

Megan Hesse

Dinner Shift

Two packets no-calorie sweetener, one half container dairy-free creamer, three stirs clockwise, one counterclockwise, drink fast enough to get all the pills down but not so fast you burn your tongue. Ridges of red and bumpy flesh that mean no taste for a few days. Head back out, layers of plates on each arm, heels clicking against linoleum. Ten-hour shift, stupid day to wear heels but it's almost over, but still, blisters the size of the thing that's growing in your lungs that you're not supposed to think about. Don't think about it, just lower the first plates onto Table 2, Meatloaf Special and Clam Chowder. Clam Chowder waves his arms wildly at Meatloaf.

"You never listen to me! I'm telling you, she has some kind of grudge against me!"

"You're overreacting."

"She threw a shoe at me, Ted!"

More plates to go, swivel around to Table 4, the Breakfast All Day Special with hash browns substituted in for sausage, Southwest-Style Cheeseburger, and Kid's Mac and Cheese. Mac and Cheese throws a green crayon in the air. It comes back down and hits him in the eye.

"Waaah! Owww!"

"God dammit, I told you to watch your brother!"

"Oh, so it's my fault he's an idiot?"

"Don't call your brother an idiot!"

"Mooooommy, it huuuurts!"

Get out of there, quick as you like. Table 5 was supposed to be Sadie's but she never showed up, claims she's sick, everyone knows she's chasing that moron husband across the state, so you took it, you need the money to deal with the thing you're not supposed to be thinking about. Overclocked, overburdened arms deliver an Apple and Blueberry pie apiece.

"Dang, that looks good. Should've gotten Apple."

"We can split 'em."

"Aww, you're so sweet!"

"It's from all the pie I eat."

A roll of the eyes and back to the counter for more plates, check to see how Barbecue Chicken Sandwich is doing, he's deep in conversation with Cherry Pie.

"I'm just saying – no more water, Sweetheart, I'm good here – I'm just saying that it's still a pretty huge world out there, plenty huge for one measly Bigfoot to be hiding in it."

You have a feeling you're more likely to see Bigfoot than a decent tip from him. Rent's due soon, car payments plus the new sparkplugs from when the damn thing stalled out on the highway with cars whizzing past and you thought you were going to die. That's not how you die. You die in a sad sterile

room with lavender walls in a gown with no back and blisters on your heels from the shoes you couldn't afford but bought anyway. You die with arms that lie limp at your sides, arms that can't hold a round of plates anymore.

"Hey, Sweetie, can I get some more coffee?"

Cherry Pie signals with a waving cup and a raised eyebrow. You'd like to stuff it down his throat, see how sweet he'd think you were then. Instead you grab the nearest pot, top him off. He winks at you.

Breakfast Special hustles her kids out the door, has left behind a five dollar tip that you pocket, and it feels greasy and slick.

You tried cigarettes once but you hated them, they smelled like your grandmother with her five remaining teeth and every gas station bathroom you'd ever been in. Only people who smoke are supposed to die this way, that's what they always told you in school. You were good in school, maybe not good at school but good in school, and also at work and in church and at home, so why is this happening to you?

Celia bumps you with her massive, childbearing hips.

"Sugar, wake up, you've got tables waiting!"

She doesn't know. She's a good enough person and if she knew she wouldn't use her hips on you but she doesn't know. You haven't told anyone, as if that makes it any less real. If no one knows but you then you can pretend it's a terrible, vivid dream. Don't think about it. Think about the Chicken Salad and South of the Border Nachos that need to be at Table 1. They slide from your arms to the table smooth as a waxed floor but Nachos is too caught up with Chicken Salad, who's clutching his arms so tight she's leaving nail marks.

"I'm just scared, okay?"

"That's fine, it's normal to be scared. You don't have to be scared, but I get why you are."

"I just want to go home and pretend like nothing happened."

"We both know you can't do that."

Chicken Salad hangs her head and you feel a fleeting urge to comfort her, to cradle her head in your arms like the child you never will have. But instead you just stand there, your mind ticking off a list of "nevers" that would make you shake your head with pity if they came from someone else. You'll never have a daughter, you'll never leave the country, you'll never go on a cruise, you'll never tell your father what you really think of him, and you'll never get these slices of carrot cake to Table 2. They crash and clatter to the floor and you're soon to follow, sinking into dirty plastic tiling, swallowed up by black-and-white checkered squares. All the tables seem to inhale at once, and a voice above you asks,

"Honey, are you all right?"

Sweetie

Honey

Sweetheart

Sugar

You'll die alone, you sweet thing, you.