

Mystery Meat 7: Robin Redbreast



The chairs at Robbins restaurant express sympathy for a middle-aged ass. Sink into the plastic coated vinyl polymer and listen to the Naugahyde sigh.

I sit at a plush booth built for twelve modest sized quilters picking at Cobb salads or three rapacious diners ready to revel in salt-heavy chicken wings, stuffed haddock, and nachos grande. My crock of French onion soup is gratifying. Bread bits saturated in broth bob under a thick canopy of cheese.

The burgundy and brass banquet room aspires to be elegant with cloth napkins and soft music. A flour-dusted dish of sautéed tenderloin medallions brightened by a sauce of cream and Grey Poupon struggles to impress. Still, there is a comforting lack of pretension in the place.

I sing under my breath, “If you don’t take her out tonight, you’re gonna find her gone.” It makes a few laps through the sound system before I recognize the Beatles song “You’re Gonna Lose That Girl.” The remixed Muzak version strips away jaunty pacing and memorable vocals, slowing it to the tempo of something one might hear in the lobby of a funeral parlor. The fancy pork dijonnaise in front of me is nothing more exotic than a pig in mustard.

A print that looks like Edward Hopper’s iconic “Nighthawks” hangs over a mini shuffleboard table. Upon closer inspection, it’s the hackneyed Gottfried Helnwein’s homage “Boulevard of Broken Dreams” where the diner patrons in the original piece are replaced by James Dean, Marilyn Monroe, and Humphrey Bogart. In the same way classic American art is supplanted by a corny dorm room poster, the general fare at Robbins is classic American cuisine a tad over-spiced for the fading palates of an older clientele. It may not be the real thing, but I find comfort in the familiar interpretation.

Earlier, defibrillators and oxygen tanks had been dispatched to settle a passel of pensioners who witnessed the blood-drenched and blanketed body of the Fox Valley Butcher's latest victim hustled out of the restaurant on a stretcher.

The seniors had flown in for the Early Bird Special: \$10.95 for a soup or salad, choice of potato, and main course of ribeye Oscar, stuffed shrimp, or orange glazed chicken. They didn't expect to see a prep cook opened up at the sternum with a cleaver stagger into the main dining room to pirouette twice before collapsing. The blood was as red as the breast of a scarlet tanager.

I heard the basics on my scanner and headed over. Medics had calmed some of the chaos, but there remained a jittery air of anxiety as police secured the crime scene. When I arrived, I ordered a Tom Collins at the bar. I like the Robbins lounge. An etched glass scene of geese flying low through cattails soothes the senses before potent boozy inspiration transports a drinker far from the day. It is the sort of place divorcees can share lapsed love stories over brandy snifters.

I asked the bartender, "Notice anyone suspicious?"

The sweet open-faced girl narrowed her eyes and cocked her head the way a curious dog contemplates the universe, "Nope, mostly regulars."

A mummy at the end of the long bar must have had his hearing aid turned all the way up. This ancient artifact was preserved in an Oshkosh Truck windbreaker, perma-press slacks, and a Gilligan hat festooned with fishing lures. He spoke into a glass of Old Grandad, "I seen one feller come in what didn't look right."

I slid into the seat beside him and pointed to his platter of fried white cheddar cheese nuggets, "You must have a sturdy heart."

"Hell, this isn't anything. For lunch I ordered a couple of pork chops to stuff a roast duckling braced by two full racks of baby back ribs. I appreciate a place where I can stack meat on meat and wash it down with whiskey. Keeps me regular."

I ordered a second round for the relic and figured I should play it straight with him, "I'm a private investigator working for a local investor named Raymond Brawn. We're looking for a man who's been carving up restaurant workers throughout the Fox Valley. The cook here is just the latest victim. I'd appreciate any information you have."

He held up the Old Grandad to the light, "You ever been fishin' in brown water?" The dark whiskey was a swamp in a glass. "They really bite in a dirty lake. I got fishin' holes in the Fox River black as a bog, but I know them so well I can see through all that darkness and spot a shy sturgeon quicker 'n pickin' out my own son in a lineup."

"Listen pal, I'm sure there's some parable you're working out here, but I'm on the clock so I'm asking once, did you see anyone suspicious?"

“I’ve been drinkin’ here for years. This is my fishin’ hole. The place was mostly regulars all night ‘til a strange lumberjack fellow I never seen before came in. Had an ax and everything. Sat at that table near the kitchen havin’ himself pan fried walleye.”

I had been following the lumberjack for weeks. I watched him split logs and sit around his cabin. The minute I took my eyes off him, a dead body shows up at Robbins a few minutes after the lead suspect finished his fish. I thanked the old man and ordered a plate.

Now, I review my notes and eat. I finish my French onion soup, some of the best in town, and look back at the entombed fellow at the bar. He contemplates his third entrée.

Unruffled by events, he approaches his plate of baby beef liver as if it is a lover. He gazes longingly at the slices of pan seared calf meats quivering delicately in a pornographic spread of fried onions and bacon. He dives in and finishes in minutes. It’s the sort of timing that disappoints a wife but compliments a chef.