

The Diner

Jeremías Jáuregui*

He was late. He walked into the diner and realized he would barely have time for a bite before going back to work. The place could only be considered ordinary. Fluorescent lighting, plain walls, average-looking wooden tables and chairs. James liked it anyway. It had a cozy feeling that was hard to describe, and most importantly, decent food. He sat down at his usual table and quickly scanned the place. He spotted Beth and waved. She was the best waitress. Not necessarily easy on the eyes, but quick-witted, funny and very talkative. The moment she saw him, she took a sideways glance. It seemed like she was looking at someone else who was talking to her, but James could not see them from his position. A few moments later she was at his table. “Good morning, Beth,” he said warmly. “Good morning,” her tone was bone dry. Something had happened. James’s mind raced back to the previous day. Was it something he had said? They had only talked about the weather, about work, about the latest gossip, and something else he could not remember. He would never purposely say anything to upset her. His little chats with her were a colorful spot in a gray and dreary day of mind-numbing work. Her nephew! They had also talked about her nephew’s new business project. But as far as he could recall, he hadn’t said anything out of place. Beth’s voice crashed into his thoughts like a train at full speed: “What will it be?” Now he was sure he had done something. She did not ask if he was having the usual. His response came with a sinking feeling in his chest: “Just the usual.” He would get to the bottom of this by the time she came back with his food.

Five minutes had gone by. The diner was full of interesting characters today. This man, who could not be older than sixty, had made a complete mess. Most of his food was scattered all over the table like some bizarre piece of modern art. The salt shaker was on its side spilling salt all over the floor like an open tap. ‘It really is incredible how some people can reach a certain age never having learned proper table manners,’ thought James. Then, at the table on the corner, a young girl and a boy were sitting. They looked like college kids. She was not actually crying, but he could see the tears drying on her cheeks. Young love that ended too early, most likely. On the other side of the diner, this man in a brown jacket was out cold, sleeping at his table. He noticed the table had been splattered with ketchup, but the sleeping man seemed not to mind. James was not able to see his face from that angle, but he had his hands on his lap and his face was lying directly on the table. Judging by the way he was sleeping, that table was probably more comfortable than any pillow.

Five more minutes had passed. What could he have said to upset her? He had said the project was a good idea even though he did not believe it. Had she seen through his white lie? No way. James had always considered himself a good liar, and most of all, excellent at reading people and situations. But something had caused this. He had to know what.

* Manera suspicaz de enmascarar el argumento – Concurso Literario USAL en Lengua Inglesa – Categoría cuento (2022).

His food finally arrived. There were beads of sweat on Beth's forehead. A strange sight considering that it was a cold November day. Was she that nervous and upset around him? He had to say something: "Beth, is something wrong?," he asked trying to sound casual. "No," her piercing, nervous eyes avoiding his. Just before she left, she stepped on his foot with a decent amount of force. That was no accident. She had done that on purpose. James knew it. This was too much. He had to be direct. There was no other way.

He finished his meal as fast as he could. He would go to her and ask her why. He would not leave until he knew why she was angry with him. He left the money on the table and headed for the counter. When walking past the artist's table, James noticed the man was shaking and had a look of pure terror in his eyes that he had been unable to see earlier because of his glasses. He looked as if someone had scared him half to death. James walked past the two college kids, and this time he noticed a fresh bruise on the boy's cheek. Their backpacks were on the floor, wide open and jumbled. It was almost as if someone had... He kept walking and went by the sleeping gentleman's table. The ketchup on the table looked different now. It almost looked like... James finally reached the counter. Beth was there standing awkwardly. Her eyes fixed on his. As he began trying to preamble his question, he could not help but notice that Beth's eyes kept darting to the side. It was as if she was looking at something right by her feet, behind the counter. She was clearly busy, so he wasted no more time. "Did I do something wrong, Beth?" Her response never came. She kept staring at him, her eyes darting to the side. "Do you want me to leave?" He did not know what else to ask. "Please." Her tone was pleading. Now he was upset, but he could not think of anything else to say. He simply lowered his head and turned to leave. "Please." Beth's voice sounded even more urgent this time. He picked up the pace and went out the door.

That was it. He would find a new diner. He tried to convince himself that it made no difference. After all, this was always a bad neighborhood. Lots of muggings and robberies happened around this area. He had heard of a case last month that took place a few blocks away from the diner. Two robbers had gone into a lottery place and had hidden inside until the coast was clear. In the meantime, they had forced the employees to continue working and acting as if everything was normal in order not to raise suspicion. The people coming in did not even notice. 'Some people are simply scatterbrained,' James thought with a chuckle.