

Without Breaking Stride

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During dinner rush, the restaurant felt alive. Steam lifted from plates of pasta and caught the golden light that hung low over every table. The thick aroma of garlic and lemon oil filled the small dining room, pressing against exposed brick walls and drifting between closely set tables dressed in crisp white cloths. Chairs scraped and shifted, voices crossed the room, and laughter broke out in sudden bursts that carried from table to table. The space stayed in motion, alive with people leaning in, calling out, and filling every corner with sound. Tony slipped through it all without breaking stride, his hands moving in silent, practiced motions. When the lights were warm and low, the whole room seemed to breathe, and he breathed with it.

The air felt thick enough to touch. Heat rolled off the kitchen line in steady waves, curling through the space like a second heartbeat. Every few seconds the door swung open, spilling out bursts of white steam and sharp light that broke against the dim bar. The clatter of plates, the hiss of pans, and the scattered laughter of servers folded together into one long note that never stopped. Tony took pride in that sound, in the way the room held so many people at once without ever feeling careless. A woman's perfume passed through the air and mixed with garlic, citrus, and the faint smoke of seared meat. The scent clung to Tony's sleeves and hair until he could not tell where the restaurant ended and he began. The walls seemed to hum with their own pulse, and in that noise, he found a kind of peace. It was just loud enough to keep the world outside from getting in.

Tony had been at the restaurant for nearly thirty years, enough time for its rhythms to settle into his bones. Iozzo's carried the reputation of a top Italian dining room, one of the city's favorites, even if Tony knew the kitchen no longer lived up to its name. What mattered to him was the experience, and he took pride in being part of what still made it feel special. The place had become more than a job. It was the center of his days, the shape of his weeks, the one constant that never shifted beneath him. His social

life existed almost entirely within these walls, and he never apologized for it. Milestones were acknowledged with nods and raised glasses from across the bar, never with plans made afterward. The room gave him company, but not companionship. He didn't meet friends for drinks, didn't go out after shifts, didn't keep up with old faces from Chicago, where he grew up. Outside of work, his phone stayed silent more often than not, and he told himself that was fine.

Tony took endless pride in the place. The food was still decent and reliable in the way familiar things are, even if it was not what the restaurant had once been known for. What kept the room alive was the service, the way Tony and the other servers moved through it, attentive without hovering and making people feel noticed. The warm light, the low ceilings, and the walls crowded with old paintings and fading photographs all helped, but it was the care behind the bar and at the tables that held it together. People came to feel taken care of, and Tony liked knowing he was one of the reasons they left feeling that way.

Here, he had purpose. The regulars knew him by name and lit up when he approached their tables. Tony could pull a laugh from a tired stranger, calm a tense room with a single well-timed joke, or captivate a whole bar with a story from "back in Chicago." Tony always looked sharp, even late into the night, in his crisp black jacket and open collar. He worked in perfect rhythm with the clatter and hum around him, each practiced motion carrying the quiet thrum of someone who took great pride in every second of it.

Greg moved through the dining room with a similar ease, the kind that came from years of letting the restaurant shape his stride. He had been at Iozzo's almost as long as Tony, long enough that the staff joked the two of them came with the building. Cancer hadn't slowed him much in practice. He still outpaced servers half his age. Tony admired that about Greg, how he kept working after the cancer, still moving through the room with purpose. But he also knew when to stop, when to let the night finish without him. Some shifts, Greg wasn't there at all, and the room carried on. Tony found himself looking forward to the nights Greg worked. In a life built inside these four walls, Greg had become the closest thing Tony had to a real friend.

“Hey, you see that guy at table twelve tonight?” Tony said, smirking as he polished a wine glass until it squeaked. “Orders veal parm, says he’s gluten-free. I’m like, pal, you’re halfway through the bread basket.”

Greg chuckled, shaking his head as he wiped down a nearby table. “You’re going to get yourself fired one of these days, Tony.”

“Fired? Please.” Tony waved him off with a flick of his towel.

“They’d have to drag me outta here. This place’ll go under before I do.”

Greg let out a tired, warm laugh, the kind that came from too many years and too many shifts. “You really love it here, huh?”

