

T. C. Boyle

A WOMEN'S RESTAURANT

... the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them, till they are left living on with half a heart and half a lung.

—Melville, *Moby Dick*

I

It is a women's restaurant. Men are not permitted. Women go there to be in the company of other women, to sit in the tasteful rooms beneath the ancient revolving fans and the cool green of spilling plants, to cross or uncross their legs as they like, to chat, sip liqueurs, eat. At the door, the first time they enter, they are asked to donate twenty-five cents and they are issued a lifetime membership card. Thus the women's restaurant has the legal appearance of a private club, and its proprietors, Grace and Rubie, avoid running afoul of the antidiscrimination laws. A women's restaurant. What goes on there, precisely, no man knows. I am a man. I am burning to find out.

This I do know: they drink wine. I have been out back, at night, walking my dog, and I have seen the discarded bottles: chablis, liebfraumilch, claret, mountain burgundy, Bristol Cream. They eat well too. The garbage is rich with dark exotic coffee grounds and spiced teas, the heads of sole, leaves of artichoke, shells of oyster. There is correspondence in the trash as well. Business things for the most part, but once there was a letter from Grace's mother in Moscow, Iowa. Some of the women smoke cigars. Others—perhaps the same ones—drive motorcycles. I watched two of them stutter up on a Triumph 750. In leathers. They walked like meatpackers, heavy, shoulders back, hips tight. Up the steps of the front porch, through the curtained double doors, and in. The doors closed like eyes in mascara.

There is more. Grace, for instance. I know Grace. She is tall, six three or four I would guess, thin and slightly stooped, her shoulders rounded like a question mark. Midthirties. Not married. She walks her square-headed cat on a leash, an

advocate of women's rights. Rubie I have spoken with. If Grace is austere, a cactus tall and thorny, Rubie is lush, a spreading peony. She is a dancer. Five feet tall, ninety pounds, twenty-four years old. Facts. She told me one afternoon, months ago, in a bar. I was sitting at a table, alone, reading, a glass of beer sizzling in the sunlight through the window. Her arms and shoulders were bare, the thin straps of her dancer's tights, blue jeans. She was twirling, on point, between groups of people, her laughter like a honky-tonk piano. She came up from behind, ran her finger along the length of my nose, called it elegant. Her own nose was a pug nose. We talked. She struck poses, spoke of her body and the rigors of dancing, showed me the hard muscle of her arms. The sun slanted through the high windows and lit her hair. She did not ask about my life, about the book I was reading, about how I make a living. She did not sit down. When she swept away in a series of glissades, her arms poised, I ordered another beer. She wouldn't know me on the street.

The women's restaurant fronts a street that must have been a main thoroughfare fifty years ago. It comprises the whole of an old mansion, newly painted and shuttered. There is a fence, a gate, a tree, a patch of lawn. Gargoyles. The mayor may once have lived there. On either side blocks of two-story brick buildings stretch to the street corners like ridges of glacial detritus. Apartments above, storefronts below: a used clothing store, an organic merchant, a candle shop. Across the street, incongruous, is a bar that features a picture window and topless dancers. From behind this window, washed in shadow, I reconnoiter the women's restaurant.

I have watched women of every stripe pass through those curtained front doors: washerwomen, schoolmarm, gymnasts, waitresses, Avon ladies, Scout leaders, meter maids, grandmothers, great-grandmothers, spinsters, widows, dykes, gay divorcées, the fat, the lean, the wrinkled, the bald, the sagging, the firm, women in uniform, women in scarves and bib overalls, women in stockings, skirts, and furs, the towering Grace, the flowing Rubie, a nun, a girl with a plastic leg—and yes, even the topless dancers. There is something disturbing about this gathering of women, this classless convocation, this gynecomorphous melting pot. I think of Lysistrata, Gertrude Stein, Carry Nation.

