

## The Jupiter Diner

### Gracie

The wind came whipping around the corner onto Main Street in Queens, New York Looking for trouble. But instead what it found was a full head of silver hair trying to navigate its way from the underground at the Briarwood station with all its lights flickering. Gracie emerges from the dirty subway around 3:45 pm every day on her way to work. Today looking a little disheveled considering one of the elements wanted to pick a fight with her. Looking up at seemingly nothing she said “oh, hush, I haven’t forgotten about you.” to the howling wind while wrapping her hair around her wrist to get across the street.

God works the swing shift every evening at The Jupiter Diner off Main street near the Briarwood station. She arrives every day around 4p.m. and the bell above the entrance at Jupiter’s chimes when she pushes the door open and walks past the glass pastry case full of fresh pies made that morning to use the facilities and wrap her long silver hair in a tight bun the size of coffee mug turned upside down, held together using a silver hair pin with a moon stone embedded in it. She dons the classic pink uniform with the white collar, white paper hat and white orthopedic shoes. Not that she needs them, but damn, if they aren’t comfy during a dinner rush.

At Jupiter’s all her co-workers and regular’s know her as, Miss Gracie, the kindly spinster with endless patience and a penchant for smiling at nothing. But really, god just wanted a

reason to be closer to people. She had spent so long creating them that why wouldn't an architect want to enjoy the fruits of their labor up close?

As the swing shift started and the other waitresses were getting ready to leave, Gracie pushed her way through the silver double doors from the kitchen with a tray of money in her hands to start her shift with. Opening the till by pressing the "No Sale" button with her elbow she slid the tray in its drawer and counted all the money for the night. After she finished with that and restocked her pies, Gracie took a few steps down the counter and started chatting with her regular, Tony who was sitting at the counter having his usual massive lunch. The Jupiter Special, consisting of a stack of waffles four deep with a deep well of maraschino cherries Burrowed into one side of them to look like the red spot on Jupiter, two eggs orbiting the stack and a sausage patty slathered in white gravy on a separate saucer in deep space on the counter. "Hey, miss Gracie, Can I get a diet coke instead of my regular Dr.Pepper?" said Tony in a gruff voice "doctor says I gotta' cut down on my sugar intake." He said as he shoveled a mouth full of buttered pancakes past his grizzly beard into his mouth with cherry syrup dripping down his chin. "Sure honey, but you look healthy as a horse to me." She said to him as she playfully pinched his round red cheek while sliding a big plastic cup fizzing with soda next to his plate. He had another twenty-five years anyway. "Sugar isn't what's going to do him in." Gracie thought to herself.

She walked around the counter to start setting her tables for the dinner rush when a man in a tattered tweed coat whisked past her leaving a specific stench in his wake that she was familiar with. "Hi there" said Gracie in a flat tone while following him with her eyes. She stayed on his heels as he sat himself at a table across from the counter and looked around the

diner, sizing up the patrons and pausing to look a young man in a leather jacket up and down as he was counting out bills to pay his check and smiling at a young waitress. The dark gleam in his eyes was a dead giveaway that the man in the tweed coat was not there to make friends. God leaned over with one hand on the table and the other on her hip and said “there’s nothing here for you, take it somewhere else” with a low and stern voice that reverbed as she spoke. “you can’t just let me have one, for old times’ sake?” The man in the tweed coat scoffed through rotten black teeth while wiping his greasy hair from his face. “No.” said Gracie with a noticeable light coming from her eyes. “Now go.” She said jerking her head toward the door. The man looked her in the face and saw her eyes glowing like moonlight and let out a low hiss as he got up from the table and swiftly left the diner. The bell was silent as the door hit it twice. Only something dark and otherworldly could silence the truth of a bell. Gracie stared after him to make sure the door closed behind him.

