



CAFÉ CAROLINA

AND OTHER STORIES

“Café Carolina”
the story

Jefferson Flanders

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Munroe Hill Press
Lexington, Massachusetts

Café Carolina

They certainly weren't locals. Clearly they were out-of-towners, outsiders, although Evelyn wouldn't agree with any of Gina's other conjectures about the couple. But she agreed that they were out of place. They dressed too well, and they spoke too softly for a place like the Café Carolina.

As a rule, the Carolina didn't attract too many strangers. An occasional family of tourists, lost en route to Asheville, might stop for lunch and directions, or a traveling salesman prospecting for new leads might linger for a cup of coffee, but for the most part, the Café drew only familiar faces. There were the townspeople and the farmers and, of course, the good 'ole boys, as Evelyn called the morning cluster of coffee drinkers in baseball caps at the front counter.

This couple was different. No one had seen them before, and with their TV soap opera good looks it was impossible not to notice them. The mystery pair definitely had romance on their minds, as far as Gina could tell. That the two were lovers was one of Gina's initial hunches, and as much as Evelyn resisted the idea, she couldn't offer a better, or more believable, explanation for their sudden appearance in the last booth in the back, in Gina's service area, on the very cold second Monday of February, and then every Monday morning after that.

"We don't know that they're a couple," Evelyn maintained. "Not in that way. You're jumping to conclusions, Gina."

"I've got a sixth sense about this," Gina told her. "I trust my instincts."

"We don't know who they are. We don't know their names or where they're from. They could be brother and sister, for all we know."

Gina hooted in delight at that. "Brother and sister! If a brother and sister look at each other that way, then it's time to call the police. Even over in Yancey County they'd figure it was incest. They're definitely not brother and sister, or even kissing cousins. They're in love, trust me. I see all the signs of it."

"They're sitting in your booth. So you have an advantage. I haven't seen them up close like you have. From across the room, it looks like they could be family members. They've got the same coloring, and they're both tall."

“They say that when you are really in love with someone, you start to look like them. Sort of a romantic body language or mirror image.”

“Are they wearing wedding rings?” Evelyn asked. “That’d tell us something.”

“Actually, she is,” Gina said. “He isn’t. I checked out their hands the first time I had them in the booth.”

“So maybe they are married. To each other. Lots of men don’t like wearing a ring.”

“They may be married, but I’d bet it’s not to each other.”

“How can you say that?”

“Because they don’t look at each other the way married people do. At least not most married people, ‘specially after they’ve been married for a while.”

“So you think they’re cheating?”

Gina nodded her head slowly. “I think that’s a more than likely explanation for why they’re meeting here, coming here for coffee, picking the booth in the back. They can’t chance anywhere near their own hometown. I don’t think they want anyone they know spotting them together. Too risky.”

“I don’t like to think the worst,” Evelyn said. Gina didn’t believe that; she had always found Evelyn narrow and judgmental.

“There’s one other thing. They arrived separately the last few times. A few minutes apart. One waiting for the other. Which means they drove here in different cars.”

“You’re guessing,” Evelyn said. “You don’t know, for sure.”

“Maybe I do have an active imagination.” Gina paused. She didn’t like to concede anything to Evelyn. “But it passes the time. Look at it this way—we wouldn’t be standing here discussing them if I didn’t have an imagination. We’d go on about our business without anything to keep our minds active. How boring would that be?”

Evelyn had always disapproved of what she viewed as Gina’s wild flights of fancy. Evelyn had little imagination herself, and she was married to the dullest man in North Carolina, if not in the country, from what Gina could tell.

“Your stories are going to bring bad luck,” Evelyn said. “You’ll jinx someone. You really shouldn’t make up stuff. Think about the times in the past you’ve been flat wrong.”

“I’ve been right, too. Some of my hunches have been pretty close to the mark.”

“Like the FBI agent?”

Gina had been wrong on that. A year before she had been convinced that a clean-cut visitor to the Café was an FBI agent looking for traces of Tommy Benton. Benton, a local bookkeeper, had embezzled close to \$100,000 from the Ag Co-op before disappearing from town. But Gina was wrong. The man turned out to be a college football coach passing through town to scout a flashy running back at the regional high school. But Gina had been right on

other occasions. She was the first to guess that Sharon Gibson was pregnant, that Steve Cropper was sick with cancer, and that Leslie Raye's marriage was in deep trouble (although Evelyn claimed that Frank Raye had always had a roving eye, even in the early days of his marriage to Leslie).

