

John Harris / MR. IMAGE

Mr. Image was a very ordinary man. He drove an ordinary car and wore an ordinary suit. His car and suit were not old enough to be archaic, nor new enough to be stylish. He was the bursar at a small private school. He looked after the school budgets. If the librarian wanted to know if money was available in the Library Budget, for books, he asked Mr. Image. If the faculty needed money for travel they came to Mr. Image to find out if any was available in the Travel Budget. Mr. Image knew from day to day, almost from hour to hour, how much money the school had to spend in any of its budgets.

He led a very ordinary home-life. He had children, but they were grown-up and gone. He lived with his wife in a neat bungalow in a neat suburb. Every Saturday afternoon he worked in his yard. Every Sunday he went to church and then either drove out into the country with his wife or played golf with his friends.

He was a paunchy man, with grey hair and pale skin. He might have been florid if he had worked outdoors. His eyes could sparkle, when he joked with the secretaries or got deeply involved in straightening out the financial tangle in some faculty or board member's mind. But ordinarily he was quiet and dull, almost withdrawn. His real concern was the pile of requisitions that gathered in the "in" box on his desk. He read them, marked them with the appropriate comments, and then either signed them or sent them on to the Principal. He never got behind in his work, no matter how great the volume of requisitions. His desk was always clear of everything except the one requisition he was working on at the moment.

The only deviation in Mr. Image's very ordinary life was his timetable. He had to eat out, two night's a week, when his services were required by the night-school and extension people. He could not get home and back in an hour, to have his dinner. This deviation from the ordinary did not trouble Mr. Image. He actually enjoyed his evenings out. Indeed, he looked forward to them very much.

It wasn't that he did anything unusual. He always went to Grandma's Cafe, which was only one block from the School, bought a paper, ordered the night's "special," and ate while reading the paper. Grandma's Cafe was a quiet place. Sometimes he was the only customer through the whole dinner hour. The place was fitted out like a farm-house kitchen, with stained walnut walls with pictures on them of, he assumed, Grandma as she was fifty years ago. There was a fireplace, hung round with pots and pans, and there were numerous antiques scattered around. Only the chairs were somewhat out-of-place. They were heavily padded and covered with blood-red leather; probably they were refugees from some discotheque. The waitress was a tired, plain woman in her early forties, who had surprisingly shapely legs that she always showed off by means of a short skirt and black mesh stockings. The cook was a paunchy old woman with hard lines in her face. He always supposed she was Grandma, though he could never be sure. She looked tough, and a little greasy. She had long jet-black hair tied tightly back in a pony-tail, and she smoked incessantly. Whenever she wasn't busy out back, she sat at the end of the counter and talked with the waitress. He often saw them in this position when he entered — the cook seated on a stool, hunched over the counter, with her broad back toward him, a blanket of smoke hovering in the air above her, and the waitress standing behind the counter, in front of the cook, watching the entrance. The food at Grandma's was ordinary — heavy meat dishes with mashed potatoes and gravy. The dessert that inevitably went with the "special" — a fruit compote with spray-on whipped cream — was seldom finished by Mr. Image, though it tasted very good for the first few bites.

Perhaps he enjoyed the difference in the food, or the setting. At any rate, when he went to Grandma's Cafe, Mr. Image always felt a small thrill of pleasure, like a boy going on a carnival ride.

It was a strange feeling, that he never thought about much, but he always felt he was doing something exotic.

One day Mr. Image was faced with the fact that his pleasure might shortly end. He overheard the old cook and the waitress talking about the possibility that the cafe would soon have to close its doors. He presumed upon his status as steady customer to ask the waitress if what he had overheard was true. She said that the owners were indeed talking about closing the cafe. There had been a steady drop in customers over the past few years. Everyone was going to the flashy places, the pizza parlours and the pancake houses.

Now Mr. Image started to think. The problem with Grandma's, he thought, was advertising. He felt sure that there were many, of his own unassuming taste, who would come to Grandma's if only they knew about it. After all, it was the only place in town he would ever consider eating at. The other cafes were so noisy, so glittering, so fast-paced, so garish in decor. Grandma's was peaceful. A man could read the paper and eat a good meal in silence.

