

Stiff Licorice

by Deborah Jiang-Stein

A wrinkled woman with a maroon velvet hat pulled over silver black hair drawn tight into a low bun gives her waiter a retired schoolteacher smile through clenched teeth. Her lap holds a clear plastic shopping bag with flowers printed on the outside and inside, a black and white polka-dot plastic coin purse, a mass of red licorice rubber-banded together, and a lottery ticket.

Two younger women sit on the far side of this filled restaurant in downtown Seattle along the waterfront. It's the Mother's Day after they each lost theirs earlier in the year, both out for the first time since sitting Shiva.

"Tomorrow at two o'clock I'll be seventy-eight," the old woman shouts, her robust voice a rip in the silence. Her waiter rushes to her table side and whispers, "Happy birthday."

The younger women anonymously send dessert to the lone woman.

"I remember little things," the woman goes on, "like my sister when she first lisped in third grade."

Her waiter delivers strawberries and sponge cake, and when he points out the two young diners across the room, the woman juts her jaw in a single downward nod towards her distant dessert companions. She finishes in two brisk bites then marches towards the exit door. She hugs her shopping bag to her waist.

Almost to the door, in a last moment the woman detours towards her dessert comrades. She liberates two strands of stiff licorice from her plastic bag and with her other hand, she yanks from deep in her overcoat an algae green New Testament. Pocket size. A Star of David necklace peeks out from behind her silk scarf, one of the

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points caught on a silk strand.

The woman stretches her arched shoulders as much as they'll straighten, then presents both the Bible and licorice clamped in one hand as if to return graded pages of A-plus homework.

She fills the restaurant with the best use of her former teacher's voice and with references from Revelations, then mumbles something about judgment. "I can scare Satan from your soul," she yells, "and preach the arthritis right out of your joints." She goes on about angels and stars falling from above, about harvest and locusts and more mighty angels.

The woman throws high her free arm, hand open to the skies and fingers outstretched except her thumb, which locks a piece of licorice to her palm. Just as she belts out "One thousand years are ending..." the woman's younger sister walks in. She's just received a routine rescue telephone call from the restaurant.

The sisters, both childless, link arm in arm while the waiter cups a hand to their elbows and eases them in the exit direction. "Happy Birthday," the waiter says as he guides the self-proclaimed evangelist and her sister towards the door. "And Happy Mother's Day."

All of a sudden, the two dessert senders rise from their table and chase after the sisters near the door. One of the younger women begins to mouth the sound of trumpets, then bellows "Just wait!" from deep in her throat, "You just wait!"

Silence blankets the restaurant as the waiter whisks them through the door behind the two older women. He snaps the lock shut.

Outside, a light mist descends into the soft spring night air. The sisters invite their fellow crusaders home for tea and a second

dessert. Mother's Day, revived for each.

Almost to the old woman's apartment, one of the younger women steps back. "Think I'll go home," she says, "kinda tired." She walks off by herself, worried she'll end up like the old woman, alone in a restaurant somewhere, a piece of stiff licorice clutched in her hand as she shouts out about Satan.