She ignored Evelyn's criticism, though, because the new couple intrigued her in ways she didn't quite understand. She found herself looking forward to Mondays and their mid-morning appearance. They arrived at the Café usually around ten o'clock, well after the breakfast rush. They stayed for almost two hours. Their custom was to leave the Carolina right before lunch, between 11:45 and noon. Early on Mondays Gina discouraged other customers from sitting in the back booth because she didn't want the couple to find it occupied and sit elsewhere, possibly outside her area of the floor.

Saving the booth for them meant she lost some tips. And the couple didn't order much, but Gina didn't care. When they did have food it was just a bowl of soup, or a side of toast, or an occasional cheese omelet for the man. Mostly they drank coffee and talked in hushed voices.

"They ain't hungry for my cooking," said Shep rudely after Gina once gave him the couple's order for buttered toast. Earlier, he'd stepped out of the kitchen on a pretext so he could see the couple he'd heard the waitresses talking about. "They're hungry for something else."

"Your mind is in the gutter," Gina said.

"Forbidden fruit," he said, baring his strong white front teeth in a wolfish grin. "They're hungry for forbidden fruit."

"They certainly wouldn't be hungry for your slop," said Evelyn, who was waiting for an order. "It's no wonder we run through so much ketchup. The customers are smothering what we serve in Heinz, and I don't blame them."

"Just because you're always horny doesn't mean everyone else is," Gina said.

"We're all horny," Shep said with certainty. "You two just won't admit it. What did that scientific study show? We all think about sex every nine seconds. Every nine seconds."

"Subtract the time when I have to look at you," Evelyn said.

In response, Shep gave them another grin, a leering one, and began singing an off-key chorus from the song "Afternoon Delight." Gina thought about the couple's obvious passion for each other and she blushed. Somehow it seemed wrong for Shep to mock them, to make their situation tawdry and cheap when she was certain that wasn't the case.

Normally, Shep's antics didn't bother her. She had always considered him a sad little man. Shep had been to culinary school in Poughkeepsie, New York and fancied himself a chef. He claimed that he had worked in the fanciest restaurants in Manhattan before tiring of big city life. He had turned up at the Café Carolina without explanation one day, impressed the owner, Gil Gaskins, and had been hired on the spot. Shep was missing half of a finger on his right

hand, the ring finger, but according to Evelyn, who had worked at the Carolina several years longer than Gina, no one at Café Carolina had ever learned how he lost it.

After working with him for a while, Gina had concluded that Shep compensated for his lack of stature with a smart mouth. He was brighter than most people gave him credit for. Evelyn had never warmed up to Shep. She saw only the strutting bantamweight with a shaved-bald head and an immaculate white chef's blouse. Evelyn tried to avoid him. Shep knew it and dogged her with vulgar comments every chance he got.

Evelyn didn't share Gina's protectiveness towards the couple, but she was curious, nonetheless. She encouraged Gina to learn more.

"Why don't you try talking to them?" she suggested. "Not in a nosey way, but I'll bet you could find out more. Just ask them where they are from. That would be a quick way to maybe figure out what they're up to."

"I'm not going to be that rude," Gina responded. "It's none of my business. It's none of yours either."

Gina didn't want to scare them off. She was afraid too many questions would unsettle the couple and encourage them to find another place to meet. On her own, however, she began a serious study of the couple. She watched their faces when they talked. She observed their body language; how often they laughed, how often their hands touched. She noted their habits. They both liked coffee: he drank his black, she ordered decaffeinated with half-and-half and Sweet and Low.

She quickly learned their first names from overhearing their conversation. The man's name was Pierce, which somehow seemed to fit him. He addressed the woman as Amanda, and once or twice, Gina heard him call her Mandy. The woman seemed anxious; she was always looking around, one eye on the front door. Either she was high strung by nature, or she felt guilty, Gina decided. Whatever the case, it didn't diminish her attractiveness. Her clothes seemed to fit her as if they'd been tailored, even her blue jeans. She had a simple elegance about her, even though she rarely wore much jewelry or make-up.

