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Just Thinking, 02/24/03:

Take Out

by Justin Katz

The cool light of the television pulsed on the wall of synthetic stones, where it intermingled with flickers from the fire. The fireplace, resembling an open stove, but enclosed in glass, sat in the middle of a brick platform. He would have watched the flames eat away at the wood, as he had when he was a child loitering around a campsite, but the logs were merely decorations and did not burn.

Not far from where the fake stones gave way to wood paneling, neon letters read, "Dine Out from Home." A plastic sign beneath the phrase clarified the meaning, "Take Out." The twenty-something assistant manager who had taken his order stood below the signs in the doorway to the kitchen, eyes following teenage waitresses, suggesting that low salaries and sparse benefits were not the only reasons chain restaurants drew their workforces from local high schools and universities. The kid's hair shot away from his head at unlikely angles, and his black T-shirt bulged where he had tucked it into his slacks.

After placing his order and exchanging credit card and signature for a customer survey, the man had sat down on a deep leather, or leatheresque, couch across from the fire and the neon sign. He watched as patrons began to trickle in, apparel out of synch with the cultivated ski-lodge

ambiance of the interior. It was winter, so the clothes were heavy and layered, with scarves, hats, and gloves, but they were... well... the everyday *habillement* of regular folk.

A young couple walked through the door. The woman wore skin-tight black pants and a jean-jacket, and her hair spilt in rich waves over her shoulders. Her eyes glanced around the room, returning to the floor below her down-tilted head before looking in each new direction. Her companion strode beside her, his beard-stubble broken here and there by scars, like miniature scowls across his face. A perky hostess sat them at a high table with stools under a television.

The man on the leather couch looked back toward the door to the kitchen. Beyond the wall that faced the waiting area, the kitchen had an open view to the main room of the restaurant. The chefs hurried past each other and skirted between stainless steel racks and counters. Above them, a painted view of a mountain lake ran the length of the restaurant. The mural reminded him of the scenery painted behind displays at the Museum of Natural History in New York City. When a boy, he had imagined himself strolling past the stiff figures of long-extinct species into the background. He'd wondered, then, whether he would be transported to days long past or transformed into a two-dimensional detail, an inexplicable figure, out of context. He would have accepted either.

In a shadowy corner by the take-out counter, where the assistant manager busied himself entertaining a female employee who had just arrived for work, a piece of the wood paneling swung inward. The manager slunk over to the counter. He was in his thirties and practiced, apparently, at pretending that he didn't fear the girls' snickers behind his back. Nights out with friends after work were beginning to show under his eyes and over his belt.

The manager approached a podium near the entrance, where several adolescent hosts awaited people whom they could seat, and announced a new contest from the home office. "Whoever turns in the most customer surveys this week gets a \$50 bonus," he told them, before

pivoting on his heel to prove to a just-arrived family that they were welcome in his establishment. “Hello, folks! How’s it goin’ tonight? How many, four? Katie, here, will find you a table away from the bar.”

The father joked that he hoped they wouldn’t be *too far* from the bar; Katie smiled without apparent comprehension and reached across the podium for some menus and a survey. As the family made their way past the smiling line of young hosts, the manager’s attention turned toward the man waiting on the couch, who had been watching the scene with perhaps too much interest. The man looked away, down at the forgotten survey in his hand, then at a pen on a nearby coffee table.

Before he had reached for the pen, the man was distracted by a cold breeze, as a sudden wave of customers entered the restaurant. A large family blocked the way for a moment, waiting for Dad, while their host walked halfway to their table before noticing that they were not following. Over the heads of the waiting children, the next host in the rotation greeted an elderly couple and waved for them to walk around the family, behind the podium. In the short time until the entranceway was unclogged, the dinner rush had begun in earnest, with large groups taking a moment to count and middle-aged men walking past them all, saluting a gang of friends who had commandeered an entire corner of the restaurant.

“Heyhey!” the men shouted from their seats. And voices were suddenly everywhere.

“Seven?” “No, eight. My husband’s parking the car.”

“Order up!” “That was medium-rare, right?”

“Can I get you another beer?” “No, I’ll just have a soda.”

“Daddy, can I have a quarter.”

“Check, please.”

“Aaaaooow.”

A muffled groan somehow sifted through the noise of the restaurant to the man on the couch. A hiss drew his attention to the young couple that had come in earlier. Beneath their high table, the woman's slender thigh was caught in the vice grip of a masculine hand. Her cheeks contorted in an attempt to stifle the expression of pain. Her scowl-faced boyfriend was snarling in whispers. *Wait 'till we get home.*

From the waiting area, the man couldn't hear the words, but he could read them on the toughguy's face, in the way his upper lip pulled back. And he had heard those words before, spoken in exactly that way — long ago, but burned in his memory. He watched as the hand slowly moved away from the woman's leg, as she managed to hold back all tears but one, which she wiped away discreetly with her cloth napkin. He watched the bully's eye twitch above the stubble and above the scars, and he knew that the anger was being steeled until it could be released at home.

The couch let out an audible breath as he stood up. He watched the couple — male cutting his steak viciously, female overturning onion rings and chewing on her lip. He resolved to speak up, to imprint himself on the couple so that, when they got home, the brain behind the punk's twitching eye would raise his image and vaguely warn... *somebody knows*. "Sir." He wondered what he might say when he got to the table. He wondered whether there would be a fight, whether the middle-aged men would come to his defense. He stepped forward.

"Sir." He stopped.

"Sir." Katie held out a paper bag with styrofoam containers piled within it. "Here's your order. Sorry for the delay."

"Oh. Okay."

Outside, the frigid wind swept across the mall parking lot. He didn't notice as it lifted his receipt from the bag and carried it away. The customer survey was in his pocket.