



12-15-2016

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Recommended Citation

Ferrara, D. (2016) "A Moment in a Diner," *Westview*: Vol. 32 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol32/iss1/6>

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A Moment in a Diner

by D Ferrara

She would get off at Westerly.

The name of the diner, Terminal Lunch, compelled her. It evoked Raymond Carver or Saki or Sartre, depending on her mood. Its sign wasn't visible until the train pulled out of Westerly, the afterthought of a small town. Passing it on her way from New York to Kingston, each time she had thought, *Next time, when I'm not in such a hurry, I'll stop.* From Westerly, she could call for a taxi to Kingston, or her brother could come to get her.

This time, she should have been in a hurry but couldn't face the last part of the journey, yet. Her mother wouldn't know that she had stopped—her mother, wound tightly in the past, seldom noticed the present. Her brother might know, but he would be late, as well. Drinking to steel himself for the drive to the nursing home, he would still be at home when she called from the station, whatever station it was.

Early that morning, she had been in New York, her current home. From the first moment she had seen the city, she had felt roots that Rhode Island could not invoke. All her years, all her ancestors' years—Browns, Pells, Auchinclosses—still left her isolated in the tiny state. Rhode Island was her mother's home, not hers. As an Army brat, "home" evoked a shifting landscape of olive drab and furnished housing.

New York, as seen from behind the wheel of a faded Volkswagen, clicked. Driving like a cabbie, hard on the gas and brakes and merciless on the clutch, she unleashed a demon that otherwise remained tucked beneath a placid surface. No one who saw her delicate hands and slender form, no one who heard the rich tone in which she spoke or appreciated the art in her dress and demeanor, could reconcile the demon with the visible Samantha.

If, indeed, it were "Samantha" they knew. Her very proper relatives on her mother's side had called her by her full name. As a child, sleepy with Sunday dinner visits, in Victorian houses in Kingston and Narragansett, she had dreamed herself into the sepia photos on their mantels and the oil paintings on their walls as her aunt played the piano or her uncle the violin. Captured forever as a peaches-and-cream child, prim yet mischievous, or a slender young woman teasing waves on Narragansett Beach, her mother lived as much in the pictures as in the harsh world outside. "Samantha" was the right name there.

To her father's family, she had been "Sammy" (a nickname she despised). Those relatives had no oil paintings and few photographs besides brightly colored calendar art.

Studying for the first master's degree and most of the way through the doctorate, she had been "Sam." It had suited the terse efficiency with which she had pursued

her studies. Friends from that era still called her “Sam.” With her husband and her students, it was “Samantha,” as her grandmother and her uncles and aunts had called her. *So long to go full circle...*

Florence, her mother, would not call her Samantha or Sam. Most often, her mother did not recognize her. The last time, Christmas, Florence had called her daughter “Charlotte” for the whole visit, while Samantha had fed, bathed, and clothed her mother skillfully. A former Army nurse, Florence had taught Samantha well.

Once, Samantha had loved the science of nursing, the names of body parts, the chronology of disease, infection, and cure. Proud of her knowledge, she had been fascinated by science’s orderly progression. At some now-forgotten crossroads, Samantha had discovered music, theatre, dance, and poetry. She had made love to the arts in the shape of callow youths and wise older men and good friends and total strangers with music in their eyes and art in their voices, who moved in dance and declaimed as they left her or she, them. Nursing, disease, and science faded from the flow of her life.

Her mother might have noticed—must have noticed—but never mentioned that Samantha had left the potency of science to teach acting, the flakiest of arts. For even when Florence had still remembered her only daughter’s name, she seldom spoke it.

There had been no falling out. Rather, silence had built distance between them, pulling and tapping, one from the other, so gradually that neither realized until a year could elapse without more than a sentence on a greeting card.

Then, her mother aged. Guilty, visiting more often, Samantha was shocked anew every time she saw Florence. Abruptly old, deaf, wizened, and toothless, a fairy-tale hag had eradicated the elegant girl in the old photos. She became a creature who brushed crumbs off the table onto the floor that Samantha would sweep, stained her sheets with urine and bile, and shouted in her daughter’s face as if Samantha, too, were deaf. Her mother had always taken care of herself and of others. Hard and practical methods were what she had dispensed and what she needed now. Dutifully, if not always lovingly, Samantha planned her schedule around time with Florence.