Tony leaned on the bar, glass still in hand. The wood was smooth and warm beneath his fingers, sticky in spots where the lemon oil hadn’t fully dried. “What’s not to love? The food, the noise, the people. Beats sittin’ around watchin’ TV.” He smiled, but his eyes drifted toward the darkened back dining room they had already closed for the night.

Greg followed Tony’s gaze toward the empty dining room, its chairs stacked and its shadows stretching long across the floor. “Y’know,” he said softly, “you ever think about slowing down? Even a little?”

Tony blinked, the question hanging between them longer than it should have. He thought back about before coming to this restaurant.

Back in Chicago, it all started as a way to pay the bills. The year after he graduated high school, Tony moved out, eager to prove himself. He worked in a small neighborhood restaurant wedged between a check-cashing place and a pawn shop, its windows filmed with grease and fingerprints that never fully came clean. The food was fine, filling and dependable, but it wasn’t the reason people came back. What lingered was the way Tony remembered faces, kept cups filled, made a night feel easier than it had any right to.

He took every shift they offered him, doubles and weekends and holidays, because rent didn't wait. The tips depended on him more than the menu. He learned how to read a room, how to smooth over long waits and burned edges with a joke, how to make a place feel warmer than it was. After closing, he stood alone in his apartment, traffic rattling the windows, fryer oil clinging to his clothes. He stayed in his shoes longer than he needed to because taking them off meant the day was truly over.

He missed how life had felt in high school, how friends showed up without planning, how time felt wide open. He meant to keep in touch. Instead, weeks slipped by unnoticed. By the time he realized how long it had been, the quiet had already settled in. Working through it hadn't been a decision. It was the only option left, the only way to keep the lights on and the days moving forward. One night, a man who'd been eating at the counter for weeks lingered after the others left. He watched Tony work the room, the way he held things together even when the place was half-empty. "You ever think about working somewhere else?" the man asked. He talked about a restaurant farther from home, in the heart of Indianapolis, a place that needed someone steady. Someone who knew how to take care of people.

Tony said yes before he had time to second-guess it. It felt like being seen. When Tony first took the job, the pride surprised him. He felt it in the way he showed up early, stayed late, and treated the place like it mattered, a feeling he still carried with him years later. The man who invited him there retired years ago. Tony stayed.

The shuffle of coats and the low murmur of departing customers filled the pause between them. "Slowing down?"

Tony scoffed, straightening the glass in his hand. "If I slow down, I'll stop. And if I stop, this whole damn place'll crumble."

Greg smiled, not mocking, just knowing. "Maybe," he said, nudging a stray fork into alignment, "or maybe you'd find something waiting for you outside of these walls."

Tony didn't answer. He just reached for another glass, polishing it until it gleamed, as if the shine alone could quiet the thought.

Just as he finished the glass, Tony noticed a woman at the far end of the counter watching him with that polite, hesitant look he'd seen a thousand times—the kind customers used when they didn't want to interrupt but needed something anyway. He set the glass down gently, the faint ring of it against the wood slipping into the hum of the room.

“How's everything tonight?” Tony asked as he approached. Her face lit up immediately.

“Really good actually. Could I get another glass of red? My friends and I are celebrating. We finally all have the same night off.” She laughed. “It feels like a miracle these days. Everyone's schedules are insane.”

Tony reached for the bottle, its dark glass thicker than most with a clean and understated label. He knew it was a good one, the kind people ordered when the night mattered. “Night off with friends... can't beat that,” he said.

“Exactly,” she said, accepting the glass he poured. “We don't get to do this often, so when we can, we make it count.” She took a sip, then nodded toward the glowing room around them. “You've got a great place here. Feels special,” she said.

Special wasn't the food; he knew that. It was the way the room was held together. Tony smiled, the familiar pride rising in his chest. “I'm really glad you think so,” he replied. But when he turned back toward the bar, her words lingered longer than he expected. *Nights off*, he thought to himself. *Making them count*.

