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The Early Birds

As she returned the phone to its cradle, Mildred patted her lips, gently tapping them with her fingertips, a nervous teenage gesture that had managed to stick around these sixty years later. She had disappointed herself once again. She was all prepared to say no and she should have said no, but by the end of the conversation, yes had replaced it, making for yet another lunch appointment with Constance.

Then she brightened.

She could call Constance back, tell her the grandchildren were on their way over, that she had forgotten all about their visit. A moment later she looked down at the phone and shook her head. No, she thought, that won't work—grandmothers never forget grandchildren visits.

But any excuse would only postpone their lunch date. And the point *was* to cancel, to keep them canceled, and not to make any more.

Every other Tuesday, the two would go out to eat, always some place new, always before four. Sometimes they'd be running late and arrive at 3:51 or 3:53 or even 3:57 and the waitress—no, they're *servers* now—would slide two dinner menus in front of them prompting a scowl from Constance. At once, Constance would collect both menus and remind the person to bring the right ones. Mildred never caught the expression on the server's face because she'd be gazing out the window, embarrassed enough for all three of them.

For years, the orbits of their lives had intersected cordially, though not closely, but three weeks after Robert passed away, Constance phoned Mildred, her voice small and shaky, asking if she wanted to have lunch. Mildred agreed, thinking it would be nice to take some loneliness out of this woman's day, and perhaps it was her maudlin perception of their first dinner that caused the complaint by Constance ("This shrimp bisque is just not hot enough") to be viewed as a justifiable bother. After all, Mildred didn't like warm bisque, either, and asking for it hot was not unreasonable. However, after subsequent eating events gave rise to complaints about hardened rolls, limp salads, dirty silverware, lipstick-stamped glasses, a baked potato with a dark spot, and a steak served on a cold plate, it became clear that dining perfection was theoretical to Constance, something wished for but hopelessly unattainable.

Of course, the wait staff could never rectify the situation on their own. Several moments later, the manager would walk across the carpet in brisk step, looking over the tops of their heads until the last minute, smiling amiably with a slight bow once he was at the table. Nearly every one of these managers, when the time came to concede a point in acquiescence, would gesture in small harmless movements as if restrained in front by invisible handcuffs.

Then there was the matter of Constance and bread. A roll torn in half, the round portion secured between index finger and thumb, the ragged section blotting, sponging, mopping, then finally, painting the plate clean in five vertical stripes and a finishing horizontal wipe: dinner roll as squeegee. Mildred had tried staring at the plate, but Constance never looked up while she was painting and likely would have ignored the hint anyway. During these times, Mildred could think only of men with untamed facial hair sitting around campfires, tin plates on their laps, maybe a coyote howling in the background. Not long after, all uneaten rolls were napkin-clad and purse-bound, ending their dining experience for another fourteen days.

Mildred felt embarrassment should not figure so prominently in this dining arrangement. Embarrassment was for others, the young, the unaware, those stricken to bewilderment by the surprises of life's meandering ways. She was beyond that at her age, convinced that a quiet dignified stoicism should mark these years of earned leisure.

But not every other Tuesday.

The Sea-Mist was new to them. Constance parked the car and the two clopped up the wooden ramp every seafood restaurant seemed to possess. In the foyer sat an immaculate aquarium containing white gravel and unknown fish with fins trailing like silk streamers. Coarse nets and lobster pot markers hung on the walls, framing prints of oil paintings showing various maritime vessels; clippers, schooners, and other ships neither of them could identify. Polished brass portholes centered with mirrors decorated the wall between each booth where they now sat. Their server, a fit young woman with a pageboy and tattoo of a unicorn on her calf, appeared moments later.

Constance ordered the flounder stuffed with crabmeat and Mildred decided on the chicken parmigiana. After the server returned with the salads, Mildred found herself settling in to the booth, pleased at this beginning. Not only had the server handed them the right menus—the early birds—where every entree was at least three dollars less than the regular dinner prices, she also had put the salad dressing in little plastic cups instead of pouring it over the salads. All in all, Mildred was quite optimistic about their early dinner.

"She's in a better place now," Constance began.

Mildred gasped. "Goodness, Gertrude died?"

"Oh no," Constance said, waving a hand, "She's at the Shady Birch Convalescent Center. I visited her yesterday and she couldn't be happier. The rehab section has just been renovated. It's beautiful. Not like that last place."

Mildred wasn't sure *beautiful* was the right word for a rehabilitation center. She continued listening.

"Well, anyway, I hope it works out for her," Constance continued. "She should have said something to the administration of that last place. Some people let others walk all over them. Believe me, they would have known my feelings. You know me, if I don't like a meal, I tell them. I'm not going to sit in a restaurant, pay good money, and put up with a poor meal. People think they are being polite when they are really being weak."

Mildred decided to let it pass. Constance was in a good mood. After all, maybe she was talking about someone else.

Ten minutes later Mildred looked over at the swinging doors that led to the kitchen. Above the doors were two meals on a large serving tray supported by a palm bent backwards. The tray hovered for a moment, then drifted forward as the swinging doors parted and snapped back with a squeak then a thump.

