

Lunch Break

By gr8ShadesofElvis [gr8shades@mail.com]

Rated: G

Submitted: September, 2010

Summary: Musings on a lunch break

I am sitting staring blankly at nothing in particular. A pigeon wanders into my field of vision. Flying rats, some people like to call them, but they've never bothered me. They're part of the fabric of the city, like traffic and crowds. Or graffiti. Some hate it, but I think it adds character, a splash of colour amid the gray.

The bird has a gnarled foot and is hobbling on its stump, all of its toes missing. Do birds actually have toes, technically speaking, I mean? I'm not sure, but it doesn't really matter to me.

It's probably the result of something having become wrapped around its foot, cutting off the blood supply. Hair, maybe.

My mother, bird enthusiast and animal lover that she is, always forbade me from throwing any loose strands of hair out of the car window because of that exact eventuality. My discarded locks would have meant certain death to some unsuspecting bird. The hair, she maintained, would become entangled around a foot, eventually causing it to drop off, and the poor thing would die of infection or starve to death because it could no longer fend for itself. Well, something to that effect anyway.

Whatever. That one didn't appear to be doing too badly for itself, although I will admit to pitying it its lack of whole appendages. But it's gone now.

And so is he. I'm on to him, and I suspect he knows it, but he still fed me some lame excuse before he dashed away. I wonder how long he'll be gone. Do I wait or cut my losses and head back to the office? I think I'll sit here a little longer.

I cast my eyes around for something interesting to look at. People-watching can be as informative as eavesdropping. There's a young black man sitting diagonally opposite me. He has dreadlocks under his cap and a diamond stud in his left ear. He crunches his burger wrapper, wipes his hands on his jeans and gets up to leave. Someone at a table further away is reading a book; the woman sitting next to him is intently pressing buttons on her cell, playing a game maybe, or sending a text. She has tiny feet.

A different pigeon waddles past, pecking at a stray French fry that's found its way onto the floor. I know it's another bird because the first one had white on its wings which looked unusual to me, but I'm hardly an ornithority. I wonder idly if that's a word. If it isn't, and let's face it it's probably not, then it really ought to be. Oh, plus this one's feet are still intact.

I glance to my left. The Delice de France patisserie must be a pretty dull place to work. In the time I've been sitting here scribbling this down, they've had all of three customers. The branch of Burger King next door has a constant flow of people buying their junk.

That, I confess, is where I bought my lunch as well; a kids' meal consisting of cheeseburger, fries and a child-sized bottle of water. I was eyeing the juice option, but it looked like one of those sickly sweet berry-flavoured ones, so I went with the safer option. At least one component of my meal wasn't unhealthy.

The requisite toy is a little monster truck, green with licks of orange flame running down each side and an angry-looking feline face on the hood. If I was a four-year-old boy I think I'd be impressed.

I wonder if they'll keep it and give it to someone else when I

get up and leave the table. The cynical side of me says no, it'll go unopened into the trash with the rest. What a waste that would be.

Not unlike the last half hour I've spent writing this. All right, it passes the time, and stops me from staring at the cute young guy now sitting opposite me. He can't be much more than twenty and suddenly I feel old so I look away.

The pigeon's back - not Whitey, but maybe the second one. It wanders casually under my chair, pecking as it goes. I think the wildlife does a better job of cleaning this place than the people who are paid to do it. Of course, one too many terrorist threats have necessitated the removal of all the garbage cans, which doesn't really help, but still.

I drum my fingers on the table impatiently. How much longer is he going to be? I could make some phone calls while I wait, but I'm not really in the mood to chat. I'd consider my sister since I don't need to make any effort to sound cheerful or interesting when I talk to her, but she's out of the country. I got a call last night while I was in the bath I need to reply to, but right now I just can't be bothered.

I feel the table vibrating, but by the time I've fished my phone out of the mess that is my purse it's gone to voicemail. It's someone from work I discover as I listen to the message, but it doesn't sound important. If I leave it long enough, maybe she'll phone back.

Ooh! The patisserie has another customer. No, wait, he's gone elsewhere. You guessed it, Burger King. Maybe I'll take pity on them before I go and buy a pain au chocolat or something ... And maybe not.

Right, that's it. Clearly he's not coming back. I've had enough, I'm out of here. My patience has worn out. Maybe I should be concerned, but then I've warned him on numerous occasions before and he just keeps on doing it. If he's going to buy food from Ralph's Pagoda, Jimmy's got to be prepared to face the consequences. I'm just glad I won't have to use the men's room when he's done in there.

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