

Dreams of the Sleepless

By Elmer Seward

Prologue

On sleepless summer nights when the sweet scent of honeysuckle almost drips from the damp night air and frogs, like a small church choir, practice their cacophonous lullabies beneath the stars, I sit, eyes closed, immersed in the dark . . . and the past. It's in these moments that I reflect on the uncertain path that I've traveled. How did I get here? Where did it all begin? These are simple questions, but just as the humid summer air that can be felt but not touched, the answers are elusive. Maybe it began with the storms that swept through my life two years earlier, washing away everything like grains of sand swallowed by the sea. Or maybe it all began in the dark, early hours of that summer day. Sometimes the beginning and the end blend so perfectly together that it's difficult to find the dividing line. How do you separate the night from the day when the light changes so imperceptibly? Is it the point at which nightmares end and life's waking dreams begin? If you're standing where a dusty lane intersects a worn out highway, are you at the beginning of your journey or are you at the end? I guess it all depends on the direction you choose to travel. Even then, I've discovered that, all too often, the end of one thing is the beginning of another. Well, one thing is clear. Beginning, end, or both, that dark morning changed everything.

Chapter 1

As I pushed open the door to the diner, the aroma of freshly brewed coffee washed over me, sweeping me in like so much debris in a surging tide. The bright light, spilling into the darkness from the windows, over the sidewalk and into the street, was like a beacon calling to lost and storm tossed ships in the night. So there I stood, sleepless and alone. It was early, and the small restaurant was almost empty. Like most diners, it was unremarkable. There were rows of booths along the windows to the left. To the right was a counter with 1940s style bar stools, the kind with center posts anchored to the floor and red upholstered swivel seats. The once red upholstery, looking more like a dry riverbed, cracked and a muddy rust color, revealed years of wear. Beyond the counter was a large serving window opening into the kitchen area. The counter wrapped around at the far end and met the windows at the other end of the small restaurant. Like the seats, the counter top exhibited the same state of disrepair. At one time it had been a beige pebble design. Now, only faded pebbles were visible in random sections. The remainder was a worn, dull off-white.

For an instant, it brought a memory long lost. I was six years old and spending the morning at my grandparents' house. My grandpa called out, "I'm going to take the boy downtown for a soda." I jumped up from the toy-strewn floor with excitement.

My parents didn't let their young son have soda. Maybe it was the caffeine, or maybe it was the sugar. I found out later when I was an adult that my elders considered me an "active" boy. I'm sure my parents didn't want anything else fueling my energy level. I don't know if it's the memory loss that comes with old age or some twisted satisfaction that comes from watching their children live through the same parenting nightmares that they experienced themselves, but grandparents are immune to such concerns. So here we were, grandpa and me, hand in hand, walking to town to get sodas.

The diner wasn't much more than a hole in the wall on Main Street squeezed in between a furniture store and a house goods shop. A counter with evenly spaced stools ran along one side. Behind the counter, mirrors ran the entire length of the wall, giving the illusion of space to the narrow room. Small booths ran along the opposing wall with dark wallpaper behind. A narrow isle ran from the door down the center of the diner separating the two sides. Grandpa waved and called to people by name as we entered. It was a small town and, as a young boy, I can remember thinking that he knew everyone. With his strong hands, he lifted me onto one of the stools at the counter and then settled onto one next to me. He called out to a younger woman on the other side of the counter. "Ruthie, we'll take two cherry Cokes." I watched with anticipation as she filled the glasses with deep brown foaming liquid from the fountain and then pumped in the sweet, red cherry syrup.

Ruthie, who appeared to be about the age of my mother, setting the drinks on the counter in front of us, asked, "Who's this handsome young man?"

Beaming and ruffling my tousled hair with his hand, my grandpa said, "This is my grandson."

She smiled and said, "I can see the resemblance. He's got your good looks."

Grandpa smiled with gratitude and so did I. Looking across at our reflections in the mirror, I couldn't see it. He was a big man with white thinning hair combed neatly back, revealing a bald space near the top of his head. I didn't even make half of him and had dark hair, a couple of cowlicks sending wild shocks sticking out at odd angles. It didn't matter that I couldn't see the similarity; the soda was still cold and sweet.

As people stopped by to say hello, he eagerly introduced them to his grandson.

It was obvious that my grandfather loved me and was proud of me.

This happy memory faded sadly just as quickly as it had come. I wondered, "Would he be proud of me now if he were still alive?" I doubted it. This was not the same diner and I was not the same boy.

Country music played softly in the background from some unseen set of speakers. I couldn't quite place the song. I was sure that I had heard its sad lyrics and melody before, but details like that were lost on me now. Beyond the order window, I heard a woman's voice singing perfect, quiet harmony.

