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Saturday Night at the Swannanoa

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“Table for one,” said the elderly woman in the vestibule. Although she leaned on a cane, she held her shoulders high with dignity, just like the other Upper West Side widows who floated into the Swannanoa after a Lincoln Center performance of *Don Giovanni*. It was cool for late September, and she wore a slightly faded, black swing coat and matching pillbox hat. It was two minutes past 1 a.m., closing time, and Charlie had nearly slipped out the door when she walked in.

“Any table you like,” he said, although his head throbbed with the tension of the day. As most Saturdays, he had worked a double shift. “Let me take your coat,” he said, holding out his arms. She dropped her shoulders, revealing an elbow-sleeve jersey dress, black also, and Charlie caught a whiff of her perfume. Something from another era. Was it magnolia blossoms?

He couldn't afford to ponder on it. Jerry, the general manager warned him that he skated on thin ice after a mystery shopper reported him for rudeness two weeks ago. The man hadn't liked being told that baked potatoes weren't available until noon. “At the Swannanoa, the customer is always right,” Jerry barked. “I don't care if somebody orders Bananas Foster flambéed tableside by a chimpanzee at nine o'clock in the morning! We can do anything. Get that through your thick head, you moron.” The prospect of a mystery shopper—any age, any time, you'll never know who you're dealing with, Jerry warned—dangled over the heads of all the servers constantly. It would be just like Jerry to send in a mystery shopper at closing time just to rattle him. But there was no rattling the new Charlie, who was determined not to let the City get the best of him.

“I prefer to be in the thick of things,” the woman said, walking to a small table in the middle of the now-empty restaurant. Charlie took her cane and leaned it against the other chair. “How was your day, young man?”

“Terrific,” Charlie replied, as if on cue. “If a customer asks you how you’re doing, you better be terrific,” Jerry always said. “Nobody wants to hear your sob story.”

Technically, Charlie hadn’t even been on the schedule today but since his suspension he’d been showing up daily just to help out, wherever he could. He’d trail his friend Mike, another server, and clear tables along with the bus staff. Today had been a doozy, even for the Swannanoa. Located at 63rd and Broadway, the iconic, century-old Italian restaurant with its Tiffany lampshades and velvet brocade curtains, was as much as a pit stop for tourists as the Empire Hotel across the street. In just twelve hours, the Swannanoa had hosted a bar mitzvah, a bachelorette party, a 50th high school reunion, and a vicious argument between a husband and wife, who threw her wine glass across the table. Charlie had been the one to pick up all the pieces, and, as usual, with no thanks from Jerry.

“Wonderful,” said the woman. “I like it when young people are happy. There’s so much,” and she fluttered jeweled fingers in the air, “angst in the world.” She fixed aquamarine eyes on Charlie. “I’m Mrs. Cecil Van Cleave III,” she said. “And you are...” She drew out a little pair of glasses, suspended on a crystal pince-nez, as she studied his name tag. “Charles,” she said, even though his nametag read Charlie. “My first-born is named Charles!”

He nodded and handed her a menu. Although she had spoken to him like a human being, the first person to do so in a long time, Charlie couldn’t afford to let his guard down. That’s when people slipped up. He needed this job. Without it, he’d have to move back to North Carolina and admit that his acting career hadn’t panned out.

She persisted. “It’s the name of kings, you know.”

A cursory smile flickered across his face. He certainly didn't feel like a king these days. Recently, right in front of him, a mother had told her son that if he didn't watch it, he might end up as a waiter one day. As much as it stung to hear such comments, Charlie had just turned away. He needed this job. So tonight, even as tired as he was, he had no choice but to paste on a brave face. So he rolled into his comfort zone, the litany of daily specials. But the woman held up her hand.

"I already know what I want, but I always like to see the menu anyway." At these words, Charlie's heart sank. He would be here at least another hour. Her voice turned dreamy. "Cecil asked me to marry him here. Many years before you were even born, young man."

Charlie knew better than to encourage her. That was a classic mystery shopper move, distracting you from the protocol with a personal story. But it wouldn't work on Charlie. "Can I get you something to drink, Mrs. Van Cleave?"

"Dry gin martini," she said, and her eyes glazed over again. "Just like tonight, we sat in the middle of the restaurant, the only table available. When I said yes, the staff cheered and brought out a little chocolate cake and a bottle of champagne." Then she stopped, turning her face to him. "They don't do that anymore, do they?"

This was a trick question. These days, the owners, the Guariglio family, pinched every single penny. For engagements, the official protocol allowed the happy couple just a single slice of the cake of the day and two clean forks. But didn't the Swannanoa's brand rest on tradition? If he got into trouble later, he would remind Jerry about the customer always being right.

"Of course we do," Charlie said. Just then, the back door slammed shut. The chef, Eugene, had just left for the night. He was not surprised. Eugene gave him no respect, rolling his eyes whenever Charlie checked on his orders, and later muttering under his breath, "I don't work for you, you sorry son-of-a-bitch." And now Eugene had left him alone with one more customer to feed.

