

Sylvia Hauser

Eating at Joe's

I came over the rise and bam, there it was. Strasburg, Illinois, in all its blazing glory. I hit the brakes, expecting a cop to remind me that the speed limit had dropped to 15, but I didn't see a sign. I didn't see a cop, for that matter. It was probably too hot for anyone to sit waiting for speeders—I was so sweaty that I had my hair tied back with a shoelace I found in the glove compartment. It didn't look so great, but everything else was packed away and I didn't feel like searching for anything better. Anyway, it beat looking through dirty-blond bangs all the way to Colorado.

I slowed down even without the sign telling me to, because I kind of missed itty-bitty towns in the middle of nowhere, and this one certainly qualified. Nothing out of the ordinary, really—Strasburg had the same two-story frame houses with plastic deer in the front, the same shut-down feed store, the same little adobe hut selling Tex-Mex, and of course a 7-11. Or was it a Kwik Shop? They all look alike to me. I kicked the Mustang up to 30 and was on the edge of town before it hit me.

I pulled onto a gravel road, whipped a U-turn, and went back to Strasburg. Yeah, there really was a red adobe hut, with JOE'S TEX-MEX scrawled on it in white. Joe, or whoever painted the sign, hadn't left enough room for MEX, so it was squished into about half the space that TEX had taken. There was one car in the dirt lot beside it.

I wasn't hungry, and I don't like Tex-Mex, but I pulled in — this was my tour of roadside America and I wasn't going to miss any of the sights. I was torn between locking up what few possessions I was hauling in the car and risking heat stroke when I got back in, or leaving the windows down as a sign of trust and good will. I locked the car.

It was a lot lighter inside than I thought it would be; the back door was standing open, letting in the sunshine and a little breeze. Through the door I could see a trailer where I guessed Joe lived.

I sat down at one of the three tables in the room and waited for something to happen. There was another room to the side that looked about the same as the one I was in — the size of a large bathroom, with orange tables and brown vinyl chairs. My thighs were already sticking to the chair. I looked at them again — the day I told McGraw-Hill to get lost was also the day I quit shaving my legs, and it was still pretty novel.

I picked up a menu, translucent with grease, and looked for something with caffeine in it. Pieces of conversation from the next room floated in: "And then I

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told Joe ‘Why do we have to go everywhere on that damn bike?’ Oops, sorry — forgot about the baby. I said, ‘Why can’t we just go somewhere in the car for once?’ Here’s your chili, Sharon.” Her voice was half Texan and half tired. “To the Dells or somewhere like that I don’t mind, but he’s thinking about Laredo this fall. Illinois to Laredo on a bike! Good Lord, what am I gonna do with him?”

She was still muttering about motorcycles and Texas when she came into my room and saw me. Maybe I looked confused, because she smiled at me and said, “Need any explaining of the menu, missy?”

“Uh, no. I just want an iced tea and um — what are your tamales like?” I don’t know why I asked about the food — I guess I felt sorry for her, with that nut expecting her to ride on the back of a bike all the way to Texas.

“Well, I’ll tell you.” She retied her apron, pulled some dark strands of hair out of her eyes, and plunked herself down at the table. She moved my menu over so she could see it too.

“Tamales have ground beef and cornmeal, and they’re baked in a cornhusk. Don’t eat the husk, though, ‘cause it’ll make you sick.” Her hands were moving throughout her description, as if she were making invisible tamales.

“Our regular burrito is ground beef and beans in a flour tortilla. But if you get Joe’s Burrito....” She earnestly explained every damn item on the menu. This definitely wasn’t Manhattan. As she talked, I tried to decide if her dark hair and tamale expertise meant she was Mexican — transplanted to Texas and then to Illinois — or just a dark-haired woman who could cook Tex-Mex.

She had finished and was looking at me, waiting. “I guess I’ll try the tamales.” I blurted, thinking they sounded harmless. In the other room, where Sharon was eating chili, the baby was crying.

My waitress, cook, or whatever she was, disappeared into what must have been the tiniest kitchen in Illinois, and I was left to entertain myself. On the shelf behind the cash register was a gallery of Lone Star paraphernalia—a cowboy boot, with “Texas” imprinted on the side of the heel, that was actually a plastic pitcher. A piece of pine cut in the shape of the state, with pictures of tourist attractions trapped under its glossy lacquer. A rattlesnake head encased in a glass jar, forming the base for a small lamp. Lots of postcards. Were these people homesick? Were they really from Texas?