A solitary customer sat hunched over his cup near the far end of the counter, a rumpled newspaper lying abandoned next to him. He was a tall, wiry black man with short-cropped white hair and beard. His dingy white shirt hung loosely from his frail frame and was wrinkled as if it had never seen an iron. He'd probably been a much bigger man when he bought that shirt years ago but was now a shadow of his younger self. He turned toward me as I stood, hesitantly, just inside the doorway. His face like a fallow field was deeply furrowed. Slowly he studied me in the way that he might study the obituaries, his friends long since passed on. Nothing interesting, just grateful not to see a younger photo of himself smiling back from the pages. Wearily, he turned back to his coffee. Most people coming to a diner, even at this early hour, are in a rush to eat and get to work. His slow, deliberate manner told me that he really was in no hurry to go anywhere. Maybe, like me, he had nowhere to go.

I slid into the first booth as far from the old man as I could. I wanted to be alone. If I could avoid eye contact, I could avoid conversation. Although the old man seemed more interested in the depths of the dark liquid that sat before him, I thought that I would be cautious. Sometimes people in small towns can be chatty. They like to pry. I picked up the one-page laminated menu propped behind the syrup and ketchup bottles and scanned it. From behind me, I heard the door open. A guy in khakis and a black polo shirt walked past and took a seat several booths away, facing me. I could feel him starring at me. Not wanting to make eye contact, I looked out into the deep blackness through the window. The sun would be up soon, but, for now, the nighttime backdrop and lighted windowpane formed a dark, shadowy looking glass. I could see his faint reflection. He held a menu in front of him but was clearly looking above it in my direction. It was just the kind of scrutiny I anticipated as a stranger in a small town. I knew it well, the suspicious glances, the whispered disapproval, the blatant glares.

I glanced down at my menu. It was pretty standard - eggs, bacon, sausage, pancakes, and waffles. The prices seemed fair, but no price is a good price when you're broke. My hands began trembling. I laid the menu on the table and placed my hands on either side, applying pressure to try to calm them with little success. Worthless hands! I needed to see how much money I had, but my hands were useless. I laid my messenger bag on the table. The once lighter gray nylon was now dark and stained from long hours on the road. The material was beginning to fray in fuzzy tufts around the edges and my random jumble of possessions peered out through small holes forming near the frayed seams. Fighting the tremors, I tried to sort through the odd collection of items and fish out what little money I had left. It was useless. My hands wouldn't cooperate. I decided to dump the side pocket of the bag on the table. Even that was unpredictable with my hands out of control. The

contents clattered onto the table and some onto the floor. I glanced up and the old man and polo shirt were both glaring at me, it seemed disapprovingly. The noise must have alerted the waitress to the fact that someone had come in because she came hurrying from the back carrying several freshly filled salt and pepper shakers.

"I'm so sorry, Hun. I didn't hear you come in. I'll be with you in just a sec," she chirped as she hurried to unload and get her pad.

Embarrassed, I rushed to pick up my things with hands that worked as well as mittens picking up toothpicks. I struggled to put everything back in the bag. Some things took several attempts. Sitting in the booth, reaching the items strewn on the floor was even more challenging. I scrambled to pick up what I could and return it to the bag. I left the money on the table – two dollar bills and some loose change. I had hoped to slip in and out of the diner quietly, but, glancing in the mirror of the large glass window, I could see all eyes were on me.

As the waitress approached, I stole a look in her direction. She was an attractive woman, late twenties, maybe early thirties. She was tall and shapely but not cartoonishly so. She wouldn't be one of the scantily clad women in popular beer commercials. Nor would you find her adorning the pages of swimsuit calendars. But her gently curving figure was attractive. Her long, dark hair was pulled back and she wore a Kelly green knit top that hugged her curves. Her dark brown skirt caressed her hips and stopped short enough to accentuate her long legs. The green top was made of some fabric that shimmered with a faint iridescent glow under the fluorescent lights of the bleak diner. She smiled as she approached, but it was a weary smile, more show than substance. This was probably a smile practiced day after day for perhaps years on end, asking the same tired questions only to hear the same tired responses. This diner seemed frozen in time, a place where each day was like the one before, and she was the silent witness to the mundane comings and goings in other people's lives.

As she slid up to the table, she was apologetic. "I'm so sorry. I didn't hear you come in. What can I get you this morning?"

I placed my hands under the table, grasping my knees, so that she wouldn't notice the trembling. I pretended to study the menu for a few seconds and then said, still looking down, hoping to avoid eye contact, "I'll just have coffee, black."

"OK, Hun, I'll be right back with your coffee." Her voice was much too cheerful for this early hour, but I sensed that it was her "customer" voice. In its hollow cheerfulness, there was an almost undetectable sadness. She moved off to help polo shirt, and I felt relieved. I exhaled and placed my hands on the table, applying downward pressure, willing them to be still. Eventually, she drew a cup from the large brewing pot near the end of the counter and brought it to my table. By the time the coffee arrived, the trembling was mostly gone. I raised the cup with both hands to steady it and sipped it slowly.

The waitress found her way behind the counter again, busying herself loading napkin holders and preparing silverware. The door behind me banged open and a booming voice announced, "Babe, your lover boy is back!"

The waitress swiveled toward the door and her shoulders sagged as if dead weight had just been slung onto them. Her tired smile faded. She stood frozen for a second and then turned without a word and went about her business.