The bartender, Cindy, had long been gone. But Charlie had been trained on cocktails and knew what to do. "I'll get your cocktail, Mrs. Van Cleave."

She handed back the menu. "Please call me Helen. And I'll have Oysters Rockefeller," she said. "That's one of those dishes that you make on request, right? Even if it's not on the menu anymore?"

Another trick question. He wasn't aware of any dishes by request at the Swannanoa. And Oysters Rockefeller hadn't been on the menu as long as he had worked there. He had never even eaten it himself.

"If it's not too much trouble, do you mind putting on some music? Anything by Perry Como."

"Of course," he said, although he wanted to sink into a paisley island in the carpet and disappear. Instead he went behind the bar and rifled through the CDs, until he found Perry Como. Charlie took his time mixing her drink. He didn't know the first thing about Oysters Rockefeller, but he wasn't about to blow it. Not now.

He delivered the drink smoothly on a napkin. She raised her head and her eyes glistened. "How did you know?" she asked. "You're playing 'It's Impossible'! That was our song!"

Tears, now that was a new trick, something he'd not yet seen in a mystery shopper. But Charlie wouldn't fall for it. On slower days, the wait staff assembled the salads so he did know his way around the kitchen. And the restaurant offered a dish called Oysters San Francisco. Maybe he could fumble around and modify it for her. With a little detective work, perhaps he could glean the details.

"If you don't mind my asking," he said, "how do you like your oysters prepared?"

"Broiled, dearie. Just as the recipe calls for."

Charlie slunk away to the kitchen. She was definitely on to him. He spied a half-dozen raw oysters in the refrigerator, but he had no idea where to begin. Elbows down, he leaned over

the prep table and dropped his head. Crazy, he heard the voice of his Uncle Ray, who had passed away six years ago. “What are you doing in a wacky city like that, all alone? We miss you, kiddo.” He heard Gigi, what he called his grandmother Virginia, also dead, praying for him. “Dear Lord, please surround Charlie with your light, protect him from evil, and bring him home to me.” He hadn’t heard from his parents and his sister Anna in over two weeks, but sometimes he could hear his mother sobbing. “Don’t cry for me, Mama,” he would tell her when they spoke again. “Everything will be all right.”

Jerry’s not so bad, he whispered to Gigi. He took a chance on me, with no New York restaurant experience. He only wants me to get better. That’s fair. And to Uncle Ray, yes the City had its highs and lows, but everything considered, it was magnificent. Every morning, when he jogged his usual route, along Riverside Park, from 135th Street to 90th and back again, the hopes and dreams of everyone around him buoyed his spirits. The stone palisades of New Jersey, across the Hudson, kept him going, just one more step, they seemed to say. The people he encountered on the trail, though they kept their distance, shuffled along in silent communion. Maybe it was the endorphins in his brain, but it had been enough to sustain him for two years now. If he could just hold on a little while longer, he would make it eventually. Even if he’d only had a call back for a shaving cream commercial that he didn’t get, and the highlight, a nonspeaking part in a play written by a student in the Village. A play that had run only three nights in a ramshackle theater.

“No chef tonight?”

Behind him stood Helen, leaning on her cane. So she had found him out. He could hear Jerry right now. “What were you thinking, you imbecile? Did you really think you could get away with playing chef at the Swannanoa?” And Eugene, he couldn’t even let himself think what Eugene would say.

But the ruse was up, no need to lie.

“No,” he said. “I’m all on my own. And I don’t know the first thing about Oysters Rockefeller.”

Helen’s eyes glittered. But there was no malice in her expression. “Don’t you worry, Charles. I’m going to show you how to make it myself. It’s one recipe that’s foolproof. You want to get married one day, don’t you?”

Charlie nodded. He did still believe in love. Even if Morgan, the girl he moved up here with, the one he thought he might marry one day, had left him for the manager of the restaurant where she had worked. “I want a man with a future,” she had said. Lately, he’d tried to interest Sophie, another server at the Swannanoa, a brunette who dreamt of becoming a Rockette, into going with him to a movie. But she had brushed him off. “Too busy,” she’d said.

“Then you need to learn this recipe. It’s very simple. Oysters on rock salt in the shell, broiled, with butter and parsley.”

Charlie couldn’t believe what was happening. A mystery shopper who now helped in the kitchen! It couldn’t be. Maybe, and he hated himself for thinking it, but maybe she’d been trained in expert maneuvers like this. He’d have to watch it.

Surprisingly spry, even with her cane, and although she couldn’t have known her way around the kitchen, Helen somehow managed to pull all the ingredients out of the refrigerator. She even dug through the drawer to find the proper knife for shucking the oysters. “Gently now,” she said, “I wouldn’t want you to get hurt.”

This woman, an absolute stranger, seemed to truly care about him. Charlie was mystified.

“Two minutes under the broiler,” she said. “You don’t want to overcook them.”

After he plated the oysters, he sprinkled extra parsley on top. Helen nodded her head. “Almost done!” she declared. She whirled back to the refrigerator and pulled out one more item. “You must promise me that you will always finish this dish with a little squeeze of lemon.” She giggled and looked back up at him. “Isn’t this fun?”

