

The Back Room

The scene is a counter-type restaurant and cigar store with a few scattered tables and chairs. There are three entrances/exits to the playing space. One is the front door of the establishment. A bell over the entrance announces when someone comes in. There is another entrance just to the side of the counter that leads back to the restrooms and DAVE's office. On the opposite side of the stage from the entrance is another door. It is always shut except for those times that someone enters the back room. There is a window near the entrance that looks out onto the street. As the play opens, there is a man behind the counter. He is short with greying hair. At first sight he appears unkempt. His apron, however, is immaculate. He is busily dishing up eggs and bacon and humming a hymn to himself. The bell over the door tinkles as CHARLIE enters. He is a very heavy and very elderly man. He leans on a cane, but looks well manicured in an expensive but well-worn suit. He goes to the newspaper stand by the front door, looks it over and then raps his cane sharply.

CHARLIE

Counter! Where's my *Times*? Where's yesterday's *Times*?

COUNTER

Right here, Charlie! Don't you go to fussin'. I got it here. I just ain't got to getting it out yet. Got it right here for you.

(He takes a newspaper from behind the counter and passes it to CHARLIE.)

Yesterday's *Times*--warm off the press! Hee. Hee. Get it, Charlie? Warm off the press?

(The old man takes the paper without any comment and goes painfully and seats himself at a table down right.)

You want the usual, Charlie?

CHARLIE

Yes. Yes. Anything.

(He takes out a magnifying glass and begins perusing the front page.)

COUNTER

(He has the breakfast prepared and waiting for CHARLIE. He adds the finishing touches as he speaks.)

Saw ya coming, Charlie. Got it all ready. Scrambled eggs, crisp bacon, whole wheat toast. No butter on that toast. Yessir, I know what old Charlie likes.

(Brings the food to the table.)

How's that now?

CHARLIE

Where's my coffee?

COUNTER

(Fetching it.)

I ain't forgot your coffee. Black with no sugar. Got it right here.

(Returns with coffee.)

Seen your daughter lately? She don't come in here no more. Nosirreebob! Not since I told her what I thought of nursing homes. No sir, she has not come through that door.

(Charlie shows no interest in anything but his breakfast and his *Times*.)

But then, she worries about you, Charlie. That's it pure and simple. The woman worries about you.

(COUNTER has moved to take his place back behind the counter when there is a noise from off-stage behind the closed door.

COUNTER goes to the door, pounds on it and shouts.)

Let's hold it down a little back there! We got customers up front.

(Walking back to the counter, muttering.)

No respect! You'd think they'd have some pride, wouldn't you? Some kind of upbringing? I tell you they're like that on the Sabbath day, they are. The Sabbath day! I'm glad Sgt. Timms wasn't in here. It upsets her terrible the way they go on, but I tell her to just carry on. That's all you can do. Just carry on with the Lord's work. And she'll be shore tickled pink when she sees this jar won't she?

(There is a jar full of bills and coins on the counter. He pats it affectionately.)

We had us a good month for the Lord's work, didn't we, Charlie? We sure did.

(CHARLIE reads his paper. The bell over the door sounds again as a young girl enters. She is in her late teens or early twenties. She is dressed shabbily and wears too much make-up. Otherwise, she is very pretty.)

Yes ma'am?

ANNIE

(She looks at the old man and then back at COUNTER.)

I come for the job.

COUNTER

Job?

ANNIE

The waitressing job. Mr. Burton at the agency said I was to give you this card, and it would be all fixed up.

(She has thrust a 3/5 card at him. He stares at it as if at something alien.)

COUNTER

This card don't do me no good. (Pause.) I can't read.

ANNIE

(Snatching back the card.)

Mr. Burton said there wouldn't be any problem. He said I should just talk with Mr. Allen. He says it's all fixed up. Aren't you Mr. Allen?

COUNTER

'Course I ain't Mr. Allen! That's the boss. That's Dave. He don't come in this early. I'm just the counterman, and that's what they call me. Counter. That's my name. And Dave never said nothing about hiring no waitress. We ain't never had a waitress.

ANNIE

But Mr. Burton said--

COUNTER

There *was* Betty. I'm forgetting about Betty. She was here when I come, but she went right away. There wasn't no one after that.

ANNIE

Well, maybe I better just come back. Mr. Burton didn't say to talk to any counterman. He said I was to talk to Mr. Allen. He said it was all fixed up.

(She starts to turn away.)

COUNTER

No. No. Don't you go away. Sit on down here. I reckon Dave's got something on his mind. Always thinking about things, Dave is. Always got some idea about something. I don't remember him saying nothing about it, but Mr. Burton ought to know. The agency ought to know where the jobs are. Give me that card back. We'll put it right here next to the cash register. You got experience, do you?