Gina found herself glaring at some of the regular customers, especially the men, when they spent too much time glancing back at the last booth. Gina noticed that Amanda began sitting with her back to the rest of the restaurant, discouraging any male attention, even though that meant she couldn't watch the front door. Gina respected her more for that.

She wondered how long they had been seeing each other. Were their visits to the Carolina the opening phase in a dawning love affair? Or had it been going on for a while? How long had they known each other? Had they waited for years to act on their feelings? Did they have to sneak away to be together? What excuses did they have to make, or what lies did they have to tell? Was the Carolina their only stop Monday mornings, or did they find their way to a motel later and act on their obvious infatuation?

She didn't share all that she knew, or what she had discovered, with Evelyn or Shep. She had overheard the couple on several occasions and knew that all was not well between them, that they were struggling with something. Once she caught bits and pieces of an argument.

"This is impossible," Amanda had said. Her hushed voice had an intensity that was painful to hear. Gina was pouring coffee for a customer in the adjacent booth and kept her back to them. Amanda had a softer accent than Pierce. Her voice made Gina think of family friends from Leesburg, Virginia.

"Can't you be patient?" Pierce asked. "Just a little patience."

"Why?" she asked. "What damn difference will it make?"

"Don't think that way."

"Why not? What's the point of this, Pierce? Can you tell me?"

By then Gina had finished with coffee for the nearby booth and had to move away, back to the kitchen, and so she missed the end of the conversation.

She ached for the elegant couple and hoped they could work out whatever it was that was troubling them. Gina could see the real tenderness between them; the way they looked at each, like no one else was around, in their own world in the last booth of the Carolina. She only wished she might have experienced such tenderness, but hers had been a life without much opportunity for that. She was surprised that she cared so much about a pair of strangers, although she felt that she knew them. It bothered her when things didn't go well, like the one time she had spotted Amanda crying.

It happened immediately after Pierce had left the restaurant. Gina hadn't noticed anything out of the ordinary that morning. Her mystery couple had seemed happy to sit and sip their coffee and talk. But after Pierce's departure, Amanda sat in the booth by herself and cried for close to five minutes. She tried to hide her face, dabbing at her cheeks with paper napkins from the dispenser on the table. Gina kept a respectful distance, but all the while, she stayed close because she was curious. She wished she could go over to the booth, sit next to Amanda, and comfort her. Finally the woman rose to her feet, her head down, and left the Carolina quickly, avoiding any eye contact.

As the weeks passed, Gina's proprietary feelings about the couple—her couple—grew. She hungered for the break in her routine their visits marked, to the excitement she felt when she saw them sitting in her booth. She was past the age for romance herself and she had no illusions about her own prospects for love, but she could identify with the couple's bittersweet pleasure in seeing each other, their magnetic attraction to each other. What did they call it, vicarious pleasure?

In late April she finally decided to share her theories about the couple with Evelyn. She was sure she had figured out why the couple chose the Carolina as their meeting spot. "They're looking to meet far away enough from home that they don't run into people they know. I figure they're from near Forest City, maybe even Gastonia."

“Maybe from Spartanburg,” Evelyn said. “They’re safer across the state line. Plenty of motels right off the highway. His wife, or her husband, wouldn’t be looking for them over here.”

Gina shook her head. “If I had to guess, I’d say Pierce was a widower. Or he’s been divorced.”

“What makes you say that?”

“He doesn’t look like he has a woman looking after him. He seems like he’s a couple of weeks behind on getting his hair cut and picking up his dry-cleaning. It’s Amanda who is married, probably with kids. Her husband is a dentist. Decent but dull. She’s caught. She loves Pierce something fierce and is struggling over whether to leave her husband, which she doesn’t want to do. She’s desperate not to break up her family. But it’s hard on her. Her husband just doesn’t get her pilot light lit anymore, and Pierce is the best thing that ever happened to her, that ever will happen to her, and she just can’t let him go.”

“He’s a fine looking man,” said Evelyn, surprising Gina. Evelyn rarely commented on the looks of their male customers.

