

The Coffee Shop Next Door

By Victoria Stewart

Lynette noticed it first—a faint misalignment in the brass lettering above the post office door. The second **S** in *UNITED STATES POSTAL SERVICE* tilted just slightly to the left, like it had lost the will to stand upright. Most people wouldn't have seen it—or if they had, they would've dismissed it as a trick of the light, a trivial imperfection in a government building worn by time. But to Lynette, it itched at the edge of her brain like an unbalanced picture frame in a waiting room. Quietly maddening.

Her gaze flicked to the sign again, narrowing slightly. The tilt wasn't egregious. It was worse—it was subtle. Subtle enough to go unnoticed by the masses but significant enough to jab at anyone with even a trace of visual sensitivity or perfectionism.

She was not, she reminded herself, a perfectionist. She merely preferred things... aligned. In place. Stable.

Two people ahead, a man shifted slightly. She had noticed him already—not for the usual reasons, but because he was standing with the stillness of someone deep in thought. His grip on the padded envelope was gentle, like it contained something fragile and beloved. Maybe it did. Something about the way he held it made her think of an old photograph or a letter someone had folded and refolded through decades of meaning.

Then she saw him glance upward, his eyes tracing the line of brass letters. His brow furrowed. Just slightly.

He sees it, she thought, surprised by the flicker of satisfaction that sparked in her chest. *He actually sees it.*

"You see it too," she said aloud, stepping closer as the line inched forward.

The man blinked, caught off guard, then gave a slow, amused smile. His voice was low and pleasant, with a trace of something old-fashioned in his cadence.

"That second **S** is crooked, right?"

"Slightly," Lynette nodded, her tone dry but companionable. "It leans left. Not enough to call attention to itself. Just enough to be unsettling. Like it's rebelling in secret."

He chuckled—a soft sound, genuine. "A barely perceptible deviation from symmetry. The kind that makes your brain itch, but only if you're paying attention."

Now she looked at him fully. Graying at the temples, yes, but in a dignified way, like he'd earned each strand. Glasses that somehow made him look both intelligent and endearingly

out of sync with the times. There was kindness in his face. And a stillness that made her want to stand closer, just to see if it would settle something in her.

“Exactly,” she said.

“I’m Gordon.”

“Lynette.”

They shook hands, though neither quite knew why. The gesture was oddly formal, oddly tender. Like old friends meeting in a dream they weren’t sure they were supposed to remember.

Silence hung between them, but it wasn’t awkward. It was observational—mutual.

Lynette glanced down at her envelope. The return address was her own, though she hadn’t written it with much joy. Inside was a book of poems, her mother’s favorite. Her mother, who had once underlined verses in neat pencil, now lay in assisted care three states away, too fragile to hold the book herself, too proud to ask for something so small. So Lynette had marked the pages with sticky notes and written captions: *Remember this one? You read it to me during that thunderstorm when I was seven.*

The envelope had sat on her counter for a week.

Gordon, meanwhile, had addressed his envelope with looping cursive that suggested patience and a steady hand. Inside were hand-cut paper snowflakes—made by his granddaughter, who lived on the other coast. She was five and proud of her work. He’d promised to mail them in time for her to hang them in her window before the spring melted away the last of winter.

They both carried fragile things.

Gordon cleared his throat, glanced toward the door, then gestured vaguely to the storefront next door. “There’s a coffee shop over there. Not a chain, thank goodness. They still serve coffee in actual mugs, if you ask.”

Lynette smiled, the first real one all day. “Rebellious mugs. I like it already.”

“I was wondering...” he began, then hesitated, as if choosing his words with care. “Assuming you’re not in a terrible hurry, would you maybe want to continue this conversation? With caffeine. And sugar, if we’re being honest.”

She glanced down at the envelope in her hands again. The line had barely moved. The crooked **S** above the door seemed to lean a little farther now, like it was trying to tell her something.

She thought about the poems, about her mother, about how long she had waited to send it and how another hour wouldn't change anything.

"I think," she said slowly, "the universe is tilting us in that direction."

Gordon's eyes crinkled with quiet delight. "Then we'd better not disappoint it."

They stepped out of line together, letting the crooked **S** watch them go.

