

The Colonial Diner
By Jack Karp
10-page sample

(The WAITRESS starts counting her tips.)

COOK

I don't know why you bother. It always comes out the same.

WAITRESS

Hey, you never know. Besides, what else do I have to do?

COOK

You could help me clean up.

OLD MAN

(Referring to the TV.)

I don't understand how you can not be mesmerized by this, Julio.

COOK

My name is not Julio.

OLD MAN

This guy's going to do big things for immigrants like you.

COOK

I'm from California.

OLD MAN

I never thought I'd see the day when this country elected a black president.

WAITRESS

Don't jinx it. It hasn't happened yet.

OLD MAN

Not to worry, my dear. It is a foregone conclusion. We are watching the American dream at work. A mixed-race child born poor to a single mother, works hard, does well in school, and goes on to become president of the United States. It's like a fairy tale out of a book. Who wouldn't vote for that?

COOK

Like you voted. I haven't seen you leave that booth all day.

OLD MAN

(Touching his heart.)

In here, Julio, in here.

WAITRESS

(To the COOK.)

Didn't you vote for Obama?

COOK

Did you?

WAITRESS

Well... no... but not because I didn't want to. Because I'm stuck here. But if I could get away... I mean, this is amazing. All those parents telling their kids you can grow up to be anything you want, even president. Who knew it was true?

COOK

Yeah, my mom used to tell me I could grow up to be president, too.

OLD MAN

Of Mexico.

COOK

My point is, for every Obama, there are ten thousand other kids just like him who ended up joining a gang and getting shot or going to jail or becoming just some other cliché.

OLD MAN

You, my friend, have a very pessimistic view of the world. It must be a result of growing up in such a poor and war-torn place.

COOK

I grew up in Los Angeles.

OLD MAN

I rest my case.

WAITRESS

Well, I'm excited. How often do you get to see the whole country change right before your eyes?

COOK

Nothing is going to change.

WAITRESS

How can you say that? That's what this whole campaign was about.

COOK

Oh, yeah, I forgot. He's just going to breeze into office tomorrow and everything's suddenly going to be fixed – the economy, the wars, the poverty, the fact that they won't stop making "American Idol" – and he'll do it all without wrinkling his pretty little Brooks Brothers suit.

WAITRESS

He just said in his speech –

COOK

And how many times have we heard that same speech? Believe what you want to believe, but he gets elected or not, we'll still be right here tomorrow. If you think different, you're in for a rude awakening. All those empty platitudes and clichés about change and hope are just that, empty.

OLD MAN

Don't listen to him, dear. He's just bitter because he had to abandon his wife and child to be tortured by his country's despotic regime so he could chase that brilliant, glowing ember of freedom off in the distance that is Amereeca. Hidden in the trunk of a car for days and then just dumped like a sack of garbage on this side of the border without a penny to his name, forced to work in the fields picking grapes under the blistering sun so rich Americans could have a glass of cabernet with dinner, the only place he could find to sleep a ramshackle old barn, leaking cold, icy rain onto his naked brow...

WAITRESS

I thought you said there was blistering sun.

OLD MAN

Don't interrupt me, I'm on a roll. Denying himself even the most basic comforts so he could send home whatever measly nickels and dimes he was able to scrimp, hoping and dreaming that if he worked hard, he might be able to aspire to one of the few good jobs this country has to offer people like him, working at McDonald's or, dare he dream, Taco Bell. But after years of struggling and getting nowhere, he has finally been forced to face the fact that the brilliant,

OLD MAN (cont'd.)

beckoning light of freedom calling to him from off in the distance was really just the nighttime glare of a 24-hour Wal-Mart.

COOK

Have you seen a map? Do you know where California is?

OLD MAN

Don't worry, you don't have to pretend with us. We are not the federalés.

COOK

I would kick you right out of here if I didn't feel so sorry for you, living all alone in your roach-infested room in one of those sketchy residence hotels down by the abandoned warehouse, a giant neon sign flashing outside your window all night – No vacancy, No vacancy, No vacancy – or better yet, part of the sign is burned out so it just flashes No, No, No, while you eat your dinner straight out of a can standing over the sink, your only company your eight cats who, when you die and there is no one left to feed them, will be forced to eat the rotting flesh off your face.

WAITRESS

That's horrible! What is wrong with you?

COOK

He started it.

OLD MAN

A little cliché on the whole, but the broken neon sign was a nice touch.

COOK

Thanks.

WAITRESS

You two are like children, I swear.

OLD MAN

Now, if you wouldn't mind turning the sound back –

(The WAITRESS finishes counting her tips.)

WAITRESS

Oh my God!

OLD MAN

What, my dear?

WAITRESS

I did it! I finally did it!

COOK

Did what?

WAITRESS

I finally saved up the money I need to get out of this place. I can't believe it!

COOK

Wait, but that –

WAITRESS

Now I can finally get on that rickety old Greyhound that leaves once a week from the gas station across the road and get out of this one-horse town for the big city!

OLD MAN

Good for you, my dear. I told you you could do it.

WAITRESS

No more of this same tedious waiting and hoping, no more running day after day just to end up in the same place. Everything is going to be completely different from now on!

(She puts the money in the pocket of her apron.)

OLD MAN

And what will you do in the city, my dear?

WAITRESS

I'm going to get a job as a waitress! But just to pay the bills while I go on auditions and take acting classes so someday I can make it big on Broadway!

(She breaks into a cheesy and very obviously bad rendition of a song from a big Broadway musical.)

