

HOTEL PEOPLE

by Adam Sifre

It's 6:45 a.m. A gritty, mundane sort of magic pervades the air at "Valentine's" in the Hamilton Hotel. The silver troughs are already filled with thick wedges of French toast, pounds of flattened, cardboard-like bacon, mounds of shiny sausage links, and piles of other artery-clogging goodies. Urns of strong coffee stand guard over the holy of holies--the omelet station. The priests, disguised as waiters, carry pitchers of iced water and cold pewter creamers to their individual altars and stand ready.

Sylvia, the matriarch of the Weissman family, is the first to arrive. She rolls in, older and dustier than the pharaohs and flanked by two Sumo wrestlers dressed as tired tourists. This morning she is decked out in powder-blue sweat pants and a faded yellow blouse. Behind the wheelchair, her son staggers as he pushes her majesty further into the room; a zombie stumbling toward coffee and salvation. Everything about the first family screams "buffet veterans."

"Make sure the tea isn't so strong this time. It's always too strong. No one knows how to make tea anymore," she declares. The zombie rolls his eyes further back into his head. Since forever, he has been serving her "tea" consisting of a cup of hot water with a dry tea bag on the saucer. Always she complains that it is too strong.

The two Sumos break off from the procession and attack the omelet station, shouting out their demands while the zombie manhandles Queen Sylvia into position at the table. He collapses into a chair while she mutters something disparaging about the air-conditioning.

Royalty seated, the audience wanders in. A small army garbed in shorts, sandals, and mismatched socks. A few sport t-shirts with pithy sayings like "Obamanation," and "I'd trade gun control for bladder control!"

A family with three noisy children burst onto the scene, descending on the cereal station like crows on a battlefield.

Eventually, everyone settles in and the familiar music of forks on dishes and clattering ice cubes against glass precedes the main event.

No one actually stops eating, but there's a familiar flavor of anticipation in the air. The waiters move just a little faster in, replenishing the troughs and re-folding those magical beige cloth napkins that refuse to absorb or clean.

Lee enters the room, filled with equal parts of desperation and determination. A large man just starting to turn to fat, he moves as if he is perpetually walking against a strong wind, sometimes dispensing his own. Today he wears slightly grimy blue jeans and a black Izod shirt, which hides a small gut, the foreshadowing of years to come. He is alone, armed with a dog-eared Dean Koontz novel (the one about a child in danger and a pet dog). There's less than a full day's growth peppered across his face. Whatever hair he sports is hidden under a faded Yankee's baseball cap. He has stayed in many different hotels but Sunday mornings from 7:15 to 9:00 am are always the same. For Lee, every breakfast buffet is a personal challenge.

Valentine's buffet is \$15.95; about \$5.00 more than breakfast would cost him at the Broadway Diner just down the road. He knows that he can hit the breakeven point by the second serving if he loads up on the bacon, but he's unsure of the quality of today's pork. It glistens with the promise of smoky satisfaction, but Lee has been fooled before by buffet meat products. He could pile on food, ignore it, and get a second plate, but it would be a hollow victory.

Instead he chooses a cheese and onion omelet and three pieces of French toast. This is also not without risk. While more satisfying, they are more filling and always make him feel sleepy.

"This tea is too hot," her highness announces. Mummified, shaky hands, replace the cup. Some hot water splashes over and the lonely tea bag finally achieves its life's purpose, darkening the small puddle in the saucer.

Across the room, Lee takes his seat and digs in. In a concession to culinary preference over economic interests, he piled the eggs on a

toasted bagel, strings of cheese hanging over the end like Spanish moss. He alternates between the omelet and French toast, and by the time her majesty is satisfied with the temperature of her water, he is up for seconds. He is already full and a little tired, but he knows he is still about seven dollars in the hole. Lee, the Rainman of the buffet circuit, throws caution to the wind and loads up on the bacon and Danish. He knows this will ruin his day, but he also knows he'll finish this morning in the black.

He piles the bacon so high that even the Sumo wrestlers take notice. Frick and Frack are on their 3rd plate already, but their portions are smaller and they are not members in good standing of the clean plate club. Amateurs.

Lee opens his Koontz novel and reads about the damaged but cute doggie. He quickly takes a chunk of bagel and eggs, then folds over a piece of bacon and sticks in the corner of his mouth like chewing tobacco. Wiping his hands on his jeans, he repeats the process until only the Danish remains.

A waitress glides over and refills his cup with hot, black lubricant. He gratefully takes a swallow and then attacks the pastry. His blood sugar has spiked to a little under 400 and he's having difficulty concentrating. He keeps rereading the same sentence over and over, and his vision is getting a little blurry. But he has the presence of mind to know that he's eaten close to \$22.00 worth of breakfast. He pauses to gently massage his chest. After a few moments and another large swallow of coffee, the pain recedes and he pops the last bit of Danish into his mouth.

Finally, he can breathe easy. The anxiety and tension disappear and the pain in his chest recedes and the caffeine kicks in. He is rewarded with that false sense of immortality that surrounds all hotel people. Mission accomplished, Lee gets up for some window shopping at the cold cereal and yogurt parfait table.

"This grapefruit is sour," Sylvia announces.

