Just Two for Dinner

RED ROCK COUNTRY IS KNOWN FOR ITS NATIVE AMERICAN SPIRITUALITY. MESSAGES ARE CONVEYED THROUGH VARIOUS MEANS TO THOSE WHO ARE RECEPTIVE TO THEM. I OFTEN RECEIVED SUCH SPIRITUAL MESSAGES WHILE RESEARCHING AND WRITING *THE OTTER SPIRIT.* INSPIRATION FOR THIS SHORT STORY ALSO ENTERED MY IMAGINATION DURING ONE OF MY JOURNEYS INTO THIS SPIRITUAL REALM.

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JUST TWO FOR DINNER

a short story
by
Judith K. Berg

Oh, a vacation to the bewitching beauty of red rock country! We will journey to the land of mystery and adventure. Yes... yes... yes! My husband and I had discussed where to go for a much-needed break from our busy worlds, and this was the result of our decision. We packed up our car and headed to our destination.

We found a small quaint town located amongst giant red cliffs for our first stop. Ah, a perfect place for an early dinner and overnight lodging. Because we were both very hungry, we decided to seek a nice dining establishment for our evening meal. Tucked back in the pinion pines, we discovered an interesting looking restaurant. There were no other cars in the parking lot, but it was still before the normal dinner hour. A stately looking man met us as we entered through the heavy wooden door.

"You are early, but I will serve you," he said in a dry monotone voice. We followed him into the small dining room. He sat us at a table overlooking the majestic red rock sculptures.

The table was set for three people. It was also the only set table. The waiter proceeded to pour three glasses of water and handed us three menus. We reminded him that there were only two of us. He said nothing and walked away. When he returned, he took our dinner and wine order. Then he walked back to the kitchen.

The interior of the restaurant would best be described as 'rustic elegance'. Fresh flowers adorned each of the wooden tables and hearty plants sat in the greenhouse windows. On the walls hung scenic and western-themed watercolors. It was all very comfortable. It was all very perfect. Why weren't there any other patrons?

The waiter brought our wine and poured three glasses. Then he served three salads. We again reminded him that there were only two of us. His far-off gaze told us to refrain from saying any more about it. When we finished our salads, he removed our empty plates. Then he removed the third full plate.

After he walked away, my husband and I giggled, then said in unison, "I wonder what this third person ordered?" We had both decided on the same entree, at the suggestion of our waiter. Well, when our meals arrived, there were three plates, each containing the same food. My husband and I enjoyed our deliciously prepared and delicately presented gourmet meal. The third person ate nothing. *I guess he or she didn't like it!*

Our waiter, cook, and all-around only other person in the restaurant provided

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us with dining entertainment. He sat down at the piano and began hitting the keys, bringing forth popular songs from yesteryear. To us, the music brought back memories of our own times gone by along with those we had only heard about. The plants in the greenhouse windows and the fresh flowers on the tables seemed to dance to the rhythm of the music. The old grandfather clock chimed in with its own melodic expressions. How delightfully perfect it all was. Why were we the only patrons?

We finished our meal. The waiter removed our two empty plates and the third full plate. Then he poured the remaining wine and left us the check. We were charged for only two dinners. When the waiter returned, my husband jokingly asked him about the third diner.

"He'll take care of his own," the waiter said with a solemn expression. I looked for matches or postcards of the restaurant, but there were none. I did pick up the cork from our nice Italian wine as a keepsake of our evening.

My husband paid our bill with his credit card. I felt uncomfortable with his signature and account number being given to our strange waiter, but the deed was done. We took our copy of the receipt then left. We enjoyed our meal, but also felt relieved at leaving this eerie restaurant. There were still no other patrons. It was now 8:00 p.m. As we drove from the parking lot, the outside light dimmed on its way to entering its darkened state.

We drove to a nearby motel, checked in, and proceeded to our room. After driving all day, we looked forward to a good rest. We fell asleep while laughing about our weird experience.

That night I had a very strange dream. Although disguised, my dreams normally contain real people engaged in real events. This one was different. I saw indescribable images floating through a darkened world. I felt removed from myself. I woke up trembling. I got out of bed and took a long hot shower. Then I felt better, so I returned to bed. My husband was still fast asleep. I went back to sleep too.

The next morning, we went to the motel's office to check out. We asked the proprietor for a good place to eat breakfast. He gave us the names of a couple nearby places. Then we asked if the restaurant where we dined the night before might also be open for breakfast. He looked at us with a startled expression on his face.

"You didn't eat there last night," he said. "That place has been closed for ten years. It closed right after that Indian fellow committed suicide. So, you couldn't have eaten there."

"Oh yes we did," I said. "We had a delicious gourmet dinner." Then I described the interior of the restaurant.

"Well," he said, "that sounds like what the place used to look like, but not anymore. That establishment was boarded up 'cause' it's haunted. After that fellow died, strange things started happening in connection with that restaurant, so people

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stopped going there. The owner, an Italian fellow, returned to Italy after he closed up the place. It's been boarded up ever since. Yep, it's haunted."

My husband and I both persisted in the fact that we had eaten dinner there. Then my husband produced the receipt. Yes, it had the name of the restaurant and the date. The proprietor looked at it.

