

*This story was sent and accepted before the City of Saint Paul hosted a Certain Large Event. The events described may or may not correspond to those in our timeline. Mickey's Diner is real. Google it.*

# The Diner

by Eleanor Arnason

Mickey's Diner was outside the security perimeter, so customers would be able to get to it. A St. Paul cop dropped by to tell the staff.

"But remember, the security goes one way. A lot of people aren't going to be able to get in, but the Republicans will be able to get out. You may get a few of them here. We think they'll mostly be in the fancy places inside the perimeter, Kincaid's and the St. Paul Grill, but you never can tell. And over in Minneapolis, of course. But what they do over there is not my problem."

He paused. "What they do inside the perimeter isn't my problem, either. The damn Secret Service has told us not to mess with their work. I don't appreciate being told to buzz off in my own city."

"I don't figure we'll have any trouble," Sal said. She was the senior wait these days, with more years at Mickey's than most of us could imagine. The strange thing about her was, she didn't age. As far as we could tell, she was forty and had been forty for years. Her blond hair never grayed, though that could be dye, of course. But her face didn't change any more than her hair. I wouldn't say it had a timeless beauty, but it had a timeless something. "I wouldn't mind meeting a Secret Service man," she added. "I met one years ago."

The cop said, "From everything I hear, they're jerks."

Vorg, who was a regular, a big guy with grey skin and a lot of teeth, said in his deep, rasping voice, "If there is trouble, I cannot assist you. The rules say we cannot interfere with a pre-contact civilization." He wasn't much for talking, and went back to shoveling scrambled eggs and hash past all those teeth.

"We appreciate that," the cop said. "Saint Paul is a pretty quiet town; and we'd like to keep it that way. Let Minneapolis have the action. If you guys decide to start making a big deal about being here, do it in

Minneapolis."

"I come for the eggs and the grease," Vorg said. "I do not intend to make a deal, either big or small." He paused, then held out his cup. "Also I come for the coffee."

This was a crazy thing to say. The coffee at Mickey's is not good. But maybe it was better than what Vorg could get where he came from; and you are never going to hear me complain about the eggs or the hash browns.

Sal gave Vorg a refill, and the cop left; and that was that until the convention began.

The second night was rainy, with a wind blowing through the handful of skyscrapers in downtown St. Paul. I knew the convention was on, because there were cop cars parked at intersections and streets closed off, and I saw more people than usual. Most of the time, downtown clears out after work; and there's no one around after dark, except poor people transferring from one bus line to another. It's kind of restful, but also eerie: a downtown of empty streets, with no stores and maybe a dozen restaurants. The smart Republicans would have gone to Minneapolis; and the demonstrators—there were supposed to be thousands—would be in the free speech zone in Harriet Island Park on the other side of the river, where they could speak and demonstrate to their heart's content and bother no one.

As we'd been promised, Mickey's was outside the perimeter, and I was able to make it in. There were a couple of homeless guys at the counter, bitching about how the Dorothy Day Center had been closed down because of the convention, and they had to go across the river to a temporary shelter on the West Side.

It was not convenient, and it was not right, they said; and one of them added, "We live here. We're citizens."

"Do you vote?" asked Sal, as she refilled their cups.

The homeless guys got silent.

“You ought to,” Sal said. “It’s part of being an American, and you have no right to complain if you don’t.”

The guys stayed silent. No one argued with Sal. I settled farther down the counter, next to a slim, green fellow who looked sort of like a lizard. He must have been six feet tall, though, larger than any lizard I had ever seen. He wore a vest and big, loose trousers and boots like a pirate in a movie. The trousers were yellow and silky-looking. The vest was green and had a lacy red pattern. After a moment, I realized the pattern moved, coiling and uncoiling. Fractals, I thought. Or maybe something else. In any case, the motion made me a little queasy, the way the red lines flowed and curled, expanding into things like flowers, then contracting back into lines. I didn’t spend a lot of time looking at the vest.

“I hear the eggs are good,” the lizard said. “Sunny side up with link sausage on the side.”

That was a matter of opinion. I have never been one for fried eggs. But I wasn’t going to argue with a six foot tall lizard. So I told him, “Be sure to get the hash browns,” and put in my order.

If there is anything pleasanter than eating breakfast in a diner on a rainy, kind of cold, late summer night, I don’t know what it can be. Like the lizard, I got sausage and the hash browns, though I went for the kitchen sink special, which was an omelet with everything inside. Rain beat on the windows. People came and went, though the lizard stayed and drank tea with sugar. He looked interested and comfortable.

Finally, right after I finished the last slice of toast with grape jelly, the Republican arrived, pushing the door hard as he entered. I looked over. He was a middle aged white man in a raincoat, and he looked pretty drunk. How could I tell he was a Republican? The campaign buttons. They were all over the front of his raincoat, big and round and red, white, and blue.

“Here comes trouble,” someone said just loudly enough so we all could hear, and someone else—most likely Gene—said, “Uff da.”

The Republican looked angry for a moment, then sat down. “It’s raining cats and dogs out there,” he said to Sal. I couldn’t place his accent, but he had one. Not from around here.

“Convention going okay?” she asked as she poured coffee.

“Yeah,” he answered. “I think we’re going to win. We ought to. This damn country is going to the dogs, and someone has to set things straight.”

We let that comment pass, though I don’t think there

