

Sunday Breakfast

Stephen Paul Sayers

Sunday after church, Melanie Maxwell rode in the station wagon's back seat, her father driving, her mother beside him. With their weekly religious obligations fulfilled, the family headed to Wurdig's diner out at the far end of Route K, home of the "belly-buster" breakfast. The little girl gazed through the side window at the world flying past, a rumble in her stomach, wondering why pancakes always tasted so much better after church. Other restaurants closer to town served a breakfast just as delicious as Wurdig's, but no one seemed to mind the extra miles together. One of Melanie's favorite games on their Sunday drives involved her mother or father pointing to a car and asking her to tell a story about it. Her imagination piqued, Melanie could weave quite a fantastic tale.

"So, where are they going?" Her father asked, nodding toward the ancient VW van crawling in front of them, a smattering of faded bumper stickers across its rear window.

"Hmmm . . ." Melanie chewed her lower lip, "actually they're not going anywhere. They're coming home."

"From where?" Her mother raised an eyebrow.

"Not where . . . when. They were caught in a time swirl."

"That sounds scary."

"It is!" The little girl leaned over the front seat. "They went out to breakfast thirty years ago and disappeared until just now."

"They must be hungry," her father offered.

"And thirsty, too," Melanie added.

Her father clutched the steering wheel tighter. "Probably why they're driving so slowly," he mumbled.

The little girl loved Sundays and time spent with her parents. She also loved the diner, the sound of plates and glasses clinking together, the bell dingling when an order came up or the cash register opened, and the din of cheery conversations filling the air. Melanie's order never changed—the silver dollar pancakes—always just the right size. Plus, since they came in a stack of twelve, she could eat all day and never come close to finishing them. Her dad would get the "belly buster" with extra bacon—every time—and pineapple

juice. Her mother proved to be a mystery, though, always a surprise.

Today, Melanie and her mother played a different game once they arrived at the table. “Okay, honey,” her mother said, “what am I getting for breakfast today?”

The little girl scrunched her face, trying to guess what her mother would order. “Let’s see, you’re getting the French toast . . . with cherry pie and a vanilla milkshake.” She lifted her wide eyes to her mother.

“You’re amazing, Melanie. That’s exactly what I planned to order!” She gave a quick wink to her husband.

“I knew it.”

“You know, Melanie, every day provides opportunity for new adventures. Eating the same food all the time makes life too predictable and boring.” She said this while peering at her husband. He glanced up from his newspaper with mock irritation, just a quick peek over his glasses, making her mother smile and Melanie giggle.

The little girl loved Sundays.

After breakfast, Melanie’s parents sipped their coffee and talked about grownup things while she colored on a paper children’s menu. An uncomfortable dizziness fell upon her, darkness sweeping across her vision like moving clouds drawing shadows across a patch of lawn. She dropped her crayon and stared straight ahead, unseeing—the pictures playing in her mind, like a movie. A movie about her family.

Only the movie wasn’t a happy one at all.

Blood spattered their faces, and her mother lay sprawled in the road with her head dented in and her neck bent backward. Her father’s crumpled body rested on the car’s hood, halfway in and halfway out the windshield, his legs bent in places they didn’t normally bend. A gurgling sound bubbled from his throat as he tried to breathe, like when he blew milk bubbles with her through a straw at the kitchen table. No sound came from her mother. A big white truck, decorated with a picture of cows and milk bottles, rested way too close to the car, steam billowing from its engine. People stood everywhere watching them, covering their mouths with their hands, gasping. No one moved. They just watched them. In an instant, the movie in her mind stopped.

Melanie lifted her head. The restaurant sounds once again swelled in her ears. Her father gave her a wink as he dropped a handful of bills on the table. “Okay, time to hit the road.” He slid from the booth.

Melanie crept under the table instead.

“Melanie, honey, get off the floor.” Her mother reached for her under the table. “It’s dirty under there.”

“We can’t leave yet.” The little girl pulled away from her mother, grasping the table leg.

“Honey, I told you last time, it’s disrespectful to the people waiting to eat.” He shrugged at the hungry family waiting for their table.

“We have to wait.”

Her father folded his arms. “Melanie! Let’s go!” Other patrons stared at them, shaking their heads.

Melanie closed her eyes to see if she could replay the movie in her head, but she saw nothing. It usually didn’t take long for the pictures to go away; she just needed to wait a while. If she waited and still saw the pictures, she needed to wait longer.

“Okay, I’m ready.” She crept from under the table and reached for her parents’ hands, walking them outside the restaurant, across the gravel parking lot, and over to the car. Her mother and father exchanged a glance as they buckled their lap belts, whispering in hushed tones.

They eased into the heavy weekend traffic heading south on Route K. They drove for a few minutes until they approached the intersection of K and Highway 63. At a stoplight, her mother leaned over the backseat. “Hey Melanie, do you see the milk truck up ahead with the cows and bottles painted on the side of it? Tell us a story about that one.”



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