"I think these are ours," Mildred said.

Constance turned around in the booth. "Yum," she said, smiling.

The server lowered herself to one knee in front of the adjoining booth and slid the tray onto the table. Mildred glanced at her calf once more. One at a time, the server picked up the plates with an oven mitten.

"These look wonderful," Constance said.

The server placed the meals in front of each woman. "Please be careful. The plates are very hot."

As soon as the server was gone, Constance leaned over her plate and inhaled deeply with her eyes were closed. Mildred mouthed a short prayer and grabbed a squat jar with a perforated metal lid, shaking grated cheese onto the mozzarella-covered cutlet and the spaghetti. Constance folded a lemon wedge so the ends

touched, dripping the juice over the flounder. For the first thirty seconds of the meal, they traded compliments about how delightful the other's meal appeared. For the next five minutes, they ate wordlessly.

A half hour later, Mildred stopped eating. Her meal was unfinished. Constance looked up from her plate.

"What's the matter?"

Mildred said nothing as she turned her plate toward her friend. Constance's face went slack.

"We have to talk to the manager about this," Constance said. "We need to get the manager. What's our girl's name?"

"Nora. I think."

Mildred heard the swinging doors open, then close, and saw the manger walking toward them. He was looking directly at her. Mildred caught something in his face, a look. He was not smiling.

Now she wished she had said nothing. She wanted to take the complaint back, start anew, walk up the wooden ramp again, and order something different.

"Hello, ma'am, my name is Sal. I'm the manager. How may I help you?" Sal's hands were not folded in front of him.

Mildred felt a sudden heat come onto her neck and ears.

"Yes, why hello, yes," Mildred stammered. "I was eating my meal and, well, I'm almost finished and I find this sitting on the bottom of the plate." She angled the plate toward him like a jeweler showing an expensive watch, but without the smile.

The manager leaned in for a better view, dipping to avoid the plate's glare. His eyes widened for a moment, then narrowed.

Several black hairs—long ones—sat pasted in place by the reddish- orange sauce.

Not one hair, several. Certainly, too many to have been an accidental thread breaking free from a scalp and floating plate-ward. It was all very clear to Mildred. She could imagine the kitchen staff, tattooed and unshaven, smoking at a half-opened back door, laughing about it right now, the only break in their mirth occurring when the conversation turned to which one of them had the most stringent parole conditions.

The manager cleared his throat. "I'm sorry, ma'am. I'll speak to the kitchen staff about this. I appreciate your bringing this to my attention."

Constance and Mildred looked at each other. Constance turned toward the manager. "Well, what are you going to do about it?"

"As I said, ma'am, I will speak to the staff and correct the situation."

"That's it?"

The manager continued. "Ma'am, that is all I can do right now."

"Correcting the situation," Mildred said, "would be comping us the meal."

Immediately, Mildred regretted that word, *comping*. It wasn't feminine or dignified or stoic. It sounded crass, slick, like something a parolee would say. Or Constance.

"Ladies, please, I'm trying to make this right," Sal said.

"Talking to your staff isn't helping us," Mildred said. "And it *isn't* making it right."

This surge of assertion exhilarated Mildred. These words coming from her mouth were strange and exciting. And that look on Sal's face.

But what surpassed even this was the look on Constance's face. The woman's eyes were full of light, as if a piece of sunlight had gotten caught behind each iris. Mildred was sure it was the angle of the sun.

Had to be the sun. But as she studied her closely, Mildred realized something else. Constance was more than happy. She was proud.

"Ma'am, you have eaten nearly all of that meal. I won't be able to adjust your check. I'm sorry. I'll have Nora total it out. She'll be here shortly." Sal turned and walked toward the kitchen.

Constance and Mildred looked to each other. The piece of sunlight? Gone. Mildred looked toward the swinging doors and saw Sal giving Nora instructions.

"Why, what a rude man," Constance said.

"Like I said," Constance explained as she drove. "I cannot, *cannot*, believe that man. We should've never been charged for that meal. That was disgusting. 'I'll have Nora total it out.' We weren't even offered dessert. And dessert comes with the early bird. That's fraud! We should find out who owns that Sea... Shell... whatever it's called."

"Mist," Mildred said quietly.

"He was very rude to us. You can tell he's not a professional. This is probably his first job managing a restaurant."

"No," Mildred replied. "It's not."

Constance frowned in confusion. "What do you mean? Why that was the first time we'd been to that Sea-Spray place."

"Sea-Mist. Yes, it was. But that wasn't the first time we've seen that manager."

"What are you talking about, Mildred?"

"He was the manager of The Trawler. He must have changed restaurants. He recognized us."

"The Trawler?"

Mildred nodded. "Yes. Over on the bay."

"Did that place have a wooden ramp going up to the door?" Constance asked.

"I'm sure of it."

Constance's face changed slowly and she nodded. "Oh, that's right. The Trawler. Sure, The Trawler. We got half off the check because I started to get sick. I think it was the fried clam strips. Too chewy."

Mildred and Constance looked at each other and began to laugh, knowing the Tuesday after next was only fourteen days away.