She patted the creases from her apron, fixed her hat and went back to setting clean silverware on white paper napkins and refilling her sugar packets in their little clear crystal holders. The bell rang again a few minutes later when the door opened and she looked up to see Clyde the Mailman walking in. Clyde is a Middle-aged Nordic man with a fisherman’s face, a long beard and a nose that looks carved out of wood. Tall and slim with broad shoulders he stood at the entrance of the diner scanning the room until he saw Gracie then hopped in step and smirked at her “afternoon Miss Gracie, how are you?” He asked while handing her Jupiter’s mail. Gracie accepted the envelopes and set them on the counter before saying “Well it’s not all a basket of kittens, but all in a day’s work” as she motioned out the window to the greasy haired man smoking a cigarette across the street walking away. Clyde looked over and

said, "I see." As he nodded at the sight of him. "Well, I just wanted to let you know I've got another one for you. Poor thing is pretty lost. He should be here around eight pm. Although, we both know how my sense of timing has been off lately." He said while tipping his hat to her and walking towards the door. "Never you worry, Clyde, I'm sure ill recognize him when I see him." She said while standing with her hands on her hips and admiring her work on the set tables.

Dinner time rolled around and this particular Thursday night, Gracie was in section three near the back of the restaurant with the most tables. She would seat her own guests and get them talking, get them laughing, or just leave them alone if all they wanted was food service and not friendship. She knew how to pick her battles. Human souls can be finicky like a time bomb attached to a pocket watch; sophisticated, but with a pronounced need for delicacy.

At some point a young man in his early twenties came in and somehow seated himself in the back section before Gracie saw him. He slipped right past the counter and Gracie only noticed him when she felt a shadow in the corner. He was not very tall, dirty black hair and a clean-cut face. Gracie looked at him out of the corner of her eye while she was getting him a coffee mug and water glass just sitting there staring at the table as if he was trying to read something written on it. This was him.

"you *are* getting a little rusty, Clyde" she mumbled to herself looking at the clock on the wall with the neon pink bulb stretched all the way around it that read 7:16 pm.

"Hi there, what'll you have?" Gracie said to the young man as she walked up and stood with one hip out setting the water glass on the table. "You ever think about just packing it all

up and disappearing? Starting a new life somewhere else?” Said the young man despondently. Gracie stopped short with her hand holding the coffee pot over his mug and looked at him. He was staring at the table still. She exhaled, chewed the inside of her cheek, glanced around, and sat down across from the young man. “Rough night, sugar?” she said as he just kept staring at the table until Gracie said, “what’s your name, kid?” “Theodore.” He said only half looking up from the table. “well, Theodore, why would you trade this life for another? Haven’t you got appreciation for what you have?” Theodore looked her up and down and had to think for a moment about his answer. “I feel like I have put everything I have into making my life here in New York work but what has it all been for?” he said while tearing the napkin in front of him into strips. “I feel like all I do is work for very little in return while living in a city that’s supposed to be the mecca of culture where everybody is just glued to their phones because Facebook, Tik-Tok and tinder have defined our generation.” He finished making ribbons of the napkin then proceeded to grab a sugar packet and pour it out on that table slowly while watching it. “I don’t know, maybe I just missed the era where all of this mattered” he said looking up to gesture towards all the people in booths talking. “I think we date people we don’t love just to figure out who we are in comparison to a stranger. We do the same thing to one another until one of us gets the information we feel like we need and leaves the other with unanswered questions.” He said as he started tearing the sugar packet into little strips as well.

Gracie locked her fingers together with her elbows on the table and pursed her lips above her knuckles while looking at Theodore. “Well, I would like to tell you that it will all get better, son, but only time will tell.” She said as she stood up and wiped the spot where her

elbows were resting. “but since you’re here why don’t I at least buy you a slice of pie and a cup of coffee?” He sat up a little and nodded his head that he would appreciate it.

Jupiter’s had what they liked to call their Celestial Pies. Rhubarb, Apple, Peach, Cherry and God’s personal favorite, Humble Pie. Gracie had always meant for humble pie to be a figure of speech but being that she was using an otherwise normal diner as an ethereal weigh station for wayward souls, she liked to keep the physical flavor on hand. The same way you would keep an Epi-pen for someone with an allergy to existence. She picked up her favorite silver pie server and dug out a piece of the humble pie while smiling at Theodore from across the counter. She walked back over with it and poured him a cup of coffee while setting the pie down. She pulled a can of whipped cream out from under her arm and drizzled a little cone on his slice, then took a seat across from him, folded her arms on the table and smiled while she watched him take a bite.