My eyes and ears are open. Still, what I have come to know of Grace & Rubie's is what any interested observer might know. I hunger for an initiate's knowledge.

II

I have made my first attempt to crack the women's restaurant.
The attempt was repulsed.

I was sitting at the picture window of the topless bar, chain-drinking tequila and tonic, watching the front porch of Grace & Rubie's, the bloom of potted flowers, the promise of the curtained doors, and women, schools of them, electric with color, slamming car doors, dismounting from bicycles, motorcycles, trotting up the steps, in and out, tropical fish behind a spotted pane of glass. The sun was drifting toward the horizon, dipping behind the twin chimneys, spooning honey over the roof, the soft light blurring edges and corners, smoothing back the sneers of the gargoyles. It was then that I spotted Rubie. Her walk fluid and unperturbed as a drifting skater. There was another girl with her, an oriental girl. Black hair like a coat. I watched the door gape and then swallow them. Then I stood, put some money in my pocket, left some on the table, and stepped out into the street.

It was warm. The tree was budding. The sun had dropped a notch and the house flooded the street with shadow. I swam toward it, blood beating quick, stopped at the gate to look both ways, pushed through and mounted the steps. Then made my first mistake. I knocked. Knocked. Who knocks at the door of a restaurant? No one answered. I could hear music through the door. Electric jazz. I peered through the oval windows set in the door and saw that the curtains were very thick indeed. I felt uneasy. Knocked again.

After an interval Grace opened the door. Her expression was puzzled. "Yes?" she said.

I was looking beyond her, feeling the pulse of the music, aware of a certain indistinct movement in the background, concentrating on the colors, plants, polished woodwork. Underwater. Chagall.

"Can I help you?"

"Yes, you can," I said. "I'd like—ah—a cup of coffee for starters, and I'd like to see the menu. And your wine list."

"I'm very sorry," Grace said. "But this is a women's restaurant."

III

A women's restaurant. The concept inflames me. There are times, at home, fish poached, pots scrubbed, my mind gone blank, when suddenly it begins to rise in my consciousness, a sunken log heaving to the surface. A women's restaurant. The injustice of it, the snobbery, the savory dark mothering mystery: what do they *do* in there?

I picture them, Rubie, Grace, the oriental girl, the nun, the girl with one leg, all of them—picture them sipping, slouching, dandling sandals from their great toes (a mental peep beneath the skirts). I see them dropping the coils of their hair, unfastening their brassieres, rubbing the makeup from their faces. They are soft, heavy, glowing with muliebrity. The pregnant ones remove their tentish blouses, pinching shoes, slacks, underwear, and begin a slow primitive shuffle to

the African beat of the drums and the cold moon music of the electric piano. The others watch, chanting, an arcane language, a formula, locked in a rhythm and a mystery that soar grinning above all things male, dark and fertile as the earth.

Or perhaps they're shooting pool in the paneled back room, cigars smoking, brandy in snifters, eyes intense, their breasts pulled toward the earth, the slick cue sticks easing through the dark arches of their fingers, stuffed birds on the walls, the glossy balls clacking, riding down the black pockets like burrowing things darting for holes in the ground . . .

IV

Last night there was a fog, milk in an atomizer. The streets steamed. Turner, I thought. Fellini. Jack the Ripper. The dog led me to the fence outside the women's restaurant, where he paused to sniff and balance on three legs. The house was a bank of shadow, dark in a negligee of moonlit mist. Fascinating, enigmatic, compelling as a white whale. Grace's VW hunched at the curb behind me, the moon sat over the peaked roof cold as a stone, my finger was on the gate. The gate was latched. I walked on, then walked back. Tied the dog to one of the pickets, reached through to unlatch the gate, and stepped into the front yard at Grace & Rubie's for the second time.

This time I did not knock.

Instead I slipped up to a window and peered through a crack in the curtains. It was black as the inside of a closet. On an impulse I tried the window. It was locked. At that moment a car turned into the street, tires chirping, engine revving, the headlights like hounds of heaven. Rubie's Fiat.

