

## CORNER

\* (All the characters in this story are fictional. Any similarity between any person, living or dead is purely coincidental.)

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*corner*: [*kawr-ner*] *noun*. The place which two converging lines or surfaces meet.

However, it can be much more. An adjective- a verb as well. It can also be a statement, a fact, a presence that is announced before arriving. "Corner." The most used word in the English dictionary when working at a modern-day restaurant.

Mark Holman had worked at this particular restaurant for several years. He had thought that his life being tied to food service might be over when COVID hit the big city. "How long would I be unemployed?" he had thought. "Would I remember everything after being away for so long? Where would I even begin?" But Mark did begin again. This time would be a new experience, one that he thought would be his last- by design perhaps. Or, at least he hoped it would be. It was a Kosher restaurant. Starting at the beginning of a new establishment, with no seniority to fight with. This was his third time opening a new venture here in the big city. Everybody would be starting fresh. An unusual place of business that he knew nothing about. But really, how different could it be?

Early on, the magic of a new enterprise seemed like it was made to order. The management was eager to have everyone on the staff be part of the team; that everyone would be working towards the same goal. Plus the money would be great- the prices were astronomical. There was a distinct feeling like this could really succeed. The owners were hands-on, yet would disappear for weeks at a time.

The fact that there appeared to be representatives present from the "mother" company, or corporation added a sense of stability to the restaurant. Everyone was respected and actually enjoyed each other's company. These gentlemen often extended their business directly to the restaurant, meetings for hours and hours in private, finally opening their doors for dinner to be served. It was certainly not the average state of affairs as in a big city restaurant, that was for sure. Still the staff were grateful that the powers that be created a friendly and welcoming atmosphere. Besides, the presence of God was always in abundance- at least for those who cared to notice. The most important addition to the menu was prayer. You could feel it in most everyone that came in. They served God before they would allow to be served themselves. And of course, the restaurant was always closed on the Sabbath.

Often men would gather in groups of nine to twelve or more. Dressed in their "uniforms" of white shirts, prayer shawls, dark blue suits, curly sides of their hair and yarmulkes- most wearing glasses as well. And beards. But for those representing the mother company, clean shaven was the style. Dress shirts and ties for the most part. After all, this was still expected to be a place of reverence. It was a reoccurring presence that Mark finally got use to- and was soon able to totally see past the clothes to find the humanity in all of them. They would often stand, solemnly facing Jerusalem and pray. Rocking forward and back in meditation, saying their prayers in Hebrew, deepening the sense of spirituality within the framework of this place of business. A reflection of the owners as well. It would be feeding the faithful. They would meld their simple humanity into this feeling of community, unlike anything that Mark had ever witnessed in his twenty years of being part of the food industry in the big city, or anywhere else he had worked for that matter. And by and large, these wonderful people would be full of life and love and so overjoyed to be having a great time, that Mark found a satisfaction in being part of this joy as well. It was the joy of being alive. So often their warm spirits would engulf Mark, making him feel like he was part of them. These gentlemen would drink and somehow engage Mark in dancing and singing with them. An unbelievable new experience for him in what was usually a very black and

white routine. Greet, feed, pay the check, get out. But this was original. Mark soon became a house favorite with many guests, making him feel more like an ambassador or even a mascot, if that could be possible. Much more it seemed than just a waiter.

Often when mixed groups of orthodox couples would meet for dinner, they split the table- one end women, the other end men. It was never couples together. Also interesting to note were the varying outfits. The “uniform” for women, as if these each represented varying sects (like the men did.)

Now completely different from any uniform, it was quite amazing for Mark to see several beautiful women all with long hair- always long hair. Parted down the middle, mostly dressed to kill, but all in long dresses with long sleeves. Conservative elegance. Maybe they dressed for each other. A fashion statement perhaps, usually none wearing anything revealing. If they ever did, they were stared at and were considered “outsiders” or simply in bad taste. Sometimes they wore expensive wigs if they were married, most though had incredible natural hair and skin. And of course, the one thing any married lady would never dare go out without wearing- her diamonds. Some big enough to choke a horse! All very much in keeping with style and protocol. “Girls Night Out” would often be met with a bit of hesitation if they did not know the restaurant very well. But if they were celebrating a birthday or an engagement, they would soon come around and have a great time. Wearing their tiaras and banners (like the princesses that they were) which they had brought of course, all adding to the fun. Plus having a few cocktails never hurt either.