I looked at the wall to my right. It was plastered—absolutely covered—with business cards. Every square inch. Okay, it wasn’t a very big wall, but still—the whole thing was wallpapered with cards from local businesses. A.J.’s Rendering Service, Elizabeth. Ed ‘n’ Jo’s Drive-In, Stockton. Ronnie’s Amoco, Galena. I felt bad that I didn’t have a card to contribute.

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A man strolled in the open back door and grinned vacantly at me. He was very tan and needed a shave. He was probably one of those people who look older than they actually are, but for all I know he really was 50.

"You the Mustang with New York plates?"

What a genius. I nodded.

He smiled beatifically. "I hate New York."

"Me too. That's why I left."

"I used to have to drive a truck into Brooklyn." He shook his head. "They're animals. Plain loco." He found a chair, put his feet up by the cash register, and scratched his beer gut. His accent told me this was Joe, but I wasn't sure; maybe the whole town was filled with Texans.

"So where you headed?"

"Colorado. I've got a sister there." Here I go, telling him my life story.

"Colorado. Yep." He waved off a fly, and I saw he had one, maybe two fingers missing on his left hand. I tried not to stare.

"I took a truck over Wolf Creek Pass-- the Rockies, you know—and that was the hardest damn trip I ever had. In fact on the way down—"

"Joe, leave the poor girl alone. She doesn't want to hear your old stories." Rescued by a plate of tamales.

The woman—I still hadn't figured out her name—set down a dish and a big glass of tea.

"There you go. Now don't eat the husk, 'cause it'll make you sick." I waited until she had turned her back on me before I took my first bite; if it was terrible, I didn't want her to see my face.

Joe and Linda (I finally made up a name for her) went into the other room to talk to Sharon and the baby. I ate. The tamales were actually good, and the tea was cold. The three adults were discussing the best way to get to Toledo; apparently, Sharon was going to meet her parents there next week and wasn't sure how to get to I-80. "Got a map?" I heard Joe say.

Of course no one did. I went out to the car and got my atlas. This time I left the car unlocked. I didn't want them to know I'd been listening, so I left the atlas open on my table, as if I were looking at it, and waited for someone to see it.

Linda came in to see how I was doing and spotted it right off. "Hey Sharon!" she yelled. "We got a map for you." She hesitated. "It's OK if we use it?"

I acted surprised. "Huh? Oh yeah, sure."

"Sharon, come in here. Joe'll show you how to go."

Pretty soon everyone had surrounded my table, even the baby. I thought I

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was going to suffocate, but I didn't want to do the New Yorker thing and tell them to get the hell away from me—I wasn't a New Yorker anymore. Joe began telling Sharon just how to get around Toledo, and rambled into a trucking story.

I saw Linda's attention start to wander, so I sawed on the husk with my knife just to shake her up. It worked. "Stop that!" she said, grabbing my hand, "You want to get sick?"

"Oops, forgot." I smiled, and put the knife down. Everyone was staring at me like I was stupid but it stopped Joe's Toledo tale and I thought it was worth it for Linda.

I drained my glass, pushed my chair back, and headed for the cash register. Joe beat me there—he moved pretty fast for an aging, overweight man. He punched some numbers and said, "That'll be two dollars and ten cents." I found two bills right away and started digging for change, but Joe waved me off.

"Don't worry about it—we'll call it two bucks even for you."

"Hey, thanks."

Sharon shut the atlas and handed it back to me. I opened it back up and ripped out the pages with Illinois, Indiana and Ohio on them. "Take these—I've already gone through them."

"Well, bless your soul," Linda said. "That's really nice of you."

I wasn't a fairy godmother or anything—all I did was give her a couple pages of a five-year-old atlas and she thought I was Mother Teresa. Well, that happens.

There were flies buzzing around in the Mustang when I got into it. I shooed most of them out and pointed the car out onto the highway. I looked back, thinking maybe the whole gang would be standing in the door of Joe's Tex-Mex waving goodbye, but they weren't; they were probably still studying the map. I kicked the Mustang up to 30 and headed for the edge of town.