

The Stuckville Café

Bonnie Grove

The town has a real name, but I call it Stuckville. Because, boy, oh, boy, I'm stuck here. Plunked down in the middle of nothing-to-write-home-about by a husband who wanted a change (so we moved here), then wanted a bigger change (so he left me). Now, I'm the sole proprietor of one rinky-dink café right across the street from the train tracks. I sell ice cream, espresso drinks and Mexican food. I know the combination sounds cock-eyed, but most everything about this town is cock-eyed.

Don't think there aren't times I think I should cut bait and run. But I suffer from the worst of human maladies—a double whammy of a total lack of a plan and an over-developed sense of responsibility. Like I said: stuck.

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Gene's a regular. When I say "regular" I mean a constant presence. He's old, like dirt. Or so he says. One day he says, "Carol, I'm old." Me, diplomatic and tactful like I am, I say something like, "Oh, Gene, you're only as old as you feel," or some such gabber. He looks me square on and says, "Woman, I'm as old as dirt." And he pounds his cane on the floor. Now, I'm not old, but I've been around long enough to know that when an old man calls you "Woman" and bangs things on the floor, its best to just smile and nod.

Gene comes in twice a day, after lunch and just before supper. Sure, he likes the coffee, but he's actually coming to see me for medical treatments. Cancer has chewed away at his ear, and the doctors have taken most of the rest of it. They left a piece though, a ragged, festering gob of flesh that requires a salve to be applied three times a day. Unfortunately, Home Care only comes once a day, and because Gene is half blind, he can't see to apply it himself. So he walks the block and a half from his house across from the post office to my café twice a day. When the place is devoid of other customers, I apply cream to the stump of his ear with a Q-tip and tape new gauze to the wound.

One morning he presents his ear for my inspection and says, "What kind of a God lets an old man get cancer?"

I pull off the blood-encrusted tape and say, "The same one that let you get as old as dirt."

Gene grumbles, but I see a smile pull at the corners of his mouth.

He says, "Who says there's a God? You can't see Him. You can't know Him."

I squint at the oozing blob of flesh that used to be his ear. It looks bad. Worse than yesterday. "The Bible says you can know God if you are born again in the Spirit. 'The wind blows wherever it pleases,'" I quote. "'You hear its sound, but you can't tell where it comes from or where it's going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.'"

Gene pulls his eyebrows together until they form a V in the middle of his forehead. "Bible says that?"

I dab at his ear. It smells terrible. "Yeah, a guy named Jesus said that. Ever heard of Him?"

Gene smiles and nods like a bobble head.

"Hold still," I say, "Did the home care nurse say anything about the way your ear looks today?"

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. When you see her tomorrow, you ask her about it, okay?”

Grumble.

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Teresa comes to my shop several times a week. She normally orders a couple of burritos, a plate of nachos, and ice cream for dessert. Today she sits stirring herbal tea, the only thing she’s ordered. I’m happy to be missing out on the money from her large orders ’cause Teresa is trying to lose weight.

She puts the spoon down on a napkin and takes a tentative sip. “My mother is coming this weekend. I’m dreading it.”

It’s quiet in the café, Teresa is the only customer. I sit at her table, absently wiping it with a damp cloth. “Why dreading?”

Teresa pulls a face, like she just ate a bug. “She hates me. She’s always hated me.”

The train across the road blows long “whuuuuunnnnk, whuuuuunnnnk” whistles, and scares us both out of our cotton socks. As the train screeches and skreeks through town, Teresa and I smile patiently at each other. Only when the train has moved off a reasonable distance can we continue our conversation.

I prop my chin up with my right hand, elbow on the table. “That’s a good reason to dread her arrival.”

Teresa takes a long sip of tea. “Do you know what it’s like to have your mother hate you?”

I think for moment. “Nope.”

“It’s horrible.” She starts crying, quietly, small streams of tears leaking out of her eyes. She stabs at them with a finger. I get up and grab the box of tissues I keep behind the counter and place it on the table. She pulls one out and holds it to her eyes. “She’s the reason I’m fat,” Teresa says in a flattened voice. She rolls her eyes. “You think I sound stupid. Blaming my mother for my being fat.”