There were even multiple engagements that were strategically planned for private rooms. Hundreds and hundreds of dollars spent- some for the evening, some lasting only an hour. One of them ended short- Mark guessed the answer must have been “no.” Most were quite ornate with flowers, candles, balloons and photos. Some even having a designer come in three hours early before the couple arrived to decorate and set up A/V equipment, rearranging the entire room. Unbelievable! Aside from engagements, first dates became quite obvious to Mark who had a knack for summing up the situation quickly. A young couple seated across from each other would order three courses, not including dessert, sit for hours and basically not touch a thing! The dinner was a pretense for getting to know each other with a bite here and a bite there. By the time everything was ice cold, they would be ready to do the same to the next course. And nothing ever taken home.

Meanwhile staff came, staff left. Management teams would be there for six months, maybe eight months. But then leave much sooner than would seem normal. But really, what is normal? Even one of the original managers suddenly died. It shook most people who knew Bob Davis to hear the news. Any explanation or additional information was never divulged. Mark often thought that it might all be just a front- a fake. No reason to think that way, but Mark never put anything past anyone. Maybe while riding on the “A” train sometime he might look up there would be Bob, sitting at the other end of the train compartment. Just a smile of recognition- nothing else. Getting off at the very next stop. In truth so much is never known about where people might end up- as if it's not important. There are so many aspects about the restaurant business in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century that are not common knowledge. The average person can only accept what is at face value, then move along with the greater changes that are made. Some know more than others, like any other business in any city. And being transient is a core feature in big city restaurants. A year or more at one location is a long time, like dog years perhaps. Besides, one worker is only present for a certain number of hours on any given day. So much could go on without one even being aware. This certainly did not affect the definition of what “friends” were to Mark in today's world. There were acquaintances and fellow-workers. Friends, Mark found were really neither of the two. And it was never beyond Mark by this time to say quite honestly to himself, “never trust anyone.”

Now the main constant amid all of this, who had survived all along was the most important man at a Kosher restaurant- the Rabbi. Avi Schiff was his name and he was there most every day and every night. The fact that he was the focal point in the kitchen, aside the Executive Chef, seemed to Mark

to allow this man of religion and careful inspection to be deserving of a great deal of respect from the entire staff. Or so you would think.

But as the years wore on, Rabbi Schiff was often talked down to by the third General Manager, Warren Odell. This was not just a single episode, which Mark found rather alarming. It was certainly apparent that Rabbi should receive the respect any religious man should, even if you were not Jewish. None-the-less, as time went by both Mark and Rabbi Schiff became friends, were close enough in age and would often banter together table side, almost like some strange comedy act (of sorts.) Rabbi was always happy to see Mark, making him feel well accepted. The best part of their time was spent late at night after everyone had gone, except for the dishwashers who loudly played the music from their homeland. Mark would fold napkins as their discussions led to their outlooks on life, plus Mark's own beliefs and religious background- as well as dealing with everyday life in the big city. And of course, how Mark's sales and tips were that night. They both always ended on a happy note. Life carried on much this way. As a side note, the napkins folded each and every night were black. Yet it appeared often that they were not all the same color of black. Some purple, gray, some bluish or brown and many black napkins just covered with small bits of paper, impossible to remove. Like a star-studded night's sky. Rightly so, Mark Holman would refer to this chapter of his life as, "Fifty Shades of Black." How ironic that title would soon come to be.

"The Jewish Mafia." Call them the assistant to the assistant. A deal here a deal there, all in their attire with enough similarities that sometimes, Mark could not be sure who was who. There were even three brothers who used the restaurant for business all the time. You could hardly get them to just sit down and eat. Never finishing either, always with an iPhone glued to their ears. All three dressed the same, had beards and were always in a hurry, never enough time to relax- ever. Someone once told me that they had it in their DNA- never able to just sit and eat while doing business. It was very alarming to watch these goings on.

