

# Dinner at Fabbro's

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I went to Fabbro's Steakhouse for dinner because big decisions are best chewed on with a fifty-dollar sirloin. The two-story, red brick building sat on the corner of High and Tenth Street. High Street ran south, decorated with a long line of dazzling skyscrapers and luxury apartment buildings where bankers kept their mistresses. Tenth ran perpendicular, its ends leading into crummy neighborhoods where dogs barked all night and mortality rates soared. On the drive over, I took High Street. I envied the success of those men leading double lives, armed in Armani suits, and driving Maseratis and Porches. They'd cracked the code my twenty-four-year-old brain still struggled with.

I parked my rattling rust bucket next to a pickup truck caked in mud. On the way out of the garage, I spotted a few nicer vehicles. Fabbro's took all shapes and sizes. Old money, new money, and working class families with shoebox cash saved for a special occasion. I still wore my work clothes, cheap blue slacks and a white dress shirt from Macy's. I needed to upgrade my wardrobe. *Phoenix has designer outlets, right?* God, Phoenix. The wild west. A full day of driving from Indianapolis. Insignificant compared to the countless days spent working toward success. I imagined the gritty taste of red sand, washed down every night with a bottle of 1975 Cognac. An oasis of opportunity waiting for me out there in the middle of the desert.

No, I'd wait to weigh the options once I had a table. The sooner the better. Friday nights were busy, so I half sprinted down the sidewalk. The sun had descended beneath the concrete wall of buildings, casting dark, rectangular shadows across the street. Golden light, shaped by white trim, glowed from the windows at Fabbro's. No line at the front door. My lucky day.

A jingle of metal caught my attention as I crossed the alley separating Fabbro's from the parking garage. The space between them was pitch black. I searched for the source while quickening my pace, but my shoe caught the next section of sidewalk. When I pulled back my foot, the ground came with it. I braced for impact. Maybe it wasn't my lucky day.

"Woah! I gotcha, I gotcha now," said a raspy voice.

A firm hand held onto my shoulder and pulled me up, away from the concrete. I stumbled before regaining my footing. My hero emerged from the darkness. Caramel colored eyes studied me from beneath a black stocking cap. He wore at least three fraying jackets and a pair of plaid pajama bottoms painted in stains.

His matted beard had started graying at the ends. When he smiled, cracks on his lips split open.

“Close one, Mr. Taylor,” he said.

“Hank, right?” I asked. I should’ve known. In my defense, I hadn’t been to Fabbro’s in a few weeks. Hank always stood outside, begging for money with a Best Dad Ever coffee mug. The last time I’d gone to Fabbro’s, I had one too many martinis. Outside, I almost stumbled into the street. Hank caught me and offered to help. We talked a little, from what I could remember, as he escorted me to the parking garage. I slept in my car that night and the next morning I woke up with the worst hangover.

“Yes, sir.” Hank nodded. “We have to stop meeting like this.”

“Yes, we do. How are you, by the way?” I asked.

He shrugged, glancing up and down the sidewalk. “They come and they go. You know how it is, Mr. Taylor. Some days things are alright. Other days, not so much. But I’m blessed. I’m blessed every day. How about you? How is everything with your lady friend?”

Leave it to drunk me to blab about all my problems. I ran a hand through my hair. “Well things are... they’re not anymore.”

Hank frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Something came up and I’m thinking it might be best to move on,” I said. Down the street, a laughing couple entered Fabbro’s. More would show up soon. “Listen, I have to get going or else the good tables will all fill up.”

“Of course. I know you’re a busy man. But say, you mind contributing?” He held up a chipped mug half full of coins and a few dollar bills. I grabbed my wallet and checked for any cash. Nothing. I sighed and shoved it back into my pocket.

“I only have my card.” I felt bad. Hank had helped me not once but twice now and I had nothing to give him in return. I doubted drunk me gave him anything either. In a world of transactions, Hank deserved something.

“It’s okay, Mr. Taylor. You go on in and get you a nice seat before they fill up. Stay blessed. Alright?” He began retreating back into the shadows. I pinched the bridge of my nose.

“Wait,” I said.

He stopped retreating and raised his eyebrows. “Yes, sir?”

“You hungry?”

He argued at first. I think he felt out of place being offered to join me for dinner. I understood. Mixing with higher classes can be intimidating and Hank sat at the bottom rung. But I didn’t offer just so I could pay him back, I admitted. Big decisions are best made with a second opinion. Our lack of proximity made Hank the perfect candidate. No bias. No stake. That’s what finally sold him. Always eager to help.