"You folks playing with my head!" he declared. "You must have eaten there the date of the murder. Look at the year on your receipt. It was exactly ten years ago yesterday that it happened."

We both looked at the year posted on the receipt. He was right! Well, before yesterday, we had never been to this town. What was happening? Then something clicked in my head as to what the proprietor said. First he said it was a suicide then he said it was a murder. Hmmm, I wonder which it was?

"Just to relieve your minds, folks, I'll let you talk to the real estate fellow who has been trying to sell that property."

The proprietor called him. The real estate person reiterated what the proprietor told us.

"No one who knows about that place would go anywhere near it," he said. Then he laughed, "Hey, do you want to buy a restaurant?"

We gave up. We paid our motel bill and left the office. As we started walking towards our vehicle, the local sheriff's car pulled into the parking lot.

"You the folks who dined at the haunted restaurant last night?" he laughed.

"Yes," we replied.

Then he asked, "Would you like to see the restaurant where you said you ate dinner?" We were both curious and thought that now we could clear this matter up 'once and for all', so we responded affirmatively, then followed him to the establishment.

We got out of our vehicles and walked to the large wooden door. The three of us entered the restaurant. My husband and I both stood in a state of disbelief. Dust now covered the piano that bore many broken keys within a yellowed plane. Music would never resound from this instrument again, unless it were broken chords of shattered dreams. The greenhouse windows were laced with sagging cobwebs strung among browned leaves in broken pots. There were no fresh flowers on the upturned wooden tables. The grandfather clock stood at attention, but its melodic sounds would not enter this scene. Its hands were missing, along with its heart and soul. Even the vibrant watercolor paintings no longer decorated the walls.

How could a sensually appealing restaurant one day turn into a frightening relic

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the next. It was impossible! Yet, it happened. At least I did not experience it alone. My logical, fact-finding husband had also been a part of the event. We both stood silent as our eyes looked out into this unreal world. The other world had been real. This world was not. Or was it?

The sheriff looked at me without speaking a word. His eyes, cold and foreboding set against a stern and emotionless face, expressed his inner thoughts. He penetrated my being with his hardened glare. My body began to tremble. I felt the blood being sucked from within me. I wanted to run from him, but my feet were stuck to the floor. Movement was not an option. I looked at my husband whose mouth was opening and closing but his words did not enter this silent world. Maybe I transcended into another world? Nothing seemed real to me. I didn't understand.

The last thing I remembered was feeling tears flowing from my closing eyes and darkness entering my world. Then, when I again opened my eyes, I found myself lying in the bed of a small room. Activity I saw from the open door told me it must be a hospital. My husband stood beside my bed. He said that I had collapsed. He apologized for not taking our vacation sooner. He didn't realize how stressed I was. Well, stress wasn't a part of me until we went back to that restaurant. Or did we?

Maybe the event was a horrible dream. I asked him where I collapsed.

"We'll discuss it later. Just rest for now," he spoke quietly. Then I saw a uniformed police officer enter through the doorway. It was the same man as the one in my dream. Maybe it hadn't been a dream! I drifted off to sleep.

I felt better when I awakened the next day, so I was released from the clinic. The sheriff arrived to bid me a 'fond adieu'.

"Perhaps it would be best for your health to leave as soon as possible," he expressed. "Then I'm sure you'll make a speedy recovery." I received his message loud and clear.

"You know, folks," the sheriff conveyed, "this country can play tricks on peoples' minds. People can think they see or experience something, but in reality they don't. That is probably what happened to you". We both just nodded our heads. "Well, have a good trip!"

We walked to our car. My husband uttered, "I can't wait to get out of this town." I, however, had one small request before we made our final departure. I desired to check the local biweekly newspaper office to see what the paper printed about the suicide or murder. My husband knew of my stubbornness, so he reluctantly agreed.

We drove to the newspaper office. The smiley-faced woman behind the desk went to her files and pulled out a copy of the paper on the date after the death occurred. There was but a brief article on the event. The gist of the article was that a man was found dead at a local restaurant where he worked. The sheriff stated that tests showed the victim was drunk and on drugs. No indications of wrongdoing were discovered. The

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case was labeled a suicide. The man was an Indian from one of the local tribes. His relatives picked up his body for a final ceremony. End of story.

I asked the lady if the sheriff mentioned in the article was the same as the one currently in office.

“Yes,” she replied.

I asked if she had known the victim.

She replied, “No.”

I asked if she knew where the relatives of the Native American lived. She just shrugged her shoulders. I thanked her then we left.

As we were driving out of town, we drove past the restaurant. I spotted the sheriff's car in the parking lot. He was sitting in the car. We drove by slowly but didn't stop.

My husband looked at me and said, "It's over. Let’s forget about it. Maybe it was our imaginations."

"I don't think it was our imaginations," I responded as I turned my head to observe the passing landscape. I felt movement among these rocky monuments. They kept coming closer and closer, reaching out to encase me within their eerie world. Howling winds blew through the open window trying to convey a message. My hand became uncontrollable as it fiddled with the wine cork in my jacket pocket.

“I don't understand what all of this means”, I said. “But, it really *isn't* over!”

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