

FIVE SOUTH



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Leshko's: Cold Pierogies, Warm Beer, Wish You Were Here **By Deborah Johnstone**

In a small, dilapidated kitchen, Harry – the lone cook – wrestles with the challenge of non-stop food preparation. Befuddled with years of drink and remorse and beset by missed opportunities, he believes he's destined for greater things. If only he could get out of here. The odor of grease seeps into his pores and each time he thinks he can't make one more meal, someone orders French toast and he relives that night. She was the one who broke his heart into a million pieces. It never mended. Time didn't heal. Agnes loved his French toast. Since then, Harry believes that if he makes French toast exactly the way she likes it, Agnes will come back to him. She'll appear in a halo of fairy dust and beg him to run away with her. He believes this so strongly that he scrubs the grill each night at dawn until it resembles a gleaming silver bullet so that her French toast will be perfect with no hint of grease – should she ever return to Leshko's.

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Three o'clock in the morning, The Lower East Side, New York City and dawn's plum velvet sky await. I stand outside Leshko's and watch Harry scrub the grill. I know it's for me, but I can never bring myself to relive all the times we tore each other apart. All the cacophony and reckless love is now folklore. Time stops. All I see is Harry working the tiny kitchen like his life depends on it. I see all that determination and passion and muscle – all gone to waste. He never sees me, and I never plan on being there. I arrive to Leshko's on those nights when I'm

engrossed in thoughts of “What if?” I have no intention of seeking him out – it just happens. I need to feel the comfort of knowing he’s still here and the ache of knowing we were destined to perish within each other’s embrace.

Just outside the diner, druggies, loan sharks, and runaways take up residence.

Homemade signs beg for forgiveness or money or warn that Jesus is on the prowl. Gather up your children. Cops rarely move the revelers from in front of Leshko’s because their presence compliments the décor. It all just sort of goes together – the smell of grease from the kitchen, the unbridled yearning of a thousand dream whores at the intersection of no return, and the cold pierogies.

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Upon entering the diner, one is momentarily stunned by the fluorescent lights that cast each person as a putrefied replica of humanity – a Madame Tussaud-like live works series in the process of decay. It’s three o’clock in the morning on Avenue A and East 7th on the Lower East Side of New York City. It’s the only time to be in a diner, really. One soon adjusts to the light and learns that reading the menu isn’t necessary. You arrive at Leshko’s to understand how the meaning of life seeps and twists out of its vaunted edges and perhaps, to witness how the promises of youth give way to unwanted clarity. I have just one more note to jot down, one more clear-eyed observation to make, and then I’ll leave. I don’t really belong here. These are the vanquished, the always searching for validation, piety,

wealth, nirvana, solace, love. Their stories are legion and yet, when they cease to exist, no one cares. They are instantly replaced by the next simulacrum. Except for him, of course.

This night, I score a coveted table by the window facing the action on Avenue A and in Thompson Square Park, a 10-acre area that has become a ramshackle homeless camp. From my seat, I follow the non-stop mayhem of the Lower East Side – the resplendent Alphabet City. Booze, blow, Danceteria and landlines are the blueprints for an irreverent Bohemia where psychos, wannabes, druggies, prostitutes, runaways, the homeless, and those who may not make it through the night, roam endlessly. It's reality TV before everyone knew what that meant. It's just fucking reality. I see every single person who enters the diner. I imagine their journeys to this place in time. I wonder if any of them will expire before they pay the check ... It happens.

Voices in conversations, half-baked avenues of hope, stream of consciousness pitfalls, jutting in and out of time, cascading like discordant arpeggios, claiming they have the answers, convincing the uninitiated that time can be halted and no goodwill comes from progress. I nearly believe them.

“Did ya get that, Honey? Did ya write that down?”

“I got it,” I tell them.

They know I'm eavesdropping, taking notes, using them as fodder, searching for meaning in their desolation. It makes them feel special, necessary. It gives me purpose. It takes my mind off why I'm really here. This is the last place we argued, the final time. I'd felt those crystal blue eyes wrap me up in their fire. We were younger then – not much – but enough to know the difference between life beating you down and life holding promise. Now, only our lusting demons light the way. Harry doesn't think of moving on anymore. I know why he stays. Another kitchen, another town, another beginning – it's all the same in the end. Besides, he knows I'm still around, somewhere. Any given day, we'll bump into each other and he'll say he's sorry – again – for what he won't know, but he'll say he's sorry anyway. He'll cook me dinner, buy me flowers, press me into his body. I'll forgive him. For what, I won't remember.

“I know I'm not everything you were hoping for, Agnes. I know that. I'm just a fucking cook in a diner, but I try ... I do my best to make you happy. I'd do anything for you ...”

It's true, I was hoping for more, but that's life, isn't it? You take love wherever and how ever it comes. I tell him we'll move in together, but it never happens. I just can't get to it. I need my own space. He waits. Harry is nothing, if not patient. Then, one day I leave. I pack it all up and go home to Toronto. I'm a vagabond.

I've only ever been good at leaving. I didn't mean for us to end up in pain. I still want him close. I need to know he's there. I want him to cook for me.