I look her in the eye. “Eating makes you feel better.”

The floodgates open. She grabs at the tissues and pushes a handful of them at her tears. “I’m bawling in public. What if someone comes in and sees me?”

I mime a Grocho Marx cigar and waggle my eyebrows at her. “Ya want me to tell you a joke?”

She smiles through her tears and sips the tea. She makes a long, loud slurping sound. Some of the tea sloshes down her shirt.

I grin. “You’ll lose weight fast if you dump half of what you’re putting in your mouth onto your clothes.”

She starts to giggle, but tries to cover it by smacking her lips together. I slap my hand over my mouth, smothering a laugh. I take a sharp breath in and make a weird piggy sound with my nose.

The two of us dissolve into laughter, snorting and stomping like a couple of kids.

The door opens and a family of three walk in. I touch my face, which feels menopausal hot from laughing, and smile at the new arrivals.

Teresa turns in her chair and salutes them with her cup. “I highly recommend the tea.”

They look confused, but the train whistle blows again and no one can explain anything.

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It's three in the afternoon and the pipeline guys are jamming into the café. Twelve burly men, who smell of clay and metal, press their faces to the ice cream cooler.

A young guy looks up at me with Christmas tree eyes and says, "Can we order triples?"
"Yep."

A voice from behind the gaggle of men hollers. "Can they all be different flavors?"

I stand on my tip toes and shout into the crowd. "You bet."

Twelve grown men bellow "Woo hoo!" and begin ordering all at once.

I'm scooping a ball of Moose Tracks when I hear Debi's voice call me. "Surrounded by fawning men. What else is new?" She smiles at me over the heads of the men. She can do that. She's over six feet tall.

I strike a movie star pose. "Just my lot in life, I guess. Are you working this afternoon?" I ask, meaning the flower shop next door.

She joins me behind the freezer, grabs a scoop and says, "I work here now." She pokes a finger toward a short guy wearing safety goggles. "You want a waffle cone?"

I throw her a grateful smile and the triple scoop waffle cone I'm holding breaks in half and crashes to the floor with a dull sploot. I stare down at it, shaking my head. "Rats." I look up at the man in the hard hat who ordered it. He's grinning. "That's okay," he says. "I changed my mind anyway. I want Bear Claw instead of Cotton Candy."

The man in the hard hat is paying for the men's ice cream. "Thirteen triples."

I look at him. "Twelve."

He grins as he holds out the money. "Plus the one that hit the floor. We'll be back tomorrow."

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Debi pops in on a break from her part-time at the flower shop. The café is empty and I'm sitting at a table in the corner reading. Debi peers over the prep table. "Got nachos today?"

I put my book on the table, face down. "Sure."

I'm grating cheese and Debi sits at the table I just got up from. She picks up my book and flips the pages. "Whatcha reading?"

I fling chopped onion and red pepper onto the nachos. "It's about how God works with you when your life is messed up." I put the nachos in the microwave and push some buttons.

Debi sets the book down. "Should be a bestseller." She gets up, opens the fridge and pours salsa into a bowl. I snag the sour cream and the gooey hot nachos. We sit down and dive in.

"You know what?" Debi says. Her mouth is full so it comes out, "Woo now ut?"

"What?"

She wipes salsa off her chin with a napkin. "You keep wondering how on earth you ended up here—"

"In Stuckville," I say.

"Yeah, in Stuckville. But I thank God every day that you're here. Know why?" She jams three nacho chips in her mouth.

“Cuz you like my cooking?” I shove two chips in my mouth and a dollop of sour cream blobs onto the table.

We chew loudly at each other, smiling. Debi is new to my life, but I feel like I’ve known her forever.

She’s about to answer when the door opens and a “holy-smokes-get-a-load-of-this” guy walks in.

He’s short, about 5’ 7”, with coal black hair slicked back, and wearing what looks like an expensive black leather jacket. I get up from the table and smile at him. He flashes 32 blinding white teeth in return. He looks cool and handsome in a Fonzie sort of way. Except he doesn’t ride a bike. I see his car out the window, a speeding bullet of a BMW. The top is down and the leather seats seem to purr in the sunlight. There is only one explanation for his presence in Stuckville: this guy is lost.

