**Boulangerie**

*by Killick*

*1100 words*

I see these two chuckle-birds come into my shop often enough.

The big one, he’s always here same time every Saturday and Wednesday morning, 6am, pretty much on the dot, just as I’m pulling the second round of fruit buns out of the oven. I could set my watch to him, I swear. He’ll always get a loaf of bread, but likes to change it up. One week he’ll pick up a dark rye sourdough, the next he’ll get a crusty Vienna, another week it’s a herbed potato bread.

Along with his loaf he’ll pick himself out a little cake. Now, I don’t mind it when a customer takes their time choosing what they want. I put a lot of work and experience and probably a little too much time than I can afford into my cakes. But I make up for it with the price. I have to. Got rent to pay, and it ain’t getting paid if I’m charging any less than seven dollars fifty for a slice of strawberry cheesecake roulade. You want something cheap? Buy a donut. Best damn donuts this side of the river.

Where was I? Oh yeah. Big guy, he takes his god-damn sweet-ass time in picking out a cake. But honestly, he’s the only one who I’d be perfectly happy to let stand there all day. He’s not indecisive. He doesn’t ‘um’ or ‘ah’ like some slugheads that come in. He’s thorough. It’s like a science with him, like he’s at a museum weighing up the merit of each exhibit before he makes a final decision. I’m good at my job and I like what I do, but at the end of the day it’s just bread and cake, right? The big guy somehow gives them depth and weight, makes it feel like just for a moment my shop is the centre of the universe.

And when he chooses something, whether it’s the chocolate tartlet or the vegan pistachio slice, he is just the nicest guy. Super excited to try whatever I’ve got layed out that day. And it’s genuine, you know? I can tell.

The little guy, he’s a bit more all over the place. Wouldn’t know what a schedule was if it slapped him upside the face. I see him a few times a week, but I’ll never know when. Some days he’ll be here at lunch, other days he’ll pop up just as I’m closing. Once or twice he’s arrived before I’ve even properly opened, waiting outside the roller doors at 5am. It’s like, for him, time is a concept that happens to other people. I figure if he shows up two days in a row at the same time, then we all need to put on our helmets and get ready for the apocalypse.

Anyway, little guy, he’s never here to buy groceries, he’s here to eat. It’s always a sandwich or a pie, or even a quiche if he’s feeling fancy. Honestly, people that just want a snack or a quick bite have about a billion other choices that don’t charge my prices. Like I said, I’m a classy joint. He could be down at the local snack bar ordering a deep fried sausage on a stick, but no, he’s in my place picking up a turkey on focaccia with housemade onion jam. To me that says he doesn’t just want food, he wants good food, he’s looking for an experience and doesn’t mind paying just a few extra bucks for it. Doesn’t hurt that he’s spending those extra bucks at my place.

So anyway, big guy and little guy. Two of my most interesting customers. Always bring a smile to my face when they’re in the shop.

But that’s not the good part.

The good part is when they happen to stroll into my little place at the same time.

Take last Saturday.

It’s 6am. I know this because big guy has rolled in, and he’s already eyeing the cake cabinet while he asks for a farmhouse loaf. A minute later, I see little guy approaching.

Little guy sees big guy examining the pastries, and there is the tiniest hesitation in his confident stride. I only notice ‘cause I’ve noticed it before. Little guy kinda shuffles up to the counter next to big guy, like he’s not sure if he’s allowed to be there, which is unusual ‘cause little guy normally walks around like the whole world works for him.

Big guy’s got a good sense of when someone else is waiting. “You can order, I’m still making up my mind,” he says with a smile. Then he turns and sees little guy. A visible tingle runs up big guy’s neck and ears, like a guitar string being plucked.

Now they’re both aware of each other, the air shifts or something. Like my shop has dropped away leaving just them and those faint, shy little smiles that they both try to hide from each other.

Their eyes are twinkling and they fumble some words at each other, like it’s the politeness grand championship. I see little guy reach out a hand, but quickly draws it back, this sudden worried look on his face. I imagine he thinks he’s crossed a line, which is dumb, they’re ordering bread.

“I don’t mind waiting,” says little guy. I know from experience this is untrue.

“Please, I insist,” responds big guy.

Little guy lets out a laugh, then a cough, then looks to me. “Can I get a quiche?”

I nod.

Now big guy speaks up. “Oh, that sounds good. I’ll get a quiche as well, please.”

I stop. I’m thinking, woah, big guy wants a savoury instead of a sweet? This is big news. Man-on-the-moon cure-for-cancer kind of news. Now I’m hesitating, caught up in whatever is going on here, now I’m part of it. But I feel like I’m intruding. And I’m distracted now, so I feel pretty embarrassed when I put both quiches on the counter and stupidly ask “Together or separate?”

They both stiffen. So do I when I realise what I’ve said. Then at the exact same time, both the little guy and the big guy say “Together.” They look at each other, faces going redder than a strawberry, standing stunned.

Then little guy says, “Separate. Paying separately please.”

“Yes, sorry, separately,” big guy confirms.

They both pay, and start to move out of my shop. But then they pause at the exit. I raise an eyebrow. This is new.

“Hey, um,” stutters little guy. “I hope you enjoy your quiche.”

A smile the size of the damn sun spreads over big guy’s face. “I will.”

Then they’re off, big guy heading one way, little guy heading the other.

I hope that one day they come in and pay together.

Your voice in this? \*chef kiss\* Perfect. It's spot on 90% of the time. The characters (especially the narrator) are all solid without needing a whole lot of description or elaboration needed. I was initially caught off-guard by 'chuckle-birds' thinking they might actually be birds until you started talking about turkey sandwiches. I was a bit overly-primed, though, so that's on me.

There were a few places where the narrator's voice drops. In a longer work, that's alright, because you experience a voice by building up a listening habit over time. However, in so few words, you really have to pare that down to laser focus, or at least use breaks in the voice intentionally. This story is at the perfect length, so finding those places to tighten up is going to be key. One instance is 'They both stiffen', where 'stiffen' doesn't really seem like the type of word the narrator would use. Maybe freeze up? Something like that. The last line, however, is what really caught me off guard. It's very plain contrasted with the rest of the more colorful speech. Could be as simple as prefixing it with something: 'Me? I hope that one day...' Just a way to keep that focus there.

All in all, fantastic work. Just amazing use of space - didn't need to be shorter, didn't need to be longer, spot on - and voice. Thanks so much for sharing!