

ROADHOUSE FRIDAY
a short fictional tale
by Dale Thele

A people-watcher lets his imagination weave made-up stories based on first impressions of folks he encounters during an evening at the Roadhouse Diner.

“Life has become immeasurably better
since I have been forced to stop taking it seriously.”
Hunter S. Thompson

It was early Friday evening, not much different than most any other October evening in Southern Texas, except it'd rained earlier. Just enough to cool the air. I was kinda glad I'd brought a light jacket with me. I was warm and dry inside the Roadhouse Diner. At some point during the evening, I'd leave the comfort of my cozy diner booth to go out of doors to find my ride home, then I'd want the jacket. For that moment, I sat next to a window where I watched the goings-on outside in the parking lot. The light of dusk was slipping away from an overcast sky. In the dimming light, I could barely make out the rain droplets lazily dripped from the eaves of the diner's exterior. Rain puddles glistened in the parking lot, reflecting the glow from the outdoor lighting. The darkening parking lot was flooded with amber light and empty parked cars. Various makes and models resembled a used car lot. Each vehicle waited patiently to be claimed by its owner.

I shivered as I sensed the cool damp air that hovered on the opposite side of the large window pane from where I gazed. That very booth was my favorite table at the Roadhouse Diner. A comfortable booth butted against the window where I could overlook the parking lot. On rare occasions like on that particular evening when I could get away. I'd come there as a welcome escape from my everyday world. From “my” booth I could see the goings-on of the entire inside of the diner. I must admit, I'm an avid people-watcher. I like to let my imagination create fascinating stories of the people I encountered. Since I didn't get out as often as I'd have liked, that night was a special treat, indeed.

“Sir?” A female voice startled me. I became aware of the six-page laminated menu spread open like a magazine in front of me. I'd been lost in my thoughts, I hadn't studied my supper options.

“Hun, are ya ready to order?” the perky young waitress smiled.

“Uh, well ...” dribbled out of my mouth as I struggled to regain my mental bearings.

“Hun, I can come back if ya need more time.”

I read the name on her name badge. “Sharon, what a pretty name. You definitely look like a Sharon.”

“Thanks. I'll just give ya some more time to look over the menu.”

“No, Sharon, that won't be necessary.” I smiled and proceeded to politely give her my order.

I studied the blonde waitress as she walked away with the menu under her arm and my order in hand. My impression of her was of a financially struggling single mother with a five-year-old son. She took classes at the community college during the day and waitressed at night. Her son, Tad, didn't recall his father, other than what Sharon had told him. “Your daddy was a brave soldier in the army, but he won't be coming home. He was killed in the war.” In reality, she'd met Tad's father at an anti-war rally. They smoked some weed and they shacked up that one time. She never got the guy's name or saw him again. Tad and his mother lived in a broken-down rented trailer on the wrong side of the tracks. “It's only temporary.” she assured her son (and herself), “‘til I get my nursing degree.” See how people-watching works? Simply observe someone for the briefest of moments. Instantly the mind invents a story of that person's life which becomes a perceived reality of that individual.

Faint memories of my childhood emerged as I looked at the decor of my surroundings. The diner had only been open for a couple of years, yet the memorabilia mounted on the walls along with rustic pine fixtures had the feeling the diner had existed for decades. Aged automobile license plates, corroding metal signs of defunct gasoline, and motor oil brands peppered the walls. All were familiar ghosts from my younger days. I recalled many of the nostalgic items from childhood summer family vacations and short weekend road trips.

The red and white checkered table clothes draped over the tables were reminiscent of summertime family picnics when I was a boy. Momma would dress a picnic table with a checkered cloth and then unpack the picnic basket of potato salad, deviled eggs, and fried chicken. Sometimes a gust of wind would cause the tablecloth to bellow. We'd frantically grab a hold of roiling food containers and airborne paper plates to prevent our lunch from blowing clean away. Afterward, we'd resume our picnic. We'd laugh till our stomachs hurt as we retold our heroic acts which saved our picnic outing. Funny ain't it, how the sight of inanimate objects triggered forgotten memories.