The conductor’s voice reminded Samantha that Westerly would be the next stop. Suddenly positive, she collected her small leather bag, sweeping down the aisle to the exit. The conductor glanced, surprised, muttering, “Westerly?” in a quizzical tone.

Samantha nodded tightly, sweeping from the train. Her coat, a marvelous confection of Irish wool, blazed with color in the autumn air. Twenty years ago, it had been an extravagance. With Yankee thrift, she had made it earn its keep.

Once on the ground, she hesitated. Having never actually been here before, she needed to get her bearings. Her heels were too high, and the ground was blanketed with loose rocks and pebbles.

No one else got off at Westerly. The stationmaster (or someone she supposed was the stationmaster) stood nodding quietly as the silver train pulled away. He had a

pipe resting softly between his lips. Samantha loved the smell of a pipe but knew without seeing that the man would have yellowed teeth and stale breath. As she approached, she stumbled off her thin heel. The man grabbed her arm.

He was stronger than she would have supposed and, as she rose to meet his eyes, much younger. The pipe tobacco was pleasing, even so close.

“You all right, Miss?”

“Yes, thank you...a pebble...”

“True enough. Too rough for those pretty shoes.”

“Uh, yes. Anyway, I’m looking for the...diner...” Her voice trailed off. She felt foolish in her quest and silly even breathing the name of the place.

The stationmaster nodded solemnly. “Westerly’s not that small a place, Miss. We have two luncheonettes, plus Foley’s drugstore, even a restaurant. The restaurant only serves dinner, not open till five. Which place would you want?”

“The... Terminal...”

He laughed. “*That* place? Greasy spoon, hardly fit for a nice lady like yourself. Besides, I don’t even know if it’s open for lunch—Charlie does a good breakfast business, what with the rail yard workers, construction crews, and such. Then it’s as like to close up at eleven after the coffee break.”

He pulled an old-fashioned watch from its pocket. “Still, it might be open today. It’s payday for the crews—some might like a nice lunch.”

Carefully, he directed her. “Follow the tracks past the station house—don’t go to the right around the building, the sidewalk’s being repaired. Any year now, they’ll fix it up. Go to the luggage wagon, make a right there—not before—and cross the green. Bear to the left, around the yellow house, and Charlie’s place is straight on.”

He held her arm for a brief second more to assure himself that her shoes would not betray her again. Then, she walked briskly from him.

“Miss?”

She turned.

“You can check that bag if you like.”

“No... No, thank you.”

“Suit yourself.” His demeanor was kindly as he resumed staring past where the train had been.

As he had instructed, she followed the tracks past the station house. To her right, she saw wooden sawhorses set up. Two men, grimy with a full day’s dirt already, stood laughing, one hoarsely, one deeply. They paused guiltily as she passed by, although she had not heard their joke. Nodding, they touched their caps.

Samantha thought there was something odd about them, but she didn’t have the inclination to study the pair. *Besides, this is Rhode Island. They might not appreciate some New Yorker staring.... They might not even see the humor in a place called Terminal Lunch serving only breakfast...and not being at a “terminal”*

for that matter....

Rounding the station house, she came to the green, a barren strip of dead grass. The inevitable stack of cannonballs mortared together, originally a Revolutionary or Civil War monument, stood in the center, mounted on a pedestal with the names of the town's dead inscribed on copper panels all weathered to the same green-brown. As instructed, she walked around the only yellow house.

Confused, she stopped. She could not see the diner.

She slid her bag to the ground, and turned slowly. *I can see the sign from the train.... The diner is right below....* She found the tracks and followed them with her eyes, tracing the path in the air with a slender finger until returning to her original position.

The sun's glare blinded her, and she blinked against it.

Over her fingernail was the sign, less battered than she recalled but unmistakable. "How did I miss that?" There was no one to answer. Shouldering her bag, she headed for the sign.

In all the years passing the place, she had never given it more than a brief glance. As she approached, she found it exactly like a dozen other Depression-era diners: a stainless-steel trailer with printed green curtains. Without seeing inside, she knew there would be a counter with linoleum—white with little gray or green squiggles—wobbly stools with red vinyl tops, and booths sticky with the same red vinyl. *Maybe tape...yellow vinyl tape...on the rips....*

The menus would be covered in clear vinyl and would feature pancakes, oatmeal, meat loaf, and Irish stew served with slices of white bread on the side.

She had read once that in the thirties the diners were delivered on trucks, complete with dishes, curtains, and flatware—an instant business for the Deco age. Its siblings still dotted the country. This place would be nothing special. For a moment, her detour seemed heartless.