Inside, I drank in the view. Rows of tables dressed in white cloth sat all types: bargaining businessmen, bickering families, and bantering couples. Servers in stainless black uniforms danced around each other on polished wood floors, balancing trays of steaming food and sweating bottles of wine. In the back, behind the bar and through the swinging steel doors, Chef Alphonse Fabbro waved his knife like a wand and created magic. Aromas of butter, garlic, and rosemary made my stomach groan.

Unlike me, Hank seemed unimpressed by the spectacle. Smile lines fought against the frown tugging at his face and his eyes narrowed. I’d expected him to gasp. Or show some level of appreciation. All that time spent outside, begging for his next meal, you’d think being on the inside for once would at least lighten his mood.

“I shouldn’t be in here,” he muttered.

Before I could respond, the host came to greet us. She gave Hank a once over but said nothing. Then she grabbed two menus and asked us to follow her. People stared at Hank. One lady clutched her purse. We were given a table in a dark corner behind the restrooms. I should’ve argued for somewhere better but I held my tongue. I didn’t want to cause any problems.

Once we were seated, Hank set his mug on the table and studied his menu. I already knew my order. A nine ounce sirloin steak with asparagus and a baked potato on the side. Hank took his outermost jacket off and slumped back in his chair. Those caramel eyes stared out the window, onto Tenth Street and beyond.

“Have you decided?” I asked. He nodded without looking at me. “So what will it be?”

“Soup of the day,” he said. His clipped words lacked their usual, passionate

rasp. Maybe I'd made a mistake convincing him to join me.

A young server approached our table. Her black hair shimmered beneath the dim golden lights hanging above us. She stood close to six feet tall and her forearms were taut with muscle. "Good evening, gentlemen."

"Good evening," I said. Hank nodded without making eye contact. The woman smiled at us and gestured to the menus with a calloused hand.

"I'm Janelle and I'll be your server tonight. Can I start you two with something to drink? We have a great selection of wines and spirits. Our tap options are on the back," she explained.

"Water, please," I said.

"Water," Hank said.

"Alright, I'll be right back with those."

After she left, Hank turned to me. "So, what's this decision of yours?"

"Well, the consulting job I work at is offering me a transfer," I said. "Out in Arizona, of all places. It's actually where their headquarters is based. The job comes with new benefits: a fifteen percent pay increase, more paid time off, a free gym membership, and better insurance. This is all in addition to the benefits I already get."

Again, where I expected Hank to be impressed, his frown only deepened. "Well, Mr. Taylor, seems like the deal of a lifetime."

"It is. And you don't have to keep calling me that." I laughed. Although, if I'm being honest, I didn't mind being called Mr. Taylor.

"Truth is, I don't know your first name." Hank shrugged. "The night you came out stumbling, you told me to call you Mr. Taylor and nothing else."

"Oh." The more I learned about drunk me, the less I liked him. He sounded pretentious. "Listen, I'm sorry about all that. I don't usually drink that much and I probably wasn't in a good state of mind. Just call me Owen. Alright?"

"Sure, and you can call me Mr. Wright. Since I'm your elder and all." Hank chuckled.

I grinned and shook my head. "Okay, Mr. Wright, what should I do? Do I keep

working in Indianapolis or do I take my dream job in Phoenix?”

“Seems like you’ve already made up your mind,” Hank said.

Janelle returned with our drinks. Hank shifted back toward the window and crossed his arms. The source of his discomfort must’ve been the staff at Fabbro’s. I couldn’t understand why, though. Fabbro’s Steakhouse only hired the best. Hard working, professional, and attractive. Janelle fit the description to a tee.

“Have you gentlemen had a moment to look over the menu?” she asked.

“Yes, I’ll do the nine ounce sirloin—medium rare—with asparagus and a baked potato,” I said. Janelle nodded and turned to Hank.

“And you, sir?”

“Soup of the day,” he muttered.

“Okay, and any starters while that cooks?” she asked.

“No thank you.” I smiled and handed her our menus.

“Alright, I’ll have that right out.” I liked her eyes. Amber but lighter. Almost the color of Hank’s.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Can’t complain.”

I hoped the meal would lighten his mood. A belly full of good food can work wonders for anyone. I took a sip of water. Two degrees shy of freezing. Water would be different in the desert. More refreshing.

“So, you think I should take it?” I asked.

Hank scratched his beard. Flakes of dead skin showered his lap. “If you want. Seems like it’ll make you happy.”

I glanced around. The table next to us sat two men clad in pinstripe suits. One had a receding head of snow white hair. Frown lines deepened as his associate, a blonde man closer to my age, spoke in an excited whisper. I picked up something about a retiring executive and a new position opening up. Bankers, if I had to guess. A cutthroat industry since 2008. I almost went that route but jobs were scarce. Third-party consulting has more opportunity, although with greater risk.