Then she started “You see kid, what we’ve made of this world is a direct result of who we are in nature. We have all these social media apps because deep down we all want connection, to be seen, heard and remembered.” Ancient problems just have modern solutions these days. “The natural curiosity you are talking about in relationships doesn’t have to be as *cloak and dagger* the way you describe it. You can be honest about growing together, and if you grow apart its almost more important to be honest about *that*.” Gracie said in a soft tone. “It’s not that you are out of place in this world. You’re just out of step.” She said with a humble but matter-of-fact tone. He looked up from his plate with a raised eyebrow and ask asked “How am I out of step if I’m marching off a cliff I didn’t ask to be set on?”

Gracie smiled and slid a napkin across the table for him to wipe the pie crust off his lip and said “nobody asked to be put on this earth, child. Maybe you are just out of step because you are hoping there is already an answer where you need to make one for yourself. ” Theodore was looking at her and then became intensely focused on his pie almost as if he realized he was starving and began to eat it furiously. Gracie could tell the pie was starting to work because he was listening very intently but couldn’t take himself away from the slice to respond so she continued “you see a world only interested in being likeable online, gratifying sexual desire thinking it will show you a better version of yourselves while actually producing no real sustenance for the soul. But really, many souls have turned to these platforms because each of you is afraid to just sit with one another and make eye contact, be honest, tell stories, and most of all to be vulnerable to strangers. The dignity and love in working together is not lost. It just fell asleep and missed it’s stop with this era. It seems like it has woken up inside of you though, and that’s a strength in this life.” She said touching her fingertip to the table and tapping it a few times.

Theodore finished his last bite with a smack of his lips and took a sip of coffee to wash it down. His face was a little brighter and he sat upright with more intent while responding. “If that’s true, then how am I supposed to tell other people things like that? How the hell does someone insignificant like me even begin a conversation like that?” he said with honest curiosity. “well, you already have” said Gracie while leaning back in the booth and chuckling. “You’ve already taken the hardest step. Looking up and around in a crowd where everyone’s head is down asking the questions you are already so intent on knowing the answer to. That’s where you start.” She said with a smile.

She slid her hand across the table and placed it on his hand still holding his fork and said “you just have to keep asking yourself and others what it is that you really want out of this life and then proceed to find it. Because nothing is guaranteed, but it’s all on the table.” God usually tries not to touch people for too long. It gives them memories of the last time she had a hand on them, in the hours leading up to their birth when she was assembling who they would be, while humming a tune only the universe knows the words to. It tends to overheat their circuitry to see the universe in the form they were in before they were human.

Theodore looked a little stunned while he studied her face for a moment and then smiled. He looked at her name tag and said, “you remind me of someone, Miss Gracie. I can’t put my finger on it though.” She smiled and got up from the table and said, “I’ll get you a warm cookie and some coffee to go honey, on the house.” Theodore wiped his hair from his face and smiled. She handed him the cookie and cup of coffee before the bell rang as he left the diner in peace. He stopped at the corner and looked back at the Jupiter diner and smiled before he walked over to the Briarwood station entrance and disappeared into the ground, coffee and cookie in hand. The Man in the tweed coat was still standing near the corner but didn’t bother with Theodore once he smelled the cookie he was carrying.

Gracie watched him for a while through the window while standing at the cash register and then got back to work since orders were up in the window. Eventually the dinner rush ended, and Gracie closed her till around midnight. She pulled the pin from her bun as she was walking away from Jupiter’s and her silver hair fell to her waist over her tan Members Only jacket with the white collar from her pink uniform poking over the top as she made her way to the Briarwood station. She took the tip money from her jacket pocket that she had made from



the night and put it in a homeless man's cup that he was holding out while his head was slumped down half asleep and kept her meandering pace towards the Briarwood station.

She stood underground waiting for her train with both hands on her grey diamond stitched purse. A little girl on the other side of the tracks in a pink coat with green ribbons in her dark coarse hair looked over at Gracie while holding her mother's hand. Gracie smiled and waved at her before a train in the middle track quickly rolled by without stopping and the lights in the Briarwood station flickered then suddenly, Gracie was gone. The little girl looked around platform and down in the track themselves, but Gracie was nowhere to be seen. God never misses her train.

## The Jupiter Diner

### Theodore

The alarm went off at 8 am as usual, and Theodore laid in his bed wide awake staring at the water stain on the ceiling. It had gotten bigger since the last time he looked at it and was now starting to take on the form what looked like Johnny Cash, or maybe he had just been staring at it too long before his alarm went off. Either way, if the landlord didn't answer him the last three times he complained about it there was probably no use in reporting it again.