I lost my head. Ran for the gate, tripped, scrambled back toward the house, frantic, ashamed, mortified. Trapped. The car hissed to a stop, the engine sang a hysterical chorus, the headlights died. I heard voices, the swat of car doors. Keys rattling. I crouched. Then crept into the shrubbery beneath the porch. Out by the fence the dog began to whimper.

Heels. Muffled voices. Then Rubie: "Aww, a puppy. And what's he doing out here, huh?" This apparently addressed to the dog, whose whimpering cut a new octave. I could hear his tail slapping the fence. Then a man's voice, impatient. The gate creaked, slapped shut. Footsteps came up the walk. Stopped at the porch. Rubie giggled. Then there was silence. My hand was bleeding. I was stretched out prone, staring at the ground. They were kissing. "Hey," said Rubie, soft as fur, "I like your nose—did I tell you that?"

"How about letting me in tonight," he whispered. "Just this once."

Silence again. The rustle of clothing. I could have reached out and shined their shoes. The dog whimpered.

"The poor pup," Rubie breathed.

"Come on," the guy said. I hated him.

And then, so low I could barely catch it, like a sleeping breath or the hum of a moth's wing: "Okay." Okay? I was outraged. This faceless cicisbeo, this panting lover, schmuck, male—this shithead was going to walk into Grace & Rubie's just like that? A kiss and a promise? I wanted to shout out, call the police, stop this unthinkable sacrilege.

Rubie's key turned in the lock. I could hear the shithead's anticipatory breathing. A wave of disillusion deadened me. And then suddenly the porch light was blazing, bright as a cafeteria. I shrank. Grace's voice was angry. "What is this?" she hissed. I held my breath.

"Look—" said Rubie.

"No men allowed," said Grace. "None. Ever. Not now, not tomorrow—you know how I feel about this sort of thing."

"—Look, I pay rent here too—"

I could hear the shithead shuffling his feet on the dry planks of the porch. Then Grace: "I'm sorry. You'll have to leave." In the shadows, the ground damp, my hand bleeding, I began to smile.

The door slammed. Someone had gone in. Then I heard Grace's voice swelling to hurricane pitch, and Rubie raging back at her like a typhoon. Inside. Muffled by the double doors, oval windows, thick taffeta curtains. The shithead's feet continued to shuffle on the porch. A moment ticked by, the voices storming inside, and then the light cut out. Dead. Black. Night.

My ears followed the solitary footsteps down the walk, through the gate and into the street.

V

I shadowed Rubie for eight blocks this morning. There were packages in her arms. Her walk was the walk of a slow-haunching beast. As she passed the dark windows of the shops she turned to watch her reflection, gliding, flashing in the sun, her bare arms, clogs, the tips of her painted toenails peeping from beneath the wide-bottomed jeans. Her hair loose, undulating across her back like a wheatfield in the wind. She stopped under the candy-stripped pole outside Red's Barber Shop.

I crossed the street, sat on a bench and opened a book. Then I saw Grace: slouching, wide-striding, awkward. Her sharp nose, the bulb of frizzed hair. She walked up to Rubie, unsmiling. They exchanged cheek-pecks and stepped into the barbershop.

When they emerged I dropped my book: Rubie was desecrated. Her head shaven, the wild lanks of hair hacked to stubble. Charlie Manson, I thought. Auschwitz. Nuns and neophytes. Grace was smiling. Rubie's ears stuck out from her head, the color of butchered chicken. Her neck and temples were white as flour, blue-veined and vulnerable. I was appalled.

They walked quickly, stiffly, Rubie hurrying to match Grace's long strides. Grace a sunflower, Rubie a stripped dandelion. I followed them to the women's restaurant. Rubie did not turn to glance at her reflection in the shop windows.

VI

I have made my second attempt to crack the women's restaurant. The attempt was repulsed.