I liked my job, but sometimes I wondered. Would things be different if I was that young kid, sitting across from a skilled veteran who weathered the housing crisis? A man of prestige, worthy of respect.

I looked back at Hank. "I think you're right. It's the best option for me."

"I never said that," Hank replied.

"Well wouldn't you agree?" I asked.

"Depends."

"On?"

"What are you leaving behind? You want the job and all it comes with. A blessing, sure. But what about your life here? Don't you have family here?" he asked.

"They live in Fort Wayne. I can call anytime and with the money I'll be making I can fly back whenever I want," I said.

Hank turned to me and set his hands on the table. His eyes sparkled in the golden light. "What about your lady friend?"

The eye contact made me nervous, but I can't say why. "What about her?"

"That's the question, isn't it?"

A laugh lodged in my throat. I took another sip of water. Three degrees shy of freezing. "I told you I'm not... I'm not settling. I want her to be happy, but don't I deserve happiness too? If I stay, she's just going to hold me back."

"From?" he asked.

"Phoenix. Opportunity. The next level." I forced a smile. "You understand."

Hank smiled back, but it didn't reach his eyes. "Oh yes, I understand. That's why you picked me, isn't it? Because I have an unbiased opinion."

"Exactly. Everyone I'm close to here would see things differently," I said.

"Probably out of selfishness, right, Mr. Taylor?"

His smile bothered me. It seemed fake, mocking almost. "Yes. Owen, by

the way.”

“I’ll stick with Mr. Taylor.” He waved a hand. “Now, if you want an unselfish opinion, I’ll give you one. Okay?”

“Okay.” I wished I were back at home. Then I could finish reading *The Essays of Warren Buffet*. The wise words of a modest billionaire always made me feel better.

Hank leaned back in his chair. “I knew Mr. Fabbro’s partner back in the day. Not Alphonse but his daddy, Emil.”

“I didn’t know Emil had a partner,” I said. Aside from the plaque near the front door commemorating his death, I barely knew anything about Emil. But I did know he’d opened Fabbro’s in the late seventies. He’d intended it to be a pizza place, but the vision shifted after they met a crowded market.

“He did. A young, penniless man with a community college business degree. He had big plans for Fabbro’s. Once pizza failed, he helped Emil turn it into a steakhouse. Not just any steakhouse either. One with class. One where all types were welcome,” Hank explained.

My ears perked up. “Really?”

He nodded. “Yes sir, Mr. Taylor. But the boy didn’t stop there. In 1996 he sold his share and invested in a few other startups. Within a few years he had millions to his name and owned equity in over thirty different companies.”

“Wow.” Rags-to-riches stories always motivated me. I almost excused myself to call my boss and accept the transfer right then. But Hank hadn’t finished.

“He had cars, tailor made suits, and a penthouse in New York for business trips. As his wealth increased, so did his appetite. He began cheating. Cheating on his wife, taxes, and even his own companies. He worked twelve hour days, using cocaine to keep up. The boy kept reaching for more and more and more. When the housing crisis hit, his companies felt the ripple. Half went bankrupt. A renewed sense of justice sent agencies hunting for crooks like him. They found him out and after a long legal battle they sent him away for four years and took every last penny. No one visited. He’d burned every bridge and his crimes impacted thousands.”

I’d heard similar stories. Rags-to-riches-to-rags. I never understood people like that. “Listen, Hank, I see what you’re getting at. Don’t get greedy, right? Don’t fall into certain traps. I’m not stupid, though. I understand—”

“You think the boy was stupid?” Hank raised an eyebrow. “You think he was born corrupt? Made decisions without thinking them over? People like him aren’t greedy because greed is an idea. He’ll never be the greediest. But a little greed is justified. A little cocaine is justified. Why? Because the next guy is always doing more. Three grams of powder ain’t nothing when Jeff over there is doing six.”

“Yeah, but don’t some people have good intentions? Like taking care of their loved ones? Setting them up for the future?” I asked. This conversation had started irritating me. Of course someone like Hank hated capitalism. I couldn’t stand people like him. Always blaming the system for their problems.

He shook his head. “You think it all came from a place of selfishness? He worked eighty hours a week to put himself through business school. Why? Because he grew up in a rundown trailer park with seven other siblings and a mom who struggled feeding them. But they didn’t want his money, so he gave it to his wife and daughter. Daddy became nothing but a checkbook. They knew about his faults too. So every time he visited home he had to buy back their love. But the love ran out before the money did, and no amount of zeros can make you a good person.”

“Very moving,” I muttered. I needed a drink. Maybe two.