Unconsciously I'd thrummed my fingers in the condensation dribbled down the side of the ice tea glass. I took a swig of sweet tea. The twang of lime wedges floated on top of the ice cubes met my nose, it dawned on me, I hadn't stirred my tea.

I swirled the ice with a teaspoon, then took another gulp. Ah. Thank Gawd for whoever invented sweet tea. After I set my glass back on the table, I wiped my wet hand with the napkin. That's when I noticed the hostess greet an elderly couple entering the diner. The old woman was hunched over a metal walker. She shuffled one foot, then the other. The man with her had wrapped his arm around hers, providing her extra support as they scuffled along. He held her shiny black patent purse in his free hand. They made the perfect married couple. Both were dressed smartly in their Sunday best as if they'd come from church, but it was only Friday. She donned silvery-blue teased and coifed silvery-blue hair. He wore a dark fedora which he removed once the hostess had seated them near the door but protected from drafts.

I pretended to picture the old lady in her younger days, a school teacher, middle school, English. I could spot a retired teacher a mile away by the eyeglasses draped across their chest by a string of beads around the neck. He'd been an accountant. It had always been just the two of them, they'd never had children, not for the lack of trying, children just weren't in the cards for them. They were somewhere between their fiftieth and sixtieth wedding anniversary. They'd been together for so many years, numbers no longer had meaning for them. Most of their friends had already passed. The few who remained either lived with family or in rest homes.

They'd arrived too late for the early bird specials, something I never missed. I figured they'd probably come from a memorial service for one of their dwindling reserve of friends. Neither was in a hurry to return to their quiet home, so they enjoyed supper out on the town. It was kinda sweet and sad to see them celebrate the remaining time they still had together.

The waitress set a platter of chicken fried steak and mashed potatoes smothered in cream gravy in front of me. My mouth watered as I tucked a stiff starched red and white checkered napkin into my shirt collar. I bowed my head to say grace, but when I saw the side-dish of fried okra, I lost all self-control. With a fork in hand and a knife in the other, I dove into a southern-style dinner fit for a king. I hoped the good Lord would overlook my tiny transgression. However, if Momma had still been alive and seen, I hadn't said grace. She'd have whacked me across the back of my head. A knot would welt up for near a week. There's something about a throbbing bump on the noggin that makes one remember to say grace before a meal. Momma went to Jesus, years ago. I'm sure she was watching from heaven above. I'd have bet Jesus was beside her as they plotted a fitting punishment for me.

A young college couple entered the diner. They'd probably been high school sweethearts. She clung to him like they were stuck together by glue. She was far more attentive to him than he was to her. They settled into a booth, snuggled together on a bench seat on one side of the table. He turned to her and said something and gestured to the opposite side of the table at the empty seat. She looked at him strangely, then she slid out of the booth and reluctantly occupied the bench seat across the table from the guy.

The waitress handed each a menu, then shifted her weight to one leg as she pointed at menu items. He nodded and weakly smiled at the waitress. The waitress left and the couple studied their menus. He closed his menu and laid it on top of the table as the waitress returned with two glasses of ice water. She retrieved a pad from her apron and grabbed a pencil from on top of her ear ready to take their orders. The guy looked across the table at his girlfriend who studied the choices from her menu. He shook his head as he said something to the waitress. The waitress tucked the pad back into her apron and slipped the pencil back over her ear, then walked away.

The guy said something to the girlfriend that made her slam down her menu. From my vantage, I could only see the back of her head. He glanced around as if the girlfriend had said something embarrassing and he checked to see if anyone had heard her comment. He reached for her hand. She recoils like a snake about to strike, instead, she crossed her arms over her chest. He leaned in as if he was gonna tell her something confidential. She abruptly leaned back into her seat, then become quite animated by flinging her arms wildly about. Clearly, they had had a disagreement. There was a back and forth match of vocal jabs. She paused to take a sip of water, then without warning she hurled the water across the table to splash into his face. Mouth gaped, he attempted to control his anger. After he'd wiped his face with a napkin, he searched for the girlfriend or rather, ex-girlfriend. As the customers watched her stomp out of the diner. He made no effort to go after her. His face was red as he scanned the startled faces of patrons. He sheepishly smiled. Everyone slowly returned to their meals and boring conversation. He climbed from the booth to make an excrete exit, as excrete as one can after being made a spectacle of a public breakup.

