

HALLOWEEN
CAFE

MIRANDA
DICKINSON

**Dedicated to my wonderful Twitter tweethearts,
incredible Instagram chums and fabulous Facebookers
with all my love and thanks
for your amazing support**

xx

The memo read:

RE: SEASONAL STAFF ATTIRE

This year, to add to the sense of fun at Tony & Frank's, we are inviting all T&F staff members to dress in Halloween-appropriate costumes. Remember, everyone's family here at T&F, so let's make this a fun event that all our customers can feel part of. So come on, T&F-ers, get into the ghoulish spirit and wear something SPOOKTACULAR!

Jon Cutler groaned. Someone at Head Office was clearly very proud of that last line. They probably had a fantastic chuckle about it as they sat in their plush London offices. No doubt the closest the management of the American diner theme restaurant chain would be getting to this particular ghoulish spirit was a smug grin at the thought of unfortunate waiters like him up and down the land facing the same dilemma: how to conjure up a suitably spooky outfit with less than 24 hours' notice...

Sophie Duckett, manageress of *Tony & Frank's* (Prospect Gate Retail Park branch), smiled apologetically as she passed him, handing out the memos to her assembled staff.

'I know it's lame. Just try to do the best you can. We have a box with some costumes in from last year, and I'll pop over to the Early Learning Centre this morning to get us some face paints. Anything you have at home bring along tomorrow and we'll hopefully make this happen.'

Jon exchanged glances with Lily Jenkins, the new girl, who looked about as pleased with the memo as he did. She was lovely but painfully shy; in the three weeks since she had joined the team she'd barely spoken to anybody. Jon had resorted to encouraging smiles, which seemed to be working - although how he was ever going to get to know her on facial expressions alone he didn't know...

'Bags-I the witch hat!' Imogen Smith shouted, sticking up a stick-thin hand as if she was a six-year-old choosing teams for a game of Tag.

'I wanted that one,' Lucy protested, her conker-brown bob shaking with indignation as she glared at her colleague. 'You wore it last time.'

Imogen shrugged. 'You snooze you lose.'

'I'm sure there'll be plenty for everyone,' Sophie rushed, keen to avert another argument. The downside of having such a young staff was that strong characters

and frayed tension were never far from the surface. At forty-three, she felt positively ancient. Tomorrow was going to be a *very* long day...

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At seven-thirty next morning, Jon stared blankly at the contents of his wardrobe. Nothing looked remotely ghost-like (unless you counted the duvet cover and he wasn't going to work in *that*) - let alone *spooktacular*. He groaned. Working back-to-back shifts was bad enough without having to dress like a moron on your second one. When he realised he had less than thirty minutes to get dressed and leave for work, he grabbed a bright orange t-shirt, slung it on over a grey long sleeved top and wriggled into his work trousers. Taking the small pack of face-paints that his house-mate Adam had given him last night, he drew a deep breath and set to work...

Today, I am no longer ordinary restaurant waiter Jon Cutler, he mused. Today I become - Face-paint Skeleton Guy!

Smiling at his wonky-toothed expression in the mirror, Jon picked up his jacket and headed out of the door.

* * * *

Tony & Frank's had been transformed overnight and Jon had to stop for a moment to take it all in when he arrived for work. White wisps of fake cobwebs were strewn across the window blinds and dangled from the retro Fifties' light fittings; white spectral paper-chains of ghosts looped from one side of the restaurant to the other; black glittery bats were suspended from the ceiling tiles. A green spotlight had been placed behind the bar, casting an unearthly glow across the multicoloured bottles in their optics and state of the art coffee machine. Pumpkin tea-lights adorned each of the diner-style booths and rubber spiders with glowing red eyes guarded the serving hatch. Sophie had clearly been busy, Jon smiled to himself. Head Office should give her a pay rise.

Imogen was already twirling around the darkened restaurant, her desired prize perched proudly atop her garish blonde curls. In a small attempt to create a costume she had pinned a rubber bat to her white uniform shirt, but apart from this and the witch hat had made very little effort at all. Her smug grin deepened as Jon approached.

'My life, what are you supposed to be?'

‘I’m a skeleton.’