“That he is,” Gina agreed. “He’s a gentleman, too. Nice manners. And he’s got some money, too, from what I can tell.”

“How do you know all that?”

“I can tell. Little things. He’s very courtly. He wears one of those expensive diver’s watches. And he’s driving a Mercedes. I haven’t seen the car, but I have seen his key chain on the table.”

“So is Amanda going to run off with him? He sounds too good to be true.”

“I don’t know,” Gina said. “I haven’t figured them out completely yet.”

“Maybe she wants to have her cake and eat it, too. There are women like that. Plenty of them. Can’t say that I like that sort at all. Talk about your selfish.”

“Talk about jumping to conclusions,” Gina said. “I don’t think you should be passing judgment on anybody without knowing all the facts.”

“If your story is half right, then what she’s doing is immoral. Him, too.”

“Maybe the situation is different. Maybe she’s divorced and he’s the married one. Maybe her ex abused her, so she left him. Their problem, their predicament, is that Pierce is married to a sick woman, one of those manic-depressives. So he’s unhappily married. He once loved his wife but now she isn’t quite the same person. Maybe the problem for Pierce is that if he even brings up the idea of divorce, his wife could slip over the edge and do something desperate. He’s too decent and loyal a man to risk that, but Amanda ain’t going to wait forever. She wants to get on with her life.”

“You have an incredible imagination,” Evelyn said. They had been having their conversation in the corner of the kitchen and Gina was surprised when she heard Shep clear his throat. She looked over—he had been listening intently.

“Hey, you don’t have to choose just one of her explanations,” he said. “All of Gina’s crazy stories could be true.”

“What do you mean?” Evelyn asked. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“It does if there are parallel universes,” Shep said. “Suppose there are other Café Carolinas and other couples in these universes. All of Gina’s stories could be true. A different story for each universe.”

“That’s crazy,” Evelyn said. “You’ve been watching way too much Star Trek.”

“There could be other Ginas and Evelyns for that matter. Evelyn, you could even be a hot mamma in one of those universes. Sort of the exact opposite of what you are here.”

“Which of the stories do you believe?” Gina asked Shep. “What’s your explanation?” He turned to her, giving his full attention to the challenge.

“I couldn’t rightly say,” Shep said. “No question that they’re stepping out, based on what I’ve seen. They’re definitely hiding something. People get trapped, through no fault of their own. Since nobody died and made me king, I’m not the one to judge them.”

“Why not judge?” Evelyn asked. “If they’re cheating, it’s wrong. Immoral. Plain and simple.”

Shep shot her a look of disgust. “Nothing’s that plain and simple,” he said. “I’d guess that they’re in love. It ain’t just lust. If it was just about jumping into bed they’d be done by now. The only reason to keep fooling around with a married woman is when there’s love. He’s fallen for her in the worst way. It ain’t worth the risks, otherwise. There’s too much that can go wrong. Angry husbands with shotguns. Divorce lawyers. Messing up the lives of your kids, if you got ‘em.”

“Speaking from experience?” Evelyn asked. Shep ignored the barb.

“Somebody’s gonna get hurt in this one,” he said. He had a deep, husky voice, roughened by too many cigarettes, and Gina recognized a wistful tone she hadn’t heard before. “They both look like they’ve been lonely, and loneliness can make you do crazy things.”

“I don’t think that it’s loneliness,” Evelyn said. “And that doesn’t justify it.”

Shep looked past her in wordless contempt. He addressed his next words solely to Gina. “You’ll see what I’m talking about. Look into their eyes when you get the chance. I know it’s there. You’ll see it.”

So she took Shep’s advice and watched the couple for signs of loneliness. They seemed so wrapped up in each other that there couldn’t be much room for it. She did notice that there were times when Amanda looked tired, older; the lines around her mouth seemed almost severe. That generally happened when she was by herself, but she softened when Pierce arrived with his easy smile and soft voice.

Then, on the third Monday in May, it all changed and for the worst. It was a deceptive day, colder than it looked, with rain showers off and on in the

morning. Gina had shivered in her car on the way to work. Evelyn had the day off; she and her husband had gone to Spartanburg to visit his sister. Carla was covering for Evelyn and had turned up late, forcing Gina to handle most of the early crowd by herself.