“Would ya like more tea?” The waitress named Sharon asked.

I shook my head as I covered the rim of my glass with my palm. She smiled and moved to the next table while juggling a pitcher of sweet tea in one hand and unsweetened in the other.

There was no doubt in my mind it was Friday, the one night of the week central Texans go out to eat. A continuous stream of customers flowed into the diner.

A family of three entered the diner, a momma, a daddy, and a five-year brat. For no reason whatsoever the boy cut loose a high-pitched squeal. I covered my ears and pinched my eyes tight. I tried to wish the child away. When I opened my eyes, he was still there, held in his father's arms as

they waited to be seated. I'd always said, "if rug-rats can't act civilized in public, they should be locked away at home with a sitter and not be put on display to distract everyone else."

I tried to ignore the family, and I focused on my supper. Methodically, I sliced the chicken fried steak then swirled it around in the thick gravy before I relished the taste. I'd become overly concerned the screaming toddler and the apparently deaf parents might have been seated close to me. That would be most unacceptable. That evening was my night of relaxation. It's what I liked to call my "me time." It was the one time I'd set aside to temporarily escape; to forget the world and my troubles. I couldn't allow that family to ruin my evening. I shot them the evil eye and then, I made a hand gesture I'd learned from an old gypsy woman who cast curses.

Nervously, I chewed my steak and kept a cautious eye on where the family of four would be seated.

The waitress approached the toddler and parents.

My whole body tensed, I felt the perspiration build in my armpits. The moment of truth had arrived; would toddler boy ruin my evening and be seated in a nearby booth? Or would the gypsy curse save me from such unspeakable hell?

With laminated menus in hand, the waitress gestured in my general direction and said something to the family.

"Oh Gawd, NO. Please. Don't come this way." I crossed my fingers – even my toes.

She then gestured with the menus (still in hand) in the opposite direction.

The toddler father said something to the waitress.

She nodded, then led the family to a booth at the far end of the diner.

Relieved the impending nightmare didn't come to pass, I sighed and sank deep into the upholstered booth.

I returned to my dinner, and I gandered at the assortment of patrons stream through the front doors. There were fat people, skinny people, tall, short, and of all ages. I loved to watch people, they could be quite amusing, especially when they don't know someone was watching. The diner hostess bustled in pace with the flow of arriving customers, seating them as quickly as vacant tables became available. I could never have been a waiter. I hadn't the patience nor the memory to remember who'd ordered the House Salad and who got the hamburger with fries. I was more suited to be a customer, a lone customer. I preferred to enjoy my meal in solitude, without the useless chatter of conversation. Supper companions too often rambled about things I didn't understand, agree, or cared to know about. On those extremely rare occasions when I did have a dinner companion, I'd nod a lot and let the companion enjoy listening to their own voice. My, how some people loved to talk about nothing. I keep my thoughts to myself so no one thinks I'm wacky or something.

The family of three were seated at a booth across the diner, a safe distance from me, but close enough they were within eye-shot. Father said something to the waitress as he pointed to a nearby unoccupied booth. The waitress nodded and the family of three relocated to the vacant table. In their new location, I had a better view of the family.

The mother was youngish with dark mousy hair and a haggard look. She'd nod occasionally but otherwise, she didn't say much. Father appeared tired and looked as if he forced himself to be sociable. As for the boy, well, he was a demon straight outta hell. I didn't know what crawled up his britches, he kicked and caterwauled as if he was possessed by the devil. He slapped over the salt and pepper shakers. Tore open sugar packets and flung crystal granules into the air, leaving the tabletop dusted in sugar and powdered artificial sweetener. Customers attempted to ignore the young child, but the deafening screams were difficult to block out.

