

## Minor Characters

*John Martino*

I keep hoping I won't turn into my father, but my dad's youngest brother keeps telling me how much I act like him. The way, for instance, I sit, removed, at a distance, listening perhaps, but unwilling, or unable, to enter the conversation. The way, right now, I drift and stare, picking unwittingly at a fingernail. You're probably thinking the same things he thinks, my uncle says. And what might that be? He takes a swallow of coffee. I don't know, you tell me. I blow a puff of air through my nose and half smile, look down at my cup, my reflection in miniature on the dark surface. I'm thinking about how I can turn our relationship, for lack of a better word, into a poem, or a story. My dad, I'm pretty sure, has never thought about doing that. No, I suppose not, he says, pausing. But everything—and he spreads his hands to indicate, from where we're seated in a corner booth, the whole of the diner—is a kind of fiction to him. Like he doesn't know how to deal realistically with the world. Or doesn't want to. Other people simply serving as extras, on set. Minor characters he can take or leave. He picks up the tiny metal pitcher. Including his wife. Tips out a splash of cream. His kids. Watches it swirl with the coffee. His brothers. Takes a spoon and stirs. A bell rings. I look up to see a middle-aged man in dirty coveralls enter, removing a red ball cap and fixing his dark thinning hair as he crosses the threshold, the glass door closing slowly behind him with a long, protracted gasp. Heavy set, like a walking egg inside his grease-stained blue jumpsuit, he takes a seat at the counter. Black coffee, my dear, he says to the waitress, a blonde, his age, also heavy. She's chewing gum and smiling as she pours the coffee, quick and high, into the man's cup, a yellow pencil behind her ear. He peers at the nametag pinned above her left breast. Dawn? Now where'd you get a pretty name like that? I bring the sunshine, hon, I brighten the day, she says, not missing a beat, her smile widening as she finishes the pour, then disappears into the back kitchen. Chuckling at that, the man adds a spoonful of sugar to his cup and stirs. Yeah, he lacks people skills, I say, looking back at my uncle. I get it. No, that's not exactly right. He pauses, takes a drink, sets the cup down. Your dad was quite the lady's man back in the day, when we were kids, teenagers, in high school. All the girls wanted to be with your dad. I shake my head. So I've heard. Hard to believe. My uncle laughs. And your dad was a heck of a salesman. The best. Could sell snow cones to Eskimos in the dead of winter. I take a sip of coffee. But, see, he says, those were like roles he was playing—sales-man, lady's man. In those roles, playing those characters, and treating others as characters too, he could take home an Oscar. But back in reality, being a father, a husband, a brother. . . and he trails off, letting his upturned empty hands finish

the sentence. Yeah, well, that may be him. But it's not me. I like people, I say reassuringly. I think what I mean, my uncle interjects. More coffee? The blonde waitress is standing next to our table holding a steaming glass pot. My uncle looks up, smiling. My savior, he says. Dawn will save the day, she smiles, chewing her gum, refilling his cup. There you go, hon. And how 'bout we top yours off, she says to me. I nod and push my cup towards her. She pours it in quick and high. Can I get you gentlemen anything else? Just one of those winning Powerball tickets for tonight's 800 mil, my uncle says, laughing. Dawn laughs, too. Hon, if I hit I'm splittin' it with you. Only trouble is, you'll have to find me, 'cause I guarantee you I won't be comin' back here. My uncle claps his hands together, laughing harder. I hear that, he says. Dawn beams at me and I smile back. Alright, she says, you holler now you need more coffee, and walks off. My uncle adds a splash of cream to his. What I mean, he continues, stirring, is that outside those very narrow, specific roles, your father doesn't know how to act. Interact. He's too inside himself, too quiet, always up here, and he taps his right index finger to the side of his head. You see how he is even at get-togethers, the occasional family gathering, hardly says a word to anyone, sits off at a distance like he's watching the rest of us on TV. Your mom, God bless her, had to fill in and do all the talking, all the socializing. I watch a semi pull into the parking lot through the front window. The truck like a beast heaving a heavy sigh as it shuts down. The driver's side door opens and a woman climbs out, black leather jacket, blue jeans, the ubiquitous red ball cap. She stomps each of her boots alternately a few times on the pavement, arcs her shoulders, her upper-back like a bow, stretching. She lights a smoke and stands there, exhaling up at the bright blue late-morning sky. The two of you ever have a real conversation? We talk. Sometimes. Yeah, but I mean a real sit-down conversation. Like what we're having now? I don't say anything. Then: A lot of sons and fathers go through this. It's practically cultural here in America. A rite of passage. This father-son disconnect. My uncle rubs his mouth and chin with all eight of his fingers. All I know is, while growing up, grandpa, *my* dad, took care of you, spent time with you, came to the house nearly every day to see you. Not your father. He paused. He and your mom didn't get along after you were born. You know that. Oh, so it's my fault? I joke. He laughs. Well, I'm not too sure your dad got along with your mom even before you were born. And then after your brother, things soured even more. But that's your dad, never . . . he fumbles for the word . . . *happy*, I guess, is the clearest way to say it. Unless he was playing one of those roles he was so good at. Yeah, well, I think my dad wasn't meant to be a dad, or a husband, the whole nine-yards family-man lifestyle. Not that I'm defending him, but I think he was just following the script already in play and it was an old script, the wrong script. For him. But he didn't know there were other options. And maybe there weren't. My uncle looks at his phone, then at his watch. I gotta go pick up your aunt soon. Look, the point is, I don't want you

to follow so closely in his footsteps. I like my brother, but. . . Open up more, come out of your shell. Date someone. Be happy. Like the song says. I'm happy, I say. My uncle watches me. It's just sometimes I think I was put on this planet to talk less and look more. I like to observe things, how they unfold. It's fun, interesting, like watching . . . and I break off, look down at the black circle in the round white rim of the cup. A movie, my uncle finishes for me. He spreads his hands again. And here's the set and the rest of us are just characters in some 3-D show for your amusement. Right? He takes a big swallow and sets the cup to the side. You'll probably turn this (he gestures between us with his right hand) into one of your stories. I blow a puff of air through my nose and half smile. Come on, I say, I won't do that.