Still, she had to call her brother. The diner would have a telephone.

Trudging up the stairs, she pushed open the door. The counter was deserted except for a thin young woman with short hair who sat idly spinning on a stool, applying spots of color to her nails. Two construction workers were finishing their lunch, and the smell of meat loaf, onions, and sweat filled the small room. Piles of soiled dishes lay in a metal basin on the counter. In the back, the kitchen was framed by a pass-through. Samantha hesitated until a woman's voice called, "Come on in, Miss. I'll be there in a second."

She moved down the counter to the end opposite the young woman. To her surprise, the counter and stools were covered in well-scrubbed oilcloth. As she draped her coat over a stool, a round, red-faced woman in her twenties bustled from the kitchen.

A stained towel was tucked in the ties of the woman's once-white apron. Beneath the apron was a brown cotton housedress, similar to the ones that her father's

sisters had worn. Mopping her forehead with the towel, the woman smiled pleasantly at Samantha. Her glance swept the frayed lining of the beautiful coat without judgment.

"Nice day, isn't it?"

"Lovely."

"You in town long?"

"No, I'm just off the train from New York."

The woman smiled again, but Samantha cut her off. The friendly manner was too personal.

"Could I use...Is there a phone?"

"Sure." The woman pulled an old-fashioned rotary phone onto the counter. "If you're having something, I'll add five cents to your tab. If not, just leave a nickel on the counter."

Samantha stared at the phone. Her phone card wouldn't work with a rotary phone. She'd have to tell the operator the number. She hated doing that in public places. "Thank you. Uh, coffee, please. I'll have coffee."

"Sure enough." The woman poured into the thick pottery mug that Samantha had expected, then moved down the counter. As she approached the thin, young woman, her manner changed from professional sociability to chagrined affection.

"Babe, whatever do you have on those fingernails? What is that, blue lacquer? For Pete's sake, you look like you've turned!"

Babe laughed heartily even as she blushed toward the two construction workers.

"Aw, Charlie, give her a break—my wife says that's what those fashion magazines are showing. Blue nails, pink hair, that whole 'European' look." The younger construction worker seemed proud of his information. The older man scowled, throwing money on the table as he rose heavily.

"See you, Charlie," the older man intoned.

Samantha felt that this must be a habit for the two workers—early lunch, friendly banter. Babe must be a regular too or a casual waitress. Samantha laid her hand on the telephone but didn't pick it up. This scene had drawn her here: a small-town ritual played out gracefully. She had missed such things in her own youth. The family had only settled down in the States when her father had retired. At age twelve, she discovered that other girls shared bonds that would never release to admit her.

As the workers left, Babe spun once more, shyly glancing at Samantha. Despite her bony frame, Babe had a dancer's grace above the waist. As she waved her hands to dry her nails, her arms and shoulders moved in liquid harmony with some unheard music that flowed through her head and neck. The coltish legs stuck out at awkward angles and had no chance to keep up.

"You're from New York?" Babe could hardly suppress the tremor in her voice.

"Babe! Mind your own beeswax!" Charlie scolded, without rancor.

"No, it's all right." Samantha remembered the excitement that the words "New York" had stirred in her. Vibrant, foreign—no, *alien*—New York had been the magnetic center of the world, drawing everyone and everything to it. She had succumbed inevitably.

"Yes. I'm from New York."

Babe nodded as if in possession of a great secret. "I could tell! Your coat, your shoes, your nails, the way you wear your hair! That's how they do it in New York, isn't it? You're wearing *trousers*! New York ladies wear them all the time, I bet! In the movies, you can see them..." She paused. "You're not a movie actress, are you? No, that would be too silly. What would a movie actress be doing in Westerly? But I bet you have some kind of artsy job, don't you? Oh, are you an *artist*?"

Charlie laughed. "Take a breath, Babe, for crying out loud! Can I heat that up for you, Miss?"

Samantha had not touched her coffee. "No, thank you. It's fine." Babe had edged down the row of stools to the center of the diner, anxiously awaiting her answer. Samantha smiled, in spite of herself. "I...teach."

Babe's disappointment was brief. "Oh." She brightened. "You teach in *New York*!" Chuckling, Charlotte hefted the basin of dishes into the kitchen.

"Yes, and Chicago."

"*Chicago*!" From the rapture in her voice, Chicago held only slightly less magic than New York. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm visiting my mother...in Kingston."

