

The Waitress

by Jack Zipes

She never knew how it had happened, but there was once a chair stuck on the back of a waitress. She jiggled, she jumped, she bucked and she kicked her heels like a wild horse in a rodeo show. But nothing she did could help poor Marie get the chair off her back. She went to the best doctors, carpenters, detectives, midwives, and plumbers in all of Paris, but nobody could help her. The chair stuck on her back, and everyone was afraid of tearing it off her back because she might die. After all, Marie was a small young woman, somewhat on the skinny side. You might even call her frail or fragile. Perhaps that was because she was always running from table to table in the restaurant where she worked. Perhaps it was because she never had time to eat a good meal. Marie never thought about it. She just worked as hard as she could.

At first Marie thought she looked like a humpback, and she was ashamed of her chair, but the chair was light as a feather, and she could barely feel it.

"Maybe something good will come of this," Marie said to herself.

"Maybe if you dressed me up, you might learn a thing or two," the chair said to her.

"You can talk!" Marie said with astonishment.

"You can walk," the chair said.

"Of course I can," the waitress said. "Anyone can."

"Hey, that's not true. Not anyone can. There are a lot of old people who can't walk. What about babies? What about people who have accidents? What about people who are born differently?"

"All right, all right," Marie said. "I get your point."

"Well, if you get my point," the chair said. "Get me dressed and do something about it."

"What would you like to wear?"

"Something with frills, and I like colors like aqua blue, jasmine green, fire red, and chartreuse."

"Are you a girl?"

"Does it matter?"

Marie said it didn't, and off she went with the chair on her back to the nearest department store. People didn't seem to mind that she had a chair on her back, and Marie found that strange.

"Can they see you?" she asked the chair.

"People see only what they want to see," the chair replied.

Once they found the interior decoration department, Marie thought she could feel the chair smile.

"What now?" she asked.

"Well, let's choose some material," the chair said, and choose they did. There were all types of linen, silk, and cloth, and the chair nudged her to pick out pink, yellow, and blue flower patterns and then an intricate diamond shaped red, black, and green roll of wool, and finally she had to pick out soft feather pillows in different colors. The bill came to \$500, and Marie told the chair there was no way she could pay for all the materials.

"Look into your purse," the chair demanded.

Marie stuck her hand inside and pulled out ten one hundred dollar bills.

"Oh!" she almost fainted.

"Stop that," the chair said, "and pay."

"But what if somebody lost this money? What if it was stolen?"

"I told you, good things happen in strange ways," the chair said.

Marie hesitated still, but finally she paid and rushed home as fast as she could. As she entered her one-room apartment, she almost stumbled over a sewing machine.

"What's this?" she exclaimed.

"How do you think you're going to make my outfits if you don't have a sewing machine?"

"But I can't sew."

"You can now. Try it."

At first Marie was afraid of hurting herself with the needle, but the instructions were easy to read, and once the machine began humming, it was as if she were playing a violin sonata. She was carried away in rhapsody, and when she had finished, she had produced seven marvelously colored chair covers.

"Hey, let's do a fashion show!" the chair proposed, and Marie could feel the arms of the chair picking up one of the outfits and slipping it on. When the chair gave a sign that it was ready, Marie strolled over to the bathroom and turned around and around so she could see the chair in the mirror.

"Oh, you look beautiful!" Marie said.

"Thanks, but it was all you, and now we've got to get to work."

"To do what?"

"Well, you don't think I'm going to let my looks and your talents go to waste. We're going to start a restaurant service for people who have trouble walking."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you know all those people who sit at home and can't get out because they're sick or disabled or old. We're going to pick them up, and you'll carry them in me to the restaurant. Then they can be with other people for a while and have a meal on the house. We'll call ourselves the Walking Wizards!"

"But I can't carry anyone on my back," Marie responded.

"You're carrying me."

"That's different. You're light. Or, at least I can't feel you."

"Trust me," the chair said firmly,

Well, Marie had no other choice, and she carried the chair to Marcel, the owner of the restaurant where she worked.

"Marcel," the chair said, "We're going to expand your business."

"Hey, you're pretty cute," Marcel replied, for the chair was dressed in flaming red and yellow.

"Now's not the time for flirting," the chair answered. "Here's what we propose."

No sooner did the three finish their conversation than Marie set out and arrived at the apartment of an old woman named Natalie. She was eighty-five years old, tiny like a mouse, and she rarely left her apartment because she had difficulty walking without a cane.

Marie knocked. The door opened.

"Madame Natalie," Marie said. "We've come to invite you to lunch."

No sooner said than Marie stooped down. The old woman sat down in the chair. And in a flash they were at Marcel's.

"Madame, it's a pleasure. We shall be expecting you for lunch every day."

The next stop for Marie and the chair was Fat Pierre's home. He weighed close to four hundred pounds. He was a young man, not more than thirty-five, but when his wife died suddenly, he went into a deep depression, stayed at home all day, watched tv and ate junk food.

When Marie knocked, the door opened.

"Monsieur Pierre," Marie said. "We've come to invite you to lunch."

No sooner said than Marie stooped down. Somehow Pierre managed to fit himself into the chair. And in a flash they were at Marcel's.

"Monsieur, it's a pleasure. Take a seat next to Madame Natalie. We shall be expecting you for lunch every day."

Off went Marie with the chair. This time they went to visit Liliane, who had been the brightest student in her class, but she had been hit by car and had lost the use of one of her legs and refused to go to school anymore. Her mother tried everything from bribes to psychologists, but Liliane refused to move from her room.

When Marie knocked, the door opened, and Liliane's mother showed her to her daughter's room.

"Mademoiselle Liliane," Marie said, "we've come to invite you to lunch."

Liliane's eyes opened wide when she saw Marie with a chair stuck on her back, and she giggled. In fact, she continued to giggle when she jumped into the chair and sped to Marcel's restaurant.

Throughout the morning Marie and her chair sped through the neighborhood until twenty-one people were gathered at Marcel's for lunch. He had set up a special banquet room for his guests, and he cooked the most delicious specialities of the house. There was laughter and chatter. Almost all the people knew each other somewhat, but they were discovering they had so much in common that they made plans to do things with each other. They kept toasting Marcel and praising his cooking. "There's nothing like French cooking!" they cried.

And Marcel replied, "It's all on the house! You are my guests forever."

The next day Marie and her chair did not arrive at the restaurant, nor did they go knocking on people's doors. Nevertheless, all the people managed to show up at Marcel's restaurant, and they enjoyed themselves and kept meeting until the end of their days. As for Marie and her chair, it is difficult to remember what happened to them. Some say they never existed. But I for one don't believe them.