ANNIE

(Giving the card back to him.)

I was a car hop back home.

COUNTER

No fooling? Bet that kept you hopping!

(He is pleased with his little joke. ANNIE smiles weakly. She shifts her weight nervously from one foot to the other.)

ANNIE

I took book-keeping in high school

COUNTER

(Hastily.)

I keep all the books around here.

(He points to the cash register.)

Everything that comes in and goes out through there, I got it down.

ANNIE

I thought you couldn't read.

COUNTER

Numbers! Numbers ain't reading. I got all the numbers right here in my head. I do fine with numbers now, I--

(The bell rings. A WOMAN enters. She is dressed as if for an afternoon tea. Her hair is styled. Her heels are high. COUNTER regards her with approval.)

Well now, ma'am, what can I get you today?

WOMAN

I, uh. . .I'd like some coffee, please.

(She sits at the counter.)

ANNIE

(Tugging at COUNTER's sleeve.)

You want me to wait on her? I could do it. I could.

COUNTER

(Brushing her aside, kindly but surely.)

Now we don't know what's what, do we? We don't know what Dave's gonna do. I'll take care of this lady.

(He pours some coffee for the WOMAN.)

There you go, ma'am. Sure you wouldn't like to sit at one of the tables? Might be more comfortable.

WOMAN

No. This is fine.

COUNTER

Cream?

(He scowls at ANNIE who removes herself to the end of the counter.)

WOMAN

Please. (Pause.) I don't think I've ever been in here before.

COUNTER

No, ma'am. I reckon you ain't. I don't forget a face.

WOMAN

I didn't even know there was a coffee shop here.

COUNTER

We're a little out of the way.

WOMAN

I don't come downtown that often. (Pause.) This is Mr. Allen's cafe, isn't it?

COUNTER

Yes, ma'am

WOMAN

You're not--

COUNTER

No, ma'am. I'm not.

WOMAN

I see.

COUNTER

Was there something special you wanted?

WOMAN

No. . .that is . . .possibly. A friend of mine said that I should speak with a Mr. Allen.

COUNTER

What friend was that?

ANNIE

(She has been edging forward.)

I come first!

WOMAN

Excuse me?

COUNTER

Here girl, you ain't got no--

ANNIE

They sent me! The agency sent me! I'm sorry if you need the job and all, but I need it worse. I'm sorry, but I do!

WOMAN

Job? I don't know anything about--

COUNTER

Come on girl. This ain't got nothing to do with no job.

ANNIE

The man at the agency said--

WOMAN

Perhaps I better come back another time.

COUNTER

No! Wait, there ain't any need to do that. This girl's just new, that's all. Here, girl, you just keep still.

ANNIE

But I got to have this job, Mr. Counter!

COUNTER

I ain't Mr. Counter. I ain't Mr. Nobody. Here, I'll tell you what though--Dave--Mr. Allen. He ain't gonna hire you unless you got a uniform. You got a uniform, girl?

ANNIE

A uniform? They didn't say nothing about me needing a uniform.

COUNTER

Oh, you got to have a uniform. You better go and get yourself a uniform.

ANNIE

I don't know--

COUNTER

Down the street, there's a little store. You can get one there cheap.

ANNIE

It don't matter how cheap they are. I--

COUNTER

Ain't you got any money? I--

(The WOMAN has begun to get up from the counter.)

Hold on there, Ma'am. This won't take but a minute.

(He reaches into the jar of money and takes out a handful of bills.)

This is money for the Lord's work, honey. You can use some of it. Go on. Take it!

That's right. Now you go on down to that store where I told you. It's right by the fountain. You ought to sit there for a little while. It's real nice down there by the fountain.

ANNIE

I don't know if I should.

COUNTER

Of course you should. That's Salvation Army money you got there. It was meant for the needy--them that's willing to work for their way.

(He has escorted her to the door.)

Go on now!

ANNIE

(She turns back to him.)

This is real nice of you. How do you know I won't just take this and run away?

COUNTER

Well, now. If you was to think that was what you had to do, then that's the Lord's business, and it ain't no nevermind of mine.

ANNIE

All right.

(She goes out. The door closes behind her.)

COUNTER

(Returning to business.)

I don't know about these youngsters. Think they can get a job without a uniform!

ANNIE

(Bursts back through the door lugging a suitcase.)

Look what I found out on the sidewalk, Mr. Counter. It was just standing by the door.

WOMAN

(Standing quickly.)

That's mine!

ANNIE

Well, you ought not to leave it around like that. There's people will steal suitcases. They got signs at the bus station that tell you--

WOMAN

(Going to her bag and lifting it.)

