

I Will Remember

by Brit

He'd been coming into the diner every morning for breakfast for the past six and a half months, 7:00 a.m., almost without fail. I saw him every day but Mondays and every other Saturday, my days off. At first, I was a little leery of him, the way he flirted with me. I mean, come on—he was old enough to be my father. That, and it was my first waitressing job. Actually, it was my first job since I'd gotten married eight years ago. And divorced, eight months ago. After high school and a few years at community college, I'd fallen in love, gotten married, and had two kids. Granted, it wasn't a perfect marriage, but what one is? I just figured we'd work through the bumps together. I never expected to be served divorce papers when he ran off with the temp filling in at his insurance agency, and— Oh, sorry. Should have warned you from the start that I don't know when to shut up sometimes. Anyway, all that to say I just wasn't used to being come on to is all. Now, it rolls off my back like that greasy brown glop sliding off Pete's mashed potatoes that passes for gravy around here. And after eight months here, I can dish it out as good as I get.

After the initial shock of this guy—Dave—flirting with me, I learned he was really okay. I'll tell you what, though, that smile must have broken a few hearts along the way. And when he gets that glint in his eye, you'd better watch out. I'd been smacked on the caboose more than once since I started working here, but anybody else tries it besides him, hoo-boy, you'd better watch out. Dave'll be on him like white on rice. Dave, my protector. Took on a guy half his age a few weeks back, and, quick as you please, I got an apology from the chump who groped me.

I really don't know much about Dave. You don't usually get all that personal with your customers, even if they are regulars. But Dave was different. Dave was special. I knew he'd been a cop all his adult life and gotten banged up a bit in the process. I knew that he thought the sun rose and set on his former partner, and that he still had some funky red car tucked away in the second stall of his garage. I knew he'd been married for over twenty years, but they'd never been able to have kids. And, I knew he was one of the truly nice guys in this lousy world.

Anyway, almost every morning, in would come Dave with a slight limp that ruins what probably would have been a strut, I think. Orders the same thing, though I'm surprised his stomach hasn't rotted away and fallen off. I told him that once, and he nearly laughed his head off, though I don't know why. I didn't think it was *that* funny.

I don't usually pay too much attention to my regulars' comings and goings. Many of them, especially the older folks, often go visit some distant relative or their kids, or whatnot. But when Dave disappeared for a few days, I'd gotten a little worried and I was afraid he was sick or something.

So, I was pretty surprised the morning Dave came in, a little later than normal. I was about to scold him for making me worry—more than I cared to admit to—when I saw him stop to hold the door open, and another guy I hadn't seen before walked in. They looked about the same age, but they're like night and day. The other was taller, and there was a little less gray running through hair that must have been golden once. Dave's is darker, and even though his hair's fairly short, you could tell it was wavy. I'll bet he had one of those funky 'fros back in the seventies. The lines on his face are like Dave's, though. You can tell they'd both laughed a lot by the creases around their eyes and mouths. And from what Dave's told me about his years as a cop, they'd had a lot to laugh about.

The new guy stopped in the doorway when he entered, leaving Dave still holding it open. He looked around, taking it all in, then shook his head. His voice was surprisingly rich. "I don't know this place."

Dave finally gave him a nudge and let go of the door. He took the other by the arm and led him to his regular spot at the counter. "That's okay. It'll be fine, you'll see."

The blond nodded, and while he wasn't afraid, I could tell he was a bit hesitant. Like my old cat was when we moved out of the house and into the trailer. Still, the new guy obviously trusted Dave enough to follow him and they sat down. I wondered what his deal was. After a second, he looked up at me and really saw me, then smiled. Big. Good to know I can still turn a man's head, even if he is twice my age.

"Hutch," Dave said. "This is Mindy. Mindy, Ken Hutchinson."

"So *this* is the guy you've been yammering about for the last hundred years?" I looked him up and down. "Funny, I expected you to be at least ten feet tall, the way Dave here talks about you."

Ken—or Hutch, as I'd always heard him referred to—cocked a skeptical eye at me, then turned toward Dave, who wouldn't meet his eyes.

"Lies. All lies." Ken took my hand, which is cracked and rough from too many dishes, and held it between his. Then, of all things, he kissed it! He's as bad, if not worse, than Dave. I knew I was going to have my hands full if these two were going to make breakfast here a habit.

"Hey, now, none of that, I saw her first." Dave rescued my hand and held it in his, rubbing his thumb across the top of it, caressing it. I swear...

"All right, you two, knock it off. You're going to get me in trouble with Pete." Dave gave me this martyred look, like I'd broken his heart, again, then ordered his usual. Before Ken even took a menu from between the napkin dispenser and the ketchup bottle, Dave ordered for him, too, but instead of the heart-stopping breakfast he gets for himself,

he asked for oatmeal, fruit, and juice for his friend. Ken didn't seem to mind in the least, and simply nodded as I jotted down the order.