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Harry is a cracker jack cook. Thousands of hybrid food combinations escape from his kitchen. A million tales echo over every combination, then break apart and soak up every last crumb on every plate with relentless exhilaration. Harry ties his red paisley bandana tight around his head, trapping the sweat, preventing his mind from burning up in the grill. Curly graying hair escapes from behind his ears. He moves with the grace of a man forty pounds lighter and twenty years younger. Sometimes, I pass by the diner just to see his face – a morsel of respite. Harry is my anchor, the only one who would always care for me, no matter what – if only I could be convinced to stay. An orange neon sign glows with the words “Open 24 Hours” as if announcing a boarding house for those afflicted by incessant yearning. Nowhere in New York can you enjoy a trifecta of lunatic confessions, incoherent ravings, and stunning misdemeanors with a side of onion rings, a Coke, or pickles. Part of that collective, endless yearning is imprinted on Leshko's shabby brown and yellowed wallpaper. Ketchup stains appear as ink blot tests, testimony to the confusion of some patrons who believe ketchup to be the blood of Christ, and as such, something that must be scattered generously into the ethers of the universe. Christmas lights remain lit all year long – an

emblem of goodwill at a crossroads where goodwill has long since been delayed in transit.

Harry never drops a beat, slicing and searing and sweating and smoking through the whole process, never missing an order, never letting people wait, never seeing me by the window crunched in a banquette, almost ready to call out to him, but I don't. I can't go through his pain again. Smoke billows around the tables and banquettes creating a permanent haze. Red plastic ashtrays are filled to capacity but never emptied. Full ashtrays are the sign of a busy night. I begin to cough, but I'm not leaving. I've got the best seat in the house – under the neon sign next to the entrance, with an assembly of half-dead snake plants clawing their way to heaven. On this night, the bright, once promising detritus of all those stolen moments are splayed in Leshko's cracked, orange vinyl booths.

Rent boys in high heels and short shorts count their money and their blessings – they made it through one more night. No one beat them. Once their hunger is sated with cherry cheese blintzes they'll hit the streets again. The Goths occupy the next orange vinyl booth, young girls pushing the boundaries of notoriety, praying for the right boy to come along after they shed the black-rimmed wreckage of their souls. And the boys, tall, skinny, distant – their hair permanently controlled with more intent than their parents thought possible. Those boys. They believe they are invincible. They'll soon learn the truth. No

one's gilded cage will save them. They load up on French fries and Coca Cola with sides of potato pancakes. The grease fryer crackles like it's being whipped by a dominatrix. The drag queens sit near the restrooms. Sequins, shaved chests, and Aqua Net mark clandestine journeys through a maverick wonderland. They dish everyone over lukewarm coffee and eggs – oblivious to the fact that dawn will reveal the crow's feet and plump tummies they so desperately want to conceal. They take refuge here. Don't even try to fuck with that.

Drug-addled musicians who goad their inner child with endless riffs on what the future holds, pile in after a set at the Pyramid Club. They load up on cabbage rolls and French fries. It reminds them of "home cooking" but they've done so much blow they don't actually taste anything. Their banquette has been patched together with gaffer's tape and Elmer's glue. Someone tried to eke out a design with the tape and it doesn't look half bad. Bridge-and-tunnel party-goers sashay into the diner thinking their tackiness won't be noticed. Wrong. Eating at Leshko's is their one chance to escape crushing mediocrity. They want to believe they could be rebels. Once they order a round of Heinekens, they're instantly marked as imposters. I'm an imposter in my own life so I watch others looking for signs of fallibility, hoping everyone is as misshapen as I.

I miss all those furrowed brows evaluating plastic-coated menus, trying to tie up loose ends they can't remember, and summoning the will to survive amid all

indications that survival will probably kill them. Each story is piled up one by one, on top of each other over a grilled cheese or fried eggs, or pancakes, or hash browns and some slaw with a pickle on the side. Each tale is woven into the laminated menu and smeared on the rickety tin ceilings and yields over 3,000 food combinations – most of which no normal, sober person would dare touch. All combinations are wrangled through Harry’s assiduous intent, his need to ensure the grill bends to his will.

In Leshko’s pre-dawn, deep-fried anarchy – when the threat of daylight sends most patrons into a death-spiral – lip-smacking, gut-crushing tales of woe are legion. A unified din bounces off Formica tabletops and pulsates with the conversations of a million stars all negotiating for that one last chance. Behind the counter, Stella – waitress extraordinaire whose accent no one has ever been able to place – scoops, swoops, pours, and plates all manner of food and she listens. Her egg-shaped body, cherub smile, and scrambled curly locks, soothe the most unbalanced patron. I miss all those chronic vagabonds – listless and driven to oblivion, eager for anything that promises instant respite. I think I may be one of them after all.

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My French toast arrives, greasy as usual, and I smother it in fake maple syrup. I know Harry won’t clean the grill until 4:00 a.m. I use eight more creamers to dull

the bitterness of hours old coffee and watch as a young woman on the stool at the counter bursts into tears. They're the kind of sobs that cause her to convulse, that steal her breath away. Stella brings her tomato soup with extra crackers. The woman's purple mascara streams down willowy cheeks and her nose ring is covered in snot. We all watch as her tears verify the fear and vulnerability that hovers over all of us at 3:00 a.m. The next group of wanderers will show up shortly. Harry's shift will end. At 5:00 a.m., he'll saunter to the dive bar across the street and have a few. He'll talk to the bartender about his night, the incessant New York heat, some football team, why the police can't be trusted ... He'll request a tune from the juke box, "I Can't Stop Loving You" by Ray Charles. He'll remember when we were there together, happy, for that oh-so-brief mecca of time. He'll catch glimpses of women in the street, the same red hair, the same engineer boots, that laugh, those silly Eiffel Tower earrings, but none of the women will be me. I'm not really here anymore. I'm an imposter.

I miss Leshko's at three o'clock in the morning on Avenue A and East 7th on the Lower East Side where all day breakfast was \$2.99, where anticipation languished as vagrants and the haphazard idled. I miss wondering about all the stories that despair held securely in his pocket. I miss standing at the entrance to Leshko's at dawn and waiting for Harry to finish his shift.

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