Sunshine

Robin McKinley

Chapter 1

It was a dumb thing to do but it wasn't that dumb. There hadn't been any trouble out at the lake in years. And it was so exquisitely far from the rest of my life.

Monday evening is our movie evening because we are celebrating having lived through another week. Sunday night we lock up at eleven or midnight and crawl home to die, and Monday (barring a few national holidays) is our day off. Ruby comes in on Mondays with her warrior cohort and attacks the coffeehouse with an assortment of high-tech blasting gear that would whack Godzilla into submission: those single-track military minds never think to ask their cleaning staff for help in giant lethal marauding creature matters. Thanks to Ruby, Charlie's Coffeehouse is probably the only place in Old Town where you are safe from the local cockroaches, which are approximately the size of chipmunks. You can hear them clicking when they canter across the cobblestones outside.

We'd begun the tradition of Monday evening movies seven years ago when I started slouching out of bed at four a.m. to get the bread going. Our first customers arrive at six-thirty and they want our Cinnamon Rolls as Big as Your Head and I am the one who makes them. I put the dough on to rise overnight and it is huge and puffy and waiting when I get there at four-thirty. By the time Charlie arrives at six to brew coffee and open the till (and, most of the year, start dragging the outdoor tables down the alley and out to the front), you can smell them baking. One of Ruby's lesser minions arrives at about I've for the daily sweep- and mop-up. Except on Tuesdays, when the coffeehouse is gleaming and I am giving myself tendonitis trying to persuade stiff, surly, thirty-hour-refrigerated dough that it's time to loosen up.

Charlie is one of the big good guys in my universe. He gave me enough of a raise when I finished school (high school diploma by the skin of my teeth and the intercession of my subversive English teacher) and began working for him full time that I could afford my own place, and, even more important, he talked Mom into letting me have it.

But getting up at four a.m. six days a week does put a cramp on your social life (although as Mom pointed out every time she was in a bad mood, if I still lived at home I could get up at four-twenty). At first Monday evening was just us, Mom and Charlie and Billy and Kenny and me, and sometimes one or two of the stalwarts from the coffeehouse. But over the years Monday evenings had evolved, and now it was pretty much any of the coffeehouse staff who wanted to turn up, plus a few of the customers who had become friends. (As Billy and Kenny got older the standard of movies improved too. The first Monday evening that featured a movie that wasn't rated "suitable for all ages' we opened a bottle of champagne.)

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Charlie, who doesn't know how to sit still and likes do-it-yourself at home on his days off, had gradually knocked most of the walls down on the ground floor, so the increasing mob could mill around comfortably. But that was just it - my entire life existed in relation to the coffeehouse. My only friends were staff and regulars. I started seeing Mel because he was single and not bad-looking and the weekday assistant cook at the coffeehouse, with that interesting bad-boy aura from driving a motorcycle and having a few too many tattoos, and no known serious drawbacks. (Baz had been single and not bad-looking too, but there'd always been something a little off about him, which resolved itself when Charlie found him with his hand in the till.) I was happy in the bakery. I just sometimes felt when I got out of it I would like to get a little farther out.

Mom had been in one of her bad moods that particular week, sharp and short with everyone but the customers, not that she saw them much any more, she was in the office doing the paperwork and giving hell to any of our suppliers who didn't behave. I'd been having car trouble and was complaining about the garage bill to anyone who'd listen. No doubt Mom heard the story more than once, but then I heard her weekly stories about her hairdresser more than once too (she and Mary and Liz all used Lina, I think so they could get together after and discuss her love life, which was pretty fascinating). But Sunday evening she overheard me telling Kyoko, who had been out sick and was catching up after I've days away, and Mom lost it. She shouted that if I lived at home I wouldn't need a car at all, and she was worried about me because I looked tired

all the time, and when was I going to stop dreaming my life away and marry Mel and have some kids? Supposing that Mel and I wanted to get married, which hadn't been discussed. I wondered how Mom would take the appearance at the wedding of the remnants of Mel's old motorcycle gang - which is to say the ones that were still alive - with their hair and their Rocs and Griffins (even Mel still had an old Griffin for special occasions, although it haemorrhaged oil) and their attitude problems. They never showed up in force at the coffeehouse, but she'd notice them at the kind of wedding she'd expect me to have.

The obvious answer to the question of children was, who was going to look after the baby while I got up at four a.m. to make cinnamon rolls? Mel worked as appalling hours as I did, especially since he'd been promoted to head cook when Charlie had been forced - by a mutiny of all hands - to accept that he could either delegate something or drop dead of exhaustion. So househusbandry wasn't the answer. But in fact I knew my family would have got round this. When one of our waitresses got pregnant and the boyfriend left town and her own family threw her out, Mom and Charlie took her in and we all babysat in shifts, in and out of the coffeehouse. (We'd only just got rid of Mom's sister Evie and her four kids, who'd stayed for almost two years, and one mom and one baby seemed like pie in the sky in comparison. Especially after Evie, who is professionally helpless.) Barry was in second grade now, and Emmy was married to Henry. Henry was one of our regulars, and Emmy still waitressed for us. The coffeehouse is like that.

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I liked living alone. I liked the silence - and nothing moving but me. I lived upstairs in a big old ex-farmhouse at the edge of a federal park, with my landlady on the ground floor. When I'd gone round to look at the place

the old lady - very tall, very straight, and a level stare that went right through you - had looked at me and said she didn't like renting to Young People (she said this like you might say Dog Vomit) because they kept bad hours and made noise. I liked her immediately. I explained humbly that indeed I did keep bad hours because I had to get up at four a.m. to make cinnamon rolls for Charlie's Coffeehouse, whereupon she stopped scowling magisterially and invited me in.

It had taken three months after graduation for Mom to begin to consider my moving out, and that was with Charlie working on her. I was still reading the apartments-for-rent ads in the paper surreptitiously and making the phone calls when Mom was out of earshot. Most of them in my price range were dire. This apartment, up on the third floor

at the barn end of the long rambling house, was perfect, and the old lady must have seen I meant it when I said so. I could feel my face light up when she opened the door at the top of the second fight of stairs, and the sunshine seemed to pour in from every direction. The living room balcony, cut down from the old hayloft platform but now overlooking the garden, still has no curtains.

By the time we signed the lease my future landlady and I were on our way to becoming fast friends, if you can be fast friends with someone who merely by the way she carries herself makes you feel like a troll. Maybe I was just curious: there was so obviously some mystery about her; even her name was odd. I wrote the check to Miss Yolande. No Smith or Jones or Fitzalan-Howard or anything. Just Miss Yolande. But she was always pleasant to me, and she wasn't wholly without human weakness: I brought her stuff from the coffeehouse and she ate it. I have that dominant feed-people gene that I think you have to have to survive in the small-restaurant business. You sure aren't doing it

for the money or the hours. At first it was now and then - I didn't want her to notice I was trying to feed her up - but she was always so pleased it got to be a regular thing. Whereupon she lowered the rent - which I have to admit was a godsend, since by then I'd found out what running a car was going to cost - and told me to lose the "Miss."

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