

Caucus at the Parking Meter

By Donal Mahoney

For years Rocky's Diner had always done a great business for breakfast and lunch but his dinner business had fallen off recently as folks moved to the suburbs, got married, died or simply went elsewhere to eat. He thought about closing early but he had a small cadre of elderly men, many of whom had been his customers for two or three meals a day, and Rocky didn't know where else they might go to eat. They were all single now for different reasons—divorced, widowed, never married or deserted by a wife who had become fed up. Most were in their late 70s and early 80s and not renowned for their civility. They were a crotchety bunch but Rocky liked them all. He himself was in his late 60s, happily married, and didn't have to worry about money, thanks in large part to loyal customers like these elderly men, some of whom had been eating at his diner for decades.

Many of them would arrive for dinner—or supper, as most of them called it—at 6 p.m., their unofficial appointed hour for the last meal of the day, and depending on their mood, they would either take a stool alone at the counter or pile into one of the red vinyl booths. In a booth, they hoped to be joined by others who might also have spent the day alone, watching television, reading the obituaries or maybe playing solitaire.

Conversation in the booths ran the gamut from politics to religion to dead wives and ex-wives to girls they should have or shouldn't have married. Occasionally, the conversation in one booth would be joined by those in the booth behind, in front of or across from that particular booth. If the weather was good, sometimes the conversation would spill out onto the street afterward where, weather permitting, the men would gather around a parking meter and continue their caucus.

It was on just such an evening in spring while the caucus at the parking meter was in full swing that an attractive young lady walked by, heels clicking, skirt swaying, and all of the men paused and assessed her with murmurs of appreciation. She was, they all agreed, a very nice young lady.

"I remember years ago dating a girl like that," said Harry, "and she gave me nothing but heartache. Back then, you'd have to marry them. They didn't give it away. Thank God I married Mildred instead. She caused me no heartache and I hope to God she's enjoying heaven. She's been there for about 10 years now. I still miss her oxtail soup."

Truth be told, Harry may have been the only one at the parking meter who had been happily married. Three of them had gone through difficult divorces decades ago and still cursed their former wives when their aches and pains were worse than usual. Another man had lived through a tortuous marriage but for religious reasons never considered divorce. His wife finally died and he forced himself to go to the funeral. There was also a bachelor in the group, 78 years old, who prided himself on the number of women he had sampled over the years without ever buying the cake.

"I'm glad I never married," said Jimbo. "I enjoyed most of the women I dated and they seemed to enjoy me but I never found one I wanted to spend my life with, though it was difficult at times to fight them off. Every one of them wanted to get married. Don't let a woman tell you size doesn't matter. I'm proof positive it does."

Most of the other men over the years had heard Jimbo's tales of sexual prowess and they didn't want to get him started again. But Clarence was relatively new to the group and had always wondered if it was his limitations as a lover that had caused his problems. He wondered what Jimbo had that he didn't. His wife had never complained about their love-making but she may have been too busy complaining about everything else. So he decided to ask Jimbo why he had it so good.

"Jimbo, you mean all those women wanted to marry you because of the size of it. I'm not small but what are we talking about here, 12 inches?"

"Clarence, I don't want to brag but I remember one woman who insisted I do something to make certain that when we went out, no one would notice if I had a spontaneous reaction. She was afraid if I saw another attractive woman, it might pop up and everyone in the restaurant would notice. So to make her happy I taped it all the way down my leg and stuck the head of it in my sock. I always wore socks with an elastic band as an extra precaution. I wanted to make sure nothing inappropriate happened. I almost married that woman because she was better than the others at taking off the tape when we got

home.”

The other men had all heard Jimbo’s story before and kept a straight face while he told it because they wanted to see Clarence’s reaction. They were more than a little surprised when he finally spoke.

“I hope it wasn’t duct tape, Jimbo,” he said, “because that would have hurt like hell when she pulled it off.”