

Quantum Diner

A science fiction short story

C.R. Lang

A 100 Acre Spotlight Production

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Quantum Diner

by C.R. Lang

The Crossroads Diner sat at the junction of Route 9 and nothing, a chrome-sided relic with a flickering sign and a counter that had seen a hundred thousand elbows. It was open twenty-four hours a day, because in the diner, time was a suggestion. Truckers came in from a world where the highways had never been paved. A woman in a spacesuit once ordered pie from a reality where the moon had been colonized in 1952. The menu changed hourly, and no one complained, because the coffee was always perfect.

Desmond Achebe had been the cook for nineteen years, and he understood the diner's one rule better than anyone: the kitchen serves what the universe offers. Each night, a shimmer would settle over the pass-through window, and through it came ingredients from elsewhere. Fruit that tasted of memory. Spices from a world where the Silk Road had never closed. He did not ask where they came from. He only cooked, and the patrons ate, and for the length of a meal, they tasted a life they had not lived.

It was a good job. It had been a good life, once.

* * *

Desmond's wife, Adaeze, had died eleven years ago in March, in a hospital room that smelled of antiseptic and cut flowers. She had been a cook too, better than he was, with a hand that could coax sweetness from an onion and make a stew taste like homecoming. He had never cooked

her recipes since. They lived in a green notebook on the shelf above the stove, and he did not open it.

On a Wednesday in October, at 3:17 a.m., the shimmer in the pass-through changed color.

It was gold instead of silver, and it did not deliver ingredients. It delivered a single sheet of paper, warm, folded in thirds. On it, in handwriting he would have known anywhere, was a recipe.

Egusi soup with bitterleaf and smoked catfish. Serves two. Cook slowly. Taste often. Come home when it's ready.

He read it standing at the stove with his hands shaking. It was Adaeze's script, the looping g, the slanted t. But he had never seen this page. It was not in the notebook. He checked, and it wasn't.

At the bottom, in smaller letters, someone had added a line.

The door opens when the soup is right. Don't be afraid. —A.

* * *

He cooked it that night.

He did it carefully, the way you handle a thing that may break. He ground the melon seeds, rendered the palm oil, stirred until the kitchen filled with the dark, nutty, impossibly familiar smell of his wife's cooking. The diner was empty at that hour except for old Pruitt, a regular who had been stuck in the same booth since a universe where the Cubs won in 1908. He looked up from his crossword and said, "Smells like somebody's mother."

"Somebody's wife," said Desmond.

When the soup was ready, he ladled two bowls and set them on the pass-through. And the gold shimmer rose, widened, and became a door.

Beyond it was a kitchen. It was small, warm, and yellow, with a window over the sink, and the late sun slanting across a table set for two. A woman stood at the stove with her back to him, humming a tune he had not heard in eleven years.

She turned around.

Adaeze was older than the woman he remembered. Gray threaded through her hair. There were lines at her eyes that he had never been

given the chance to watch arrive. She looked at him, and her face did something complicated and wonderful, and she said, in the voice that had lived in his head for over a decade, “You took your time.”

* * *

He stayed for a week.

Or what felt like a week; he could never tell afterward. In that yellow kitchen, he learned that she had never gotten sick. In her world, the diagnosis had come early and been treated, and she had lived. They had grown old together in a small house with a dog and a garden. In that world, Desmond had retired at sixty and taken up painting. He had a studio in the back. It was full of canvases, bright and sloppy and joyful, and every one of them was of her.

“I don’t paint,” he said.

“You do here,” she said, and laughed, and leaned against him, and for a moment he forgot everything but the warmth of her shoulder.

There was another Desmond, of course. He came home on the third day from the market, whistling, with a bag of oranges, and stopped at the kitchen door at the sight of a stranger wearing his face. The two men looked at each other for a long time. The other Desmond was heavier, softer around the eyes, a man who had never lost anything.

“You’re the one who didn’t get her,” he said quietly.

“Yes.”

The other man set down the oranges. He did not say I’m sorry. He did not say stay. He only walked to the stove, ladled a second bowl of egusi, and put it in front of the guest, as one man might feed another after a long journey.

* * *

On the seventh night, Adaeze found him sitting on the back step in the dark.

“You’re thinking of going back,” she said.

“I’m thinking I don’t know how to leave.”

She sat beside him. Crickets sang in the garden she had planted, and the air smelled of rain coming. She took his hand, and he felt the calluses of her thumb against his knuckles, and knew without any doubt that she was real, and not his, and never would be.

"I'm not the one you lost," she said gently. "I want you to hear that. I love you, and I would love you in any universe. But she is gone, Dez. The one in your kitchen, with the notebook. She is gone, and if you stay here, you will spend the rest of your life loving me in her place, and neither of us will ever be sure which of us you are looking at."

"That's the best life I can imagine."

"It's a beautiful one. It isn't yours." She turned his hand over in hers. "The door opened because you made the soup right. That doesn't mean you have to walk through it forever. Maybe it opened so you would finally cook her recipes again. So you would remember that you can."

He was crying. He had not cried at the funeral, or in the years after. He cried now, quietly, with his head bowed, and she held him, and the rain began.

* * *

He went home in the morning.

The door was waiting at the end of the hall, gold and humming. The other Desmond walked him to it and pressed a paper bag of oranges into his hands without a word. Adaeze did not cry. She kissed his cheek, and said, "Cook the soup for the people who need it. That's what we always did. That's what it's for."

He stepped through.

The diner was exactly as he had left it, chrome and linoleum and the smell of coffee. Pruitt was still in his booth. The sign still flickered. On the counter, the two bowls had gone cold, but the shimmer in the pass-through was silver again, offering a crate of strange, glowing peaches from a world that had never known winter.

He stood there for a moment. Then he took the green notebook from the shelf above the stove, the one he had not opened in eleven years, and turned to the first page.

Jollof rice, for a Sunday, it began, in her looping hand. Cook it when someone needs forgiving.

Behind him, the bell above the door rang. A woman in a coat that belonged to no decade he knew came in out of the dark, shaking rain from her hair, and asked in a small, tired voice whether the kitchen was still open.

“It’s always open,” said Desmond. He tied on his apron. He lit the burner under the pot, and the diner filled with the smell of his wife’s cooking, and somewhere beyond the walls of every world, a door he would never use again quietly closed. “Sit down. I’ll make you something from home.”