Mr. Image thought deeply about Grandma's for a week, and then took it upon himself to find out the owners. He thought only to make some suggestions that might help keep the place going. A surprising thing happened. Mr. Image bought the business. He had convinced himself that it could be a profitable enterprise. When he found the owners determined to close, he seized the opportunity that seemed so sure. He was not a rich man, but the investment was a small one — the furnishings and kitchen equipment, two small salaries and rented space. He could manage the experiment for a year or so, without having to give up his job. He was convinced he would succeed.

So, in a few weeks time, after some minor renovations to bring out the farm-house atmosphere, Grandma's Cafe opened under new management. Mr. Image conducted a quiet advertising campaign on the radio and in the newspaper. His ads stressed the "leisurely atmosphere" of the place, and "Grandma's old-fashioned cooking." Mr. Image thought he was being quite subtle. He reasoned that most people of his age and station believed in the old, agrarian values that they had known as children. These people would come to his cafe to eat. Among the renovations were the replacement of the red plush chairs by early American furniture, and the elimination of the spray-on whipped cream.

A few curious people came to Grandma's in the two weeks of the advertising campaign, but they were plainly not the kind of people that Mr. Image had hoped to attract. Soon everything was back to normal, with Mr. Image himself often being the only customer in the dinner hour. The books showed a steady loss, that would eventually, he knew, prove unbearable.

Evening after evening, not just on his working evenings but more and more regularly as the days slipped past, Mr. Image sat in his cafe and brooded. The cook and waitress went about their familiar tasks, and talked together quietly at the end of the counter. The old pendulum clock on the wall ticked away the hours.

Where had he gone wrong? Mr. Image thought and thought about it. For one thing, he had assumed, as people probably did who knew nothing about business, that his taste was universal. Actually, people of his nature seldom dined out at all. He himself had been forced into it by his job. Why had he been so sure of the success that seemed in retrospect so unlikely? What had tempted him to invest a good deal of his hard earned and carefully managed money in a failing enterprise?

His meditations eventually took him far back into his childhood, a time of his life that he had not thought of for years. He remembered faces, situations, events. Certain scenes from his past seemed to glow, to pulse, as if irradiated by some inner light. The first day of school, when he had awakened suddenly very early in the morning and silently left his warm bed to stand for a long time on the front porch of the house in the pre-dawn. The pale, handsome face of the woman across the street, whose husband was a brutal drunk and whom he had tried to impress one day by showing her all the month's earnings from his paper route. His school studies which, he now realized, were not practical, scholarly, diligent (though he was a highly-praised student) but rather furtive, sporadic — forays into that other world of mystery and romance. This was what he remembered. A caravan of gypsy figures. Not the public ceremonies of childhood and adolescence. Not the things he always assumed he remembered because he was always reminded of them. The things illuminated by the white light of day — these things had disappeared from his memory. The other things remained, like dark jewels embedded in the past.

Then he gradually began to understand what had caused him to make his venture. And he understood too why he had failed. He had actually eliminated the very things that had drawn him to Grandma's. It was the whipped cream and the waitress's black-stockinged legs and the red leather that had drawn him to the place. Or rather it was the whipped cream, legs and red leather in the context of Grandma's hearth rugs, antiques, fireplace, varnished walnut walls and heavy meat dinners.

Mr. Image rushed to correct his mistake. He reinstated the red leather chairs and the whipped cream. Then he began to improvise. He dimmed the lights. He found an old picture of a very fleshy, cherubic nude and hung it on the wall in a prominent place above the pies and pastries. He changed his ads, introducing the caption "discreet dining" and, in the newspaper, a sketch of a girl in black-laced stockings and partly-opened blouse surrounded by the usual emblems of Grandma's. It was as if the hidden poetry of his life was at last finding expression.

His efforts were rewarded. Customers gradually came in. They came once, and then again and again. Eventually Mr. Image did quite well. He was able to quit his job at the school, and devote himself entirely to the peculiar experience of Grandma's.