I should leave now. I'll--I'll come back another time.

COUNTER

No! No. You hold on now. Girl, if you got any intention of asking Mr. Allen for work, you go and get yourself that uniform and get it now!

ANNIE

(Backing up to the door.)

All right. I just wanted to help.

(To the WOMAN.)

You got to be careful, Ma'am. You don't know what people will do.

(She turns and hurriedly exits.)

COUNTER

(Going to relieve the woman of her bag.)

Here now, ma'am. You let me help you with that.

WOMAN

She's right, you know.

COUNTER

(Carrying the bag to the end of the counter nearest the closed door.)

What's that now?

WOMAN

A person ought to be careful

COUNTER

Well, sure they do.

WOMAN

And it would be a mistake to commit oneself to something if one hadn't thought about all the--

COUNTER

All the what?

WOMAN

The . . .possibilities.

COUNTER

Possibilities?

WOMAN

If. . .if the person wasn't sure that there wasn't any other way.

COUNTER

You got trouble, ma'am?

WOMAN

Trouble? No. Of course not! Why do you ask?

COUNTER

You seem. . .worried. Tired maybe. It's a hard old life.

WOMAN

Yes. Yes, it is. I--when do you think Mr. Allen will be here?

COUNTER

Are you needing a place to, you know, someplace to go?

WOMAN

I'd really rather speak with Mr. Allen.

COUNTER

You can do that. He won't be long now. Here, sit down again. Finish your coffee. Lookit here, you ain't hardly touched it.

(There is a pounding from the backroom and a thump.)

WOMAN

What was that?

COUNTER

What? Oh, them sounds? That's nothing to worry about.

WOMAN

It sounded as if someone fell.

COUNTER

(Rounding the counter with the pot of coffee.)

Hey, Charlie! You need that coffee freshened up? Nothing worse than cold coffee. Nosireebob. Got to have nice hot coffee!

CHARLIE

(Looks up absently. Peers at Counter and then at the woman.)

Who's that? Counter! Who's on that stool?

COUNTER

A friend of Dave's Charlie. Just a friend of Dave's.

CHARLIE

Friend, huh? (To the WOMAN.) Don't like the man, myself!

COUNTER

Oh, now, Charlie. You like your little joke.

(Turning back to the WOMAN.)

He likes a little joke, old Charlie does.

WOMAN

I have the worst headache. Do you have any aspirin?

COUNTER

(Rattling about behind the counter.)

Headache? Ain't that just the way? Sure I got some aspirin. Here we go! Here take two of these. And some water, some nice ice water.

WOMAN

I just don't know what I'm going to do.

COUNTER

Just take them aspirin, Ma'am You' feel better. You wait.

(She swallows the aspirin. COUNTER watches her calmly.)

There now. It won't be no time at all. You'll be good as new.

WOMAN

Yes. I do feel better.

COUNTER

(Reaches under the counter and brings out a large dusty ledger book.)

Tell you what, ma'am. Before Dave gets here, we could go ahead and get started.

(He lays the book open in front of her.)

WOMAN

What is this?

COUNTER

Ain't nothing much. Just need you to sign that's all. Then Dave won't have to go to so much trouble. You just sign it, and put your next of kin down. That's all.

WOMAN

It seems a little formal, doesn't it? Is it really necessary?

COUNTER

I don't know what your friend told you, but we are not some fly by night outfit.

WOMAN

What am I signing?

COUNTER

Like a hotel register, that's all. A visitor's book. We got to keep track. All you got to do is sign.

WOMAN

(Reluctantly signing.)

I don't know what to do for next of kin. I wouldn't want my husband to ever know. He wouldn't understand.

COUNTER

Put down whoever you like. Got a cousin or something? It don't really matter.

WOMAN

I have an Aunt.

COUNTER

That would be just fine. Go on now.

WOMAN

(Putting down the pen.)

I think I'll wait.

COUNTER

Well, if that's what you want. Dave will be here any minute, I reckon.

WOMAN

Next week! I think I'll come back next week.

COUNTER

Next week is a long time to wait. It might be too long. Come on now, what are you worried about?

WOMAN

I don't know.

(She hurriedly takes up the pen and writes something in the book.)

COUNTER

(He puts away the book and comes around to pick up her suitcase.)

There now, I bet you feel better already. Come on now. It's just this way.

(He unlocks the closed door and opens it.)

WOMAN

Now?

COUNTER

Now.

WOMAN

(She stands and presses the wrinkles from her skirt. She looks up at COUNTER.)

Do I look all right?

COUNTER

Like an angel. (A hint of impatience.) Come on now. It's time.