‘Skeletons don’t wear orange t-shirts,’ Imogen scoffed. ‘And aren’t you a bit well-fed for a skeleton?’

‘It’s just a costume, Imogen.’ Jon avoided her stare as he passed.

Tony & Frank’s staff-room was unusually quiet, considering the number of staff present for breakfast service. All around the room sat dejected ghouls, vampires, werewolves and a thoroughly depressed Frankenstein. Each greeted Jon with a mumbled ‘Morning’ as if it were some secret password, everyone united in their dread of the day that lay ahead.

‘How are we all doing?’ Sophie’s bright smile beamed into the room several seconds before the rest of her. ‘Wow... Well I can see you’ve all made a real effort so thank you. I know this isn’t as fun as Head Office thinks it is, but together I think we can really make today a great one.’ Her expression was one of poorly concealed pity for her collectively mortified staff. ‘So - um - chin up everyone and let’s get out there!’

As the assorted Halloween characters rose reluctantly from their seats, the door to the staff-room flew open and a startlingly pale-skinned zombie with pearl white eyes and a rather fetching serving wench’s outfit dashed in.

‘Sorry I’m late,’ Lily panted.

Sophie checked her watch. ‘Only five minutes, Lily. Was the bus late again?’

‘The bus driver wouldn’t let me on,’ Lily replied in a half-whisper, a faint pink blush warming her pale powdered cheeks. ‘I had to wait twenty minutes for the next one.’

‘Oh - dear...’ Sophie suppressed her amusement. ‘Well, you’re here now and that’s what matters.’

The waiting staff moved to their places in the restaurant as Imogen opened the front door, welcoming in the first customers of the day. Their bemusement at the oddly costumed waiters soon gave way to expressions of surprise at the decorated interior of the restaurant, parents pointing out the pumpkins, spiders, bats and ghosts to their wide-eyed children.

Jon’s first table were less than impressed by his face-painting skills, their young daughter dissolving into tears at the sight of the wonky-faced skeleton. He patiently waited while they comforted the little girl, assuring her that it was “just a silly man in make-up” - a description Jon was not altogether comfortable with. Pacified by a large stack of pancakes and a handful of white, red and green *Tony & Frank’s* balloons, the child’s terror eventually ceased and Jon breathed a heavy sigh as he moved to his next table.

‘Blimey, what are you supposed to be, mate?’

‘I’m a skeleton. Happy Halloween.’

‘Don’t think I’ve ever seen a skeleton in an orange t-shirt before...’

As breakfast service wore on, Jon was acutely aware of Imogen (who he had renamed *Smug Witch* for the day to amuse himself) swaggering about the restaurant in her minimal effort outfit. She flaunted her witch hat at Lucy (*Werewolf Number 3*) at every occasion and spent a happy hour making snide comments at the expense of Dev and Kurt (*Werewolves 1* and *2* respectively). Her self-satisfaction only grew when Keith Slack walked in at ten o’clock, blatantly not attired for *Tony & Frank’s* Halloween event.

‘Memo? I didn’t get a memo,’ he protested, incurring the muttered expletives of a passing vampire as he did so.

‘I emailed it to you yesterday,’ Sophie said.

‘Ah. Internet was down,’ Keith replied, as innocent as a fluffy kitten in a poppy-field.

‘Hmm.’

‘Honestly, Soph, it was. I’d offer to go home and change but -’ he waved a hand at the rapidly filling tables, ‘looks like we’re snowed under already.’

Sophie admitted defeat and pushed through the double doors to the kitchen. One she was out of sight, Keith (now named *Boring Guy* by an irritated Jon) turned to Imogen and high-fived her.

Lily (*Zombie Serving Wench*) rolled her opaque eyes as she passed Jon and he felt his heart lift despite the deathly dragging day and his impossible colleagues. If only he could find the words to talk to her...