I smile. “What can I get you?”

He pulls off his sunglasses and his eyes, brown as Momma’s gravy, look me up and down. “Your sign says you serve espresso. Is it any good?”

I think for a second. “I don’t know.”

He slides me another grin. “Well, make me one and I’ll tell you.” He sits at an empty table and begins rapping out a beat with his knuckles on the table. He glances at Debi and acknowledges her by cocking his thumb and finger, lone gunmen style, at her and making a “click click” sound. Undaunted, Debi forms a gun with her fingers, points at him and says, “Kapow, right back at ya.”

I start up the espresso machine. It’s a honker of a stainless steel behemoth that can spew out up to four teensy cups of coffee at a time. It’s so loud no one can be heard over its burbling and snorting. Still, Debi tries, bellowing something to him over the noise. He cups his ear with his hand and hollers, “Eh?” back at her.

I turn the machine off and Debi shouts, “Why are you here?” She slaps at her mouth, and then says in a normal voice, “Pardon my yelling. What brings you to town?”

I put the espresso on the table in front of him and he looks up at me. For a second our faces are close together. “Well,” he says. “That remains to be seen.” He smiles into my eyes and raises an eyebrow.

I back up fast until I make contact with the ice cream freezer. My stomach feels fluttery. I try to think back to the last time a man flirted with me. Ten years of memories fly by and I give up.

He’s looking at me as he takes a sip of the coffee. “It’s good. What’s your name?”

“Uh, Carol. That’s Debi.” I point to her. They look at each other and exchange “Heys.”

Like most people who spend more than ten minutes in my café, our new macho friend opens up like a can of worms. His name is James, but everyone, except his Mamma, calls him Jimmy. He’s working in a nearby city overseeing the installation of video lottery terminals in a new casino. He tells us he’s divorced from a “high maintenance” woman who colors her hair “bimbo blonde,” wears too much makeup, and doesn’t spend enough time with their two-year-old son. He worries about his son being in day care five days a week. He says he knows he isn’t home enough, but his job involves lots of travelling. He worries what’s going to happen to the kid.

He looks at me. “You married?”

Oh gee. How to answer? Technically, I’m married. But, since my husband is living with his pregnant girlfriend, I’m not holding out much hope for our future bliss together.

He frowns at me. "What? You don't know if you're married?"

I shrug. "Some questions are more complicated than they appear."

He finishes his coffee. "I gotta go. But I'll be back soon. I want an answer to my question."

I grab a dish towel and start twisting it. "Hey, listen, tough guy, it was nice to meet you. I'm sorry about your kid. What's his name?"

Hand on the door, he cocks his head. "Jonathan. I call him Jonny. Why?"

"I'll pray for him."

He smiles, but he's shaking his head. "Oh, man. You're a religious girl? I wouldn't have pegged ya for the type."

"We can be handy to have around."

He pushes the door open. "Yeah, that's what my Mamma says."

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Teresa has lost ten pounds. She comes by to tell me and to have a cup of raspberry jazz tea. "I need to thank you."

I lift an eyebrow. "What for?"

She shakes her head. "I don't know. You listened to me like you understood. It's not often that thin people listen to fat people. "

I wave my hands in a no-way gesture. "Hey, inside this thin body is a couch potato yearning to get out. You're doing all the work. I'm just your herbal tea supplier."

She pushes her lips together hard. "Seriously, you did more than that." Her glance falls to the table. I watch her for a second and then I get it.

She's felt it. She knows I pray for her.

I feel tears well up in my eyes and I offer up serious gratitude to God for the cool ways He works to connect people together. My shoulder jerks in a tiny shrug. "I pray for people. It's what I do."

She doesn't look up. I see a tear hit the table. "I know. I think that's why I keep coming here."

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Gene arrives earlier than usual. It's ten in the morning and I've just opened the café. He flops into a chair. "The nurse said it's fine. Looks terrible, but these things do, you know. They cut half my head off."

"You do remarkably well for a man with half a head."

He opens his mouth wide and slaps his knee. He's laughing. "She made me an appointment in the city on Tuesday."

