**Jamie Brindle**

**The Distinguished Diner At The Hungry Narrative**

It was evening, and everything was going smoothly in *The Hungry Narrative*. Froop observed his domain with satisfaction. Waiters bustled from table to table, bringing freshly prepared loops of story bursting with characterisation and exquisite, tender plots. The clientele was the usual mixture of high-flying meta-narrative elite. Most were young couples, for was his restaurant not the finest, most renowned, most respected place to eat in the whole of Story? Of course it was, and Froop was rightfully proud. He had built this up from nothing, starting with little more than a few half-baked tales - poorly plotted and badly drawn - and a crazy dream. But it had worked. Word had spread, and now they came from every corner of the Universe: hungry stories, curious stories, stories with bright eyes and moist lips. For stories, of course, feed on stories, and they are constantly cannibalising themselves.

     Froop was about to walk back into the kitchens, when a figure entered. It was Graf - the hugest and greediest Story who had ever been told - an ancient, stooped, gelatinous figure. Graf had never visited *The Hungry Narrative*, though everyone knew who he was. A hush fell over the restaurant as the creature made his way slowly between the tables. He rolled towards Froop like a tidal wave. Froop could see tiny twists of half-digested Stories glimmering within the creature's massive body. He stared, aghast, unsure if he should be terrified or flattered. It took every ounce of professional pride he had not to simply turn and flee.

     Graf stopped and glanced around, looking bored.

     "I hear," he said slowly, "this is the best place to eat in the whole Chapter."

     The creature's voice was thick and greasy.

     "I like to think so," said Froop. He swallowed. "In fact, some even say we have the primacy in the entire known Anthology."

     Graf stared at him with huge, unmoved eyes.

     "I will decide for myself," he said.

     Graf sat down, and the tension went out of the room. The clientele relaxed, a gentle hubbub of talk drifting back amongst the tables.

     Froop sighed.

     "Would sir like to see the menu?" he offered, but Graf shook his enormous head.

     "No," he said. "It's your place. You choose. I want the very best. Three courses."

     "Of course," said Froop smoothly. "We will start with a tart little chiller, gently seasoned with pathos. For the main course, we have a freshly caught offbeat romance, laced with a sauce of sautéed horror and left to satirise gently. Then for dessert…"

     "Don't try and sell them to me," Graf cut him off. "Just bring them. The best, remember. Only the best."

     "Naturally…" stammered Froop.

     "And if I am not full afterwards," said Graf. "I will have to find something else to sate me…"

     Froop did his best not to run into the kitchen. He had some serious work to do.

**Starter**

     Bill sat in the odd little cafe, blowing into his hands, trying to force the cold of the streets from his body.

     The place was empty. Just the waiter and the strange man who had found him half-freezing in a doorway.

     "And you don't want *anything* in return?" queried Bill again. "I ain't got no money."

     The strange little man shook his head.

     "No, no!" he smiled wolfishly. "We are simply keen on helping those in need."

     It sounded suspicious to Bill, but he was almost too hungry to care. He had lived on the streets for years, but this winter was the cruellest yet. He hadn't eaten for days.

     The waiter brought a teeming plate, tender meat and exotic vegetables, steaming and delicious. Bill fell on it ravenously.

     The place began to fill up, but Bill hardly noticed. He stared intently at his food. Nothing else mattered The other customers were like ghosts to him, distant and insubstantial.

     "Do you do this often?" Bill asked between mouthfuls. "Feed people like me, I mean."

     "Oh no," said the strange little man. "Once was quite enough."

     Bill nodded, not really listening. No matter how much he ate, he never seemed to make a dent in his hunger. But then, it had been so long since his last real meal.

     "Do help yourself," said the strange man, but now he was talking to the other customers. "You will find it quite as delicious as real food, just as succulent. Only there are absolutely zero calories, of course. Well, you know that. That's why you all come here!"

     A fork swooped out of nowhere and scooped up a chunk of dripping meat.

     "Hey!" snarled Bill. He swiped at the patron who had stolen his food, but his hand didn't connect. While he was distracted, another fork dipped down and stole some asparagus.