This time I was not drunk: I was angry. Rubie's desecration had been ranking me all day. While I could approve of Grace's firmness with the faceless cicisbeo, I could not countenance her severity toward Rubie. She is like a stroke of winter, I thought, folding up Rubie's petals, traumatizing her roots. An early frost, a blight. But then I am neither poet nor psychologist. My metaphors are primitive, my actions impulsive.

I kicked the gate open, stamped up the front steps, twisted the doorknob and stepped into the women's restaurant. My intentions were not clear. I thought vaguely of rescuing Rubie, of entering that bastion of womanhood, of sex and mystery and rigor, and of walking out with her on my arm. But I was stunned. Frozen. Suddenly, and after all those weeks, I had done it. I was inside.

The entrance hall was narrow and dark, candlelit, overheated, the walls shaggy with fern and wandering Jew. Music throbbed like blood. I felt squeezed, pinched, confined, Buster Crabbe in the shrinking room. My heart left me. I was slouching. Ahead, at the far end of the hallway, a large room flowered in darkness and lights glowed red. Drum, drum, drum, the music like footsteps. That dim and deep central chamber drawing me: a women's restaurant, a women's restaurant: the phrase chanted in my head.

And then the door opened behind me. I turned. Two of the biker girls stepped through the doorway, crowding the hall. One of them was wearing a studded denim jacket, the collar turned up. Both were tall. Short-haired. Their shoulders congested the narrow hallway. I wheeled and started for the darkened room ahead. But stopped in midstride. Grace was there, a tray in her hand, her face looking freshly slapped. "You!" she hissed. The tray fell, glasses shattered. I was grabbed from behind. Rabbit-punched. One of the biker girls began emitting fierce gasping Ninja sounds as her white fists and sneakered feet lashed out at me. I went down, thought I saw Rubie standing behind Grace, a soft flush of alarm suffusing her cheeks. A rhythm developed. The biker girls kicked, I huddled. Then they had me by belt and collar, the door was flung open and they rocked me, one, two, three, the bum's rush, down the front steps and onto the walk. The door slammed.

I lay there for a moment, hurting. Then I became aware of the clack of heels on the pavement. A woman was coming up the walk: skirt, stockings, platforms.

She hesitated when she saw me there. And then, a look of disgust creasing her makeup, she stepped over me as if she were stepping over a worm or a fat greasy slug washed up in a storm. Her perfume was devastating.

VII

I have been meditating on the essential differences between men and women, isolating distinguishing traits. The meditation began with points of dissimilarity. Women, I reasoned, do not have beards, while they do have breasts. And yet I have seen women with beards and men with breasts—in fact, I came to realize, all men have breasts. Nipples too. Ah, but women have long hair, I thought. Narrow shoulders, expansive hips. Five toes on each foot. Pairs of eyes, legs, arms, ears. But ditto men. They are soft, yielding, dainty, their sensibilities refined—they like shopping. I ran through all the stereotypes, dismissed them one after another. There was only one distinguishing sexual characteristic, I concluded. A hole. A hole as dark and strange, as fascinating and forbidding, as that interdited entrance to Grace and Rubie's. Birth and motherhood, I thought. The maw of mystery.

I have also been perusing a letter from Rubie, addressed to a person named Jack. The letter is a reconstruction of thirty-two fragments unearthed in the trash behind the women's restaurant. "I miss you and I love you, Jack," the letter said in part, "but I cannot continue seeing you. My responsibilities are here. Yes I remember the night on the beach, the night in the park, the night at the cabin, the night on the train, the night in Saint Patrick's Cathedral—memories I will always cherish. But it's over. I am here. A gulf separates us. I owe it to Grace. Take care of yourself and your knockout nose. Love, R." The letter disturbs me. In the same way that the women's restaurant disturbs me. Secrets, stifling secrets. I want admission to them all.