I put the coffee pot down, walk over to the phone and dial. "Deb? Can you drive Gene to the city on Tuesday for a doctor's appointment?" I listen for a second, and then hang up.

Gene doesn't look up. "What'd she say?"

I pour fresh coffee and put it down in front of Gene. I take his hand and place it on the side of the cup. Gene's eyes aren't what they used to be. "She said if you start walking now, you should get there by Tuesday."

Gene throws his head back and laughs until it becomes a deep cough. He reaches into his back pocket, pulls out a hanky and hacks into it. I wonder how long it's been since the thing has seen the inside of a washing machine. When he's done bringing up a lung he puts the hanky away and I sop up the coffee he spilled over the table and floor. I pour him another. He takes out his salve and gauze. I glance at the clock. Oh, yeah. It's Saturday. Home Care comes late on Saturdays. Five in the afternoon instead of nine in the morning.

"Hey, Gene," I say. "I've been thinking about opening earlier on Saturdays. Ten is late. I'm missing out on customers. I think I'll open at nine next Saturday."

He stares at the floor. "Well, I'll come at nine. So you won't be lonely."

I pull at the tape on Gene's ear. "Good."

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Jimmy is back. He sips espresso and grins at me. "Have you figured out if you're married or not?"

I stare at the floor, chewing the inside of my cheek. "I'm in the middle of a divorce."

He shrugs. "Is that all?"

I look up and smile, grateful for his nonchalance. I'm shy talking about my divorce. Most of the people in my church don't talk to me anymore, including the pastor. "That's all."

"What happened?"

"To my marriage? I don't know. He just... walked away."

Jimmy shakes his head. "He's an idiot."

I'm warmed by the insult.

He leans forward, his head low to the table and whispers, "Where's he at now?"

Something vague and spooky creeps up my spine. Something about the way he asked. I blink at him. "Somewhere in Michigan."

He seems to think about this. He sits back in his chair and is quiet for a moment. "Did he make you cry?"

Tears rush to my eyeballs. "Maybe a little."

He slams a fist on the table and I jump. Espresso sloshes onto the table. He pushes a napkin at it. "You tell me where he's at. Where in Michigan? What's his name?"

"Why are you asking?"

He looks me in the eye. "I know people in Michigan."

He knows people? He can't mean what I think he means. I grab a chair and sit down hard. I'm having a conversation I don't want to have.

He's watching me closely. He shrugs and sips his coffee. "Your call. It's a sin when a man makes a beautiful woman cry. That's all I'm saying."

I force a smile. "Sin? You're a religious guy? I wouldn't have pegged ya for it."

He leans toward me. "I don't know religion. But I know right and wrong. And walking out on someone like you—that's wrong."

"Thank you," I say, feeling oddly peaceful that he would look at me with such violent compassion. With such strange grace.

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Debi is sitting across the table reading a calendar from a nearby university. “They have a good psychology department.”

I’m reading material from a Bible college hundreds of miles away. I point at the university calendar. “I doubt I’d pass the entrance exam.”

She taps the top of the paper I’m reading. “Why do you want to study psychology?”

I put the paper down. “I want to help people.”

She laughs.

“What?”

She’s still laughing, and shaking her head at me. “You don’t think you’re helping people?”

“I serve ice cream and coffee. I heat up burritos. Not exactly saving the world over here.”

She cocks her head. “How come you’re so dumb?”

“I want God to use me to help people. Ya know?”

She folds her hands on the table and sits tall in her chair in a “now-class-pay-attention” sort of way. “There’s this guy, named Jesus. You may have heard of Him.”

I stick out my tongue.

Debi ignores me. “He said, ‘Whatever you did for the least of my brothers, you did for me.’ Please note, He did not say, ‘Whatever you did after you earned a degree and gained success in the world’s eyes, you did for me.’”

I roll my eyes. “You gonna preach? You want me to pass the offering plate?”

She shrugs. “I’m just saying you don’t have to go to school so God can use you. If you look around, you’ll see He’s already using you.”

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That’s the way it is at the Stuckville Cafe. I never know what the day will bring. Or who’ll walk through my door. And it’s enough to keep me here. I open my café each day and find I am both the giver, and the receiver, of God’s grace. It looks nothing like I thought it would.