He got up and slid yesterday's pants on and made sure his wallet was in his back-right pocket by running his hand over it while surveying the room for socks that passed the smell test and sneakers. He grabbed his phone off the charger and quietly tiptoed out of the room since he shared one bedroom with two other people. New York sure wasn't what he thought it was going to be. Actually, he didn't know what to expect but if someone had told him back in Ohio at graduation that when he moved out to New York to be a copy editor that everyone would be an asshole and he would have to work seven days a week to survive he would have curbed his losses and just gone to state college like his parents wanted him to.

Now three years into being in New York he had carved out a nook for himself in a small brown stone in queens. He had a few friends he had met through work as a copy editor and a few from NYU where he was a student hanging on by a thread. Not that he was a poor student, he was actually on track to graduate Magna cum laude. But it's hard to be happy about a title when all you do is work for it; Academic neurosis is just expensive anxiety.

He had found a room with some of the other students who were like him, small town guys who wanted to be anywhere but their parent's houses. He had a girlfriend, but Dyna had broken it off with him last week when he told her he couldn't afford to move in with just her. Rent in Queens was ridiculous with two other people living in his room as it was. Well-to-do girls in New York were not exactly turned on by guys struggling to pay rent he thought to himself as he lit a cigarette and stepped off the stoop of his brown stone into the windy street with garbage moving faster than traffic and headed towards the Court Stair Station in Queens to get across The Hudson to Manhattan.

Every day the commute brought something new like bands playing in the station with tourists standing around them and recording, police harassing the homeless to move the apartments they had set up in a phone booth, a pastor with no shoes screaming that god was dead and he was the only one left who could save Theodore's soul, or a fight breaking out on the train that would cause everyone to just move to the next train car. Bad as it was, Theodore liked when this would happen because he would wait for people to go to the other cars and then just go sit on the opposite end of the fight. With headphones in- it was almost like being alone, and that is a hard feeling to come by in New York. His job was in a tiny grey office around the corner from time square in a basement with a single window that had him copy

editing a lot of pretentious self-help books that seemed like a supercomputer had written them after being forced to watch thousands of hours of Deepak Chopra videos and early 90's Oprah re-runs. If he never read another self-worth mantra in his life again it would be too soon.

This particular day after work he left with a real sense of gloom. None of this seemed worth it. He skipped class today- school felt never ending, and not having a girlfriend anymore to share your personality with makes for a very lonely guy, even in a city of eight million people. This job was definitely not what he thought it was going to be but he was too proud to quit now and go back to Ohio. He could hear his mother's voice at the airport now "We told you that a big city is no place for a nice boy like you." The thought alone made him light another cigarette and appreciate the dirty sidewalk he was standing on with pigeons next to him picking at a rotten hot dog.

New York is the "mind your business" capitol of the world, and they live up to it. Walking away from work, a guy in an Armani suit walked straight into him and knocked him over while looking at his phone and said, "walk much- Ya Jerg-off?!" To Theodore while lying on the cold cement he had just been admiring not a few minutes before. Theodore just looked up at him while he was walking away. Never pick a fight with someone who's cologne you can smell before you even see them, they have no limits. The inconsideration of people in a big city like this is enough to make anyone feel invisible.

He walked through central park and sat at a fountain for a while, chain smoking and watching people. Watching all the selfies they were taking together and all the people making idiots of themselves on Tik-Tok, businessmen moving at a brisk pace and yelling at people on

the phone. In all the interactions he watched not a single person introduced them self to a stranger. Not one person looked at him, although he was not exactly giving off a bright and chipper “talk to me” vibe anyway. Life seemed to be happening for people, but only in these tiny little pockets.

When Theodore left from the park his head space had gotten worse. He didn’t see the point of trying to Participate in this rat race because what was it all for? He thought hard about this as he was sitting on the train and tuning out a woman who was yammering on about the summer house her family had just bought. He was so deep in thought that he missed his stop and wound up at the Briarwood station in Queens. He got off and saw that the next train back to Court Stair was not for almost an hour, so he walked up to street level and decided to just walk instead. It’s not like there was a whole lot waiting there for him at home so he would just take this time getting back.

