

Van Gogh Cafe by Cynthia Rylant

Marc comes out of the kitchen. He is looking for his watch, which he believes he put inside the porcelain hen (her head lifts off), and as he looks around the cafe to smile and greet his customers, Marc suddenly sees the elegant man at the small back table. And unlike everyone else who has remembered his good manners, Marc stops what he is doing and stares.

The man smiles shyly and looks away.

Marc is staring because he knows who this is. He looks around the cafe to see if anyone else realizes who is among them. No one does. No one remembers this man's movies.

But Marc remembers them all. Marc has seen all of the old silent films, the ones with Charles Chaplin and Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks. He knows them by heart, and he knows the actors' faces like he knows his daughter's face, and Marc is *certain* who this elegant man in the cafe is.

He is a star.

Clara doesn't know, of course. She has watched old movies with her father, but, except for Chaplin, she doesn't know the actors. Only their movements.

And it is perhaps the way the elegant man has moved through the cafe that reminds her of something she has seen before. Reminds everyone. But none can quite place the memory.

The breakfast hours pass and people go their way, to work, to the mall at the edge of town, back home to put up a tree.

But the elegant man stays on. He has hardly touched his egg. His teacup is still half full. The door of the Van Gogh Cafe opens and closes, opens and closes, and he stays on, looking out the window.

Marc cannot help himself. When there is no one left in the cafe except the silent star, Marc walks over to his table. Clara, curious, shyly follows.

Marc offers his hand and the man gracefully takes it. They shake.

“I know your work,” Marc says softly. “I love it. I love all your films.”

Clara’s eyes are wide. She has not known until now that a star is in her cafe.

The old man blushes and smiles.

“Thank you,” he says.

There is an awkward moment, then, graciously, he offers Marc and Clara the two empty chairs at his table.

Happily, they sit.

Marc and the silent star talk about the old films as Clara listens. There is an innocence in her father’s face she has not seen before. He is like a boy. The silent star seems pleased, quietly thrilled, to talk of his work with someone who understands so well. He laughs and sighs and even trembles slightly, reliving it all.

There is a moment or two when each is quiet, catching his breath.

“Why, sir, are you at the Van Gogh Cafe?” Marc gently asks. Clara waits.

The old man seems glad someone has asked. He reaches into his coat and pulls forth an old photograph. He hands it first to Clara, then to Marc.

It is of a beautiful young man in a waistcoat and top hat, standing before an old theater. Marc looks carefully at the building in the picture.

“Is this...?”

“Yes,” replies the silent star.

The building is the Van Gogh Cafe. In 1923. When it was a theater.

“He and I did some shows here together, the summer we met.” The silent star smiles and puts the photograph back inside his coat.

“Today I am waiting for him,” he says.

Clara’s heart is pounding. She feels that she herself is in a movie. Every gesture the man makes, each word he speaks is so beautiful to her. She knows the cafe remembers this man. She can feel it drawing in to him, reaching for this man who has been a part of its first magic, on the stage of the old theater.

Oddly, not one person has walked into the cafe to break this spell.

Marc offers the star a fresh cup of tea and a piece of apple pie, which is gratefully accepted. Then Marc and Clara leave the old man to his waiting.