They had arrived separately. Pierce turned up first, twenty minutes earlier than usual. He ordered a cup of coffee and sat in the back booth and watched the rain come down outside the Carolina through the nearby windows. When Amanda arrived, Pierce stood up and waited until she had slipped into the booth across from him before sitting back down. Gina brought her a cup of hot decaf coffee and was rewarded with an appreciative smile.

The two of them sat there for almost five minutes, drinking their coffee, without talking. Gina watched in dismay—somehow she knew something was wrong. She had never seen them so silent before. She saw Pierce reach out and gently brush his fingers over Amanda's hand; she slowly, reluctantly, withdrew her hand, avoiding his eyes. Gina noticed that she had begun twisting the wedding band on her ring finger.

Gina had to do something. She couldn't wait any longer. She went over to the booth to ask if they wanted to order any food. In the past she had waited until Pierce glanced over at her. Neither looked directly at her.

"No, thank you, ma'am," he said. "Not much of an appetite today."

Amanda responded in such a low tone of voice that Gina couldn't hear her, but she knew that she wouldn't be ordering anything either. Gina felt embarrassed at having interrupted them. She refilled their cups and wrote up their check for two coffees and left it on the table. She stood by the kitchen door, frozen in place, aware that there was nothing she could say or do that would alter what was happening. It hurt to stand there, bursting with things she wanted to say to them, but forced to remain silent—it was none of her business.

Amanda left the booth first. She had stayed only twenty minutes. She seemed unsteady on her feet. She stopped by his side of the booth and leaned into him, kissing him softly on the lips. It was the first time Gina had seen them kiss. Amanda slowly straightened up and then left the restaurant. She didn't look back.

Pierce remained at the table, his head bowed slightly. He cradled his face in his hands, his elbows on the tabletop, his eyes covered. He sat there for five minutes, not moving. Finally, he sighed, audibly, and got up awkwardly from the booth. He left money for their coffee and included a huge tip, five twenty-dollar bills. Gina knew immediately that it was the last tip he would ever leave her—it was a reward of sorts for the weeks they had occupied her booth.

She found herself moving into the aisle, blocking his way to the door, not sure why but unable to let him leave without saying something.

"Drive safely," she said, the first thing that came into her mind.

"Thank you," he said.

“See you next week, then?” she asked.

“I don’t think so,” he said. “But you take care.”

He nodded at her and embarrassed, she moved aside, letting him pass. She knew it was over then, for sure. The next Monday there wasn’t a chance that her couple would come through the Café Carolina’s front door, bringing the promise of love and renewal with them. Their booth in the back would sit empty. Gina was glad that Evelyn had taken the day off to visit her sister; she wouldn’t have wanted Evelyn to witness the end. Evelyn would have tried to find some moral lesson in it all, when Gina knew there wasn’t any.

Eventually Gina would have to offer Evelyn some explanation for the couple’s disappearance. She hoped to delay that reckoning for as long as she could. It would be a week or two before their absence became obvious. When Evelyn did ask, Gina might even lie and tell Evelyn that the couple had finally brought her into their confidence, enough to tell her that they had decided to move to California. Gina imagined the conversation that she might report to Evelyn.

“We have a few obstacles that we’ve overcome,” Pierce would have confided to her. “Now we are free to move on. To start over.” Gina would have been leaning against the side of the booth, comfortable, proud to have been trusted with the news. Pierce and Amanda would have been sitting side by side in the booth holding hands, their fingers intertwined. It would have been the first time that they hadn’t faced each other, and Gina would explain to Evelyn that it signaled a new milestone in their relationship.

“It meant they were finally secure,” she would tell her. “Before, when they faced each other it was almost like they were trying to memorize each other’s features. Lock it into their memories. Like they might never have the chance again. When I saw them side-by-side, I said to myself that they were sure now about the future. They weren’t going to be separated. There would be time enough to stare at each other as much as they liked.”

“Finish with your story,” Evelyn would say, eager to hear the resolution. “What happened next?”

And Gina would resume retelling Pierce and Amanda’s story.

“We’re going to miss this part of the country,” Pierce would have explained. “Both of us grew up here. But it’s best to start over. Clean slate.”

