

The Great Farini

By Robert Rinne

Linus sipped at his second double martini and stared into the parking lot of the stir fry restaurant at nothing in particular. The night had started and the streetlights had come on . People filed in for dinner, either in pairs or in groups, lining up at the stir fry buffet and going back to their tables to slurp down their food. He had thought about it when he came in, ordering some food, but he knew he would just pick away at it and leave it on the bar to get cold. He went past the hostess with a slight wave and headed for the bar. He wasn't ashamed to admit he needed a drink.

He had sat in his car with the engine running, looking at the neon coloured chalk writing on the black sandwich board propper up next to the front double doors.

'Martini Mondays - all martinis half price from 5PM to close'.

Linus had never drank a martini in his life but he'd watched enough reruns of M*A*S*H* to know that whenever Hawkeye and B.J. had a hard day, that was what they ran to so he figured he wouldn't be doing so bad if he did the

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same. As he sipped at his second one he had made up his mind ; they sho taste fine.

He pushed himself to a standing position, hooking his heels on the rung of his bar stool, and reached into his front pocket to see how much money he had left. He counted out twenty four dollars and some sixty eight cents. He put a ten on the bar, not remembering how much he paid for the first one and deciding that if the bartender wanted more, she would say so. The change left over would be a combination of her tip and money towards the next drink. After ten minutes went by he had almost finished his second double martini - and man, o, man, he thought as he took stock of his soothed nerves, there was a damned good reason those television doctors washed down that dramatic stress with strong, dry martinis - and the bartender had not taken his money.

"Scuse me," he said. "Can I get another one of these and I'll pay for them both at the same time?"

Linda the bartender came over with a smile on her face. He'd been served by her before but, after a couple of drinks and thoughts of his girlfriend safely tucked away in the back of his mind, he wished he'd get served by her.

With that on his mind, he forgot what he was going to ask her when she approached.

"Yes?" She said with a smile. He guessed she was significantly younger

than him and knew it. She wore a white work shirt that was either purchased one size too small or she tailored them to be tight across the back so they were taut across her breasts.

Damn, he thought, I fucking love martinis.

"Uh," he said. "The martinis. What do I owe you for the martinis?"

She shook her head. He noticed she wore heavy eyeshadow and he thought he liked it. "Nope. No charge. Someone's already taken care of your tab for the entire night."

"Bullshit," he said and she shook her head.

"Are you my mysterious tab payer?" he asked and she shook her head again.

"That guy over there."

"A guy is paying my tab?"

"Did you want to pay for your own drinks? Half priced martinis are still eight bucks each."

"Where's that guy again?" He said, looking across the bar.

"Ho, lee, she, it."

"Problem?" she asked.

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He ignored her question, picked up his third double martini, and walked around the bar to shake hands with the man that bought him his drinks for the night.

"Thank you, sir," Linus said.

"You are more than welcome," the man said. "I wanted to thank you for what you did tonight, my boy. Please. Sit down."

"Thank you, sir," the man said.

They sat next to one another at the bar, sipping at their drinks. The man couldn't tell, but it looked like his benefactor was sipping at a whiskey sour. The liquid was all cloudy and it looked like there were three maraschino cherries at the bottom of it. The bartender walked past them twice. The second time, each caught the other staring at her heart shaped ass and they giggled like a couple of pre-pubescent teenagers instead of the working men that they were.

"It's amazing how you did that," the benefactor said. "It really is."

"It's amazing how they do that," Linus said, pointing to the guys in the chefs hats and the greasy aprons, wielding their spatulas and squirt bottles like weapons. "Ever watch them?"

"I make sure they wash their hands," the man said.

Linus sipped at his drink and winced a little. "No, no. Watch them. They

have to remember every order that is called out to them and the order it was given in. He has to remember everything that the customer wants and he has to do it with a smile. He does it, knowing that someone at the end of the night will count the number of orders he did and compare it to how long he was working and determine how many meals he turned over every minute."

"So? He's a fry cook. So what?"

"Nope, not so what," Linus said. He put down the drink and pushed it to the inner edge of the bar. He didn't think he would finish it after all. "It's a hard job. What if that is his only job? What if that is his third job? What if this isn't even what he wants to do for a living? But he comes here every night and cooks people their food. Some people he probably sees more often than he sees his own grandmother."

"Hey, Linda," Linus said. He sunk his head a little beneath his shoulders, hearing the sound of his own voice and embarrassed at how loud it must have sounded to Linda's ears. She came over anyway, smiling, with a bar towel over her shoulder. The set of her eyes had softened to an attractive almond shape.

"Could I get a glass of ice water? With a lemon?" He asked.

She smiled and let her bar towel fall gently on the bar while she got his water. The man kept on watching the kid at the stir fry station.

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"He's sweating like a pig," the man said.

"Yup. I bet he's been there for three hours and not even a smoke break."

"Smoking is bad for you," the man said.

"Quit two years ago," Linus offered.

"Good for you. I'll be going out in a while. Join me?"

Linus shook his head. Linda brought over a tall, blue plastic glass, choked halfway with ice chips and a single wedge of lemon trapped beneath, the red and white straw stabbed through to the bottom. He took it and smiled and sipped from the straw, enjoying the coldness.

