

Roadside Daisies

by Matt DeVirgiliis

Pete and Melissa stood in the vestibule at Primo Pasta. It was almost time for the big rush. The dinner crowd trickles in before six. They pour in after six. Pete and Melissa knew this; they'd been working here long enough. Melissa prepared the podium and Pete Windexed the glass doors.

The podium was Melissa's station, her headquarters. Each customer, satisfied or grumpy, had to go through her. She was the gatekeeper. She liked her job. It was important, yet she didn't risk dropping a tray of martinis or bowls of pomodoro. Melissa worked hard. She was efficient.

Pete glanced at her over his shoulder while he smeared the cleaner across the glass. It always smeared. The commercials lied. While Melissa manned her podium, Pete ran the floor, letting Melissa know when tables were clean and when patrons would be up. He sat new patrons and thanked those leaving for having dinner at the restaurant. She worked him. She worked him to a sweat. But he liked it.

Still wiping, he quickly looked over his shoulder. She saw him and smiled. Blushing, he smiled back. "Streaks," he said.

"They look fine. Why don't you grab a water before it gets busy."

"Do you want one too?" he asked.

"Sure. Such a gentleman."

Pete left and returned with two lidded, plastic cups, each filled with ice water. Pete handed one to Melissa. "Is this our first drink together?" Pete asked.

"We do this every Friday night," said Melissa.

"I guess it just always feels like the first time," said Pete.

Melissa giggled and put her cup against the back of his neck, just below his hairline. He quivered. "Cold?" asked Melissa. Pete returned the favor. She shivered.

Melissa's cell phone buzzed from inside the podium, startling both of them. Her slim arm disappeared for a second and then came out with the still buzzing phone. It read: Tim's Cell.

"I'm going to take this for a minute," Melissa said to Pete. She walked to a bistro set in the vestibule and sat. Her conversation was short and heated -- a few shut ups, a few fines, and a few byes. She came back to the podium flustered.

"Everything okay?" Pete asked. "I hate fighting with my mom."

"It was my boyfriend. But thanks for trying." Melissa's mood changed a bit. Her magnetic smile was there, but she was still bothered.

The crowd came. They came fast and they came in droves. Melissa's list of names stretched two pages long. She had to use first names and last initials to keep track of everyone. There were three men named Bob, five women named Jenn, and about seventeen men named Tom. None of them liked hearing about the two-hour wait. They waited anyway. The food was good. The food was real good.

Pete broke a sweat. His sweat broke sweat. Two tables were up in the back. Another table needed silver. And another was still dirty. Add a chair to the end of table ninety and push together table forty-five and fifty. Pete sweat all night.

Melissa smiled, but she wasn't herself. The customers couldn't tell. They just wanted to eat. Pete noticed. Her shoulders pushed forward and her eyes were dull. Her voice cracked and she made a mistake... maybe two. It was an off night for Melissa. Pete saw it.

At about ten o'clock, the big bellies and noisy children stopped coming in and those already sitting were wrapping up with coffee and cannoli. Some of the cooks had left, leaving just a few to man the entire kitchen. The faint clank of glass and porcelain rang out from the back as the staff began cleaning up. Pete's list of clean tables was longer than his list of tables that need to be cleaned. The night was winding down.

Melissa stood at her podium. She glanced over a large stack of menus, ripping dirty ones in half and throwing them in a garbage can by her side. She looked for stains, but she wasn't really looking.

Pete walked through the near-empty dining room, checked tables, and picked up menus. He peeked over at Melissa and saw the look on her face. As he passed table twenty-one, a two-top, he picked up the vase that sat in the middle. The vase had two white Gerber daisies poking out of the top, adding just a touch of romance. Pete took the daisies out of the vase, blew water off the stems, tucked them behind his back, and headed toward the podium.

I don't know why you're with him. He's not a very nice guy. You could date me. I'm an idiot. Pete's thoughts streamed through his head. His thoughts poured out, but his feet stuck to the floor. His palms sweat. She was really making him sweat.

Finally, he reached the podium.

"Melissa, I... I think —"

"Pete, do you mind if I cut out early? Tim's here."

Pete looked through the streaky glass doors and saw the Pontiac Firebird resting at the curb. Tim leaned against the passenger-side door and talked on his cell. He stood there waiting like he could care less if Melissa came out or not, like he expected her to come out. He expected it because she was his. Melissa belonged to Tim.

"Pete? Pete, do you mind?"

"Oh, sorry. Sure, I'll finish up."

Melissa took her purse from underneath her podium and pushed passed Pete, slightly touching his back as she left. She walked out the doors to her Tim. Peace for a moment. Then yelling. Tim got in the car, slamming his door. His voice boomed through the car and penetrated the vestibule. Melissa seemed to collapse. She yelled back a bit, but she couldn't match his vocal strength — a house cat hissing at a tiger.

Her door slammed and the car peeled away. Pete pulled the daisies from behind his back and put them on the podium. He watched as the Firebird screamed out of the parking lot and out of site.

The phone rang. Pete wiped his heavy eyes and squinted so he could see. He looked at the clock. It was five o'clock in the morning.

He rolled over and tucked his head under his pillow. The phone rang again. He ignored it. It rang again. He picked up. "What? Oh God." Pete hung up and sat there, in the same exact spot, until late in the afternoon.

Finally, he got himself out of bed and dressed. He picked up the two white Gerber daisies he'd brought home the night before and headed out. The corner of Fries Mill and Gantown? Why would he do that? Why did she go home with him?

Pete reached the busy intersection of Fries Mill Road and Gantown Road. He pulled his Caprice into a doctor's parking lot on the side of the road and climbed out of the car, slowly making his way to a slightly bent, cracked telephone pole. Flowers of all colors already draped the ground underneath the pole. A small, brown, stuffed monkey laid across some of the flowers, looking up with its black, button eyes.

Pete reached up and touched the pole. He didn't move, just stood there and held the pole. Pete pulled the two white Gerber daisies out and laid them across the monkey. "These are for you, Melissa." He touched the pole one more time, got in his car, and drove off.

