

Like Sweet Buttermilk

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Character Background: Rick and Viv find DeTante's

Walking around downtown D.C. in the rain that night, Rick could almost see the love between he and Viv: like their personal aura bubble had manifested itself physically. He relished the quiet walk with Viv, but thoroughly enjoyed the rain. Nature-lover that he was, the rain seemed to invigorate rather than depress. Rick could tell Viv was taken with the romantic feel of their little adventure too – she didn't complain at all about the wet and cold. She seemed perfectly content leaning against Rick, his arm around her shoulder. After walking a few blocks, it dawned on Rick just how far Georgia Brown's was from subway, and as much as they were enjoying the walk, Rick knew the trance would break as the rain picked up.

Quickening their pace, Rick and Viv hurried along "I" Street, deciding to nip the jaunt to Georgia Brown's and find someplace closer – anyplace closer. Food was no longer the priority; shelter was. Rick spotted what he thought was a photography studio and reasoned he and Viv could look at the photos while waiting for the downpour to pass. Placing his hand at the small of Viv's back, Rick guided her to the studio's alcove. The rain slackened, and while neither was soaked, both were wet and thankful for the brief respite.

"You okay," Rick asked.

"Yeah," Viv replied, shaking out the umbrella. She sounded winded, "But my suggestion of a cozy romantic evening at home is looking at most, the better option here." She looked at Rick with a sly smile. "But I'm not gonna say any 'I told you so's,' because in spite of myself, I'm enjoying this time with you." Viv reached up and grabbed Rick behind the head and pulled him towards her. She kissed him softly, teasingly; her tongue gently caressing his. When they parted, Viv looked at Rick, another smile playing around her lips. Rick could tell it was a smile of things to come. His erection started to settle down as now hunger, sparked by the taste of vanilla on Viv's lips, took over. His stomach fluttered

though when Viv grazed her fingers along his zipper (letting her palm provide a second of pressure) before turning to look at the photos. Rick closed his eyes and sighed. He was hungry yes, but when Viv touched him like that, he could forget almost anything. He couldn't forget that they were in public though, so taking this further was out of the question. He wouldn't have pursued it anyway. For him, sex belonged behind closed doors – in a bedroom. But Rick didn't consider himself a prude. Because once behind those doors, Rick was open to practically anything – he just simply preferred a bed (and a door) when being intimate.

Rick moved behind Viv and wrapped his arms around her. "Actually I think this has worked out quite nicely," Rick whispered and kissed her ear. He glanced over the various photos of landmarks throughout the southern states. "You like the pictures?"

"Definitely. Makes me wish I had pursued a career in photography. What's the name of this place anyway?"

The rain slowed to drizzle, so Rick stuck his head out from under the overhead and craned his neck to read the name on the sign above and behind him. Rainy mist feathered his face. The name "DeTante's" was illuminated in orange neon.

"It must be an Italian place. It's called DeTante's." Rick ducked back into the alcove. He noticed few people were out this evening.

"Do you smell food Rick?"

"Uh-Huh. I smell fried okra and salmon cakes to be exact. Must be a restaurant nearby, and I'm hungry too. Now that the rain has slowed down some, you wanna see where those smells are coming from or head on home?"

Viv tilted her head as if listening rather than smelling. "No Rick, I think the smells are coming from here."

"But isn't this a photography studio?" Rick stepped back to get a better view of the establishment. It still looked like a photography studio. "I can't tell one way or the other."

"Well let's just see for ourselves instead of standing out here guessing." Viv grabbed Rick's hand and pulled him toward the door. A muted yellow glow illuminated from the sides and bottom of the glass and mahogany door. The name DeTante's was written diagonally from bottom left to top right on the glass portion of the door. It was odd, but there were no descriptive words to identify the type of place it was. No hours of operation – nothin'.

"Whatever it is, it looks open," Rick said. Normally Rick liked to determine the time of day by "reading" the amount and quality of daylight, but November was a hard month to do that — it was what Rick called a "season transition" month — and the weather didn't help much either. His trusty Seiko watch had to suffice. He looked at his watch. It was almost 8:00pm. Rick turned the knob, entering what would be a favorite place to eat for years to come.