“I like California,” Amanda would say. “It’s so warm and sunny and open. No one knows anyone there about your past. They don’t care.”

“Don’t even bother with that,” Pierce would have said to her, ignoring Gina’s presence for the moment. “Let’s move on. We decided, didn’t we?”

“But that’s important, isn’t it?” Amanda would have said, never taking her eyes off Pierce. “Isn’t it?”

“No,” he would have said, “It isn’t. We are. That’s all that matters now. That’s all that ever should matter.”

But Gina knew that, in the end, she wouldn't lie to Evelyn. There had been no conversation. There was no future in sunny California for her couple. Pierce and Amanda would never occupy her back booth again.

She went back into the kitchen. Shep must have caught the stricken look on her face, because he asked her if something was wrong. She told him half the truth and said that she just had an upset stomach and needed some air. Gina fled to the porch overlooking the back parking lot and stood there, under the eave, avoiding the rain, hoping to regain her composure. She had a hollow, sick-to-her stomach feeling, the feeling she first had, at twelve, when they took her aside in school and told her that her mother had passed away that morning from a heart attack.

Shep poked his head out through the door. He looked at her for a long moment. "You okay, Gina?" he asked. "Everything okay?"

She nodded. Shep stepped out onto the porch to join her. He fished a pack of Kents from his back pocket, fumbling with the package to recover a cigarette. He gripped the cigarette with his one shortened finger and then lit up, blowing smoke out into the drizzle. She glanced over and saw that some of the rain had dripped from the gutter onto his bald head, beading up, but he ignored it.

"You had to know it wasn't going to last forever," he said. "A shame, in a way. But just a matter of time."

Gina didn't ask how Shep knew what had happened. Carla must have noticed and come back into the kitchen and said something to him.

"Look at it this way," he said. "How many times did we see them in here? Ten, maybe twelve Mondays? You could see how they felt something fierce for each other. Hell, I hardly saw them but once or twice and I could see it. It was all over their faces. So they had something rare, something precious, for however long it lasted. I figure that they felt more in those ten Mondays than most people do in a lifetime."

He paused to take a long drag from his cigarette. Gina found the whole situation strangely reassuring. She was amazed at the depth of Shep's observations, that he had sensed some of the same things about her couple she had. Perhaps, like Gina, he envied their passion and even their sorrow and their pain. In the time they had come into Café Carolina, into her life, she had felt more alive from just watching them.

Shep spoke again, softly, and Gina could barely hear him over the sound of the rain. "Take me. I've never had that precious thing, that fierce love. Never felt that way, or at least not when the woman felt it, too. Not even once. Not that I didn't wish for it. Hell, I prayed for it."

"Please don't say anything about this to Evelyn," Gina said. "I want to tell her."

“Sure. She ain’t going to understand anyway. That woman’s stone cold clueless when it comes to these matters. What would she know about heart break?”

They heard Carla calling for Shep in the kitchen, an order to place, and he turned to go back inside. “Not only did they have the love, but they must have had some killer sex.” He paused, looking out past her into the back parking lot of the Carolina. “Banging like a screen door in a hurricane. I’ll tell you, that’s nothing to sneer at on a rainy day.”

She nodded at him, afraid to say anything more for fear that she would start crying. Shep left the porch and went back into the kitchen. It had begun to rain harder, with sheets of rain sweeping across the pavement. Puddles had begun to form in the ruts along the edge of the macadam.

Gina didn’t want to stay in the Carolina, she wanted to start walking, ignoring the rain, down past the Baptist church and towards the river, away from the town and the bustle of the mid-day traffic on Main Street. She could imagine her apron and uniform soaked by the rain, her hair a sodden mess, not thinking of anything but how cold and wet she had become, and how if she kept walking she wouldn’t have to stay in the Carolina and see that empty last booth.

She heard Shep calling her name, softly, almost plaintively. She turned towards the door, torn, hungering to leave, to head out blindly into the rain, but knowing that Carla, hot-headed and inexperienced Carla, could never handle the Monday lunch crowd by herself.

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Cover photo by Robert Matthews © 2010

Munroe Hill Press, Lexington, Massachusetts

ISBN: 978-0988784024

eISBN: 978-0988784048

Printed in the United States of America