... Even though I'm just moderately pretty in a very American, girl-next-door kind of way but am nothing special really and there are like fifty-thousand other girls just like me trying to do the

WAITRESS (cont'd.)

exact same thing. But I am determined and will keep plugging away year after year, getting rejection after rejection while I live on Wonder Bread and ramen noodles in a one-bedroom apartment I share with three roommates until one day when I meet a big Broadway producer at the restaurant where I work and he tells me I'm perfect for the lead in his new show. And of course, I'll sleep with him, but that's okay because it's for my art, and I'll only later find out the part is really just a one-line walk-on in an off-off-Broadway show in the basement of an East Village theatre. But in the meantime, I've lost my job because I missed so many shifts for rehearsal, and with the economy being what it is, I'll have to resort to selling my body. It'll be tough at first, but eventually I'll get used to it, and the drugs help of course. And then one night I'll wake up in a strange motel with some man I don't recognize huffing and puffing on top of me while dressed for some inexplicable reason as a clown and it'll just be too much. I'll get up and wander out into the night, distraught, stumbling onto the nearest bridge, climbing up on the handrail and taking a deep breath before ending it once and for all. And my bloated corpse will be reeled in three days later by a pair of homeless men fishing for empty soda cans off the pier!

COOK

Sounds like quite the plan.

WAITRESS

It's just an outline really. I haven't given it much thought. I'm trying to stay open to anything.

OLD MAN

I'm sure if anyone can do it, it's you, my dear.

WAITRESS

I can't wait! This is so exciting!

(She checks the clock and then jumps up from the table.)

Oh, wow, I'd better pack my stuff if I'm going to catch that bus!

(She takes her apron off and puts it on the table, and runs out excitedly. They wait for her to exit and then the OLD MAN goes to the neighboring booth the COOK checked earlier and lifts the cushion to look for himself.)

COOK

I already checked.

OLD MAN

Yes, but the money is different here and I'm guessing the Mexican education system doesn't teach math.

COOK

Big state. Next to Nevada. Lots of sun. You can't miss it.

OLD MAN

(Referring to what was hidden beneath the cushion.)

It's all gone.

COOK

I told you.

OLD MAN

Well, what happened to it?

COOK

She has to know.

OLD MAN

She doesn't know.

COOK

How does she keep finding the money then?

OLD MAN

Why would she keep putting up with all this if she knows?

COOK

Maybe because you keep getting her hopes up.

OLD MAN

I don't know what you're talking about.

COOK

You're making her believe she's getting out of here.

OLD MAN

So? What's wrong with letting her have hopes?

COOK

You call them hopes, I call them delusions.

OLD MAN

It is a thin line, my friend.

COOK

It's not fair. We both know she's not going anywhere.

OLD MAN

We know no such thing.

COOK

Yes, we do. It's always the same thing – the enthusiastic young waitress with big dreams saving up money to escape her small town and run off to the city, but just when she finally has enough cash, her mother gets sick and needs an operation or the evil bank manager from town threatens to foreclose on the family farm, so she has to stay and ends up trapped here, growing increasingly bitter as her dreams slip further away, becoming meaner and meaner to her customers until finally she gets fired for throwing a piece of pie at the homecoming queen, and eventually she becomes that old lady none of the kids will ring her doorbell on Halloween because they think she might poison their candy.

OLD MAN

You underestimate the great spirit of America. This country is a grand and sprawling blank canvas on which you can paint for yourself any life you wish. She need only want it badly enough and work hard enough and eventually she will –

COOK

No she won't! Get that through your thick skull. Nothing changes! Just look at us. The Mexican cook? The cantankerous old man who sits at the diner all day drinking coffee because he has nowhere else to go? These stereotypes are from like 1956. But we're still stuck with them.

OLD MAN

I'm impressed you've become so familiar with our cultural tropes. I'm sure it was quite a struggle for you with your limited English. I applaud your attempt at assimilation.

COOK

I grew up playing little league and eating hot dogs! I have a master's degree in English from Berkeley!

OLD MAN

Ah, now we know how it is you ended up working here.

COOK

It's honest work.

OLD MAN

I've seen what you put in the meatloaf. There's nothing honest about it.

COOK

You're an ass.

(The COOK returns to sweeping. The OLD MAN watches him.)

OLD MAN

Well... ?

COOK

Well, what?

OLD MAN

You know what.

COOK

I did it last night. And the night before that.

OLD MAN

You're the one who says nothing ever changes.

COOK

You do it for once.

OLD MAN

You know I can't.

COOK

Why not?

OLD MAN

Because, I'm the harmless and eccentric old man who speaks in vague aphorisms that have the ring of wisdom but don't really mean anything. You're the illegal, desperate for money to send back to your family over the border. Everyone knows you wetbacks can't be trusted.

COOK

That's it!

(The COOK lunges at the OLD MAN. The OLD MAN moves around the other side of a table to avoid him.)

OLD MAN

Come on, Jesus. Surely you wouldn't harm an old man.

COOK

My name is not Jesus!

(The COOK lunges at the OLD MAN again and the OLD MAN avoids him. The COOK chases the OLD MAN around the table.)

OLD MAN

If you get arrested, they'll deport you.

COOK

I am going to shove this broom up your wrinkly old ass!

OLD MAN

See, this is exactly the kind of thing that gives you people a bad name.

(The COOK catches the OLD MAN and raises the broom to hit him.)

You don't want me to call immigration, do you?

COOK

For the last time, I am not from – !

OLD MAN

Do you really think it matters?