**CAROL’S PLACE**

--There is no such thing as a free lunch.

 Anonymous

The Five Points Waffle House in Athens, Georgia, has long been something of a local institution. Many important people have eaten there. It is a “meetin’ and eatin’” place. I once saw Vince Dooley, the famous former football coach and Athletic Director at the University of Georgia, eating at the high counter one morning. Athens’ iconoclastic columnist Ed Tant has long been a regular. Loran Smith, another well-known local columnist and sports enthusiast, wrote of a night waitress, Polly, a former school teacher, who was a special person for him. Another regular, Alpha McCreery, wrote a series of love poems about several waitresses at the Five Points Waffle House, with the stringent stipulation that they would be published by a vanity press only after his death. Thanks to his son Morris, they were, and I have a copy.

Carol was my favorite waitress on the first shift (7:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m.) at the Five Points Waffle House. As soon as she saw me, she would set up a glass of unsweet ice tea on a table in whichever section she was assigned for the day. She seemed slightly frustrated that I did not have a “usual” breakfast so that she could call it in to the cook before I could even sit down. I had different favorites.

Carol was probably in her late 30s or early 40s. It was hard to tell. She was apparently someone for whom life had been hard, what some Southerners call—referring to a horse but also to a person—someone who “has been rode hard and put up wet.” She had a sincere and warm personality, though it was evident that she was not very well educated. She could coo over the well-behaved patrons and she could give it back to the loud-mouths and impolite college kids. She called me “Hun” or “Sweetie,” and never knew my name. No, I didn’t write her any love poems.

After getting to know her better, I learned that the cook was her younger brother, Roger Westmoreland. The regulars called him General Westmoreland, to Roger’s great delight, after the U.S. general in charge of the Vietnam War. The older lady waitress, Vera, was Carol and Roger’s mother. The youngest waitress, Frankie, who started out working as a greeter on weekends, was Carol’s daughter. While the turnover rate among waitresses and cooks at the Waffle Houses was astoundingly high, the Carol family, as I thought of them, were long-term workers and diligently devoted to their jobs. It turns out that they all lived in a double-wide trailer—I mean mobile home—in Madison County, a largely rural suburban area north of Athens-Clarke County. I called them the Carol family because it was evident that she was the vigorous and dynamic force that cemented them together. They *were* the Five Points Waffle House for me and many others.

When I walked into the Five Points Waffle House one morning and asked where Carol was, La Quashia (Tweety) Flanagan, a wonderful and personable waitress, told me Carol had given her two-weeks’ notice and was opening her own restaurant. Tweety said that her entire family was going with her.

Since they were at the same time the pillar and anchor of this successful Five Points enterprise, Carol came up with the enterprising idea that the family should open their own restaurant. They did, renting a vacant space on Athens’ east side that had been a former Kentucky Fried Chicken carry-out establishment. Naturally, they named it “Carol’s Place.”

My wife and I, being loyal and supportive customers, shifted our morning nourishment place accordingly.

As Carol’s Place was a former carry out, the available seating was severely limited. My thought upon first entering was “How can they make a go of it here?”

After about six months, they didn’t.

Not to be conquered by lack of revenue and overwhelming costs, however, Carol and company rented another space in the small, remote satellite community of Winterville at the northeastern edge of Clarke County. They had shifted from the high-density student stronghold of Five Points to the low-density east side, one-eighth of a mile from Shoney’s, now to a truly isolated location. They were running away from their market. My wife and I, however, followed them to the new “Carol’s Place.”

Carol’s Place II had capacious seating space, an ample kitchen, abundant parking, and an industrious labor force.

What more could you ask?

Well, unfortunately, neither Carol nor any of her crew had the MBA degree.

I ate there nearly every morning now, as it was just down Robert Hardeman Road that links up Morton Road where I lived, practically on my way to work. I generally sat at the counter if my wife was not with me. I observed many interesting things roosting from my vantage point. For example, one morning the bread delivery man brought in a load of bread, 80 percent white and 20 percent wheat. (I always ordered wheat.) He handed Carol the invoice, and she paid him with cash from the cash register. As he left, I saw Carol crumple up the invoice and toss it idly away. I was astonished at the lack of bookkeeping. And there was Frankie, Carol’s daughter, who would occasionally simply remove bills from the cash register. Once when she spied me staring at her during what I considered her bold behavior, she glanced dismissively at me and nonchalantly said, “I need some new shoes. It is all right.” I said nothing. Carol came by just then and repeated, “It’s all right. She works here and doesn’t get paid.” Carol also said, “Roger has another job part-time. All he takes is $20 a day to play lotto, but he has never won nothing.” Still I said nothing.

I did react once, though, when I saw a strange man walk up and grab all the bills from the $20 tray. As he was heading out the door, I blurted out “Carol!” But she quickly walked up to me and softly whispered, “That was my ex. He needs some new tires. He works in Atlanta, ain’t it a long drive?”

I was alarmed by all of this casual, imprudent family financial conduct and the magnanimous sharing of the commons. How long can Carol’s Place II survive under such malfunctioning circumstances? My generous tipping didn’t help, though it made Carol my appreciative dear friend, her “hun” and “sweetie.”

Yes, it was not long—actually almost a year—when Carol closed the eatery down. And they had all worked so long and hard. The whole family was moving to Florida, where they would live in Carol and Roger’s sister’s house, Vera’s other daughter—a nonwaitress—and Frankie’s favorite and only aunt. Before they left, I gave Carol my name and address and asked her to write. Carol reported about a month later that Vera had become a seamstress, Roger, the daily gambler, became a security guard, Frankie went back to high school, and Carol was in the hospital diagnosed with depression. It was a sad, sad ending for such a hard-working family.

However, one morning, the day before Christmas 1994, I was reading the *Athens Banner Herald*, as is my wont, now back at the iconic Five Points Waffle House, being waited on by Kat, my Carol replacement, when I saw the front-page headline. I read the story and screeched out to my wife:

“Emily, it says a Roger Westmorland, a former Athens cook, has just won the Florida megamillion jackpot: $51 million!”

Yes, and the day before Christmas! And you thought this was not going to be a Christmas story.

And they say there is no such thing as a free lunch! Oh, yeah?

Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays to Carol and all her family.