This news did not interest Babe much. "Have you ever been to *California*?"

Pursing her lips, Samantha hesitated. She had spent the best and worst of times in California. Nothing to share with this child. She changed the subject.

"What do you do, Babe? Are you in school?"

Surprised, Babe stammered, "Y-yes. I'm in nursing school at South County General." Charlotte, peeking from the kitchen, shook her head cheerfully.

Startled, Samantha muttered, "My mother...did her training there..."

Babe and Charlotte exchanged a glance. "South County? It's a new school...only a few years old," Babe said, uncertainly.

"What?" The nursing program at South County General had been well established when Samantha herself had toyed with the idea in high school. *She must be in some specialized program....*

Wiping her hands, Charlie came to the doorway. "Nurses have been training one way or another since the Civil War. Babe, here, thinks that since it's new to her, must be new to everyone."

Babe blushed again, rose tint on porcelain. "Anyway, I'm almost finished. After that, I might go to New York." She raised her chin defiantly.

"You'll be lucky if you get to Portsmouth, you jonnycake!" But Charlie touched Babe's hand to soften her words. The two laughed.

"Do you think there'll be a war in Europe?" Babe asked earnestly, clearly attributing wisdom on all subjects to the stranger from New York.

"There's always a war somewhere—just ask CNN." From the look on their faces, neither Charlie nor Babe ever watched the news station, but they nodded vigorously.

"It's true," Charlie affirmed. "Those foreigners always have something to fight about. We should let them sort it out themselves. It's not our fight."

Babe twisted her face thoughtfully. "If there's another war, they're going to need nurses. I could volunteer and see Europe or maybe even China..."

"...meet a soldier boy, get a bun in the oven..." Charlie teased.

"Oh, you kid!" Babe giggled. "Could you imagine my mother's face if I brought home a soldier! She'd tan my bottom!"

"And if you brought home a baby? She'd turn you out on your round heels, slicker'n a whistle!" The two dissolved in fits of laughter.

Momentarily forgotten, Samantha wondered how such things could still matter, even in Rhode Island. Her own brother had fathered a child by a woman who could barely tolerate him now. The little girl was precious beyond words, even to Florence, who managed to recognize the child with fair regularity.

"You are so bad, Charlie! You know I'm not fast!"

"Just funning you, Babe." Charlie grinned crookedly. "One day, you've got to leave South County—this place's not big enough for you. Send me a postcard when you do."

Babe tossed her head dramatically. "Why, certainly, my dear Miss Charlotte. I'll send you all my cast-off clothes to wear to your pathetic little church socials."

"Oh, thank you, thank you!"

Noticing Samantha as if for the first time, both women looked embarrassed. "Sorry, Miss. Don't mind us, blowing off a little steam. Anyway, Babe, you got to get back to school, and I've got a load of dishes to wash."

Samantha stared at the phone. She wouldn't call her brother, wouldn't risk his unsteady driving.

"Um, what time is the next train?"

"To New York?"

"No. The other way."

Charlie glanced at the clock. "Fifteen minutes, give or take."

Samantha stood, gathering her coat. "How much do I owe you?"

Charlie glanced at her untouched cup. "Shoot, you didn't drink your coffee or make your telephone call neither. Forget about it. Me and Babe were making so much

noise, I bet you couldn't hear yourself think!"

Samantha shrugged. "No, really, it was...nice."

"Glad to oblige."

Slipping her bag over her shoulder, Samantha nodded. "Thank you."

Babe bounded to open the door for her. "Do you think...you might come by here again?"

"I don't know—maybe."

"I'm here every morning—I help Charlie with the early shift and at eleven between classes. If you...stop in..."

Suddenly, Samantha had an urge to reach out to Babe and hug her tightly. Resisting, she touched the girl's hand.

Turning pink, Babe asked, "What's your name?"

"Samantha."

"How elegant! Mine is..." Babe looked embarrassed. "...Florence...but no one ever calls me that, except my family..."

Samantha stifled the cry in her throat. "Good-bye...Florence."

* * *

She opened her eyes. Standing in the middle of the green, she noticed that the sun had moved directly overhead, making her Irish wool coat too warm. Her hand was still outstretched, tracing the tracks in the air, coming to rest on the shabby sign. A placard reading "Closed" hung in the door.

Feeling something sticky, she stared at her palm as small flecks of blue lacquer peeled away.

Picking up her bag, she decided she wouldn't go in after all.