After I gave the ticket to Pete to fill, I poured each of the guys a cup of coffee. They were already in the middle of an argument. And I bet Dave was losing, because he was the loudest. “—and that's because *you*—”

“—*Me?*”

Dave's jaw had a stubborn set to it. “—*you* instigated it. I was perfectly innocent—”

“—the only thing you were *ever* perfectly, Starsky, was a jackass.”

“You just don't remember—”

“I remember that night just fine, thank you very much. It was 1976. Around December, because you and the guys gave Dobby a toilet for a Christmas present and—”

My standing in front of them, staring and shaking my head in amusement brought Ken's diatribe to a halt. He looked at me as if he were just seeing me for the first time. He quickly glanced around the room, then back at Dave, then me again. “Oh, hello. We should order. Have we ordered?”

With Dave's teasing personality, I expected him to lay into his friend. Instead, he just smiled gently. “Yeah, we have, Hutch. It'll be up in a minute, okay?”

Ken seemed a bit embarrassed and chuckled a little under his breath. “Oh, yeah, you're right. I..you ordered for me. I must have forgotten.”

“No big deal, pal. You just got distracted losing our argument.”

“Like hel—” Ken glanced up at me. “Like *blazes* I lost that argument, you rotten—”

I had to break up this good-natured arguing before it cost me a decent tip. I slapped a quarter down on the counter. “All right you two barbarians, why don't you give a working girl a break and play something on the jukebox for me? Something *soothing*.”

“A jukebox? Really?” Ken looked around and spied it in the back corner. It was ancient, probably older than these two jokers, and though it had been restored once upon a time, it had definitely seen better days. During the restoration, it had been converted to play CDs rather than vinyl. The selection was pretty eclectic, so I was sure it'd have something in it they'd recognize.

Dave picked up the quarter and handed it over to Ken. “Find some *good* music, okay, Hutch? Maybe some Zeppelin or Stones.”

Ken looked indignant as he took the coin and got up from the stool. “Buddy Holly.”

I freshened up Dave’s coffee as he pivoted on his stool. It looked like he was making himself more comfortable by leaning back against the counter, but I knew it was so he could keep an eye on Ken as he looked over the song selections.

“Dave? It’s none of my business, really, but is there something wrong with your friend?” He looked at me out of the corner of his eye, instantly protective of the other. Still, he knew I didn’t mean any harm and that I’m no gossip. He sighed, but not because what he had to tell me was a burden to him, but because it hurt him some. “You don’t have to tell me. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have—”

He shook his head and lifted a hand to tell me it was okay. He cleared his throat before speaking. “About a year and a half ago, Hutch started forgetting things. At first, it was little things, like where he’d left his keys, or forget about an appointment. Then it just started happening more and more often. He’d forget to eat or where the bookstore was that he’d been going to for years.”

He was quiet for a moment, then continued. “It was odd, because when it comes to, say, five or ten years ago, or even longer, he remembers every detail. Things I’d even forgotten.”

“Does he...?” I followed Dave’s gaze to the tall blond. “Does he know?”

Dave nodded.

“Does he have somebody? I mean, does he live alone?”

“He lives with me now.” I could swear his eyes blazed a bit. “Hutch got divorced about seven years ago and doesn’t have anything to do with the b— with *her*.”

I had to grin a bit at the way Dave spat out the reference to the ex-Mrs. Hutch.

“His stepson is worthless. I wouldn’t trust him to take care of my garbage, let alone Hutch. Seven months ago, Hutch went to his stepson’s place in Sacramento to help out the jerk after he’d had knee surgery. Then, when Hutch’s memory started getting worse, his stepson wanted to get rid of him and put him in a...in a *home*.” Dave swore under his breath, letting me know in no uncertain terms what he thought of that idea. “So, now he stays with me.”

“There’s nobody else? No other family?”

“Just us.”

“That’s awfully nice of you.”

Dave glanced at me. “Nothing nice about it. He’s my best friend, and I owe him my life.”

I didn’t have a response to that, so I just nodded. “Has he seen a doctor?”

“Yeah.” He was quiet again, as if he couldn’t bring himself to name the disease that was robbing his friend of his precious memory. But he didn’t have to tell me, I knew. And it broke my heart for both of them. Finally, Dave sighed. “It’s the damnedest thing. He might not remember a phone call from yesterday, but he remembers everything from way back. All our years on the force, almost every case we’d ever worked on. Old friends, people, places...”

“I have a grandmother like that. Remembers fifty years ago, but forgets the recent stuff.”

“How’s she doing?”

I was ashamed to admit it, because I hadn’t seen her in years. “I don’t know. We had to put her in a nursing home because—”

“Because?” He probably didn’t mean it to, but the look he gave me pierced me.

“Because one day she couldn’t remember anything at all.”

We were quiet for a moment. I knew the other waitress was ticked because she had to see to my other customers, but I didn’t care right then. “Dave, what if...what if Ken forgets someday? All of it, I mean. What happens when he just can’t remember?”

Dave smiled gently, but I saw a fierce love in those blue eyes before he looked away and watched his friend return to him.

“Then I’ll remember for both of us.”

Brit
6/16/04