There was the "money man," the CFO, a business executive from the mother company, a liaison between the owners and the large group of primary officials who ran "the show," so to speak. This "money man" was naturally in-depth with the managerial crew and would show up now and then, but never five days a week- ever. Mark found it odd that this was an important position, demanding hands on with the restaurant in all aspects of the business. Maybe the fact that there were cameras everywhere somehow kept him in tune with the situation. Once again, Mark was not privy to all that pertinent information. And anyone he would ask would probably say, "Well, that's none of your concern." It was like the "Wizard of Oz"- the man behind the curtain. Full of secrets, revealing nothing except what he wanted you to see. But what *was* actually there?

An interesting note about the calendar at a Kosher restaurant is the sheer number of holidays. Three days off here, a week there, never the same from year to year. And dealing with these holidays was sometimes difficult. Paid Time Off was one security, but not as good as a regular paycheck. And then when the staff would meet again afterwards, there was always some level of change- the menu, the decorations or the staff. Once again, some come and some go. Into the second year, Mark realized that a number of the new staff knew each other from another restaurant, all from New Jersey. But as time wore on, it seemed that you were either in their "circle" or you were out. Like something out of a bad high school movie.

Aside from his treatment of Rabbi Schiff, the latest General Manager, Warren Odell appeared to be a buoyant character, also from New Jersey. He was nothing like this restaurant had ever seen. A gift of the gab as it were, happy and seemingly open and available to all. Certainly able to approach tables and at the same time be in control of the floor. Mark found out the hard way that if you dared to cross Warren or did something he disapproved of, he could turn immediately irate and "Mr. Nice Guy" would be gone in a flash. It did not make matters any easier for Mark to be around this kind of "fair-weather"

nicety. He had enough of that kind of treatment in grade school. And it certainly left no stability for him to hold on to. Slowly, the warning sirens began their soft alarm.

The new employees that had come into Mark's circle- the GM, a waiter, a captain plus a female manager had indeed known each other for some time. It appeared that all would be in a period of adjustment while the new staff, unknown by the original employees would quickly be taking over.

Suddenly, there was an entirely different approach to this reverent and joyful setting. The spirit of God that was established slowly began to be in a state of flux. The new female manager, Veronica James seemed at first to be rather approachable by Mark, as well as a captain named Darren. These as stated before, knew each other and set up shop without any difficulties. Warren Odell continued with these partners he had brought into the restaurant. But as the weeks went by, the unsettled feeling that the basic spirituality that this place once knew began to exit out the door, while a dull sense of foreboding assumed its place. For the first time, Mark felt on shaky ground. If only the owners were here, or even the business men from the mother company whom he had known for so long on a first name basis. If they were here- these friends he trusted- maybe he might feel more secure by hearing his concerns. Summer soon turned to fall, as life slowly dissolved into less work with the High Holidays. And yet for Mark, this was indeed no holiday. Doom could arise any day now and the comfortability of once being considered "indispensable" by Warren and "adored" by the owner's wife was soon a thing of the past.

The attack of Hamas and the war in Israel and Gaza brought nothing but bad news. It came right at the end of the Jewish Holidays, with hundreds held captive by Hamas. These loving people from all over the world only wanted to have the experience of being in the Holy Land with friends and family. There were sure to be people that Mark had known from the restaurant who were directly involved somehow. Their sadness had no limit and Mark immediately felt the impact- the loss of customers and lack of revenue. His schedule reflected this as well. It wasn't too long before the once fat calf of this house of fun and food became a withering corn stock, standing in a field of drought. And the need for a spring of new life failed to appear, at least for Mark.

