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## Dark of the Deli

### Author Bio

Graduating with a major in Biology and a minor in English, Michael hopes to continue his passion and career in writing by pursuing a masters in Composition, Rhetoric, and Digital Media at Nova Southeastern University. Meanwhile, he will continue to work on his sci-fi novel as well as several short stories with hopes for publication.

# DARK OF THE DELI

 MICHAEL H. D. MCCALL

The library, one of my favorite places to go when I want to write or study, or just have a nice lunch. That was the plan today: lunch under the library, at the deli there that overlooks the lake. I've become such a regular customer that the two workers there know my name, and I've gotten to know at least one of theirs: Judie. I always like how Judie makes my sandwiches so neat and tidy that I rarely use napkins. That's not to say that the other worker makes my sandwiches sloppy. In fact, I'm sure she always gives me a little extra on my sandwiches, which of course means more sauce. And more napkins. But I love both workers and always look forward to seeing either one or the other when I visit. I also love the customers there. More often than not, they're students coming in to study or to take a break from hours of it. Sometimes they order their food and remain within the deli, and sometimes they take their order to go. But today was different.

Today, there was no one in the Deli except for the generous worker, me, and a trio of girls sitting by the glass wall that overlooks the Gold Circle Lake. And it was dark too. Of course, the lights were on, but the sky threatened rain – that plus the fact there were hardly any smiling faces there. Yes, I know, you can't really see people smiling behind their masks. But sometimes you can see a smile in someone's eyes, sometimes even feel it. And I felt very few smiles in that empty Deli. But I knew it was simply because there were few people, period. So, I went ahead and ordered my usual: eating-in; whole white hoagie; beef; extra cheddar; mayo and honey mustard; onions, tomatoes, and olives; no chips or drink; \$6.72. Yes, I would like my receipt. Thank you. So then, I walked slowly from the ordering counter, choosing where to sit for my stay. Even with the pandemic and fewer people on campus, I rarely have the whole Deli to choose my view. So, I walk, slowly considering old views I knew well and new views I'd never seen. I also take into count the girls who had already received their food and were talking merrily amongst themselves – especially the one girl who was *not* wearing her mask. Deciding that I'd like to see those honest smiles and laughing faces, I chose a high table on the right wall where the only real view there is of the Deli floor, and it's usually only nice when the floor's full of people.

But today was different.

There was only me and those girls, and while that might had been a little sad at first, I found it was actually something special. With only us in the dark of the Deli, the only smiling people and fonts of life, I felt intimate with those girls, like I was sharing a private moment that only we would know. Though we would never speak, I would always remember a short, cloudy afternoon under the Library alongside three nice girls.

But that was only what I wanted to remember.

As I reached the high table on the wall, I caught a glimpse of the girl who wasn't wearing her mask – and she wasn't smiling – and she was looking at me. Truth be told, she was just smiling and talking with her friends the moment before I walked over. But now, she saw me, and she just stopped; the smiling and the talking all stopped. The other girls also stopped, confused as I was at their mask-less friend. I stopped for a moment as well; for a full second, I stood there looking at the mask-less girl and she at me. Though my body was still, my heart recoiled from those unsmiling eyes. And so, I chose *not* to sit at the high table where I could have seen those honest smiles and laughing faces. Instead, I chose to sit far behind the trio, behind the mask-less girl where I couldn't see or dare enter the view of those suddenly unfriendly eyes.

I couldn't figure out what went wrong, what could've disturbed her so from her happiness. Was I too close? No, I made sure I was more than six feet away. Did I look mean? I know I could seem standoffish, but that's only when I'm agitated, like *really* agitated, and few things and people can agitate me like that. What did I do wrong? And the last thing I wanted to consider, the last thing I never wanted to admit was— our skin. We had different skins, different colors. But it wasn't just the differences between our own skins. It was the history they had with each other. That history goes back and back, and it also reaches forward too with a claw dug deep into the lives of a lot of people who shared either my skin or the mask-less girl's. That history has caused a lot of hate, a lot fear between our 'peoples.' But I never let that hate or fear run through my mind when meeting someone of a different color than I am. And when such thoughts do invade, I make sure to let go of the history of my skin because it carries a lot of baggage that can easily wear the soul down if I'm not careful. But of course, I can never be free of that baggage. Whether I want it or not, my skin carries it, and maybe not on my own person, but on others when they see me. And perhaps I've never noticed because I was always surrounded with presumably honest smiles and laughing faces?

But now, in the dark of the Deli, I was alone, unshielded, and the honest smile and laughing face was mask-less. But maybe *she* wasn't really who

I was beginning to fear she was. Maybe *I'm* the one who's paranoid and thinking the worst of people. Or maybe I'm not. In either case, I ate my sandwich, not necessarily in peace, and grabbed my stuff to go. I usually don't carry much with me to work or school. I try to keep it light with just my laptop, some headphones, and a good book.

But after the Dark in the Deli, I find that I feel a lot heavier now, like I'm lugging a lot of weight around, a lot of bad stuff that doesn't feel right on my skin. And I think it's because I can never forget the mask-less girl and her un-smiling eyes. Of course, it's a memory, good or bad, that I'll always cherish.

Because it reminds me to not forget my baggage.