

I

The waitress was new here. She came out of the underpass and hurried down the sidewalk, very businesslike, keeping to herself, as tall as me even in flat-heeled shoes. Maybe forty years old? That's not the kind of thing you can ask a lady. She had a sort of flesh-pink makeup on her eyelids, she must have spent a long time getting ready. I didn't look too closely at her shoes, the way I usually do to size someone up, because I had a feeling she'd seen some rough times, and there was no point overdoing it. And I've seen some rough times too, I tell myself now and then, but

I'm not even sure it's true. The sky was all cloudy. Sometimes, on gray days like this, you can see why you're here, in a café like Le Cercle. People come in to get out of the weather, they have a drink, and then they go on their way. The boss was smoking his morning cigarillo when she showed up. He and I got along nicely, I think you could put it like that. I'm already about to retire, whereas he's in his prime, theoretically, but he has problems with his cholesterol, and other health worries besides. He keeps his pills in a corner of the bar next to the Casio. I used to have to take the same kind myself, and I'm still here, but I think that sort of got to him, he seemed a little on edge. Sabrina hadn't been in for three days now, she'd sent a note from the doctor, she had a bad flu. The new girl must have been wondering if this was the place, I wasn't sure if she was going to come in or keep walking. The boss was dreading another lunch shift alone with his wife and me, and without Sabrina, and of course it's not easy finding someone who knows the job to fill in just like that.

The boss threw her a quick glance, she took her little piece of paper from her purse and came in, slower now, yes, it was her. He didn't budge, he just put down his smelly cigarillo in the green

and white Suze ashtray. We don't get much call for that kind of apéritif anymore, but we still have the ashtrays with the name on them. We also have Dubonnet glasses here at Le Cercle, and other kinds with the brand names of bottles that never come down from the shelves, maybe they still mean something to the customers, what I don't know. She looked a little nervous, and I gave her a big smile to encourage her when she came up to introduce herself. A lot of the time the boss has a sour look on his face, kind of like a bulldog, but he's not such a bad guy, really. Sometimes he'll sulk for two or three days, even a month or two, and then as quick as it came over him it's gone, and that's the end of it. That week he was scowling more or less full-time, and had been for almost a year, but what can you do, that's the boss. She said something to him in a quiet voice, I couldn't hear because there was a garbage truck being loaded outside. I could see two little green men with big gloves on their hands, along with a mattress done in by the rain yesterday and the day before. I'd already looked at that mattress a couple of times, I'd even made a quick detour to walk past it on my way in, it spoiled my view. I wondered if somebody was moving out, or maybe there'd been a death, unless someone had just left it there because they'd got a

new bed. There's a big furniture store not far from here, on the pedestrian street. It was a king-size, with the usual stains, all on the same side, and little feathers that hadn't felt a raindrop for a good ten years. I've slept alone for too long. I've never even had a chance to try Viagra, which apparently works wonders, and ends lots of marriages, from what I hear in the café. I'd like to, from time to time. Hundreds of bottles went tumbling into the truck when the dumpster lid opened, and it made one hell of a racket, if you'll pardon the expression. But of course everybody has to throw out a mattress sooner or later, and if you're still alive your nights will never be quite the same. The trashmen shoved it in on top of the bottles and drove away. That would have made a good commercial for Alcoholics Anonymous, I thought to myself, but that's not my line of work. The trashmen go to the other bar, across the street, La Rotonde. I have no idea why it's called that.

The boss shook her hand and introduced me. "This is Pierre," he said, and she gave me a nod, her eyes were sort of small but bright, maybe because of the cold outside, it was nine-thirty in the morning. I put out my hand and said "Hello, how's it going?"

What I really wanted to say was “Welcome to the club,” and then give her some tips on the questions she was probably going to ask. The boss isn’t much of a talker, but he’s him and I’m me. I’m only the oldest employee of Le Cercle, which is the café where I work, across from the Asnières train station, where there’s nothing to see but people coming in and going out, trains every seven minutes to and from Saint-Lazare in Paris, and also some double-decker Transiliens to Argenteuil, Versailles-Rive Droite, Versailles-Chantier, Évreux, Dreux, and lots more places in the outer suburbs. She had a firm grip, when she let go I noticed she had a big wedding ring on her left hand, and I wondered if that’s really where it’s supposed to go. That was all too long ago for me, maybe I’d forgotten. Still, I’d stayed married for eight years, I was a young man then. I kept my ring on at first. Then I put it in my nightstand drawer. I lost a lot of illusions, but not her. My ex remarried, lived happily, and had two children. Then unhappily, and still two children. Then we lost touch. Her name was Marie, like my adoptive mother. The boss looked around, he’d picked up his cigarillo again.

“Well, let me show you the kitchen,” he said to Madeleine.

With a jerk of his chin he pointed me toward a customer who

comes to see us three times a day, I won't mention his name out of Christian decency, he's overdue on his tab. The boss had already asked him more than once when he'd be paying, but last night at midnight, apparently – I'd gone home a good while before – the guy had suddenly burst into tears. He'd undone his necktie, laid his suit jacket beside him on the bar next to his final drink, and the boss had had a terrible time getting him to stop his little strip-tease. He was undressing to go throw himself into the river "in the altogether," as he put it, the Seine's just two hundred meters away. Not even that. I went over to him, I held out my hand, and he gave it a gentle little shake. "Hello, Pierre, how are you?" It's always the same, once or twice a week he goes on a bender at Le Cercle, then the next day he's all sweetness and light. Sometimes I had to see him home. He lives on La Lauzière, which is a little uphill street not far from the train tracks, where you'll find a few millionaires' villas, his among them.

