This is Where We Come From

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“Lee and Ira are coming in,” my boss at the restaurant explains to me early on a Friday night shift. “Their oldest son died this week.” Larry talks to me through the kitchen window, not looking up. He pushes a steaming plate into the window, meets my gaze. His hazel green eyes are focused and intense, his brow sweating from the heat in the kitchen. He drags a forearm across it, continues: “37 years old. Lung cancer. Wasn’t even a smoker. We’ll send them food. Lee, she likes the pizza. And the Zuppa. And we’ll get them dessert.” They are good friends of his, in from Arizona for the services. Larry will cook for them. “Come into the restaurant,” he had told Ira on the phone the day of the funeral. “You need to eat for God’s sake.”

You see all kinds, waitressing: Fashionistas in their Seven jeans and crocodile pumps floating in a cloud of daylilies and patchouli; the couples who fight silently at the table, the bubbling anger just below the surface, each jab cloaked in the polite wool of etiquette. You watch first dates, last dates, the engagements. You witness women across from empty chairs waiting uncomfortably while their food gets cold, their boyfriend outside making a 30-minute business call. You endure the out-of-towners who drink White Zinfandel, ask for chicken parmesan, and tip 10%; the cocky businessmen who thrust their hand in your face and demand, without looking at you, “Come back in 10 minutes.” And then there are the regulars, the people who make you feel good for still being around. The people who ask for you when they call to make reservations, or who
include you in their pictures, or gush because you have the same name as their daughter, 1 year old and beautiful.

It is an intimate experience, waiting on people. You see them clearly and honestly because they, for all intents and purposes, do not see you. By the end of a meal you generally understand what they like and how they like it—more than many of their friends or co-workers might know about them. And if you have waited on the same people before, you have a different kind of intimacy. You can anticipate their needs, their special orders. You know, for example, that Marty and Christine will order a bottle of Chianti Classico, that they want the pizza regardless of what’s on it. They like crushed red pepper, and their bread pudding with extra caramel. You feel a part of their lives on a micro level. You know what they want.

And this is no small thing.

Lee and Ira I have waited on before. I know that he likes a Grey Goose martini extra cold, up with olives, that she will have one glass of Shiraz Cabernet. Larry knows that she does not like artichokes, and so when they order the pizza tonight he will make a special one without them. And they know their part. They know, for example, that Larry will always send dessert. So we go through the ritual together: I bring the dessert menus, they gush and drool over the things that they want but have no room for, and order nothing, knowing that I will communicate to Larry what they want, and that he will have the pleasure of sending it out to them. On the house. The script is comforting, and you cannot deviate.
It is a learned talent to know if and when to share something about yourself at a table, or to inquire or quip or joke with them. Talk too much about yourself or become too familiar, and you have disrupted the balance between server and patron. You are not, after all, a part of their meal. You are the facilitator. Sometimes the last thing a table needs is to feel the pressure of talking to you. Especially if you are waiting on them the day they have buried their son.

I am not married and I do not have children, but I have buried a child. Several years ago at the Chicago high school where I teach during the week, one of my favorite students was shot and killed by a rival gang member. Whether Sergio himself was in a gang, or if it was simply his connection to his brother and his brother’s friends who were in a gang, was never established. Nonetheless, at 3:23 am on Sunday, March 23 a bullet ripped through his young body, killing him. He grunted two words, it is said, to the boy who held him as he died: “It hurts.”

The day after Sergio is killed, I walk into my classroom where twenty-six of Sergio’s peer are sitting, shell-shocked and speechless. Boys and girls have their heads on the desks; others are staring ahead or looking down, not bothering to wipe their tears. Eliana simply walks out of the classroom, only to return with Kleenex. She gives me two before she hands them off to be passed around. Later that day when attempting to hold it together to give a spelling test to my freshman, I break. I am in the middle of a word, and I cannot continue. Standing at the podium, I place my head in my hands. My eyes are closed and I cannot breathe. I cannot look up. When I finally do, trying desperately to pull it together, I see twenty-five faces looking at me. They are patient and respectful;
they understand this moment. “Don’t worry, Miss. Take your time,” Maria says from the front of the room, her huge brown eyes comforting. *It’s alright, Miss. Cry.*

The day of the funeral I am sitting on the floor in the front of the cramped bus. There is no music, and no one speaks. Jaime looks out the window; Nacho has his head on the person next to him. Clarisia has her eyes closed. I see shards of the neighborhoods through which we are passing through the bus doors. Neighborhoods I have never seen on the west side of Chicago—the Chicago bungalows with their cramped lawns and identical spaces; gang graffiti trying desperately to cancel each other out; long urban roads that stretch out endlessly, an urban treadmill. Many of my students are from these neighborhoods, and on this day, driving through them with my stunned students, I feel like I am being initiated. *This is where we come from Miss.* I am a guest, a witness.

