

Ibby's Falafel

by Paul Vigna

The yellow light blinked evenly, dinging the night with its glow. The cab rolled through the street and pulled over in the middle of the short block, its engine humming in a fast, slapping rhythm. There was an exchange of cash, she opened the door, grabbed her suitcase, and stepped onto the sidewalk. She fastened the top button on her coat. It was cold outside, colder than she'd remembered it being this time of year.

Hey, the car driver said, how do I get back to the tunnel?

Turn left here, go left at the first light, it's about ten blocks down. Can't miss it. She stepped back. The cabby rolled up the window and drove off. The intersection was starkly silent; the buildings, the intersecting streets, they merely defined an empty space. The wind blew torn wrappers and other bits of garbage down the dark boulevard. Two urban toughs, buzz cuts, puffy leather coats and baggy blue jeans, crossed the street, going against the red light. They stared at her flatly as they crossed.

Dark hung over the night like an occupation force. Across the street a Cuban diner fought it off with green and yellow neon lights, Latin rhythm beating through the air. A deli across the street was full of white light salvation. But most of the storefronts were castled behind steel gates. Behind her was a small triangle-shaped park, a leftover patch between three roads, paved with cracked, uneven concrete blocks. Along a low wall four or five transients sat, eating cheap fast food and sleeping. In the middle of the park were escalators leading down the open grave pit of the Path station. A flat stone roof was erected over them, dim halogen lights beckoning nefarious safety. All was quiet.

Streetlights fleshed out the hard blacktop. A car came up the street, heavy bass lines breaking the silence, growing louder and louder. The car passed, the bass filling the street as it reached her and receding as it cruised past and up the avenue. She walked

down Grove along the small park's edge, crossed Columbus and crossed to the other side of Grove. The Cuban diner had large plate glass windows, and inside she saw the smiling chirping tables, groups of laughter and nighttime camaraderie. She walked past them and down the block, alone on the empty sidewalk.

The falafel place was wedged into a narrow storefront, just a door and two narrow plate glass windows. A small green neon sign hung in one of them, steadily beaming the words Ibbby's Falafel. She walked through the open door. The walls were white-painted patterned tin. The half-dozen black Formica tables, all with only two chairs, were empty. The only person in the place was a thick, middle-aged Syrian man behind the counter. She vaguely recognized him, recalled he was the owner. Middle-Eastern flavored Rock-N-Roll, a high-pitched fast rhythm, played through a tinny radio. She walked up to the counter.

Falafel, she said.

For here? he asked in his Syrian accent.

Yeah, she said. He took two little balls of mashed chickpeas and dipped them in a deep fryer. She sat down in a window seat. He sliced open a pita pocket, and filled it with chopped lettuce and tomatoes. There was no traffic outside, just the blacked-out storefronts of a tenement building across the silent street. The wind picked up and blew a white plastic bag down the street. Fall was in the thin air. Two young girls crammed themselves through an open window across the street on the second floor, looking into the same empty street. There were two or three other lights illuminating windows in the block-long tenement. The shopkeeper fished the little chickpea balls out of the fryer, stuffed them in the pita bread, and drizzled a yoghurt sauce in as well. One of the girls in the window disappeared into the room, then the other fell back, shutting the window. The light went off, leaving a gap of pure black in the space before the window frame readjusted to the still darkness.

Falafel, the shop owner said. She walked to the counter, counting bills.

Two dollars, he said.

Water, she said. He reached into a refrigerated case behind him and pulled out a plastic bottle of water.

Three dollars. She counted three dollar bills and handed them to him.

Here, she said. He took the bills, then gave her another look, a curious one.

Don't I know you? he asked.

I used to live around here, she said. He smiled.

I remember, he said. He looked at her suitcase. Just visiting?

No, she said quietly. That's all of it.

Oh, he said and paused. Well, welcome back.

Thanks, she said. She picked up the water and a plastic basket holding the falafel and sat down. The falafel was good, and the sauce seeped out of a hole in the pita bread as she bit into it. She drank the water, watching a street lamp outside. The circle of light beneath it illuminated a parked car's hood. The wind blew dead leaves down the street with a chattering rustle. She picked out thick tomato chunks, and took another bite. Nobody was on the street. The storefronts stood stone-faced and dark. The shop owner rattled knives, wiped down the counter. She took another bite. The wind mumbled a whimper as it flowed down the street, a wide dark night. She finished the falafel. In a second story window, a light went out. She threw out her garbage, put on her coat and grabbed her suitcase. It was cold outside, colder than she'd remembered it this time of year.

