

Claude Chabot

Darling, the Angels Sent You

The rain sweeps the pavement. It falls silently, murmuring in the gutters, haunting the shadows, talking softly to the lamplights. The drops fall in a heavy drizzle, keeping dominion over the city. The faint sounds emptying into the sewers is their conversation with the pavement.

I had been called at my office to see if I was available for freelance work Friday night. I accepted; a bit greedy for the extra cash. Now the work was done and the night past, yet an energy still clung to my weary body. Confident of the extra income, I knew I could afford a meal out and a cab home. I said good night to a drowsing guard as my steps left empty echoes in the lobby of the corporate headquarters. Outside I hurried through the drizzle listening to the sticky hiss of a cab's tires against Park Avenue. Tiny leaves on the trees were the only clues to spring in Manhattan.

There was more than my appetite to be satisfied by having a late supper. I sought a kind of sociability. The restaurant across the street from the tower is open at all hours and attracts all shades of humanity, at this hour the rarest or oddest with the brightest or most bizarre plumage. I was quarrying for the unusual, the substrata not visible in the streets stores workplaces in the day or evening. There was another life happening in the city not visible in the glare of rationality. I stepped lightly down the steps to the restaurant as the adrenalin from the night's work faded, and I began to relax.

The wary eyes of the maitre'd greeted me. Despite its late hours the establishment is emphatically not a dive and prefers that its customers acknowledge its dress code. I was, after all, attired in a suit and tie, well dressed to be sure, but mussed and weary. Yet I passed him, barely falling, I suppose, into the admissible category, and at the bar one of the waiters whom I knew, maybe a Tartar from a Central Asian clime, gave me a nod. I smiled back and seated myself there.

"What will you have, sir?" He seemed about to laugh when he asked this. Perhaps it was the absurdity of having a meal at such an hour. I ordered a glass of Côte du Rhone before ordering supper, but not before I began to have a closer look at the denizens of this brasserie. Mahogany walls and heavy carpeting muffled any unsavory noise, and a handsome staff discretely served the smart clientele. The room and its inhabitants celebrated the comforts of money, putting me at ease, making my daily struggle seem less than it was.

But this is not to say that amongst them there were no stories. I had been here before and the personalities I sought I knew I would find.

"Would you prefer a table or would you enjoy having supper at the bar, sir?"

"I would enjoy supper at the bar, sir," I answered and winked. The waiter laughed outright. "Good to see you again, sir."

I looked around. To my left was a young couple in their teens dressed

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elegantly in formal clothes. They could have been coming from someone's debut. Yes, a coming out party. They sat hunched in conversation, oblivious to the room.

To my right, at the edge of the bar, was an otherwise shabby looking woman who sat chain-smoking. She was wrapped in a dress of quality, though her clothes were creased and her hair looked as if had been flattened by sleep. She eyed me oddly, took a long drag on her cigarette and as she did so, looked away and smiled and hailed a waiter. "Darling, another martini. The same, but no olives. I abhor olives, darling. Especially the ones with the pimento. They've always looked like nipples to me." My waiter turned to prepare the cocktail, and winked at me while another waiter brought my wine and a menu.

I scanned it, searching for something that would appease my appetite. Suddenly, in a far corner of the room, I heard a group of uniformed men burst into laughter. I turned from my menu to scrutinize them. One of them shouted in some sort of British accent, "Ian stop it, stop it, this is a respectable place," then once more gasped into hysterics.

I turned around and tried to see what they were laughing at. Somewhat interrupting my line of vision was a formidable woman shaped like a wrestler, seated by herself at a round table for four, incongruously dressed in an evening gown rustling with layers of sequined taffeta and brocade, with ostentatious jeweled rings squeezed onto thick fingers. Her features were broad and ungainly, crowned with a mane of greyish auburn hair, a bit too long, I thought, for someone who appeared to be in her early 60s. She sat staring into space, her stubby fingers turning a flute of champagne around and around in her hands.

The waiter came to take my order and I turned around. "The poached eggs Burgundy, the St. André and an endive salad." The waiter nodded, and I thought how affected this would sound to my father. He would have laughed at me.

"So few people know enough to order it," the waiter whispered kindly, as if he could read my thoughts, and I think he meant it. My father always told me that waiters were only kind when they wanted to earn a bigger tip. Maybe this is often so, but I have found people, including waiters, who are motivated by something besides money.

My father would have thought me ridiculous ordering such food, even being in such a restaurant, especially at such an hour. That I would even work at such strange hours would be an outrage to him. He had his ways; a regular job, regular mealtimes and the newspaper before he was off to bed. My mother had had some curiosity about life, but being totally dependent on my father could not attend the opera and theater that she so loved because he did not want to go, and she would not go without him.

When I think of my mother I recall a store in the Village that she liked and began to visit when I was nine years old; a store that sold delightfully silly and elegant baubles; the store in the Village with the fireplace, with the tiny staircase plush carpeted a sunny gold which led up to the apartment of the two men who ran it, one of them an elegant silver haired gentleman who smiled at me and my mother. She smiled back those many years ago and asked about the balsam incense and the diminutive

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oil paintings while my father, gruff and uncomfortable would not talk to anyone (especially not the silver haired man!), would not look at anything, would not, would not, would not. My mother said he didn't like the Village, but I liked the Village, and the two men, especially the tall silver haired man who smiled at me with real warmth. My father would later say he only wanted to sell me something. For the first time I triumphantly knew he was wrong.

Now I look for my departed mother's kindness and humor and her love of curiosities in the faces of foreign waiters and the antics of strangers, in a midnight restaurant far from any routine. And I raised my glass to toast her memory. My lips met the cool glass and the wine flowed easily over my tongue and warmly into my veins.

I was seized from my reverie by the big woman in back of me who abruptly rose and declaimed, "I would like to drink to the anniversary of the death of my husband." I turned, mid-sip into my glass; I turned, as did everyone, I think, to watch. She was standing with the flute of champagne raised to the ceiling. I could see the bubbles rising out of the glass glowing gold against a lamplight. She herself was lit from behind by one of the ceiling lights and her mane of hair was ablaze behind her. In the flash of that instant and no more she looked heroically beautiful. She stood there silently with the glass raised, swaying ever so slightly, she stood there as if remembering. Then she slowly brought down her arm, took a sip from the glass, closed her eyes and whispered, "Darling, the angels sent you and then took you from me, you bastard." She put down the glass, very slowly sat down, and lowering her large head with its mane of greying hair falling over her plate, began to weep.