* * * *

Hidden from view, high up amid the fake cobwebs and dangling ghosts, somebody was watching the staff of *Tony & Frank’s*. Two somebodies, to be exact. They had been there long before Head Office sent their jokey memo; long before many of the current employees had begun to work at the retro restaurant next to the cinema on the modern retail park. In fact, they had been there from the very first day. Their alabaster eyes had seen countless people moving through this space: couples and families, businesspeople and children. They had witnessed first dates and break-ups, treats and meetings, family gatherings and birthdays. *Countless* birthdays - and more repeats of Cliff Richard’s *Congratulations* than anyone should have to endure. A million words had passed their ears: spoken and

unspoken, significant and banal; and a million snippets of life stories had played out before them - a never-ending pantomime with a cast of thousands.

They watched the scarily-dressed staff today with unusual interest - especially the Face-paint Skeleton and the Zombie Serving Wench as they skirted each other in the course of their work.

'Would ya look at those two?' said one to the other in the dimness of the ceiling space.

'I see them,' replied the other. 'Hopeless. That's what they are.'

The first voice gave a muffled cough. 'I've *had it* with this stuff. Gets right up my nose.'

'It's festive,' said the other. 'Get with the spirit, would ya?'

'*Spirit* - huh - that's a good one. But you wouldn't be makin' fun if *you* had cobwebs floatin' across your face.'

'Quit moanin' and watch them already!'

'OK, OK, I hear ya.' A long sigh made the nearest string of paper ghosts shiver over the heads of the customers, but nobody noticed. The place had air-conditioning, after all...

* * * *

'I'll have the New York Burger with fries - and can I get a side of onion rings with that?'

'No problem.' Jon's eyes drifted from his order pad to the waif-like figure of his colleague, clearing a table on the next row of booths. His heart sank. She was so lovely - even dressed as a member of the Undead. From the first time she had walked into the restaurant, he knew she was *The One*. Which was odd in itself, as in all his thirty years Jon had never really believed in the concept of one perfect person placed on earth just for him. But now Lily filled his thoughts constantly, each blissful memory tempered by a growing frustration at his lack of communication with her.

Girls had always been a mysterious species as far as Jon was concerned. He could never seem to find the magic combination of words to entrance them. Not that it stopped him trying, of course, and neither did it prevent him enjoying a comparatively successful dating life. It was just that when a few dates had the potential to turn into something more, things changed. Sometimes it was the girl backing away, sometimes him finding insurmountable problems. It was almost as if he reached an invisible barrier that prevented him moving forward...

Lily was the most beautiful creature he had ever laid eyes on and all words deserted him when she was near. Frustratingly dumbstruck, all he could do was share facial expressions with her whenever the chance presented itself. It was like falling in love with someone who didn't speak your language - any communication was reduced to shared expression and gesture. But it wasn't enough for Jon. It would *never* be enough...

* * * *

'Those guys ain't never gonna get together,' said the voice, high above Jon's head.

'True.'

'So how come we're watchin' them?'

'Because I wanna make sure I'm doin' the right thing, Frankie.'

'What thing you thinkin' of, boss?'

'I'm thinkin' today is the perfect day for a bit of magic...'

* * * *

The lunchtime rush eased to a trickle by two-thirty that afternoon and by three o'clock the restaurant was practically empty. Several werewolves and a vampire finished their shifts and beat a hasty retreat, leaving Smug Witch, Boring Guy, Sophie, Lily and Jon to clear tables and prepare for the early evening influx due to arrive an hour later.

Jon was about to head to the staff-room for a break when Sophie hurried over.

'Can you help me a minute?' she asked. Her usually smooth brow was furrowed - an expression so alien to her that it stopped Jon in his tracks.

'Yes, of course. What's up?'

A visibly pale Sophie took his arm and walked behind the bar. Lowering her voice so that the few customers nearby didn't hear, she leaned closer. 'This is going to sound ridiculous, but I think I saw something.'

'What?'

She shook her head. 'I'm going mad, I know it.'

'Just tell me.'

Her eyes were wild as they met his. 'I saw - at least I *think* I saw - one of the Founders moving.'

'The Founders?'

Her voice dropped to a whisper. 'The *statues*...'

Jon followed her gaze to the two alabaster busts of *Tony & Frank's* eponymous (and fictitious) founders, which were placed high above the serving hatch at the far end of the restaurant. 'Are you sure?'

'No - of course I'm not sure, Jon! I'm a sane, forty-something woman who doesn't usually see inanimate objects moving. But I think one of them did.'