As they entered DeTante's, Rick picked up the subtle yet distinctive sound of flutes playing overhead and was immediately comfortable. He loved the sound of flutes (though he himself never learned to play a thing). To Rick, flutes were peaceful instruments. He always associated their sound with two things: Greek Mythology, (which he loved), and nature's solitude. The smells and sounds of cooking wafted from what had to be the kitchen area on the right, and Rick's hunger pangs reasserted themselves as the focal point of his current motivation, so he reached for Viv to bring her in farther.

The seating attendant, Josephine, led Rick and Viv to what would soon be their regular spot — a table on the second of the three-tiered platform at the restaurant's center. The 3-tiered floor plan was nice, but one of the things Rick liked best was the misleading way DeTante's was set-up outside: giving the impression of a photo studio or gallery and absolutely no hint of the true find inside. It was a contradiction of sorts he found interesting. As he walked to their table, Rick looked back at Viv and could tell that she too was as much in amazement as he was. Following her line of sight, Rick found Viv admiring the myriad of photographs adorning the walls and square columns. Based on the majority of tag cards given on the photographs, Rick concluded the pictures were by local talent. Most of the pictures were of children at play as well as more shots of landmarks throughout the South. The photographs were another plus for DeTante's. If the food was good, Rick thought, he was sold.

DeTante's specialized in southern cuisine and soul food, and neither Rick nor Viv were disappointed with their entrees. Rick dined on barbecued beef rib tips, baked potato and green beans, while Viv went truly down home with collard greens, candied yams, and oven-fried whiting. They dined slowly and deliberately, enjoying each bite and even occasionally moaning their satisfaction with the delicious meal. DeTante's was quite busy this night, and Rick just could not get over the fact that they had never heard of the place. Considering the number of people present, DeTante's, it seemed, had been around for quite some time.

After requesting the check (and deciding to postpone trying DeTante's desserts until their next visit), Rick noticed Josephine approaching their table. With her was a tall man dressed in black jeans and a gold colored shirt that really didn't look gold until he was close enough to tell. The orange lighting of the restaurant made some the colors in the restaurant look strange.

Rick lowered his voice when he leaned toward Viv in a conspiratorial way and said, "Josephine is bringing some man over to our table. You think they found out we're fugitives just tryin' to blend?" Rick got a whiff of Viv's perfume. A lilac scent that was new but nice.

"You are so silly boy." Viv giggled and waved her hand at Rick to shoo him back to his side of the table. Just the same, she peeked over her shoulder, then turned back to Rick. "Sure is tall, but what makes you think they're headed to our table?"

"Well for one thing I can just sense these things. For another, Josephine has pointed at our table twice since they started walking this way." Rick leaned back and reached for his glass of water. For some reason he started to feel uncomfortable and oddly territorial over Viv.

Josephine and the gentleman arrived as Rick took the last swallow of water, the ice tinkling as he set the glass down.

Josephine said: "Hello Again. I can tell from your faces that you're wondering what's going on, but everything's okay. This is Mr. Rast, the owner of DeTante's, and he just wanted to say hello since you're new here. Are you sure you don't want dessert?"

"No we're good for now," Rick replied. He still hadn't settled down yet.

"The food was wonderful though," Viv added, "we were both saying we hadn't had food this good in a long time, so I'm sure we'll be back." She looked at Rick who nodded his agreement.

"Well that's good to hear," Rast finally spoke, "We definitely want to keep the people coming back for more." He turned to Josephine, "I got it from here Jo, thanks." Josephine smiled at Rick and Viv before leaving.

Rick and Viv looked at each other, the same silent question, "What is going on?" passing between them.

Rast broke the awkward silence. "You know, this response from customers never fails. Most customers are like 'Why is the owner coming and talking to us?' I guess it's something we'd expect only from television or something. And actually that's where I got it from—I thought it was a nice gesture."

"Well I will say it's a first for us, so if we came across as rude, I apologize." Rick stood up to shake Rast's hand. Rast's shake was strong, firm and short. The classic business shake. Rick liked him almost immediately (he was more comfortable, but not completely).

"Not at all. By the way, my first name's Jonathan and what I prefer to be called. Do you really like the restaurant?" Jonathan looked at Viv.

"Oh yeah," Rick answered, "but what's with the fake-out in the front. This place looks like a photography studio from the outside. Can't you lose business that way?"

"The pictures are really nice by the way," Viv added.