Quite obvious to Mark was the fact that Veronica seemed to be "testing the waters" when it came to the original staff. Meaning that underneath a thin veneer, she wanted to see first hand which people she could control and which of those she would have difficulty with. Those she was able to manipulate. All of this, plus the fact that she had the most disappointing fashion sense Mark had ever seen in his twenty years of working in restaurants in the big city. Veronica seemed to spend all her money on something else besides a wardrobe. And sloppy second-hand clothes, no make-up, plus her hair tied back haphazardly did not serve her very well. All the while wearing a smile on her face and the devil in her eyes. Such black eyes that could send out daggers without a second thought. It quite surprised Mark that someone new could work their way into the fabric of a business so quickly- so easily. And in the guise of being so open and sweet- intelligent without a doubt. And scheming, always scheming. Mark often thought, "*why am I the only one who sees this? Is everyone else too gullible, too naive or am I just paranoid?*" There did not seem to be any easy solution to this dilemma, as the next few weeks would prove to be even rougher than Mark could have ever imagined.

After the High Holidays, a friend of Mark's at work gave him a dire forecast. "You know she fired Warren. Yeah. Just like that. Took over his job. No thanks for bringing her here, waiting for her chance. He got sick or something and bam! She moved right into his chair! Money man approved. The owners... who knows? As long as this place is making a profit, why should anyone care?" It was so hard to believe. A seemingly great General Manager just disappearing, no word as to what exactly happened. Then without any forewarning at all, this new woman none of the senior staff knew anything about just "assumed" his place. No explanation. None needed, thought Mark. The warning sirens became louder and louder. *Prepare for doom* they said.

Aside from a new GM, there was also another addition from New Jersey that seemed to be subservient enough to Veronica James, adding to her minion. Ryan did his mistress' bidding and had as much hospitality as a stock of celery. Their craven relationship was like "Grima" is to "Saruman," if one follows "The Lord Of The Rings" (and just as nasty.) There seemed to be a mounting effort to completely change the structure of the staff. The Head Chef soon proved to be part of this overall conspiracy as well. The days were numbered for many before the bloody stroke of Madame Guillotine would have her fill. And the worst part of all, the owners and businessmen from the mother company were nowhere to be seen. No one there to inform about the sad state of affairs. Many of them were occupied with the tragedy in Israel, no doubt. Was all of this change unbeknownst to them? Would any of them speak up, saying that this whole change in mood, character- the lack of spirituality, the misdirection of a once vibrant business was indeed wrong? Or worse, would any of them even care?

Mark saw his schedule reduce from five to three to two shift a week. The newest addition to the waitstaff quickly became the darling of management, completely usurping any seniority that Mark thought had existed. Meaning that he was formerly held in high regard. Having a terrific section and a regular full schedule. Now, he was pushed to the side. Plus being told his sales were not up to par with the rest. But how much can you sell when nightly you only have deuces (two-tops) to sell to?

To Mark, the sense of evil and darkness was palatable. Yet it seemed to emanate from more than Veronica James. The laughter and good feelings between the staff was gone and everyday someone else was fired. At times he felt dizzy, faint and over-heated, like some force was pushing down on him. The computer system at the restaurant had been changed three times during the course of his time there and the present system did nothing to aid his sense of defeat. Soon there was nothing he could do to turn the course of events back in his favor. The cards were stacked against him, with no one to save the present situation. Even his former "friend" Maria who had been raised from waitress to manager kept a low profile. Doing Veronica's bidding in order to save her own neck- her own job- offering no help to Mark. She was groomed by Veronica from the very beginning, sealed tightly into her web. Mark wrote an e-mail to Warren Odell, expressing his sadness at Warren being fired. Mark even went so far as to call Veronica James a "Succubus," something beyond your average statement like "b\*tch" for he had dealt with these type of creatures from hell before. As a matter of fact, he was directly related to one. The glory days at the Kosher restaurant were over. Now, it seemed that the only course of action was to hold on as long as he could. But little did he know that his words to Warren Odell in his e-mail, words he considered to be private would so easily be used against him.

It was a very gray Thursday. His second shift of the week and the overwhelming quietness at the Kosher restaurant was deafening. The floor plan was not available and a sense of dread was thick in the air. Veronica James plus the new star waiter and her favorite captain, Darren had a closed door meeting in one of the large separate rooms upstairs.

