

The Waiter
by Eric Cecil

It's the year after next, and the money's gone. I get by on scraps from tables in restaurants and bars. A café tires of running me off, so they hire me as a busboy instead. The cooks and dishwashers all sneer in disapproval. Most of the customers ignore me, leaving me the ends of their meals, which I continue to eat in secret. One night a waiter watches me pick through some leftovers. Cut it out, he says. You'll get in trouble. I tell him to go to hell. He frowns at me when I walk the plates to the kitchen and drop them into the sink. I return his scowl on my way out, then throw my apron on the bar and leave.

Later that night I decide to leave town altogether. I'll just ride the trains as far as they'll take me, jumping from line to line until I can't go anymore. I pack a small bag and head to the nearest station: a grand and filthy terminal at the south end of the city. Its many rails gleam like fangs on either side of a sprawling concourse, a number of damp platforms between them. I pick a train idling at the end of the hall and dart inside.

The train's empty, and warm, so I slouch into a corner seat and wait. The wait is long. As I stare at the tunnel darkness that presses the windows, I think about my decision to quit the city. I have no idea where I'm going. But I'm also too tired to care. The murmuring engine soon rolls my indifference into a dull and hollow resolve. I lower my eyes to my knees and sink deeper into my seat.

When I wake, the train's still empty, but a sharp breeze now gusts through the open doors. The car rocks and trembles against it. A distant glow hues the windows, where I notice a change in scenery: instead of the grand hall and its many tracks, the train now sits at an outdoor platform, high above the rooftops of several adjoining buildings. An irregular skyline saws the distance.

I step onto the platform for a better look. The skyline is unfamiliar. Everything is. The nearby rooftops appear wrecked, abandoned. Debris heaves at the corners of each: empty cans, the skins of spent tires, an array of derelict furniture. A tabletop missing its legs leans against a crumbling parapet, a knot of frayed chairs lingering in the shadows.

I make the length of the platform, meeting no other passengers, and take a staircase that appears to my right. The street below is just as grim. Lights blink and blind there, revealing the obscure windows of odd bars, the crooked shelves of barren pharmacies. Everything is empty or otherwise closed. There are no customers entering or exiting, no cashiers or clerks visible inside. Nor are there any pedestrians.

There's only traffic. It rushes the main street in a roar. Small cars and top-heavy vans rattle over the uneven pavement. Large trucks lumber behind them, their cargo nearly scraping the inert tracks overhead. The high rails above stitch into the distance, and the street follows their slant below. So do I.

I walk the long blocks as if skirting the banks of a clattering stream. The traffic continues its swift advance at my side, its clamor sharpening as I approach the breach of a major intersection. Here two streets seethe with an impossible tangle of cars: deeper, louder horns sounding over the continual thrum of motors, engines growling through faulty mufflers or rustworn hoods. Still more vehicles enter from a lesser alleyway. I stand at the corner and wait for the light to change. When it finally turns over, traffic slows from a growl to a whine, idling at the ready.

The intersection is too much for me, so I decide to cross and head into the quieter avenue. I slide past the front fender of a white sedan and glance into its side window. Behind the blur of mottled glass, a driver stiffens his arm against the wheel, turning to look at me. His gaze is heavy, unkind, tempered by a stark frown. The frown is familiar: it's the waiter from the café.

I'm surprised to see him, but his expression remains flat and impassive. There's no sign of recognition, no change in his features as I approach. Still looking into the car, I cross the length of his bumper. The light opens to green. Horns erupt down the line of cars, and I race through the gap to make the other side. The white sedan rolls forward as I step onto the curb. A high truck closes the space behind. Traffic advances, shuttling the waiter's car through the intersection.

If the waiter is here, I consider, then I must not be that far from home. But home isn't home anymore. I've already left it all behind. Including, I now realize, my bag: in my haste to leave the platform, I've forgotten it on the train. I curse and consider doubling back, but just as quickly, I shrug the idea aside. The distance seems too great. And anyway, if I'm going to split, then it's best to make a clean break and keep moving.

I hike my collar against the wind and continue down the street. Block after block, I look into doorways, under awnings, through cracked and streaked windows. Most are void, or blackened, boarded. But some now appear wet and fogged, as if breathing under a crush of bodies inside. I pause at one of these and listen to the faint music that rattles the frame of its door. Beneath the persistent thud, and over the roar of traffic behind me, I can hear the distant bark of laughter, a chorus of voices wrestling for attention. They're the first real sounds of humanity I've heard in what seems like a long while.

I open the door to reveal the interior of a long, narrow bar. It's dim inside, but it's packed. The noise is oppressive. Dozens laugh and shout over the rise of music. None seem to notice me in the entryway. Only the bartender rustles to attention. He eyes me over the heads of several

patrons, mutters something to two men standing by a cooler, then steps to the edge of the counter. His face is all too familiar. But this time it's the voice that gets me. It's the same smug tone, the note of reproach, and the thick frown that delivers it. Once again, it's the waiter.

There's no response the first time, so he repeats himself: It's windy, he says. If you're coming in, close the door. I stammer something like an apology, but I don't bother with the door. I'm too busy thinking about the white sedan, wondering how it's even possible. I know it isn't, and yet he's here. And when the men at the cooler turn to look at me, I see that he's there, too: that both of them are also the waiter.

