

A Seed Is Planted

The car chugs along Route 17. Reuben Freed, sitting in the passenger seat of the Model T Ford, feels every bump and pothole in the road. Still, he's enjoying this ride into the countryside, a welcome break from the hot city streets of summer and too much free time. He grimaces at the thought. If time is free, it's the only thing left that is. All the rest he owes money on, he and his brothers, money they can't repay.

"Next stop," his cousin Murray announced, turning the car onto the strip of dirt in front of a lean-to with a garage and a gas pump.

Reuben opened the door with a creak and got out, giving his cramped muscles a long stretch. He noticed a large building going up in back of the gas pump.

Murray spotted it too and remarked, "Haven't been here in awhile, wonder what that's going to be."

"I'm waiting for you, Murray," came a voice from inside the shack. The accent was European, maybe Dutch.

Reuben helped unload the cartons from the car and followed Murray inside.

"How you been, Anton? This here's my cousin Ruby. Say hello to Anton Thomas. He's a big man around these parts."

To Reuben, short and slight of build, most everybody was a big man. Nodding politely at Anton, he put down the box. He watched as Anton and Murray, sitting on the floor, checked in the auto supplies.

Anton scribbled his next order on a piece of cardboard and pointed them toward a few worn stools at the only table in the place. Bringing out a bottle of seltzer, he gave Reuben the once-over. "So, Murray, business good, you took in a partner?"

"No, no, Ruby's just keeping me company today." He gestured to the construction site. "What's doing over there?"

“Ach, such aggravation.” Anton waved his hand, like a magician trying to make something disappear. “I have a nice little refreshment stand outside, right, for everybody coming up the road. The people coming down the road, they stop at Orsecks’ stand on that side. I’m happy, they’re happy. Until Orseck decides to put up a big beautiful restaurant. So what can I do, I have to build too.”

“Looks like you’re making a real job of it,” Murray said.

“That’s the problem. I’m a garage man, not a restaurant man.”

As Reuben went out to find the washroom, the last thing he heard was, “You get around, Murray, maybe you heard of somebody . . .”

He passed the snack window, where the smell of gas from the pump was stronger. Not a good setup, fumes with your food. He walked over to examine the new foundation—it seemed sturdy, built to last. His eyes swept the whole lot, all the way back to the railroad track. Did Anton Thomas own it all? The loudest sound out here was his own footsteps. Damned if it wasn’t quiet. Not that quiet was a bad thing. No, not after fighting for a seat every morning and night on the subway.

When he came back in, the way Murray and Anton both looked up gave him the feeling they’d been talking about him. Murray forced a laugh. “There you are. I thought you went home without me. C’mon, sit down.”

Anton Thomas measured his words. “Your cousin says you know a lot about the food business.”

Now it was his turn to laugh. He felt the hard jab of Murray’s shoe under the table.

“Anton here’s been telling me, he’s in the market for a restaurant man to take over his new place.” He fixed Reuben with a hard stare. “So naturally I thought of you.”

Reuben might have laughed again . . . if it wasn’t for that stare. “Why?” he asked, confused.

“Come on, Ruby, this is no time to be modest. You practically lived inside that Exchange Buffet downtown.”

The Exchange was the cafeteria in the garment district that he used to eat lunch at, before Freed Brothers closed. He corrected Murray. “We were next door to the Exchange.”

To Anton, intent on his own problems, it was all the same. “My competitor across the road is already open. And my place could move along fast. I just need to find a good man to lease it, a man who can run it.”

Reuben sat studying the seltzer bottle. On the way up he and Murray had talked about what he could do next. Where do you go from one of the most successful manufacturing houses in New York? An American success story. Until it went bust.

Murray slapped him on the back, maybe to bring his thoughts back to the table. “Lucky you caught this guy at the right minute, Anton. Before he took another offer.”

The word snapped Reuben to attention. The realist in him did a quick inventory. One wife. One young son. No offers.

It was a new decade, with the 1920s lying in scraps on the cutting room floor. He set his jaw. In a voice of quiet confidence, he turned to the owner. “You could say . . . I’ve spent a good many hours in restaurants.”

The scowl on Anton’s face softened. “Wait here. I’ll get the plans.”

The minute he was out of earshot, Reuben grabbed Murray’s sleeve. “You belong in a lunatic asylum. My only restaurant experience is eating in them, and you know it.”

“I also know you. You built up that business from a nothing to the best in the city. You learn fast. You can do it again.”

Through the open door Reuben could see a piece of road slicing through the rural landscape, a stray car passing by now and then. A cricket chirped.

“But . . . *here?*”

“Why not? The area is crying for a decent place to eat. Didn’t we have to bring our own lunch?” Murray rapped on the table with his fist. “Opportunity knocks. The man is desperate, at least hear him out.”

Ethel had been so sick after Herbert was born. Now that she was just beginning to enjoy being a mother—and living in Brooklyn amid family—how could he uproot her to this wilderness?

Then there was no more time to think about his failed factory . . . or what Ethel would say . . . or even his jar of borscht and boiled potato waiting in the car, because Anton Thomas was spreading the sheets on the table and explaining the layout.

Reuben surprised Anton with his first question. “Does this spot have a name?”

“Sure. Southfields. It’s right in the middle.” Anton hunched a shoulder. “This way, New York City.” Then the other shoulder. “That way, the Catskills.”