The coffee shop smelled like cinnamon and rain-soaked pavement—the kind of scent that made you feel warm before you even stepped inside. The lights were soft, golden, casting a quiet glow over scuffed hardwood floors and mismatched tables. Somewhere near the back, a Billie Holiday song played faintly, as if it were humming directly into the bones of the place.

Without a word, they approached the counter. The barista greeted them with a nod, a silver nose ring glinting as she turned toward the espresso machine.

"Two lattes, please," Gordon said, then glanced at the glass case. "And that lemon tart?"

Lynette smiled, barely. "I was hoping you'd say that."

They didn't discuss how to split it. It simply appeared on their table—two forks, one plate. By the time they settled into their chairs near the rain-speckled window, their conversation had already resumed, as if it had never truly begun but had always been waiting for them to step into it.

"So here's what I keep thinking about," Lynette said, fork hovering over a golden edge of tart. "Would we even know what vision is if nobody had eyes? I mean... would the concept of *seeing* exist at all without receptors to interpret light?"

Gordon looked at her, not startled, not confused, but intrigued—as if she had just unlocked a door he'd always known was there, waiting and had longed to peek inside.

"You're asking if perception defines reality," he said slowly, "or if reality exists independently of our ability to perceive it."

She nodded, energized. "Exactly. What if there are entire dimensions layered around us, like sheets of music playing all at once, but we can only hear one at a time? What if we just... lack the senses to perceive the rest?"

He leaned forward, elbows on the table, coffee momentarily forgotten. "Like angels."

Her eyes lit up. "Yes! Not the kind with feathered wings and golden halos. I mean... beings that exist in dimensions adjacent to ours. Parallel, not above."

"The spiritual realm as an extension of string theory," he mused, the corner of his mouth lifting in delight.

"Or folded within it," she added quickly, warming to the exchange. "Like extra dimensions curled so tightly we can't detect them. Maybe the Fall—when Adam and Eve were cast out of Eden—wasn't just spiritual separation. Maybe it was *perceptual*. A sensory amputation."

Gordon blinked, caught by the sudden gravity of the idea. "What if... what if they could *perceive* God not just spiritually, but *biologically*? What if they had a sense we no longer have?"

"Yes!" she said, almost breathless now. "What if the Fall didn't just exile humanity from a place—it changed our *wiring*? Broke our internal calibration. I mean, think about it: biologically, everything alive is constantly trying to maintain homeostasis, but we *never* reach it. Not perfectly."

She took a breath, her voice quiet but charged with wonder. "What if Eden was homeostasis? Perfect cellular harmony. A body, a world, *in balance*. And sin—entropy—set the breakdown in motion. A world that used to hum with resonance now only stutters."

He sat back slowly, the fork in his hand forgotten. The tart was almost gone, the flavors lingering on his tongue like echoes. He stared at the air between them, as though seeing something for the first time.

"Then the resurrection..." he said, barely above a whisper, "wasn't just about saving souls. It was about restoring *wholeness*. Undoing entropy. Rebalancing the original design."

There was a stillness in the air between them now, but it wasn't silence. It was reverence.

Lynette felt something bloom in her chest—not romance, exactly, but something deeper. Rarer. The feeling of being known in a way that had nothing to do with history or biology or small talk. The sacred recognition of another mind moving with hers, not behind or ahead, but alongside.

She looked down at the crumbs on their plate, the rings of foam left in their cooling lattes, and asked softly, "Do other people think about this stuff?"

Gordon chuckled, warm and genuine. "Not often. And if they do, they usually stop. Because no one wants to talk about it. Or they're told they're crazy."

She looked up again, her expression tender, uncertain. "You don't think I'm crazy."

He shook his head, eyes kind. "Not even close. I think you're asking all the right questions."

Outside, the rain began to fall again—gentle, steady, rhythmic. It traced silver threads down the window beside them, pooling along the sills like time made liquid.

Neither of them noticed.

They sat there in that little pocket of the universe—unchanged by their conversation, and yet, somehow, completely different.

When they finally stood to leave, they didn't speak much. Just the soft rustle of coats and the scrape of chairs across wood. Gordon held the door for her, and Lynette stepped into the rain like someone who didn't mind getting wet.

As they walked past the post office, the crooked **S** above the door still leaned slightly left, quietly defiant in its imperfection.

But they didn't look up.

They had more important things to see.