With my biscuit, I sopped up the residual gravy until the plate was spotless. A sight that would have made my Momma proud. It wasn't like she didn't like to wash dishes, au contraire, the woman considered a spotless plate a complement of her culinary skills. I was amazed at what wonderful meals

came from Momma's cast iron skillet.

Two men entered and claimed stools at the bar across the aisle from my booth. I politely smiled and nodded. The older of the two returned a courteous gesture.

My attention returned to the demon child across the dining room, just in time to witness the mother slap the boy's tiny hand. Of course, the urchin reacted with a blood-curdling scream. The mother grabbed the boy's shoulders and gave him a good hard shake. The father seemed to not care or notice. The satanic boy cowered and whimpered as he plotted his next strategic move.

As for the elderly retired teacher and her former accountant husband, I don't believe they'd been disturbed by the screaming boy, not one bit. There were definite advantages to growing older, one could lose one's hearing so as not be bothered by the unruly actions of the devil's spawn.

The waitress delivered a baked chicken platter to Mother. Father had a steak with a baked potato. Junior had a hamburger and french fries. Immediately, the boy scooped a fist full of fries and pitched the potato projectiles at Father. The greasy fries tumbled down the front of Father's shirt to fall unceremoniously into his lap. Father nonchalantly brushed the fries onto the floor. The devil child next plucked off the bun from his burger and catapulted it into the air. It sailed across the table. Mustard laden bread landed on Father's chest, to slowly pull away from the fabric, leaving a yellow mustard mark on Father's light blue oxford shirt. Father examined the damage to his shirt. For the first time since the family had arrived, Father acknowledged the boy's presence across the table. The boy stared daggers at Father, daring him to make a move. Father accepted the challenge and gestured for Mother to slide out of the booth. The boy retreated into the corner without Mother's protection. Father came around the table and lunged for the possessed boy. Apparently, Father had had enough of the child's shenanigans and yanked the child from the booth. Father dragged the kicking and screaming scamp by the arm as if he were a mere rag doll. Out the door, Father dragged the boy through the parking lot to disappear behind a large parked SUV. I imagined Father securely tied the devil's spawn to a tree where he would leave the devil child as food for the night creatures. I doubted any priest in his right mind would consciously approach that possessed creature, he was beyond saving with a cross, holy water, and biblical words. I wasn't Catholic, but I crossed myself just to be on the side of caution.

Inside the diner, Mother appeared oblivious to the curious eyes of nearby diners, as if nothing out of the ordinary had occurred. She casually sliced a sliver of baked chicken with a knife in one hand and a fork in the other. She fed herself and resumed to cut another slice. Never once did she make eye contact with prying eyes.

Diners return to their meals and the hum of countless senseless conversations resumed. Father returned empty-handed without the boy. Father joined Mother at their table. He sat opposite his wife and without a word, he began to saw his steak into bite-size pieces. Mother and Father continued their meal without acknowledging each other, totally oblivious to their surroundings.

I was curious as to what had become of the demonic child. Had Father tied the boy to a tree for the discretion of bears and coyotes? I'd read somewhere about how some couples aren't cracked up to have children.

I polished off the last of a peach cobbler the waitress named Sharon had brought me as I'd watched the demon child situation deteriorate. Then, I remembered the two guys seated at the bar. One was a youngish African American. I decided he was a college student, and the older Caucasian gentleman, nearly old enough to be the younger's father was a traveling salesman. I didn't believe for a second the older man who could have been the father. I noticed the older slipped a gold band from his finger and discretely placed it inside his sports coat pocket. All the while he nursed a cocktail and watched the boy hungrily devour a burger and onion rings slathered with catsup. That's when I decided to make up a story about the two of them. What could their story be?

The older put his hand on the younger's knee. They exchanged a quick smile. Ah-ha! Of course,

they were boyfriends. They'd met last year at a cruise park. No. They'd met at a highway truck stop. The younger spent the night at the salesman's motel room. The next day, the older drove back home to his wife and daughters, while the younger returned to his political science studies. The salesman wanted something extra outside of his marriage, but nothing serious or permanent. The younger wanted to have a little fun without commitment because college came first.