In time, Mark headed slowly downstairs, not saying anything to his friendly co-workers. He did not know if saying his goodbyes would be appropriate or not- but he still could sense the final chapter for him was spinning out of control, the room closing in on him. Even Mark's steady friend, Rex had no idea what this sense of evil Mark felt from management was all about. Rex said he had no problem with them at all. But Mark sensed that Veronica had already worked her coercion, making Rex her servant- to do her bidding just like she had on Maria before-without their even knowing. And Rex would have no idea that anything was different at all. In retrospect, Mark compared his feelings to what Mia Farrow dealt with in "Rosemary's Baby." Everyone in the film around her could not understand her deep paranoia, her fear, yet Rosemary knew innately what the truth was. And in the end she was right.

Soon Veronica and Ryan, the new manager came down from the second floor, asking Mark to follow them into another smaller private room. The prayers Mark said to himself were for comfort and strength, knowing it was all over.

“We're going to let you go.” It was all that needed to be said. Veronica spoke in such a nonchalant manner that the only thing Mark could say in return was, “thank you.” There really wasn't anything else necessary to discuss. Mark knew that his alternative now would be to either take the company to court, find a lawyer for a lawsuit and sue the owners whom he care for, or simply comply and go on unemployment. Unprepared for what came next, Veronica stated, “I know what you said about me to Warren in your e-mail and I found it highly inappropriate.” “*Inappropriate, but true,*” thought Mark, seeing the blackness of her eyes; such disdain directed at him from three feet away. His next words came out before he even had a moment to question if they were right or wrong, but these words to him rang as honest and true as anything he had ever said...

“May the evil you spew come back to haunt you... But they will not hurt you, but those you love.”

A curse? A payback for her cruelty to such an obedient and faithful employee? He could not retract his statement- it was already said. The thought that a GM like Warren Odell could be fired by this ogre, then betray Mark by sending on his own personal thoughts to Veronica James seemed beyond anything he could imagine. Mark had faced betrayal all of his life- as far back as he could remember. Trust therefore, was always an issue for him- even unto this day. “Friends, what *are* friends?”

Was all of this a deepening conspiracy to befall the presence of God in this seemingly special place? Was everything that was created before now forfeit solely for the need to make more money? And at the expense of human dignity? Did Warren Odell leave in order to freely let Veronica James commit more blasphemy at this place of business? As if he knowingly played into her soulless game? In the end, Mark was the last remaining original server from the very beginning, allowing management to convert more of the waitstaff to Veronica's personal specifications- those she wanted to bring no doubt from across the Hudson River. Those who matched her undying need for obedience and servitude. More of her minion to serve *her*- and those she would choose to share in the riches she would help produce.

Of course in the end, Mark certainly was not free from making mistakes. But he was on-time, never called out sick and always held his guest's needs as a top priority. He would look back on this episode with sadness for what it was, but glad to be far away from what it had become. Mark Holman had created a wonderful ambiance from the start. People who would come back to the restaurant would be told that Mark was “no longer with us.” And when these guest that looked forward to his service asked why, they would be told, “oh, he's moved on. It was just not a good fit for him anymore.” These friends he had created would be confused. But as Veronica would see to it, these guests would continue on, probably not giving it another thought. And unfortunately, this would not be Mark's final appearance at a restaurant either. He would find new companies to bring his hospitality to, not as financially rewarding as the Kosher restaurant was, but free from the stress of being “hunted down” by the forces of evil. “*Now, let's see... Who will be next?*”

It is a wonder to think what his final words to Veronica James might amount to. Maybe in the near future, when fate finally rears her ugly head to smack Veronica in the face, she'll remember his last words to her... and regret. Regret her so easily casting him off, disposing an excellent addition with years of experience that many a company would be glad to have in their rank and file. But that story is for another day- still waiting to be written.

Leaving his aprons, ties, pens, crummer, and the rest of the company's property on the floor of the staff locker room- and upon Veronica's shouting at him to “get out of this building!” Mark felt relieved. Sad but relieved. For in the end, there was no loss for him. Because every step he took away from anger and the forces of evil led him to a peace and freedom.

Freedom it seemed, to turn the next corner of his life.

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