As he crossed main street the lights from a diner on the corner up ahead flickered and he looked up at it. The Jupiter Diner had a neon planet on it with a tiny sun that blinked in a few different areas and sizes to make it look like Jupiter was in orbit. The sign seemed warm and inviting for some reason and he found himself pulling on the door handle before he could stop himself. He walked in past the big glass pastry case of homemade pies that looked plucked from a Betty Crocker commercial and looked around. There were all manner of people inside, a lot of blue collar workers who had stopped in for a bite to eat, some well to do women who had just come from what looked like a shopping spree, and a few worn out looking mothers with their kids just being loud and wearing more food than they were eating. Most of them were smiling and talking over their burgers and breakfast at 7pm at night.

The light was a warm yellow from the track lights above the counter that was reflected by the silver - tin - diamond - tuft on the walls and was made brighter by the black and white checkered floors.

The booths were all full, so Theodore kept walking past the counter where the waitress with a silver pin in her hair had her back to him pouring a milkshake into a tall glass. He took a seat in the back and asked himself “Why am I here? I’m not even hungry.” After a few minutes of surveying the people in the back of the restaurant, a confident voice came out of a small woman and said, “Hi there, what’ll you have?” Theodore couldn’t stop himself and just let it slip out of his mouth “A new life.” Knowing it wasn’t on the menu or in the realm of possibility. He figured he was about to get an earful about wasting her time, everybody in this city is always in a damn hurry. Without missing a beat the woman sat down across from him and this surprised him a little.

He didn’t look at her, but she continued anyway “Rough night, sugar?” he wasn’t ready for someone to actually engage with him and was a little speechless. “What’s your name, kid?” she asked him. He knew the answer to that “Theodore” he said looking at her uniform and her nametag, but not into her eyes. He noted that her name was Gracie. Her name tag was handwritten with a sharpie but with perfect penmanship.

Her eyes were still fixed on him and she said “Well, Theodore why would you trade this life for another? Haven’t you got appreciation for what you have?” “appreciation for what I have?” He thought to himself. “What do I have?” He brooded over this as he looked Gracie up and down. She had a kind face and crystal blue eyes with specks of gold in them that seemed to

penetrate with her gaze. It was kind of like looking at starlight when you focused in on her stare. It reminded him of Grand Central's ceiling.

Theodore felt the need to just be honest because no one had ever actually asked him what he thought about all of this, he had just been ruminating on it for the last few months. But you can't chew on something forever so this seemed like a good time as any to spit or swallow. He took a deep breath and said "I think all we do is work and try to climb ladders that have no end. We date people we don't love just to figure out who we are in comparison to a stranger or get tired of all of it and accept the label of a lunatic or a bum because we don't want to participate in this rat race anymore. I didn't sign up for this. I don't know that another life would be better. But at least it would be a different set of problems for a while, ya know?" it all came spilling out of him so fast that he put his hand over his mouth afterward because he felt like he had just opened a flood gate but he couldn't stop, "It's like we live in a time when all the great writers and artists are dead. If artist teach people how to see how are we supposed to focus now? With so much content in the world constantly being churned out, there is no reason to believe anyone's life and work will be appreciated after were gone. The further we get, the closer the end of the track seems. I don't know, maybe I just missed the era where all of this mattered" as he gestured vaguely to his surroundings. He knew he sounded manic, but he could not help himself for some reason, he just wanted to tell this waitress everything he thought.

She must have thought he was crazy. Any minute now she would get the three-hundred-pound line cook in the back to come chase him off with a giant spatula screaming at him in Italian. But instead, she clasped her hands under her lips while calculating him with her

celestial stare. After a moment she spoke in a soft tone, "Well, I would like to tell you that it will all get better, son, but only time will tell." She said as she stood up, took a white rag from the back of her apron and ran it over the table where her arms had just been. "but since you're here why don't I at least buy you a slice of pie and a cup of coffee, Hmm?" Theodore wasn't hungry but he was raised to not turn down a simple offering of food. So, he nodded in appreciation and she smiled and walked away.

He replayed everything he had just said out loud and it had somehow given it more power, the sense of despair was stronger than it was when he walked in. He felt like he was starting to spin out. And then the clank of the ceramic plate with a homemade slice of pie on it snapped him out of it and he looked up at Gracie from the table and she pulled a can of whipped cream out from under her arm and drizzled a cone for him like his mother used to do when he was little and had a bad day after school.