I try to speak, but I can't find the words, and suddenly I'm back on the street, walking. It takes a few blocks before I can catch my thoughts. Or maybe they catch me first. The buildings seem to close in, and I charge ahead, nearly running. The frown of the waiter follows: as the driver, the bartender, the customers. As everyone. To my side, traffic slows to a scour that threatens gridlock. Cars brake at lights only to run them without warning, while trucks jolt to a halt, then barge through turns, horns bleating. Someone shouts from the high cab of a pickup. I don't dare look at him. Instead, I jog through the next intersection, and another, then turn onto a narrow sidestreet.

After several more blocks, I lean against one of many shuttered buildings and try to collect myself. Probably, I reason, it's a lack of sleep. I'm just tired and hungry. I'll get some rest, a bite to eat. Then I'll get the hell out of here. I ball my fists into the pockets of my jacket and swallow a few curses, eyeing the road ahead.

A patch of low lights tints a near corner. I survey them from a distance, then slink forward when I'm sure the space is empty. It has all the makings of a rough patio. Withered and unkempt shrubs mark its boundary, framing the entryway to what looks like a restaurant. Several small tables sit on either side of it. Some are set with clean plates and dull flatware. Others show the remnants of abandoned meals. Beyond them, through darkened windows, are slight and spectral movements: the flash of a forearm, the bend of a hip. Figures appear in fragments, then retreat into the shadows, as if twirling away.

I spot the husk of a basket at one of the dirty tables, so I sidle up to it, looking without looking. An untouched roll remains among a handful of crumbs. To its side is a short glass, brackish with the dregs of drink.

Back at the windows, there's the flash of an open hand, the glint of a closed smile, but little else. There are no eyes visible, no frowns angling onto the patio. I place my hand on the back of the chair, preparing to sit. I stop when the front door opens.

A figure exits. He has the same gait, the same build. And though I don't see it, I know it's the same face. I get a brief glimpse of the profile, but then he turns, offering me the flat of his back instead. He doesn't even notice I'm there. He ambles to a corner table, and I watch his elbows tuck and bend, listen to the scraping of plates. From the side, I notice his jaw working. His hand lowers to the plate, raises to the mouth, and back to the plate again.

I expect that at any moment, he might turn to see me. He doesn't bother. Instead, he continues eating in swift, savage movements: neck and shoulders tensed, hips angled away from the windows.

He pauses when the door opens again, a second figure emerging from the restaurant. I'm not surprised to see who it is. But when the two of them speak to each other, something happens. There's a kind of dizziness, and the knees go a little, the head and stomach dropping. I lean forward and steady myself on the table. The white paper that drapes its surface crackles under my hands, and its many imperfections then appear to me as a kind of map: its stains like new lands, the folds and creases lending their terrain. I reach for the silverware as if finding the arms of a compass. Its chiming echoes throughout the patio. Other noises soon follow: the scuffing of pavement, the barking of furniture, a litany of grunts and growls. The paper thunders in my fists, and I grab whole handfuls of it, closing my eyes.

When I look again, both of the waiters are gone. But the scene's changed. The far corner of the patio is now in disarray. Several napkins flutter from the shelves of an upturned cart. The wind blooms them like lilies. The legs of a chair angle away from them and into the sky. A man's legs writhe on the concrete behind them. They move in slow circles, the feet kicking at a rolling saltshaker.

I draw toward the cart, the tables, the chairs, staring at the man on the ground. The face of the waiter stares back. His eyes are bright, unfocused. The deep frown is now a taut grimace. He shivers under ragged and arrhythmic breaths, hands like another's at his neck. The end of a fork glints there. It extends from between his fingers, where the ink of a wound shows. The ink slicks his hands, beads and weeps up and across his forearms. Some of him soils the napkins from the upended cart. More of him paints the sidewalk in the spaces between.

I lower to my haunches and study him. He gasps, burbles something. The words are wet and unclear, even when I tilt my ear to his lips. I want to speak for him, to free the phrases that gnarl in his throat: *Cut it out. You'll get in trouble.* But rather than give him anything, I decide to take away. I grasp the blunt end of the fork with my hand and pull it from the neck. He opens wider onto the patio. I step over him and head inside.

The restaurant is teeming. Everyone there, from customer to staff, is a waiter. Each is indiscernible from the next. All are busy dining, drinking, working. All but one. He walks with purpose to the kitchen, leading me through a set of swinging doors. I look on as he throws a greasy plate into the sink. Directly after, I toss in the bent fork. Both clatter into the basin, ringing like an alarm in the restaurant behind us. None of the waiters seem to hear it. Not those dining or drinking or working. Nor the one dying outside. This one's already out the door and back onto the street, his soiled apron draped over the end of the bar.

I push through the crowd and out of the restaurant, nearly stumbling over the wounded waiter's legs. They're still now, already stiff, and the eyes remain open, but dull. He no longer blinks. Nor breathes. His neck and hands are as dark and oily as the night itself. It's the same darkness that once pressed against the windows of the train. The same wind that trembled its interior now turns the wheels of the upended cart. It flies the flowers of dirty napkins, flutters the paper covering of a nearby table. With its dark streaks, its curious designs, the covering no longer looks like a map. It's now the flag of a conquered land. Only the surrendered meal holds it in place.

The other waiter is down the street now, approaching a distant intersection. His figure's unmistakable. I follow him up this block and others, down subway stairs and into grand stations, through odd areas and places I've never seen. Soon he's gone altogether. I find traces of him here and there: mostly remnants of meals left behind, or other waiters who swear they've seen him. At a restaurant next to a railway, one tells me that I just missed him, then hands me something. Is this yours? he asks. It's a small bag. I take it and thank him, explaining that I have no way of repaying his kindness. He tells me that it's fine. Outside, someone approaches a dirty table and begins picking at its scraps. The waiter inside frowns. They keep coming, he says.