VIII

The girl in the department store asked me what size my wife took. I hesitated. "She's a big one," I said. "About the same size as me." The girl helped me pick out a pink polyester pantsuit, matching brassiere, tall-girl panty hose. Before leaving the store I also visited the ladies' shoe department and the cosmetic counter. At the cosmetic counter I read from a list: glosser, blusher, hi-lighter, eyeshadow (crème, cake and stick), mascara, eyeliner, translucent powder, nail polish (frosted pink), spike eyelashes, luscious tangerine lipstick, tweezers, a bottle of My Sin and the current issue of *Be Beautiful*. At the shoe department I asked for Queen Size.

After two weeks of laying foundation, brushing on, rubbing in, tussling off, my face was passable. Crude, yes—like the slick masks of the topless dancers—but passable nonetheless. And my hair, set in rollers and combed out in a shoulder-length flip, struck close on the heels of fashion. I was no beauty, but neither was I a dog.

I eased through the gate, sashayed up the walk, getting into the rhythm of it. Bracelets chimed at my wrists, rings shot light from my fingers. Up the steps, through the front door and into that claustrophobic hallway. My movement fluid, silky, the T-strap flats gliding under my feet like wind on water. I was onstage, opening night, and fired for the performance. But then I had a shock. One of the biker girls slouched at the end of the hallway lighting a cigar. I tossed my chin and strutted by. Our shoulders brushed. She grinned. "Hi," she breathed. I stepped past her, and into the forbidden room.

It was dark. Candlelit. There were tables, booths, sofas and lounge chairs. Plants, hangings, carpets, woodwork. Women. I held back. Then felt a hand on my elbow. It was the biker. "Can I buy you a drink?" she said.

I shook my head, wondering what to do with my voice. Falsetto? A husky whisper?

"Come on," she said. "Get loose. You're new here, right?—you need somebody to show you around." She pinched my elbow and ushered me to a booth across the room—wooden benches like church pews. I slid in, she eased down beside me. I could feel her thigh against mine. "Listen," I said, opting for the husky whisper, "I'd really rather be alone—"

Suddenly Rubie was standing over us. "Would you like something?" she said.

The biker ordered a Jack Daniel's on the rocks. I wanted a beer, asked for a sunrise. "Menu?" said Rubie. She was wearing a leather apron, and she seemed slimmer, her shoulders rounded. Whipped, I thought. Her ears protruded and her brushcut bristled. She looked like a Cub Scout. An Oliver Twist.

"Please," I said, huskily.

She looked at me. "Is this your first time?"

I nodded.

She dug something—a lavender card—from an apron pocket. "This is our membership card. It's twenty-five cents for a lifetime membership. Shall I put it on the bill?"

I nodded. And followed her with my eyes as she padded off.

The biker turned to me. "Ann Jenks," she said, holding out her hand.

I froze. A name, a name, a name. This part I hadn't considered. I pretended to study the menu. The biker's hand hung in the air. "Ann Jenks," she repeated.

"Valerie," I whispered, and nearly shook hands. Instead I held out two fingers, ladylike. She pinched them, rubbed her thumb over the knuckles and looked into my eyes.

Then Rubie appeared with our drinks. "Cheers," said Ann Jenks. I downed the libation like honey and water.

An hour and a half later I was two sheets to the wind and getting cocky. Here I was, embosomed in the very nave, the very omphalos of furtive femininity—a prize patron of the women's restaurant, a member, privy to its innermost secrets. I sipped at my drink, taking it all in. There they were—women—chewing, drinking, digesting, chatting, giggling, crossing and uncrossing their legs. Shoes off, feet up. Smoking cigarettes, flashing silverware, tapping time to the music. Women among women. I bathed in their soft chatter, birdsong, the laughter like falling coils of hair. I lit a cigarette, and grinned. No more fairybook-hero thoughts of rescuing Rubie—oh no, this was paradise.

