In an Unfamiliar Restaurant.

by Peter Cherches

I find myself in an unfamiliar restaurant, its cuisine an uncomfortable pastiche of Croatian, Burmese, Jamaican and leftovers of long ago Sunday dinners in a small New England town. I am crippled by the anxiety of what to order.

Another worry springs to mind: will I have to pay for the floor show? I don't want to be entertained, but this, it appears, is my fate: a chorus line of griffins and sphinxes, accompanied by the odors of eighteen dead musicians, the house band from a Havana night club, circa 1933, conjuring the essence of an off-key rendition of "The Peanut Vendor."

And then my date arrives, fifty years late, a withered hag with a lame excuse. Gentleman that I am I don't take her to task, but rather ask, "Shall we dance?"

Dance we do, quickly progressing from tango to tragedy as she crumbles in my arms.

"Dust!" they shriek, the waiters, castrati to a man. "Dust!"

Alone again, at my table, I am crippled by the same old dilemma: what to order?

"Has the gentleman made up his mind?" asks my chubby little waiter, a dead ringer for the latter-day Peter Lorre.

Paralyzed with fear I can barely get the word out. "No!"

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The waiter, thrilled by my reply, makes a suggestion, which circumstances force me to accept, and several hours later he returns with my meal. Cackling like a madman, he puts the plate in front of me and announces, "Today's special!"