'When?'

'Just now.'

'OK...' Jon surveyed his manager carefully, considering his next question.

'What did it - *do* - exactly?'

Sophie folded her arms. 'It blew a cobweb from its face.'

'A cobweb.'

'Yes - a fake one, obviously. I went a bit mad with them last night when I was decorating the restaurant. I hung them over Tony and Frank and I swear just now Frank blew it away.' She placed her hand on Jon's arm. 'Would you - I can't believe I'm even asking you this - would you mind grabbing the ladder from the back and checking the statues for me?'

Maybe all the Halloween preparations were getting to Sophie, Jon reasoned. But her fear was so tangible that he agreed.

Five minutes later, Jon began to climb up to the ceiling as a worried Sophie clung to the bottom of the ladder, her eyes trained on the two alabaster figures.

'Be careful up there,' she called.

'What's he going to do, bungee jump?' Imogen mocked as Keith sniggered nasally.

Jon ignored them all as he climbed the rungs. Nearing the top of the ladder, he noticed Lily a few feet away, watching him with interest.

Enough with the longing looks, said a voice.

Jon's head snapped back. He stared at the impassive expressions of Tony and Frank.

'Can you see anything?' Sophie called.

'Erm, no,' he replied, shaking away the question in his mind. He reached across and removed a length of polyester cobweb from Tony's neck.

Too kind, said another voice.

Jon's pulse rocketed. 'Listen,' he growled under his breath, 'I don't know who this is or why you're doing it, but it's not funny.' He listened. Nothing.

'Can you just take the bats down from the shelf while you're there?'

'No problem, Soph.'

He unwound the thread attached to the plastic glittery bats from the edge of the shelf, the back of his hand brushing the base of Frank's statue as he did. An icy chill shuddered through to his bones.

Tell Lily you like her, said the first voice.

'Excuse me?'

Because there's no better day than today...

Jon couldn't believe what he was hearing. He looked around but all of his colleagues were deep in conversation as though nothing unusual was happening. He stared back at the busts of the Founders: Tony a suave charmer, his lustrous hair swept back in a high quiff from his defined Italian features; Frank an inch smaller, squat and bald, with a grin the size of Napoli. Jon had seen these statues every day he had worked at the restaurant and yet today it was as if he was seeing them for the first time.

'I - I don't know what to say...' he admitted before his common sense could stop him. 'I never know what to say to her.'

Ask her to dinner. Cook her meatballs...

What are ya, nuts? The boy works in a restaurant, Tony, he don't wanna be cookin'...

Would ya let me do the talkin' Frankie?

OK, Tony, you da boss...

This was too much. He was already dressed like an idiot; he didn't need to listen to imaginary voices in his head on top of everything today. Angry at himself, Jon began to climb down the ladder.

Kid, listen to me. Lily is The One. You have to tell the girl.

Jon stopped and instinctively his eyes drifted over to the Zombie Serving Wench stacking glasses behind the green-lit bar. Despair pulled at his insides, stronger than gravity.

'How do I tell her? Where do I start?'

There was a pause. Jon could hear the thud-thud-thud of his heartbeat, loud in his ears. On the tinny speakers of the restaurant's sound system, Dean Martin began to croon *That's Amore*...

You start by saying hello.

'And then what?'

The words will be there when you need 'em. You trust your Uncle Tony, kid.

Could it really be that simple? Jon gazed at the snow-eyed zombie, his heart making its familiar flip as she smiled at him. Taking a deep breath, he climbed down the ladder and began to walk towards her...

* * * *

That night, when all the customers had gone and the staff had finally been released from their Halloween duties, the restaurant lay in darkness. Gone were the imitation cobwebs, the ruby-eyed spiders, paper-chain ghosts, bats and bright pumpkin lanterns. All was again as it had always been: a slice of Little Italy on a West Midlands retail park.