"So, feeling fine?" I asked.

He seemed a little out of it, which gave me a chance to look toward the station. The mattress was gone. "Yeah, I'm doing OK. Thanks." He's a developer, he's in on all the crooked deals that go down around here, I've even been told he knows the people on the District Council, all those suit-wearing lowlifes from Neuilly,

Levallois, Clichy, and Paris-La Défense, but then people tell me a lot of things. I listen, but I don't really hear. I put some coffee in the Lavazza machine, because I knew he'd be wanting a cup at this time of day, and then I came and bent down beside him.

"You're going to have to pay us, you know," I said, with my hand in front of my mouth so no one could hear.

The boss doesn't like dealing with that sort of thing, especially with a guy like this. Also, he's too quick to lose his temper. The guy looked at me, he's one of my favorite customers here, deep-set eyes, never a pain in the ass, a cup of coffee between nine and nine-thirty, daily special at lunchtime when he's not away on business, and then for the past few months he's been coming in after work, too, when I'm finishing my shift. Sometimes we talk, which for a barman means I listen while he throws out sentences that don't always know where they're going, about his life, his career, his children. He has three, with three different wives. The oldest of the girls is thirty, and he's just turned sixty. They look a lot alike. Sometimes they eat together at Le Cercle. She's a psychiatrist at Marmottan Hospital. She must be his favorite, I've never seen the two others. Does she know her daddy makes a habit of undressing in Le Cercle to go throw himself into the Seine when he's had one too many? I don't think she has the

slightest idea. I like seeing the two of them here, sometimes I even have regrets.

“Oh lord, I really tied one on, Pierre! Can you get me a glass of water?”

He took out a tube of Nureflex with codeine and dropped two tablets into the glass.

The new girl was already setting tables back in the dining room. There’s nobody here in the morning but the kids from the high school, usually just two or three of them, this is where they come to skip class. They don’t always have enough cash for a Coke, or even a coffee. I’m well known around here, they call me by my first name, I can’t always keep them straight but generally it’s a pleasure to see them. We also get people waiting for a phone call to set their course for the day, and housewives from the villas behind the train station, they come in together for a cup of coffee before they head off to the shops. He gave a big sigh and asked what he owed us. Without my noticing, the boss had left by the back door, next to the old dumbwaiter from before they renovated the café. Sometimes he uses the front door like everyone else, but now and then he slips out on the sly. They live above Le Cercle.

“Hang on a minute, if you don’t mind, I’ll go see,” I said.

I went to the Casio and found his sheet under the coins. He hadn’t paid for ten days or so.

“160 euros,” I told him.

I didn’t ask if he wanted to check over the bill, because with the states he got into, he’d have no way of judging. He pulled out his Société Générale checkbook, then said “No, not that one” and got out another, from Barclays. He filled out the check with a fancy Mont-Blanc pen, the slender kind, like the one the boss’s wife keeps in her purse to sign the vendors’ invoices. “Thanks,” I said, and I set down a change saucer beside him. That made him smile, not really a nasty smile, just a smile.

“Do you want a receipt?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll go write it up.”

“I don’t know if I’ll be back for lunch.”

“We have lamb chops with ratatouille.”

“Right.” (He was looking toward the train station.) “I’ll see. Could you please put this on my account?”

“No problem, have a good day.”

He put on his jacket and got out his cellphone. His workday was starting, it was after ten.

“Thanks,” I said, picking up the twenty euros he’d left as a tip. He paid those all at once too.

He was a prince of a customer, the boss would be happy.

I went on serving drinks, soon the lunch crowd would be trickling in, I had a little chat with the new girl, she lived in Paris on the Rue David-d’Angers. She asked if I knew the neighborhood. You bet I did, I’d spent a good twenty years knocking around Buttes-Chaumont. I’d done some short stints at a big café on the Rue Manin, just left of the town hall. Ah yes, she could picture the place. She knew her way around the nineteenth arrondissement. There was still room for people like her there, and in any case she lived alone. How would she fill her spare time if she didn’t live in Paris? She was born on the Place Colonel-Fabien. For the past three years she’d been living across from the swimming pool on the Rue David-d’Angers.

“How long does it take you to get here?”

She also casually asked me how business had been, and I was happy she’d come to trust me so quickly, I’m a fixture around here, people realize that. I served a few beers, brought the school-kids their coffee, two coffees plus three glasses of water, and the

girl greeted me with a peck on the cheek. “What’s new, Pierrounet?” As usual, I wasn’t thinking about anything much. I was wondering why the boss had left without a word, and even that didn’t particularly interest me, in the end. I was just feeling a little disturbed by a dream I’d had the night before, and not for the first time, either. Here I am nearing the end of my working life and I still have dreams about my job, sometimes they terrify me, I’d like to understand that. This guy had come in with another guy, they looked at their watches and changed their minds, it was too early to serve them anyway. They turned around and left without so much as a word to me, and mind you these guys had to be in their forties. I wanted to give them a piece of my mind, but I kept quiet. The new waitress went into the kitchen for a chat with Amédée, the Senegalese cook we found, he’s one of the best the bosses have ever had. They even gave him a raise to keep him around, but I don’t know if that’s going to do it. I went in to see him as soon as I got here, just like I always do, once I’ve wiped down the bar to start off my day. We talked for a while, that Amédée knows a lot of things. He rents an apartment in Saint-Denis, by the new tramway line. I used to go visit him on our days off back when I had my Renault 5. By bus it would take me an hour