"You ever hear of a guy called Willie Hunt?"

"Wha?"

"Willie Hunt. He tightroped across Niagara Falls in the 1800s. Couldn't tell you how many times he crossed it. Fucking guy would do somersaults on the tightrope, right over top of Niagara Falls."

"No shit."

Linus nodded. "I went to the Guinness Museum after I read about him in a book. I wanted to see pictures up close, you know. I wanted to walk over to the falls and see if I could find the rocks where he set up his line. Guy worked with P.T. Barnum. Did you know that?"

"Never heard of him."

Linus continued. "He didn't call himself Willie Hunt, though. I mean, who would take a guy like Willie Hunt seriously? William Hunt? Hello, yes, my name is William Hunt and I was wondering if you would let me do a fucking somersault over Niagara Falls."

"I don't think that's how he did it," the man said.

"Really? How would he have done it? I bet it was a bit like walking a tightrope, though. One false move and it would have all been over. It never said, not in the book anyway, how it was he went about it. If he had help setting up his cables or anything."

"Why are we talking about Willie Hunt?" the man asked.

"Oh, no," Linus corrected. "Not Willie Hunt. The Great Farini. That gave him some credibility. Sounds like he is some kind of a duke of tightrope walking. And it sounds like he was from Europe. From Italy, to boot. And they all knew how seriously the Italians took their tightrope walking."

Linus pronounced it Eye-talian and snorted out a giggled. He sipped at his water some more and started to squirm a bit in his seat.

"Couldn't tell you how many times he did it. He kept it up for a while, though. Somersaults and flips and all kinds of impossible things."

"You said that already."

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"Did I tell you that the Prince of Wales came to see him once?"

"No, you didn't."

"He did. He came to see ole Willie Hunt come to walk across Niagara Falls. But I don't believe it." Linus shook his head.

"Why do you say that?"

"No one comes to watch someone walk a tightrope. They come to watch someone fall off a tightrope. And the Great Farini never fell. No matter what he did. And the more he did to make people think that he would fall off, the more people came. Right up to the fucking King of England."

"You said the Prince of Wales."

"Same thing," Linus said. His water was almost done and he looked at his martini. He exchanged one for the other, but only sipped at the martini.

"And that is why I think he stopped."

"He stopped?"

"He stopped."

"Why do you think he stopped?"

"Because people stopped coming to see him. It became about as fun as watching a healthy young man cross the street. Not an old man, mind you, because sometimes old men don't always make it across the street. It got

boring. And maybe, it got boring for him, too."

"How could it get boring?"

"You know what he did once?" Linus said, pointing to the man with one finger from the hand that held the inverted cone bowl of the martini glass.

"You know why I think he got bored and went on to cross the Sahara desert on his own two feet?"

"He walked across the Sahara?"

Linus closed his eyes and shook his head to clear it. "Yes, yes. Just another kind of tightrope for him. When you cross the Sahara it's like crossing the Niagara. You're still working without a net. You know why I think he got bored?"

"You were getting to that."

"One day, he carried a big, metal washing tub out with him on his back, right to the middle of his line. And then he sits down, lowers the metal tub into the water below, brings the tub back up, and washes twelve handkerchiefs. He does his fucking washing on the high wire. Can you believe it? That's why I think he quit. The whole thing became a chore for him. Nothing special. Nothing more different than you or me washing our dirty underwear, the fact he is hovering, a few ounces one way or the other from death, doesn't matter a good goddamn."

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Linus waved it all away and downed the last bit of his third double martini and put it back down on the bar. He smacked his lips and rubbed his eyes.

"But..." the man began.

"But me no buts, my good sir," Linus said, patting the man on the back. "I must off. My jacket and keys are over there, so I will shake your hand and bid you adieu." He did a little mock bow in front of the man, stood up and extended his hand.

"You're driving home?" the man asked.

Linus looked at him. "I'd better drive home. Too fucked up to walk."

The man just stared and Linus laughed.

"Linda knows to order me a cab once I order my glass of water. I'm off to take a pee and go home and kiss my kids goodnight and roll into bed next to my wife. You know what, though."

"What?" The man said. He still hadn't finished his one whiskey sour, the maraschino cherries had turned into blurry photographs at the bottom of his glass.

"Couldn't tell you if The Great Farini had any kids. Hmmp. I'll have to check that."

He walked around the bar, keeping his eyes to the ground, and smiled. He

put one hand to his mouth and softly pinched his lips between his fingers and thumb, then rubbed his chin, like he thought he might shave before he went to bed for all of the stubble that was there. His leather sportcoat hung over the back of his chair and he grabbed at it but Linda was there before he could put it on and she helped him. From behind, she kissed him on the cheek and whispered something in his ear. His grin grew a little and he adjusted the lapels of his sportcoat.

The cab had pulled in front of the glass double doors and the cabbie had got out the open the door to the restaurant. He held it and Linus walked through, patting the cabbie on the shoulder as he passed. The passenger side rear door of the cab was open and Linus got inside. The cabbie closed the door behind him twice, making sure it was closed, and then walked around the front of the car to get into the driver seat and take Linus home.

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