     He was about to jump to his feet, when he realised his plate was just as full as ever. Not a bite had been eaten. He shook his head, baffled.

     But he was, he realised, too hungry to care.

     "Did he suffer at all?" came a voice. It sounded distant and hollow.

     "Oh no," said the strange little man. "Not at all. We used a very potent poison. Tasteless, of course. And very quick. Don't worry, *that*doesn't form part of the haunting! You are all quite safe."

     The words washed over Bill. They seemed strange, yet strangely familiar. He wondered how long he had been here. He found he could not say.

     Gradually, they died away. The place was empty again.

     Outside, a cold wind blew along the endless night.

     "And you don't want *anything* in return?" queried Bill again.

**Interstitial**

     Graf took the last bite, chewed, swallowed. He did not look impressed.

     Froop wrung his hands nervously. This was not going well.

     "Mildly diverting," said Graf. "Not very substantial."

     "We don't want to fill you too quickly," wheedled Froop. "Here at *The Hungry Narrative*, we pride ourselves on the beauty of the meal as a whole."

     Graf dabbed at his lips with a napkin.

     "The main course better be good, then," he said evenly.

     Froop glanced down at the creature's huge body. Through the layers of narrative fat and gristle, he thought he could see the remains of the little starter. It was billowing and unfolding in digestive juices, breaking down into its component particles of plot and language and structure.

     "Yes," he said automatically. "Yes, of course. I will bring it at once. You will love it. I'm sure you will love it."

     Graf replaced the napkin.

     "I hope so," he said. "For your sake."

**Main**

     She was beautiful, all flowing hair and golden grace, tall, elegant, and standing next to her boyfriend just ahead of us in the queue. I kept trying to pull my eyes away from her and back to my date, Sophie. But poor Sophie, with her curling lip and faint damp smell, could not compete with the vision ahead of us.

     Sophie and I had been approaching the doorway of the restaurant when the limo had pulled up, splashing dirty rainwater on our first date. While we had spluttered, the sparkling couple decamped and blithely slid in front of us. We were far too aware of their evident superiority to protest.

     The ma'tre d' greased his way in from the shadows and took the couple under his wing. While we waited to be seated, we observed the room about us with disappointment. Everything looked drab, grim and faded. Candles burnt listlessly on tables, small islands in the darkness, casting dirty light on unsmiling faces.

     At last the ma'tre d' returned, and led us through a grey maze of tables to our seats.

     "The last in the house," he told us briskly.

     Our table was near the back of the restaurant, too close to the floor, with a wobbly leg and a grubby air. But the table at the very back was something special, raised up high with sumptuous red seats for the diners and two tall candles burning as brilliantly as a pair of small stars. Can you guess who was sitting there?

     We made a pretence of studying our menus while really we studied the sparkling couple. They were what every first date aspires to: beauty, charm, ease, laughter. Everyone watched them with a mixture of jealousy and awe.

     They ordered foie gras to begin, and it arrived before we had even attracted a waiter. The whole energy and attention of the restaurant seemed locked on this sun-touched couple.

     When our first course came, the food was as bland and uninspired as our conversation.

     The ma'tre d' slid up to the wonderful table at the back, and asked the couple if they would not care for a special drink on the house before they left?

     By this time, Sophie and I had given up all pretence of paying one another the slightest interest, and had settled into a watchful silence.

     Their drinks arrived, hot and steaming, and were washed down with delight while the ma'tre d' grinned and rubbed his hands.

     Then a strange thing began to happen. Very slowly, the handsome man and the splendid woman took on a glassy look. Their eyes stared, their heads lolled, their animation fell away and was lost.

     Around us, the restaurant held its breath.

     With a slurping noise, the sumptuous chairs began to move. The rich velvet armrests unfurled themselves, so slowly one could hardly be sure if they moved at all. Up, up they crept, slipping over tanned, firm flesh and white perfect teeth, enveloping flawless skin and styled hair. At last, nothing was left of the couple: they had been covered by the thick fabric.

     At once, the restaurant came to life.

     The candles burnt brighter, plants and flowers on tables seemed to bloom with light and sustenance; even the waiters were moving with vim, attentive to our every want.

