

ALICE'S DINER

By Christine Aramburu

Mrs. Titus stopped. She turned her head to the right and to the left. The old woman wasn't sure. She looked in each direction for clues – clues to where she is and where she should go.

The early morning sun had not yet scorched the city's sidewalks and the afternoon winds were still hours away. Mrs. Titus arose early that morning, as she liked to do every morning, stretching with arms wide open, taking in the aromas and sounds that would come in through her open windows – clean and cool morning air, a neighbor's bountiful cooking, the hum of the early traffic, and the animated talk of the people outside.

The new day with its promise of renewed possibilities always gave Mrs. Titus a sense of wonderment, of freedom to move about, to explore the outside world, to swing her arms when she walked, to take sprightly steps, to delight in being alive.

But at this moment she was lost.

Mrs. Titus's chiffon pink blouse was wrinkled. Lying untucked from her black sweatpants, the pink shirttails covered her concave belly. She didn't notice the contrast of the light and heavy fabrics against her skin, between the thin smooth blouse and the coarse, scratchy pants. Her thin sockless ankles were visible between the elastic of her pant legs and her fastidiously laced and tied clean white tennis shoes.

They were new shoes and she was proud of them. "Look at someone's feet and you look at his character," she would lecture to those who would listen. "It's the little things that matter in a big way."

Her left hand clutched a vinyl black handbag, filled with coins, scraps of paper scrawled with names and phone numbers, her favorite rose-colored lipstick, two sticks of yellow-wrapped gum, and a two-year-old pack of Certs mints. But at this moment she paid no mind to herself or her clothes or her shoes or what her bag held.

“This looks familiar, but I can’t quite remember which way I was supposed to go. I remember this area, but where was I supposed to go from here...?” Her stiff body stood motionless where it had stopped, and only her eyes moved, darting from right to left, focusing on far and near.

She was invisible to the sidewalk crowd that bustled about her. The early morning hours were obliged to the lawyers, accountants, salespeople, and bankers that would make use of these hours. Scrolls of people – one after another after another – passed her, and they neither looked at Mrs. Titus nor ignored her.

“I could ask for directions, but I don’t want to bother anyone. If I just take a moment, I’ll remember...I just need a moment.” She struggled to listen to her own silent words.

Purposeful sounds of life surrounded her. Garbled all-at-once voices of passers-by. Clicks of heels against pavement. Honking of cars. Whirls of sirens. Rustling of crisp fabric worn by bodies in forward motion. The noises overwhelmed her. Her breaths and the rhythm of her heart raced to keep pace with her thoughts. Her face paled, the sidewalk spun beneath her, blackness was descending upon her, and she had to steady herself against the telephone booth.

“Oh dear, I’m letting myself get all upset. This is silly. There’s no need for this confusion. I just need a moment...” Her damp palm smoothed back a single stray wiry hair. *“I see a coffee shop just over there. I’ll go get a bite to eat. I’ll feel better and I’ll get on my way.”*

Mrs. Titus moved away from her post and with shuffling steps made her way to the diner. The clean white fastidiously tied tennis shoes never cleared the sidewalk as Mrs. Titus's tired legs were doing all they could just to scoot one worn foot ahead of the other. Her hand's crooked and bony fingers reached the door handle, and with feet braced against the floor, right in front of the left, she pulled. In slow motion the door opened and she was at once embraced with the mingle of warm air and the welcoming aromas of fresh coffee, maple syrup, frying bacon, and warm toast.

The red vinyl-upholstered couch at the diner's entrance, for so many years offering rest to visitors, today did the same for Mrs. Titus. She sat her body on the faded couch, taking care not to sit on the jagged tears in the sofa, carelessly mended with clear tape. No one else sat upon the red vinyl-upholstered couch during these early morning hours.

"I'm glad they offer these seats for tired people like me. It's comfortable – like my couch at home."

Across from the couch she noticed the cash register and beneath it the clear case holding assorted goodies – mints, chocolate bars, chewing gum. She studied them behind the smudged glass, and she noticed her favorite gum, the kind that comes in the yellow wrapping, was not among the assortment. A flaw in the otherwise well-stocked cabinet.

Her strength returning, she stood to approach the sign, *"Please wait to be seated."* She inhaled, allowing the familiar warmth and smells to enter her, diffuse through her, and calm her. Her breaths and the beating of her heart slowed. Mrs. Titus could not remember why or how she knew this place and these smells, but she did not worry about why she could not remember. She welcomed the internal peace it gave her.

The fresh-faced hostess presented herself. “Hello, Mrs. Titus. Is it just you today? Your daughter’s working, right?” Her voice was young and melodic, and her face was mobile with smiles.

“Yes, just me today,” Mrs. Titus replied, and she remembered Mr. Titus, his memory bringing forth a pause and then the recollection of the first day the diner opened, a festive day almost 60 years ago, heralding the growth of the little town. Back then, its location was on the edge of town. Now, it was considered the center of the city. The edifice once maintained a proud facade of freshly painted reds and blues, eye-catching and bright; the name “Alice’s Diner” was bold in its black cursive across the front door. Now, like the faded red vinyl couch, the diner’s exterior was a memory of itself.

Above the diner were two levels of apartments, one stacked on the other, two apartments on each floor, and all were inhabited by honest, hardworking people. Mrs. Titus thought she knew all the residents by name, and she wondered to herself what they were busying themselves with today.

She followed the buoyant hostess to a table for two. With a swift discreet hand the hostess removed the second table setting. “Enjoy your meal, Mrs. Titus,” she chirped.

“I’d like a cup of coffee, dear. Thank you,” the old woman instructed the young hostess. “And I noticed that you were all out of the gum that comes in the yellow-pack. There was none up front. It should be there.” Mrs. Titus’s voice had gained an authority, though she did not notice it nor would she have known where it came from.

Her blue-veined fingers opened the menu, and the abundance of words on the pages distracted her. She did not need to read it. Like an infant’s reflex that need not be practiced or rehearsed, she trusted she would know what to order.

The pert hostess returned with her coffee, asking, “Shall I tell your waitress you would like your usual today, Mrs. Titus?”

“Yes, dear, that would be lovely,” Mrs. Titus replied, confident they knew what to bring her.

A round-faced waitress came to Mrs. Titus, delivering her usual and greeting her with a warm hug. Mrs. Titus responded with a new smile.

The cinnamon roll was warm and fluffy in Mrs. Titus’s mouth, and its smooth and sweet icing clung to her lips and tongue. She was hungry. Her blood sugar levels had risen and then fallen following the fear and panic she had experienced in the crowd outside, and she now ate with appetite.

When she was finished, she knew she had to go home. *“I think I can ask these nice people for the directions home. I know they won’t mind.”*

“Dear, can you help me get home?” she asked the waitress. She trusted this waitress and her kind manner.

“Of course, Mom. We’ll go up to your apartment, maybe see what’s on TV” the waitress replied. She spoke to the hostess. “I’ll be back in a few minutes. I’m going to walk Alice upstairs to her apartment.”