just stay in that salon all day, huh? Sunny don’t tell you anything!”

Robin slid into the seat across from me. “Fatz’s practically a town landmark. It’s been here so

long no one even knows when it wasn't. You'll see the owners later, Dill and Harvey, they're brothers. Harvey's head chef and Dill deals with the papers."

I heard muffled screams coming from the kitchen, but Robin reassured me.

"It's just a little trick Harvey likes to play on everyone during his kitchen tour. He'll getcha all curious about the freezer room, invite you in, and before 'ya know it, he's shut the door behind 'ya! I nearly tore off his head the first time he pulled that with me, but the kids get a kick out of it."

"Wow... that sounds... traumatizing."

The kids left the kitchen, clutching each other and laughing. One boy's glasses were fogged up. They forgave the incident once they saw the grilled cheese sandwiches and fries toppled on the tables.

"What do you wanna order, darling?" Robin asked.

I wanted one of those grilled cheese sandwiches, but I didn't want to look childish.

"Just a hamburger, please."

Dill, a sturdy man in a ruffled flannel, was talking about how him and his brother came to own the restaurant.

"Fatz is all about preserving the town's spirit. This is where families come together."

Two kids were sword-fighting with the fries. Harvey emerged from the kitchen with bowls of ice cream and the kids roared. Dill sighed and began passing out stickers with the restaurant's logo.

A whole pickle was pinned on top of my burger with a toothpick. The burger was too big and I couldn't bite into it. It was falling apart. Robin gave me a pitiful look as she was refilled my sweet tea.

The kids ended their lunch with a chorus of thank you's and shuffled out of the restaurant while high fiving Harvey. Fries littered the carpet. I had the rest of my burger and pickle packed for to-go. Robin was me out.

“How was the food, love?”

“Good. Thanks for the meal.”

She looked up from the register and stared at me for a few seconds. “We have leftovers from the kids' lunch. You wanna take them home? It's gonna be thrown out anyways. Take some for Sunny, she'll appreciate it.”

I nodded slowly and Robin smiled. She shoveled fries into a brown paper bag along with two foil wrapped sandwiches.

“You enjoy that! Stay warm!” Robin sent me off with a pat on the back.

I walked back to the salon, gripping the bag at my side. It was windy. I wondered how cold it was inside the freezer. If it was too dark to see when the door closed. All the meats hanging from the ceiling and the sacks of frozen vegetables stacked in towers. And how it felt standing in the middle of it all.