Then she walked back into the dining room, throwing her free arm ahead of her. “Join me. I’ve never gotten used to eating alone.”

Obediently, Charlie followed, and sat down across from her. But he wasn’t hungry. He hadn’t been for some time. “Enjoy them,” he said, shaking his head, and instead sipped from a glass of water. For the first time tonight, he relaxed. If this job didn’t work out, and Jerry ended up canning him, he stood a good chance of getting a job at another restaurant. Experience at the Swannanoa would bring a certain prestige to anyone’s resume. Yet he felt a tiny wave of satisfaction. However it turned out, he had done the best he could with this shopper.

“Mmmm,” said Helen, digging out tiny chunks of oyster. Then she stopped. “Let’s have some champagne!” she said. “Dom Perignon. I insist. It’s on me.”

Now this was a first. A mystery shopper who wanted to share a bottle of Dom Perignon! Mike and Sophie would never believe this. Charlie dutifully went to the bar refrigerator, brought out a bottle, uncorked it, and poured the bubbly liquid into a champagne glass.

“You won’t drink with me?” she asked. There was an innocence in her expression that he hadn’t seen in a long time. But still, he had to be careful.

“I can’t,” he said. “Drinking on the job is against company policy.”

Suddenly she stood, holding onto the table. Perry Como murmured “It’s Impossible” again. “Well, how about a dance?” she asked. “That’s not against policy, is it?”

A dance? No mystery shopper would ever ask that of a server. This was the time when she should have been taking notes. Getting ready to report him. “Will you dance with me Charles?” she asked again.

“I don’t care if a customer wants you to tango naked on top of the bar, you will do it!” Jerry might have said. Now Charlie laughed at the absurdity and the beauty of it all. Only in New York City.

“I’d be honored,” he said, pulling her gently toward him.

“You are such a slight young man,” said Helen, as they swayed to the music. “I hardly feel you leading me.”

With her head on his shoulder, Charlie closed his eyes, trying to hold back the moisture welling in his eyes. But they were tears of joy. He loved the City and the people in it. Even Jerry. And Eugene, well, that would take some time. But if he worked even harder, tried to stay out of his way, maybe Eugene would soften. And maybe Sophie would be impressed with his dedication and give him a chance. He decided to treat himself to a day off tomorrow, go up to the Village, and check out the calls for auditions. It was time to give his dream another try.

When the song ended, he bowed slightly. “It’s been a pleasure, Helen.”

When he handed her the bill, she was ready, peeling off five brand new hundred-dollar bills. “Keep the change,” she said.

“Are you sure?” he asked. Mystery shoppers weren’t known for their generosity. “This is more than enough.”

“You earned it,” she said, standing. “Would you get my coat?”

An amber moon cast a gentle light over 63rd Street. Even the crimson sign for the Empire Hotel, usually a garish streak in the air, seemed softer. Even so, and this was what Gigi and Uncle Ray would never understand, the City wouldn’t let you take anything for granted. What exhilarated you one moment would madden you the next. Several cabs drove by, but none of them stopped. Again, he laughed. Helen moved closer, raised her cane, and finally a cab pulled over.

“When Cecil died,” she said, as he held open the door, “I thought my happiest days were behind me. But I was wrong.” She leaned over and gave Charlie a kiss on the cheek. “Thank you my dear, for a magical evening.”

Charlie half-danced, half-skipped down the street. Tonight, he decided, the moon would be the one to follow him home.

Jerry scratched his head, stalling for time. This would happen to him in the middle of the Sunday brunch shift. He would do his best to be gentle. Just when you think you've seen it all, he reminded himself, a favorite mantra. "Who are you?" he asked the elderly woman.

"I am Mrs. Cecil Van Cleave III," she said. "Like I told the hostess, I wanted to speak to the manager about the young man who served me last night. His name was Charles. And he was extraordinary. Are you the manager?"

"I am," said Jerry. "Would you sit down, Mrs. Van Cleave?"

She perched on the banquette in the vestibule.

"Please pardon me for saying this, but you must be confused about seeing Charlie last night. You see, Charlie was killed two weeks ago. Poor kid stepped out in front of a bus."

The woman paled, and she flickered her fingers in the air. She appeared lost for words. Finally she spoke. "Do you mind if I sit here for a little while? I need to rest."

"Of course," said Jerry. "Can I get you a glass of water?"

She shook her head. "I'll be on my way in a minute."

Jerry stood and walked through the restaurant. He remembered the broken wine glass from last night. How the pieces disappeared before Mike could pick them up. How, over the past two weeks, clean silverware had been mysteriously bundled in napkins and how the water pitchers on the beverage stand never seemed to run dry. And this morning, they found five hundred dollars stashed in the tip jar.

It all made sense now. After closing time, when Jerry could finally spare a moment, he'd take a seat at the bar and order a gin and tonic. "To you, Charlie," he'd say, and before his first sip, he'd hold his glass in the air for just a minute, a quick toast to one of the sweetest kids he'd ever known.

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