

THE CURE AT LUNCH

by R.W. Schneider



Peplos Kore, c. 530 B.C.E., from the Acropolis, Athens, Greece (Acropolis Museum, Athens)

Dramatis Personae (in order of speaking)

MARCUS SAUNDERSON, A PROFESSOR

NIOBE, HIS STUDENT

ATHENA, A WAITRESS

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THE CURE AT LUNCH

An older man, MARCUS, is in a booth at a Greek restaurant with NIOBE, a younger woman.

MARCUS

It's not too late to back out.

NIOBE

Why would I back out? / That's insulting.

MARCUS

I mean, if for any reason...

NIOBE

Why would I need a reason? / Why would I need to justify it?

MARCUS

No, of course not. I'll drive you to school / or wherever you want to go.

NIOBE

I'm not scared, if that's what you're implying.

MARCUS

I'm not implying anything. We don't *have to* go through with this.

NIOBE

Do I look scared?

MARCUS

No, but—forgive me—you don't look joyful either.

NIOBE

That's my face!

MARCUS

I've seen it look happier.

NIOBE

There are no specials on this menu.

MARCUS

Turn the page... there.

NIOBE

Oh.

MARCUS

The Greek salad is good.

NIOBE

Salad is all I can eat.

MARCUS

Are you a vegetarian?

NIOBE

No. Salad is all I can eat. (*a beat.*) Are *you* scared?

MARCUS

Hey, it was my idea.

NIOBE

But maybe not such a good one. Maybe you're scared now?

MARCUS

I think I can handle a Greek salad.

NIOBE

I need another minute.

MARCUS

No rush. (a beat) They do a Pullman Salad, too. With steak in it.

NIOBE

I'm not feeling carnivorous right now. (*She folds the menu.*) Are you trying to prove that I'm not...?

MARCUS

Carnivorous?

NIOBE

No.

MARCUS

Scared?

NIOBE

No.

MARCUS

What then?

NIOBE

Toxic. Are you trying to prove that I won't ruin it? Is it a bet you made?

MARCUS

It's just a lunch.

NIOBE

A hunch?

MARCUS

A *lunch*.

NIOBE

With your student? Your academic advisee? Is that normal?

MARCUS

It's not unprecedented.

NIOBE

But *it is* a bet, isn't it? You want to show you can endure my company for an hour. Maybe 40 minutes if we don't have dessert or coffee. Big, brave academic advisor.

MARCUS

And if I end up *enjoying* your company, do you lose the bet?

NIOBE

No, I win lunch with a weirdo.

MARCUS

I was actually looking forward to it. I wasn't sure if you'd accept.

NIOBE

I shouldn't have. You'll regret this.

MARCUS

I haven't regretted it yet. I thought it might be fun. A change.

NIOBE

For me?

MARCUS

For both of us.

NIOBE

But for you it's mostly a challenge: forty minutes in the ring with Thorn.

MARCUS

Someday you'll have to tell me about your nickname...

NIOBE

Don't count on it. *(a beat)* Still think you can handle it? We don't *have to* go through with it, you know. We haven't ordered.

(A waitress is suddenly there.)

WAITRESS

Hi, my name is Athena and I'll be your server today. How are we doing?

MARCUS

We're just fine.

WAITRESS

The moussaka is really good. Are you ready or do you want another minute?

MARCUS

I'm ready. Are you?

NIOBE

I need another minute.

WAITRESS

Well, you take your time, sweetie.

(Waitress leaves. NIOBE scowls at "sweetie" and unfolds her menu.)

NIOBE

You probably think I'm indecisive.

MARCUS

No. Lunch is an important decision—and I have information you don't have.

NIOBE

What?

MARCUS

I've had the Greek salad before.

(NIOBE studies the menu a longish moment. Then folds it again.)

NIOBE

I shouldn't have called you a weirdo.

MARCUS

No offense taken.

NIOBE

You're so damn sure you can pull this off—it's the Yale in you. But you have no idea what you're getting into. I eat alone every day. Don't you think there's a reason?

MARCUS

I often eat alone myself. I prefer to have company.

NIOBE

Female company? Someone tractable and not too plain?