The booming voice swaggered past me headed toward the waitress behind the end of the counter. The voice was wearing a brown deputy's uniform. He was a large man. Probably played football in an earlier life, but his current heft wouldn't qualify as football worthy. Too many years of sitting in a cruiser. He strode past me, polo shirt, and the old guy as if we weren't even there. He was focused like a laser on the waitress. I caught the distinct aroma of alcohol as he passed.

"Come on, Babe. Is that any way to greet the man you love?"

He stood for a minute at the intersection of the L-shaped counter. The waitress continued with her back to him. He plopped down on one of the stools at the end of the counter. The edges of the seat disappeared under his cruiser-trained rump.

He boomed again, "What does a fella have to do to get service around here?"

The waitress turned slowly, her head cocked to one side, a dead expression on her face. "OK, Jeb, what do you want?"

"Babe, I want YOU," he cackled. This was all some funny game for him.

The waitress shot back with a dead voice that matched her expression, "I'm not on the menu." She turned back to her work.

Something snapped in the deputy. Where there was once sadistic laughter, there was now rage. "Don't turn your back on me!" he threatened. In the next few empty seconds, you could feel a violent eruption building in the silence. It was like watching the frenzied spikes of a seismometer just moments before a sleeping volcano explodes. "I said, don't turn your back on me!" he screamed. His anger grew by the moment. He stood and reached across the counter grabbing her with his left hand and spinning her around so violently that she fell into a stack of dishes, sending them clattering and crashing onto the floor. She screamed in pain.

"Jeb, let go! You're going to break my arm! Jeb, stop!"

The more she wailed, the harder he wrenched her arm. She buckled and twisted trying to free herself. All the while, she uselessly flailed at him with her free hand.

Each time she swung, he would apply more painful pressure. She was screaming and crying.

The old guy at the counter yelled, "Jeb, leave her alone."

Jeb shot back, "Shut up old man!" never turning from his tormenting.

I gulped down the last of my coffee. This was a good time for me to leave. I didn't know these people and didn't want to know them. This was their problem not mine. I left the two dollar bills on the table, shoveled the change into my hand and dumped it in my bag. I figured that she deserved a tip after a morning like this. I stood and hurried toward the door while the chorus of wails accompanied by shouted curses from her tormentor rose. My hand was on the door when it happened. I hated it, but couldn't stop it. I had been an empty man for months, dead inside, traumatized and emotionless. But now, with my hand on the door, I felt a growing anger. Every emotion that I had buried deep within me came rushing out in a torrent. I spun around and strode toward the deputy. My brain was screaming, "NO, NO, NO, Don't do this! He's got a gun! You're going to get yourself killed!" But at that moment, there really wasn't much left in my life. I literally had nothing to lose.

The deputy had his back toward me completely engrossed in his torture. He was leaning across the counter. His left hand shackled the waitress in its grip. His right hand was on the counter supporting his upper body. I guessed he had me by about fifty pounds, but most of that wasn't muscle. What happened next was reflex. As I reached him, I grabbed his right hand with mine and pulled it out from under him twisting up behind his back. At the same time, I grabbed his hair with my left hand, shoving his head downward toward the counter as he fell forward. My adrenaline must have spiked because his head hit the counter with a sickening thud. Dazed, he went limp, releasing the waitress, and slumped on the counter. I had to move fast before his senses returned. I unsnapped his holster and removed his gun. I looked up, and the waitress was standing frozen, mouth open and eyes wide – a look of horror. My eyes darted around the restaurant. The large coffee pot stood next to me. I removed the lid and dropped the pistol into the hot coffee, splashing the steaming brew all over the counter. I let the deputy slump to the floor, removed his handcuffs from his belt, and cuffed his right hand to the foot of one of the stools. Panic struck me as he began to moan and showed some movement. I frantically worked at removing his key ring from his belt. The tremors had returned to my hands, and I fumbled to free the ring. He opened his eyes but was clearly having trouble focusing. He clawed at my arm briefly and then his arm went limp again. Jerking and twisting, I finally came away with the collection of keys. I was banking on the handcuff and the cruiser keys being on the ring. I stood and dropped the keys into the steaming coffee pot, and then I finally took a deep breath.

I looked up at the waitress who was still frozen, mouth wide open and eyes as big as the full moon hung just above the summer horizon. The fear was gone from her face replaced by bewilderment. The deputy was moaning again and beginning to stir. It

was time for me to vanish. I placed the lid back on the coffee maker and commented to the waitress, "You might not want to serve this. Could be a bit strong."

I turned and walked toward the door. The old guy had swiveled on his seat to face me. His weary expression was gone. There was a glimmer in his eyes and a wry smile crept across his face. I glanced down at the floor to avoid eye contact, but I noticed that as I strode past him, he turned on his stool to watch me pass and leave.

I stepped out into the heavy, humid summer darkness. There was a faint sliver of orange along the jagged tree-lined horizon. It would be daylight soon. I needed to melt into the night before there was no darkness left. I walked quickly, my heart still racing, and the adrenaline still pumping. As I walked, I was disturbed by what I had just done. My hands were trembling worse than ever. I shoved them deep into my pockets to try to control them. I shook my head and mumbled, "Where did that come from?"

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