     The room filled with laughter. Our main course arrived: it was delicious. Sophie and I suddenly had a lot to say to one another. All hints of awkwardness were banished.

     When the time came to leave, it was quite certain that the night was not over. There was something in the air, a springtime thrumming that left lips moist and set hearts racing.

     We rose with smiles and left a generous tip. The chairs on the table next to us had furled up again, returned to their normal shapes. They were empty apart from two sets of fine clothing, some elegant jewellery, and a single golden tooth.

     We exchanged glances with the other diners as we left, but no one uttered a word.

**Interstitial**

     Graf gave Froop a level stare.

     "I must say, I was hoping for better," he said.

     "But, but…" protested Froop.

     "The flavours are weak, the characters are thin," said Graf. "And are you sure it was freshly-caught? Are you quite sure you haven't just whipped it out of the freezer and chucked it in the oven?"

     Froop went very still. Being shouted at and threatened was one thing. But to impute his professional reputation…

     "I can assure you that the story was fresh," he said coldly. "I caught it myself not an hour before you came in."

     It was true. Tough little stories were always daring one another to see how close they could get to *The Hungry Narrative* without getting snatched.

     "Didn't taste that way," said Graf. "Best get on with things. No point delaying the inevitable."

     "Absolutely sir," said Froop.

     His voice was perfectly courteous, though if Graf had looked up, he might have seen something worrying in the owner's eyes.

     Froop stalked back to the kitchens.

     He had had quite enough. It was time to take things into his own hands…

     "Out," he said in a flat voice. There was a pause, then all the kitchen staff left.

     Froop began pulling ingredients together.

     He would make the dessert memorable, if it was the last thing he did.

**Dessert**

     Graf was glancing around the restaurant with a hungry look in his eyes when Froop returned.

     "Here we are, sir," he said, laying a dish on the table. "For dessert, a sweet little tragedy with a twist of spite. I hope you enjoy."

     "Is this one fresh, too?" Graf demanded.

     "I made it with my own hands," said Froop.

     Graf turned to the dessert. It was small, but he had to admit it was beautiful. And it smelt good, too…

     He took a cautious spoonful, chewed, swallowed.

     Not bad…

     He scooped the rest into his enormous mouth. Within a few moments, it was all gone.

     "The dessert almost made the meal worthwhile," he said. "Almost."

     Then he stretched his mouth wide, wider than seemed possible, so wide it looked like it would swallow the entire world.

     Froop started to scream.

     Graf sucked.

     The restaurant and everything within, tables, diners, meals, even Froop himself all trembled as they fought against that enormous mouth. Then there was a horrible wet plopping noise, and the whole place - the story of *The Hungry Narrative* and everything inside - was swallowed up.

     A look of satisfaction swam across Graf's face, his eyes closed. He smiled.

     He opened his eyes, and the smile faltered.

     He was in an empty white land. There was no sign of the Page in which he had found the restaurant, or of the rest of the Chapter, or even of the Anthology itself. Just nothing, as far as far could go.

     "No," muttered Graf. "No, it's not possible…"

     A single tear rolled down his fat face.

     He was trapped.

**And To Finish…**

     Froop waited for the commotion to settle down, then wandered back to the best table in the restaurant.

     There was no one sitting there now, of course. The special dessert had done its work. He had used up a month's worth of lures. Customers would have to make do with frozen produce for a while, but it was worth it. What choice had he had?

     On the table, next to the pristine cutlery, was a tiny globe. It was white and shimmering. Froop lifted it and inhaled the scent. It was warm and smelt delicious. He peered inside. Deep, deep within the swirling whiteness, he fancied he could see a glimpse of something, something gelatinous and hungry and horribly, infinitely sad.

     He tucked the dessert away, making a mental note to offer this new delicacy only to the very richest of diners, and only when they were looking for a beautiful little tragedy to end their meal.

     Froop looked around, smiling at his other customers.

     "We apologise for the disturbance," he said. "All meals are on the house tonight."

     There was a cheer, and the hungry stories tucked back into their meals. Everyone understood what he had done, but no one thought the worse of him for it. It was in their natures.

     After all, stories are all cannibals. None would exist without the thousand other stories that came before.