Don't get me wrong, I didn't have anything against homos, they're people too. I figure some folks like apples and some prefer oranges. I was partial to pears myself. I remember Momma once told me that God created EVERYTHING and it was good. My Momma never told

me lies. I didn't get the whole hubbub of why being a homo was wrong. I just couldn't see how it made any difference to anyone but another homo.

Sharon, the waitress, cleaned the dirty dishes from my table and slipped the check on the table. I was content, my tummy was full and I'd seen so many different types of people and I'd enjoyed the stories I'd made up about all of them. To me, people watching was exciting, I could imagine all types of stories, just by watching. It was surprising to me how we pre-judge someone or assume they are a certain type of person based solely on first impressions. I couldn't say I believed the stories I concoct, then, maybe I did. I stretched my arms. It had become late and I was tired.

I scanned the diner, taking mental notes of each customer, employee, and the scenarios that had played out in my head. People continued to come and go through the front doors. Then someone came in I recognized. I waved, but he didn't see me, he spoke to the greeter. She nodded and pointed in my direction. My friend saw me and we smiled. He moved toward me. On his heels was another friend. I scooped up my jacket,

“Evening fellas, I’ve been waiting for ya.” I greeted my friends, Rodney and Roger.

“Did you have an adventurous day?” Rodney asked as he gently helped me from the booth.

“Yes, I did Rodney, thanks for asking. I've had quite enough adventures for one day. I'm feeling tired.”

“Ready to go home?” Roger asked me as he took hold of my arm.

“Yes, Roger, I’ve had a big day. I’m tired and ready for my bed.”

Together, they walked me toward the exit. I paused to wave goodbye to my waitress Sharon, and then to the retired couple, the two homos at the bar, and strangers waved to me just because they were nice folks.

Rodney opened the back door of the waiting passenger van. I climbed inside. Rodney buckled the nylon safety harness over my chest.

“I’m going home, Rodney.”

“Yes, you are. You’ll be home soon,” he assured me.

Roger drove the van out of the parking lot. I almost turned to look out the back window at the Roadhouse Diner – the end of what had been an extraordinary day. Instead, I faced straight ahead as the van entered the highway.

“I'm going home.” I smiled to myself.

Rodney and Roger took me home in the comfy van I'd ridden many times before. The pristine white van with the familiar red and blue insignia painted on the outside of the vehicle: State Hospital – Texas Department of Mental Health.

It was late Friday evening, not much different than most any other October evening in Southern Texas, except it'd rained earlier. Just enough to cool the air. I was kinda glad I'd brought a light jacket with me.

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ROADHOUSE FRIDAY

by **Dale Thele**

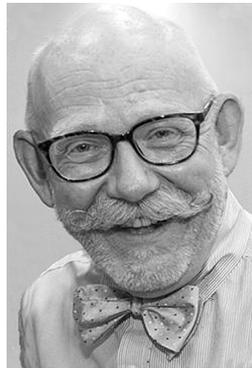
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Dale Thele

Pronouns: He / His / Him

Most of Mr. Thele's life has been a lengthy series of compulsions strung together by atrocious acts of stupidity and boredom. After raising heck in a sleepy north-central Oklahoma oil town for eighteen years, he ventured to Oklahoma City University on a quest for higher learning. He quickly learned “higher” education meant “elevating” one's mind with the aid of either a reefer or a bong, along with ample amounts of alcohol. Years later destiny lured Mr. Thele to Austin, Texas, where he currently lives vicariously through characters he conjures up in twisted far-fetched fictional adventures.

His writing career began in 2008, influenced by authors like Timothy James Beck, Michael Thomas Ford, Mark Kendrick, and Bryan Healey.

Originally writing under an assumed name, today, Mr. Thele writes under his given name, penning mostly Southern Fiction which often includes an LGBT character or two; currently under contract with Fountain Literary Press. His works have garnered him the honor of being an Amazon Bestselling Author.

If you enjoyed ROADHOUSE FRIDAY, check out my other works at

<https://www.dalethele.com>