Below the table, in the dark, Ann Jenks's fingertips massaged my knee.

I studied her face as she talked (she was droning on about awakened consciousness, liberation from the mores of straight society, feminist terrorism). Her cheekbones were set high and cratered the cheeks below, the hair lay flat across her crown and rushed straight back over her ears, like duck's wings. Her eyes were black, the mouth small and raw. I snubbed out the cigarette, slipped my hand under the jacket and squeezed her breast. Then I put my tongue in her mouth.

"Hey," she said, "want to go?"

I asked her to get me one more drink. When she got up I slid out and looked for the restroom. It was a minor emergency: six tequila sunrises and a carafe of dinner wine tearing at my vitals. I fought an impulse to squeeze my organ.

There were plants everywhere. And behind the plants, women. I passed the oriental girl and two housewives/divorcées in a booth, a nun on a divan, a white-haired woman and her daughter. Then I spotted the one-legged girl, bump and grind, passing through a door adjacent to the kitchen. I followed.

The restroom was pink, carpeted: imitation marble countertops, floodlit mirrors, three stalls. Grace was emerging from the middle one as I stepped through the door. She smiled at me. I smiled back, sweetly, my bladder aflame. Then rushed into the stall, fought down the side zipper, tore at the silky panties, and forgot to sit down. I pissed, long and hard. Drunk. Studying the graffiti—women's graffiti. I laughed, flushed, turned to leave. But there was a problem: a head suspended over the door to the stall. Angry eyes. The towering Grace.

I shrugged my shoulders and held out my palms. Grace's face was the face of an Aztec executioner. This time there would be no quarter. I felt sick. And then suddenly my shoulder hit the door like a wrecker's ball, Grace sat in the sink, and the one-legged girl began gibbering from the adjoining compartment. Out the door and into the kitchen, rushing down an aisle lined with ovens, the stink of cooking food, scraps, greased-over plates, a screen door at the far end, slipping in the T-straps, my brassiere working round, Grace's murderous rasping

shriek at my back, STOP HIM! STOP HIM!, and Rubie, pixie Rubie, sack of garbage in her hand at the door.

Time stopped. I looked into Rubie's eyes, imploring, my breath cut in gasps, five feet from her. She let the garbage fall. Then dropped her head and right shoulder, and hit my knees like a linebacker. I went down. My face in coffee grounds and eggshells. Rubie's white white arms shackles on my legs and on my will.

X

I have penetrated the women's restaurant, yes, but in actuality it was little more than a rape. There was no sympathy, I did not belong: why kid myself? True, I do have a lifetime membership card, and I was—for a few hours at any rate—an unexceptionable patron of the women's restaurant. But that's not enough. I am not satisfied. The obsession grows in me, pregnant, swelling, insatiable with the first taste of fulfillment. Before I am through I will drink it to satiety. I have plans.

Currently, however, I am unable to make bail. Criminal trespass (Rubie testified that I was there to rob them, which, in its way, is true, I suppose), and assault (Grace showed the bruises on her shins and voice box where the stall door had hit her). Probation I figure. A fine perhaps. Maybe even psychiatric evaluation.

The police have been uncooperative, antagonistic even. Malicious jokes, pranks, taunts, their sweating red faces fastened to the bars night and day. There has even been brutality. Oddly enough—perhaps as a reaction to their gibes—I have come to feel secure in these clothes. I was offered shirt, pants, socks, shoes, and I refused them. Of course, these things are getting somewhat gritty, my makeup is a fright, and my hair has lost its curl. And yet I defy them.

In drag, I like the sound of it. I like the feel. And, as I say, I have plans. The next time I walk through those curtained doors at Grace & Rubie's there will be no dissimulation. I will stroll in and I will belong, an initiate, and I will sit back and absorb the mystery of it, feed on honeydew and drink the milk of paradise. There are surgeons who can assure it.

After all, it is a women's restaurant.

(1976)