MARCUS

Someone clever and original who doesn't chat about inconsequential things. It's the weirdo in me. Or maybe—since you bring it up—the Yale in me.

NIOBE

If you're looking for conversation, you've come to the wrong place.

MARCUS

Aren't we having a conversation?

NIOBE

Not yet. We're testing the ground. We're conversing about conversation.

MARCUS

If you unfold your menu, it will keep the waitress away.

NIOBE

I know what I want. (*She unfolds her menu anyway.*) Your move.

MARCUS

I not feeling competitive right now. Is it "my move" anyway?

NIOBE (*with an effort at sweetness*)

I forbid you to put a quoting inflection on "my move," as if it were a peculiar idea of mine and you're humoring me for the sake of argument. You know perfectly well this is a game, a game you made up for your own purposes. You've put yourself in this situation and it's your move.

MARCUS

I'll admit it's a game if you admit that you're playing. Why did you consent?

NIOBE

"All men ask why of me and I thought it was a fashion."

MARCUS (*impressed*)

Emily Dickinson. Another woman who dined alone.

NIOBE

Not always. (*a beat*) My therapist said I should trust people more.

MARCUS

Do you trust your therapist?

NIOBE

No.

(*Silence.*)

MARCUS

You told me when we had our first conversation that you'd been alone for 23 years and you were ready to be alone for another 23. Was that just bravado? Excuse me for bringing it up if I shouldn't. I don't know how much of that first conversation was meant to be retained.

NIOBE

It wasn't a conversation, it was a rant.

MARCUS

You were... *distraught*. But if you hadn't been distraught, you wouldn't have told me as much as you did and I probably wouldn't have become interested in you. (*a beat*) And now... here we are.

NIOBE

Having lunch.

MARCUS

Well, that hurdle is still in front of us. Can we order? I'm hungry.

(*NIOBE folds her menu.*)

NIOBE

Are you impressed that I've read Emily Dickinson's letters? Are you going to flatter me and tell me what a perfect little scholar I am?

MARCUS

I don't have to—you flatter yourself.

(*The waitress reappears as if by magic.*)

WAITRESS

So... are we all set?

NIOBE

I'd like the Pullman salad. Rare.

WAITRESS

Anything to drink with that?

NIOBE

Just water.

WAITRESS

You take hot sauce with that?

NIOBE

No.

WAITRESS

And for Dad?

MARCUS

A Greek salad, please. Can I have extra feta?

WAITRESS

Sure thing. What would you like to drink?

MARCUS

I'd ask for a kylix of chilled retsina if you had it, but since you don't, iced tea.

WAITRESS

I'll have that right out for you.

MARCUS

Thank you.

(The waitress exits.)

NIOBE

You were flirting with her: “a kylix of retsina”!

MARCUS

I was being polite to her. There are points of difference.

NIOBE

“Polite,” really?

MARCUS

“Sociable,” then—the concept may be new to you.

NIOBE

Save the vinegar for your salad. I’m not good company and I’m not polite. You know that already.

MARCUS

What are your plans after graduation?

NIOBE

I’m gonna do a Masters in counseling.

MARCUS

Hm.

(Pause.)

NIOBE

So you invited me to lunch. What do you want from me?

MARCUS

What makes you think I want anything? There are people in the world—probably *most* people in the world—that I don’t want *anything* from. I’m perfectly happy sitting across from them like a bivalve mollusk glued to a piling, opening and shutting as their tides go in and out.

NIOBE

Usually women, right?

MARCUS

I like women. Sue me.

NIOBE

And younger than yourself?

MARCUS

As it happens, I’m an adult and I work at a school. My students are younger than me. You’re older than most.

NIOBE

And do all these young women like the speech about the bivalve mollusk? Don’t tell me you’ve never used it before.

MARCUS

What if I have?

NIOBE

Another thing I can’t believe is that I’m one of the women that put you into this bivalve state. I can’t believe you get that much pleasure from being with me—or any pleasure at all.

MARCUS

No, you interest me in a much more active way. You're a specimen of student I haven't encountered before.

NIOBE

So *I'm* the bivalve mollusk?