Hank turned back to the window and our food arrived a minute later. Neither of us said anything while we ate. I’d heard enough. Taking him to dinner had been a mistake. Clearly Hank had a problem with success. If I were in his shoes, I’d probably feel the same way. Begging every day outside a restaurant whose cheapest option, the soup of the day, costed twenty-two dollars. At least I’d paid back my debt.

“So what happened to the wife and mother?” I asked. We’d finished our meals and I couldn’t handle the continued silence. The two men at the table next to us had left, leaving a half empty bottle of seventy dollar wine. I wondered if the busboys would hold onto the bottle and drink it after their shift for a taste of the good life.

Hank stared out the window, his caramel eyes following the dying flow of traffic. “When the boy got out, he went back to them and tried to start over. They divorced before he got locked up. But they made things work for a while. Until he fell back into old habits. His ex-wife kicked him out for good when she found a bag of coke hidden under their daughter’s mattress.”

“So he never changed?” Why didn’t that surprise me?

Hank faced me. His eyes were wet. “He wanted to. He really did. He tried to

be the person they needed, but he couldn't. He wouldn't. So, in the end, he decided it best to stay away."

Janelle came with the check before I could respond. She set the black check booklet on the table and rested her hand on top. "How did you enjoy everything this evening?"

"Very good, thank you, Janelle," I said.

Hank reached out and held his hand above hers, his palm hovering just millimeters from her skin. So close, but never touching. Their eyes met. "I'm proud of you."

Janelle's plastered smile faltered. "Do I know you?"

Hank wiped the tears from his eyes with his sleeve. "No. I just thought it was important for you to hear that. Stay blessed young lady, and keep working hard. I'm proud of you."

"Thank-Thank you." She swiped away her hand from beneath his and walked off. Hank watched her until she disappeared into the kitchen.

In similar lighting, their eyes really were the same color. "You do know her."

He nodded.

"Is she your—"

"Not anymore," he said.

Hank put his outermost jacket back on, reached into the pocket, and extracted a thick wad of money. He set the roll of cash on the table. All one hundred dollar bills. At least a couple thousand dollars if I had to guess.

"Should cover the meal and tip. Good evening, Mr. Taylor. Stay blessed." He grabbed his mug, got up, and left me to chew on everything that had transpired.

How did I not see it? The eyes, the heartbreak in his story, and his fear of crossing the boundaries of his own exile. Shame washed over me. The shame of my ignorance accompanied by the shame of my envy. How could I have been so heartless?

I got up and bolted out of the restaurant. People stared. A few clutched their purses. But I didn't care. Outside, I looked for Mr. Wright. The sidewalks were

empty. I ran a hand through my hair. It doesn't matter, you have somewhere else to be.

I sped the whole way there. As fast as my old car would allow. I might've even run a red light or two. Luckily, the cops stayed away from Tenth Street.

As I entered a rough neighborhood, the sound of barking dogs greeted me. The sun had long gone down. I made sure my doors were locked as I crept past street signs, looking for the right one. Once I saw the sign for Prosperity Court, I turned. The house sat halfway in. White siding had yellowed with age. In the driveway, I recognized a familiar, beat up red minivan. She still hadn't replaced the back left tire. I shook my head as I parked behind it.

The porch light was on but the windows were dark. I got out and advanced toward the steps. Tangled wind chimes clamored together in the evening breeze. I opened the screen door and knocked. No answer. I knocked again. A light inside flicked on and a moment later the rusted lock turned. The front door creaked open, revealing an old woman in a bonnet and a nightgown. An unlit cigarette hung from her lips. She squinted up at me.

"Owen? What the hell you doing here this late?" she asked.

"Is Lilian home? I need to speak to her," I said.

"I'll go get her." She rolled her eyes and padded back into the house, leaving the door cracked. A moment later I saw a familiar figure approach the opening.

Red and yellow flowers covered her pajamas. Her pregnant belly stretched the fabric, tugging at the face of a yellow lily. Her steps were labored and she walked with a hand on her back. Tangled blonde hair framed her round face. Red and puffy bags sagged beneath her wide, emerald eyes. She stopped a few steps short of the doorway and frowned.

"What are you doing here, Owen?" she asked.

"I got offered a job in Phoenix," I said.

Lilian shook her head. "Good for you. But what do you want? You said you couldn't do this anymore, remember?"

"I know." I looked at the ground. "But I... I want to stay. I want to be here for you and take care of you. If you'll let me."

The door creaked. I closed my eyes, expecting to hear it slam shut. Then, cold

fingers touched my chin. I opened my eyes as Lilian tilted my head down to her level. Her eyebrows were raised but the frown remained. “Why?”

“Because I don’t want to lose what we could have. I want to be better for you.”

“Prove it,” she said. Then she stepped back inside and slammed the door shut.

“Yes, ma’am.” I smiled. “Even if I have to beg.”