Tony wiped down the bar and counted the stools without meaning to, his movements unhurried. Fewer regulars stayed late anymore, the kind who used to stretch a night just by talking. The ones who did linger now kept one eye on their phones, conversations thinning until there was nothing left to say. He couldn't re-

member the last time someone waited for him after a shift, or the last time he'd rushed out the door to meet friends instead of locking up alone. The bills were paid. The lights stayed on. Still, he stayed. In the mirror behind the bottles, Tony saw his reflection, the silver creeping into his dark hair and the faint lines near his mouth. The bar lights softened everyone, including him. He liked that trick.

A little time passed in a blur as Tony moved through his usual closing motions, wiping rings from tables, resetting silverware, stacking dessert plates without thinking. Eventually, the last couple lingering over their tiramisu finally stood, offering him a grateful wave before slipping into their coats and heading toward the door. Their laughter trailed behind them as it swung shut, leaving the restaurant suddenly still in their absence. The room, so full an hour earlier, felt wider now, the empty tables stretching out like quiet reminders of the night winding down. Tony gathered their glasses, the clinking of them in his hand sounding too loud in the new hush settling over the space.

Greg finished wiping down his last table and untied his apron, rolling his shoulders like the day had finally caught up to him. On his way toward the hallway, he paused beside Tony.

"You know," he said softly, "nights like this make me think you deserve more than just closing up alone every time." He offered a small, tired smile. "Give yourself a chance, Tony." Then he pulled on his jacket and headed for the back door. Tony opened his mouth to reply, but nothing came out. A moment later, Greg was gone, his footsteps fading into the quiet.

When the door clicked shut behind Greg, the restaurant changed shape. The silence filled the space like water, slow and creeping, rising around Tony's ankles and climbing higher the longer he stood still. Without the chatter and clatter to keep him anchored, the room felt strangely hollow, its warmth stretched thin. The hum of the refrigeration units pulsed in the background, steady and cold, a poor substitute for human voices. Tony ran a palm over the bar's smooth surface, his fingers catching on a tacky spot of lemon oil and felt a flicker of something he couldn't quite name. Restlessness, maybe, or the echo of Greg's words settling into the quiet.

For the first time in a long time, the place did not feel like a refuge.

Tony finished the closing tasks on instinct, his body moving through motions he had done thousands of times. He stacked the glasses, wiped down the counters, and swept the corners no one ever looked at. But each action felt strangely separate from him, as if the work belonged to a version of himself he was slowly stepping away from. The lemon oil glowed on the bar, the chairs waited in their neat rows, and for the first time, the familiar quiet felt less like safety and more like a hollow space he was standing alone inside. He paused, towel in hand, unsure what to do with the sudden stillness pressing against him. That was when his phone buzzed in his pocket, cutting through the quiet like a lifeline.

Greg: *Dinner tomorrow? I know you'll say no, but I'm asking anyway.*

The words made Tony pause. He'd have to call off work. Greg had been nudging him for months, always with the same half-joking invitation, always brushed off with a laugh or an excuse. But tonight, something about the sound of silence made the thought settle differently.

He typed back, pausing before each word: *Yeah. Tomorrow. I'll be there.* When he hit send, the room suddenly didn't feel so empty anymore. It felt like a door cracking open. He slipped the phone into his pocket and listened to the quiet settle again.

He finished closing up more slowly than usual. There was no rush now, no reason to stack one task on top of the next. He locked the cabinet, wiped the sink handles, folded one last napkin into a neat triangle and slid it into his coat pocket. For once, the night didn't feel like something he had to outrun.

As he turned off the lights row by row, he thought about Greg, about the way he worked fewer nights now and let the rest go. He had always assumed stopping meant losing something, but maybe it didn't have to. Maybe slowing down was its own kind of staying.

Tony stood there a moment longer, the smell of lemon oil sharp in the dark. He realized he didn't know what his days would look like if he took less of them here, and that uncertainty didn't scare him the way it once had.

Outside, the winter air met him clean and honest. He walked past his car just to feel the cold move around him, his hands still smelling faintly of citrus. The night felt open, not empty, as if there was time he hadn't accounted for yet. For the first time, Tony allowed himself to wonder what it might be like to slow down too.