

CHAPTER 6: THE DIFFERENCE

-- July 28, 1993 -

Being universally hated is, eventually, not much worse than being universally admired, or even all that different. The world is calm around you; everybody treats you the same way, day after day. Kimmy Bettel was universally hated, and she was doing just fine. She even had friends who hated her, and who would invite her to smoke pot with them, every day at lunch. These people talked incessantly about Kimmy behind her back. They talked about her stringy brown hair, cut savagely in the front into bangs. They talked about her weird little eyes, puckered from speed and mistrust. They talked about her smoker's cough and her voice. Her voice was low. Rough as woodchips. It would never, however, have occurred to any of her friends to disinclude her. Oberstville was small enough as it was.

Kimmy was the manager at a posh hotel, and she was the sort of manager who did amphetamines at seven o' clock in the morning, not really secluded from sight, but right there in the hotel parking lot. The speed made her into a sort of demon; her world was divided up ruthlessly into lists of undone chores, and lists of unmade beds, and lists of incoming guests. She knew, and would say between drags on her cigarette, who was on and off shift at any given point, and could predict with amazing accuracy when each day would finally end. At the moment, as it happened, she was smoking, but any minute now she would hustle off to find the bus boy, Milton, and tell him he was fired (but only from the restaurant). He was too slow.

Milton was the sort of clumsy, privileged kid that Kimmy, if it was up to her, would have liked to set on fire.

He always seemed amazed when he was done cleaning any given room, as if he hadn't really expected such a daring plan to work. This annoyed the shit out of Kimmy. He also treated each plate in the restaurant like it was a special artifact, to be handled with care, ceremoniously. Stacking plates to clear a whole table was beyond him. She was looking forward to demoting him; apparently, he wasn't to be fired. It made no sense; Kimmy didn't know what the hell was wrong with the hotel owner, Jim Meriwether. Jim was full of odd proclamations like that: "don't fire the housekeeper, just get him out of the restaurant." After lunch, stoned enough to hallucinate, her vision like a television screen beginning to fritz, Kimmy also didn't care. She gave herself a full hour to handle the issue.

Another wasted hour, ultimately. It turned out that Jim didn't need Kimmy to do a damn thing. He was going to talk to the boy himself, and probably take Milton under his wing. Kimmy couldn't believe that asshole really used phrases like those, "take him under my wing." Jim felt that Milton had potential. So did everyone in town, actually. The kid bled promise. His father was a poet - a real one. Milton's own thoughts distracted him constantly, and Jim wondered about them. What Milton's thoughts were. Why they prevented him from doing restaurant work "on, like, a basic level," as his manager on-the-scene, Kimmy, had reported. She was good at her job, but Jim couldn't stand her, not at all, down to the chewed ends of her hair. So Jim called Milton in, fired him from the restaurant, gave him extra housekeeping shifts, and told him to stop walking around wearing headphones.

...which Milton had put on at seven o'clock that morning, heading to work under a cloud, the jays blistering the air with their screams. Milton's house was in a thin, sun-splashed grove.

"It was foggy this morning," Jim interrupted.

"Oh-kay," Milton said, and then he said nothing for a really long time. Jim finally asked the boy to continue. He blamed himself, really, for asking about Milton's morning.

"My room is on the second floor, and has enormous windows looking out onto the two acres that's ours. Today was a surprising, excellent morning. Facing the green spires of the forest, I saw a family of deer among the russet trunks. They began grazing in our small backyard. They signaled to each other with their long necks and flared ears, advancing mildly, working on the tender shoots and forget-me-nots."

"They saw me, and their movements, their tawny bodies, became even more impossibly strained. Deer never look anything less than perfect, and they make us perfect too, cautious, generous and alert."

Milton hadn't seen deer crushed by cars, or dying from a rifle shot. Jim thought of the peculiar jangled steps that deer take because they don't know they're dying.

"I left the house by bicycle. I cycled up our driveway and down our quaint lane. I passed dark huckleberry bushes with oily leaves. Turning onto the main road, I roared downhill. There you are, soon, surrounded by meadows. I love the open land near the ocean."

"That's where we come in, isn't it?" Jim asked Milton. "That's where the Meriwether Inn stands. And who do you think comes to stay here?"

"Tourists," Milton said. "They don't stay here. They try to stay. First for a couple nights with you, at the Inn. But they fight, the fog settles in, and they leave early. I've noticed them leaving behind chocolates, raspberries, and

whole bottles of champagne. Then, sometimes, they move here. That lasts eight, maybe ten years. They go away again. My father only lasted five. Am I right, Mr. Meriwether? Tourists the whole time.”

Jim nodded. The boy was absolutely right. Milton would leave too, Jim figured. You had to educate them while you had the chance, like the one Jim had, now.

Why couldn't anyone stay in Oberstville, except people like me, Jim wondered. Milton glared at him, sucking at his cheeks, his headphones still around his neck. The difference, Jim figured, was spiritual. He looked over Milton's head, across the black jags of rock, towards the ocean.

“Tourists – that's right. Seekers, in other words, Milt. I started out like them myself. Do you know what it is they're after?”

“Not really,” Milton answered.

“A guru. The word means teacher.”

Jim paused, majestic. He swept back his locks with one casual hand: white thick hair, pink gleaming skin. He looked Milton dead in the eye.

“I want you to meet the guru I've got,” Jim said.