Instead of walking away from him and leaving him to his thoughts Gracie took a seat across from him again and just smiled while he picked up his for and took a bite. He had never tasted a pie like this before, it was almost a little sour, like un-ripened peaches, or half cooked green apple. He could not tell what the flavor was. Gracie broke his train of thought again by saying "You see kid, what we have made of this world is a direct result of who we are in nature. We have all these social media apps because deep down we all want connection, to be seen and heard and remembered." This made Theodore remember watching people making Tik-Tok videos and talking selfies in the park earlier that day. "It's not that you are out of place in this world. You're just out of step." Gracie said in her small confident voice. But this made Theodore kind of mad and he said, "how am I out of step if I'm marching off a cliff I didn't ask to



be set on?” he didn’t want to be rude, but her statement just seemed like a band-aid he wasn’t asking for.

She kept smiling at him with this endless patience and slid a napkin across the table and he realized he had pie crust on his upper lip. Gracie spoke again to answer his question “nobody asked to be put on this earth, child. Maybe you are just out of step because you are hoping there is already an answer where you need to make one for yourself.” As soon as he wiped the pie crust off his lip, he felt this strange curiosity come over him, his anger about the world and animosity seemed to be dripping off of him and what came next was just an unknown hunger; the need to hear more. He looked down at the pie and it seemed like the most precious treat he had ever been given. He dug in, and while he was eating, Gracie kept talking. “You see a world only interested in being likeable online, gratifying sexual desire thinking it will show you a better version of yourselves, and producing no real sustenance for the regular soul. But really, many souls have turned to these platforms because each of you is afraid to just sit with one another and make eye contact, be honest, tell stories, and most of all to be vulnerable to strangers. The dignity and love in working together is not lost, it just fell asleep and missed it’s stop with this era. It seems like it has woken up inside of you though and that’s a strength in this life.” She said these last few words while tapping the table with her hand and Theodore couldn’t help but notice her small wrist and bony hand with smooth skin, no rings and acrylic nails painted with little gold constellations.

He had been so consumed with his slice of pie yet he heard every word Gracie had just said and it made perfect sense to him. To look at the actions of other people and understand that a lot of our wants and needs are so similar but we all ask for them in different ways seems

like common sense, but not until somebody says it out loud. He felt much more at home for some reason, like that feeling you get when you hug someone you love and have not seen for a long time. But then the feeling of stasis started to waver again, and he asked “If that’s true then how am I supposed to wake other people up? How the hell does someone insignificant like me even begin something like that?” he asked this time out of curiosity.

Gracie leaned back in the booth and gestured around with her hands “well, you already have - looking up and around in a crowd where everyone’s head is down is the first step. Asking the questions you are already so intent on knowing the answer to. That’s where you start.” As she said this she put her hand on top of his while he was still holding his fork and continued “you just have to keep asking yourself and others what it is that you really want out of this life and then proceed to find it. Because nothing is guaranteed, but it’s all on the table.” Her hand was very warm on his and it reminded him of something; a song he couldn’t quite remember the melody to, in a voice he recognized but didn’t remember who it belonged to. He looked her in the eyes and studied her face and swore he met her before when he said, “You remind me of someone, Miss Gracie, I can’t put my finger on it though.” She patted his hand and smiled while standing up. She straightened out her apron and said, “I’ll get you a warm cookie and some coffee to go, honey, on the house.” He blushed because now he really felt six years old but was so taken with the moments of hospitality and the sense of home he was feeling that he said yes excitedly.

When he left from the diner, he realized he had been there for over an hour. The next train to the Court Stair station would be coming any minute. He lit a cigarette walking down the street, sipping his coffee and when he looked over his shoulder to cross Main street he noticed

the Jupiter Diner had a glow to it in this dark and dirty city - almost like a light house. He made it onto his train and got home with a somehow still warm cookie in his hand. He ate it while he did his homework, wiggling his toes to music at his desk and half smiling at the thought of an old lady setting him straight. That night he went to bed with a newfound hope for everything he had come to New York to do. Tomorrow he would call the landlord about that Johnny Cash spot on his ceiling.