MARCUS

No, you're a case of rampant egotism disguised as self-hatred. We usually think of egotism as a tendency to glorify the self, but self-contempt is egotism, too. People who ascribe exceptional natures to themselves, people who define themselves on that basis, have all bought into the fallacy of selfhood. A devout Buddhist would see right through it.

NIOBE

Well *that* puts me down: I'm transparent to Buddhists. I guess that's better than being opaque to Jews or a zero to Zoroastrians.

MARCUS

You enjoyed saying that. Admit it.

NIOBE

The mollusk speaks! Another first for Professor Saunderson!

MARCUS

And you enjoyed saying it to someone who appreciated it.

NIOBE

What if I did?

(Silence while the waitress refills their water glasses.)

MARCUS

You see the world through the plate glass of self-contempt; your reflection is always there, blocking the view.

NIOBE

I'm not going to be your friend.

MARCUS

I've never known in advance in any situation who my friends would turn out to be. When I worked in North Africa my best friend turned out to be a Tunisian electrician with one eye who didn't speak English.

NIOBE

But his other eye was fluent? His other eye could quote Shakespeare?

MARCUS

That joke is ancient. That joke is in *Mary Poppins*!

NIOBE

You can't make me happy.

MARCUS

Today, I'll settle for feeding you.

NIOBE

You can't *make me* anything.

MARCUS

The very few times I've seen you happy—genuinely happy—in class, for example, doing that group activity, you were *radiant*—as if you'd set down an enormous burden. You can't blame me for wanting to see you like that more often.

NIOBE

You want to make me *radiant*? You think you're the philosopher's stone—that you'll turn me from lead to gold! At least we ordered. That hurdle is behind us.

(The waitress arrives with covered dishes. She serves Niobe first.)

WAITRESS

Here we are. This is for you...

(On the plate is a glowing, steaming yellowish confection, like lava, but far more attractive.)

NIOBE

That's not what I ordered.

WAITRESS

Pullman Salad, named after George M. Pullman, founder of the Pullman Company and instigator of the Pullman Lockout of 1894. Dozens of strikers were killed. When they buried him, they put steel rails across the vault to keep his former workers from desecrating the body.

NIOBE

But it's not a salad!

WAITRESS

No dear, it's *generosity*, something Pullman never understood. The professor here is a flawed human being. You are flawed. The world is flawed. Generosity lets you to bear it all with a tolerant smile—as all such humiliations are meant to be borne.

NIOBE

That's my face!

WAITRESS

Sweetie, go to the Met—it's free with a New York ID. Go to the Greek section and look at the statue called *Girl in a Peplos*. It's 530 BC and she's just striding into womanhood. Her smile isn't put on to please men or appease the world, it's a smile of pure intelligence. I want you to practice that smile in the mirror every day.

MARCUS

You have unusual insight into your customers, but it's clearly not what she wanted.

WAITRESS

At the Athena Diner you don't get what you want but what you're wanting: the goddess of wisdom doesn't like picky eaters.

MARCUS

What an elegant formulation.

WAITRESS

You want another one? "You are called to the world's table *not to consume*, but *to be consumed*."

NIOBE

I can't... I just can't...

MARCUS

And what strange alchemy has the goddess got for me?

(She uncovers another dish. This one is darker, richer, but still incandescent.)

WAITRESS

Humility! You're damned near starved for it, you Yalie bastard—it's been years since anybody dared fix it for you!

MARCUS

Humility. And such a large portion.

WAITRESS

Stop imagining that you're the answer to the world's woes. She's not grateful to you. She doesn't like you. She's never going to be your friend. Get over yourself.

MARCUS

Last time it was a Greek Salad—with extra feta.

WAITRESS

Here's something you can share: a bottle of companionship. (*She produces a glowing flagon and two archaic drinking vessels.*) Life is seriously fucked up, but you don't have to bear it alone. You're not the world's protagonists. Cheer up, Sweetie: you're not Iphigenia—and *you're* not Hercules.

NIOBE

Thank you, I think.

MARCUS

We're humbled. At least I am.

WAITRESS

You two deserve each other. Eat up! The goddess commands it!

end of play