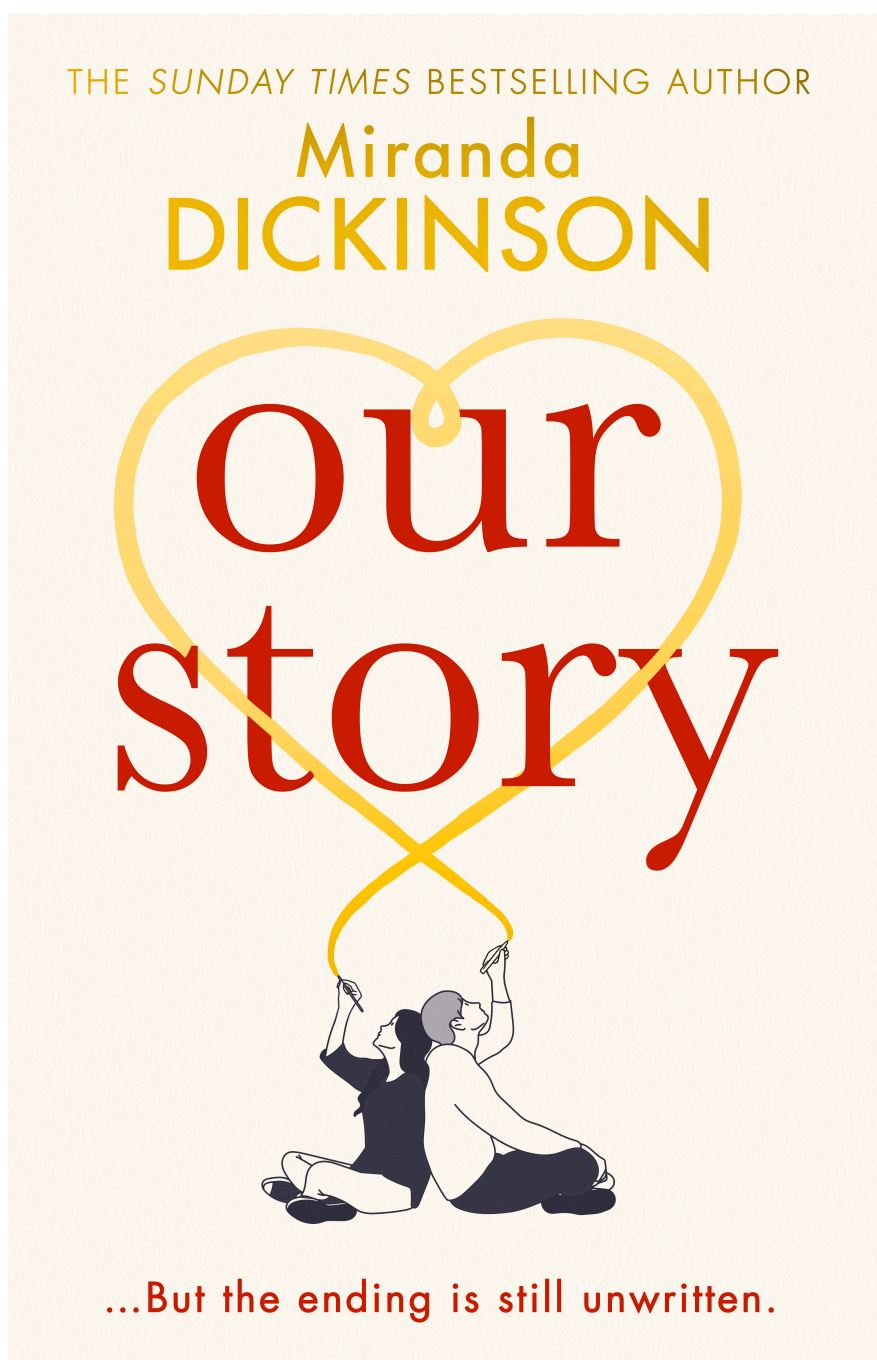
High up in the shadows, the spirits of two Italian founders gazed out across *Tony & Frank's*, their thoughts returning to the lives and loves they had once known. They had seen the Face-paint Skeleton and Zombie Serving Wench leave the restaurant together, talking as if they had their whole lives to catch up on: the young man's smile more luminous than the bright orange t-shirt he wore; the young lady's eyes no longer shy as she laughed with him...

And in the darkness, the Founders smiled.

THE END

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