"Thanks..." Jonathan said, obviously searching for a way to address them.

"Ah man I'm sorry," Rick shook his head. "I'm Rick, Rick Phillips, and this is my wife Vivian."

"But I prefer Viv," Viv said as she reached to shake Jonathan's hand as well.

"Well again, thanks Viv. I'd always wanted the photographs to be the focal point of DeTante's décor. Those that I don't shoot myself, I buy from photographers in the area." Jonathan was still holding Viv's hand, but Rick said nothing. "As for the 'fake-out'," Jonathan continued, "that really was my sister's idea, and actually it's been more of a selling point. Word of mouth about the pictures out

front and the food inside has really helped DeTante's business rather than hurt it. Folks on the floor near the windows can see out though; the pictures are placed strategically to limit obstruction of view looking out, but it's harder to see in. I don't know how sis accomplished it, but it works." As Jonathan said this, he let Viv's hand go and turned more to face Rick. Rick relaxed a little more.

"So do you always greet your customers on their first visit?" Viv asked.

"No. Sometimes I'm not here, so I can't greet everyone new. And sometimes I'm here, but I'm concentrating on other aspects of running DeTante's. Tonight I wanted to meet and greet, and Jo told me you were the second of four sets of new faces in tonight, so here I am. Didn't mean to upset anyone though."

"We weren't upset, just a little apprehensive. Like you said, it was more like somethin' off of TV not real life. But it's good to see." Rick extended his hand across the table and grasped Viv's fingers.

"Actually we were on our way to Georgia Brown's, but stopped to look at your display in the front windows to get a respite from the rain," Vivian said as she returned Rick's grasp, "but I smelled food and Rick was hungry, so here we are. Your food is delicious and it was nice meeting you."

"Believe it or not she didn't even want to come out tonight Jonathan. She was intent on staying home." Rick smirked. Viv released her grasp, but she was smiling. *Why are we talking to him so much*, Rick pondered, *we've just met this man*. Rick was pretty amiable with strangers, but this was a bit much even for him.

"Well I'm glad she changed her mind. And it was nice meeting the both of you too."

Jonathan started away from their table, but turned back to shake Rick's hand again, "I hope the two of you make it back to DeTante's soon."

"I'm sure we will. What's with the Italian-sounding name? Was that your sister's idea too?" Rick asked.

"Yep. Her again, but she didn't really have a concept behind the name, she just liked the way it sounded." Jonathan looked at his watch. "I gotta run, but I'll be sure to stop by your table whenever

I'm here. I enjoyed talking with you. Most customers aren't as friendly the first time. Take care now."

Jonathan started away again, "And don't bypass dessert next time!" he called over his shoulder.

"Well that was interesting," Viv commented.

"Yeah, but he seems nice enough." Rick's guard was finally coming down. He didn't get territorial about every guy he and Viv met, just some guys. And there were no particular criteria that stimulated the reaction. It was a very sometimey kind of thing.

"You ready?" Viv asked. There was a smile in her eyes as the meaning behind the double entendre filled the space between them.

"Yeah, let's get on home. I need the night air to wake me up." Rick got up and helped Viv with her coat. As they were leaving, each of them continued to marvel over the photos. Some of the landmarks Rick had visited, others were still on the list and these were the pictures that held the most fascination for him. He was pretty sure Viv enjoyed the southern landmarks as well, but probably favored the photos of children more.

Rick and Viv exchanged pleasantries with Josephine on their way out (with Viv doing most of the talking and Rick doing most of the nodding), and left. Over the years, they would return to DeTante's once or twice a month. For Rick it became his favorite place to eat. The soul food and southern cuisine rarely failed him, the atmosphere almost as comforting as home. As far as Rick could tell, Viv didn't fall in love with DeTante's to the extent that he did, but she always welcomed the opportunity to eat there when Rick wanted. In that respect, DeTante's became their place. Their daughter Alna, born during their 5th year of marriage, would join them on occasion, but for the most part, Rick and Viv dined at DeTante's as a couple. And for a while that was good. For a while.

To Rick, Jonathan never became more than what he was that night on their 3rd wedding anniversary. As promised, Jonathan always stopped by their table whenever he saw Rick and Viv there. And although their discussions often bordered on those of good friends, Rick never saw Jonathan outside of DeTante's. Jonathan remained simply—a casual acquaintance.