I have never been at a real burial—where you see the casket being lowered into the ground, and where the last thing you do it throw flowers on the casket before the bulldozer standing nearby dumps dirt into the hole. There are no illusions here about what is happening to this child. He is dead and he is being buried. He is in the ground. I cannot shake the feeling that he is being buried alive, and I fight the feeling to say something, anything to stop them. So I am relieved when Adriana tells me that she needs to find a bathroom. Her high heels make it very hard for her to walk, which, given how badly she needs to use the bathroom, adds to the urgency of the situation. We are navigating a dirt path to the mausoleum. She is desperate, stopping every few feet, crossing her legs. I am trying to comfort her: “It’s okay, Adriana. We’ll find one. Worst case scenario, you go in the bushes.” We separate and try to find a bathroom in this quiet marble structure, and of course there is none. This place is for the dead, not the
living. She is panicking, almost in tears, and I give her Kleenex, point her to bushes on
the side of the road. “No one will see you, Adriana. Just go.” When she returns and we
are hobbling back to the gravesite, we do not speak. All formalities and conventions are
done with.

Alma has the idea of buying 17 balloons—one for each year of Sergio’s life, and
one for each member of our asesoria (advisory). After the funeral we stand out on the
plaza. It is a painfully bright March day. We are exhausted and floating. We pass
around markers to write on our balloon, each writing a personal message to Sergio.
When we are ready, we let them go, these red and blue and green bulbs lifting themselves
slowly, rising like bread, like grief offered up. Adults would be beyond this kind of
symbolic gesture. But these kids are not, and I am amazed at this small act makes my
letting go of Sergio real. There are seventeen balloons in the wind blowing somewhere
beyond Chicago. There are seventeen years in the wind blowing somewhere beyond
Chicago. I watch my balloon until there is nothing but sky. Cheryl sees my swollen
eyes, sees that I cannot stop crying, and she hugs me. “It’s okay Miss.” It is too
beautiful a day to bury someone, I think. Seventeen years, I think.

At the restaurant, though, things are different. I do not, with Ira and Lee,
acknowledge verbally what has happened to them. I respect the luxury of being
emotionally anonymous—no need to respond or to be felt sorry for in public. I am at their
table, reciting specials and taking orders and bringing bread, but my mind is with them in
the funeral home, in the hospital. I know that the dead animate themselves in the minds
of the living, refashioning fantastic sets out of the flimsy fiber that was memory,
abandoned. I imagine that their tired minds are bloated, grown immense with these memories, the hum of a son who whispers and lingers. He colors each black and white thing as he moves through it—the pool that caught his first dive explodes into blue, the yellow sun bursts into color. Or the way he blushed the first time they caught him lying, his thin facing bleeding red inside the young skin. Technicolor. They had almost forgotten.

Or perhaps, they are past this for today, perhaps they are saying to their son, No. No more just now. We are hungry and tired. Or maybe they are thinking nothing. Simply eating.

I remember watching Sergio’s father at the mass the school had for Sergio. He stood next to his wife and looked strangely out of place given that he was the father. I imagine that he, like Ira at the restaurant, was not in the church at that moment. Maybe he was at Sergio’s side the night he was killed. Maybe he was there with his son saying, It’s okay, son, let go. I know it hurts. Or maybe he was saying, Don’t go. You can’t go. Everything I have sacrificed, I have sacrificed for you. You cannot leave me here in this country alone. It hurts.

How do fathers grieve their sons? How do they bury the boy they created, the young man who was supposed to do what they could not? The boy they risked their life for, the one they crossed the border for? The young man who had the courage they did not, the profile they did not, the humor they did not, the fate they did not. All of these things, recessive genes that skipped them. They would gladly change their blood if it meant that they could keep them.
In the church that day, I say nothing to Sergio’s father, my Spanish weak, and my courage flagging. And what would I have said, after all? But I look at Lee and Ira. *I will bring you food.* I think. *I will keep the drinks coming.* *Today is the only day that you can say:* Today I buried my oldest son. *Everything I bring you is a prayer.*

After they pay their bill, and I see Ira has tipped me 100%, I see them on their way out. Ira does not look at me, but takes my arm, his smooth hand on my elbow. He pats me awkwardly with his other hand, looking straight ahead down the ramp and out the door. “Thanks,” he says. I watch him walk away and I feel overwhelmed, emotional. I was only his waitress. He will not remember me. But I have been a part of the worst day of his life. And I have brought them food.