

# Carsten Jensen and the Very Bad Diner Food

BY LEE ATKINS

Carsten Jensen stalked down the sidewalk with a pained grimace. There were few people about that afternoon, and those few that were meandering in the midday sun paid Mr. Jensen very little mind. The grimaced stalker stalked on in silence, away from the diner he had recently exited. On the floor of the diner there was a woman. Her eyes

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were rolled toward the rear of her skull, and her back was concave in a way that contorted her figure to a most grotesque shape. Carsten Jensen had been a patron of that aforementioned establishment, in which he had dined on three fried farm fresh eggs, two slices of toasted rye with butter, and a large cup of tan coffee that one could tell was entirely too hot to drink from the steam that exited Mr. Jensen's mouth after every gulp. Immediately following the final morsel of egg-bread-butter mixture, Carsten Jensen rose from his seat and fixed his black silk tie. He smoothed the lapels of his gray suit and tugged on the cuffs of his white oxford shirt.

There was a crash as his recently used china shattered on the floor, and the man who less than a minute prior had been standing erect by his table fixing his visage was now a goblin-figure of his former self—mostly walking, but also creeping away from the building, down the street toward nowhere. There were so few people on the streets at the time that no one could hear the mumbles and babel dribbling from Mr. Jensen's slobbery lips. He had put some admirable distance between himself and the diner (given his current gait) before anyone near him could hear the faint screams and shouts of onlookers who had noticed the woman on the floor with the white and red-veiny eyes and broken back.

It may interest the reader to know that this woman, Pernitia Jones, would in fact make a full recovery in the next few weeks. And, despite the surprise and protest of friends and family, she would make a career change, divorce her husband, and become a nun. But Pernitia is

not the subject of our story, so we will leave her there on the cold diner floor with her pain and the smell of damp fur still lingering in the air.

The walking, creeping man made his way through the city until he came upon the neighborhood of Little China. Even the drunkest of drunkards would find it difficult not to notice this piece of the Orient because of the smells, the architectural shift, and the large red gate that stood as the entrance to the self-imposed ghetto. Under the gate stood a figure.

"I know you," said the hunched creeper (formerly known as the stalking stalker) who still sounded very much like Carsten Jensen.

"Of course you do," said the Old Man, "and I know you."

"What do you want?" Carsten's face began to twitch as he spoke.

"You know I cannot answer. I must ask that question of you." The Old Man's tone was soft and full, yet filled with authority and foreboding.

"I want the pain to stop."

"It is not you who is in pain, beast. It is poor Carsten Jensen." The Old Man's face was indifferent, but his voice gave away the slightest hint of concern and sympathy for the wretch before him.



"I am Carsten Jensen." The guttural rasp sounded like Carsten, and it did not; there was something else there in his eyes just behind the cataract clouds.

"You have acted in error, thing of filth. I cannot take you from this place. You must find your own way." The Old Man remained standing under the red gate decorated with gold characters and many colored flags. Carsten continued on away from Little China; the Old Man watched the figure go. He continued to watch

until a crowd of tourists passed around him, and then he simply was no longer there under the gate, or in the city at all—he was nowhere.

Carsten continued on, walking and staggering, through the city. He passed through the business district at rush hour where crowds of people streamed around him. If you would have asked any of the white-collars, they would have told you they had no recollection of a staggering

vagrant, but they did notice the smell of wet dog. As he made his way into a residential district on the east side of the city, he found himself drawn to a not-so-outstanding row house with a particularly outstanding blue door (which, in retrospect, would make said row house fairly outstanding compared to the other not-so-outstanding row houses). The door, as if reacting to the arrival of Mister Jensen, opened slightly and revealed an absolutely dark space inside. Jensen the creature pulled himself up the steps of the stoop and entered the doorway. The bluest of blue doors closed tightly behind him and very likely would not open again.

In the darkness, Jensen the creature felt immediately that he was not alone. In his raspy voice he called out "show yourself," in the way an animal, a dog perhaps, (not that Carsten Jensen wasn't very close to an animal at this point) abruptly and authoritatively barks whilst gazing out of a window at seemingly nothing at all.

"Those who are ready to join me can see clearly, and those who cannot either are not meant to, or their business is unfinished." The voice was everywhere and nowhere all at once. It rang inside Jensen's ears, and made the hair (old and new) on the back of his neck stand up.

"Who are you?" said Jensen the creature.

"I am everyone...eventually," said the voice. "You do not belong here, beast. You do not belong in this man, and he is not ready to see me."

"I am Carsten Jensen... am I not?" The figure who thought he was Carsten Jensen began to feel particularly agitated.

The voice spoke again. "Leave this place, beast. And do not depart through the door whence you came. That door only works one way, one time."

"Where shall I go?" The figure who thought he was Carsten Jensen's voice cracked, and it was much higher and sharper than before. Jensen the creature continued through the house and soon found himself walking down the sidewalk once again, heading east—away from the city.

He continued to walk, and as the sun descended behind some of the taller buildings in the early evening, the sky turned to a deep fire-orange. Carsten Jensen stalked upon a small boy. The boy, without fear or hesitation, looked up at Mr. Jensen and brightly said, "Hello!"

Carsten Jensen returned this gesture with a hissed and wheezed, "Good evening, young man." The boy stared up at Mr. Jensen's grimace. His innocent gaze washed over Jensen's grin, which by this point was quite elongated and exaggerated. The skin around the mouth seemed to have cracked and widened to reveal rows of bright white square teeth—good for chomping on bones. His body had become a bulbous egg shape, which seemed

to push the seams of his gray suit to their limit. His ears were much longer now, and quite white, their tips far above the horizon of his skull and long, dirty, white hairs protruded from their pointed apex. The sleeve of his left arm had split at the shoulder, and tufts of white mangy fur protruded. His feet had become as large as saucepans; the toe of his right shoe had burst to reveal a white paw. (If one were, hypothetically speaking, to cut off this paw and put it on a keychain, one could be sure only bad luck would follow.)

With the sun at Mr. Jensen's back, a long shadow was cast out toward the boy. The boy's gaze fell on the stranger's shadow. It was a deep, dark shadow, and the boy felt that, even as he was staring into it, he was not looking at the shadow of a man but into a hole in the world itself. And through the hole, the boy could see the void: The endless nothing of space and time.

The boy's gaze returned to the twisted face of the once handsome Carsten Jensen and he asked, "Where does that lead to?"



"Everywhere. It leads to the dark everywhere all around you. To the void. The place between all things, and where all things are. The beginning of everything, and the end of nothing at all."

The boy nodded, and as he did Carsten Jensen opened his mouth and the boy stepped inside. No other soul was there to witness, but if there had been, they would likely have said they could not tell if the boy had simply gotten smaller or the beast's mouth had grown, yet the boy walked in confidently and unafraid. The sun had almost set and shadows had gone, or

more precisely they had been stretched so far they now covered everywhere (this is why night seems so mysterious and ethereal compared to day). Bits of gray suit and dried skin blew away in the wind of a passing box truck, and The Rabbit continued to walk down the sidewalk toward nowhere.

The following morning, local headlines informed the aloof public that the previous evening's Halloween was as uneventful as previous years had been.

There was the annual disappearance of a youth and a strange accidental death, but those events had become so commonplace and predictable around this time of year that no one paid them any mind any longer.

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